



ROBERT HUDDLESTON (1814-1887)
The Bard of Moneyrea

Robert Huddleston, the 'Bard of Moneyrea' was one of the most productive of all the Ulster-Scots writers. He wrote hundreds (if not thousands) of poems, ballads and songs, mostly in the Ulster-Scots (or as he described it, Ulster-Irish) idiom. He was born on 5 April 1814 in Moneyrea, son of James and Agnes Huddleston. He was educated in Cowan's School where he encountered authors such as Byron, Milton, Spencer, Fergusson and Burns.

Life as a tenant farmer in the gentle drumlins of his beloved North Down encouraged Huddleston to consider the economic and social conditions of the time. He despised the idle landed gentry and saw Home Rule for Ireland as the political answer to the woes imposed by "The Saxon".

Huddleston was an eccentric with strong views on almost every subject. As far as his own work was concerned, he disliked having his poems described as 'mimic Scotch' - and worse still as 'sprung from Burns'. In the preface of his second book of poems published in 1846, Huddleston wrote a lengthy tirade against his critics, saying that '...pretaes in my vernacular language is as good to me as potatoes to them in theirs'. All he asked of the world, he said, was that it believed him to be 'an original': ...though I may not be a Robert Burns to the lowland Scottish peasantry, let me hope, at least, that I shall one day be a Robert Huddleston to the Ulster Irish.

From the early 1840s Huddleston began to contribute poems to local newspapers and periodicals. In 1843 he issued a florid prospectus and began to solicit subscriptions. His first volume, *A Collection of Poems and Songs on Rural Subjects*, appeared the following year, but a disagreement with his publisher over the printing costs followed, when some subscribers defaulted. Undaunted, he saw a second volume through the press in 1846, *A Collection of Poems and Songs on Different Subjects*. This too met with a lukewarm reception. He wrote a novel *The Adventures of Hughey Funny, or The Many Tales of Love*, in 1887, but it was never published.

It is recorded that when a party travelled from Belfast, curious to visit the country bard, he met them at Ballygowan station, and brought them to Moneyrea in his cart. It was covered in clabber, and the poet said: "That's the wy A pents my carriage. A jist let the new wash aff the aul." The visitors considered the bard to be very much like his own carriage.

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

Huddleston's manuscripts have survived. His output was prodigious. It appears not a day went by without a written comment on the religious, ethical, political and social matters of his era.

Today his manuscripts give us a fascinating insight into the lives and thoughts of ordinary people living in North Down in the middle of the nineteenth century.

*Tae Sing the day, tae sing the fair,
That Birkies ca' the Lammas;
In aul' Belfast, that toun sae rare,
Fu' Fain wad try't a gomas
(The Lammas Fair)*

According to John Hewitt, Huddleston was one of the last folk-bards of Ulster.

Robert Huddleston died on 15 February 1887 and is buried in the family grave at Moneyreagh Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church.

Patrick Devlin