

George Walter Thornbury (1828-76)

2 *Culloden*

Bright both in sun and shade,
Shone the brave white cockade —
White as the snow that laid
 On dark Culloden.

How the Macgregors came, 5
Faster than running flame,
Putting the Grants to shame,
 Though so down-trodden.

Looking along the line, 10
I saw the fiery eyne
Of the Macdonalds shine
 At the clan Frasers.

They pulled their bonnets down,
With a black, cruel frown,
Firm on their matted crown 15
 (Swords sharp as razors).

Each one his claymore-sheath
Threw on the purple heath,
And with dirk 'tween his teeth 20
 Glared at the cannon,
Reapers at early dawn,
Standing beside the corn,
With our keen sickles drawn,
 That day we ran on.

As the wind reaps the pines, 25
So through the Saxon lines,
Where the bright bayonet shines,
 Burst we in anger,
Spite of the fiery hail,
All our grim faces pale, 30
With a loud pibroch wail,
 Drove our mad clangour.

Loud rang the war pipes then,
Cheering the Cameron men
Thinking of lake and glen 35

 'Mid the fire fountains,
Waved the white ribbons all,
Round the king's colours tall,
Answered the bugle call,
 Horns of the mountains. 40

Athol-men, tall and lithe,
Each with a sweeping scythe;
Yet they were but a tithe
 Of the brave rebels. 45

Waded knee deep in blood
Through the hot, burning flood,
On through a flaming wood,
 As their strength trebles.

Barehead in wind and sun,
We prayed to only one. 50

Low the deep murmurs run
 Of the Dhun Wassels,
Felled in great swathes, like grain
Layed by the flooding rain:
Tide after tide in vain, 55
 Drove on the vassals.

As from grey Catdicham,
Swoops on the sportive lamb,
Spite of its bleating dam,
 Eagle-dark pinions, 60
Scaring the shepherd's child
With its glance keen and wild,
Then soaring blood-defil'd
 To its dominions.

As when the flooded rills 65
Pour down between the hills,
And the lone valley fills
 With awe and wonder.

When on before them fast
Flies the red lightning blast, 70
Through the lit pines aghast
Howls the deep thunder.

Stormy the pipers blew,
Snow white the ribbons flew,
Deeper the fury grew, 75
Madder than Flodden,
Piercing through heart and brain.
Beating like tempest rain,
Drove the red hurricane
O'er dark Culloden. 80

We did all that mere steel could do,
Against a Saxon crew,
Arm'd with the fire that flew;
Lightning to blast us, 85
Swifter than eagles' wing,
From the dark rocky spring,
Where the wild foxgloves cling,
Athol-men past us.

One line was swept away,
Still to that fatal fray, 90
Laughing like boy at play,
Drove on Glengarry.
Pistol in bloody hand,
Target thrown on the sand,
Macbane, with swinging brand, 95
Did not long tarry.

Banked up with rows of dead,
Calmly as on a bed,
With his gashed forehead red,
Sat Angus the piper. 100
Knitted his brows, and pale
As seaman who sees a sail
Split in the sudden gale,
Still growing riper.

When Keppock saw them fly, 105
Tears filled his burning eye —
“Sons of my tribe,” his cry,
“Am I forsaken?”

Fast on the bayonets then,
Hewed he down flag and men, 110
Fierce as from rocky den,
The wolf o’ertaken.

Athol and Cameron men,
Children of Lake and Fen;
Would we could see again 115
“John of the Battles!”

O for the stormy plaids!
O for the rush of blades,
Where through the rocky glades
Fast the stream prattles. 120

Round his old sire a son
Threw his stabbed arm, the one
With a blood torrent run,
Shielding from danger,
Praying to Jesus there 125
To save his hoary hair,
So he might anywhere
Die with the stranger.

One by his chieftain knelt,
Holding his girdled belt; 130
I saw the hot tears melt,
Shed on the dying.

Then with his broad claymore,
Reeking and wet with gore,
Slew he some three or four 135
Of the fools flying.

As when the granite blocks,
Stricken by lightning shocks,
Breaks from the Lomond rocks:
Riven asunder, 140
Smoke down the gorge and pass,

Shivered like brittle glass,
Sweeping down pines like grass
 With a hoarse thunder.

Crimson like driven flame, 145
On the red tartans came,
What could their fury tame?
 Not steel or iron.

Cutting a bloody lane —
Red path for serf and thane — 150
Strode the grey Allan Bane
 Through thy environ.

Sullen some stand apart,
I saw the tear-drops start,
Wrung from the bleeding heart, 155
 Mourning lost honour.

“Better go mad and weep —
Better grave twelve foot deep —
Better eternal sleep —
 Than this dishonour.” 160

Waiting and baring breast,
Gaze turned towards the west;
On their sheathed arms they rest,
 Eyes staring redly. 165
Gnashing with rage their teeth,
Sword in the sluggish sheath —
Dead on the bloody heath,
 Slain in the medley.

Wounded men crawl and die,
Striking with glazing eye, 170
Deadly their grasp and cry,
 Stabbing the German.

Clasping the bayonets, they
Strove to hew out a way,
Leaping, like hounds at bay, 175
 On the red vermin.

Old men with blooded hair,

Sea, sky, and mountain fill
All minds with wonder.

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1857

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