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Principal Cairns

John Cairns

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: John Cairns

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-4523-9

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PRINCIPAL CAIRNS

BY JOHN CAIRNS
FAMOUS SCOTS SERIES

PREFACE

In preparing the following pages I have been chiefly indebted for the materials of the earlier chapters to some MS. notes by my late uncle, Mr. William Cairns. These were originally written for Professor MacEwen when he was preparing his admirable *Life and Letters of John Cairns, D.D. LL.D.* They are very full and very interesting, and I have made free use of them.

To Dr. MacEwen's book I cannot sufficiently express my obligations. He has put so much relating to Principal Cairns into an absolutely final form, that he seems to have left no alternative to those who come after him between passing over in silence what he has so well said and reproducing it almost in his words. It is probable, therefore, that students of the *Life and Letters*—and there are many who, like Mr. Andrew Lang with Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, "make it their breviary"—will detect some echoes of its sentences in this little book. Still, I have tried to look at the subject from my own point of view, and to work it out in my own way; while, if I have borrowed anything directly, I trust that I have made due acknowledgment in the proper place.

Among those whom I have to thank for kind assistance, I desire specially to mention my father, the Rev. David Cairns, the last surviving member of the household at Dunglass, who has taken a constant interest in the progress of the book, and has supplied me with many reminiscences and suggestions. To my brother the Rev. D.S. Cairns, Ayton, I am indebted for most valuable help in regard to many points, especially that dealt with at the close of Chapter VI.; and I also owe much to the suggestions of my friends the Rev. P. Wilson and the Rev. R. Glaister. For help in revising the proofs I have to thank the Rev. J.M. Connor and my brother the Rev. W.T. Cairns.

J.C.

DUMFRIES, 20th March 1903.

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PRINCIPAL CAIRNS

CHAPTER I

ANCESTRY AND CHILDHOOD

John Cairns was born at Ayton Hill, in the parish of Ayton, in the east of Berwickshire, on the 23rd of August 1818.

The farm of Ayton Hill no longer exists. Nothing is left of it but the trees which once overshadowed its buildings, and the rank growth of nettles which marks the site of a vanished habitation of man. Its position was a striking one, perched as it was just on the edge of the high ground which separates the valley of the little river Eye from that of the Tweed. It commanded an extensive view, taking in almost the whole course of the Eye, from its cradle away to the left among the Lammermoors to where it falls into the sea at Eyemouth a few miles to the right. Down in the valley, directly opposite, were the woods and mansion of Ayton Castle. A little to the left, the village of Ayton lay extended along the farther bank of the stream, while behind both castle and village the ground rose in gentle undulations to the uplands of Coldingham Moor.

South-eastwards, a few miles along the coast, lay Berwick-on-Tweed, the scene of John Cairns's future labours as a minister; while away in the opposite direction, in the heart of the Lammermoors, near the headwaters of the Whitadder and the Dye, was the home of his immediate ancestors. These were tenants of large sheep-farms; but, through adverse circumstances, his grandfather, Thomas Cairns, unable to take a farm of his own, had to earn his living as a shepherd. He died in 1799, worn out before he had passed his prime, and his widow was left to bring up her young fatherless family of three girls and two boys as best she could. After several migrations, which gradually brought them down from the hills to the seaboard, they settled for some years at Ayton Hill. The farm was at the time under some kind of trust, and there was no resident farmer. The widowed mother was engaged to look after the pigs and the poultry; the daughters also found employment; and James, the elder son, became the shepherd. He was of an adventurous and somewhat restless disposition, and, at the time of the threatened invasion by Napoleon, joined a local Volunteer corps. Then the war fever laid hold of him, and he enlisted in the regular army, serving

in the Rifle Brigade all through the Peninsular War, from Vimiera to Toulouse, and earning a medal with twelve clasps. He afterwards returned, bringing with him a Portuguese wife, and settled as shepherd on the home-farm of Ayton Castle.

