

Looking For Clarinda
By: Tommy Miller

Robert Burns met Agnes Maclehose (alias “Clarinda”) on his second trip to Edinburgh in 1782. They met at the house of a friend “Miss Erskine Nimmo”. They were so taken with each other that they arranged to meet for tea the following Saturday. Unfortunately Burns dislocated his knee in a fall and was unable to keep the rendezvous. Never the less he was writing to Agnes four days later, he wrote:

“I can say with truth Madam that I never met a person in my life whom I more anxiously wished to meet again than yourself. I am determined to cultivate your friendship with the enthusiasm of Religion. I cannot bare the idea of leaving Edinburgh without seeing you.”

Why has very little been written about this great intellectual lady burns had found?

Agnes Maclehose was born Agnes Craig. She was the fifth child of surgeon Andrew Craig, a well-known and respected physician. She was born on April 17th, 1759 at Salt Market in Glasgow. As a teenager, Agnes became the toast of Glasgow society and at age 15 fell for the charms of James Maclehose, a Glasgow law agent who pursued her with some diligence. Even to the point of reserving all the seats on a coach to Edinburgh so that he would have an exclusive journey with Agnes. His flattering silver tongue wooed her and they were married on June 25th, 1776, and so she became Mrs. Agnes Maclehose.

Six years of close proximity with Maclehose’s mental cruelty, depression and vaguety drove Agnes to despair. Her father’s death in 1782 however gave her the opportunity to flee Edinburgh to her cousin, the advocate William Craig, later to become Lord Craig of the Court of the Judiciary who found her a small apartment at Generals Entry off Potterow.

Agnes devoted her life to literature and socializing and was a regular attender at the literary teas at the home of Miss Nimmo. In late 1782 James Maclehose announced his intentions to emigrate to Jamaica. Agnes refused the suggestion of a reconciliation. Following a time of debauchery in London, Maclehose did go to Jamaica and so Agnes was left a grass widow and thus into her world stepped Robert Burns.

John Miers silhouette picture of Agnes Maclehose hints at her buxom beauty and Burns was stunned by her golden feathery curls tied up in black velvet ribbon. To Burns golden locks were a sign of amorousness. He wrote thus in one of his books and now he was writing to his friend Captain Richard Brown. He wrote:

“Almighty love still reigns and revels in my bosom and I am at this moment ready to hang myself for a young grass widow who has wit and beauty more murderously fatal than the assassinating stiletto of a Sicilian bandito.”

Agnes obviously believed that Burns was a free man. He did not acknowledge Jean Armour as his wife until April 1788.

The intensity of their relationship developed rapidly. They embarked on the romantic correspondence of some seventy surviving letters. Burns has never felt this way before. The correspondence kept up at a fast pace of verbal tennis and they met when they could. They gave each other love names, "Clarinda" and "Sylvander" respectively. From time to time Agnes took on the role of tease and when Burns mentioned the word "love" she drew back with the not altogether mock reproof of, "Do you remember that she whom you address is a married woman?". Burns usually responded with a volley of literary analysis, religious allusion or counter reproof.

Agnes became nervous at intervals that their relationship might lead to a scandal. For instance, on December 21st, 1787 she wrote, "I entertain you not to mention our correspondence to anyone on earth, though I've conscious innocence, my situation is a delicate one."

Her cousin Lord Craig might stop supporting her if he caught a whiff of scandal. On January 13th, 1788 Agnes commented, "I hope you will come afoot even though you can take a chair home. A chair is so uncommon a thing in our neighborhood it is apt to raise speculation, but they are asleep by ten."

Burns passion for her increased. "I will love you forever" he wrote. They exchanged poems and mild physical pleasures. Dated January 16th, 1788, Agnes wrote this to Burns:

"I will not deny Sylvander, last night was one of the most exquisite ever experienced. Few such fall to the lot of mortals, few, extremely few are formed to relish such refined enjoyment. That it should be so vindicated the wisdom of heaven, but though our enjoyment did not lead beyond the limits of virtue. Yet today's reflections have not been altogether unmixed with regret."

Agnes went through a time of nervousness. People were gossiping. Burns refuted her fears, dismissing the tittle tattle as cold blooded pitiful Presbyterian bigotry. Their affair was at its height. Burns wanted to take Agnes all the way to sexual fulfillment. Agnes now decided to effect a reconciliation with her husband in Jamaica.

Burns parting from Agnes was to bring forth one of his best love songs. "Ae Fond Kiss". It comes down the years as an untarnished, emotional effusion of love.

Agnes set sail from Leith in February 1792 and arrived in Kingston Jamaica in April only to discover her husband had a Mistress and daughter and had no interest in reconciliation. Agnes returned on the next ship home. She was never to meet with Burns again.

In old age Agnes Maclehoze took a great delight and talking of the poems and songs Burns had written in her honor and her own verses he had received and approved. On the anniversary of any event she recalled concerning Burns, like his birthday or the date of his death she noted in her journal, "Things I never can forget". Parted from Burns in the year 1791 never more to meet in this world, "Oh may we meet in heaven".

In 1810 Agnes moved from Potterow to live at Calton Hill, Edinburgh where in 1825 Burns' fourth son, Captain James Glencairn Burns visited her. She died on October 22nd, 1841 and is buried in Cannongate church yard, Edinburgh, in the tomb of her cousin William, Lord Craig.

Summing Up

I find it extraordinary that Agnes and Burns never reached sexual fulfillment. I believe they did. Her denials in her letters were to protect her cousin's reputation from gossip.

I believe it was Lord Craig who insisted that Agnes go to Jamaica. This would tear her away from Burns and if the reconciliation didn't succeed she would have to return on his terms, one of these being she never see Burns again.

Lord Craig must have been a remarkable man. He took care of Agnes from age 23 and after his death, provided for her a total of 60 years.

Could it be that Agnes and Lord Craig were more than just cousins?

I wonder.

Sources

Correspondence between Burns and Clarinda
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