

## Gilbert Burns 1760 – 1827

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### Introduction:

Gilbert Burns, was born at Alloway, Ayrshire in 1760, died in 1827, aged 66 and was buried at Bolton, East Lothian. The Burnes (Burns) family consisted of seven other siblings, in addition to Gilbert there was his older brother, Robert, the oldest child in the Burnes family, four sisters and two other brothers; the siblings were Agnes, (Burness) Galt, (1762- 1834); Annabella, (1764-1832); Isabell, (1767- 1771); William Burness (1767 - 1790); John Burness (1769 - 1785); and Isabella (Burness) Begg (1771 – 1858).

### William Burnes:

Gilbert's father, William, was born in 1721 at Glenbervie, in Kincardineshire and died in 1784 at Lochlea, Ayrshire. He was reputedly an intellectual, strict and religious man, who passed on his beliefs to Robert and Gilbert at an early age. He initially worked as a gardener, before moving to Edinburgh in 1748 to work as a landscaper. His ambitions were however to be a market gardener so he moved to Alloway in 1750, where he leased seven acres of land for that purpose and built his own cottage for his future family, which was later to become the birthplace of Robert and Gilbert. William stayed as a market gardener until 1765 when he decided on a change of occupation again and became a tenant farmer in May 1766 by taking a twelve-year lease at Mount Oliphant, a ninety-acre farm about two miles from Alloway. Life at Mount Oliphant was very hard for William and his sons. Gilbert later described in his letters how extreme hard work was the only way that the family could survive and that their diet and life was one of austerity and struggle, with 'luxuries' such as butcher's meat for meals non-existent.

Gilbert was 5 years old and Robert 7 years old when William Burnes moved the family to Mount Oliphant at Whitsun, in 1766 and where he hoped to earn a good living from the farm's 70 acres and so took a loan of £100 to buy livestock. The rent was £40 a year for the first six years and £45 thereafter. Writing later Gilbert said '*that the soil at Mount Oliphant was the very poorest he knew of, unimproved and unimprovable*', and even Robert later stating, '*the farm proved a ruinous bargain*'.

The family struggled to make ends meet on the farm. Robert and Gilbert worked alongside their father in the fields. Some of the cattle died in accidents and from disease. Robert tilled the earth with a hand plough and learned to thresh the corn. By the time he was 15 years old Robert did most of the hardest work on the farm. He remembered working like 'a galley-slave'.

Gilbert was only 17 in 1777, when the Burnes family moved again, this time to Lochlea Farm. The farm was a few miles from the villages of Tarbolton and Mauchline, with the farm standing about 400 feet above sea level and being almost twice the size of Mount Oliphant, but the ground turned out to be unsuitable for efficient farming as it was very swampy and prone to flooding. Robert and Gilbert worked long hours on the farm to earn a modest wage and keep the farm running. The strain of all the hard work took its toll on William for it was at Lochlea that William Burnes died in 1784. William was able however to pass on to his sons his religious beliefs and the importance of a good education. As an example, Gilbert's religious education

was partly taught at home by his father, using the A Manual of Religious Belief that William Burnes had written for that purpose.

### **Education:**

Gilbert began his education, learning the basics of writing and reading, at William Campbell's school at Alloway Mill. However, after a short time Campbell closed the school and moved to Ayr, which resulted in Gilbert's father, William, in co-operation with four of his neighbours, responding by employing John Murdoch as a schoolmaster to provide an education for Robert and Gilbert. John Murdoch regarded Gilbert as being an able student even writing in one of his letters that of the two boys, surprisingly, the one most likely to succeed in life, was Gilbert. "*Gilbert always appeared to me to possess a more lively imagination, and to be more of the wit, than Robert*".

Gilbert had his own opinion about Murdoch's teaching capabilities, for he wrote in one of his letters '*With him we learnt to read English tolerably well, and to write a little. He taught us, too, the English grammar. I was too young to profit much from his lessons in grammar, but Robert made some proficiency in it, a circumstance of considerable weight in the unfolding of his genius and character, as he soon became remarkable for the fluency and correctness of his expression*'. It's interesting that even at this stage in his life, Robert's literary capabilities were recognizable, even by his younger brother.

John Murdoch was obviously impressed with the boys' abilities as he also communicated with Dr. Currie regarding the early education of the Burns' boys. '*Robert and his younger brother, Gilbert, had been grounded a little in English before they were put under my care. They both made a rapid progress in reading, and a tolerable progress in writing. In reading, dividing words into syllables by rule, spelling without book, parsing sentences*'. Murdoch's influence on the boys' education was obviously very beneficial as Robert and Gilbert were generally considered to be at the upper end of the class, even when ranged with boys far more their seniors.

