

## **Burns and his Bairns**

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**By**

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‘Lament him, Mauchline husbands a’,  
He aften did assist ye;  
For had ye staid hale weeks awa’,  
Your wives they ne’er had missed ye!

Ye Mauchline bairns, as on ye pass  
To school in bands thegither,  
O, tread ye lightly on the grass –  
Perhaps he was your father!’

The subject of this poem was thought by early scholars to be one James Smith, others that it is more likely to ‘Clockie Brown’.

Irrespective of the subject’s real identity, it prompts me to note that none of Burns’ Bairns were as the result of a relationship between the poet and a married woman. Indeed they were all born to pretty young women all of whom fell for his charms.

How many bairns did he father? My research has come up with different numbers. It ranges from 12 to 16.

McKay enumerates 15. Nine by Jean Armour; one each by other young ladies that I will discuss later, and one other that died at birth and one miscarried. McKay goes on to state that “in the context of the time such behaviour (and its consequences) were by no means uncommon”. The chronology of Robert Burns accounts for 13.

James Barke notes that “Of his 15 children, 9 were born in Lawful Wedlock” This depends on when you consider Burns and Jean Armour were legally married. And by the way in this same book Professor DeLancey Ferguson’s Chronology only accounts for 13. Barke goes on to comment, “... in no sense was Burns a libertine. Of no man is it recorded that he looked upon the children he fathered as his and not the mother’s responsibility. Burns was supremely conscious of the glory of parenthood ...” In my opinion this is garbage, it is like a wine connoisseur describing the qualities of a wine in terms that nobody else can fathom out, but it sounds educated. I can only assume that this conclusion by Barke is based on Burns poem “A Poet’s Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter” which he wrote on the birth of his illegitimate daughter Elizabeth Burns to Elizabeth Paton but who was later raised by Jean Armour.

Welcome my bonie, sweet, wee dochter!  
Tho ye come here a wee unsought for,  
And though your comin I hae fought for,  
Baith kirk and queir;  
Yet, by my faith, ye're no unwrought for –  
That I shall swear.

According to Alan Bold, Burns admitted to 11 illegitimate children. If we add to this his 5 children after his “official” marriage to Jean Armour then he would have fathered 16 in total. Perhaps the epitaph I read earlier was his own.

This reminds me of the story of Mrs. McNamara who had just given birth to her fifteenth bairn. She answered the door a week later and there was a priest who announced that he had come from the Vatican with a special congratulatory letter from the Pope. She answered saying “But I’m not Roman Catholic” to which the priest commented “You mean I come all this way for a sex maniac”.

According to the web site [www.burness.ca/burns.html](http://www.burness.ca/burns.html) which gives an excellent genealogy of Burns down to 250 descendants, Robert Burns had a total of twelve children by four women, including nine by his wife Jean Armour. (It makes no reference to one that died at birth (Margaret “Highland Mary” Campbell), one to Margaret “May” Cameron who miscarried and one to Helen Armstrong, all of whom are mentioned by McKay; this would make 15.) According to the genealogy, seven of his children were illegitimate, including the first four by Jean Armour before they were married in 1788. Of Jean's children, six died young and another, William, had no children. The last descendant of their eldest son Robert (1786-1857) was Jean Armour Burns Brown, who died in 1937. All living descendants of Robert Burns and Jean Armour descend from their granddaughter Sarah Elizabeth Maitland Tombs Burns (1821-1909), daughter of their fourth son James Glencairn Burns (1794-1865).

Many of Robert Burns' descendants are from his two illegitimate daughters:

1. Elizabeth "Bess" Burns (1785-1816), daughter of Elizabeth "Betsey" Paton.
2. Elizabeth "Betty" Burns (1791-1873), daughter of Ann Park.

Robert Burns also had an illegitimate son Robert by Janet "Jennie" Clow. He was born in Edinburgh in 1788 and later became a merchant in London.

Burns had several writs issued against him by the mothers of his illegitimate children. For example he said to his friend Ainslie “send for the wench and give her ten or twelve shillings” The wench was May Cameron (He was later freed of this writ). Elizabeth Paton in 1786 and Jenny Clow in 1789 issued other writs. You could say that he was a regular attendee at what is described in Calgary's legal slang as “The Slippery Zipper Court”.