The younger son, John, as yet little more than a child, was hired out as herd-boy on the neighbouring farm of Greystonelees, between Ayton and Berwick. His wages were a pair of shoes in the half-year, with his food in the farm kitchen and his bed in the stable loft. His schooldays had begun early. He used afterwards to tell how his mother, when he was not more than five years old, carried him every day on her back on his way to school across a little stream that flowed near their cottage. But this early education was often interrupted, and came very soon to a close; not, however, before he was well able to read. Writing he taught himself later; and, later still, he picked up a good working knowledge of arithmetic at a night-school. He was a quiet, thoughtful boy, specially fond of reading, but, from lack of books, reading was almost out of his reach. He had not even a Bible of his own, for Bibles were then so dear that it was not possible for parents in humble life to provide those of their children who went out into the world with copies even of the cheapest sort. In place of a Bible, however, his mother had given him a copy of the Scottish Metre Version of the Psalms, with a "Preface" to each Psalm and notes by John Brown of Had-dington. This was all the boy had to feed his soul on, but it was enough, for it was strong meat; and he valued and carefully kept that old, brown, leather-bound Psalm-book to the end of his days.

When James left home, the shepherding at Ayton Hill was taken up by his brother John. Though only a lad in his teens, he was in every respect, except in physical strength, already a man. He was steady and thoughtful, handy and capable in farm work, especially in all that concerned the care of sheep, for which he had a natural and probably an inherited instinct. He was also held in great regard by the Rev. David Ure, the earnest and kindly minister of the Burgher Meeting-house, which stood behind the Castle woods at the lower end of Ayton village. The family were of that "strict, not strictest species of Presbyterian Dissenter," and John attended also the Bible-class and Fellowship Meeting. The family of John Murray, a ploughman or "hind" from the Duns district, and now settled at

Bastleridge, the next farm to Ayton Hill, also attended Mr. Ure's church. An intimacy sprang up between the two families. It ripened into affection between John Cairns and Alison, John Murray's only daughter, and in June 1814 they were united in marriage. The two eldest daughters of the Cairns family had already gone to situations, and were soon to have homes of their own. The grand old mother, who had been for so many years both father and mother to her children, was beginning to feel the infirmities of age. When, therefore, the young couple took up housekeeping, she left the home and the work at Ayton Hill to them, and with her youngest daughter went over to live in Ayton.

John Cairns and his wife were in many respects very unlike one another. He was of a grave, quiet, and somewhat anxious temperament, almost morbidly scrupulous where matters of conscience and responsibility were concerned. She, on the other hand, was always hopeful, making light of practical difficulties, and by her untiring energy largely helping to make these disappear. She had a great command of vigorous Scotch, and a large stock of homely proverbs, of which she made frequent and apposite use. Both husband and wife were excellently well read in their Bibles, and both were united in the fear of God. Built on this firm foundation, their union of twenty-seven years was a singularly happy one, and their different temperaments contributed to the common stock what each of them separately lacked. Ayton Hill remained their home for six years after their marriage, and here were born their three eldest children, of whom the youngest, John, is the subject of the present sketch.

In the spring of 1820 the trust under which Ayton Hill had been worked for so many years was wound up, and a new tenant took the farm. It became necessary, therefore, for the shepherd to seek a new situation, and this brought about the first "flitting" in the family history. The Berwickshire hinds are somewhat notorious for their migratory habits, in which some observers have found a survival of the restlessness which characterised their ancestors in former times, and was alike the result and the cause of the old Border Forays. Be that as it may, every Whitsunday term-day sees the country roads thronged with carts conveying furniture and bedding from one farm to another. In front of the pile sits the hind's wife with her younger children, while the hind himself with his older boys and

girls walks beside the horse, or brings up the rear, driving the family cow before him. In some cases there is a flitting every year, and instances have even been known in which anxiety to preserve an unbroken tradition of annual removals has been satisfied by a flitting from one house to another on the same farm.

