

Robert Burns: A Select Anthology
A Life Revealed in Poem and Song

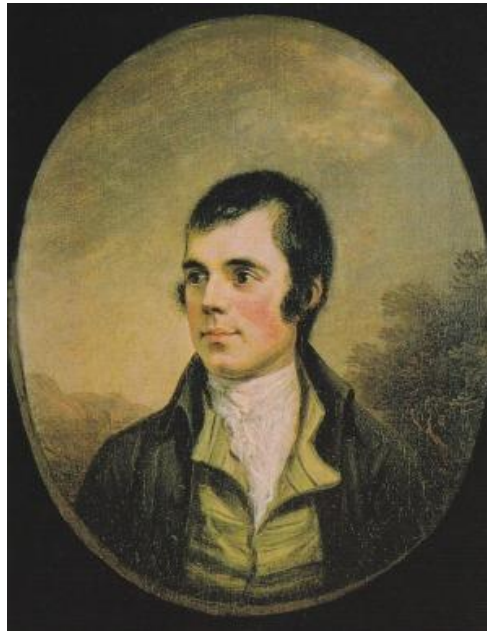


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Introduction

The poet Robert Burns is known and celebrated throughout the world, and while he is primarily recognized as *Scotland's* National Bard, the depth of human sentiment expressed in his poems and songs has endeared him to so many far beyond the borders of Scotland throughout the more than two hundred years since his death in 1796. He is not just Scotland's bard; his works are a gift to all peoples of the world.

Burns was a man of his time who, at least in his early years, was confronted with the hardships of his generation, including poverty, prejudice, inequality, and more. All these conditions inspired outpourings of his 'Muse', that mythical source of his poetic inspiration, variously juxtaposed as pain or pleasure, insult or flattery, love or loathing – in short, giving expression to all of those emotions that us humans confront in our everyday lives. He was so often uplifted by the wonders of nature and a lust for life, as well as the enchantment of numerous '*fair enslavers*' who served to focus or distract his impressionable mind and spirit. In other respects, he was a man of independent mind, but a man no less, with all the aspirations of his gender and the age in which he lived, along with his share of the faults and failing most mortals fall heir to, yet overall exhibiting the sensitivities of a decent and caring human being.

What follows is in no way a memoir or biography of the poet, although I have usually provided some background and context where useful for a better understanding of the verses, as well as including limited narratives touching on the poet's life that might provide some greater interest and insight overall. I have been particularly 'informational' in the section dealing with his romances, as with these I feel a more detailed background is necessary to understand the man, and the essence of the emotions he expresses. Besides, it is the most fascinating aspect of his life! I have, however, prepared a short biography-cum-summary of the highlights of his life that is attached as an appendix.

This Anthology is mainly an attempt to tease out what I believe are many of Burns' most memorable poetical gems from his extensive legacy of over 300 songs, 200-plus poems and various Epigrams, Epitaphs and 'Fragments'. My selections are only that, a compendium of verses that I have found touching, provocative, clever, humorous, insightful, or worthy of notice for some other reason. It is far from being a comprehensive exposition or critique of his works.

In the interests of brevity, I will usually not quote the full poem or song, although that compromise will often lead to the omission of verses that are also of notable merit and would almost surely be included in a more comprehensive treatment. I hope that what I have included will at least whet the appetite of those who may wish to delve deeper into Burns' works, or reference the full versions of specific poems or songs. Where I have displayed the full work, usually it is either because of its special interest, or where a truncated version would lose too much of its import.

I should point out that accepted spellings in the time of Burns (for example 'bonie' for bonnie) - and, to some extent, the rules of grammar and punctuation - were different than they are now. In quoting him, for the most part I have preserved his orthography and syntax, but have inserted some additional punctuation to help 21st Century readers understand more clearly.

His Earliest Works

In profiling his early attempts at rhyme, where better to start than his first known published verses, the song entitled *Handsome Nell?* The subject – Helen Blair – had been ‘coupled’ with young Robert to assist in the harvest, a risky, if charming, pairing that was a common custom at the time. Burns described her as ‘*a bewitching creature*’ and ‘*a bonie, sweet, sonsie lass*’, whom he credits as having cast the spell that first inspired him to ‘*commit the sin of RHYME*’. He was fifteen and she a year younger. He begins his seven-stanza poetical debut with:

**O once I loved a bonie lass,
Ay, and I love her still!
And whilst that virtue warms my breast,
I’ll love my handsome Nell.**

After some expressions of admiration for the bonnie lass, he opines that:

**A gaudy dress and gentle air
May slightly touch the heart;
But it’s innocence and modesty
That polishes the dart.**

And concludes with his final avowal of lovelorn admiration:

**‘Tis this in Nelly pleases me,
‘Tis this enchants my soul;
For absolutely in my breast
She reigns without controul.**

Not bad for an unsophisticated fifteen-year-old country lad, but a promising first step in a lifelong journey that would see him acclaimed as Scotland’s National Bard.

Undoubtedly our young poet-in-the-making would have taken time to hone his skills, and just one year later we see how well he had progressed. His second published offering - *Now Westlin Winds* - not only displays a marked measure of maturity in his poetical composition, but also in his knowledge and love of the natural environment of his native rural Ayrshire. As with so many of his works, this piece was inspired by ‘*a charming Fillete ...who set me off at a tangent*’, Margaret (Peggy) Thomson. The first and final two of the five verses illustrate how far he had come in such a short time:

Now westlin winds and slaughtering guns *western*
Bring Autumn’s pleasant weather;
The moorcock springs on whirring wings *red grouse*
Among the blooming heather:
**Now waving grain, wide o’er the plain,
Delights the weary farmer;
And the moon shines bright, as I rove by night,
To muse upon my charmer.**

**But Peggy dear, the ev’ning’s clear,
Thick flies the skimming swallow;
The sky is blue, the fields in view,**

All fading-green and yellow:
Come let us stray our gladsome way,
And view the charms of Nature;
The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,
And ilka happy creature.

every

We'll gently walk, and sweetly talk,
While the silent moon shines clearly;
I'll clasp thy waist, and, fondly prest,
Swear how I lo'e thee dearly;
Not vernal show'rs to budding flow'rs,
Not Autumn to the farmer,
So dear can be as thou to me,
My fair, my lovely charmer!

love

Burns' poetical output – at least of those he later published – was understandably scant until his early 20's. Skipping over a mere five other pieces in those early years takes us to one of his best-known songs that he composed at age 22, *The Rigs o' Barley*; it was based on an old song, but reworked by Burns in this greatly improved version. The 'Annie' referred to was Anne Rankine, daughter of a friend and neighbouring farmer. There may have been some exchange of amatory feelings, but they were likely simply good friends...perhaps at Annie's insistence!

The charmingly jaunty and teasingly suggestive chorus is:

***Corn rigs and barley rigs,
An' corn rigs are bonie:
I'll ne'er forget that happy night,
Among the rigs wi' Annie.***

(NB: If sung, the second line usually ends 'bonie-O', and the fourth 'Annie-O', and similarly at the end of each alternate line of the verses).

The first verse sets the scene for their tryst:

**It was upon a Lammas night,
When corn rigs are bonie,
Beneath the moon's unclouded light,
I held awa wi' Annie;
The time flew by wi' tentless heed,
Till, 'tween the late and early,
Wi' sma' persuasion she agreed
To see me through the barley.**

a religious holiday beginning August 1

away

careless

Skipping the next two verses, it ends with:

**I hae been blythe wi' comrades dear;
I hae been merry drinking;
I hae been joyfu' gath'rin gear;
I hae been happy thinking;
But a' the pleasures e'er I saw,
Tho' three times doubl'd fairly -**

have

making money

**That happy night was worth them a',
Among the rigs o' barley.**

At around age 22-23, he had to face a number of family and personal difficulties, as well as coping with periods of depression that might have been clinical in nature. Many of the verses he composed during that time were more dirge-like than hopeful or uplifting, or even just neutral in tone, so not fully representative of the poet he became, nor particularly memorable to quote.

With his penning of *John Barleycorn: A Ballad*, we may discern a renewed spirit of levity, both literally and metaphorically. It is a reworking of an old folk allegory about the violent threshing and winnowing of the barley, but according to the legend, not by a farmer, but rather three murderous kings:

**There was three kings into the east,
Three kings both great and high,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath
John Barleycorn should die.**

**They took a plough and plough'd him down,
Put clods upon his head,
And they hae sworn a solemn oath,
John Barleycorn was dead.**

But as summer passed nature worked her magic, allowing John Barleycorn to grow and mature, which enraged the spiteful kings, who set out “**to cut him by the knee**”, then:

**They laid him down upon his back,
And cudgell'd him full sore.
They hung him up before the storm,
And turned him o'er and o'er.**

What followed then was a series of murderous assaults on poor John Barleycorn that bore a curious similarity to the steps that mimicked the actions of a distiller of spirits, and lo-and-behold it was turned into a liquid, the very blood of bold John Barleycorn:

**And they hae taen his very heart's blood, *taken*
And drank it round and round;
And still the more and more they drank,
Their joy did more abound.**

It had confounded their evil intent by taking on the delectable form of that iconic elixir, Scotch Whisky, a gift for posterity:

**Then let us toast John Barleycorn,
Each man a glass in hand,
And may his great prosperity
Ne'er fail in old Scotland.**

From this point I will present the pieces grouped under categories wherever practical, such as verses of nature, romance, satire, humour etc.

Burns on Burns His Demons and His Aspirations

At this early point it might be instructive to view some of the versified insights Burns offers into his own life and thoughts. In the early years of his adult life, he experienced a series of challenges and disappointments that assailed him and that shaped his vision. His life was fraught, mainly coping with the near-poverty that beset his family, as well as having to take on the back-breaking role of sole ploughman and general labourer at the family's Mount Oliphant farm when he was just fifteen years old, which his brother Gilbert later cited as likely being the main cause of his frequent bouts of depression during his teenage years. Adding to the despondency of his own situation was his acute awareness of the miseries suffered by most of the population, the common folk. He identified with them, and harboured deep resentments over the injustices heaped upon them, victimized by the insidious class system prevalent in his day.

In *Tragic Fragments*, at just eighteen years of age, he wrote these lines, reflecting his own inadequacies, but also the 'human wretchedness' of the oppressed in general:

**All villain as I am – a damnèd wretch,
A hardened, stubborn, unrepentant sinner –
Still my heart melts at human wretchedness,
And with sincere, tho' unavailing sighs
I view the helpless children of distress.
With tears indignant I behold the oppressor
Rejoicing in the honest man's destruction,
Whose unsubmitting heart was all his crime.**

And given his personal travails, made worse by his struggle with depression, in *To Ruin*, he appeals to '...thou grim Pow'r', meaning Death, to claim him and relieve his miseries:

**I court, I beg thy friendly aid,
To close this scene of care!
When shall my soul, in silent peace,
Resign Life's joyless day?
My weary heart its throbbing cease,
Cold mouldering in the clay?**

His Dread of Poverty, and Concern Over Its Affect on Others

Throughout his life, Burns spoke against inequality and the poverty that accompanied it. He often feared the possibility that he himself might become the victim of penury, a fear that preoccupied him throughout much of his life. His *Man Was Made to Mourn – A Dirge*, confronted the privileges and cruelty of the monied classes. His brother Gilbert remarked that Burns was mortified at the thought of having to search for work, perhaps in vain, a spectre that prompted him to compose this piece. He employs the fiction of an elderly man meeting him wandering the countryside in a futile search for work:

**When chill November's surly blast
Made fields and forests bare,
One ev'ning, as I wandered forth
Along the banks of Ayr,
I spied a man, whose aged step**

**Seem'd weary, worn with care,
His face was furrow'd o'er with years,
And hoary was his hair.**

He greets the young Burns, and asks if he too is dealing with the curse of poverty, or burdened with other 'cares and woes', and goes on to speak of a long lifetime observing the cruel exploitation of the poor:

**The sun that overhangs yon moors,
Out-spreading far and wide,
Where hundreds labour to support
A haughty lordling's pride;
I've seen yon weary winter-sun
Twice forty times return;
And ev'ry time has added proofs,
That Man was made to mourn.**

In youth, he says, we are oblivious to the passing of precious time, living it up, thus greatly amplifying the likelihood that we could fall victim to 'Nature's law...'

That Man was made to mourn.

When young, we are strong and well able to find work; we ignore the prospect of advancing age when we will still have material needs, but are no longer able to find the work and earn money to support them:

**But see him on the edge of life,
With cares and sorrows worn,
When Age and Want – oh! Ill-matched pair! –
Shew man was made to mourn.**

**A few seem favourites of Fate,
In pleasure's lap carest;
Yet think not all the rich and great
Are likewise truly blest.**

But he predicts that most of those in their 'youthful prime' will come to learn the hard way:

**But oh! what crowds in ev'ry land,
All wretched and forlorn,
Through weary life this lesson learn,
That Man was made to mourn.**

And despite that we are all born of God with the capacity to love, some in positions of wealth and power nevertheless will act cruelly towards their less fortunate brethren, so that...

**Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!**

Lordlings will even spurn the appeals of a desperate man begging for work to support his family:

**Unmindful, tho' a weeping wife
And helpless offspring mourn.**

But the old man asks, if he was always fated to become a slave to a lordling, why was he created with an independent mind:

**If not, why am I subject to
His cruelty, or scorn?
Or why has Man the will and pow'r
To make his fellow mourn?**

However, he asks the poet to take dubious consolation in the thought that the oppressed will find comfort in a future existence, even if only in Death:

**O Death, the poor man's dearest friend,
The kindest and the best!
Welcome the hour my aged limbs
Are laid with thee to rest!
The great, the wealthy fear thy blow,
From pomp and pleasure torn;
But, oh! a blest relief for those
That weary-laden mourn!**

Eventually Burns appeared to grow out of the worst of that unremitting dark phase, yet as late as 1786, at age twenty-seven, in *Despondency – An Ode*, the 'black dog' returns to try him:

**Oppress'd with grief, oppress'd with care,
A burden more than I can bear,
I set me down and sigh;
O Life! thou art a galling load,
Along a rough, a weary road,
To wretches such as I!
Dim-backward, as I cast my view,
What sick'ning scenes appear!
What sorrows yet may pierce me thro'
Too justly I may fear!
Still caring, despairing,
Must be my bitter doom;
My woes here shall close ne'er *never*
But with the closing tomb!**

Even in November 1788, we can feel his pain in *The Lazy Mist*, perhaps brought on by the realization that Ellisland Farm, that he had recently leased, was yet another 'ruinous bargain':

**How long I have liv'd, but how much liv'd in vain!
How little of life's scanty span may remain!
What aspects old Time in his progress has worn!
What ties cruel Fate in my bosom has torn!**

**How foolish, or worse, till our summit is gain'd!
And downward, how weaken'd, how darken'd how pained!
Life is not worth having with all it can give:
For something beyond it poor man, sure, must live.**

A Life Plan and Pride In His Craft

In a less despondent outlook, in *Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet*, he offers advice on what most matters in life, and how we can pursue a happy existence, which we can assume were the optimistic goals he set for himself:

It's no in titles nor in rank:

It's no in wealth like Lon'on Bank,

London

To purchase peace and rest,

It's no in makin' muckle, mair;

much, more

It's no in books, it's no in lear,

learning

To make us truly blest:

If happiness hae not her seat

And centre in the breast,

We may be wise, or rich, or great,

But never can be blest!

Nae treasures nor pleasures

Could make us happy lang;

long

The heart ay's the part ay

That makes us right or wrang.

In *Epistle to James Smith*, he points to one asset he values that helps assuage his state of poverty:

Some rhyme a neebor's name to lash;

neighbour's

Some rhyme (vain thought!) for needfu' cash;

Some rhyme to court the countra clash,

tattle

An' raise a din;

For me, an aim I never fash;

become upset over

I rhyme for fun.

The star that rules my luckless lot,

Has fated me the russet coat,

And damn'd my fortune to the groat;

a coin worth fourpence

But, in requit,

Has blest me with a random-shot

O' countra wit.

In a much more upbeat song – *Rantin', Rovin', Robin* – he describes an imagined event at his birth and immediate aftermath. The midwife forecasts his future...or is it the present, as he believes his life has become?

Chorus: Robin was a rovin' boy,

Rantin', rovin', rantin', rovin',

Robin was a rovin' boy,

Rantin', rovin', Robin.

The gossip keekit in his loof

peered, palm

Quo sho: - 'Wha lives will see the proof,

said she, who

This waly boy will be nae coof:

sturdy, fool

I think we'll ca' him Robin!

**'He'll hae misfortunes great an' sma'
But ay a heart aboon them a',
He'll be a credit till us a'
We'll a' be proud o' Robin.'**

*above
to*

**'But sure as three times three mak nine,
I see by ilka score and line,
This chap will dearly like our kin',
So leeze me on thee Robin!'**

*every
(i.e., women)
blessings*

**'Guid faith', quo she, I doubt ye gar
The bonie lasses lie aspar;
But twenty fauts ye may hae waur -
So blessings on thee, Robin!'**

*said, make
legs apart
faults, worse*

In *O Leave Novels*, he pokes fun at himself again. He begins by recommending to the six Belles of Mauchline – who he catalogues as the town's most attractive young women - that they forsake the reading of racy novels (one example he gives being Tom Jones) that might predispose them to seduction by himself, Rob Mossgiel, one of the playful alter egos he uses. They would have taken his remarks as braggadocio, but the shoe might well have been a good fit!

**Beware a tongue that's smoothly hung,
A heart that warmly seems to feel!
That feeling heart but acts a part –
'Tis rakish art in Rob Mossgiel.**

**The frank address, the soft caress.
Are worse than poisoned darts of steel:
The frank address, and politesse
Are all finesse in Rob Mossgiel.**

I will conclude this segment with lines that Burns wrote in November 1794 that he intended as a versified self-portrait, in *Contented wi' Little and Cantie wi' Mair*:

**Contented wi' little and cantie wi' mair,
Whene'er I forgather wi' Sorrow and Care,
I gie them a skelp, as they're creepin' along,
Wi' a cog o' guid swats and an auld Scottish sang.**

*joyful, more
give, along
cup, ale*

**I whyles claw the elbow o' troublesome Thought;
But Man is a soger, and Life is a faught,
My mirth and good humour are coin in my pouch,
And my Freedom's my lairdship nae monarch daur touch.**

*sometimes clasp
soldier, fight
dare*

**A towmond o' trouble, should that be my fa',
A night o' guid fellowship sowthers it a':
When at the blythe end o' our journey at last,
Wha the Deil ever thinks o' the road he has past?**

*twelvemonth, fate
soothes it all
who*

**Blind Chance, let her snapper and stoyte on her way;
Be't to me, be't frae me, e'en let the jade gae!
Come Ease, or come Travail, come Pleasure or Pain,
My warst word is: - 'Welcome, and welcome again!'**

*stumble, stagger
hussy go*

Burns' Conflicts with the Kirk and His Disdain of the Rigidly Righteous

Two topics of his developing Muse were tied to his early romantic adventures, and conflicts with the conservative 'auld-licht' (old-light) proponents of the ruling Calvinist faith. These two distractions were often intertwined, as when his extramarital affairs attracted the wrath of the 'rigidly righteous' elders of the Mauchline Kirk. As with all local congregants, the moral sway lay solidly with Minister Auld of Mauchline Kirk and his bloodhound Elders, some of whom made it their main goal in life to sniff out the miscreant fornicators and sabbath-breakers, and bring them to heel.

Burns railed against what he viewed as the rigidity and hypocrisy of the auld-licht ministry. Having been raised in the pious doctrines practiced by his much-loved and respected father, Robert was a convinced believer, but he sided with the more liberal 'new-licht', or moderate, influencers who were beginning to emerge as the dominant ministry of Scottish Calvinism.

In Burns' *Address to the Unco Guid* (i.e. sarcastically, *the very good*) - sub-titled '*Or the Rigidly Righteous*' - he takes it upon himself to counsel, or assail, the auld-licht hypocrites as to how they should adjust. He sets the bar with his four opening lines:

O ye, wha are sae guid yoursel, *who, so good*
Sae pious and sae holy,
You've nought to do but mark and tell
Your neebours' fauts and folly! *neighbours' faults*

After several additional verses berating their high-handed attitudes, and their insensitivity to natural impulses, he ends with this advice:

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Tho' they may go a kennin' wrang *act knowingly in the wrong*
To step aside is human:
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving *Why* they do it;
And just as lamely can ye mark,
How far perhaps they rue it.

Who made the heart, 'tis He alone *the Almighty*
Decidedly can try us;
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring its various bias:
Then at the balance let's be mute,
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.

Minister Auld, or 'Daddie' Auld as Burns referred to him in some of his poetry, seems to have been kindly and sincere, but a devoted religious conservative in the auld-licht tradition. Despite having to 'discipline' the brash young libertarian on more than one occasion, there was evidence of mutual respect, though grudgingly on both sides.

His Religious Satire

Around this time another series of incidents took place that provided the poet with the opportunity to launch a brilliant poem that may well stand as the finest example of poetical satire in the English language...**Holy Willie's Prayer**. But first the background.

A local lawyer and friend of Burns - Gavin Hamilton - was taken to task by Minister Auld for a number of alleged offences, including sabbath-breaking, mishandling of parish poor relief funds, and neglect of family worship, among other indictments. Hamilton decided to fight these largely false accusations, initiated in part by the covert spying and misrepresentation of one of Mauchline's Kirk Elders, Willie Fisher. The dispute dragged on for about seven years, Hamilton winning his case in two lower ecclesiastical tribunals as well as the final appeal before the Synod of Glasgow in 1785. Hamilton was represented by Robert Aiken, a seasoned and loquacious lawyer much experienced in appearances before the courts of law; he secured a dismissal of all the charges. Burns used the drama to take a swipe at what he saw as the injustice towards his friend, and especially singled out Willie Fisher for his religious hypocrisy.



