



THE REAL JEAN ARMOUR – ROBERT BURNS' BONNIE
JEAN



Prepared by Tony Grace for the Carnie Group, September 2017

I find it remarkable that so much has been written about Robert Burns the man and his life as well as his works, and in fact continues to be written to this day. His life, his personality, his views and thoughts on every aspect of what was going on in Britain and beyond have been dissected and analyzed in great detail. His relationships, particularly with members of the opposite sex, have been scrutinized exhaustively and no stone left unturned as people have tried to paint a comprehensive and complete picture of this complex man. Even with all this I find there are still gaps in our knowledge and one of these concerns the person he married – Jean Armour.

There are questions about Jean's date of birth although the Armour Family Bible claims it to be February 16th, 1765, and this is supported by the records of the Mauchline parish register showing she was baptised on February 25th 1765. Jean was the second child in a family of eleven of whom three died in infancy, and was the oldest daughter and the apple of her father's eye. Jean's parents both came from families of stone masons going back several generations, and James Armour, Jean's father, was described as being "a tradesman of solid worth" and financially successful in his business dealings. He was responsible for a number of bridges in Ayrshire which are still standing, as well as contracting for and erecting Dumfries House near Old Cumnock, and Skeldon House in Dalrymple. He owned a number of properties in Mauchline, and was a highly respected Freemason and pillar of the Kirk – his advice often being sought by the Kirk Session on parochial matters; in addition he was a generous contributor to the parish poor-boxes. James led an exemplary life but was somewhat rigid and austere in his beliefs and relationships, and belonged to that stricter sect of religionists referred to as the "Auld Lichts". Mary, Jean's mother, while being an affectionate wife and mother seems to have been of a more light-hearted and even frivolous disposition in her own right.

Jean was a sprightly and affectionate girl, adored by her parents – her father being intensely proud of her. In return she had an especially strong bond with him bordering on adoration. This is borne out by her actions later in her life when she bowed to his wishes while sacrificing her own aspirations. Growing up in Mauchline she experienced the usual associations of Scottish village life, and when Burns moved to Mossgiel she was barely out of her teens. She was described at that time as being a bewitching, vivacious and attractive brunette with an affectionate nature enhanced by a winsome smile, complete with a pair of very bewitching dark eyes. According to contemporaries she had a most enticing figure and her movements were graceful and easy. She was also gifted with a witty, saucy and provocative tongue which no doubt enchanted the sober-minded young men who hoped to court her; one could say she was a complete coquette. She also had a charming soprano voice, learned at the Mauchline Singing School, at a time when singing was considered a social grace. This was combined with her being as light as thistledown on her feet and being the most popular dancing partner in the Penny Reels held weekly in Hugh Morton's ballroom in the village. For a long time it was assumed that Jean was typical of country girls of that time and was illiterate, but this is not strictly true. Helped by the fact that she was her father's favourite she appears to have received a more liberal education than was the norm. Her signature is known on a number of documents and Burns himself wrote several letters to her. After Burns had died, she wrote a number of letters demonstrating a basic knowledge of grammar and spelling.

It is not exactly clear when Robert and Jean had their first encounter, but it seems fairly definite that it was at Morton's ballroom during Race Week in Mauchline which was held in April, and probably in the year 1785. Although they were both present at this event, they did not actually meet or talk, and the dancing was disrupted by Burns' dog Luath which insisted on following his master even when he was dancing with girls other than Jean, who overheard him saying to his partner that "*he wished he could get any of the lasses to like him as well as his dog did*". We are fortunate that there was a witness to the first real meeting of the pair – Jean's sister Helen known as Nellie. Apparently Nellie never forgave Robert for seducing her sister, never recognizing him as a brother-in-law, and later when she herself had a home of her own, refusing to have his portrait on display or a copy of his works in her library; and in this she was a true Armour – and they say the Scots don't carry grudges!!

Regardless, on a sunny day later in April 1785, Jean and Nellie were spreading the family washing on the grass at the village bleaching-green to whiten in the sun. While resting from their labours, the wind picked up and ruffled the linens attracting the attention of a passing dog – which happened to be Luath, accompanied by his master. The dog soon trampled his dirty feet over the washing which caused Jean to throw a handful of stones at him which in turn drew Robert’s anger. As harsh words rose in his throat, he saw beauty, flaming cheeks and dark eyes that sparkled dangerously. He also noticed that her kilted petticoat was pinned high exposing a pair of rosy, pretty knees. “*Lassie*” he began as his eyes took in her enticing figure and sturdy, shapely limbs, “*if ye had any respect for Poet Burns ye would not be throwing stones at his poor wee dog!*” Realising who he was and in no mood to banter she turned on him, “*I have no respect for Poet Burns, nor has anyone else in this town that I’ve heard tell of.*” The sooner he took himself off- and his hateful dog too – the better it would be for all concerned. Then seeing the look of amazement on his face, she started to laugh. Never, he assured her, had he been spoken to so disrespectfully before – and by a chit of a girl not much older than his respectful young sisters at Mossiel. So with the ice between them melting, he helped her gather up the spoiled linens and take them to the pump for a fresh rinsing. “*They talked and they laughed so long together,*” reported Nellie afterwards, that she decided to proceed home alone; and with her went a feeling of uneasy apprehension for Jeanie, who at that age was romantic-minded and “*glaikit*”, and Robert Burns was undeniably handsome and persuasive, if legend and rumour are to be believed.