However, it should be noted that when it came to the brothers' total education it wasn't all success and compliments for Murdoch was also to write, '*I attempted to teach them a little church-music. Here they were left far behind all the rest of the school. Robert's ear, in particular, was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. It was long before I could get them to distinguish one tune from another*'.

Gilbert continued to attend Murdoch's school even after the family had moved to Mount Oliphant in 1766 and only left when the school was closed in 1768. In 1772 Gilbert continued his education under John Murdoch and was sent on alternate weeks to the Dalrymple parish school, whilst Robert at this time attended school at Kirkoswald, their father being unable to spare both brothers from their farm chores. As an example, Gilbert in another letter wrote, '*The summer after we had been at Dalrymple School, my father sent Robert to Ayr, to revise his English grammar with his former teacher, Murdoch. He had only been there one week when he was obliged to return, to assist at the harvest, however when the harvest was over, he went back to the school, where he remained for two weeks*'.

The brothers' education ended in 1777 when the lease was up at Mount Oliphant and William and the family moved again, this time to the 130 acre farm at Lochlea, in the parish of Tarbolton.

## **Gilbert's Personality:**

When describing Gilbert's personality it would appear there is quite a contradiction. On the one hand, he has been described as being *methodical, somewhat timid, and determined not to offend the gentry*, with Dr. John McKenzie, a doctor later attending William Burnes, writing that "*Gilbert was very capable and knowledgeable, taking after his father in manner and appearance*". When one considers Gilbert's marriage and family life, as described later, I would have to conclude he was an extremely easy-going person.

Robert Ferguson, a contemporary poet of the Burns age, puts it as "Gilbert never was able to shake off the mental attitude of the tenant farmer and the factor, whose ruling purpose in life is to do nothing that will offend 'the gentry'".

It is curious that John Murdoch, their one-time schoolmaster preferred Gilbert to Robert, and thinking that, because the former was the merrier of the two, he was more likely to turn out to be a poet. On the other hand, Gilbert was regarded by many others as lacking his brother's flair, wit and genius, but then who could compete with Robert's 'flair, wit and genius'?

It was also recorded by Gilbert that at this time his relationship with his father was such that despite his age he was treated by him as an adult. This manifested itself in their conversation whilst at work, which covered a wide range of topics intended to educate and to keep him on the straight and narrow in relation to moral behaviour. An obvious question would be why William chose Gilbert for this relationship, and not his older brother, Robert. One is left imagining how things might have turned out had Robert been his father's confidant and taken the teachings of 'moral behaviour' to heart.

## **Gilbert as a Farmer**

Gilbert was 5 years old and Robert 7 years old when the Burnes family moved to Mount Oliphant in 1766. As Robert later said, 'the farm proved a ruinous bargain'. In 1783 Gilbert and Robert leased land and a farm at Mossgiel with Gilbert writing in one of his letters, 'Robert and I took the farm of Mossgiel, consisting of one hundred and eighteen acres, at the rent of £9, from Mr. Gavin Hamilton, as an asylum for the family in case of the worst'.

Life at Mossgiel however, didn't turn out to be quite what they had hoped for, as Gilbert described how Mossgiel was unprofitable and the brothers were forced to give up the lease in 1788 and rescue what they could from their joint venture. It is unclear just exactly the reasons how or why the brothers were unable to make a profit from farming, although it has been said by good authorities that 'Gilbert knew more about the theory of farming than its practice' and even Dr. Currie stated "that neither did Robert show much skill as a farmer." Gilbert agreed with Currie's assessment, describing Robert's abilities as 'Nobody held the plough better; nobody had a more elegant cast of the hand while sowing than he; but his knowledge of markets, rotation of crops, and other mysteries of husbandry, was slender; and he would often, in following his whim or indulging his social propensities, neglect his farming duties'. Both of the brothers were relatively new to running and owning a farm, even though they had spent much of their childhood on one. When it came to running the farm the brothers saw themselves as a new, more entrepreneurial generation even down to looking for new crops and methods from books they had read about agricultural improvement. It also seems apparent that Gilbert was determined to succeed in his farming endeavours as he continued to 'farm' one way or another throughout the rest of his life.