Every verse of the poem is a feast of lyrical satire at its best, depicting 'holy' Willie's conversation with the Almighty, at first extolling his own virtues, gifts of grace, fully merited of course, because while he '*...deserv'd most just damnation...*' for Adam's *original sin*, he was, after all, one of God's chosen 'elect' who, according to Calvinist doctrinal belief at the time, was bound for Heaven right from birth no matter how much of a sinner he might turn out to be:

**When from my mither's womb I fell,
Thou might hae plunged me deep in Hell,
To gnash my gooms, and weep and wail,
In burning lakes,
Whare damnèd devils roar and yell, *where*
Chain'd to their stakes.**

**Yet I am here a chosen sample,
To show Thy grace is great and ample;
I'm here a pillar o' Thy temple,
Strong as a rock,
A guide, a buckler, and example,
To a' Thy flock**

Although, he does concede that he has occasionally succumbed to temptation:

**O Lord! yestreen, Thou kens wi' Meg - *last night*
Thy pardon I sincerely beg -
O, may't ne'er be a living plague
To my dishonour!
An' I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg
Again upon her.**

After confessing to other transgressions, he turns to pleading that Gavin Hamilton be thoroughly punished for his temerity in challenging the accusations:

Lord, mind that Gau'n Hamilton's deserts: *Gavin*
He drinks, and swears, an' plays at cartes, *cards*
Yet has mony takin' arts,
Wi' great and sma',
Fae God's ain Priest the people's hearts
He steals awa.

He even pleads for the Presbytery of Ayr (that found Hamilton innocent) to be severely punished 'For their misdeeds!', but asks for God's strongest action against lawyer Robert Aiken:

O Lord, my God! that glib-tongu'd Aiken,
My vera heart and flesh are quakin', *very*
To think how we stood sweatin', shakin',
An' pish'd wi' dread,
While he, wi' hingin' lip and snakin',
Held up his head.

Lord, in thy day o' vengeance try him!
Lord, visit them wha did employ him! *who*
And pass not in Thy mercy by them,
Nor hear their pray'r,
But for Thy people's sake destroy them,
An' dinna spare.

But, Lord, remember me and mine
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace and gear may shine, *wealth*
Excell'd by nane,
And a' the glory will be Thine –
Amen, Amen!

The real Willie Fisher was indeed a 'sinner' - a proven thief, a drunkard and a hypocrite, but not as unworthy as Burns' withering condemnation in this poem. He was a useful foil for the poet's biting satire in vindicating his friend Gavin Hamilton, as well as what he despised about the auld licht's misguided pulpit-thumping orthodoxy. The poem smacks of revenge too for the indignities Burns himself had suffered at the hands of the *rigidly righteous*. Some years later Willie Fisher was found in a ditch, with a whisky bottle beside him, literally *dead drunk*.

In the poem *The Twa Herds*, he ridicules two auld-light ministers – Alexander Moodie and John Russell – who waged a very public battle over their respective parish boundaries. Burns could not let such an internecine dispute pass, given the opportunity to satirically slag them through the dramatized delight of liberal new-light observers, as he alluded to in one of the verses:

Sic twa – O! do I live to see't? - *such two*
Sic famous twa sud disagree't, *should*
An' names like villain, hypocrite,
Ilk ither gi'en *each other giving*

**While New-Light herds, wi' laughin' spite,
Say neither's liein'!** *lying*

In a later verse, he takes a shot at the auld-light reliance on orthodoxy:

**Then Orthodoxy yet may prance,
An' Learning in a woody dance, *the hangman's noose*
An' that fell cur ca'd Common-sense,
That bites sae sair *sore*
Be banished o'er the sea to France –
Let him bark there!**

The Kirk's Alarm was written in the form of a rant by Burns after a friend, the Rev. William McGill (a new-light minister) was threatened with an enquiry by The General Assembly over a treatise he published. He recanted and gave a grovelling apology, so the inquisition was called off. Burns' disgust with the Assembly led him to compose this satiric put-down, singling out various culprits, including Minister Auld and Willie Fisher, the sycophantic Holy Willie:

**Daddie Auld, Daddie Auld, there's a tod in the fauld, *fox, fold*
A tod meikle waur than the clerk; *much worse*
Tho' ye do little skaith, ye'll be in at the death, *damage*
And gif ye canna bite, ye may bark, *if*
Daddie Auld! For gif ye canna bite, ye may bark.**

**Holy Will! Holy Will!, there was wit in your skull,
When ye pilfer'd the alms o' the poor;
The timmer is scant when ye're taen for a saunt, *proof is lacking, taken, saint*
Wha should swing in a rape for an hour. *rope*
Holy Will! Ye should swing in a rape for an hour.**

The Ordination is also an attempt, through satire, to bring attention to the absurdity of fire-and-brimstone preaching, and the auld-licht ministry that Burns abhorred. The subject of his mockery is the Rev. James Mackinley, who was under consideration for the 'charge' of the Kilmarnock Kirk, but was vigorously opposed by the 'Moderates' new-licht proponents. In the end, he secured the appointment. Burns' poem imagines the ceremony before it actually takes place. He eggs on the kirk's congregants - Kilmarnock weavers - to hurry to the church for the ceremony:

**This day the Kirk kicks up a stoure *dust storm*
Nae mair the knaves shall wrang her, *wrong*
For heresy is in her pow'r,
And gloriously she'll wang her, *flog*
Wi' pith this day.**

They are urged to find their new minister, Mackinley, a proper text for him to preach:

**There, try his mettle on the creed,
And bind him down wi' caution,
That stipend is a carnal weed *a luxury (like tobacco?)*
He takes for but the fashion -
And gie him o'er the flock to feed,
And punish each transgression;**

Especial, rams that cross the breed *fornicators*
Gie them sufficient thrashin’;
Spare them nae day.

He sarcastically urges the congregants to celebrate that from now on they’ll no longer be short of auld licht gospel harangues:

For lapfu’s large o’ gospel kail *cabbage*
Shall fill thy crib in plenty. *basket*

Burns continues for several more verses mockingly giving praise to the false morality and rigid orthodoxy of Mackinley and others of his ilk, and ends by lamenting the hegemony of these bible-thumpers, but holding out hope that they will eventually be hounded out in favour of the more enlightened moderate ministry:

To ev’ry New-Light mother’s son,
From this time forth, confusion!
If mair they deave us wi’ their din *deafen*
Or patronage intrusion,
We’ll light a spunk, and ev’ry skin, *match*
We’ll rin them aff in fusion,
Like oil some day.

To round out this section, I will share two verses from *The Holy Fair*, despite a separate treatment of that poem later. These verses fit with this section’s theme of religious satire, in this case directed at the Rev. John Russell:

But now the Lord’s ain trumpet touts, *sounds*
Till a’ the hills are rairin’, *roaring*
And echoes back return the shouts;
Black Russell is na spairin’: *Rev. John Russell*
His piercin’ words, like Highlan’ swords,
Divide the joints an’ marrow;
His talk o’ Hell, whare devils dwell,
Our vera ‘sauls does harrow’ *souls*
Wi fright that day!

A vast unbottom’d, boundless pit,
Fill’d fou o’ lowin’ brunstane, *flaming brimstone*
Whase ragin’ flame, an’ scorchin’ heat, *whose*
Wad melt the hardest whun-stain! *whinstone (hard rock)*
The half-asleep start up wi’ fear,
An’ think they hear it roarin’;
When presently it does appear,
‘Twas but some neebor snorin’ *neighbour*
Asleep that day.

A Softer Treatment of Religious Practice

As reflected in his poetry and letters, throughout his life Burns displayed a knowledge of scripture and a degree of religious reverence that leaves little question of him being anything other than a convinced Christian; but as noted in the section above, he aligned very strongly with the new-light liberal approach to devotion. His father's deep religious beliefs were likely rooted in a gentler, more forgiving interpretation of scripture compared with the old-light practitioners, though perhaps not putting him firmly into the new-light camp. But we do have some insight into the nature of his devotion as he most likely practiced it within his own home. The virtuous patriarch featured in Burns' poem, *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, may well have been modelled on his own father.

The Cotter's Saturday Night

It is a lengthy poem, and one of Burns' better-known, but not all Burns enthusiasts or critics consider it to be among his finest. It seems overly pontifical and stuffy in many of its verses, but in others it is a touching description of the devotional rituals practiced by many devout Christians in 18th Century Scotland. The first verse offers a dedicatory address to his friend Robert Aiken, probably as a 'thank you' to one of his prime subscribers to the Kilmarnock Edition of his poems, and musing that Aiken might embody *'the guileless ways'* of the Cotter, but that seems unlikely given 'orator Bob's' reputation as an aggressive and voluble performer in the courts of law.



It's a cold, blustery day, and the farmer plods his weary way back to his cottage, or biggin, at the end of a hard week of toil, looking forward to a well-deserved day of rest to follow. Upon entering, he is met by his loving wife and children:

Th' expectant wee things, toddlin', stacher through	<i>stagger</i>
To meet their dad, wi' flichterin' noise and glee.	<i>fluttering</i>
His wee bit ingle, blinkin' bonillie,	<i>fireplace</i>
His clean hearth-stane, his thrifty wifie's smile,	
The lisping infant, prattling on his knee,	
Does a' his weary klaugh and care beguile,	<i>anxiety</i>
An' makes him quite forget his labor and his toil.	

The next few verses dwell on the cosy domesticity of the cotter's family, and particularly focusing on their adolescent daughter, Jenny, who has befriended a young local farm lad and admirer, who is invited into the cottage and is being scrutinized by *'The mother, wi' a woman's wiles...'*. This leads to an idealized description of young love:

Oh happy love! where love like this is found:
O heart-felt raptures! bliss beyond compare!
I've paced much this weary, mortal round,
And sage experience bids me this declare, -
'If Heaven a draught of heavenly pleasure spare,
One cordial in this melancholy vale,
'Tis when a youthful, loving, modest pair
In other's arms, breathe out the tender tale,
Beneath the milk-white thorn that scents the ev'ning gale.'

Imagining a cautionary risk of treachery, the poet contrives expressions of abhorrence that any villain could *'Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?'*. But then, in a more idealistic tone, the tale moves on to the serving of the evening repast, at the end of which:

**The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;
The sire turns o'er, wi' patriarchal grace,
The big ha'-Bible, ance his father's pride. *once*
His bonnet rev'rently laid aside,
His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare; *grey side-locks*
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,
He wales a portion with judicious care;
And 'Let us worship God!' he says with solemn air.**

'The priest-like father' proceeds to read aloud a selection from the Bible, followed by a prayer. One verse is given over to disparaging the pompous piety of some ministers:

**Compar'd with this, how poor Religion's pride,
In all the pomp of method, and of art;
When men display to congregations wide
Devotions ev'ry grace, except the heart,**

Comparing this with the private devotion to be found in humble cottages:

**But hap'ly, in some cottage far apart
May hear, well pleased, the language of the soul.**

The concluding verses express some grandiloquent thoughts on the truer nobility of the common man compared to the pompous noblesse:

**Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,
'An honest man's the noblest work of God' *quote: Alexander Pope***

He finishes with patriotic hyperbole, celebrating Scotia's *'hardy sons of rustic toil'* and Scotland's struggle, led by William Wallace, against England's tyranny.

Referencing back to his early experiences with Minister Auld over his 'fornication', and his anger over the treatment of Gavin Hamilton, Burns was not by any means disillusioned with all of the Kirk's pastors. He only took great issue with hypocrisy and the unwelcome hell-fire sermonizing of so many of the auld-licht ministers. In fact, he admired and became friendly with quite a few ministers, particularly those who were aligned with *'the new ministry'*, and its more forgiving preachings. One such friend was the Reverend John McMath, assistant minister of Tarbolton Kirk, and a new-light liberal who was also a friend and supporter of Gavin Hamilton. In an *Epistle Addressed to McMath* - with a copy of Holy Willie's Prayer attached - the poet wonders at the folly of his composing such a bold rebuke, but claims that he was driven to it:

**But I gae mad at their grimaces,
Their sighin', cantin', grace-proud faces, *smiling*
Their three-mile prayers, an' hauf-mile graces,
Their raxin' conscience, *stretching*
Whase greed, revenge, an' pride disgraces *whose*
Waur nor their nonsense. *worse than***

Hear how he clears the points of Faith
Wi' rattlin' an' thumpin'!
Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,
He's stampin', an' he's jumpin'!
His lengthened chin, his turn'd-up snout,
His eldrich squeel an' gestures, *unearthly*
O how they fire the heart devout,
Like cantharidian plaisters *aphrodisiacs*
On sic a day. *such*

The final verse sums up the Fair's doubtful religious benefits at the end of the day:

How monie hearts this day converts
O' sinners and o' lassies!
Their hearts o' stane, gin night, are gane *by nightfall are gone*
As saft as onie flesh is:
There's some are fou o' love divine; *full*
There's some are fou o' brandy;
An' monie jobs that day begin, *romantic intrigues*
May end in houghmagandie *fornication*
Some ither day.

Burns wrote another lengthy poetical account of an outdoor assembly of people celebrating the customs (Christian and Pagan) of Halloween, the poem being named, simply, *Halloween*. It is not unlike *The Holy Fair* in its lightness, and he utilizes the same verse form. I will quote only one of the twenty-eight verses:

Among the bonie winding banks,
Where Doon rins, wimplin clear; *rippling*
Where Bruce ance ruled the martial ranks, *King Robert the Brus, once*
An' shook his Carrick spear; *traditional to southern Ayrshire*
Some merry, friendly, country-folks
Together did convene,
To burn their nits, an' pou their stocks, *nuts, pool their money*
An haud their Halloween *hold*
Fu' blythe that night.

The poem alludes to many of the old folklorist traditions associated with Halloween, and even the occult dating back as far as Druidical times. As such, some of the references are beyond our easy understanding today, except for those who still take an interest in long-past customs.

Burns and Love

To this day, Robert Burns is known almost as much for his love of women and his fecundity in producing either twelve or thirteen children, of which eight were out-of-wedlock. He had affairs with at least six women, not counting his wife, Jean Armour, and a few non-intimate amours. His lack of success in some of his failed romantic campaigns resulted from reasons such as his insufficiency of means, a lack of mutual enthusiasm on the part of the women involved, or limitations on their freedom to reciprocate. He was a 'Jack-the-Lad', to be sure, but why blame Jack or any lad for trying?

In this section, I have included more background details of a personal nature than elsewhere as I feel this is important to an understanding of what sets the heart aflutter. The poet's love life, and the emotional energy it gave rise to, fuelled so much of his poetical creativity. Even in a review such as this, an understanding of *how it all came about* adds to the enjoyment and appreciation of the product of his genius. It has been said that, absent the passionate soul of this Ayrshire ploughman, we would almost certainly have missed out on a large portion of the treasured lore of poems and songs that Scotland's National Bard has bequeathed.

Jean Armour – His Bonnie Jean

Burns broke off his affair with Betsey Paton, even before the birth of their child, partly at the urging of his family who did not seem to approve of her, but likely also because he was not really IN LOVE with her. Soon after that separation, he met his future wife, Jean Armour. It is thought that they first met casually at a dance in Mauchline, but their first significant encounter is believed to have taken place on Mauchline's village green. Jean was spreading out her washing on the grass to bleach in the sun when Robert's dog, Luath, ran over her newly washed linens. They exchanged cross words over the incident, but nevertheless seemed to have 'clicked', and shortly after began their courting.

The poet's first mention of Jean is found in his lighthearted assessment of Mauchline's available talent pool, in *The Belles of Mauchline*, Jean being singled out as 'the jewel' for him:

**In Mauchline there dwells six proper young belles,
The pride of the place and its neighbourhood a',
Their carriage and dress, a stranger would guess,
In Lon'on or Paris, they'd gotten it a'.**

**Miss Miller is fine, Miss Markland's divine,
Miss Smith she has wit, and Miss Betty is braw,
There's beauty and fortune to get wi' Miss Morton,
But Armour's the jewel for me o' them a'.**

Many years later, in the hauntingly beautiful love song, *O, Were I on Parnassus Hill*, written as a testament of his love for her while they were apart for an extended time, he seems to have reminisced on that first meeting on the village green:

**I see thee dancing o'er the green,
Thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean, slim
Thy tempting lips, thy roguish een - eyes
By Heav'n and Earth, I love thee!**

The song ends:

**By night, by day, a-field, at hame,
The thoughts o' thee my breast inflame,
And ay I muse and sing thy name –
I only live to love thee.
Tho' I were doom'd to wander on,
Beyond the sea, beyond the sun,
Till my last weary sand was run,
Till then - and then – I'd love thee!**

Of A' the Airts (directions) the Wind Can Blaw is another love song dedicated to her, ending:

**There's not a bonie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw, or green, wood
There's not a bonie bird that sings,
But minds me o' my Jean.**

It is na, Jean, Thy Bonie Face is a further poem/song addressed to her. The first two of four verses read:

**It is na, Jean, thy bonie face
Nor shape that I admire,
Altho' thy beauty and thy grace
Might weel awauk desire. well awaken**

**Something in ilka part o' thee every
To praise, to love, I find;
But, dear as is thy form to me,
Still dearer is thy mind.**

The last line of this verse is interesting. It is not surprising that a young fellow would value intelligence in his sweetheart, but to emphasize this attribute over her other charms is not common in love poems. Yet Burns does just that in this verse, and in the lauding of a few other idols of his Muse. When rating the attractions of a neighbouring laird's two daughters in *The Ronalds of the Bennals*, after acknowledging that one was bonnie, and even had '*sense and guid taste*', he goes on to praise her mind above all:

**The charms o' the min', the langer they shine mind, longer
The mair admiration they draw, man;
While peaches and cherries, and roses and lilies,
They fade and they wither awa, man.**

It might be analogous to the Hillbilly axiom that 'Kissin' don't last, cookin' do', except that for Burns it's the charms of the mind that will outlast the 'kissin'! Or so he sometimes claimed.

Unfortunately, Jean Armour's first out-of-wedlock pregnancy enraged her father, James Armour, and he managed to bully her into repudiating an informal (but legal) post-pregnancy marriage that she and the poet had entered into. He sent her off to stay with her aunt in far off Paisley during her confinement. Robert was mortified by her apparent disloyalty, and took it as a justification for him to consider their union dissolved, and he a free man again. They did get

back together after a few months, and became husband and wife (again!), but not for nearly eighteen months following their initially tentative reconciliation.

Despite all of the recriminations against Burns by Jean Armour's father, particularly over Jean becoming pregnant with what would turn out to be twins, and then the poet feeling betrayed by Jean, when the twins were born, he was pleased and proud to be a father for a second time, as evidenced in his poem, *Nature's Law*. Referring to himself in the third person, he tells us that:

He felt the powerful, high behest
Thrill vital, thro' and thro';
And sought a correspondent breast
To give obedience due.
Propitious Powers screen'd the young flow'rs *his newborns*
From mildews of abortion;
And lo! the Bard – a great reward –
He got a double portion! *twins*

Even when he was still intending to leave for Jamaica - largely to escape all the troubles brought on by his break with Jean - in *The Farewell*, he agonizes over having to leave her:

What bursting anguish tears my heart?
From thee, my Jeany, must I part?
Thou, weeping, answ'rest – 'No!'
Alas misfortune stares my face,
And points to ruin and disgrace –
I for thy sake must go!

James Armour Sets the Law on Burns

Jean returned to her parents' home after just a few weeks, and her father had her sign a legal warrant (to prevent flight) against Burns, that could have resulted in his arrest and imprisonment. This added to his troubles, forcing him to take evasive action to avoid the long arm of the law.

Armour's action was triggered by information that Robert had arranged for the publication of an edition of his verse that would make money available to support Jean and the twins. This development more than any other made Burns seek a radical solution, which was to leave Scotland for Jamaica. Soon after the warrant was issued, he booked passage, but fortunately the ship was delayed in its departure date.

The prospect of fleeing his native soil caused Robert a great deal of despondency, which he expressed in *The Gloomy Night is Gathering Fast*. He wrote this song after a long walk home from a friend's house through a dark wintery night, a night whose depressive conditions accorded with his equally depressed thoughts, reflected in the first four lines:

The gloomy night is gath'ring fast,
Loud roars the wild inconstant blast;
Yon murky cloud is filled with rain,
I see it driving o'er the plain;

And the last verse expressing his goodbyes to Scotland, his Muse, his friends, and his foes:

Farewell, old Coila's hills and dales, *Ayrshire's*
Her heathy moors and winding vales;

**The scenes where wretched Fancy roves,
Pursuing past unhappy loves!
Farewell my friends! farewell my foes!
My peace with these, my love with those –
The bursting tears my heart declare,
Farewell, my bonie banks of Ayr!**

As noted, Jean and Robert did reconcile shortly after the first edition of his poems was published, but the transition from that point to when they remarried was far from smooth sailing.

Margaret Campbell, his 'Highland Mary' in Verse

Following that first breakup, and now a bachelor once more, Robert lost no time in re-connecting with a recent girlfriend, Margaret Campbell. She was a nursemaid, before becoming a dairymaid. Details of their relationship are scant, but they almost certainly exchanged a promise of marriage, and very likely planned to emigrate to Jamaica together. They parted sometime in May 1786 after only a little more than a month of intense courtship. She travelled back to visit her family in Greenock, with a plan (it is thought) to reunite some time later. Unfortunately, she died at Greenock in the autumn of 1786, likely from typhus fever, although there is speculation that she died in premature childbirth while infected with typhus.

In the opening verse of *Will Ye Go to the Indies, My Mary*, he asks her to accompany him; these verses were written three years after her death, but it is reasonable to assume that he did ask her this before she left for Greenock:

**Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary,
And leave auld Scotia's shore?
Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary,
Across th'Atlantic roar?**

In the second last verse of *My Highland Lassie*, composed before her death, he implies they are betrothed, yet nowhere in any of the other six verses does he ask her to come with him:

**She has my heart, she has my hand,
By secret troth and honor's band!
'Till the mortal stroke shall lay me low,
I'm thine, my Highland lassie, O!**

At about the time of the third anniversary of her death, Burns wrote *Thou Lingerin' Star*, a haunting love song in her honour. The first two of four verses convey the deep pain of his loss:

**Thou ling'ring star, with less'ning ray,
That lov'st to greet the early morn,
Again thou usher'st in the day
My Mary from my soul was torn.
O Mary dear departed shade!
Where is thy place of blissful rest?
See'st thou thy lover lowly laid?
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast.**

**That sacred hour can I forget?
Can I forget the hallow'd grove,
Where, by the winding Ayr, we met,
To live one day of parting love?**

Eternity cannot efface

**Those records dear of transports past,
Thy image at our last embrace –
Ah! little thought we 'twas our last!**

Burns was clearly very much in love with Margaret Campbell, mourning her throughout his life.