There were regular opportunities for the two to meet as Burns’ favourite Howff at that time was the Whiteford Arms, which abutted a small lane on the other side of which was the Armour residence; not only that but one of the back windows of the Inn looked directly into Jean’s own room. This enabled a growing intimacy between the two over many months while keeping any knowledge of the affair from Jean’s father who was bitterly opposed to any friendship of Jean with that rascal Burns, let alone a marriage. In the early days of their courtship Robert produced such rhymes as **The Belles of Mauchline** and **The Mauchline Lady**, the former ending with the line “*But Armour’s the jewel for me o them a*”. By the summer of 1785 Robert had fallen hopelessly in love, but this road was never going to be smooth. On May 22nd of that year Elizabeth Paton, or Lizzie as she was called, Robert’s mother’s servant girl, produced a girl – Elizabeth or Bess as she was to be known – which cannot have improved Robert’s standing in the eyes of old James Armour. One result of this however was that it aroused in Robert for the first time a special kind of tenderness which he was always to feel for the children he fathered; he really welcomed fatherhood. By the time of the birth the Burns family had moved from Lochlea to Mossiel and Lizzie was no longer employed by the family and Robert had no further dealings with Lizzie, although the child Bess was ultimately taken in by the Burns’ family and raised by Robert’s own mother, who initially had encouraged Robert to do the honorable thing with Lizzie, but was overruled by the rest of the family.

The summer of 1785 was an incredibly busy time for both Robert and Jean. His love for her knew no bounds and he spent as much time as possible with her. It was also a remarkably productive time for his poetry as he composed numerous pieces, many of which were later to make him famous – **Halloween, The Cotter’s Saturday Night, The Holy Fair, Rantin’ Rovin’ Robin, Death and Doctor Hornbook, The Twa Dogs**, followed by **The Vision, To a Louse** and **The Lass O’ Ballochmyle** to name but a few. Jean took whatever chances she had when her father was away on business or her mother was out visiting, to slip across from her house to join Robert at the Inn or at one of the other busy taverns in the town.

Where Burns cam weary frae the plough
To hae a crack wi’ Johnnie Dow
On nights at e’en
An’ whiles to taste the mountain dew
Wi’ Bonnie Jean....

Although she enjoyed his poems and the reception they got when he read them to his cronies, she worried that her parents would hear his works that poked fun at the Church, in particular **The Holy Fair**, as they were both stalwarts of the Kirk. She also worried about the lack of success of the farm at Mossiel as bad weather, an unwise investment

in poor seed and mounting expenses during the crop failures meant a bleak future, which would likely preclude a marriage to Robert. Due to limited income from the above the Burns brothers were also not even able to pay the Mossgiel farm rent to Gavin Hamilton. Jean was well aware of all this and was also familiar with the gossip that Rab Mossgiel, as Robert was sometimes referred to, was meeting with Mary Campbell – Highland Mary as she was later known – when she was not able to meet with him herself. All this was of no consequence when she was with Robert, wrapped in his woolen plaid, holding him with their lips together, she knew only love and protection and could deny him nothing. This led to the inevitable and she fell pregnant at the turn of the year, confessing to her mother in the spring of 1786. By then Robert and Jean had signed an acknowledgement of marriage and thus were legally, if informally, husband and wife, even though the Kirk might not accept the provisions of such an irregular marriage, as it normally only recognized the ecclesiastical form.

They had not reckoned on the deep-seated and intense hatred Jean's father had for Burns when he learned of the news. He initially fainted, and then vowed vengeance upon the head of his daughter's despoiler. When Jean showed him the paper indicating their married state, he took it from her and visited his lawyer Robert Aiken who had it mutilated and to all intents and purposes nullified, by cutting out the names of the two parties. James would never accept Robert Burns as a son-in-law, and to separate the pair he sent Jean to her Aunt Purdie in Paisley for the duration. There her parents hoped that her one-time suitor Robert Wilson, claimed by some to be her childhood sweetheart, would renew his suit and accept the child as his own. Jean agreed to this plan and sent word to Mossgiel that Robert should make no attempt to see her or contact her again.

