



ROBERT BURNS

THROUGH THE EYES OF FREEMASONRY



Written by Tony Grace for the Carnie Group, May 2018.

It is with some trepidation and after much discussion with the Carnie Group that I agreed to tackle the subject of Robert Burns and Freemasonry. The subject of Freemasonry is enormous in itself, its origins steeped in myths and legends, a long and incredibly tenacious history and today an organization both loved and reviled around the world. Let's start by attempting to understand where it all started and what role it played in society during the time of Robert Burns. Some of what follows may be challenged by our Club Members as there are several theories about the origins and early history of the movement but I will try to minimize those controversies.

It is generally accepted that the current system of Freemasonry began life in the workings and organization of Stonemasons. Back in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries these stonemasons worked on the major buildings and structures of the day such as cathedrals, monasteries and royal palaces, where the time to complete the work was measured in years rather than months or weeks. At each site a workshop would be established for the Masons and was commonly referred to as The Lodge. The use of the word Lodge later morphed into meaning a community of Masons in a particular place, and there was likely only incidental contact and communication between different Lodges. This meant of course that the Lodges had a lot of independence in their structure and any rules and rituals they might create. It is interesting to note that the development of the Lodges and more generally the organization of Mason's work, developed differently in England and Scotland and even today the Grand Lodges in those countries are quite independent of each other, although they do acknowledge the existence of each other.

Focusing on Scotland, in 1583 King James VI decided he needed more direct control over the Masons in Scotland as he was their largest employer, using them to build his royal castles and palaces as well as any military fortifications and associated buildings. Accordingly he appointed one William Schaw as principal Master of Works (Maister o' Wark) to the Crown of Scotland, and along with this title he was also recognized as the General Warden of the Master Stonemasons. In this latter role Shaw issued his First and Second Statutes in 1598 and 1599 respectively to start to regulate the organization and conduct of Masons. The First Statute regulated how apprentices were brought into the trade and how they progressed to become Master Masons; it also laid out rules for the running of the Lodges through a hierarchy of Wardens, Deacons and Masters. The second statute consisted of fourteen separate articles and covered a number of issues one of which gave the Kilwinning Mother Lodge regional authority for the west of Scotland and making it the second Lodge in the country after Edinburgh. It also stressed the Art of Memory, something that persists to this day in the rituals.

Freemasonry continued to change and evolve and started to include some of the values that we associate with the Enlightenment; as the Age of Reason dawned, Freemasonry, Renaissance in origin, adapted to fit the new climate. Medieval, Renaissance and Enlightenment influences blended together to create an institution that reflected the progressive spirit of the age, with ideals of brotherhood, equality, tolerance and reason.

In the early seventeenth century and beginning in Britain, Freemasonry swept across Europe in the most astonishing fashion, and in Scotland men at all levels of society became intrigued by the secrets of stonemasons and the claims that their craft had a unique intellectual status. At this time Freemasonry was at the height of its popularity and in the Age of Enlightenment, its tenets seemed to promise

brotherhood and intellectual equality. Scholars, philosophers, gentlemen, farmers and tradesmen became Masons in Scotland. This meant that non-masons – men from other walks of life, started to join the Lodges. These people are referred to as non-operative Masons, or speculative Masons. Initially they may have had some indirect connection with the work of operative Masons – possibly a bishop overseeing the building of a new church, or some employer of Masons such as a builder. As time went on other people were attracted by the reputation of the Lodges and what they stood for as well as their status in society. New rituals were established in parallel with the progression of operative Masons as they rose in their trade to become Master Masons. The three steps of progression – Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, were mimicked as these speculative Masons progressed in the Lodges.

During the reformation both in England and Scotland, the level of unemployment among operative Masons rose dramatically as religious buildings were being destroyed instead of being built. However the number of Lodges continued to grow as more and more men joined as speculative Masons. Over time these people became a majority in the Lodges and the rituals and secrets were adapted to suit this new reality.

Why did people aspire to become Freemasons? Obviously the original reasons included the fact that membership was required to work as a stonemason, and it provided a structure to that trade. The Masons in Scotland seem to have been much more mobile than their brethren in England. This may have been due to smaller and shorter projects in Scotland, as well as the English Lodges being more restrictive in their rules regarding travel, possibly to protect 'local' jobs. Because of this Scotland was different and stonemasons moved around more freely. The Lodges gave these Masons a place to meet others of a similar background, with work being a common interest, as well as offering a social life when away from home. The importance of this aspect grew and the fellowship and camaraderie provided by the Lodges became an ever-increasing attraction to becoming a Mason, whether Operating or Speculative. It has to be remembered that at the time of Burns there was a plethora of Clubs of all sorts with almost totally male membership. This was the time of the Enlightenment and people from all walks of life met regularly to discuss a tremendous variety of topics – from real current issues as well as much finer points of philosophy. It almost got to the point that if a person wasn't a member of a Club then he would be considered an outsider. Lodges provided a great opportunity to meet and debate anything and everything that was going on in the world as well as to just enjoy male companionship that at times probably became quite rowdy and raucous.