Gilbert again was willing to put pen to paper and wrote his thoughts and comments on farming and flax dressing to James Currie, 'I can say, from my own experience, that there is no sort of farm labour inconsistent with the most refined and pleasurable state of the mind that I am acquainted with, thrashing alone excepted. That, indeed, I have always considered as insupportable drudgery; and think the ingenious mechanic who invented the thrashing machine, ought to have a statue among the benefactors of his country, and should be placed in the niche next to the person who introduced the culture of potatoes into this island'.

Gilbert continued to farm at Mossgiel even after Robert departed for Edinburgh in 1786 and remained until 1798. However, as it turns out his farming was still a struggle, and he was only able to continue through the generosity of his brother, who in January 1789 sent Gilbert 180 pounds, almost half of the profits generated from his sale of the Edinburgh volume of his poems. It turns out that the money actually wasn't a gift, but a loan, with interest being charged. As it turns out there perhaps was some ulterior motive in Robert's 'generosity'. In his January 1789 letter to Dr. John Moore, Burns said "I only interposed between my brother and his impending fate by the loan of so much and I give myself no airs on this for it was mere selfishness on my part. I was conscious that the wrong scale of the balance was pretty heavily charged and I thought that throwing a little filial piety and fraternal affection into the scale in my favour might help to smooth matters at the grand reckoning', i.e. at heaven's gate".

Another aspect of the loan was what to do with Elizabeth Paton, 'Dear-bought Bess', Robert's illegitimate daughter by Elizabeth Paton, born in 1785 to their servant girl at Lochlea. Robert had a document drawn up leaving the profit of the Kilmarnock Edition and the proceeds from the sale of his estate to Gilbert on the condition that the child was brought up as if his own. Gilbert therefore provided a home for 'Dear-bought Bess' when Burns intended to move to Jamaica.

After leaving Mossgiel in 1798, Gilbert spent 2 years farming at Dinning, in Nithsdale, where he is recorded as having made very fine cheeses and introduced the Ayrshire method of dairy farming to the locals. Gilbert left Dinning before the lease was up as he was appointed by the son of Frances Dunlop, Captain John Dunlop, as estate manager at Morham West Mains, East Lothian for four years.

Four years later he became factor on the East Lothian Estates of Lady Katherine Blantyre and lived there at Grant's Braes, near Haddington, where he ended his days in 1827.

### **Flax Growing and Flax Dressing 1781 – 1784**

The brothers, when they sub-leased a parcel of the land from their father at Mossgiel, decided in 1781 to start to grow flax. It is unclear whether it was Robert or Gilbert's idea to grow flax, although Gilbert in one of his letters wrote, 'Burns began to think of trying some other line of life. He and I had for several years taken land from my father for the purpose of raising flax on our own account.' At this time flax was cultivated both for its fibre, from which linen yarn and fabric are made, and for its nutritious seeds, called flaxseed or linseed, from which linseed oil is obtained. Interestingly, the government provided grants for flax growing, which perhaps also added to the brothers' decision to give up farming and take up flax growing. Flax dressing was the process of turning untreated flax into flax fibres that could then be spun and turned into cloth

Dressing the flax is the process of removing the straw from the fibres and consists of three steps: 'breaking, scutching, and heckling'. The 'breaking' breaks up the straw, with some of the straw scraped from the fibres in the scutching process, and finally, the fibre is pulled through

heckles, which are sharp, long-tapered, tempered, polished steel pins driven into wooden blocks at regular spacing, to remove the last bits of straw.

The brothers obviously saw a potentially profitable business opportunity in initially growing flax and even more so later on, the process of converting the flax fibres to linen through the flax dressing process. Although it was Robert, who after they had started to grow the flax began to think of flax-dressing, both as being suitable to his grand view of settling in life, and as subservient to the flax raising. He accordingly tried the business of a flax-dresser in Irvine for six months, in July 1781 age 22.

***An interesting aside to the term 'heckling' as part of flax dressing is how the word 'heckling' is used in modern times. The flax hecklers of Dundee evidently established a reputation as the most argumentative element in what was a famously radical town and were already operating as a powerful trade union. Within the group, one person was nominated to provide incisive and witty comments and interjections i.e. heckling, which were designed to tease or elicit the truths that politicians might prefer to conceal or avoid. Thus, heckling entered the world of political debate, combining an incisive comment or question with spontaneous wit and quick-fire challenges enjoyed by those speakers who could deal with them and amuse their audience with a ready riposte.***

Robert's experience with the flax dressing in Irvine didn't last very long, only 6 months, and he returned to Mossgiel. However, it was obvious to Gilbert when Robert returned that some significant changes had occurred during his days in Irvine for he wrote that 'he here contracted some acquaintances of a freer manner of thinking and living than he had been used to, whose society prepared him for overleaping the bounds of rigid virtue, which had hitherto restrained him'. Even Robert agreed for he stated that Richard Brown's views on illicit love 'did me a mischief'.