As might be expected this capitulation by Jean to her father's wishes and her outright rejection of him, enraged Robert. He made one more impassioned attempt to persuade James Armour to allow the marriage, even claiming that he was willing to do anything at home or abroad to support his wife and children, but was met by a deaf ear; James refused him any further visits – it was over. Robert spent that summer in mental anguish as he wrestled with what to do – not only as regards Jean, but with his future generally. As always he turned to his pen, writing verses as well as letters to his friends deploring Jean's behavior but not being able to get her out of his mind and heart. He did however console himself by renewing his meetings with Mary Campbell, and they pledged themselves to each other in early May with the intention of going to Jamaica together in the fall of the year. Mary then left for Campbeltown to prepare for that move, and with both Mary and Jean being separated from him, Robert considered how best to move forward.

With the mutilation of the letter signed by Robert and Jean, they both understood that the marriage had been annulled and themselves to be single. During her short stay in Paisley, Jean heard stories about Robert's courtship of Mary Campbell, even as Robert was hearing rumours about Jean and Robert Wilson. She returned to Mauchline on June 9th to her parent's house, despite knowing it was against their wishes and that it would expose her to the wrath of the Kirk, but presumably just to be closer to Robert. In the following weeks the pair made penitential appearances at the church and were formally absolved from scandal. In addition, Robert had requested the Kirk issue him a certificate of bachelorhood to confirm his single status and to guard against possible claims of bigamy should he wed Mary, and this was duly granted. The Kirk would never recognize the informal contract that Robert and Jean had signed anyway – even though technically the legality of that document was still strong. When Jean returned to Mauchline she found that Robert was planning to leave Scotland, although it is unclear whether she knew that Mary Campbell was planning to go with him. In all events she remained under the Armour family roof until after the birth of her twins.

As part of his arrangements to leave the country, Robert planned to publish his poems, which he hoped would not only establish him as a poet but put some much needed money in his pocket. However, James Armour continued to hound him and took out a writ requiring Robert to put up a significant sum of money to support the coming child. In retaliation Robert turned over his interest in the Mossgiel farm as well as any proceeds from his forthcoming book to his brother Gilbert to be used to support his first born, Bess, who was being brought up by the Burns family, thus leaving nothing for the Armour claim except the possibility of a jail cell for Robert.

Through these turbulent times both Jean and Robert pined for each other. Jean told Robert she still loved him but her family was intractable about a marriage, which he could not afford anyway. Robert was in two minds, alternating between anger over her rejection of him and never being able to get her out of his mind as he relived the happy memories of the times they had spent together. Despite his betrothal to Mary Campbell in May and his efforts to turn his back on Jean, he wrote in early June *“one thing I know, she has made me compleately (sic) miserable. – Never man lov’d, or rather ador’d, a woman more than I did her: and, to confess a truth between you and me, I do still love her to distraction after all, tho’ I won’t tell her so..... I have run into all kinds of dissipation and riot, Mason meetings, drinking matches, and other mischief, to drive her out of my head, but all in vain.”* While they were both in the Mauchline area during that summer there seems to have been limited contact between them as Robert continued to get ready for his departure to Jamaica. On September 3rd Jean gave birth to twins – a boy named Robert and a girl called Jean. It was agreed that Robert would be brought up by Burns’ mother at Mossiel along with his half-sister Bess, while baby Jean would stay with the Armour family in Mauchline. Delaying, and delaying again his departure for the Indies, Robert hoped that he would finally be accepted into the Armour family, but it was not to be even after he managed to force his way into Jean’s room to see her and the twins and breaking down in tears. Then the following month he received word that Mary Campbell had died.

Still very much at odds with the Armours, Robert took himself off to Edinburgh late in November 1786 with the intent of preparing a second edition of his poems, and was not to return to Mauchline until the following June. Meanwhile Jean remained at home, her only news of Robert being through Gilbert. How much information regarding Robert’s activities with the fairer sex in Edinburgh was passed on is not known, as no doubt Gilbert would have been somewhat circumspect in this regard with the daily reminder of young Robert in his house. Jean was sunning herself with her daughter when Robert came across them in the courtyard adjoining the Whiteford Arms a couple of days after his arrival back in Mauchline in June. There was a very emotional reunion, and they picked up as though nothing had happened between them over the last year or so. After celebrating at the Inn they crossed the lane to meet with the Armours, who at last let Robert join them in the family home. Clearly the reunion was a joyful one as it subsequently turned out that Jean became pregnant that month, just after his return; although two weeks later he declared in a letter to his friend James Smith that he had no intention of marrying Jean, but nevertheless the summer of 1787 was a pleasant one for her as she had her Robert back and relations between him and her parents were becoming cordial – at least they were less antagonistic.