Agnes McLehose: His Clarinda, and His Nancy

After his Kilmarnock Edition was published, Robert travelled to the capital to arrange for a second enlarged 'Edinburgh' edition. He had two prolonged stays there, and during the second of those, in December 1787, he met a society lady – Mrs. Agnes McLehose. She was beautiful, well educated, and talented, even in composing tolerably good poetry; but she was married, albeit unhappily. Her abusive husband was managing an inherited plantation in far-off Jamaica.

Partly because of their shared interests in literature and poetry, they became good friends, but, predictably, Burns fell in love with her. It is likely that she returned only a guarded affection, being at pains to maintain the appearance of marital fidelity, and they were almost certainly never intimate, much to Burns' great angst! They wrote often, adopting noms de plume to avoid any risk of scandal should their correspondence fall into the hands of others. She would be Clarinda, and he Sylvander – *Man of the Forrest*; he used the pseudonym for her in his verses, but also Nancy, a recognized nickname for Agnes. He wrote ten poems/songs with her as the subject, including *Sylvander to Clarinda*, that bemoaned his denial of conquest, beginning:

**When dear Clarinda, matchless fair,
First struck Sylvnder's raptur'd view,
He gaz'd, he listened to despair –
Alas! 'twas all he dared to do.**

**Love from Clarinda's heavenly eyes
Transfix'd his bosom thro' and thro',
But still in Friendship's guarded guise –
For more the demon fear'd to do.**

He continues in this pleading tone for six more verses, and concludes resignedly:

**O, could the Fates but name the price
Would bless me with your charms and you,
With frantic joy I'd pay it thrice,
If human art and power could do!**

**Then take, Clarinda, friendship's hand
(Friendship, at least, I may avow),
And lay no more your chill command, -
I'll write, whatever I've to do.**

Possibly in response to this plaintiff pseudo-acceptance, Agnes sent him some verses she had composed around the theme of her being obliged to deny him the intimacy he craved, entitled 'Talk Not of Love'. Burns responded, suggesting two additional verses - entitled *Interpolation* - that rather bizarrely put him inside her head, reinforcing her painful interdiction...towards him!

**Your friendship much can make me blest,
Oh! why that bliss destroy!
Why urge the only, one request
You know I will deny!**

**Your thought, if love must harbour there,
Conceal it in that thought;
Nor cause me from my bosom tear
The very friend I sought.**

It may have been his attempt at reverse psychology, feigning surrender, but hoping for mercy!

One fortunate outcome of their friendship (for him, obsession) was his composition of what may be the most beautiful and heart-wrenching love song in the English language. In January 1792, Agnes was about to set sail for Jamaica to join her husband (at his invitation), which to she and Robert meant probably parting forever. In fact, her husband treated her badly upon her arrival, and, after a very short time, she returned to Scotland. Nevertheless, she and Burns never again met in person. This masterpiece – *Ae Fond Kiss* - deserves to be quoted in full:

**Ae fond kiss, and then we sever! *one*
Ae farewell, and then forever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.
Who shall say that fortune grieves him,
While the star of hope she leaves him?
Me, nae cheerfu' twinkle lights me,
Dark despair around benights me.**

**I'll ne'er blame my partial fancy;
Naething could resist my Nancy! *nothing*
But to see her was to love her,
Love but her, and love for ever.
Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met – or never parted –
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.**

**Fare-thee-weel, thou first and fairest!
Fare-thee-weel, thou best and dearest!
Thine be ilka joy and treasure, *every*
Peace, Enjoyment, Love and Pleasure!
Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!
Ae farewell, alas, for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.**

Later, after his Nancy had returned to Scotland, even though they had been parted for well over a year, in *Thine am I, My Faithful Fair*, he continues to moon over her:

**Take away those rosy lips
Rich with balmy treasure!
Turn away thine eyes of love,
Lest I die with pleasure!
What is life when wanting love?
Night without a morning!
Love the cloudless summer's sun,
Nature gay adorning.**

There was a cruel twist to this otherwise romantic, almost ethereal, liaison between Clarinda and Sylvander. On January 25th, 1788, the poet's birthday, Agnes sent her maid, Jenny Clow, over to Burns' rooms with a present...presumably a birthday present. Perhaps in part because of the frustration he would have suffered at failing to consummate his relationship with Agnes, or just because Rob Mossgiel was Rob Mossgiel, he seduced the unfortunate girl. She became pregnant and bore him a son, Robert. This must have infuriated Agnes, since he not only violated her vulnerable maid, but also the trust and close affection between them.

So, where was Bonnie Jean throughout this whole amorous interlude? The excuse Burns could have offered quite genuinely would have been that at the time of his first meeting with Agnes, and for the few months after when his heart was all aflutter, he and Jean were still in the early stages of an attempted reconciliation, the outcome of which was still uncertain.

In claiming that *Ae Fond Kiss* may be the most beautiful love song in the English language, I recognize that there is an obvious alternative contender for that award, namely Robert Burns' other masterpiece, *My Luve Is Like a Red, Red Rose*. There is no question that it is by far the better known worldwide; in fact, almost everyone is aware of it to some degree, as opposed to *Ae Fond Kiss* being known by comparatively few. That is unfortunate.

One notable difference between these two songs is that *Ae Fond Kiss* was written with but one woman in mind, and in response to a real event. *Red, Red Rose*, on the other hand was a reworking of old folk versions, and as far as we know was not directed at anyone in particular. As with *Ae Fond Kiss*, its place of honour as one of Burns' most loved songs merits displaying all four verses here. In any case, it is not lengthy:

**O, my luve is like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June.
O, my luve is like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.**

**As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luve am I,
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.**

**Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun!
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.**

**And fare thee weel, my only luve!
And fare thee weel, a while!
And I will come again, my luve,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile!**

Other 'Fair Enslavers'

There were other women who Burns' was either drawn to, or with whom he was actually involved...or tried very hard to be. My focus here will be on the verses he composed for a few of those women, proving without much doubt that he admired them for more than *just* their human qualities. In some instances, it is difficult to know where the line is drawn, because in his poetry he sometimes alternated between socially acceptable compliments and expressions of questionable propriety, at least by the near-puritanical standards of his time. But we need not judge...only enjoy the product of his Muse.

Earlier, I touched on only one verse that gave some mention of his first conquest, Betsey Paton, in *The Fornicator*, but that involved a compliment that most women would have shunned, and other references to her in the poem are more flighty than devotional. So, Betsey gets short shrift, poetically and sympathetically.

Elizabeth Gebbie

When about 21, our young Lothario took a shine to one, Elizabeth Gebbie, or Alison Begbie as she is sometimes erroneously referred to. He was captivated by her, but from afar, because they never actually met. Never! He composed at least two poems dedicated to her, neither of which has great merit. Bizarre as it may seem, given that they never met, he proposed marriage to her in a letter, but she refused...also by mail! As they say, you can't make this stuff up!

There is an outside possibility that she was the inspiration for the song, *Mary Morison*, the date of its composition roughly coinciding with the time he was pursuing her. Whether or not, it is a cue to cite one of Burns' popular songs, the first of three verses being:

O Mary, at thy window be!

It is the wish'd, the trysted hour.

Those smiles and glances let me see,

That make the miser's treasure poor.

How blythely wad I bide the stour, *bear the struggle*

A weary slave frae sun to sun,

Could I the rich reward secure –

The lovely Mary Morison!

Margaret Chalmers

Another one-sided romance was with Margaret Chalmers. They met at her parents' home and quickly struck up a friendship. Later they spent eight days in each other's company, a time that Burns described to her as 'the best of my life'. She was well above him in the social order and declined an offer of marriage that he made, but they remained good friends from then on, keeping in touch through occasional correspondence.

He composed two songs to her, the first, *My Peggy's Charms*. Margaret expressed reluctance to it being published for fear that the depth of feeling conveyed might imply she and Burns had been a courting pair, especially since she had recently become engaged. He thought the verses innocent of that interpretation, but agreed to withhold the poem. It was not published until well after his death. In my view, this is a good example of how deeply touching his words could be in expressing his adulation for the women he admired, and so I am including all four verses here:

**My Peggy's face, my Peggy's form
The frost of hermit Age might warm.
My Peggy's worth, my Peggy's mind
Might charm the first of human kind.**

**I love my Peggy's angel air,
Her face so truly heavenly fair,
Her native grace so void of art;
But I adore my Peggy's heart.**

**The lily's hue, the rose's dye,
The kindling lustre of an eye -
Who but owns their magic sway?
Who but knows they all decay?**

**The tender thrill, the pitying tear,
The generous purpose, nobly dear,
The gentle look that rage disarms -
These are all immortal charms.**

The second poem, *Where, Braving Angry Winter's Storms*, was composed not long after the first. It is plaintive in his seeming acceptance of the likelihood of their life-long separation. Here is the second of two verses:

**Blest be the wild, sequester'd glade,
And blest the day and hour,
Where Peggy's charms I first survey'd,
When first I felt their pow'r!
The tyrant Death, with grim control
May seize my fleeting breath,
But tearing Peggy from my soul
Must be a stronger death.**

Jean Lorimer

We now move on to a woman of some mystery, in that there are few known details of her involvement with Burns, but they were certainly more than just friends. Indeed, although nearly sixteen years his junior, there are indications (including her own admission) that they did have an affair. Whatever the truth, she impressed him enough to be made the subject of twenty-four poems and songs. Her name was Jean Lorimer, but as with Agnes McLehose, he masks her identity by referring to her as Chloris in his poems. She was a noted beauty, with 'lint-white locks', although today we might just describe her as 'a blond'.

Most of the pieces written in which she is 'the lass' are middling examples of Burns' work, but the song *Lassie wi' the Lint-White Locks* is worth quoting. Beginning with the chorus, then the first verse:

**Lassie wi' the lint-white locks,
Bonie lassie, artless lassie,
Wilt thou wi' me tent the flocks - tend
Wilt thou be my dearie, O?**

**Now Nature cleeds the flowery lea,
And a' is young and sweet like thee,
O, wilt thou share its joys wi' me,
And say you'll be my dearie, O?**

clothes, meadow

Another short song – *Ah, Chloris* - alludes to her fleeing from her profligate and pathetically inept husband of just three weeks. In this piece he speaks of his love for her, but (unconvincingly) mainly as a friend. No doubt he was being respectful of her distress, but in a note to a friend, with a copy of the poem attached, he admits to being “in the clouds” over her:

**Ah, Chloris since it may not be
That thou of love wilt hear,
If from the lover thou maun flee
Yet let the friend be dear!**

must

**Altho' I love my Chloris more
Than any tongue could tell,
My passion I will ne'er declare –
I'll say I wish thee well.**

**Tho' a' my daily care thou art,
And a' my nightly dream,
I'll hide the struggle in my heart,
And say it is esteem.**

And from *Come Let Me Take Thee* when presumably she was more ‘available’:

**Thus in my arms, wi' a' thy charms,
I clasp my countless treasure,
I'll seek nae mair o' Heav'n to share
Than sic a moment's pleasure!
And by thine een sae bonie blue
I swear I'm thine for ever,
And on thy lips I seal my vow,
And break it shall I never.**

such

eyes

Wilhelmina Alexander

A song, *The Lass o' Ballochmyle*, was written after Burns was taking a walk and spied a fair maid from afar, also out for a walk. She was far, far above him in ‘class’, and there was no contact between them, but he was sufficiently impressed by her beauty to honour her with his muse. In one of the five verses, he describes his view of her, albeit from a distance:

**With careless step I onward stray'd,
My heart rejoic'd in Nature's joy,
When, musing in a lonely glade,
A maiden fair I chanc'd to spy.
Her look was like the morning's eye,
Her air like Nature's vernal smile,
Perfection whisper'd padding by: -
'Behold the lass o' Ballochmyle!'**

Out of courtesy, Burns sent the lady – Miss Wilhelmina Alexander - a copy of these respectful, but very flattering, beautiful verses, but she high-handedly refused permission to ever publish the piece. He did not need her permission, but he respected her wishes, and it was not published until after his death. Ironically, Miss Alexander remained a spinster until she died at about ninety years of age, and Burns' letter to her, and the copy of the song he sent with it, were among her most prized possessions. 'O wad some Power the giftie gie us...'

Margaret Kennedy

The poet likely met this young lady only once, at a house reception. She was the daughter of an acquaintance, and after that visit he sent her a copy of a song he had composed in her honour, *Young Peggy*. I include this reference to her only to identify the inspiration for this song, which includes this charming description in the second of two verses:

**Her lips, more than the cherries bright –
 A richer dye has graced them –
 They charm the admiring gazer's sight,
 And sweetly tempt to taste them.
 Her smile is of the evening mild,
 When feather'd pairs are courting,
 And little lambkins wanton wild,
 In playful bands disporting.**

Given the strict social etiquette of the time, the fourth line strikes me as a little risqué, addressed as it is to a young woman scarcely known to him.

Anna Park

In mid-1790, the poet had an affair with Anna Park, the eighteen-year-old second cousin of the Innkeeper of the Globe Inn, Dumfries, where he stayed occasionally while carrying out his Excise duties. *Yestreen I Had a Pint o' Wine* was brashly and quite insensitively worded, given Anna's tender age and its apparent purpose to mark his conquest. It is quite lengthy, so I will quote only the first and the last two verses, the latter being labelled 'POSTSCRIPT':

Yestreen I had a pint o' wine,	<i>last night</i>
A place where body saw na;	<i>private</i>
Yestreen lay on this breast o' mine	
The gowden locks o' Anna.	<i>golden</i>

The Kirk an' State may join, an' tell	
To do sic things I mauna;	<i>such, must not</i>
The Kirk an' State may gae to Hell,	<i>go</i>
And I'll gae to my Anna.	

She is the sunshine o' my e'e,	<i>eye</i>
To live but her I canna;	<i>without, cannot</i>
Had I on earth but wishes three,	
The first should be my Anna.	

Sadly, young Anna became pregnant, and delivered their daughter, Elizabeth, just nine days before Burns' wife Jean delivered a son. Jean graciously agreed to raise Anna's child, which caused her to remark many years later that "Oor Rab should have had twa wives."

More Love Songs and Verses

Under this heading, I wish to offer a few songs that have not appeared within any of the other more specific themes...little orphans, but most of them quite sweet.

Happy Songs

There were various bawdy versions of the traditional song, *Comin' Thro' the Rye*, as one can easily imagine given the title, but thankfully Burns gave us this pleasingly innocent rendition:

Chorus: O Jenny's a' weet, poor body, *all wet*
Jenny's seldom dry;
She draigl't a' her petticoatie, *bedraggled*
Comin' through the rye!

Comin' thro' the rye, poor body,
Comin' thro' the rye,
She draigl't a' her petticoatie,
Comin' thro' the rye!

Gin a body meet a body, *if*
Comin' thro' the rye,
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?

Gin a body meet a body
Comin thro' the glen,
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need a body ken?

Whistle o'er the Lave o't was another traditional song that Burns re-wrote in its entirety. He restored or 'improved' many such songs, and this is considered one of his best:

First when Maggie was my care,
Heav'n, I thought, was in her air;
Now we're married spier nae mair, *ask no more*
But - whistle o'er the lave o't! *rest*

Meg was meek, and Meg was mild,
Sweet and harmless as a child;
Wiser men than me's beguiled –
Whistle o'er the lave o't!

How we live, my Meg and me,
How we love, and how we gree, *agree*
I care na by how few may see –
Whistle o'er the lave o't!

The subject of the song, *Young Jessie*, was Jessie Staig, the lovely but seemingly modestly self-effacing daughter of the Provost of Dumfries. This is the second of the song's two-verses:

**Fresh is the rose in the gay, dewy morning,
And sweet is the lily at evening close;
But in the fair presence o' lovely young Jessie,
Unseen is the lily, unheeded the rose.
Love sits in her smile, a wizard ensnaring;
Enthron'd in her een he delivers his law; eyes
And still to her charms she alone is a stranger;
Her modest demeanour's the jewel of a'.**

John Anderson, My Jo was a traditional song with bawdy lyrics, but well sanitized by Burns in this version:

**John Anderson my jo, John, *darling*
When we were first acquent, *acquainted*
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonie brow was brent; *smooth*
But now your brow is beld, John, *bald*
Your locks are like the snaw,
But blessings on your frosty pow, *pate*
John Anderson, my jo!**

**John Anderson my jo, John, *climbed, together*
We clamb the hill thegether, *happy*
And mony a cantie day, John, *one another*
We've had wi' ane anither; *must*
Now we maun totter down, John,
And hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep thegether at the foot, *the eternal sleep*
John Anderson my jo.**

The oft-sung *Ca' the Yowes To the Knowes* at first seems to be about sheep, but is really a love song. This is the second version, improving on his first attempt seven years prior:

**Chorus: Ca' the yowes to the knowes *call, ewes, knolls*
Ca' them where the heather grows,
Ca' them where the burnie rowes, *streamlet runs*
My bonie dearie.**

**Hark, the mavis e'ening sang *song*
Sounding Clouden's woods amang, *tributary of the Nith river*
Then a-faulding let us gang, *returning the sheep to their fold*
My bonie dearie.**

**We'll gae down by Clouden side,
Thro' the hazels, spreading wide
O'er the waves that sweetly glide
To the moon sae clearly.**

Yonder Clouden's silent towers
Where, at moonshine's midnight hours,
O'er the dewy bending flowers
Fairies dance sae cheery.

Ghaist nor bogle shalt thou fear - *ghost, demon*
Thou'rt to Love and Heav'n sae dear,
Nocht of ill may come thee near, *nothing*
My bonie dearie.

Another traditional song, *Pretty Peg*, was improved by Burns, but not inspired by any of his love interests as far as is known:

As I gaed up by yon gate-end, *went*
When day was waxing weary,
Wha did I meet come down the street, *who*
But pretty Peg, my dearie?

Her air sae sweet, an' shape complete,
Wi' nae proportion wanting,
The Queen of Love did never move
Wi' motion mair enchanting.

Wi' linkèd hands we took the sands,
Down by yon winding river;
And O! that hour and shady bower,
Can I forget it? Never!

Love-Gone-Wrong Songs

The song *And Maun I Still on Menie Doat*, is a good example of how Burns often cleverly contrasts the uplifting 'mood' conveyed by the seasons or other aspects of nature, with the contrary emotions of some poor wretch, this time one suffering from unrequited love:

Chorus: *And maun I still on Menie doat,* *must, dote*
And bear the scorn that's in her e'e *eye*
For it's jet, jet-black, an' it's like a hawk,
An' it winna let a body be. *won't, alone*

Again rejoicing nature sees
Her robe assume its vernal hues;
Her leafy locks wave in the breeze,
All freshly steeped in morning dews.

In vain to me the cowslips blaw,
In vain to me the violets spring;
In vain to me in glen or shaw, *wood*
The mavis and the lint-white sing. *linnet*

The merry ploughboy cheers his team
 Wi' joy the tentie seedsman stalks; *careful*
 But life's to me a weary dream,
 A dream of ane that never wauks. *one, wakes*

Three more verses follow describing the joys of nature that serve only to increase his depressed mood, until in the final verse he welcomes the prospect of winter's gloom that will 'soothe' his depressed spirits:

**Come winter, with thine angry howl,
 And raging, bend the naked tree;
 Thy gloom will soothe my cheerless soul,
 When nature is all sad like me!**

Ay Waukin' O is also about grief from the loss or long absence of a lover, although in this case probably not from being rejected. Note that 'waukin' means awake, not walking:

**Chorus: *Ay waukin', O* *always awake*
Waukin' still and weary:
Sleep I can get nane
*For thinking on my dearie.***

**Simmer's a pleasant time;
 Flowers of every colour,
 The water rins owre the heugh *over, crag*
 And I long for my true lover.**

**When I sleep I dream,
 When I wauk I'm eerie, *wake, apprehensive*
 Sleep I can get nane,
 For thinking on my dearie.**

**Lanely night comes on, *lonely*
 A' the lave are sleepin', *rest*
 I think on my bonie lad,
 And I bleer my een wi' greetin'. *make bleary, eyes***

Now we have a disgruntled husband, *O, Ay My Wife She Dang me:*

**Chorus: *O, ay my wife she dang me* *struck*
An' aft my wife she bang'd me! *often*
If ye gie a woman a' her will.
Guid faith! She'll soon o'er-gang ye. *dominate***

**On peace an' rest my mind was bent,
 An' fool I was I married;
 But never honest man's intent
 Sae cursedly miscarried.**

**Some sairy comfort at the last, *hard-won*
 When a' their days are done, man:
 My 'pains o' hell' on earth is past,
 I'm sure o' bliss aboon, man. *above***

Ye gallants bright, I rede you right, *counsel*
 Beware o' bonie Ann!
 Her comely face sae fu' o' grace,
 Your heart she will trepan: *ensnare*
 Her een sae bright, like stars at night, *eyes*
 Her skin is like the swan.
 Sae jimply lac'd, her genty waist, *tightly, neat*
 That sweetly ye might span.

Youth, Grace, and Love attendant move,
 And Pleasure leads the van:
 In a' their charms, and conquering arms,
 They wait on bonie Ann.
 The captive bands may chain the hands
 But Love enslaves the man:
 Ye gallants braw, I rede ye a', *advise*
 Beware o' bonie Ann!
Beware o' Bonie Ann

Auld Rob Morris is a traditional song that Burns re-composed with an altered theme. In his version, it shows how wealth is more persuasive than love for some young women. Rob Morris is old, but rich, and succeeds in making a young woman 'his darling', despite she herself being a wealthy heiress, and beautiful:

She's fresh as the morning, the fairest in May,
She's sweet as the ev'ning among the new hay,
As blythe and as artless as the lambs on the lea, *meadow*
And dear to my heart as the light to her e'e. *eye*

A young would-be suitor who is poor, has no hope of winning the object of his love, and must conceal the grief he thinks may bring on his early demise:

The day comes to me, but delight brings me nane;
The night comes to me, but my rest it is gane; *gone*
I wander my lane like a night-troubled ghaist, *alone, ghost*
And I sigh as my heart it wad burst in my breast.

Oh, had she but been of a lower degree,
I then might hae hop'd she wad smil'd upon me!
O, how past describing had then been my bliss, *describing*
As now my distraction no words can express!

