

Burns and Ministers Presentation

To many people Robert Burns has been regarded as anti-religious especially when you read the number of poems he wrote, which were very scathing and personal towards the many ministers he came into contact with. From the research I did for this paper I don't believe that statement to be true. What Burns can be guilty of is a total disagreement of what various 'Auld Licht' ministers stood for, especially their hypocrisy.

To give some context to the paper, first some background on the religion prevailing in Scotland at this time. There were 2 main religions prevailing, Presbyterianism and Catholicism with Burns being brought up in a staunchly Presbyterian family by his father, William Burnes, with William embracing the 'Auld Licht' aspects of Calvinism.

The Calvin 'Auld Lights' represented a more severe and unforgiving form of Presbyterianism, which involved fire and brimstone sermons and the idea of predestination as a route to heaven, which Burns so despised. The Calvinist influence was strong and Burns found himself in opposition to its theology and social attitudes. It is apparent when reading Burns' poems and letters that he felt profoundly about the problems and issues of the 'Auld Licht' aspects of the Presbyterian church, namely the hypocrisy of certain ministers and their Kirk sessions. The latter serving as a moral watchdog, summoning congregants who strayed from the 'straight and narrow' and handing out censure and punishment, as Burns was to find out when Jean Armour became pregnant. These aspects were hypocritical and counter to his beliefs as a Christian and he found himself more comfortable with embracing the theory and teachings of the 'New Licht'. The 'New Licht' tended to be a more moderate form of Presbyterianism, which emphasized the human aspects of religion to which Burns as a poet with a deep social conscience subscribed and therefore could not accept the orthodox position of the so called 'Auld Lights'. He believed in the power of good works to determine salvation and sincerely believed that all humans were to be treated with dignity and equality. To Burns, religion was in the simplest and most literal meaning of the phrase, " the religion of humanity."

In researching for this paper, I was able to locate a large number, of references to various ministers, amazingly to me around 61. All of whom had some sort of affect, positive or negative, on Burns. On one hand, ministers in the 'Auld Licht' camp were subject to Burns' scathing and satirical comments, whilst those in the 'New Licht' camp were entirely the opposite and to whom he was highly complimentary. I've selected a sampling of some of the ministers and which poems Burns wrote about them.

Let's start with a sampling of the "Auld Licht' ministers:

'Auld Licht' Ministers

The Reverend William 'Daddy' Auld 1709-91,

Auld was the Minister at Mauchline for 50 years, from 1742, and was best known as the minister to Elder William Fisher (Holy Willie).

A zealous, hard working man, though very opinionated, he seems to have lacked ambition, and to have been quite content to remain a parish minister. Although he was a rigid Whig and an upholder of the 'Auld Lights', his attitude was described more as old fashioned, rather than bigoted, but he was said to have been 'kindly and courteous'. This kindness being demonstrated

when Jean and Robert had to make their three appearances in the church before Auld, due to Jean's pregnancy, the poet was allowed to stand in his own pew next to Jean, instead of in the 'place of repentance'. By keeping silent about his verbal vows, Burns then got from Auld his certificate as a 'blameless single man'.

It was in the poem 'The Kirk's Alarm', that Burns called him "Daddy Auld" and not actually in 'Holy Willie's Prayer', which suggests that in spite of the reprimands for fornication with Jean which Auld had to administer, Burns regarded Auld with a respect that was probably mutual.

So much for the charitable interpretation of Auld's character. On the other hand, it has to be admitted that the full story of the proceedings against Gavin Hamilton, an ardent supporter of Burns, suggest a vindictiveness, which it is hard to account for merely by assuming a clash of personalities.

Auld also had a further connection to Burns as he baptised Jean's first set of twins, Jean and Robert.