But she must have become aware as time went on during the summer that she was likely pregnant again but Robert had spent much of the time away from Mauchline as he undertook three of his tours – first in the West Highlands, then into the Highlands and finally into Stirlingshire. Between these last trips he spent time in Edinburgh trying to settle his business affairs and to collect the monies due him, but in which he was unsuccessful. However on October 20th with the tours behind him he went to Edinburgh again with three matters in mind; wind up his affairs with William Creech his publisher; settle the business of leasing a small farm and obtain a position with the Excise, something that had been in his thoughts for some time. Clearly by this time thoughts of Jamaica were no longer his priority. It is noteworthy that on that same October 20th that he arrived in Edinburgh his daughter Jean died in Mauchline. We can only imagine the mental anguish that Jean Armour suffered; her daughter passing, Robert heading off to the capital for an extended period and herself pregnant. Jean did not see Robert again until February of 1788 when they spent a night together at Tarbolton Mill.

It would appear that as 1787 turned into 1788 Robert was trying to find a suitable home for Jean and the children. When Jean confessed to her parents she was pregnant for the second time, they *“turned her out of doors”* and she was left to fend for herself initially staying with relatives in Ardrossan. With Robert back from Edinburgh and the charms of Clarinda, he effected a rapprochement between Jean and her mother who agreed to stand by her daughter, although the Armours refused to take her back under their roof. Robert finally found an upstairs room in the Backcauseway overlooking the Mauchline Kirkyard. Jean was in a difficult position at this point; she was unwed, but was having ongoing conjugal relations with Robert although she had been declared single by the Church, and

above all was pregnant and in danger of being declared a “Harlot” by the Kirk with all the restrictions and dishonor that that would bring. In mitigation against that parlous possibility Robert claimed to be domiciled with Jean to help support a “*marriage by habit and repute*” status. He wrote to his friend Robert Ainslie “*Jean I found banished like a martyr – forlorn, destitute and friendless; all for the good cause. I have reconciled her to her mother; I have taken a room for her; I have bought her a mahogany bed; I have given her a guinea and I have taken her to my arms.....*” In return Jean promised to make no husbandly claim upon him. She was still madly in love with him, and was solely dependent upon his support and was willing to love him on any terms.

Robert spent the winter of 1787-1788 in Edinburgh and eventually reached an agreement with Creech about the monies due him, although it was much later before he actually received those monies. He also pushed hard for employment in the Excise, and worked with James Johnson on songs to be published in the latter’s Scots Musical Museum. But most of the time seems to have been taken up with Agnes or Nancy McLehose in a short but intense relationship.

It would appear that in January of 1788 James Armour discovered that Jean and Robert were still in touch with each other which caused further friction between father and daughter. Robert, who was in Edinburgh dalliancing with Nancy at the time, persuaded a friend William Muir of Tarbolton and his wife to take Jean into their house and look after her away from the influence of her father. She stayed there until February 22nd when Robert arrived. Later in February he arranged for Jean to return to Mauchline to a rented apartment in the house of his friend Dr. John Mackenzie.

I would like to think that at this point in their lives Robert had come to the conclusion that his moment of popularity with the jaded Edinburgh society was on the wane and that he needed to find a tenant farm for his family which would mean marrying, as no farmer could run a farm without the help of a wife, and that he should obtain employment with the Excise as a backup but should continue to write poetry as well as pursue his latest interest of reclaiming Scottish songs.

The exact date of the birth of Jean’s twin daughters is not known, with dates between March 3rd and the 10th of 1788 being suggested, and the burial register for Mauchline shows that “*Jean Armour’s Child, unbaptized,*” was buried on March 10th with an identical entry for the second twin dated March 22nd. These were busy weeks for the future Mr. and Mrs. Burns as Robert signed a long-term lease on the farm at Ellisland and they entered into a civil marriage that was later confirmed by the Kirk in July. He also had to disentangle himself from Nancy in Edinburgh who clearly had expectations that her relationship with Robert would continue.

Prior to Robert’s move to Ellisland in June of 1788 he completed the necessary six weeks of training for the Excise (his commission was issued on July 14th), while Jean worked at Mossgiel to learn the domestic duties of a farmer’s wife, as well as enabling her to spend time with her firstborn son Robert. In November Jean finally joined Robert in Nithsdale, not at the new farmhouse which was still not finished, but at a house nearby owned by his friend David Newall. They finally moved to their own house at Ellisland in April of 1789 after many delays.

