

Antoinette Sterling and Other Celebrities  
Chapter 6 – Love For Scotland  
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In this chapter, I will include quite large sections from the book, as I feel it is most suited in describing the relationships Antoinette had.

“Oh, the Scotch heart, the Scotch mind, the Scotch tongue, the Scotch oat-cakes, the `Caller and the dried herrin’, I love them all!” Antoinette wrote in one of her journals. She also wrote: “Dear Edinburgh! Home of my heart, my soul, my spirit! As I lay in bed this morning, looking out upon the castle and the hillside, I felt so happy that the tears poured out of my eyes. When I arrived here, I seemed like an exile coming back. It felt, somehow, as though London were my resting-place, but Edinburgh my home.” These were the singer’s words during a concert tour through Scotland.

Antoinette had many intimate friends in Scotland, and others she knew in public life. She even became friends with the celebrity of canines, “Grey Friars Bobby!”

Sir Noel Paton was a leading Scotch painter, and Antoinette had the pleasure of knowing he and his wife. In her journal, she shared of her first visit to their home: “When I entered, Lady Paton held out both arms and kissed me over and over again, saying she could hardly believe that A.S. had really come.” Antoinette would refer to herself as A.S. anytime an event had to do with her singing, wishing to keep it separate from her married life.

Antoinette continued the story: “I told her I had come to sing to them about `De poor lost sheep of de sheepfold, ‘ and we went down to Sir Noel’s studio. There, standing in front of his canvas, I saw the most magnificent type of Scotchman (he might have been a Michelangelo model), with a face which suggested that of the beloved George MacDonald. He looked like one of those paintings of the prophets or heroes. Such a head! Such a front! A glory of greyish hair with the Scotch crinkly waves; a beard, long and heavy, curly and thick; massive shoulders, fearless eyes and commanding pose, grand in stature, noble from head to foot, and a heart to match. Lady Paton was true, loving, womanly and sweet, a fit mate for him. And as they stood together in the studio A.S. sang, `And de poor los’ sheep of de sheepfold, dey all come gatherin’ in. Ah! Ah!’” In her description of the physical appearance of the painter, she showed she had good taste in men!

Following, is Antoinette’s recollection of her meeting with John Stuart Blackie, considered “Very Scot of Very Scot.” Blackie was born in Glasgow, educated at Aberdeen and Edinburgh. He was a writer, and translated Goethe’s “Faust” into English. “O that dear, strange, wonderful Professor Blackie – just an outcome of Scotland, like a bit of wild, strange, beautiful mountain scenery with rushing waters and quiet lakes; unconventional to the highest degree. We were so alike in disposition that I might almost have been of the same family. The Professor knew we were coming, and came to open the door himself, a white straw tall hat upon his head. `I came to receive my guests myself. No men-servants here,’ were his words of greeting.

“He had on a white tie with long flowing ends, and reminded me rather of Joshua Fox, of Falmouth, only Fox was taller, broader, and quieter – a Quaker, around whom all things with wings flocked in such numbers that you could scarcely distinguish him. Mrs. Blackie was a tall, remarkable woman, with blue-grey eyes, original in her ideas, and extremely musical. Taking Mrs. Balfour and A.S. on either arm, the Professor conducted us to

the drawing-room, where we had a flow of wit and humour, touching stories, and Scotch songs. As I sang, he kept saying, 'Follow nature! That's right!', beating time with his two hands all the while. Every few verses he would join in, and sing a few lines with me. He was then eighty-four years old and said he was going to keep on working until the day he died. At the carriage door I remember his saying, 'I worship God! I worship God!' He was religious, but very unorthodox – I was going to say 'Thank God! And I do say it ten thousand times.' A little more than a year, and the Professor died.

It was her doctor, David Wilson, who became one of her oldest and dearest friends. In a letter to her, after hearing her sing "Caller Herrin", he described how, through her singing, she transported him back to when he was eighteen. "My Dear Miss Antoinette Sterling, --I cannot retire to bed before posting this note to say that you excelled yourself this evening – in 'Caller Herrin'" especially. Your singing was to my mind grand and heavenly; your triumph surpassed, in my opinion, even the reception given to that old favourite ----. In fact, you are the Queen of Song, and that is plain truth. I feel more than trebly rewarded, in the improving condition of your vocal apparatus, for all the time bestowed upon it whereby it may and shall still further send forth into space in Divine perfection the marvellous and lovely emanations of that inspired soul, which the Father of Spirits has given unto thee. Your 'Caller Herrin' and its encore have positively given me a pain through pure emotion of the most elevated character. I have never been so aroused by song all my life as to-night. You carried me back as if by an electric shock to my student days in Edinburgh, when I was a lad of eighteen. You brought before my eyes again those fine Musselburgh fishwomen with their creels, calling out in the streets at eleven o'clock at night, as vividly as when I was close by them. The whole audience were riveted when you sang, afterwards calling out 'Bravo! Bravo!' with myself. Some exclaimed 'Magnificent! One lady close by me said she had heard it a dozen times, but never to such grand perfection. Good night, and God bless you!"

Dr. Wilson had both financially-secure patients, and those who could not afford to pay. He never turned anyone away. In a year's time, he saw hundreds of non-paying patients, which says a lot about his reasons for being a medical doctor! He was a man who demanded each patient, and even his nurses, to follow his instructions completely. If they didn't, his Scotch blood flowed even redder, and the offending person was made sorry they had erred!