*[There is some evidence that Robert and Jean were privately married in April 1788, but it was not until August 5 that they appeared before the Kirk Session to acknowledge and accept rebuke for their irregular marriage, after which time their marriage was formally recognized. They finally set up house together at Ellisland in November 1788. In addition to her own children, Jean raised Robert's illegitimate daughter Betty (born in 1791 to Ann Park), and in later years her granddaughter Sarah Burns whose mother had died in childbirth]*

**Children of Robert Burns and Jean Armour** were as follows:

i. **Robert Burns**, born 3 September 1786 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland. He married Anne Sherwood on 24 March 1809 in London, England. He died on 14 May 1857 in Dumfries, Dumfriesshire, Scotland, at age 70.

Robert was educated at Dumfries Academy and Glasgow University. In 1804 he obtained a clerkship in the Stamp Office in London, but was not successful and got into trouble for gambling debts. In 1832 he was given early retirement and a pension due to his father's fame. He retired to Dumfries with his common-law wife Emma Bland where he taught mathematics and classics while Emma kept a lodging house.

ii. **Jean Burns** was born on 3 September 1786 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland. She died on 20 October 1787 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland, at age 1.

iii. **Unnamed Burns** was born on 9 March 1788 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland. She died on 10 March 1788 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland.

iv. **Unnamed Burns** was born on 9 March 1788 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland. She died on 22 March 1788 in Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland.

v. **Francis Wallace Burns** was born on 18 August 1789 in Ellisland, Dunscore, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. He died on 9 August 1803 at age 13.

vi. **William Nicol Burns** was born on 9 April 1791 in Ellisland, Dunscore, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. He married Catherine Adelaide Crone on 8 September 1824 in Bangalore, India.

William was educated at Dumfries Academy and Christ's Hospital, London. He entered the service of the Honourable East India Company and eventually rose to the rank of Colonel. He retired to Cheltenham Gloucestershire, England, and died on 21 February 1872, at age 80 without issue.

vii. **Elizabeth Riddell Burns** was born on 21 November 1792 in Dumfries, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. She died in September 1795 at age 2.

viii. **James Glencairn Burns**, born 12 August 1794 in Dumfries, Dumfriesshire, Scotland; He married Sarah Robinson in April 1818, she died on 7 November 1821 in Neemuch, India. He married Mary Beckett in June 1828.

Like his older brother William, James was educated at Dumfries Academy and Christ's Hospital, London, before entering the service of the Honourable East India Company where he rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He also retired to Cheltenham where he died on 18 November 1865 at age 71.

ix. **Maxwell Burns** was born on 25 July 1796 in Dumfries, Dumfriesshire, Scotland. He died on 25 April 1799 in Dumfries, Dumfriesshire, Scotland, at age 2.

*[Elizabeth Paton was baptized on 20 August 1760 in Tarbolton, Ayrshire, Scotland. She married John Andrew on 9 February 1788 in Tarbolton, Ayrshire, Scotland. Elizabeth (Betsey) Paton was employed as a female servant on the Burnes farm at Lochlie during the winter of 1783-84, but returned to her own home when the Burnes family moved to Mossgiel in March 1784. However, Robert apparently returned to visit her since their daughter Elizabeth (Bess) was born 22 May 1785. Betsey subsequently married John Andrew, a farm labourer, and they had four children.]*

**Children of Robert Burns and Elizabeth “Betsy” Paton were:**

**Elizabeth “Bess” Burns**, born 22 May 1785 in Tarbolton, Ayrshire, Scotland; married John Bishop in 1807.

*[Janet Clow was born in 1766 in Newburgh, Fife, Scotland. She died in January 1792 in Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland. Janet (Jenny) Clow was a maid to Nancy McLehose, a friend of Robert Burns, who lived in Edinburgh.]*

**Children of Robert Burns and Janet Clow were:**

**Robert Burns**, born November 1788 in Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland.

*[Ann Park was baptized on 16 December 1770 in Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland. She married John Greenshields on 11 November 1794 in Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland. Ann Park was a barmaid at the Globe Inn in Dumfries.]*

**Children of Robert Burns and Ann Park were:**

**Elizabeth “Betty” Burns**, born 31 March 1791 in Edinburgh, Midlothian, Scotland; married John Thomson in 1808.

Let me conclude with some of Burns’ own words, which I think reflects the bard’s outlook on his women and a certain disregard for their offspring.

“With rueful face and signs of grace  
I pay’d the buttock hire,  
The night was dark and through the park  
I could but not convoy her;  
A parting kiss, what could I less,  
My vows began to scatter,  
My Betsy fell – lal de dal lal lal,  
I am a fornicator.