Then followed some of the happiest days of Jean’s life; she had her own home with her beloved husband, and in August 1789 she gave birth to a boy, Francis Wallace Burns, following which the family was completed by the arrival of their firstborn son Robert from Mossgiel. She loved doing the daily domestic chores around the farm and sharing the evenings with her husband as he continued to work on his poems and songs as well as carrying on with a busy correspondence. Much of this time was taken up with his collaboration with James Johnson over songs for the Scots Musical Museum. But for Jean this period of her life was to be all too short. Within a year it became apparent that the farm was going to be a ruinous bargain that required more effort and resources than Robert was able to provide. In September of 1789 he was appointed a Riding Officer by the Excise for ten parishes outside Dumfries including his own residence at Ellisland. He had been agitating for this for about a year but he finally had secured the steady income he so desired. This meant he was away most of the week, sometimes overnight, leaving the running of the

farm to Jean helped by some farm workers. Her taste of the good life had not lasted long. Events only got worse as Robert's health began to suffer due in part to riding up to two hundred miles each week in all weathers.

Jean was aware of Robert's relationship with Highland Mary and how her sudden death had affected him. Around the third anniversary of that event in November 1789 she noticed that he became sad and withdrawn as the day wore on, wandering around the barnyard with Jean encouraging him to go inside to the fireside. He kept agreeing but continued to walk around the farmyard, looking at the clear and starry sky. He eventually stretched out on a heap of straw, looking fixedly at a bright planet. Asked once again to go into the warmth, he did so this time and went immediately to his desk where he wrote with no hesitation at all the sublime and complete **To Mary in Heaven**.

It is sometimes suggested that while Jean had no other love than Robert whom clearly she worshipped and continually forgave his wanderings from the marital pathway, Robert did not fully reciprocate those sentiments. But look at the poems he addressed to his wife – "*My darling Jean*" he calls her in his first "**Epistle to Davie**"; "*my bonnie Jean*" in "**The Vision**"; "*Armour's the jewel for me o' them a'*" he exclaims in "**The Belles of Mauchline**"; in "**The Lament**" and in "**The Farewell**" he pours forth the anguish of his heart when separation threatened the lovers; the ardour of conjugal love breathes in the immortal verses of "**O, were I on Parnassus hill!**" and "**Of a' the airts the wind can blaw**" – a rich tribute from a husband and lover to his wife and sweetheart, and which remained her favourite song for the rest of her life. Not only in verse did he praise his wife, in the September following his marriage he wrote to Margaret Chalmers a young lady who declined his proposal of marriage but somehow remained his friend and confidant; "*If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, and fashionable dress, I am not sickened and disgusted with the multiform course of boarding-school affectation; and I have got the handsome figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the county. Mrs. Burns believes, as firmly as her creed, that I am le plus bel esprit, et le plus honnete homme in the universe.*" Clearly they were a well matched couple. Robert was well aware of Jean's fondness of ballad poetry and that she had a large range of reading interests despite her somewhat limited formal education. Robert would turn to her as the voice of an honest critic for all the verses he wrote, and he invariably benefited from it. This was particularly true in the case of songs as she had a lovely voice and would sing the nascent efforts for him.

In April 1791 Jean gave birth to another son who was christened William Nicol. Just ten days earlier Ann Park had produced a daughter Elizabeth to be known as Betty, the result of an affair with Robert. Ann worked at the Globe Inn where Robert stayed when he was working for the Excise in Dumfries but was unable to get back to Ellisland for the night. There are two conflicting stories about the upbringing of Betty, but it is clear that at some early time in her life she was taken in by Jean and brought up in the Burns household with Jean uttering the well-known comment "*our Rab should hae had twa wives.*" While Robert was still alive they agreed that she would not be known as Robert's daughter, but someone they were bringing up on behalf of a friend. After he died she was known as Betty Burns and she lived with Jean and the boys as equals. The two women obviously had a mutually affectionate and respectful relationship as Betty stayed with Jean until she married in 1808.

During 1791 Robert became disillusioned more and more with farming, recognizing that the unfriendly acres of Ellisland would never provide for a family living. At that time his landlord received an offer to buy the farm from a neighbour and Robert took the opportunity to give up the lease and move to Dumfries some five miles away where he was already working as a Foot Officer with the Excise. While he was happy to shake off the toils of Ellisland, Jean viewed the move with dismay. At Ellisland she had a comparatively spacious home which she had adapted and made her own. She ruled over a sizeable establishment of children, hired help and frequent visitors. She would be giving up the glorious vistas of the River Nith, the enchanting views of the countryside and cultivated fields as well as the freedom that running her own farm provided. In exchange, she would live in three little rooms and a tiny kitchen in a district of Dumfries called the Stinking Vennel. However Robert welcomed the social opportunities that Dumfries offered and he kept himself busy as apart from his official duties with the Excise he loved the companionship of his fellow man. To the very end he not only corresponded with James Johnson in regard to the Scots Musical Museum

but supported a similar a similar venture with George Thomson called A Select Collection of Scottish Airs. For both these ventures he wrote, re-wrote and put words to existing melodies to enable Scotland to retain its musical memories.