Gilbert wrote a letter to Mrs. Dunlop in 1797 about Robert's decision to abandon it 'as neither agreeing with his health due to the dusty nature of the work nor inclination.' One could argue that the major outcome of Robert's attempt at flax dressing and his return to Mossgiel was that Burns arrived in Irvine as 'an **apprentice flax-dresser** and left as an **apprentice poet**'.

## **Gilbert's Marriage**

Gilbert married Jean Breckenridge (1764 – 1841) of Kilmarnock in June of 1791, at Craigie near Ayr and with whom he had no less than 11 children, named Agnes, Anne, Gilbert, Isabella, James, Janet, Jean, John, Robert, Thomas, and William. Little is known of Jean or their children and so I'm assuming that they lived a 'normal' life for country farm people of that time.

In addition to this large family, which also included 'Dear bought Bess', Gilbert also had his mother living with the family until she died in 1820 at the age of 88, and his unmarried sister, Annabella, who, outlived her brother by 5 years. In my opinion living with such a large family and relatives should entitle Gilbert to be considered something of a 'martyr', but it also gives an indication of his stable temperament and personality.

## **Gilbert's Personality and Influence on Robert:**

In the information available on the Burns' brothers there is no mention of what today would be termed 'sibling rivalry' with Robert noting that he regarded his brother as his intellectual equal, as well as his trusted confidant and his best friend. It was Gilbert, who in 1784 advised Robert that he should publish his poetry putting the thought into Robert's mind that he could become a published poet and even giving his brother helpful feedback on his poem *Epistle to Davie*.

Gilbert's support of Robert wasn't just verbal, but also financial as he managed to secure seventy subscribers to Robert's first book of poems, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.

It should also be noted however that there were times when Gilbert disagreed with Robert's actions for example, he sided with his sisters against Robert and his mother in advising Robert not to marry Elizabeth Paton after his affair, which resulted in the birth of Elizabeth Paton Burns.

As the brothers grew older, contact became less frequent and after the move from Mossgiel in 1788, Gilbert saw little of his brother. He did however, attend Robert's funeral in 1796 in Dumfries, interestingly, he was the only close relative to do so.

Gilbert's father's religious influence on him manifested itself through his involvement in different church activities as an example in 1808 he was made an Elder of the Church and had responsibility for the areas of Begbie, Dalgowrie, Lethington, Westfield, Myreside, Colstoun, East and West Bearford, and Monkrigg. He became the Treasurer of the Bolton Bible Society and in 1809 supervised the completion of Bolton church.

Perhaps a poignant example of Gilbert's personality occurred in 1820, when Gilbert was given £250 to write some additional material for the eighth edition of Currie's *The Works of Robert Burns*. But the publishers, Cadell and Davies, warned him that he must not cast doubts upon the general accuracy of Currie's portrait. Gilbert therefore had a unique opportunity to defend his brother's reputation, but agreed with the publisher's request and the opportunity passed by. One positive outcome however was that out of his payment cheque he repaid his dead brother's loan.

Gilbert is also credited with being the person who first introduced David Sillar (1760-1830) to Robert and the Burns family in 1780. David was a year younger than Robert and was probably Burns' closest friend, his *Dainty Davie* during his Lochlea days. David becoming a great admirer of Robert and a great influence on Robert's writings. In later life in recognition of this admiration, he was to become the first vice-president of the Irvine Burns Club.

### **Gilbert's Letters**

In addition to his love of reading, Gilbert was very fond of writing down many of his thoughts in the form of letters. Valuable information about Robert's health and personality as a young man and teenager at Mount Oliphant were related by Gilbert in his many letters and he describes how 'Robert suffered regularly from headaches, palpitations, faintness and feelings of likely suffocation'. Gilbert also mentions how as a teenager, Robert was shy and awkward with women. However, as we now know that changed once he reached manhood as he avidly sought female company and was constantly falling for members of the fair sex. Again, there seems to be a contradictory aspect to this behaviour as there is also a further statement by Gilbert that until Robert was 23, 'he acted with great respect towards women, probably because he was keen to be seen as an eligible bachelor and the time he spent at Irvine was partly due to his desire to find a wife and settle down'. Gilbert also records that, 'he never saw his brother drunk during the seven years that they were at Lochlea'.