The Cairns family now entered on a period of migration of this kind, and in the course of eleven years they flitted no less than six times. Their first removal was from Ayton Hill to Oldcambus Mains, in the parish of Cockburnspath, where they came into touch with the Dunglass estate and the Stockbridge Church, with both of which they were in after-years to have so close a connection. The father had been engaged by the Dunglass factor to act, in the absence of a regular tenant, as joint steward and shepherd at Oldcambus, and the family lived in the otherwise unoccupied farmhouse. The two elder children attended a school less than a mile distant, and in their absence John, the youngest, who was now in his fourth year, used to cause no little anxiety to his careful mother by wandering out by himself dangerously near to the edge of the high sea-cliffs behind the farmhouse.

At length, in a happy moment, he took it into his head to go to school himself; and, although he was too young for lessons, the schoolmaster allowed him to sit beside his brother and sister. When he was tired of sitting, tradition has it that the little fellow used to amuse himself by getting up and standing in the corner to which the school culprits were sent. Here he duly put on the dunce's cap which he had seen them wear, and which bore the inscription, "For my bad conduct I stand here."

A tenant having been at length found for Oldcambus Mains, the family, which had been increased by the birth of three more children, removed back to the Ayton district, to the farm of Whiterigg, two miles from the village. The house which they occupied here is still pointed out, but it has been enlarged and improved since those days. At that time, like all the farm servants' dwellings in the district, it consisted of a single room with an earthen floor, an open unlined roof of red tiles, and rafters running across and resting on the wall at each side. There was a fireplace at one end and a window, and then a door at right angles to the fireplace. When the

furniture came to be put in, the two box-beds with their sliding panels were set up facing the fireplace; they touched the back wall at one end, and left a small space free opposite to the door at the other. The beds came almost, if not quite, up to the level of the rafters, and screened off behind them perhaps a third of the entire space, which was used as a lumber closet or store. Above the rafters, well furnished with *cleeks* for the family stock of hams, there was spread, in lieu of a ceiling, a large sheet of canvas or coarse unbleached cotton. There was a table under the window, a *dresser* with racks for plates, etc., set up against the opposite wall, and an eight-day clock between the window and the fireplace. "Fixtures" were in such houses practically non-existent; the grate, which consisted merely of two or three bars or *ribs*, the iron *swey* from which hung the large pot with its rudimentary feet, and, in some cases, even the window, were the property of the immigrants, and were carried about by them from farm to farm in their successive flirtings.

When at Whiterigg, the children attended school at Ayton, and here young John learned his letters and made considerable progress in reading. After two years, the death of the Whiterigg farmer made another change necessary, and the family returned to the Dunglass estate and settled at Aikieside, a forester's cottage quite near to their former home at Oldcambus Mains, and within easy reach of Oldcambus School. Aikieside is in the Pease Dean, a magnificent wooded glen, crossed a little lower down by a famous bridge which carries the old post road from Edinburgh to Berwick over the Pease Burn at a height of nearly one hundred and thirty feet. A still older road crosses the stream close to its mouth, less than a mile below the bridge. The descent here is very steep on both sides, but it seems to have been even steeper in former times than it is now. This point in the old road is "the strait Pass at Copperspath," where Oliver Cromwell before the battle of Dunbar found the way to Berwick blocked by the troops of General Leslie, and of which he said that here "ten men to hinder are better than forty to make their way."

Beautiful as the Pease Dean is, it has this drawback for those who live in the vicinity—especially if they happen to be anxious mothers—that it is infested with adders; and as these engaging reptiles were specially numerous and specially aggressive in the "dry year" 1826, it is not surprising that when, owing to the cottage

at Aikieside being otherwise required, John Cairns was offered a house in the village of Cockburnspath, he and his wife gladly availed themselves of that offer. From Cockburnspath another removal was made in the following year to Dunglass Mill; and at last, in 1831, the much travelled family, now increased to eight, found rest in a house within the Dunglass grounds, after the father had received the appointment of shepherd on the home-farm, which he held during the rest of his life.