Now, to finish on a sweeter note:

Bonie wee thing, cannie wee thing,
Lovely wee thing, wert thou mine,
I wad wear thee in my bosom
Lest my jewel it would tine. *be lost*
Bonie Wee Thing

Nature Poems

Robert Burns can be described as, among other things, a poet of nature. He was, after all, a farmer, familiar with the rich fauna and flora of Ayrshire, and a keen observer of animals, birds and the native vegetation.

About Animals – And a Mountain Daisy

Perhaps we can begin with one of his best-loved animal poems, *To a Mouse*, with its expression of heartfelt sympathy for a poor defenceless creature, and displaying rare flashes of wisdom. The very expressive first lines capture our immediate attention:

**Wee sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!**

What panic indeed. After Farmer Burns ploughs through the little creature's fragile dwelling in the soil, it runs away, fearful that the cruel monster-of-a-human will pursue and slaughter it. But he calls to the mouse, telling it that it need not have been so terrified, and offers this apology:

**I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle.**

But what of the poor mouse's ruined house?

**Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
Its silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane
Of foggage green!
An' bleak December's win's ensuin',
Baith snell and keen.**

*walls, winds
nothing...to build a new one!
coarse grass

both, bitter*

The mouse originally saw that the field was cleared, and with winter coming, thought this would be a cosy place to shelter...

**Till crash! The cruel coulter past
Out through thy cell.**

long nose of a ploughshare

How sad now that all that work was for naught, and the poor little mite will have to endure the harsh, cold winter without shelter.

Most of us have long been familiar with the two closing stanzas, at least two lines of which are often cited, and provided the title for John Steinbeck's classic novel, *Of Mice and Men*:

**But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes of mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief and pain,
For promis'd joy!**

*not alone

go often awry
leave*

An' ower she wars'l'd in a ditch: *over, floundered*
There, groanin', dying, she did lie,
When Hughoc he cam doitin' by. *wandering*

The seemingly inept Hughoc (a farmhand) stands by helplessly, looking down at the poor dying Maillie, which then appeals to him:

'O thou whase lamentable face *whose*
Appears to mourn my woefu' case!
My dying words attentive hear,
And bear them to my master dear.'

Through several more verses, the unfortunate ewe pleads with Hughoc to convey a number of lessons to her master about how better to tend his animals to avoid a repeat of her fate, such as not tethering them, but letting them roam free. She then appeals for her master to take good care of her lambs, recommending various measures to keep them safe and well, and asking that her master teach her son and heir to be a success in his woolly life, and also her other female offspring. She finishes with:

'And now, my bairns, wi' my last breath,
I lea'e my blessing wi' you baith: *leave, both*
An' when you think upon your mither,
Mind to be kind to ane anither. *one another*
Now, honest Hughoc, dinna fail,
To tell my master a' my tale;
An' bid him burn this cursed tether,
An' for thy pains thou'se get my blether.' *you'll, bladder (to make haggis 🍷)*

This said, poor Maillie turned her head,
An' clos'd her een among the dead! *eyes*

To a Louse employs the imagery of a bloodsucking head louse and a prim young woman in stark contrast. It takes place inside a church, and the perspective is that of someone sitting in a pew behind the finely-dressed, attractive young lady – Jenny, one of the 'Mauchline Belles' - who was wearing a 'Lunardi' bonnet, named after Vincenzo Lunardi, who had made many balloon flights over Scotland. With all the excitement that aroused, enterprising milliners came up with a bonnet resembling a hot-air balloon in shape...very trendy among ladies of fashion. The theme of the poem revolves around the unfairness and inhumanity of class differences, and how we should eschew vanity in favour of humble self-awareness as to how others see us.

The poem begins with the observer noticing the impudent creature crawling '**Owre gauze and lace**', then expressing disgust at its choosing such a fine lady. He urges it to seek out someone poor to feed upon, thus admitting society's contempt for the well-being of the disadvantaged:

Ye ugly, creepin', blastit wonner,
Detested, shunn'd by saunt an' sinner *saint*
How daur ye set your fit upon her - *dare, foot*
Sae fine a lady!
Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner *go*
On some poor body.

He recommends it creep about the locks of some poor beggar, among all the other vermin it will find there, implying that such a poor man might not be welcome in the church. But he suddenly loses sight of it...tells it to stop as it seems set to reach the very top of the lady's bonnet, only to see its nose emerge '**As plump and grey as onie grozet**', or gooseberry; if only he had some bright red powder, he'd cover it in that.

In the next verse, instead of choosing the stylish bonnet of a fine lady, he thinks it would be more acceptable if it were crawling on the cap of an old, poor woman, or on the undershirt of a scruffy boy, once again giving voice to the double standards that denigrate the poor:

I wad na been surpris'd to spy	<i>would not</i>
You on an auld wife's flainen toy;	<i>flannel cap</i>
Or aiblins some bit duddie boy	<i>perhaps, small</i>
On's wyliecoat;	<i>on his ragged vest</i>
But Miss's fine Lunardi! Fye!	
How daur ye do't.	<i>dare</i>

But at last he sees the light and scorns Jenny's posturing vanity, telling her she shouldn't toss her head so pridefully when the people around her are noticing the indignity of her situation and pointing at her, and winking in scorn. Time for her to show more humility!

In the final verse, he wishes the Almighty would give us the gift of self-awareness to see ourselves as others do, thus allowing us to act and speak more reasonably, and how we should accept that fashion and a haughty attitude will not save us from appearing foolish in the eyes of others:

O wad some Power the giftie gie us	
To see oursels as ithers see us!	
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,	
An' foolish notion:	
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,	<i>leave,</i>
An' ev'n devotion.	

The Twa Dogs was a poem composed to memorialize the poet's dearly beloved pet dog, Luath, that had been cruelly killed, deliberately, by someone the day before. The second dog - probably intended by the poet to be a Newfoundland - is named Caesar, but unlike Luath is likely fictional. It is a long poem so I will quote a comparatively small sampling of the lines.

Luath was a poor ploughman's Collie, while Caesar belonged to a prosperous laird. Coming from different social strata, each had a different tale to tell concerning their own comforts and lifestyles and that of their respective masters. They met by chance:

Twa dogs, that were na thrang at hame,	<i>not busy at home</i>
Forgathered ance upon a time.	<i>once</i>

First Caesar's introduction:

His locked, letter'd, braw brass collar	
Shew'd him the gentleman an' scholar;	
But tho' he was o' high degree,	
The fient a pride, nae pride had he.	<i>complete lack, no</i>

Then Luath's:

The tither was a ploughman's collie, *other*
A rhyming, ranting, raving billie. *fellow*

The gentrified Caesar begins the conversation by asking:

I've aften wondered, honest Luath,
What sort o' life poor dogs like you have;
An' when the gentry's life I saw,
What way poor bodies liv'd ava. *at all*

He continues with a lengthy description of how extravagantly his laird and family live, so much of their time taken up with gluttonous eating. Luath responds by relating how his master works himself half to death, and even when disaster strikes...

But how it comes, I never kend yet, *understood*
They're maistly wonderfu' contented;
An' buirdly chieles, an' clever hizzies, *stout lads, girls*
Are bred in sic a way as this is. *such*

Caesar describes his master as cruelly dismissive of poor folk, and paints a scenario actually suffered by the Burns family when his father had to '*thole a factor's snash*' when an unyielding land agent hounded him for falling behind in his rent during harsh times:

Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,
How they maun thole a factor's snash: *must endure, scorn*
He'll stamp an' threaten, curse an' swear,
He'll apprehend them, poind their gear; *seize their goods*
While they maun stan', wi' aspect humble, *must stand*
An' hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!

Luath comes back with the surprising response that despite the poverty and hardships facing his master and his family, for the most part they are content with their lives, and:

The dearest comfort o' their lives,
Their gushie weans and faithfu' wives; *growing children*
Their prattling things are just their pride,
That sweetens a' their fireside.

The conversation goes on for some considerable time in similar vein, with Caesar painting a picture of the unhappy rich, and Luath extolling the life of make-do contentment that his people enjoy. Their chat ends with:

By this, the sun was out o' sight,
An' darker gloamin' brought the night; *twilight*
The bum-clock humm'd wi' lazy drone; *beetle*
The kye stood rowtin' i' the loan; *cattle, lowing, path*
When up they gat an' shook their lugs, *ears*
Rejoic'd they were na men but dogs;
An' each took aff his several way,
Resolv'd to meet some ither day.

Nature Most Fair

In a different vein, there is great delight to be found in some of the poet's descriptions of birds. Here he paints a word picture of five different birds in a single verse:

The sober laverock, warbling wild, *lark*
Shall to the skies aspire;
The gowdspink, Music's gayest child, *goldfinch*
Shall sweetly join the choir;
The blackbird strong, the lintwhite clear, *linnet*
The mavis mild and mellow, *thrush*
The robin, pensive Autumn cheer
In all her locks of yellow.

The Humble Petition of Bruar Water

And, of Nature, sweet:

The little birdies blithely sing,
And o'er their heads the hazels hing, *hang*
Or lightly flit on wanton wing
In the birks o' Aberfeldie! *birches*

The Birks of Aberfeldie

Even in a depressive mood, Nature can be invoked:

The sweeping blast, the sky o'er cast,
The joyless winter day
Let others fear, to me more dear
Than all the pride of May:
The tempest's howl, it soothes my soul,
My griefs it seems to join;
The leafless trees my fancy please,
Their fate resembles mine!

Winter: A Dirge

So many other gems descriptive of Nature can be found in the poetry and songs passed down to us by Scotia's Bard. Some were inspired by nature's beauty and then transposed upon, or coupled with, women who were the objects of his admiration. *Behold, My Love, How Green the Groves* is particularly touching, and creative in its contrasting comparisons. Quoting all:

Behold, my love, how green the groves,
The primrose banks how fair;
The balmy gales awake the flowers,
And wave thy flowing hair.

The lav'rock shuns the palace gay, *lark*
And o'er the cottage sings:
For Nature smiles as sweet, I ween, *declare*
To Shepherds as to Kings.

Let minstrels sweep the skillfu' strings,
In lordly lighted ha':
The Shepherd stops his simple reed,
Blythe in the birken shaw.

birch wood

The Princely revel may survey
Our rustic dance wi' scorn;
But are their hearts as light as ours,
Beneath the milk-white thorn?

The shepherd, in the flowery glen;
In shepherd's phrase, will woo:
The courtier tells a finer tale,
But is his heart as true?

These wild-wood flowers I've pu'd to deck
That spotless breast o' thine;
The courtier's gems may witness love,
But, 'tis na love like mine.

pulled

A variation of that theme, but with a sting in its tail:

Aft hae I rov'd by Bonie Doon
To see the rose and woodbine twine,
And ilka bird sang o' its love,
And fondly so did I o' mine.

the river Doon

conjoin

every

Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose,
Fu' sweet upon its thorny tree!

pulled

And my fause lover staw my rose –
But ah! he left the thorn wi' me.

false, stole

The Banks o' Doon

In praise of the twelve-year-old daughter of an acquaintance, already an accomplished musician who could sing Burns' songs to her own accompaniment:

Within the bush her covert nest
A little linnet fondly prest,
The dew sat chilly on her breast,
Sae early in the morning.
She soon shall see her tender brood,
The pride, the pleasure o' the wood,
Among the fresh green leaves bedew'd,
Awauk the early morning.

awake

So thou, dear bird, young Jeany fair,
On trembling string or vocal air,
Shall sweetly pay the tender care
That tents thy early morning!
So thou, sweet rose-bud, young and gay,

tends

**Shalt beauteous blaze upon the day,
And bless the parent's evening ray
That watch'd thy early morning.**

A Rose-Bud by My Early Walk

**O, were my love yon lilac fair
Wi' purple blossoms to the spring,
And I a bird to shelter there,
When wearied on my little wing.
How I wad mourn when it was torn
By Autumn wild and Winter rude!
But I wad sing on wanton wing,
When youthfu' May it's bloom renew'd.**

O, Were My Love

**Here is the glen, and here the bower
All underneath the birchen shade,
The village-bell has toll'd the hour –
O, what can stay my lovely maid?**

birch's

**'Tis not Maria's whispering call –
'Tis but the balmy-breathing gale,
Mixed with some warbler's dying fall
The dewy star of eve to hail!**

Here is the Glen

The Braes o' Ballochmyle laments the forced sale of Sir John Whiteford's estate following the collapse of the Ayr Bank, in which he was heavily invested. The first verse notes that winter has caused nature to hibernate; the second verse laments that when Spring heralds in its vernal rejuvenation, it will bring no joy to the departing family, including Whiteford's daughter Maria:

**The Catrine woods were yellow seen,
The flow'rs decayed on Catrine lea,
Nae lav'rocks sang on hillock green,
But nature sicken'd on the e'e.
Thro' faded groves Maria sang,
Hersel' in beauty's bloom the while,
And aye the wild-wood echoes rang: -
Fareweel the braes o' Ballochmyle!**

*meadow
larks
eye*

hills, farewell

**Low in your wintry beds, ye flowers,
Again ye'll flourish fresh and fair;
Ye birdies, dumb in the with'ring bowers,
Again ye'll charm the vocal air;
But here, alas! for me nae mair
Shall birdie charm, or floweret smile;
Fareweel the bonie banks of Ayr!
Fareweel! fareweel! sweet Ballochmyle!**

no more

The Riddells

The poet took up residence at Ellisland Farm, six miles from Dumfries, in June of 1788. Very soon after, he met and befriended a local member of the gentry who was four years his senior and who would figure prominently in the next phase of his life. Robert Riddell of Glenriddell had inherited the adjacent Glenriddell estate, and a country house that was known as Friars' Carse. Riddell allowed the poet open access to Friars' Carse Hermitage, a small summerhouse on the property which the poet used to much effect as a quiet retreat for contemplation and writing.

Burns' first product of this sanctuary was *Verses in Friars' Carse Hermitage* with these inspiring opening lines:

**Thou whom chance may hither lead,
Be thou cast in russet weed,
Be thou deckt in silken stole,
Grave these counsels on thy soul.**

**Life is but a day at most,
Sprung from night, - in darkness lost:
Hope not sunshine ev'ry hour,
Fear not clouds will always lour.**

**As Youth and Love, with sprightly dance
Beneath thy morning star advance,
Pleasure with her siren air
May delude the thoughtless pair:
Let Prudence bless Enjoyment's cup,
Then raptur'd sip, and sip it up.**

Burns used a diamond-tipped stylus (more of that later) to inscribe the first eight lines on a windowpane of the Hermitage. That same window can be viewed at the Ellisland Farm Museum. He similarly inscribed the following four lines on another pane of the Hermitage:

**To Riddell, much lamented man,
This ivied cot was dear:
Wand'rer, dost value matchless worth?
This ivied cot revere.**

This was an epitaph for Robert Riddell, who died suddenly in early 1794.

Near the end of 1791, Robert met the young, charming, and precocious Maria Riddell at Friars' Carse. She had recently married Walter Riddell, the brother of the poet's new friend, Robert Riddell. Maria had an interest in literature and poetry and was a reasonably good poet in her own right. As Burns was so often a guest at Friars' Carse, and the nineteen-year-old Maria was beautiful, they inevitably became friends, or more so on his part, as he hints in *On Maria Riddell*:

**Maria, all my thought and dream,
Inspires my vocal shell:
The more I praise my lovely theme,
The more the truth I tell.**

Burns and Maria met and corresponded frequently, the poet often critiquing her poetical efforts. He also provided her with a letter of introduction to Edinburgh's leading printer, William Smellie, which led to the latter agreeing to publish her book, *Voyages to the Madeira and Leeward Caribee* (sic). In the song *Farewell, Thou Stream That Winding Flows* he displays surprisingly deep affection for her, and is worth quoting in full. *Eliza* was in fact Maria. He changed it later to Eliza after falling out with Maria, as described later below:

Farewell, thou stream that winding flows

Around Eliza's dwelling!

O Mem'ry, spare the cruel throes

Within my bosom swelling:

Condemned to drag a hopeless chain

And yet in secret languish,

To feel a fire in every vein,

Nor dare disclose my anguish!

Love's veriest wretch, unseen, unknown,

I fain my griefs would cover;

The bursting sigh, th' unweeing groan *unwitting*

Betray the hapless lover.

I know thou doom'st me to despair,

Nor wilt, nor canst relieve me;

But, O Eliza, hear one pray'r –

For pity's sake forgive me!

The music of thy voice I heard,

Nor wist while it enslaved me! *knew*

I saw thine eyes, yet nothing fear'd,

Till fears no more had sav'd me!

Th' unwary sailor thus, aghast

The wheeling torrent viewing,

'Mid circling horrors sinks at last

In overwhelming ruin.

Unfortunately, later in that same year there was a disastrous falling-out with the whole Riddell family, including Maria. A serious, drunken indiscretion on his part (the 'Rape of the Sabine Women' incident) brought him deep shame, and he appealed to Maria to forgive him and remain friends, but she too shunned him, which angered him greatly. He wrote two defamatory poems in rebuke, the first being *Monody on a Lady for Her Caprice*, the first two verses that read:

How cold is the bosom which Folly once fired!

How pale is the cheek where the rouge lately glisten'd!

How silent that tongue which the echoes oft tired!

How dull is that ear which to flatt'ry so listened!

If sorrow and anguish their exit await,

From friendship and dearest affection remov'd,

How doubly severer, Maria, thy fate!

Thou diedst unwept, as thou livedst unlov'd.

He also penned some insulting lines entitled *Pinned to Mrs Walter Riddell's* (i.e. Maria's) *Carriage*:

**If you rattle along like your mistress's tongue,
Your speed will out-rival the dart;
But, a fly for your load, you'll break down on the road,
If your stuff be as rotten's her heart.**

They did reconcile in early 1795, surprisingly, given Burns' vitriol-in-verse towards her. They also met in person about two weeks before the poet died, at Brow Well; coincidentally, both had gone there to take the supposedly healing waters for their health.

Despite also being estranged from Robert Riddell over the same 'Sabine Women' incident, when he died unexpectedly as noted above, aside from the brief epitaph referred to there, Burns composed *Sonnet on the Death of Robert Riddell* that was – in his words – “a small heart-felt tribute to the memory of the man I loved.” His continuing affection for Maria's brother-in-law contrasted with the anger he so pointedly directed at Maria. This could be explained by feelings of betrayal, likely because of the more personal romantic attachment he had felt for her, and that he had hoped she shared, despite no physical manifestation being likely. Maria's earlier emotional feelings for him were almost certainly much more muted than his for her, perhaps akin to that of a fond friendship, which, even if true, would equally argue against her shunning him so completely for so long.

His Humour

There are many examples of humour in the works of Burns, some of which I have included elsewhere in this presentation, especially in the epitaphs and epigrams; also in his satirical verses, such as *Holy Willie's Prayer*.

Other examples are plentiful. In his *Reply to a Trimming Epistle Received from a Taylor* – that gentleman obviously having annoyed him - the opening verse of his lengthy response was sharp, but no doubt exaggerated for comic effect:

**What ails ye now, ye lousie bitch
To thresh my back at sic a pitch?** *so vigorously*

**Losh man, hae mercy wi' your natch!
Your bodkin bauld:** *notching-blade
needle, bold*

**I didna suffer half sae much
Frae Daddie Auld.** *Minister Auld*

Indeed, he did suffer much from Daddie Auld!

His *Reply to An Invitation* was certainly meant to bring a smile to its recipient:

**Sir,
Yours this moment I unseal,
And faith! I'm gay and hearty.
To tell the truth and shame the Deil,
I am as fou as Bartie.
But Foursday, Sir, my promise leal,
Expect me o' your party,
If on a beastie I can speel
Or hurl in a cartie.** *Devil
drunk as the Devil
Thursday, true
climb
trundle*
Yours – ROBERT BURNS

In *The Keekin Glass*, Burns parodies a judge who, vision-impaired through drink while referring to the beautiful daughter of a friend, asked: "wha's yon howlet-faced thing in the corner?":

**How daur ye ca' me 'Howlet-face'
Ye blear-eyed, withered spectre?
Ye only spied the keekin' glass,
An' there ye saw your picture.** *owl-face
mirror*

The poet suffered 'an omnipotent Toothache' in mid-1795, which we can thank for an amusing take on something most of us have experienced at some point in our lives. His attack on the condition – personified to validate the verbal assault – in his *Address to the Toothache* can be taken as intended farce to vilify the accursed condition:

**My curse upon your venom'd stang,
That shoots my tortur'd gums along,
An' thro' my luggies monie a twang
Wi' gnawing vengeance,
Tearing my nerves wi' bitter pang,
Like racking engines.** *sting
ears, gives, twinge
stretching machine*

When fevers burn, or ague freezes,
Rheumatics gnaw, or colic squeezes,
Our neebors sympathise to ease us,
Wi' pitying moan;
But thee! – thou hell o' diseases –
They mock our groan.

chills

The Calf is a clever and smile-worthy product of a wager between Burns and his friend, Gavin Hamilton, challenging the poet to produce a poem on the theme and content of a sermon delivered at Mauchline Kirk by a guest minister, James Steven, who based his sermon on a Bible text, 'And ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.' He offered this in response, all of which needs to be quoted here to appreciate the humour. No doubt Burns won the bet:

Right, sir! your text I'll prove it true,
Tho' heretics may laugh;
For instance, there's yourself just now,
God knows, an unco *calf*.

awful big

And should some patron be so kind
As bless you wi' a kirk,
I doubt na sir, but then we'll find
Ye're still as great a *stirk*.

*don't doubt
steer*

But, if the lover's raptured hour
Shall ever be your lot,
Forbid it, every heavenly Power,
You e'er should be a *stot!*

young bullock

Though when some kind connubial dear
Your but-and-ben adorns,
The like has been that you may wear
A noble head of *horns*.

rustic cottage

be a cuckold

And, in your lug, most reverend James,
To hear you roar and rowte,
Few men o' sense will doubt your claims
To rank among the *nowte*.

*ear
as if passing wind*

cattle

And when you're numbered with the dead,
Below a grassy hillock,
With justice they may mark your head –
'Here lies a famous *bullock*'.