It is well known that the Kilwinning Lodge considered itself to be the oldest fraternity of Freemasons in Scotland, and consequently possessed a right of granting charters of constitution to subordinate Lodges, and exercising a jurisdiction over their proceedings. Our friend William Schaw had written in his Statutes that Mother Kilwinning was the 'Heid Lodge o' Scotland" with its founding dated back to 1140. With the formation of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736, Kilwinning refused to recognize its authority as it was listed only as the second Lodge in Scotland and refused to surrender their independent rights and privileges. The consequence was that it stood aloof from the Grand Lodge until 1807 when it decided to throw in its lot with the more modern but by now all-prevailing confederation. Their seniority was finally recognized as they were listed, and still are, at the head of the roll of Lodges as No. 0.

It was into this scene that a young Robert Burns stepped in 1781 in Tarbolton. It would appear that being relatively close to Kilwinning Freemasonry was widespread, and not only Freemasonry as there was a number of Clubs in this small village of Tarbolton, which had a population of just 450, including a Weaver's Guild, a Universal Friendly Society, a Farmer's Society and later a Reform Movement. It was a time when men thirsted after a better life, enjoying each other's company and welcoming the opportunity for serious conversation as well as convivial company. According to Dr. R. T. Halliday "A prime factor which assisted to unite all classes in eighteenth-century Scotland into a recognized brotherhood, and provided the opportunity and sanction for voluntary cooperation, was the bond of Freemasonry; not Freemasonry as we know it today with all its modern trappings and symbolic teaching, but the earlier jolly Brotherhood with its gatherings at the local inn." Freemasonry was established in Tarbolton in 1771 when an application was made by the local masonic brethren to the Kilwinning Lodge to charter a Lodge of their own. This Lodge held its first meeting on July the 25th of that year as the Lodge Tarbolton Kilwinning with over sixty brethren attending and signing the minute book. There was a declaration of twenty one rules to provide direction to the conduct of the Lodge as well as the comportment of its Members. Included in these rules was one that read "Whoever shall break a drinking glass at any meeting he shall immediately pay sixpence sterling for every one he breaks before he be allowed to leave the room or company." It was indeed a convivial hard-drinking age!

Within two years the Scottish passion for schism betrayed itself. Eleven disaffected members led by one Sir Thomas Wallace Dunlop Bart., petitioned the Grand Lodge of Scotland (itself established only in 1736) to form a separate Lodge under the Grand Lodge's charter as opposed to a Kilwinning charter. This was granted in February 1773 and established St. David's Lodge Tarbolton No. 135. It is worth noting that Sir Thomas was the second son of Robert Burns' later confidant, correspondent and supporter, Mrs. Dunlop. Within a year the original Tarbolton Kilwinning Lodge also petitioned Grand Lodge for their own charter and this was probably due to their desire to protect their own position as a Lodge. In 1774 the newly named St. James Tarbolton Kilwinning Lodge No. 178 held its first meeting. Two Lodges, both operating under Grand Lodge Charters, now functioned in this small village and for the next seven years continued to co-exist with considerable success and in close harmony. It is surely a tribute to both Lodges that from their original formation until 1780 each had initiated upwards of 140 members.

It became increasingly apparent however that the community could not continue to properly sustain both Lodges. Accordingly in June of 1781 the two Lodges were united under the style and title of St David Tarbolton No. 174. At the first meeting of the united Lodge the minutes record "Sederunt for July 4th. Robt. Burns in Lochly was an entered apprentice. Joph. Norman, M." At the meeting in October, and again quoting from the minutes "Sederunt October 1st 1781. Robt. Burns in Lochly was passed and raised. Henry Cowan being Master. James Humphrey being Senr Warden and Alex Smith Junr. Do., Robt. Wodrow Secy. and Jas Manson, Treasurer and John Tannock Taylor and others of the Brethren being present."