My great-grand aunt first met Dr. Wilson soon after arriving in England, and the two became very close, so close that they regarded each other as father and daughter. She would even call him "Pa", as she thought of him as a second father. Dr. Wilson's daughter, Annie, became Antoinette's closest and inseparable companion. Annie and the singer, over the years, shared many times of happiness and sorrow, which drew them all the more closer.

Through Dr. Wilson, Antoinette was fortunate to meet people, such as Mary Anderson, and Forbes Robertson.

In the book, Malcolm shares that until Dr. Wilson's death, Antoinette and John would go to his home to spend Sunday evenings with him. Malcolm wrote: They would arrive in time for a sort of –"High Tea" it might have been styled, only as tea was tabooed by the Doctor, it would be a Hibernianism to give that name to a meal in which the only liquid drunk was cocoa. The evening would afterwards be spent quietly in chatting or reading the papers to him. For years it was my mother's invariable custom to drink the particular sort of cocoa which Dr. Wilson used to have specially prepared for his patients. It was rather complicated to get ready, as the making of it involved a constant stirring over the fire or spirit lamp for some minutes, until the milk (there was no water used, so that it was very nourishing, not to say fattening) had boiled up three times. In spite of this,

wherever she went, it was her custom to take sufficient to last till her return. When staying at an hotel or in a friend's house, she would more often than not make it herself. This led to a rather awkward contretemps, in which she was guilty of unintentional rudeness. She had been invited to stay with some Quaker friends, who were manufacturers of a famous make of chocolate. When she arrived, her hostess inquired what she would like to do about meals, as she was singing in the evening. My mother answered that she usually had a chop and some stewed fruit about half-past four. "I will see that they are made ready for you at that hour. What would you like to drink? I know it's no good offering tea. Perhaps you would care for a cup of chocolate?" "Oh, no, thank you!" she answered, without thinking. "I don't care to take anything except my old doctor's cocoa. I have some with me." Bringing coals to Newcastle with a vengeance!

The poet-preacher, George MacDonald was Antoinette's earliest Scotch friend. They met in New York, in the year 1872 when MacDonald came to America. You will recall it was Dr. Wilson that walked Antoinette down the aisle the morning of her wedding. Following, is the journal entry written by Antoinette: "My first meeting with that apostle of love, of poetry, of kindness, of nobleness, was when he came to New York during a lecturing tour. He was advertised to speak one night upon the subject of Burns at the Young Men's Christian Association Hall. I had always been a devotee of Robbie Burns and of George MacDonald's books. I therefore set out for the Hall with a friend during a heavy rain storm, clad in a large waterproof and goloshes. The latter I always call 'rubbers,' much to the amusement of English people. We sat entranced all through the evening, until suddenly some one called out: 'No lecture upon Burns could be perfect without the voice of one of his most enthusiastic followers and greatest exponents – Miss Sterling.' From his first words I somehow imagined that Mr. MacDonald must have brought a protégée whom he wished to introduce to the American public. I was simply horror-struck to hear my own name pronounced at the end of the sentence. The three thousand or more people burst out into loud clapping, while I only felt confused and sat immovable. But the public will was so strong, and the calls were so loud and unintermitting, that the lecturer was obliged to stand still, supposing, of course, that the demonstration had been arranged, and I was a young singer wanting an appearance. At last some one came and literally pulled me on to the platform. I had not yet recovered my self-possession, and stood there stupefied by the rush and din. Amid cries for 'A Man's a Man for a' That,' I jumped out into the open sea of music, and, with no idea of absolute pitch, started half dazed at the middle of the first verse. The crowd grew more boisterous than ever, and my mind fell into greater confusion. I went on to the second verse, but suddenly came to a barren place. All the words disappeared. This was hardly to be wondered at, for I had never before sung it without holding the music in my hand. I had foolishly learned to depend on having the words to refer to in case of a lapse of memory. I hesitated for a moment, and then there sounded in my ear the soft, rich, Scotch voice of George MacDonald, 'Gie fules their silks and knaves their wind.' It was like giving a toboggan a little push down the hill. It started the wheels of memory, and, like a hidden mental phonograph, the machinery worked. I went through the rest of the song somehow, and was very glad to get back to my waterproof and those goloshes, which always seem to make one feel like a large, clumsy penguin walking along.

"The next time I saw the poet-preacher was at a church in New York City, where I knew he was going to preach. There was a small gallery directly over the pulpit. Here I took up my position, and at the close of the sermon, much to the congregation's surprise, sang, without accompaniment, 'The Lord is our Shepherd.'"

It was when MacDonald lived on the Italian Riviera that Antoinette visited him, while on her way to Australia. This concert tour in Australia was when her husband, John MacKinlay, suddenly died, and she came back to London, a widow.

The last time Antoinette saw George MacDonald was at a garden party, given by his son, Dr. Greville. Antoinette noted how proud he looked to be surrounded by his family and friends. Malcolm wrote that MacDonald and Antoinette were very much alike; both broad-minded in religion and delighted in mysticism; both simple, loving, generous; both strong in their beliefs; both did right because it was right. Above all, they were alike in speaking and thinking of death as something beautiful, not to be feared. “How strange it seems,” George MacDonald once said, “to have a fear of Death. Yet we are not frightened at a sunset.” The same feeling was expressed in the lines which Antoinette Sterling would so often quote – Earth is but our Resting-place, Heaven is our Home.

Stay tuned for Chapter 7 – Her Philanthropic Interests