Next, we have the most comically insulting song in the pantheon of Burns' work, *Willie Wastle*:

Willie Wastle dwalt on Tweed,
The spot they call it Linkumdoddie.
Willie was a wabster guid
Could stoun a clew wi' onie body.

dwelt

*weaver good
have stolen, clue*

He had a wife was dour and din *stubborn, sullen*
 O, Tinkler Maidgie was her mither!
 Sic a wife as Willie had, *such*
 I wadna gie a button for her. *wouldn't give*

She has an e'e (she has but ane), *eye, one*
 The cat has twa the very colour, *two*
 Five rusty teeth, forbye a stump, *as well as*
 A clapper-tongue wad deave a miller; *deafen*
 A whiskin' beard about her mou, *mouth*
 Her nose and chin they threaten ither;
 Sic a wife as Willie had,
 I wadna gie a button for her.

And so it goes on for two more verses, ending in:

Her walie nieves like midden-creels *ample fists, midden-baskets*
 Her face wad fyle the Logan Water; *foul*
 Sic a wife as Willie had,
 I wadna gie a button for her.

In illustrating Burns' humour, I would be remiss not to include a reference to his *Ode to Spring*, but with the strenuous warning that - depending, Dear Reader, on your tolerance for bawdry - it may offend a little!

In early January 1795 when Burns sent a copy of this *Ode* to George Thomson (a collector and editor of songs), with a view to having it published, he remarked that he had composed it several years earlier "when I was younger, and by no means the saint I am now." I think if he had been writing that today, he would have ended with LOL.

The piece was undertaken as a wager with a friend, who challenged him to produce a pastoral poem to rival any that the more classical-style poetasters of the day put out - such as Keats perhaps, though he was not yet born. In the result, he deserved to win the bet, at least if it is judged on its originality of theme that is cleverly woven into a passably idyllic pastoral reverie .

The first verse offers a not-unlovely description of a spring-induced fecundity of flora and fauna (with some questionably crude references to copulation), and Nature becoming aroused by Madame Thetis, an ancient Greek sea goddess. In verse two, we are introduced to mortals Damon and Sylvia, lying together, who '**To love they thought no crime, Sir**'. I will print the third and final verse, with just one judicious censoring:

First wi' the thrush, his thrust and push
 Had compass large and long, Sir;
 The blackbird next, his tuneful text,
 Was bolder, clear and strong, Sir:
 The linnet's lay came then in play, *thrush's*
 And the lark that soar'd aboon, Sir; *above*
 Till Damon, fierce, mistim'd his arse,
 And f****d quite out o' tune, Sir.

The asterisks are mine.

The Diamond-Stylus Verses

Burns was given a diamond-stylus pen as a gift, which he often used to inscribe extempore verses on windows, usually without the prior permission of the proprietors. Despite at times being etched in anger, some nevertheless contained elements of humorous satire.

While living at Ellisland Farm near Dumfries, Burns sometimes partook of a few drinks in a tavern not far from the farm. On one such visit the landlord's wife decided that Burns and her husband – his drinking buddy that evening - had had enough libation, so she abruptly closed the bar. As he had planned, Burns stayed the night, and shortly after he had left, the good lady found these very uncomplimentary lines inscribed on one of the tavern's windows - entitled *The Henpecked Husband*...intended as humour, or satirical invective?

**Curs'ed be the man, the poorest wretch in life,
The crouching vassal to the tyrant wife!
Who has no will but by her high permission;
Who has not sixpence but in her possession;
Who must to her his dear friend's secret tell,
Who dreads a curtain lecture worse than hell!
Were such the wife had fallen to my part,
I'd break her spirit, or I'd break her heart,
I'd charm her with the magic of a switch,
I'd kiss her maids, and kick the perverse bitch.**

All that for closing the bar early!

By way of balancing off this harsh rebuke, we have another stylus-inscribed verse that, although not humorous, attests to the fact that he was not always inclined to criticism during his travels. Here at least, he is highly complimentary of an Inn's service, the Inn being one that he had stayed at quite frequently in the village of Sanquhar while travelling in connection with his work as an Exciseman – *At Whigham's Inn, Sanquhar*:

**Envy, if thy jaundiced eye
Through this window chance to spy,
To thy sorrow thou shalt find,
All that's generous all that's kind
Friendship, virtue, every grace,
Dwelling in this happy place.**

While visiting an Inn in Dunkeld, the poet encountered a very angry-sounding woman, which caused him to inscribe this epigram on one of the Inn's windows:

**Ye gods, ye gave me a wife, out of your grace and pleasure,
To be a partner of my life and I was glad to have her.
But if your providence divine for better things design her,
I obey your will at any time, I'm willing to resign her.**

In fact, other than making minor variations in the wording, these lines were not composed by Burns at all, but rather by a Mr. Seedo several years earlier. They must have impressed him as he clearly had committed them to memory, and we must assume that he shared the sentiments expressed, at least as applicable on this occasion.

The Devil's In his Muse

The Devil, in one guise or another, is peppered throughout Burns' work. In almost all cases these satanic references are relatively benign, introduced to add humour or colour to his verse. Burns' Devil goes by many names: Auld Nick or Bartie, Cloutie or Mahoun, Auld Hornie or Auld Hangie, and one or two more. Some of his entrances will be revealed in poems and songs that will later be discussed separately in this paper, including Auld Mahoun doing his dance in the next section that summarizes *The Deil's Awa wi' th' Exciseman*.

The first significant mention the old fellow gets – or at least an agent of his - is in *Death and Doctor Hornbook*, sub-titled 'A True Story'. Well, the character being skewered in the piece, John Wilson, who was a Tarbolton fellow Mason and local schoolteacher, is about the extent of what is 'true'. Besides teaching, Wilson operated a grocery shop that also sold medicines, with free unqualified medical advice being dispensed by Wilson. When Burns heard him airing his faux medical knowledge at a masonic meeting, he couldn't resist composing this comic satire. He and Wilson were friends, so they were likely both in on the joke:

**Some books are lies frae end to end,
And some great lies were never penn'd:
Ev'n ministers, they hae been kend,
In holy rapture,
A rousing whid at times to vend, *lie*
And nail't wi' Scripture.**

**But this that I am gaun to tell, *going*
Which lately on a night befel,
Is just as true's the Deil's in Hell
Or Dublin city;
That e'er he nearer comes oursel
'S a muckle pity! *terrible***

The teller of the tale relates how he was leaving a tavern one dark night, a little the worse for drink, heading across fields and reaching Willie's Mill:

**I there wi' *Something* did forgather,
That pat me in an eerie swither; *put, ghostly panic*
An awfu' scythe, out-ower ae shouter, *across one shoulder*
Clear-dangling, hang;
A three-tae'd leister on the ither *three-pronged trident*
Lay, large an' lang.**

It was truly a strange creature, very tall, but with scarcely any stomach, and spindly legs. His name was *Death*, or the Grim Reaper as we would know him. They agree to sit down and have a chat;

**'Sax thousand years are near-hand fled
Sin' I was to the butching bred,
An' monie a scheme in vain's been laid,
To stop or scar me; *stop, scare*
Till ane Hornbook's ta'en up the trade, *one*
An' faith! he'll waur me.' *get the better of***

Death complains bitterly that several attempts he made to kill off another victim with his dart or scythe were foiled by Hornbook, whose medicines had (metaphorically) blunted his instruments of death, so, he had a go at Hornbook himself:

**'I drew my scythe in sic a fury,
I near-hand cowpit wi' my hurry,
But yet the bauld Apothecary
Withstood the shock;
I might as weel had try'd a quarry
O' hard whin-rock.'**

*such
tumbled

granite*

The spectre gripes on about Hornbook's successes over him at every turn, frustrating all his attempts at doing his job. His fury ends in a threat to take down Hornbook when next they meet:

**'But hark! I'll tell you of a plot,
Tho' dinna ye be speakin' o't!
I'll nail the self-conceited sot
As dead's a herrin';
Neist time we meet, I'll wad a goat,
He'll get his fairin'!**

*next, wager fourpence
what's coming to him*

In *Address to the Deil*, we get quite a mouthful of names for the Devil:

**O Thou! whatever title suit thee –
Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick, or Cloutie -
What in yon cavern grim an' sootie,
Clos'd under hatches,
Spairges about the brunstane cootie,
To scald poor wretches!**

splashes, brimstone dish

**Hear me, Auld Hangie, for a wee,
And let poor damned bodies be;
I'm sure sma' pleasure it can gie,
Ev'n to a diel,
To skelp an' scaud poor dogs like me,
An' hear us squeel.**

*Old Hangman

scald*

The speaker continues for many verses cataloguing the Devil's actions, with obvious distaste. I will finish with the next-to-last verse:

**An' now, Auld Cloots, I ken ye're thinkin',
A certain Bardie's rantin', drinkin',
Some luckless hour will send him linkin'
To your black Pit;
But, faith! he'll turn a corner jinkin',
An' cheat you yet.**

*hurrying
dodging*

He appears in many other poems, such as *Tam o' Shanter*, which we will get to later. So, we'll leave Auld Cloutie in peace for now.

Burns the Exciseman

Farming was Robert Burns' profession and only source of income, until 1786 when the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition of his poetry yielded a moderate additional sum; but the prospect of eking out a decent living from farming, and any added proceeds from his continued output of poems and songs would have seemed unlikely to meet his considerable financial needs. This made him consider other options, and preferably those that would guarantee a salary sufficient to support a family.

The idea of becoming an excise officer seems to have come to him sometime in that year, about the same time as the publication of his works and his first sojourn in Edinburgh to pursue an expanded second edition. Burns would have known that he easily met the basic educational qualifications required for entry to the Excise Service of Scotland, and an appointment would come with a decent income upwards of £50 per annum, plus even a modest pension. With help from influential contacts and benefactors that materialized after he achieved recognition and fame as Scotland's new leading bard, he pursued the goal and was eventually awarded his commission in July 1788, shortly after settling into his new farm at Ellisland, just outside Dumfries. He had to wait for a territory, or Division, close to Ellisland to come vacant, but that did not happen until more than a year later. And that Division was only opened up after Burns lobbied, successfully, to have the incumbent dismissed for lack of performance. Without going into all the details here, he quickly earned success in this new profession.

Surprisingly, there are just three poetical references to his work as an Exciseman, only one of which stands out. *The Deil's Awa wi' th'Exciseman* is a humorous acknowledgement of the widespread dislike most people at the time had for these reputedly insidious and sneaky tax collectors, a view reinforced in this rollicking song. It is not long, and it's fun, so we might as well have the whole piece:

Chorus following every verse:

***The Deil's awa, the Diel's awa,
The Deil's awa wi' th'Exciseman!
He's danc'd awa, he's danc'd awa,
He's danc'd awa wi' th'Exciseman!***

**The Deil cam fiddlin' through the town,
And danc'd awa wi' th'Exciseman,
And ilka wife cries: 'Auld Mahoun, *every, the Devil*
I wish you luck o' the prize man!**

**We'll mak our maut, and we'll brew our drink, *malt*
We'll laugh, sing, and rejoice, man,
And mony brow thanks to the meikle black Deil, *many fine, great*
That danc'd awa wi' th'Exciseman.**

**There's threesome reels, there's foursome reels,
There's hornpipes and strathspeys, man,
But the ae best dance e'er cam to the land *one*
Was *The Deil's awa wi' th'Exciseman.***

After his appointment, Burns was assigned to a serving officer - Graham of Fintry – for six weeks of training, which involved:

Searching auld wives' barrels,

Ochon, the day!

That clarty barm should stain my laurels

But what'll they say?

These movin' things ca'd wives an' weans

Wad move the very hearts o' stanes!

On Being Appointed to an Excise Division

Alas!

dirty yeast

kids

stones

Clearly, he felt badly about raiding the illicit stills and 'clarty' barrels of poor working folks, compared with confronting smugglers and seizing ships that brought in contraband. He was involved in at least one such major incident, the armed assault and seizure of the Rosamond ship, a raid in which he greatly distinguished himself in leadership and bravery.

Shortly after his appointment, while staying at the King's Arms Tavern in Dumfries, and overhearing some disrespectful remarks being made about Excisemen, in *Kirk and State Excisemen* Burns felt moved to inscribe a rebuttal with his diamond stylus on one of the window panes of the tavern:

Ye men of wit and wealth, why all this sneering

'Gainst poor Excisemen? Give the cause a hearing.

What are your Landlord's rent-rolls? Taxing ledgers!

What Premiers? What ev'n Monarchs? Mighty Guagers!

Nay, what are Priests (those seeming godly wise-men)?

What are they, pray, but Spiritual Excisemen!

The Rights of Man – And Woman His Politics and His Social Activism

Robert Burns was passionately dedicated to equality and liberty for all, regardless of rank, and for the granting of additional rights to the common man to achieve it. There was no Labour Party to champion the rights of the working man and woman; few had the right to vote. In the late 18th Century, speaking out in favour of a universal franchise or for equal rights for all, risked the serious charge of *sedition*. As Scotland's de facto National Bard, Burns did have a platform to air grievances and press for meaningful change, but he was walking a fine line in doing so. He recognized this in his *Address to William Tytler*:

But loyalty - truce! we're on dangerous ground:

Who knows how the fashions may alter?

The doctrine, to-day, that is loyalty sound,

To-morrow may bring us a halter! *noose*

His poem *A Dream* – completed just before the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition – sports the following two lines below the title, as if to plead for tolerance of the content of the poem.

Thoughts, words, and deeds, the Statute blames with reason:

But surely *Dreams* were ne'er indicted Treason.

The poem begins with an address to King George III, and while being carefully respectful of him for the most part, he seems to push his luck in some poetical asides, such as when he dog-whistles that Bonnie Prince Charlie might have been 'better' than George:

For me, before a Monarch's face,

Ev'n there I winna flatter;

For neither pension, post, nor place,

Am I your humble debtor:

So, nae reflection on your Grace,

Your kingship to bespatter;

There's monie waur been o' the race, *worse*

And aiblins ane been better *perhaps one*

Than you this day.

He has some sharper veiled criticisms alluding to other statesmen and Royals that rendered the poem politically risky. A friend tried to persuade him to omit it from the publication of his second edition, but he did not heed the advice. The men in power at the time were not unaware of the messaging embedded in his poetry, and more than once he was warned to reign in his behaviour and his provocative poetical rhetoric.

The theme of equality recurs in many of his poems and songs, but none so openly as that rousing song, *A Man's a Man for A' That*. In fact, it could well serve as the international anthem for socialist causes. Although in today's world the nobility no longer usurps the wealth and rights of the common citizen, they have been replaced by the proverbial one-percenters that we speak of today.

This song, with its powerful social and political inferences, is quite a remarkable indictment of the British class system in Burns' time, and the yawning deficit of wealth and perceived worth

and dignity that separated the common man from the gentry. This is one of a few pieces that I feel needs to be reproduced in full.

The opening verse comes close to summarizing the issue:

Is there for honest poverty

That hings his head, an' a' that? *hangs*
The coward-slave, we pass him by –
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Our toils obscure an' a' that,
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that. *gold*

The common, 'honest' man, despite his poverty, is more than a match for the nobility. Indeed, he is king of men:

What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin' grey, an' a' that? *course woollen cloth*
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine –
A man's a man for a' that.
For a' that an' a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that,
The honest man, though e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.

And he voices this rebuke for a pretentious, fool-of-a-lord:

Ye see yon birkie ca'd a 'lord', *fellow, called*
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that?
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a cuif for a' that. *fool*
For a' that, an' a' that,
His ribband, star, an' a' that, *decorative ribbon*
The man o' independent mind,
He looks an' laughs, at a' that.

Honesty and a bedrock of sense and pride place the common man above lordlings and princes:

A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an' a' that!
But an honest man's aboon his might – *above*
Guid faith, he mauna fa' that! *must not deny*
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their dignities an' a' that,
The pith o' sense an' pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that.

The poet concludes with a heartfelt plea for equality and brotherhood between all men, prophesying that 'it's comin' yet for a' that':

Then let us pray that come it may
(As come it will, for a' that),
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth,
Shall bear the gree an' a' that. *be the goal*

**For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin' yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.**

It is interesting to observe that the final two lines of each of the five stanzas is declaratory, serving for the most part as a pithy summation of the previous six lines. These are very effective in hammering home the message, often in a quotable dictum.

The Rights of Woman

If we look back, say, thirty years or less, 'man' and 'mankind' were taken to include both genders, which leaves little doubt that Burns intended the rights owed to all men, and their equality within society, to apply equally to women. As we know, until after the first world war, women in Britain – even of the highest social standing - did not enjoy the same political or legal rights as men of much lower rank; for one thing, they could not vote in Burns' time, even if they would have qualified under the rules that applied to men. Burns took up the crusade of a need for additional rights for women in his poem *The Rights of Woman*. It focused, not on the right to vote or the attainment of other political rights (which were far out of reach), but emphasized respect for women.

The poem was written to be performed by a leading actress – Louisa Fontenelle – as an 'Address' in Dumfries's Theatre Royal in November 1792. Loaded as this topic is today, I think we should assess the content in non-revisionist terms:

**While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,
The fate of empires and the fall of kings;
While quacks of State must each produce a plan,
And even children lisp The Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman merit some attention.**

What follows might cause most modern women to gag! Burns' first *Right* is 'Protection':

**The tender flower that lifts its head elate,
Helpless, must fall before the blasts of fate,
Sunk on the earth, defaced its lovely form,
Unless your shelter ward th'impending storm.**

Now ladies, chins off the floor please, it's only a metaphor from nature, which was his poetical forte! I think he's just saying that women are the weaker of the sexes – physically – so don't abuse them, and show them the respect they deserve in what, in 1792, was very much a 'man's world'.

His second *Right* 'tis *Decorum*':

**There was, indeed, in far less polish'd days,
A time, when rough rude Man had naughty ways:
Would swagger, swear, get drunk, kick up a riot,
Nay, even thus invade a lady's quiet!**

Sounds like some of the fellows I've known! Again, we should interpret the point he's making in the context of the social graces observed by women in that era. Conduct, as he is describing it, would have been upsetting to women, much more so then than now.

**For Right the third, our last, our best our dearest:
That right to fluttering female hearts the nearest,
Which even the Rights of Kings, in low prostration,
Most humbly own – ‘tis dear, dear Admiration.**

Here he is referring to ‘Immortal Love’, a right of all, that everyone should defend. He ends with the rousing call:

Ah! ça ira! THE MAJESTY OF WOMAN.

(Note: ‘Ça ira’ was a French Revolutionary slogan, the use of which risked having him accused of sedition.)

These more social aims (however condescending, and even sexist, by today’s standards) should be viewed in the context of those prevailing in the late 18th Century - bold and supportive of women, and placing him at the forefront of feminism.

Earlier in a verse epistle, *To The Goodwife of Wauchope House*, he praises women and the qualities they bring to everyday life (to the benefit of men!) in a sincere, respectful manner:

Hale to the sex! (ilk guid chiel says); *each good chap*
Wi’ merry dance on winter days,
An’ we to share in common!
The gust o’ joy, the balm of woe,
The saul o’ life, the heav’n below, *soul*
In rapture-giving Woman.
Ye surly sumpsh, who hate the name, *boors*
Be mindfu’ o’ your mither;
She, honest woman, may think shame
That ye’re connected with her!

Liberty

References to liberty – sometimes personified by the poet when he capitalized the first letter – appear in nine of Burns’ poems and songs. In almost all instances it is clearly associated with a political theme. **The Tree of Liberty** is a revolutionary song, almost certainly inspired by one virtually of the same title, composed in 1775 by the political activist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine. It was one of Burns’ most politically specific pieces whose allegorical approach serves as a thin disguise for his contempt of the French aristocracy, and his corresponding admiration for the revolutionaries who acted to rid France of their oppressors. Burns deemed it too radical to publish in his own lifetime, only appearing after his death:

Heard ye o’ the tree o’ France,
I watna what’s the name o’t; *don’t know*
Around it a’ the patriots dance,
Weel Europe kens the fame o’t.
It stands where ance the Bastille stood, *once*
A prison built by kings, man,
When Superstition’s hellish brood
Kept France in leading strings, man.

He seems to cheer the fate of the hapless Louis XVI, who was held in contempt by most people in Britain at the time. He could therefore risk seeming dismissive of that particular monarch without raising the ire of the British royal house:

King Loui' thought to cut it down, *the Tree of Liberty*
When it was unco sma', man: *very small*
For this the watchman cracked his crown,
Cut aff his head and a', man.

Bringing the message closer to home:

We labour soon, we labour late,
To feed the titled knave, man:
And a' the comfort we're to get
Is that ayont the grave, man. *beyond*

He ends on a celebratory note, anticipating the happy coming of liberty to England (to include Scotland we trust?), but with the faintest of a hint of revolution as the alternative:

Syne let us pray, auld England may *Then*
Sure plant this far-famed tree, man;
And blythe we'll sing, and hail the day
That gave us liberty, man.

It should be noted that Burns later lost his enthusiasm for the French revolutionaries, partly because of the atrocities committed, but also when, under Napoleon Bonaparte, they threatened to invade Britain.

Burns' poem, *Ode for General Washington's Birthday*, had little to do with George Washington or his birthday. Rather, it was another call for liberty. Burns looked upon the nascent republic of America – 'Columbia' in the poem – as a champion of liberty and equality. However, as an opponent of slavery he may have overlooked an inconsistency between the US Declaration of Independence's avowal 'that all men are created equal' and the widespread practice of slavery:

'Tis Liberty's bold note I swell:
Thy harp, Columbia, let me take!
See gathering thousands, while I sing,
A broken chain, exulting bring
And dash it in a tyrant's face,
And dare him to his very beard,
And tell him he is no more fear'd,
No more the despot of Columbia's race!
A tyrant's proudest insults brav'd,
They shout a People freed! They hail an Empire sav'd!

But come, ye sons of Liberty,
Columbia's offspring, brave as free,
In danger's hour still flaming in the van,
Ye know, and dare maintain the Royalty of Man!

Jacobite Songs

Burns wrote well over twenty poems and songs either wholly or in part sympathetic to the Jacobite cause. There is no question that he had strong Jacobite sympathies, not least because three generations of his ancestors – including his father – were involved in the 1715 or 1745 rebellions. During his lifetime, it was still considered seditious to join in the popular toast to ‘the King over the water’, and we know that he attended a celebration of the birth of the Young Pretender in Edinburgh in December 1789 when that very toast was given.