Jean put up with all this while looking after the family which grew steadily during the Dumfries years with the birth in November 1792 of Elizabeth Riddell; this was followed by James Glencairn in August 1794. Unfortunately Elizabeth fell ill when she was only two and after a long-drawn out time finally passed away in September 1795. Robert was devastated but too ill to attend her funeral in Mauchline although Gilbert arranged for Jean to be present. This had no sooner happened when Jean noticed that her husband was showing increasing signs of illness with depression and physical fatigue occurring more frequently. She did everything she could think of to help him but even with his doctor's recommendations nothing seemed to be of any benefit. With herself in the final weeks of yet another confinement she was helped in looking after Robert by Jessie Lewars, the young daughter of an Excise colleague. As a last resort he spent a few days at the Brow bathing in the cold waters of the Solway Firth before returning home to die on Thursday July 21st 1796. His funeral was held the following Monday when his casket was watched by thousands of mourners lining the streets of Dumfries. On that same day Jean gave birth to her last child to be called Maxwell after the doctor who treated Robert in his last illness.

So here is Jean, just thirty one years old, a widow with five children of her own and two other children of Robert's. Although not a pauper when he died, he did not leave Jean much cash with which to bring up the children or pay the rent. She received an annuity of ten pounds a year from Robert's Excise employer, his books (valued at about ninety pounds) and other moveable property, but otherwise was dependent on the generosity of her husband's friends and colleagues as well as the general public. The day prior to Robert's death, Alexander Cunningham, a lawyer friend from his Edinburgh days, wrote to another friend and Excise colleague, John Syme, that they should establish a publicly sponsored fund for the poet's family. After some time and much hard work some seven hundred pounds was raised. John Syme and others also urged Dr. James Currie to edit Burns' works and write a biography, with any profit going to Jean and her family. Although this work was not published until 1800, it did result in some two thousand pounds for the family. Some years later in 1817 a benevolent Lord Panmure created a bond that provided a further annuity of fifty pounds a year. All this enabled Jean to live comfortably in the house in which Robert had died as well as to educate her young sons until they were able to make their own way in the world. She did this on an estimated annual income of about sixty pounds up to 1818 when her sons James Glencairn and William Nicol were able to provide one hundred and fifty pounds yearly for their mother, which resulted in a total annual income of about two hundred pounds – much more than Jean required and a lot of which she was to donate to charities. It is worthy of mention that Jean never asked for the one hundred and eighty pounds that Gilbert owed his brother but desperately needed for himself and which was only repaid many years later. Robert Jr. constantly got into financial difficulties and had to be regularly bailed out by Jean when she could least afford it, and once in 1831 to the tune of two hundred pounds. There were some who felt that the illegitimate children of Robert Burns also deserved public support and to this end Alderman Shaw of London, a former Ayrshireman, promoted a fund of four hundred pounds to be split equally between Lizzie Paton's Bess and Ann Park's Betty.

Jean's immediate task was to look after her family and to make sure they were educated as well as possible, in which she was successful. Robert, the poet's eldest child and lone survivor of Jean's first set of twins, attended both Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities before obtaining a position with the Stamp Office in London, where he served undistinguished for some thirty years before retiring back to Dumfries with his common-law wife Emma Bland and their four children, following the collapse of his marriage to Anne Sherwood. Young Maxwell born on the day of his father's funeral survived just thirty three months, dying in April 1799; Francis Wallace lived to the age of fourteen before dying in 1803. William Nicol and James Glencairn were both educated at Dumfries Academy and Christ's Hospital in London before joining the Honorable East India Company where both had long and successful careers.

Jean continued to live in the house she had shared with her husband which she was able to lease, repair and improve as and when she could afford it. Although young enough to re-marry she never did, politely rejecting several

opportunities that arose over the years. For the remaining thirty years of her life she was visited by thousands of strangers, all curious to see the home of Scotland's bard and many hoping for some item to commemorate their visit. Such was the demand for artifacts connected to the poet that she appears to have agreed to have had the bed in which he had died broken up, with pieces of the wood made into souvenirs. She never refused any audience and seemed to believe that her house and memories of the poet were in some way the property of the public. One of the visitors was James Hogg, known as the Ettrick Shepherd, to whom in praise of her late husband she stated *"He never said a misbehadden word to me a' the days o' his life."* She also became good friends with Mrs. Frances Dunlop who had been the earliest and most loyal of Robert's sponsors. In the spring of 1804 Dr. James Currie and his son paid a visit prior to paying homage at the poet's grave. She was frugal in her tastes, delighting in music, pictures and flowers. In spring and summer her windows were adorned with the beauty of her floral treasures, which was her one extravagance in life. Fond of the society of young people, she seized the chances to enjoy their company. It is interesting to note that Jean for many years dined every Sunday, after attending St. Michael's Kirk, with a Mrs. Agnes Perochon, the eldest daughter of Mrs. Dunlop.