Gilbert's comments on Mount Oliphant, 1766 – 1777

The farm my father possessed in the parish of Ayr, Mount Oliphant, is almost the poorest soil I know of in a state of cultivation. A stronger proof of this I cannot give, than that, notwithstanding the extraordinary rise in the value of lands in Scotland, it was, after a considerable sum laid out in improving it by the proprietor, let a few years ago five pounds per annum lower than the rent paid for it thirty years ago. My father, in consequence of this, soon came into difficulties, which were increased by the loss of several of his cattle by accidents and disease. To use the buffetings of misfortune we could only oppose hard labour, and the most rigid economy. We lived very sparingly. For several years butcher's meat was a stranger in the house, while all the

members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength, and rather beyond it, in the labours of the farm. My brother, at the age of thirteen, assisted in thrashing the crop of corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm, for we had no hired servant, male or female. The anguish of mind we felt at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great. To think of our father growing old (for he was now above fifty), broken down with the long-continued fatigues of his life, with a wife and five other children, and in a declining state of circumstances;

Gilbert goes on 'these reflections produced in my brother's mind and mine sensations of the deepest distress. I doubt not, but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of his life was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits with which Robert was so often afflicted through his entire life afterwards. At this time he was almost constantly afflicted in the evening with a dull headache, which, at a future period of his life, was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart, and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night-time.'

In addition to his love of reading, Gilbert was very fond of writing down many of his thoughts in the form of letters, as an example, describing his time at Mount Oliphant by saying 'Nothing could be more retired than our general manner of living at Mount Oliphant; we rarely saw any body but the members of our own family. There were no boys of our own age, or near it, in the neighbourhood. Indeed, the greater part of the land in the vicinity was at that time possessed by shopkeepers, and people of that stamp, who had retired from business, or who kept their farm in the country at the same time that they followed business in the town.' Sounds like cottage country territory!

Gilbert also had thoughts about Robert's days in Irvine 'that he here contracted some acquaintances of a freer manner of thinking and living than he had been used to, whose society prepared him for overleaping the bounds of rigid virtue, which had hitherto restrained him.

Robert himself stated that Richard Brown's views, his friend in Irvine, could easily lead him astray, 'Richard's views on illicit love did me a mischief'.

### **Tarbolton Bachelor's Club**

The Tarbolton Bachelor's Club was a debating club founded on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1780 by Robert Burns, Gilbert Burns, Hugh Reid, Alexander Brown, Thomas Wright, William M'Gavin and Walter Mitchell, all young men of Tarbolton parish with the first meeting being held in John Richard's alehouse in Tarbolton. The alehouse, which was the most popular meeting place in the village had a large room accessed by an outside stair and was well known to Robert and Gilbert as the Freemason's meeting place and for Robert especially as in 1779 he attended dance classes there and as he said 'to give his manners a brush'.

Although it is unclear who actually initiated the formation of the 'debating club' the fact that at the first meeting, Robert Burns was unanimously elected president for the night, suggests that he likely was the initiator and main driving force behind its formation. The aims of the club were:

- to 'forget their cares and labour in mirth and diversion',
- to promote friendship, and
- improve their minds with meaningful debate.

The proceedings were to be ordered, with no swearing or profanity, and no obscene or indecent conversation allowed. The members also decided a certain decorum and protocol should be followed and accordingly rules were drawn up, the tenth and most significant of which read:

- 'Every man proper for a member of this Society, must have a frank, honest, open heart; above anything dirty or mean; and must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex.

- No haughty, self-conceited person, who looks upon himself as superior to the rest of the Club, and especially no mean spirited, worldly mortal, whose only will is to heap up money shall upon any pretence whatever, be admitted.

**Conclusion:**

From the research and information available on Gilbert, on his upbringing, his life and his relationship with his brother Robert, the conclusions I can draw are that Gilbert was 'an ordinary, decent person and family man' with no indications of some of the usual 'sibling rivalry'. In fact, it would appear that Gilbert was more than willing to encourage Robert in his writing endeavours and support him when he wanted to try 'flax dressing' in Irvine.

He obviously enjoyed reading and writing a diary, especially when growing up and where his and Robert's lives were concerned with life as a farmer. One assumes that when he became a full time farmer and father, with 11 children, he had less time for writing his letters, but did find time for his various church and masonic lodge activities.