One of his well-known Jacobite songs is boldly titled *Ye Jacobites By Name*, although it was based on an old song, and the extent of Burns’ contribution to it is not known. It dates from just after the ’45, when many – even in Scotland – opposed the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, and accounts for why it was anti-Jacobite. Burns was starting with that, and as the ‘improver’ he may not have wanted to deviate too far from the original sentiment. But it appears he did soften it by incorporating a humanitarian, anti-war message:

**Ye Jacobites by name, give an ear, give an ear,
Ye Jacobites by name, give an ear,
Ye Jacobites by name
Your fautes I will proclaim, *faults*
Your doctrines I maun blame – you shall hear! *must***

**What makes heroic strife, famed afar, famed afar?
What makes heroic strife famed afar?
What makes heroic strife?
To whet th’assassin’s knife,
Or hunt a Parent’s life, wi’ bloody war!**

A ballad-song more sympathetic to Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Jacobites is *Johnie Cope*. This celebrates the Battle of Prestonpans, which was the first significant engagement of the ’45 rebellion. The forces of General Sir John Cope were easily defeated. I will give the chorus and just two of the eleven verses:

***Hey, Johnie Cope, are ye wauking yet, *awake*
Or are ye sleeping, I would wait:
O haste ye get up for the drums do beat.
O fye Cope rise in the morning.***

**He wrote a challenge for Dunbar,
Come fight me Charlie an ye daur; *dare*
If it be not by the chance of war
I’ll give you a merry morning.**

**When Charlie look’d the letter upon
He drew his sword the scabbard from –
‘So Heaven restore to me my own,
I’ll meet you, Cope, in the morning.’**

Cope marshalled his men for battle, but, in Burns’ version of events, when he beheld the well-turned out and armed-to-the-teeth ‘Highland lads’ arraigned against him, he took to his heels, giving Charlie an easy victory. The reality is not quite so dismissive of Cope; he did stand and

Whare hae ye been sae braw, lad?
Whare hae ye been sae brankie, O?
Whare hae ye been sae braw, lad?
Cam ye by Killiecrankie, O.

I faught at land, I faught at sea,
At hame I faught my auntie, O;
But I met the Devil an' Dundee,
On the braes o' Killiecrankie, O.

live-in girlfriend
General Viscount Dundee

The bauld Pitcur fell in a furr,
An' Clavers gat a clankie, O,
Or I had fed an Athole gled
On the braes o' Killiecrankie, O!

ditch
knock
else, hawk

I will finish with a verse inscribed on the window of Stirling Inn with Burns' diamond-tipped stylus, clearly supportive of the Stuart line:

**Here Stewarts once in glory reign'd,
And laws for Scotland's weal ordain'd;
But now unroof'd their palace stands,
Their sceptre fall'n to other hands;
Fall'n indeed, and to the Earth,
Whence grovelling reptiles take their birth;
And since great Stewart's line is gone,
A race outlandish fills their throne:
An idiot race to honour lost -
Who know them best despise them most."**

well-being

the House of Hanover

This was very bold of him, and very foolish. His application to join the Excise service was still under consideration, and he was questioned about these lines by the senior excise managers, which seriously threatened his eventual approval. It is said that about two months later he returned and smashed the window, but the cat was out of the bag.

The Epistles

Beginning in about 1784 – when he was twenty-five – the poet adopted a new form of versification which he used extensively from that point on, namely the **Epistle**, or letter in verse. It was a clever device (though not of Burns' invention) that gave wider scope to his muse, including the use of humour and the introduction of everyday topics, as well as opportunities to wax philosophical on his views of life and the sharing of advice. These were addressed to friends and acquaintances, and served as an invitation to the recipient to reply in like manner. The first of these that we know of was addressed to a good friend and fellow-farmer, John Rankine, who happened to be the father of the young lady who was thought to have been his partner in *The Rigs o' Barley*. This *Epistle to John Rankine* is not notable for its poetical excellence, being an example of ribald humour in response to the older man's mischievous prodding upon learning that young Rob Mossgiel had made Betsey Paton pregnant. Robert makes light of the incident, employing the analogy of a poacher to characterize the affair:

'Twas ae night lately, in my fun,	<i>one</i>
I gaed a rovin' wi' the gun,	<i>went</i>
An' brought a pairrick to the grun' -	<i>partridge, ground</i>
A bonie hen;	<i>Betsey</i>
And, as the twilight was begun,	
Thought nane wad ken.	<i>none would know</i>

The poor wee thing was little hurt;	
I straikit a wee for sport,	<i>stroked it a bit</i>
Ne'er thinkin' they wad fash me for't;	<i>hassle</i>
But Deil-ma-care!	<i>just my luck!</i>
Somebody tells the Poacher-Court	<i>the Kirk Session</i>
The hale affair.	<i>whole</i>

Shortly after this, Burns tried his hand at another Epistle, this time addressed to a young friend and aspiring brother poet, David (Davie) Sillar, who lived close to the Burns family farm of Lochlie. Robert's success in publishing a volume of his poems in 1786 – The Kilmarnock Edition – inspired Sillar to publish his own volume of verse in 1789, but it was unsuccessful.

The *Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet* is very different in tone to that addressed to John Rankine; far from being vaingloriously flippant, his epistle to Davie is a serious commentary on life and its challenges, peppered with philosophical musings and considered conclusions, most of the latter offered as brief summations in the last four lines or so of each fourteen-line verse. Two of these will serve as examples:

Nae treasures nor pleasures	
Could make us happy lang;	
The heart ay's the part ay	
That makes us right or wrang.	<i>wrong</i>

The honest heart that's free frae a'	
Intended fraud or guile,	
However Fortune kick the ba'	
Has ay some cause to smile.	<i>always</i>

Later, he refers to Davie's current love interest, Meg, and his own, Jean:

**Ye hae Meg, your dearest part,
And I my darling Jean!
It warms me, it charms me
To mention but her name:
It heats me, it beats me
And sets me a' on flame!**

And as a nod to their close friendship, tied with his love for Jean:

**It lightens, it brightens
The tenebrific scene, *dark and gloomy*
To meet with, and greet with
My Davie, or my Jean!**

Burns had an exchange of verse Epistles with another much older friend and farming neighbour, John Lapraik. He had come across a song of Lapraik's that impressed him. He sought him out, and they immediately struck up a friendship as brothers in the muses. Robert penned an *Epistle to J. Lapraik* and two more later, each among his best. In the first, he praises the skill of his friend and shares some thoughts concerning his own early efforts at rhyming, when:

**Amaist as soon as I could spell, *almost*
I to the crambo-jingle fell; *rhyming***

Later adding, with dubious modesty:

**I am nae poet, in a sense,
But just a rhymer like by chance,
An' hae to learning nae pretence;
Yet what the matter?
Whene'er my Muse does on me glance,
I jingle at her.**

And in similar vein:

**Gie me a spark o' Nature's fire,
That's a' the learning I desire;
Then, tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire *puddles*
At pleugh or cart, *plough*
My Muse, tho' hamely in attire,
May touch the heart.**

In his *Second Epistle to Lapraik*, he muses on the privileges and assumed superiority of the monied classes, but is thankful that man's state is bestowed by nature (or God?) with those of poorer rank being able to attain greater worth in life by virtue of their human attributes:

**For thus the Royal mandate ran,
When first the human race began:
'The social, friendly, honest man,
Whate'er he be,
'Tis he fulfills great Nature's plan,
And none but he.'**

Epistle to a Young Friend is another deserving of notice. It was addressed to Andrew Aiken, the son of a good friend, Robert Aiken, mentioned a few times in this treatment. It is dated May 15, 1786, when the young recipient was just setting out on the journey of life. It is of interest not only because of the advice and wisdom it seeks to impart, but also because of its great similarity in theme to Polonius's advice to his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's **Hamlet** ('*Neither a borrower nor a lender be' etc.*), as he - like young Andrew Aiken - was setting out on a journey. Was this Burns' inspiration for this epistle? Given his expressed solicitudes, I think that is very likely.

I would have liked to include all eleven verses, but for brevity I will select just four:

I lang hae thought, my youthfu' friend,

A something to have sent you,

Tho' it should serve nae ither end

Than just a kind memento:

But how the subject-theme may gang, *go*

Let time and chance determine:

Perhaps it may turn out a sang,

Perhaps, turn out a sermon.

Ye'll try the world soon, my lad;

And Andrew dear, believe me,

Ye'll find mankind an unco squad, *strange*

And muckle they may grieve ye; *much*

For care and trouble set your thought,

Ev'n when your end's attained;

And a' your views may come to nought,

Where ev'ry nerve is strained.

Ay free, aff han', your story tell,

When wi' a bosom cronie;

But still keep something to yoursel'

Ye scarcely tell to onie: *anyone*

Conceal yoursel' as weel's ye can

Frae critical dissection;

But keek thro ev'ry other man, *glance*

Wi' sharpen'd sly inspection.

Adieu, dear, amiable youth!

Your heart can ne'er be wanting!

May prudence, fortitude, and truth,

Erect your brow undaunting!

In ploughman phrase, 'God send you speed,'

Still daily to grow wiser;

And may ye better reck the rede, *heed the advice*

Than ever did th' Adviser!

In total, Burns produced twenty-five 'Epistles', most being lighthearted, but a few, like these latter three, were written in serious vein.

The Epitaphs

Burns wrote many epitaphs – about thirty-five in all that were published – most of which were not intended for the *real* deceased. Many served as tropes, usually to poke innocent fun at his friends, but occasionally to scorn those he disliked, or that had upset him. We can assume that his friends, at least, enjoyed them...provided they could still look down at the grass! Or not, when it was a satirical or hurtful barb, as in *Epitaph on a Henpecked Squire*:

**As father Adam first was fool'd,
A case that's still too common,
Here lies a man a woman ruled –
The Devil ruled the woman.**

Or for 'Clockie' Brown, a local clockmaker, who had the reputation of an opportunistic lady's man, *Epitaph for a Wag in Mauchline*:

**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 his grass –
Perhaps he was your father!**

And Clockie was a friend!

But, of course, they were occasionally composed respectfully upon the death of a friend or relative. *Epitaph on My Honoured Father*, who died at Lochlie farm in February 1784, was published in the first printing of his poems, the Kilmarnock Edition. The lines were inscribed on his father's headstone, a replica of which is still standing in old Alloway Kirk's graveyard:

**O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains,
Draw near with pious rev'rence, and attend!
Here lie the loving husband's dear remains,
The tender father, and the gen'rous friend.
The pitying heart that felt for human woe,
The dauntless heart that fear'ed no human pride,
The friend of man – to vice alone a foe;
For 'ev'n his failings lean'd to virtue's side.'**

quote from Oliver Goldsmith

He even composed one clearly intended to apply to himself, *A Bard's Epitaph*. At five verses, it is long for an epitaph, so I will quote just one in full:

**The poor inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know,
And keenly felt the friendly glow,
And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
And stain'd his name!**

Epigrams and Fragments

I will now share a few pieces that Burns labelled as Epigrams, and others that could be called 'Fragments' for the want of a better description. Also, some miscellaneous poems and songs that don't easily fit into any of the categories I have used throughout.

Epigrams

Burns wrote several Epigrams, similar in many respects to his Epitaphs, but not composed for the dead, or the pretended dead. Most ran to just a few lines, some as pithy barbs, some complimentary. These are a few examples:

**Dear -----, I'll gie ye some advice,
You'll tak it no uncivil:
You shouldna paint at angels, man,
But try and paint the Devil.**

**To paint an angel's kittle wark,
Wi' Nick there's little danger:
You'll easy paint a lang-kent face,
But no sae weel a stranger.**

*tricky work
the Devil
long-known*

Epigram Addressed to an Artist

**Fair maid, you need not take the hint,
Nor idle texts pursue;
'Twas guilty sinners that he meant,
Not angels such as you.**

Epigram to Miss Ainslie in Church, that he inscribed on the fly-leaf of Miss Rachel Ainslie's Bible after Burns and she had sat through a 'hell-fire and damnation' sermon that made her visibly agitated.

**I'm now arrived – thanks to the gods!
Thro' pathways rough and muddy,
A certain sign that makin' roads
Is no' this people's study:
Altho' I'm not wi' Scripture cram'd,
I'm sure the Bible says
That heedless sinners shall be damn'd,
Unless they mend their ways.**

Epigram on Rough Roads

**Ask why God made the gem so small,
And why so huge the granite?
Because God meant mankind should set
That higher value on it.**

Epigram on Miss Davies

O had each Scot of ancient times
Been, Jeanie Scott, as thou art,
The bravest heart on English ground
Had yielded like a coward.

Epigram on Miss Jean Scott

Fragments

Of Lordly acquaintance you boast,
And the Dukes that you dined with yestreen; *last evening*
Yet an insect's an insect at most,
Tho it crawl on the curl of a Queen

The Toadeater.

I send you a trifle, a head of a Bard,
A trifle scarce worthy your care;
But accept it, good Sir, as a mark of regard,
Sincere as a saint's dying prayer.

Address to William Tytler enclosing a copy of an engraving of himself.

The following lines were composed in the summer of 1786 at a time when he was concerned about his financial security, with emigration to Jamaica on his mind as a possible solution. They were written on the blank back of a one-guinea Bank of Scotland note:

Wae worth thy power, thou cursed leaf! *woe betide*
Fell source o' a' my woe and grief.
For want o' thee I've lost my lass,
For lack of thee I scrimp my glass!
I see the children of affliction
Unaided, through thy curs'd restriction.
I've seen the oppressor's cruel smile
Amid his hapless victims' spoil;
And for thy potence vainly wish'd,
To crush the villain in the dust.
For lack o' thee, I leave this much-loved shore,
Never, perhaps, to greet old Scotland more.

Lines written on a Bank-Note

The hackney'd judge of human life, *King Soloman*
The Preacher and the King,
Observes: 'The man that gets a wife
He gets a noble thing.'

But how capricious are mankind,
Now loathing, now desirous!
We married men, how oft we find
The best of things will tire us!

On Marriage

This is a drinking toast celebrating two of life's gifts – good drink and good companionship:

Here's a bottle and an honest friend!

What wad ye wish for mair, man?

Wha kens, before his life may end,

What his share may be o' care, man?

Then catch the moments as they fly,

And use them as ye ought, man!

Believe me, Happiness is shy,

And comes not ay when sought, man!

Here's a Bottle

Through and through th' inspir'd leaves,

Ye maggots, make your windings;

But O, respect his lordship's taste,

And spare the golden bindings!

The Book-Worms

Addressed to Peggy Thomson, on whom he had a teenage crush, shortly before his planned emigration to the Indies – *To an Old Sweetheart*:

Once fondly loved and still remembered dear,

Sweet early object of my youthful vows,

Accept this mark of friendship, warm, sincere –

(Friendship! 'tis all cold duty now allows.)

And when you read the simple artless rhymes,

One friendly sigh for him – he asks no more -

Who, distant, burns in flaming torrid climes,

Or haply lies beneath th' Atlantic roar.

Concluding this segment, some subtle advice on the folly of riches over passion:

Twa bonie lads were Sandy and Jockie;

Jockie was lo'ed but Sandy unlucky;

loved

Jockie was laird baith of hills and of valleys,

But Sandy was nought but the king o' guid fellows.

Jockie lo'ed Madgie, for Madgie had money,

And Sandy lo'ed Mary, for Mary was bony;

Ane wedded for love, ane wedded for treasure,

So Jockie had siller, and Sandy had pleasure.

one

money

Sandy and Jockie

The Graces

Note: My thanks to Dr Stewart Cameron of the Halifax Burns Club, who assembled these verses, and composed the descriptions.

Robert Burns wrote several blessings for use before and after dining.

Selkirk Grace

This is the blessing traditionally delivered at Burns suppers. It is also known as Burns Grace at Kirkcudbright. It is attributed to Burns in 1787 but Burns may have adapted this from a pre-existing piece called the Galloway Grace which dated from the 1600's.

**Some hae meat and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat, and we can eat,
Sae let the Lord be thankit.**

A Grace Before Dinner 1

It is reported that this grace was created and delivered by the poet extempore at a dinner in Dumfries

**O thou who kindly dost provide
For ev'ry creature's want!
We bless the God of Nature wide,
For all Thy goodness lent.
And if it please Thee, heavenly Guide,
May never worse be sent;
But, whether granted or denied,
Lord, bless us with content.**

A Grace Before Dinner 2

**O Thou, in whom we live and move,
Who made the sea and shore,
Thou goodness constantly we prove,
And, grateful, would adore.
And, if it please Thee, Power above!
Still grant us with such store
The friend we trust, the fair we love,
And we desire no more.**

A Grace Before and After Dinner

Written by Burns for the landlord of the Globe, William Hyslop and his wife, in return for the meal. According to a notation in the Complete Works of Robert Burns, Burns and some companions had arrived unannounced at the tavern and there was nothing prepared to feed them. Mrs. Hyslop offered the meal originally cooked for the family, a ram's (tup) head and feet. Meg and Jock are believed to have been the servers.

O Lord, when hunger pinches sore,
Do thou stand us in stead,
And send us, from thy bounteous store,
A tup or wether head! Amen.

O Lord, since we have feasted thus,
Which we so little merit,
Let Meg now take away the flesh,
And Jock bring in the spirit!

Other Notable Works

Some of Burns' poems and songs stand out as exceptional, deserving of special consideration outwith the categorization I have been largely following. In fact, I have grouped a few such gems with other pieces similarly themed, such as *Holy Willy's Prayer*, *Ae Fond Kiss* and *A Man's a Man*. But others fit less well within such groupings. These I will present separately here.

Tam o' Shanter A Tale

Of all the poetical achievements of Robert Burns, Tam o' Shanter stands out as arguably his greatest masterpiece, and hailed by the authors of *The Burns Encyclopaedia* as 'one of the finest narrative poems in European literature'. The impetus for this poem, or Ballad, arose from the poet's dealings with a respected antiquarian, Francis Grose, whom he first met in 1789. Grose was in the process of publishing a compilation of the *Antiquities of Scotland*, and Burns suggested profiling Alloway's old, haunted kirk. Grose wanted something more substantive, which morphed into this folktale of witches and goblins. It has long been thought that it was first published in *The Edinburgh Magazine* in 1791, and a month later in



Volume 2 of Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland*, but recent research has argued quite convincingly that it was published first in the *Antiquities*.

On market days, Tam had the habit of hitting the taverns and boozing it up with friends, never thinking about the challenging ride home, or the resentful wife waiting impatiently...

We think na on the lang Scot's miles,
The mosses, waters, slaps and styles, *bogs, pools, gaps in fences*
That lie between us and our hame,
Whare sits our sulky, sullen dame, *where*
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

On such a night he would canter out of Ayr, oblivious of the hazards he would face:

O Tam, had'st thou but been sae wise
As taen thy ain wife Kate's advice!
She tauld thee weel thou was a skellum, *good-for-nothing*
A blethering, blustering drunken blellum; *babbler*

He'd drink until the late, after-dark hours with his pals, which was sure to end in disaster:

She prophesied that late or soon,
Thou would be found, deep drown'd in Doon *the river Doon*
Or catch'd wi' warlocks in the mirk, *wizards, dark*
By Alloway's auld haunted kirk.

**Ah, gentle dames, it gars me greet,
To think how monie counsels sweet,
How monie lengthen'd sage advices,
The husband frae the wife despises!
How very true!**

*makes, weep
many*

So, on this one particular night, '**Tam had got planted unco right**' with his pals, carousing as usual - even flirting with the landlord's wife - totally unmindful of the storm raging outside...
**The storm without might rair and rustle,
Tam didna mind the storm a whistle.**

roar

**Care, mad to see a man sae happy,
E'en drowned himsel among the nappy.
As bees flee hame wi' lades o' treasure,
The minutes winged their way wi' pleasure;
Kings may be blessed, but Tam was glorious,
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!**

drunks

**But pleasures are like poppies spread:
You seize the flow'r, the bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river,
A moment white - then melts forever;
Or like the borealis race,
That flit ere you can point their place;
Or like the rainbow's lovely form
Evanishing amid the storm.**

Northern lights

Well, Tam finally had to face the storm, even though...
**That night, a child might understand,
The Deil had business on his hand.**

Devil

Tam finally took to the road,
**Weel mounted on his grey mare Meg,
A better never lifted leg,
Tam skelpit on through dub and mire,**

puddle

But keeping a wary eye out for bogles, knowing that...
**Kirk-Alloway was drawing nigh,
Whare ghaists and houlets nightly cry.**

ghosts, owls

By this time, he had crossed the ford where all manner of heinous murders had been reported over the years, and still the storm raged. The storm and lightning were getting much worse, then Kirk-Alloway appeared through the trees, lit up by the lightning, and resounding to the sounds of '**mirth and dancing**'. But with all that whisky and beer roiling in his head, what had he to fear from demons, although Maggie found it threatening:

**But Maggie stood, right sair astonish'd,
Until by hand and heel admonish'd,**

his horse,

**She ventur'd forward on the light;
And, wow! Tam saw an unco sight.** *amazing*

What they saw was '*warlocks an' witches in a dance*', the devil himself, Auld Nick, playing the pipes with great gusto, making even the rafters ring. And then Tam saw that...

**Coffins stood round, like open presses,
That showed the dead in their last dresses;
And by some devilish cantraip sleight,
Each in its cauld hand held a light:
By which heroic Tam was able
To note upon each haly table,
A murderer's banes, in gibbet-airns;
Twa span-lang, wee, unchristen'd bairns;
A thief new-cuttet frae a rape -
Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape;** *magic*
holy
bones, irons
palm-length
rope
mouth

You get the picture! The poet goes on with more gory sights, and ends the scene with:

**Wi' mair of horrible and awfu',
That even to name wad be unlawfu'.**

There is an interesting footnote to this morbid description. Burns had four more lines following on from the above in his original – and at the time 'final' – copy. These were:

**Three Lawyers tongues, turned inside-out,
Wi' lies seamed like a beggar's clout;
Three Priests' hearts, rotten, black as muck,
Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.** *patch on a beggar's coat*
corner

A lawyer friend of the poet persuaded Burns to expunge these lines, as they were a gross insult to both lawyers and priests, and it might make enemies of many of them. He resisted at first, but agreed in the end. Burns had good reason to dislike at least *some* of the priests he had been forced to deal with, and lawyers, or again *some*, such as those that had hounded his father for several years over a dispute with his landlord concerning the lease of Lochlie farm.