Jean was extremely upset with some of the rumours that followed Robert's death in which his reputation was sullied and his habits distorted, particularly concerning drinking and womanizing. Unfortunately some of these rumours found their way into the early biographies and were repeated unchallenged over many years. She herself claimed that *"never either before or after their marriage saw him intoxicated and never once was 'seen home' or in the least difficulty as to dispose himself when he arrived home."*

James Glencairn Burns had married Sarah Robinson in 1818 and they had three children, Jean Isabella, Robert Shaw and Sarah Eliza Maitland Tombs. Sarah herself died giving birth to her second daughter in November 1821 and the following month Robert Shaw died in India. James decided to send both Isabella and baby Sarah back to his mother in Scotland to bring up, but unfortunately the older girl fell ill and died during the voyage. Sarah stayed with her grandmother until the latter died when she was twelve. Sarah later recalled *"On Saturday afternoons when I was home from school she used to give me pennies to take round to some of her poor neighbours, and I remember the beggars who came to the door always got meal to put in their 'pokes'. I can only recollect her loving kindness to me. I used to read a chapter to her out of the Family Bible, and I can vividly remember seeing her, after her last seizure, lying speechless with her eyes closed. After our Minister Dr. Wallace prayed, she opened her eyes and looked round the room for me, and as I went up beside her the tears coursed down her cheeks, and I think she pressed my hand, but she never spoke again."* The years with Jean were happy ones for Sarah and it is she who appears alongside Jean Armour in one of only three authentic portraits we have of Jean which was painted by Samuel McKenzie in about 1826.

During her widowhood, Jean received many invitations to visit friends and family and it is a somewhat ironic that one of the few she did accept was to visit Edinburgh. Invited by George Thomson with whom Burns had collaborated on his *Select Scottish Airs*, and it was at his house that Jean stayed while in the capital in 1821. The journey to Edinburgh started out well with Jean able to visit with several of the Belles of Mauchline on the way and to exchange reminiscences of the happy times as they grew up together. Once in Edinburgh the word soon spread to many of the people who had known and admired Robert Burns and they loved to attend the daily levees at the Thomson home with Jean. These included Robert Ainslie who had accompanied Burns on his excursion into the Borders as well as acting as a go-between with him and Nancy McLehose, Dawnie Douglas of the Anchor Hotel and one of the founders of the Crochallan Fencibles and Alexander Cunningham who had worked so hard on behalf of the family after Robert's death. Another of the Mauchline Belles, Miss Smith now married and known as Mrs. Candlish, also called. Many others called to pay their respects including Nancy McLehose herself (Clarinda that is), with her well known fund of lore and charming powers of gossip. Apparently they got on well, with Jean, by nature free from any jealousy, becoming as much impressed by her worth as her husband had been, and pronounced herself fortunate in possessing charms that in the end triumphed over those of her talented and pretty rival! *"How happy Robin was with either when t'other was away!"* One meeting that did take place but not at Thomson's house was with Walter Scott who had met with Robert when he was but a teenager himself. The meeting was protracted

and affectionate with the characteristics of the one affecting the mind and heart of the other. Unfortunately, neither party has left any record of this meeting.

In October 1821 Jean was visited by a Mr. J. Brown a native of Dumfries, who presented Jean with a pair of silver candlesticks and a snuffer and tray. The tray was inscribed *"The gift of a few Scots in Sheffield to the widow of Burns,"* with the following quatrain written by James Montgomery;

He passed through life's tempestuous night,
A brilliant, trembling Northern light,
Through years to come he shines afar,
A fixed unsettling Polar Star.

Today they are still with the Burns' family in the possession of his great, great, great grandson Richard Gowring.

Jean was well aware of the debt she owed to Alexander Cunningham's zeal and munificence on behalf of her family and wanted to acknowledge that. When she and Robert had reconciled and married, her father had presented the poet with a fine stone punchbowl that he had made earlier with some left-over stone from construction work at Inverary, and this was the gift she gave to Cunningham. Unfortunately in later times this item left the Cunningham family and was sold for three hundred guineas at auction, finishing up in the British Museum. Had Jean received no other kindness in Edinburgh beyond that she experienced at Cunningham's home she was ready to declare that her husband had better friends than she gave him credit for, or than he even deserved.