CHAPTER II

DUNGLASS

The Lammermoor range, that "dusky continent of barren heath-hills," as Thomas Carlyle calls it, runs down into the sea at St. Abb's Head. For the greater part of its length it divides Berwickshire from East Lothian; but at its seaward end there is one Berwickshire parish lying to the north of it—the parish of Cockburnspath. The land in this parish slopes down to the Firth of Forth; it is rich and well cultivated, and is divided into large farms, each of which has its group of red-roofed buildings, its substantial farmhouse, and its long tail of hinds' cottages. The seaward views are very fine, and include the whole of the rugged line of coast from Fast Castle on the east to Tantallon and North Berwick Law on the west. In the middle distance are the tower of Dunbar Church, the Bass Rock, and the Isle of May; and farther off is the coast of Fife, with Largo Law and the Lomonds in the background. The land is mostly bare of trees, but there is a notable exception to this in the profound ravines which come down from the hills to the sea, and whose banks are thickly clothed with fine natural wood.

Of these, the Pease Dean has already been mentioned. Close beside it is the Tower Dean, so called from an ancient fortalice of the Home family which once defended it, and which stands beside a bridge held in just execration by all cyclists on the Great North Road. But, unquestionably, the finest of all the ravines in these parts is Dunglass Dean, which forms the western boundary of Cockburnspath parish, and divides Berwickshire from East Lothian. From the bridge by which the Edinburgh and Berwick road crosses the dean, at the height of one hundred feet above the bed of the stream, the view in both directions is extremely fine. About a hundred and fifty yards lower down is the modern railway bridge, which spans the ravine in one gigantic arch forty feet higher than the older structure that carries the road; and through this arch, above the trees which fill the glen, one gets a beautiful glimpse of the sea about half a mile away.

Above the road-bridge, and to the right of the wooded dean, are the noble trees and parks of Dunglass grounds. The mansion-house,

a handsome modern building, part of which rises to a height of five storeys, is built only some eight or ten feet from the brink of the dean, on its western or East Lothian side. About fifty yards farther west are the ivy-covered ruins of a fine Gothic church, whose massive square tower and stone roof are still tolerably complete. This church before the Reformation had collegiate rank, and is now the sole remaining relic of the ancient village of Dunglass. In former times the Dunglass estate belonged to the Earls of Home, whose second title, borne to this day by the eldest son of the house, is that of Lord Dunglass. But it was bought about the middle of the seventeenth century by the Halls, who own it still, and in whose family there has been a baronetcy since 1687. The laird at the time with which we are now dealing was Sir James Hall, whose epitaph in the old church at Dunglass bears that he was "a philosopher eminent among the distinguished men of an enquiring age." He was President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh for many years, and was an acknowledged expert in Natural Science, especially in Geology. His second son was the well-known Captain Basil Hall, R.N., the author of a once widely-read book of travels.

Behind the church, and about a hundred yards to the west of the mansion-house, are the offices—stables, close boxes, coach-house, etc., all of a single storey, and built round a square paved courtyard. The coachman's house is on one side of this square, and the shepherd's on the other. The latter, which is on the side farthest from the "big house," has its back to the courtyard, and looks out across a road to its little bailyard and a fine bank of trees beyond it. It is neat and lightsome, but very small; consisting only of a single room thirteen feet by twelve, with a closet opening off it not more than six feet broad. How a family consisting of a father, mother, and eight children could be stowed away in it, especially at night, is rather a puzzling question. But we may suppose that, when all were at home, each of the two box-beds would be made to hold three, that a smaller bed in the closet would account for two more, and that for the accommodation of two of the younger children a sliding shelf would be inserted transversely across the foot of one of the box-beds. Certainly, an arrangement of this kind would fail to be approved by a sanitary inspector in our times; and even during the day, when all the family were on the floor together, there was mani-

fest overcrowding. But the life was a country one, and could be, and was, largely spent in the open air, amid healthful surroundings and beautiful scenery.