Resuming our tale, Tam looked on, amazed and transfixed as the witches danced, sweating and throwing off their clothes. But they were all withered old hags,

**Louping and flinging on a crummock,
I wonder did na turn thy stomach!
Now Tam, O Tam! had thae been queens,
A' plump and strapping in their teens!** *leaping, cudgel*
these, young women

And what he would have given...

For ae blink o' the bonie burdies! *one glimpse, maidens*

But then, to his delight, Tam does spot one young lass, Nanny:

**There was ae winsome wench and wawlie
That night enlisted in the core.** *one, lovely*

Winsome and wawlie she might have been, but she was well known and feared locally for her evil deeds, even sinking ships. But, what a beauty...

Her cutty-sark, o' Paisley harn, *short petticoat, cloth*
That while a lassie she had worn,
In longitude tho' sorely scanty,
It was her best, and she was vauntie... *proud*

Nanny, or 'Cutty-Sark' as Tam called her, danced up a storm; even Satan was mesmerized. Tam was bewitched, so much so that, in a moment of untethered excitement...

Tam tint his reason a' thegether, *lost*
And roars out, 'Weel done, Cutty-sark!'
And in a moment all was dark;
And scarcely had he Maggie rallied,
When out the hellish legion sallied.

It was as if they were being assailed by plundering hordes:

So Maggie runs, the witches follow,
Wi' many an eldritch skriech and hollow. *unearthly screech, halloo*

Ah, Tam! Ah Tam! thou'll get thy fairin'! *deserved reward*
In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin'!
In vain thy Kate awaits thy comin'!
Kate soon will be a woefu' woman!
Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,
And win the key-stane of the brig; *centre stone of the bridge*
There, at them thou thy tail may toss,
A running stream they dare na cross!
But e'er the key-stane she could make,
The feint a tail she had to shake; *scarce*
For Nannie, far before the rest,
Hard upon noble Maggie prest,
And flew at Tam wi' furious ettle; *aim*
But little wist she Maggie's mettle! *expected*
Ae spring brought off her master hale, *one, whole*
But left behind her ain grey tail;
The carlin claut her by the rump *beldam, clawed*
An' left poor Maggie scarce a stump.

And finally, the moral of the story:

Now, wha this tale o' truth shall read, *who*
Ilk man, and mother's son take heed: *each*
When'er to drink you are inclin'd,
Or cutty-sarks rin in your mind, *run*
Think! ye may buy the joys o'er dear;
Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.

Scots Wha Hae



This patriotic song is a great favourite of present-day Scots, looked upon by many as Scotland's unofficial national anthem. It was politically provocative in its glorification of Scotland's successful fight for independence from the yolk of English rule at the beginning of the 14th Century. It was published anonymously, hard on the heels of the French Revolution, Burns being fearful that it might be adjudged seditious by the authorities.

The tune to which it is sung is reputed to be that of the battle march of Bruce's troops at Bannockburn. Burns was inspired to write the song after a visit to the site of The Battle of Bannockburn. It is based on that battle led by King Robert the Bruce, or Brus, but Sir William Wallace is gallantly mentioned in the first line as the heroic instigator of Scotland's fight for freedom from the slavery of England's King Edward 'Longshanks':

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled, *who have*
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led, *whom*
Welcome to your gory bed
Or to victorie!
Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour, *appear menacingly*
See approach proud Edward's power –
Chains and slaverie!

The Scots were heavily outnumbered, fielding only about 7000 rag-tag warriors to Edward's 20,000 heavily armed and well-trained soldiers. But thanks to Bruce's leadership and tactical genius, the Scots confronted the enemy with unbounded courage:

Wha will be a traitor knave? *who*
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave? –
Let him turn, and flee!
Wha for Scotland's King and Law
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
Freeman stand, or Freeman fa', *fall*
Let him follow me!

Despite the huge disparity in men and arms - even body armour - relatively few of the Scots perished, while Edward's massive army was almost wiped out, thousands slain in a bloody rout on the banks of Bannock Burn.

By Oppression's woes and pains,
By your sons in servile chains,
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free!
Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow! –
Let us do, or die!

The Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 marked the beginning of Scotland's freedom. There were a few other pitched battles to come, and many more skirmishes, but Scotland had finally become a free and sovereign nation. This was recognized internationally after the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, and its endorsement by Pope John XXII.

Auld Lang Syne

This may be Robert Burns' most popular work, recognized across the globe; who hasn't had a go at singing it? And yet, most of those New Year revellers will have no idea who wrote it!

Burns is on record as saying that he took down the words of an ancient folk song, sung by an old man. He claimed the song had never been published. As was his forte, he reworked the lyrics, although no doubt using some of the original phrasing. He put it to a traditional folk tune, which is different from that most popularly used now.

The title of the song – *Auld Lang Syne* – can be anglicized in more than one way. It literally translates as 'old long since', but the likely intended meaning of the first line of the chorus is, *For old long ago*:

**For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne!**

Some of the old Scots words, that are part of the 'Lallans' (Lowlands) vernacular, need interpreting, and for that reason – and because it deserves full treatment – I will quote all the verses:

**Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne?**

**And surely ye'll be your pint-stowp,
And surely I'll be mine,
And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne!**

*it's your turn to pay
okay, now mine*

**We twa hae run about the braes,
And pou'd the gowans fine,
But we've wandered mony a weary fit,
Sin auld lang syne.**

*two, hillsides
pulled, daisies
foot
since*

**We twa hae paidl'd in the burn
Frae morning sun till dine,
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin auld lang syne.**

*paddled, stream
morning-time, dinner
broad*

**And there's a hand my trusty fiere,
And gie's a hand o' thine,
And we'll tak a right guid-willie waught,
For auld lang syne.**

*friend
goodwill drink*

Address to a Haggis

Titled an 'Address', not a 'Toast', as it is sometimes referred to. Every Scot knows of it, and many can recite it from memory. It is meant as a theatrical address to a steaming, personified Haggis, piped in on a platter; then, ceremonially sliced open before the traditional meal of roast beef, mashed turnips (neeps) and potatoes (tatties) is served up to the ravening, semi-intoxicated guests, along with a generous 'heapit helpin' of Haggis.

It was written by Burns near the beginning of his first stay in Edinburgh to arrange for the publication of his second volume of poems. It is a long piece, running to eight six-line verses, therefore I will quote just four of them:

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,	<i>greetings to, cheerful</i>
Great chieftain o' the puddin'-race!	<i>pudding</i>
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,	<i>above</i>
Painch, tripe or thairm:	<i>paunch, guts</i>
Weel are ye wordy of a grace	<i>worthy</i>
As lang's my airm.	<i>arm</i>

The plattered, steaming pudding is further praised, but then the knife comes out!

His knife, see rustic Labour dight,	<i>wipe</i>
An' cut ye up wi' ready slight,	<i>skill</i>
Trenching your gushing entrails bright,	
Like onie ditch;	<i>any</i>
And then, O what a glorious sight,	
Warm-reekin', rich!	

In this verse, the reciter will typically pronounce the last words of lines 1,2,3 and 5 as dight, slicht, bricht and sicht respectively, as in vernacular Scots.

The poor, now-disembowelled beastie is favourably compared to inferior French cuisine, and an imaginary 'feckless', undernourished gallic gentlemen being skewered for not appreciating the worth of a haggis, then comparing the 'poor devil' to a sturdy, rustic, haggis-fed Scot:

But mark the Rustic, haggis-fed,	
The trembling earth resounds his tread,	
Clap in his walie neive a blade,	<i>big fist</i>
He'll mak it whissle;	
An' legs an' airms, an' heads will sned,	<i>lop off</i>
Like taps o' thrissle.	<i>thistle</i>

Ending with a plea, or supplication:

Ye Pow'rs wha mak mankind your care,	
And dish them out their bill o' fare,	
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware	<i>watery</i>
That jaups in luggies;	<i>splashes in porringers</i>
But, if ye wish her gratefu' prayer,	
Gie her a Haggis!	<i>give</i>

Green Grow the Rashes, O

This song is another that has earned worldwide popularity, and deservedly so. It is partly based on much earlier versions, some bawdy. Burns reworked the song in about 1783, producing a truly lovely version, and lyrically appealing. It is popular myth (which just might be true) that the word 'Gringo' was coined by Mexican soldiers during the 1846-1848 Mexican/American war as slang for Americans after hearing them singing this as one of their favourite songs. 'Green grow' would certainly sound a lot like 'gringo' from a distance.

**Chorus: Green grow the rashes, O
Green grow the rashes, O
The sweetest hours that e'er I spend,
Are spent among the lasses, O**

There's nought but care on ev'ry han', *hand*
In every hour that passes, O;
What signifies the life o' man,
An' 'twere na for the lasses, O.

The war'ly race may riches chase, *worldly*
An' riches still may fly them, O;
An' tho' at last they catch them fast,
Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O.

But gie me a cannie hour at e'en, *quiet, evening*
My arms about my dearie, O,
An' war'ly cares an' war'ly men,
May a' gae tapsalteerie, O. *topsy-turvy*

For you sae douce, ye sneer at this; *smart-Alec*
Ye're nought but senseless asses, O;
The wisest man the warl' e'er saw *King Solomon*
He dearly lov'd the lasses, O.

Auld Nature swears, the lovely dears
Her noblest work she classes, O
Her prentice han' she try'd on man,
An' then she made the lasses, O.

I have placed this here for fuller treatment because I have a particular liking for it, especially the very quotable last verse. How to gain the approval of an assembly of the fair sex!

The Jolly Beggars – A Cantata

This piece is uniquely different in Burns' catalogue of verse. It is styled a 'Cantata', a term of Italian origin signifying a musical composition designed to be performed. It is usually a drama, with some similarities to an opera, but with the actors generally singing a series of solo parts. At least this more-or-less describes The Jolly Beggars. It fills nearly ten pages of script, and therefore I will quote very sparingly.

Burns got the idea for this in late 1785 after encountering a 'merry core' of beggars (Gypsy Travellers?) while sitting with a friend in Poosie Nansie's tavern in Mauchline:

Ae night at e'en a merry core	<i>one, evening</i>
O' randie, gangrel bodies,	<i>disorderly vagabonds</i>
In Poosie-Nansie's held the splore	<i>carousal</i>
To drink their orra duddies:	<i>quaffs of ale</i>
Wi' quaffing and laughing,	
They ranted an' they sang,	<i>roistered</i>
Wi' jumping an' thumping,	
The vera girdle rang.	<i>very gridle</i>

After giving some background on himself, the first singer tells us...

And now, tho' I may beg, with a wooden arm and leg,	
And many a tatter'd rag hanging over my bum,	
I'm as happy with my wallet, my bottle and my callet,	<i>girlfriend</i>
As when I us'd in scarlet to follow a drum.	<i>as a soldier</i>

A young female is next:

**I once was a maid, tho' I cannot tell when,
And still my delight is in proper young men:
Some one of a troop of dragoons was my daddie,
No wonder I'm fond of a sodger laddie!**

**And now I have liv'd - I know not how long!
And still I can join in a cup and a song,
But whilst with both hands I can hold the glass steady,
Here's to thee, my hero, my sodger laddie.**

And so it progresses. I will end with the chorus of the last player's song:

**A fig for those by love protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest!**

These last lines reflect some of Burns' cynical opinions about Church and State.

O, Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut

This is one of the most delightful and 'fun' songs composed by Burns which lends itself to an entertaining three-person performance. Burns had got together with two friends in late 1789 at Moffat in the south of Scotland, they being the poet, Allan Masterton and William Nicol. They had such an enjoyable evening of bacchanalia that Burns thought he and Masterton should collaborate on a song to mark the occasion, Burns writing the lyrics, and Masterton the music. Hence the Willie, Rob and Allan protagonists of the piece.



The chorus is repeated after each verse, attesting that 'we're still not drunk!'

We are na fu', we're no that fou, *drunk*
But just a drappie in our e'e! *droplet, eye*
The cock may craw, the day may daw, *dawn*
And ay we'll taste the barley bree! *whisky*

Setting the scene:

O, Willie brew'd a peck o' maut, *malt*
And Rob and Allan cam to pree. *taste*
Three blyther hearts, that lee-lang night, *live-long*
Ye wad na found in Christendie.

Three merry boys together, and boys will be boys:

Here are we met, three merry boys,
Three merry boys I trow are we; *vouch*
And monie a night we've merry been,
And monie mae we hope to be. *more*

It's late, but we've still got a lot more drinking to do:

It is the moon, I ken her horn, *know*
That's blinkin' in the lift sae hie; *glinting, sky so high*
She shines sae bright to wyle us hame *lure*
But, by my sooth, she'll wait a wee. *bit*

No getting up and leaving; first man to fall down drunk is the winner!

Wha first shall rise to gang awa,
A cuckold, coward, loun is he! *fool*
Wha first beside his chair shall fa', *who, ('first': did Burns really mean last?)*
He is the King amang us three!

And a great time was had by all.

Miscellaneous Poems and Songs

Below is a selection of unrelated verses that the reader may enjoy.

A Mother's Lament, composed for a lady mourning the loss of her young son:

Fate gave the word – the arrow sped,
And pierc'd my darling's heart,
And with him all the joys are fled
Life can to me impart.

By cruel hands the sapling drops,
In dust dishonor'd laid:
So fell the pride of all my hopes,
My age's future shade.

The mother linnet in the brake
Bewails her ravish'd young;
So I, for my lost darling's sake,
Lament the live-day long.

Death, oft I've feared thy fatal blow!
Now fond I bare my breast;
O, do thou kindly lay me low
With him I love, at rest!

I Hae a Wife o' My Ain is another traditional ballad re-worked by Burns, probably in 1792, about a man who most certainly knew his own mind:

I hae a wife o' my ain,
I'll partake wi' naebody; *nobody*
I'll take cuckold frae nane, *none*
I'll gie cuckold tae naebody.

I hae a penny to spend,
There, thanks to naebody,
I hae naething to lend, *nothing*
I'll borrow frae naebody.

I am naebody's lord,
I'll be slave to naebody,
I'll hae a guid braid sword, *good, broad*
I'll tak dunts frae naebody. *blows*

I'll be merry and free,
I'll be sad for naebody,
Naebody cares for me,
I care for naebody.

A nice marriage of nocturnal conquest and conviviality:

O May, thy morn was ne'er sae sweet
As the mirk night o' December! *dark*
For sparkling was the rosy wine,
And private was the chamber,
And dear was she I dare na name,
But I will ay remember.

And here's to them that, like oursel,
Can push about the jorum! *punch-bowl*
And here's to them that wish us weel –
May a' that's guid watch o'er 'em!
And here's to them, we dare na tell,
The dearest o' the quorum!
O May, Thy Morn

Gie him strong drink until he wink,
That's sinking in despair;
An' liquor guid to fire his bluid, *good, blood*
That's prest wi' grief and care:
There let him bowse, and deep carouse,
Wi' bumpers flowing o'er,
Till he forgets his loves or debts,
An' minds his griefs no more. *remembers*
Scotch Drink

Again on the topic of drink, a verse from *The Holy Fair* attributes many benefits to drink:

Leeze me on drink! It gies us mair *Blessings*
Than either school or college;
It kindles wit, it waukins lear, *wakens learning*
It pangs us fou o' knowledge: *crams us full*
Be't whisky-gill or penny wheep, *beer sold for a penny*
Or any stronger potion,
It never fails on drinkin' deep,
To kittle up our notion, *stimulate*
By night or day.

Rusticity's ungainly form
May cloud the highest mind;
But when the heart is nobly warm,
The good excuse will find.

Propriety's cold, cautious rules
Warm Fervour may o'erlook;
But spare poor Sensibility
Th'ungentle, harsh rebuke.
Rusticity's Ungainly Form

In appreciation for a generous, sincere reception received by Burns from a Lord:

I watched the symptoms o' the Great –

The gentle pride, the lordly state,

The arrogant assuming:

**The fient a pride, nae pride had he,
Nor sauce, nor state, that I could see,**

absence of

Mair than an honest ploughman!

Then from his Lordship I shall learn,

Henceforth to meet with unconcern

One rank as weel's another;

Nae honest, worthy man need care

To meet with noble, youthfu' Daer,

For he but meets a brother.

On Meeting with Lord Daer

Admiring Nature in her wildest grace,

These northern scenes with weary feet I trace;

O'er many a winding dale and painful steep,

Th' abodes of covey'd grouse and timid sheep.

My savage journey, curious, I pursue,

Till fam'd Breadalbane opens to my view.

The meeting cliffs each deep-sunk glen divides:

The woods, wild-scatter'd, clothe their ample sides;

Th' outstretching lake, imbosomed 'mong the hills,

The eye with wonder and amazement fills:

The Tay meand'ring sweet in infant pride,

The palace rising on his verdant side,

The lawns wood-fring'd in Nature's native taste,

The hillocks dropt in Nature's careless haste.

The arches striding o'er the new-born stream,

The village glittering in the noontide beam.

Verses Written with a Pencil

Ye hypocrites! are these your pranks?

To murder men, and give God thanks?

Desist, for shame! Proceed no further:

God won't accept your thanks for Murther!

murder

Thanksgiving for a Naval Victory

Chorus: *My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here*

My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer,

A-chasing the wild deer, and following the roe –

My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go!

Farewell to the Highlands, farewell to the North,
The birthplace of valour, the country of worth!
Wherever I wander, wherever I rove,
The hills of the Highlands for ever I love.

Farewell to the mountains, high-cover'd with snow,
Farewell to the straths and green valleys below,
Farewell to the forests and wild-hanging woods,
Farewell to the torrents and loud-pouring floods!

My Heart's In The Highlands

McPherson's Farewell is based on a real event, the hanging of the lawless James McPherson in 1700 – a criminal, but a noted fiddler. He was captured and sentenced to hang, which was carried out in the marketplace in Banff. Just before the long drop, he played a tune on his fiddle, and then smashed it. That same tune - *McPherson's Rant* - is reputedly the one to which this song is sung. It is worthy of being quoted in full:

Chorus: *Sae rantingly, sae wantonly,
Sae dauntingly gaed he,* *went*
*He played a spring, and danc'd it round
Below the gallow-tree.*

Farewell, ye dungeons dark and strong,
The wretches destinie!
McPherson's time will not be long
On yonder gallows-tree.

O what is death but parting breath?
On many a bloody plain
I've dared his face, and in this place
I scorn him yet again!

Untie these bands from off my hands,
And bring to me my sword,
And there's no man in all Scotland
But I'll brave him at a word.

I've liv'd a life of sturt and strife, *trouble*
I die by treacherie;
It burns my heart I must depart,
And not avenged be.

Now farewell light, thou sunshine bright,
And all beneath the sky!
May coward shame disdain his name,
The wretch that dare not die!

Tho' Women's Minds might be appreciated more by men than women! But I'm fairly sure the poet was just having fun with this one:

Chorus: For a' that an' a' that,
And twice as meikle's a' that, *much*
The bonie lass that I loe best *love*
She'll be my ain for a' that. *own*

Tho' women's minds like winter winds
May shift and turn, an' a' that,
The noblest breast adores them maist - *most*
A consequence, I draw that.

Great love I bear to a' the fair,
Their humble slave an' a' that;
But lordly will, I hold it still
A mortal sin to thraw that. *contradict*

In rapture sweet this hour we meet,
Wi' mutual love an' a' that,
But for how lang the flie may stang, *fly, sting*
Let inclination law that! *decree*

Their tricks an' craft hae put me daft, *made me mad*
They've taen me in an' a' that, *taken*
But clear the decks, and here's - 'The Sex!'
I like the jads for a' that! *hussies*

A much-valued benefactor of this poet was James Cunningham, Earl of Glencairn. He met Burns on his first sojourn in Edinburgh, and, being greatly impressed with the first edition of his poems, welcomed him warmly to Edinburgh and introduced him to many of the capital's most influential literary people, which helped greatly in facilitating the printing of an enlarged second edition. Glencairn died at just forty-two years of age, and, to express his gratitude, Burns composed a 'Lament'. The final verse expresses the depth of his gratitude and indebtedness:

The bridegroom may forget the bride
Was made his wedded wife yestreen; *last night*
The monarch may forget the crown
That on his head an hour has been;
The mother may forget the child
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;
And I'll remember thee, Glencairn,
And a' that thou hast done for me!
Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn

An expression of hope for better times:

Tho' stars in skies may disappear,
And angry tempests gather,
The happy hour may soon be near

That brings us pleasant weather;
 The weary night of care and grief
 May hae a joyfu' morrow;
 So dawning day has brought relief –
 Fareweel our night o' sorrow.

Nithdale's Welcome Hame

Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat? was one of the most patriotic pieces (in this case a song) written by Burns, probably in March 1795, about three months after he became an inaugural member of the Dumfries Volunteers, a defence unit (a la 'Dad's Army!') set up in response to rumours that Napoleon was about to invade Britain. It was printed in several newspapers, and became something of an anthem for both the Dumfries Volunteers and other ad hoc fighting platoons:

Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?

Then let the loons beware, Sir! *fools*

There's wooden walls upon our seas

And volunteers on shore, Sir!

The Nith shall run to Corsincon,

flow uphill

And Criffel sink in Solway,

a local hill, the Solway Firth

Ere we permit a foreign foe

On British ground to rally!

O, let us not, like snarling tykes,

dogs

In wrangling be divided,

Till, slap! come in an unco loon,

uncommon fool

And wi' a rung decide it!

cudgel

Be Britain still to Britain true,

Amang ourselves united!

For never but by British hands

Maun British wrangs be righted!

must

The kettle o' the Kirk and State,

Perhaps a clout may fail in't; *patch*

But Deil a foreign tinkler loon

not a, tinker fool

Shall ever ca' a nail in't!

drive

Our fathers' blude the kettle bought,

blood

And wha wad dare to spoil it,

who

By Heavens! the sacrilegious dog

Shall fuel be to boil it!

The wretch that would a tyrant own,

And the wretch, his true-sworn brother,

Who would set the mob above the throne,

May they be damn'd together!

Who will not sing God Save the King

Shall hang as high's the steeple;

But while we sing God Save the King,

We'll ne'er forget the people!