The Reverend William Dalrymple, (1723 — 1814)

William Dalrymple was licensed to preach in 1745, and became junior minister of Ayr Parish in 1746, where he remained for 10 years. Dalrymple was considered a mild Calvinist, which suited Burn's father, William, who approved of his mild flavour of Calvinism and also, interestingly did not appear to bring him into conflict with the orthodox Calvinists. It was also Dalrymple who baptised Burns when the poet was one day old. Dalrymple is mentioned in two of Burns' poems, in 'The Twa Herds' Burns appears to be quite complimentary as he depicts Dalrymple as having been 'lang' the 'fae' of the 'Auld Licht' faction. However, in 'The Kirk of Scotland's Alarm' Burns called him 'D'rymple mild,

D'rymple mild! D'rymple mild, tho' your heart's like a child,
And your life like the new-driven snaw,
Yet that [winna](#) save you, auld Satan must have you,
For preaching that three's ane an' twa,
D'rymple mild! For preaching that three's [ane](#) an' twa.

The Reverend James Oliphant (1734-1818)

The evangelical Minister of Kilmarnock High Church from 1764-73. He was an 'Auld Licht' minister with a powerful voice. Burns referred to him in 'The Ordination' as making the church 'yell' and was satirised in the poem resulting in Oliphant denouncing publicly the Dumbarton Magistrates 'for conferring the honour of freeman of the Royal Burgh of Dumbarton on Burns 'as the author of vile, detestable and immoral publications.' Although considered ultra-Calvinistic, records of the period, show that Oliphant did not allow the demands of the next world to interfere with his enjoyment of this. Yet another example of the hypocrisy prevalent in the Presbyterian church at the time. Somewhat of an irony, Oliphant was noted for his good deeds, and his sense of humour and when he died in 1818, he was mourned by his parishioners, who had come to regard him with deep affection and appreciation.

Oliphant was also known as an author of religious books as he wrote '*A Mother's Catechism*, and *A Sacramental Catechism*,' both of which were popular in his day.

The conclusions that can be reached when reviewing Burns' relationship with various ministers is that he wasn't 'anti-religious' as has often be stated. In my opinion, it is clear that any 'anti-religious' views Burns held on the Calvinist aspects of religion were solely related to the many religious hypocritical aspects as was demonstrated by the 'Auld Licht' ministers that he saw and heard in Ayrshire in his time. Burns was not an enemy of religion, nor an overly pious Presbyterian as can be seen from his embracing of the 'New Lights', but we can be sure from the satire contained within his poems e.g. in 'Holy Willie's Prayer' that he was concerned for the injustices that he saw in the society and remained outspoken until the end of his days.

The Reverend John Russell, (1740 -1817)

The Reverend John Russell was a minister at Stirling and was described as being 'a large, robust, dark-complexioned man, imperturbably grave, and with a sullen expression seated in the deep folds of his forehead' leading to his nickname 'Black Russell'. There were also rumours of a woman attending his church who suddenly saw Russell in a pulpit, and was 'so overcome with terror that she fainted away'.

Russell was a staunch supporter of the 'Auld Licht' teaching, and a powerful preacher of the roaring hellfire-threatening sort. Burns mentions Russell in a number of poems as 'Black Russell' in 'The Holy Fair', 'wordy Russell' in 'The Twa Herds', 'Rumble John' in 'The Kirk's Alarm' and a reference is also made to him in 'The Ordination'.

Russell was also known for the doctrinal battle with fellow 'Auld Licht' Minister, the Reverend Alexander Moodie of Riccarton. It was the undignified spectacle of two members of the 'unco guid' fighting between themselves that inspired Burns to write 'The Twa Herds'.

Elder William Fisher, (Holy Willie) 1737 — 1809)

One cannot discuss Burns' satirical views of the 'Auld Licht' aspects of religion, without mentioning 'Holy Willie's Prayer.' The poem is a tale of an insignificant little church elder of Mauchline, who becomes the prototype of hypocrisy in what is perhaps the greatest religious satire written. The poem was prompted by the defeat of the 'Auld Licht' censure of his friend Gavin Hamilton for Hamilton's failure to participate in public worship. The poem, shaped like a prayer, is put into the mouth of the 'Auld Licht' adherent 'Holy Willie' and articulates Willie's doctrinal stance on predestination.

O Thou that in the heavens does dwell!
Wha, as it pleases best thysel,
Sends ane to heaven an ten to hell,
A' for thy glory!

And no for ony gude or ill
They've done before thee.