The income available for the support of such a large household seems to us in these days almost absurdly inadequate. The father's wages rarely exceeded £30 a year, and they never all his life reached £40. They were mostly paid in kind. So many bolls of oats, of barley and of peas, so many carts of coals, so many yards of growing potatoes, a cow's grass, the keep of two sheep and as many pigs, and a free house,—these, which were known as the *gains*, were the main items in the account. This system gave considerable opportunity for management on the part of a thrifty housewife, and for such management there were few to surpass the housewife in the shepherd's cottage at Dunglass.

The food was plentiful but plain. Breakfast consisted of porridge and milk; dinner, in the middle of the day, of Scotch kail and pork, occasionally varied by herrings, fresh or salt according to the season, and with the usual accompaniments of potatoes and pease bannocks. At supper there was porridge again, or mashed potatoes washed down with draughts of milk, and often eaten with horn spoons out of the large pot which was set down on the hearth. Tea was only seen once a week—on Sunday afternoons. And so the young family grew up healthy and strong in spite of the overcrowding.

Before the removal to Dunglass, the two eldest children had been taken from school to work in the fields, where they earned wages beginning at sixpence a day. Their education, however, was continued in some sort at a night-school. John and his younger brother James, and the twins, Janet and William, who came next in order, attended the parish school at Cockburnspath, a mile away. Cockburnspath is a village of about two hundred and fifty inhabitants, situated a little off the main road. It has a church with an ancient round tower, and a venerable market-cross rising from a platform of steps in the middle of the village street.

On the south side of the street, just in front of the church, stood the old schoolhouse—a low one storey building, roofed with the red tiles characteristic of the neighbourhood, and built on to the

schoolmaster's two-storey dwelling. The schoolmaster at this time was John M'Gregor, a man of ripe and accurate scholarship and quite separate individuality. The son of a Perthshire farmer, he had studied for the ministry at St. Andrews University, and had, it was said, fulfilled all the requirements for becoming a licentiate of the Church of Scotland except the sending in of one exercise, This exercise he could never be persuaded to send in, and that not because he had any speculative difficulties as to the truth of the Christian revelation, nor yet because he had any exaggerated misgivings as to his own qualifications for the work of the ministry; but because he preferred the teaching profession, and was, moreover, indignant at what he conceived to be the overbearing attitude which the ministers of the Established Church assumed to the parish schools and schoolmasters. This feeling ultimately became a kind of mania with him. He was at feud with his own parish minister, and never entered his church except when, arrayed in a blue cloak with a red collar, he attended to read proclamations of marriages; and he could make himself very disagreeable when the local Presbytery sent their annual deputation to examine his school. Yet he was essentially a religious man; he had a reverence for what was good, and he taught the Bible and Shorter Catechism to his scholars carefully and well.

As he disliked the ministers, so he showed little deference to the farmers, who were in some sort the "quality" of the district, and to such of their offspring as came under his care. The farmers retaliated by setting up an opposition school in Cockburnspath, which survived for a few years; but it never flourished, for the common people believed in M'Gregor, whom they regarded as "a grand teacher," as indeed he was. He had a spare, active figure, wore spectacles, and took snuff. There was at all times an element of grimness in him, and he could be merciless when the occasion seemed to demand it. "Stark man he was, and great awe men had of him," but this awe had its roots in a very genuine respect for his absolutely just dealing and his masterful independence of character.

John Cairns first went to Mr. M'Gregor's school when the family removed to Cockburnspath from Aikieside, and he made such progress that two years later, when he was ten years old, the master proposed that he should join a Latin class which was then being formed. This proposal caused great searchings of heart at home. His