Robert Burns' Last Love – But Not His Lover **Jessie Lewars**

Jessie Lewars was a young neighbour of Robert Burns and his wife, Jean. Her father, John Lewars, had been a fellow excise officer and friend of the poet. At the time of Robert's death, she was eighteen years old. In response to the worsening health of Burns and Jean's pregnancy, Jessie volunteered to help the Burns household during the six-month period leading up to the poet's death.

She was fully dedicated to this unpaid role, including nursing the poet intensively through the last two weeks of his life. He gave every sign of having fallen in love with her, even under the gaze of Jean, although it would not have been love of the passionate variety. He dedicated several verses to his young heroine, including two love songs. The first of these was written about three months before his death, *Here's a Health to Ane I Loe Dear* (one I love), the last of two verse being:

**I mourn thro' the gay, gaudy day,
As hopeless I muse on thy charms;
But welcome the dream o' sweet slumber!
For then I am lockt in thine arms, Jessie –
For then I am lockt in thine arms!**

In an endearing, but more playful verse, *Versicles to Jessie Lewars, The Toast*, he writes:

**Fill me with the rosy wine;
Call a toast, a toast divine:
Give the Poet's darling flame,
Lovely Jessie be her name;
Then thou mayest freely boast
Thou hast given a peerless toast.**

The second song, *O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast*, is likely to have been his last important composition. It is beautiful, and, given his impending death, quite haunting. German composer, Felix Mendelssohn, wrote a musical score specifically for it, to which it is now popularly sung:

O wert thou in the cauld blast
On yonder lea, on yonder lea, *meadow*
My plaidie to the angry airt, *tartan shawl, wind direction*
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee.
Or did Misfortune's bitter storms
Around thee blaw, around thee blaw,
Thy bield should be my bosom, *shelter*
To share it a', to share it a'.

**Or were I in the wildest waste,
Sae black and bare, sae black and bare,
The desert were a Paradise,
If thou wert there, if thou wert there.
Or were I monarch o' the globe,
Wi' thee to reign, wi' thee to reign,
The brightest jewel in my crown
Wad be my queen, wad be my queen.**

Significant Works Not Profiled

There are, of course, many of the Bard's poems and songs not mentioned or quoted in this document. My reasons – wholly subjective - are many and varied, from a piece being very long, yet unlikely to appeal to most readers, or that I did not feel was sufficiently beautiful, or humorous, or simply not appealing enough in general. Some would have been topical at the time, but dealing with issues that most of us would now have difficulty understanding, or that have long since lost significance for most of us, such as some of his politically motivated poems. Nevertheless, there are a few exclusions that are worth a mention.

The Brigs of Ayr is one of Burns' major poems, at least in length, but also in the breadth of subject matter he has the two 'brigs' (bridges) discuss, as one would expect from a conversation between two bridges! I did not introduce it because I found it too challenging to provide sufficiently adequate comment within the limited parameters of space I had established for this undertaking. For anyone with a more-than-casual interest in Burns, I would recommend they read this poem.

The Vision is a very interesting poem, but almost defies being attached to a typical Burns genre. It begins with a few verses of self-reflection that we can assume aligns with the poet's inner thoughts, then launches into a description of an apparition in the form of an attractive young woman who, through the medium of a mantle she is wearing, presents scenes of faraway landscapes and historic sights and happenings. In effect, a 'vision'. The vision is multi-layered, and difficult to summarize, but well worth the time to read.

The Auld Farmer's New-Year Morning Salutation to His Auld Mare Maggie is a longish poem that has an old farmer reminiscing about the much younger years that he and his mare shared. Thus, better read in its entirety.

Scotch Drink: While I did include a separate introductory rhyme to this poem, I did not delve into the body of the poem itself. The Bard addresses Scotland's liquid gold in praiseworthy adoration and thanks it for all the good it has wrought, particularly for ordinary folk. The Lallans vernacular is quite pronounced.

The Inventory is a humorous and cleverly written response to an increase in taxation introduced to help pay for the after-effects of the American war. It is well worth a read, but a little too dense for this presenter to adequately summarize while preserving its entertainment appeal.

Libel Summons, like *The Inventory*, is a tongue-in-cheek extravagance (not intended negatively) that is poorly suited to dissection, nor is it redolent of inspiring or quote-worthy phrases. But it is amusing enough, particularly for the reader who enjoys irreverent word play laced with mild bawdry.

The Whistle – A Ballad, describes the saga of a drinking contest at which Burns was a witness and recorder, and being the pre-eminent Bard that he was, he provided a full record of the event in this poetical ballad. The contest took place at the Riddell residence of Friars' Carse; the three participants competed for a small ebony whistle that was brought to Scotland by a Dane who was closely connected to the Danish royal family. It was inherited by the Riddell family, but after

besting his fellow contestants – one of whom was Robert Riddell – by downing five bottles of claret and still being able to blow the whistle, the winner of the contest, and the prize whistle, was Alexander Fergusson of Craigdarroch.

Grim Grizzel is a very amusing piece (with many references to 'sh*te'), but is a little too long to reproduce in this economically brief anthology. It was inspired by a tombstone Burns happened upon in Dunblane that read as follows:

**'Here lyes with Dethe auld Grizzel Grimme,
Lincluden's ugly witche.**

O Dethe, an what a taste hast thou

Cann lye with sicke a bitche!'

Burns could hardly have resisted taking up the theme for one of his fabled comedic yarns, especially tied to the occult.

Around the same time, Burns composed the poem **To Robert Graham, ESQ., Of Fintry**, who was his superior in the Excise Division, and who championed his appointment to the service. The poem complains of an injured leg as a way of clocking in sick, and proceeds to relate in great detail the trials and tribulations of his life. It is a masterful piece, describing with such poetic ingenuity all that ails and concerns him, blaming nature for leaving him so exposed and defenceless. Better had he been created dull, but comfortably snug. He regrets the loss of his principal benefactor, the now-deceased Earl of Glencairn, but wishes 'Fintry' – his next best benefactor and defender – a long and fruitful life.

The Soldier's Return is probably less well known than many of Burns' other longer songs. However, I recommend it as one of his fine efforts at taking a traditional bawdy song and refining it. His version is the opposite of bawdy.

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Appendix

Highlights of the Life of Robert Burns

This is a brief account of the important events of the life of Robert Burns, Scotland's National Bard. Although spanning only a little over 37 years, at least from the time of his early manhood until his death in 1796, he managed to cram considerably more than most into that short existence.

And where better to start than at the wee clay biggin – or cottage - in the hamlet of Alloway on a cold winter evening of January 25th, 1759. Robert was the first-born of a very ordinary



working-class couple, William Burnes and Agnes Broun. William was a native of Kincardineshire, while Agnes was a local Ayrshire lass from Maybole. William was a gardener by trade, but would later turn his hand to tenant farming. He and Agnes were fine, salt-of-the-earth people with strong, yet moderately tempered religious beliefs. They produced seven children in total, four sons and three daughters, all of whom

survived childhood, although John died in his teens and William at twenty-three.

William was determined that his children should be given a sound basic education, especially his sons, and Robert and his younger brother, Gilbert, were formally schooled for about a three-year period beginning in early 1765 when Robert was just over six years of age. The school was established ad hoc by William and supported financially by him and four of his neighbours. John Murdoch was hired as the teacher, a young man of just eighteen, but dedicated and effective in his pedagogic role. He seems not to have recognized the full potential of the stubborn, introspective young Robert Burns, but through his continuing friendship with the Burns family following the disbanding of the school, he maintained a strong interest in the development of both boys, lending them hard-to-come-by reading material, most of which Robert devoured.

In early 1766 William took over the lease of Mount Oliphant, a 90-acre farm about two miles east of Alloway where the family remained for a total of eleven years of grinding effort, coaxing a living from its poor soil. But time and money were still found to add to the formal schooling of both Robert and Gilbert. When Robert was about thirteen, they both attended school in Dalrymple, taking week-about during the summer months, and in the summer of 1775 Robert spent a few weeks in Kirkoswald studying mainly mathematical subjects. He was also introduced to the pleasures of wine, women and song, although at the tender age of sixteen, more as an observer than a participant.

In 1777 the family moved to take on a 7-year lease of a larger farm, Lochlie, located roughly equidistant from the two closest market towns of Mauchline and Tarbolton. Robert was by then a young man, and although shy in his social interactions - including with, as he described them, the 'fair enslavers' - he soon began to develop the assertive self-confidence that was a mark of his later character. In 1780, he took the lead in forming a

debating group, the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, and a few weeks later began a five-month courtship – seemingly completely by correspondence - with Elizabeth Gebbie (Alison Begbie), culminating in his first proposal of marriage. The first of these endeavours was a great success, while the second ended in humiliating defeat.

In the summer of 1781 Robert moved to Irvine for a seven-month period to learn the flax-dressing trade. It was a puzzling decision, but most likely he saw it as a way to increase his profits from farming. Flax was a valuable crop, especially if he could add value by completing the 'dressing' stage himself. But it proved to be a disaster, both in its original intent and in what was a close encounter with death from a three-month mysterious and very debilitating illness. The one thing he took away from the sorry experience was exposure to the seamier and more licentious and adventurous side of life, thanks mainly to his association with a new-found wildly libertarian friend, one Captain Richard Brown.

Upon returning to Lochlie, Robert stepped into a battle that had been developing between his father and David McClure, the landlord of Lochlie farm. The issues between them revolved around disputed obligations that were carelessly undocumented in the original lease. It escalated into a long series of fractious back-and-forths, and became the subject of a formal legal action which eventually vindicated William, but he died shortly after in February 1784. The immediate cause was Tuberculosis, but the stress of the dispute with McClure is thought to have hastened his demise.

Robert and Gilbert did not sit idly by while this dispute dragged on. In about July 1783 they entered into secret negotiations to secure the lease of Mossgiel Farm located not far from Lochlie. Those arrangements were finalized in November 1783, and the family moved to Mossgiel in March of the following year, not long after their father's death. Robert was now his own man and head of the Burns household.

The Mossgiel years for Robert were both eventful and formative. Of first mention, there was his affair with Elizabeth, or Betsey, Paton, the family's servant lass. This began at Lochlie, but continued at Mossgiel, and bore fruit in May of 1785 with the birth of Elizabeth, his 'dear bought Bess'. Betsey Paton was persuaded to let the child be brought up by the Burns family at Mossgiel, and there is little mention of her from that point on.

This was a period during which Burns blossomed as a poet, with the composition of so many of his most familiar pieces. But he was also making his mark socially within the communities of Tarbolton and Mauchline, helped along by his initiation into Freemasonry and his active involvement in the Lodge. Then came the dispute between Robert's friend Gavin Hamilton and the Mauchline Kirk over Hamilton's alleged mishandling of poor-relief funds and Sabbath-breaking and other trumped-up charges. After a long-drawn-out battle with the Kirk's unco righteous - including its patriarch, Minister 'Daddie' Auld - Hamilton was exonerated. Burns' celebrated the victory in **Holy Willie's Prayer**, a gloriously mocking condemnation of hypocrisy and conservative-Calvinism's absurdities. It is surely one of the greatest works of poetical satire in the English language...despite being written in the Scottish Lallans dialect.

In April 1785 Robert first met Jean Armour, with '*thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean*', although their first significant meeting was less than cordial. Nevertheless, he became smitten with her and in September 1785 they entered into an informal marriage, backed by a document described as a 'certificate of marriage'. She became pregnant in December of that year, but delayed telling her parents until the following March when she could no longer conceal it. They were furious and determined that she must break off with that rascal Burns. Jean eventually buckled to the will of her parents, acquiescing to the mutilation of the certificate of marriage document, effectively nullifying it. She was also banished to relatives in Paisley as a way of hiding her *shame* from the village, but after a few weeks she returned to Mauchline.

Robert was incensed at what he considered to be Jean's disloyalty to him, and her subservience to her father's interfering will, and proceeded to obtain his bachelor's certificate from the Kirk in Mauchline, leaving him free to seek out another lover and soul mate...and he very soon found one. Enter the now mysterious Highland Mary or Margaret Campbell as she was named. Their time together was short - little more than a month - but from Burns' point of view at least, it seems to have been an intensely emotional affair. In the meantime, Jean was bullied by her father into taking out a warrant against her erstwhile lover and soon-to-be father of her twins, forcing Robert to leave Mauchline post-haste and go into hiding. He made plans to flee Scotland by accepting a post in Jamaica as a so-called 'bookkeeper' - but really a supervisor of slaves. He and Margaret had pledged to marry and travel to Jamaica together, but she died unexpectedly at her parents' home in Greenock. She had travelled there with her brother in early October. He contracted typhus and while nursing him back to health she tragically became infected herself, dying in late October. Little is recorded about the Bard's immediate reaction to the news of her death, but we can be sure he was devastated, and we know that he always treasured her memory.

With his break from Jean, and her obtaining the warrant against him, the resulting prospect of financial ruin left him with only one other option to leaving Scotland, namely to urgently pursue his dream of publishing a volume of his poems. Fortunately for us, he found a Kilmarnock publisher, John Wilson, who agreed to a subscription-based run of 612 copies. His 235-page *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* - the 'Kilmarnock Edition' - was published on July 31, 1786 and it received such enthusiastic and wide acclaim that he quickly abandoned his emigration plans and was even persuaded to pursue the possibility of another more expansive second edition.

His new-found fame also impressed old James Armour, Jean's father; perhaps this Burns fellow wasn't such a bad prospect for a son-in-law after all. As a result, Jean had the warrant vacated, making it possible for Robert to come out of hiding and leaving him free to travel to Edinburgh to seek out a publisher for that new, expanded edition of his poems. It would be one of two lengthy stays in Edinburgh to achieve this goal. Jean delivered twins at the beginning of September - Robert and Jean.

The recognition and fame he gained following the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition opened many doors, even back in Ayrshire, including contacts with notables such as Professor Dugald Stewart, Viscount Daer, Dr. Thomas Blacklock and many others. He set out for Edinburgh on November 27th, 1786. Fortunately, his fame preceded him. Soon after arriving, he was able to quickly establish valuable and influential contacts there, foremost of whom was James Cunningham, 14th Earl of Glencairn, who became his principal benefactor and critical to the success of the new edition by spearheading the gathering of the required subscriptions. On a more personal level, this stay in Edinburgh allowed him to visit Dr. Blacklock, a distinguished member of Scotland's literary elite, who had become a great admirer of his works following publication of the Kilmarnock Edition, and he was one of a few key influencers who persuaded the poet to pursue the goal of that second edition, and abandon his Jamaica plans. They maintained a warm friendship until Blacklock's death in 1791.

This first sojourn in Auld Reekie heralded the oft-cited lionization of the Bard, which Burns seems to have taken in stride, recognizing that such fame was fleeting. More important to him was Lord Glencairn's help in putting him in touch with William Creech, the leading publisher in Edinburgh at the time. By mid-December he had entered into a contract with Creech to publish up to 5000 copies of the new, expanded Edinburgh Edition, selling at a price of five shillings a copy, although only just over 3000 copies were printed. It contained about one hundred additional poems and songs. He would live to see a second Edinburgh Edition roll off the presses, although he earned nothing from that as a result of his selling the copyright to the content of his first Edinburgh edition to Creech.

Starting in the spring of 1787, and over the course of the few months following publication of the first Edinburgh Edition, he embarked on four tours, including to the Borders, the West Highlands and the Highlands. Interspersed with these were return trips to Mauchline (where he renewed his love affair with Jean) and Edinburgh. He eventually settled in the capital for a second extended period, primarily to pressure William Creech to turn over the remaining proceeds of his share of sales under the terms of their contract, as well as to pay him for the sale of the copyright mentioned above. Given Creech's infamously sharp business practices, it was a long, frustrating process.

One other important event during this stay was his meeting and friendship with Agnes McLehose, or Clarinda as he would refer to her in their extensive correspondence, as well as Nancy in verses inspired by her. The eternal unanswered question is whether their close personal and intellectual friendship stopped short of romantic intimacy; romantic it certainly was for Robert, but she was more cautious. In fact – no doubt much to Robert's chagrin and frustration – it is very unlikely that any intimacy took place between them. But as if to make up for that disappointment, he did enter into an unlikely dalliance with Agnes's housemaid, Jenny Clow. At her mistress's bidding, she came to his rooms on January 25th, 1788 (his 29th birthday) to deliver a package, and about nine months later she delivered him of a son. Perhaps Agnes was sending him a birthday gift...the package

that is, not Jenny! Robert paid the poor lass a small sum of money and offered to take on the upbringing of the child, Robert, but she refused. She died about three years later.

In mid-February 1788, Robert found it necessary to interrupt his second Edinburgh stay in order to deal with some pressing matters in Mauchline. Jean was expecting a second set of twins, for which she had been banished from her parents' home. Robert had to find rental accommodation for the family, which he succeeded in doing. The twin girls were born in early March, but both died within a few days. He also dealt with the matter of purchasing a farm near Dumfries. While in Edinburgh, he had made great efforts to secure an appointment with the Excise Service as a more reliable career prospect than farming. With help from influential friends he was now hopeful of a result, with a likely posting within the Dumfries district. Nonetheless, he believed he could still farm as a sideline, so he took time to look at some options near Dumfries, in the end choosing Ellisland farm, although more for its riparian beauty on the banks of the River Nith than for the quality of its soil.

He was back in Edinburgh by the 13th of March, this time remaining in the capital for only one week, but what a week that was. He had his final meeting with 'the arch-rascal Creech', received his appointment to the Excise, signed a 76-year lease on Ellisland, and said his melancholy farewells to Agnes McLehose, never to meet with her again.

The poet returned to Mauchline where he and Jean lived openly, although they did enter into an unconventional - but legal - civil marriage. After undergoing his mandatory six weeks of Excise training in Tarbolton, he took possession of Ellisland in June 1788. Jean joined him there in December, along with young Robert, the other twin, Jean, having died a few months earlier. They stayed in temporary accommodation while the cottage at Ellisland was being renovated and expanded at the landlord's expense. The family moved into Ellisland the following April. Like all the Burns family farming ventures before it, it proved to be a poor bargain; the soil was ill-suited to crop farming, so in 1790 he converted it to a dairy operation. This made it more financially viable, but still a millstone to be borne in view of his onerous excise duties. Finally, after three years - no doubt to his delight - his landlord found a buyer for the farm and bought out the balance of the lease. This allowed the family to move into the town of Dumfries, first to an apartment in the not-very-salubrious Wee Vennel, but six months later moved into a two-story house at the more desirable location of Mill Vennel, now known as Burns Street.

The remaining years of Burns' life were occupied mainly with his work as an Excise Officer and his very successful early attempts at recognition and promotion. He seemed marked for much bigger things within the service, and had he lived a much longer life he would certainly have done very well for himself.

When he first arrived at Ellisland he became acquainted with Robert Riddell, the laird of a mansion and small estate adjoining Ellisland. Burns seems to have developed a strong

liking and respect for Riddell, reciprocated, but perhaps to a lesser degree by the laird. He also befriended Riddell's pretty young sister-in-law, Maria, who was herself a poet of some merit and later a published author. His attraction to her was probably not confined to a shared interest in literature, but she was as much his junior in years as she was his senior in social standing, so we must doubt any seriously illicit consummation. Unfortunately, there was a drunken incident at the Riddell home, and he was accused of gross, ungentlemanly conduct (perhaps a sexual indiscretion towards Maria) which caused an immediate rift with the family that was never made good, but he and Maria did reconcile and become friends again before his death.

Robert also disgraced himself in his usual licentiously profligate ways by causing the pregnancy of Anna Park, a young barmaid at the Dumfries Globe Inn where he took a room from time to time while traveling from Ellisland to the town to carry out his excise duties. In the cruelest of ironies, Jean presented Robert with a son (William Nicol Burns) just nine days after Anna's daughter Elizabeth was born. In an act of near-saintly generosity, Jean agreed to raise the child as their own. Her only recorded comment on the incident years later was that "Oor Rab should have had twa wives."

Regarding his family life, Jean bore him a total of nine children, of which only three sons survived to full adulthood. Two babies died shortly following birth, and three as infants. A son died while still a teenager, posthumous to his father.

There were many other aspects to the life of Robert Burns, both while at Dumfries and before. There was his long friendship with Mrs. Dunlop, for example, mostly conducted by correspondence. She became his personal confidante, but frequently she proffered unsolicited literary and social 'correctness' advice, most of which he ignored. Sadly, she cut him off not long before his death because of some remarks he made that she strongly disagreed with. It was as much her loss as his.

Besides his prolific output of poetry and song, for many years he devoted much of his efforts to providing material (both original, and improved folklorist songs) to two important publications of collected songs, referred to respectively as *The Scots Musical Museum* and the *Select Collection of Scottish Airs*. These popular publications were profitable, but Burns refused to accept any payments for the great amount of time he invested, treating them as worthy national causes. A great many of his songs were specifically written with these two publications in mind.

Robert Burns suffered ill health throughout most of his adult life, but his last year was particularly bad. He was subject to undiagnosed illnesses that often confined him at home for weeks on end. His condition steadily declined until, at the beginning of July 1796, his physician – Dr. Maxwell, after whom his posthumous son would be named – recommended a week of supposedly curative therapies at Brow Well on the Solway Firth, including sea-bathing. Given his already critically weakened condition, this regimen was

a kill-rather-than-cure prescription. He returned home barely able to walk from the end of the street to his house. He was mostly confined to his bed from that point, just when Jean was in the final few days of her pregnancy.

A young neighbour, Jessie Lewars, volunteered to nurse the ailing bard, as well as help Jean; she took up this purely volunteer task starting about six months before the poet's death, and continued for several weeks after. Robert seems to have virtually fallen in love with this angel of mercy, although muting any passion he may have felt for her. He



composed some of his finest verses dedicated to her within the last days of his life. He finally succumbed on the 21st July 1796. The cause of his fatal debility was probably myocardial infarction, or heart failure. The bright star's beaming ray was prematurely extinguished.

On the very day of his son Maxwell's birth, July 25th, 1796, he was given a public funeral reportedly attended by 10,000 people. At first he was buried in an inconspicuous corner plot of St. Michael's churchyard, but a public subscription was begun in 1813 to build the present very impressive Mausoleum, and he was reinterred there in September 1817.

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