Burns then goes on to have Willie condemn himself by describing moments of fornication and justifying them as temptations visited on him by God and ends up giving Willie's opinion of Gavin Hamilton, 'He drinks, and swears, and plays at cartes', and then his chagrin that Minister Auld was defeated. The poem ends with the requisite petition asking blessings for himself and his like.

'New Licht Ministers'

Reverend William Burnside (1751 — 1806)

Minister of St Michael's in Dumfries. Burns wrote to William Nicol from Mauchline, and described him as: 'a man whom I shall ever gratefully remember' and maybe it was because Burns then described Anne, the minister's wife; 'as Gude forgie me! I had almost broke the tenth commandment on her account. Simplicity, elegance, good sense, sweetness of disposition, good humour, kind hospitality, are the constituents of her manner and heart: in short — but if I say one word more about her, I shall be directly in love with her.'

Bishop John Geddes (1735 — 99)

John Geddes was Roman Catholic Bishop of Dunkeld, who first met Burns in 1786-7. Geddes took an interest in the poet's work, and was responsible for getting 5 Catholic Seminaries, to subscribe to the Edinburgh Edition of 1787. Although Geddes was a Catholic, Burns had a close relationship with him and met him on a number of occasions and signing his copy of the Edinburgh Edition.

Reverend John Skinner (1721 -1807)

John Skinner was born at Balfour, Aberdeenshire, was educated at Marischal College, in Aberdeen and became a minister at Longside, Aberdeen.

Burns was disappointed that he did not meet Skinner on his Highland tour, even though he passed only four miles from the minister's home. Skinner wrote Burns a long verse epistle - 'by far the finest poetic compliment I ever got' said Burns, who answered on 25th October 1787, 'in plain dull prose'. Burns asked Skinner to send him any songs he had that would be suitable for inclusion in the Scots Musical Museum, telling him that 'Tullochgorum', 'John of Badenyon' and 'Ewie wi' the Crookit Horn' were going into the second volume. Burns later sent Skinner the second volume of the *Museum* in 1788: 'as a mark of the veneration I have long had, and shall ever have, for your character'. His song 'Tullochgorum', was described by Burns as 'the best Scotch Song ever Scotland saw'.

Reverend George Smith, (1748 - 1823)

George Smith was Minister at Galston, Ayrshire but was also known as the great-grandfather of R. L. Stevenson.

Burns would appear to have been quite conflicted in his dealings with Smith. Complimenting him in 'The Holy Fair', but criticizing him in 'The Kirk's Alarm'.

"Cessnock-side, Cessnock-side, wi' your turkey-cock pride,
O' manhood but sma' is your share;
Ye've the figure, 'tis true, even your faes maun allow.
And your friends daurna say ye hae mair,
Cessnock-side! And your friends daurna say ye hae mair.'

Later, in 'The Twa Herds', poem, Burns suggested that while pretending 'New Licht' sympathies, he was not to be trusted:

"An monie a ane that I could tell,
Wha fain would openly rebel,
Forby turn-coats amang oursel;
There's Smith for ane -
I doubt he's but a grey neck still
An' that ye'll fin'."

Conclusions

The conclusions that can be reached when reviewing Burns' relationship with various ministers is that he wasn't 'anti-religious' as has often be stated. In my opinion, it is clear that any 'anti-religious' views Burns held on the Calvinist aspects of religion were solely related to the many religious hypocritical aspects as was demonstrated by the 'Auld Licht' ministers that he saw and heard in Ayrshire in his time. Burns was not an enemy of religion, nor an overly pious Presbyterian as can be seen from his embracing of the 'New Lichts', but we can be sure from the satire contained within his poems that he was concerned for the injustices that he saw in the society and remained outspoken until the end of his days. He believed in the power of good works to determine salvation and sincerely believed that all humans were to be treated with dignity and equality. Where he suspected insincerity, want of charity or bigotry no mercy was shown in his poems or letters to the offender, no matter who.

I think we can also acknowledge the great service he rendered to Scottish religious life when we look at the quote from 'The Unco Guid' which, conveys what to him were the essential components of religion.

Then gently scan your brother man

Still gentler sister woman,

Tho' they may gang a kennin wrang,

To step aside is human