With guests regularly present in the house, small parties spontaneously erupted with music and song. George Thomson was an accomplished violinist and provided excellent tunes for the pleasure of those present, and Jean was persuaded to exhibit her own musical gifts. Those songs that had been inspired by her, and which after repeated requests she consented to sing, were listened to with an attention that would never again be revived in Edinburgh. From music and song it is but a short step to dancing, at which point the younger members of those present would take over the floor. At the close of a reel one of the youngsters approached Jean's chair with the remark *"I suppose Mrs. Burns your dancing days are over?"* *"More than you seem to think so,"* roguishly replied the belle of bygone Mauchline penny reel days. *"I have not seen you on the floor,"* commented the by-now embarrassed joker. *"That's no fault of mine,"* replied the widow. *"Do you mean to say you would try a spring, Mrs. Burns?"* *"Ay, a dozen of them, gin I got the chance."* Imagine the delight and surprise of the company when they saw the venerable lady stand up beside her ecstatic partner. Bonnie Jean's feet had lost none of their cunning; she set and whirled about with a grace and agility that would have added new laurels to the reputation of Cutty Sark of Tam O'Shanter fame. Naturally every gallant present claimed Jean as his partner before the evening ended. So thoroughly did the veteran danseuse enter into the spirit of the moment, and compel her fellow dancers to bestir themselves, that not a few of them were happy when George Thomson drew the last run on his bow. Jean sat down smiling, and hinted that she was ready to play a similar part in every remaining night of her stay. On her last night in the city Jean was regaled by old and new friends with demonstrations of affection and esteem fit for a queen, and was similarly greeted on her return to Dumfries.

As Jean's years passed she suffered some of the aches and pains associated with growing old. At the age of fifty nine she had high blood pressure and had suffered a number of minor strokes; but in 1833 she had a severe one which left her partly paralysed and affected her speech, and this was then followed by yet another severe one in 1834 which resulted in her death. The Dumfries Courier reported *"On the Saturday preceding [March 22nd, 1834] she was seized with paralysis for the fourth time during the last few years and, although perfectly conscious of her situation and the presence of friends, she became deprived, before being removed to bed, of the faculty of speech and in a day or two thereafter of the sense of hearing. Still, she lay wonderfully calm and composed and, in the opinion of her medical attendants, suffered from weakness rather than pain. On the night of Tuesday or morning of Wednesday, a fifth stroke, unperceived by her attendants, deprived Mrs. Burns of mental consciousness and from that time till the*

hour of her death, her situation was that of a breathing corpse. And thus passed away all that remained of Burns's Bonnie Jean."

Robert had originally been buried in a secluded spot in the north east corner of the Kirkyard of St. Michaels Church, but it was subsequently felt that there should be a more prestigious setting for his remains and in September 1817 they were transferred to a new mausoleum, financed by public subscription which included donations from the Prince Regent as well as Sir Walter Scott; and it was there that Jean was laid to rest next to her earthly partner. Three of their children are buried there as well; Francis Wallace and Maxwell and later their first born son Robert, when he died in 1857. It is interesting that Jean apparently retained ownership of Robert's original grave and Mrs. Agnes Perochon had earlier wished that she be buried in it. Jean had agreed, but was saddened when Agnes died unexpectedly and needed the grave in 1825.

In April 1827, two years after the death of Agnes Perochon, Jean's dear brother-in-law Gilbert passed away in the Lothians at his home at Grant's Braes at the age of 67 and was buried in his family's grave at Bolton Church, Haddington along with his and Robert's mother.

It is a sad fact that there are very few statues and plaques commemorating Bonnie Jean, but the most noteworthy and substantial memorial are the Jean Armour Burns Houses just outside Mauchline and adjacent to Mossgiel. Built originally by the Glasgow and District Burns Association they provide free accommodation for elderly couples, widows and widowers.

There are so many women associated with Robert Burns that for a long time the one who above all others was the source of his greatest inspiration was not recognized as such. This is the woman to whom Robert on his death bed, amid the horrors of distress and poverty made the memorable declaration "*They will ken me better, Jean, a hundred years hence.*" Jean knew the real Burns, not the artificial one. She knew she was his fate – that she was for him; and better for him than any of those who simply represented short episodes in his life. Posterity has portrayed her memory as the loving, faithful, true and the long suffering wife of an erratic and hard-to-manage man, who in all his wanderings paid to her the truest homage of a love as boundless as it was sincere. Elizabeth Gebbie (sometimes referred to as Ellison or Alison Begbie) Burns thought at one time would have made him happy, but she did not think so. Nellie Kilpatrick was a delightful memory but would have made a poor life partner for a mature Burns. Had he married Nancy McLehose or Margaret Chalmers, both of whom would have appreciated him as a poet, there would have been some congenial times, but in the long run they would not have been able to live with and support the wayward poet as well as Jean did. Highland Mary burnt intensely but briefly but was clearly second best whenever Jean was on the scene. All of these women lasted but a short time with Burns, whereas Jean was courted (if that is the right word), for over two tempestuous years as well as being married to him for a further eight during which time Jean's love never wavered. She was the "right" wife for Robert Burns and even he admitted that eventually.

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