The union of the two Lodges was ill-fated however and the ensuing split proved exceedingly acrimonious as well as litigious. By December 1781 Robert Wodrow, elected secretary of the united St David's Lodge but originally a member of the St. James Lodge, had removed from the Lodge Charter Chest, the Charter, Books and sundry papers belonging originally to St. James Lodge. He was 'expunged'

from the Lodge St. David and the two Lodges resumed their own meetings, which led to the original St. James Lodge being re-constituted by the Grand Lodge in July of 1784 as St. James Tarbolton No. 135. Burns turned out to be the only person to be initiated, passed and raised in the united Lodge and he then went on to associate himself with the reformed St James Lodge Tarbolton No 135.

Is there any particular reason that Burns decided to become a Mason at this time when he was just twenty two? He had just been refused an offer of marriage by Alison Begbie (or more properly Elizabeth Gebbie) and was still smarting from this. One can further speculate, but the timing does coincide with the period he was in Irvine learning the art of flax-dressing. He had become an entered apprentice before going to Irvine and it was on a brief visit back to Lochlea in October that he was passed and raised. Being a Freemason would have been advantageous to Burns in Irvine as it would have shown he held a certain status in society. It would have opened doors to him, given him contacts and allowed him social and working access to a group of people with similar interests and friendships.

Burn's masonic career lasted for fifteen years from his initiation in 1781 until his death in 1796. It can be divided into three parts. First, the time he spent with his Tarbolton Lodge in the county of Ayr, the historic home of Scottish Freemasonry; this period was interrupted by the two visits he made to Edinburgh where he was made a member of more than one Lodge but was less active as a Mason, but had many dealings with various Freemasons personally; and finally there is the third division when he spent his last few years in Dumfries. It is worth noting that at the age of sixteen, well before becoming an Entered Apprentice, he had attended a school in Kirkoswald to learn about the practical use of instruments concerned with mensuration and surveying, the Square, the Level and so on, and was therefore already well versed in the operative uses of a mason's working tools.

Burns' name does not appear again in the minutes of the Tarbolton Lodge until 1784, although there is a letter in his hand-writing addressed to the Master, Sir John Whitefoord, Bart., asking for help in correcting the wretched state of the Lodge's financial affairs. In July of 1784, Burns was elected Depute-Master, an office that at the time was elective and of much more practical importance than it is today. The position carried with it the active duties of the Master, who in those days was little more than a figurehead and attended meetings rarely. In effect Burns was the virtual head of the Lodge, and it is on record that he carried through his work with marked ability, and he held the position until July of 1788.

Oft have I met your social band,
And spent the cheerful festive night;
Oft honour'd with supreme command,
Presided o'er the Sons of Light.

He was an enthusiastic Mason, as quoted by Robert Chambers "that according to reports of old associates he was so keen a mason that he would hold Lodges for the admission of new members in his own house," and in fact it was at one of these that his brother Gilbert was admitted to the Craft. In 1785 Burns was present at nine meetings, and at one of these there was an incident concerning the "vainglorious tendencies" of the village schoolmaster, a John Wilson (1759 – 1821), who, to earn a little extra money opened a shop where he sold medicines and was wont to proffer medical advice. The incident resulted in the poem *Death and Doctor Hornbook*, the famous colloquy between himself and

Death, thus conferring on John Wilson an immortality which he scarcely deserved. The following year he also attended nine meetings, at the second of which he passed and raised his brother Gilbert. It was the minutes of this meeting that he signed "Robert Burns" for the very first time as prior to this he had used the signature "Robert Burness".

During Burns term of office as Depute Master the Brethren were convened seventy times, with Burns attending thirty three of them. When it is remembered that he spent a total of about twelve months in Edinburgh during this time, his attendance record is quite impressive. During that time Burns signed twenty nine minutes as Depute Master with three being wholly in his penmanship. One of these signatures was cut out and removed, never to be recovered. A second signature was also cut out, but noticed in a timely manner and recovered. To this day it can be seen neatly pasted in its original setting. The excellent manner in which Burns carried out his duties is supported in a letter written by Professor Dugald Stewart of Enlightenment fame; "In summer 1787 I passed some weeks in Ayrshire and saw Burns occasionally I was led by curiosity to attend for an hour or two a Masonic Lodge in Mauchline, [actually a meeting of the St. James Tarbolton Lodge held in Mauchline], where Burns presided. He had occasion to make some short unpremeditated compliments to different individuals from whom he had no occasion to expect a visit, and everything he said was happily conceived and forcibly as well as fluently expressed. His manner of speaking in public had evidently the marks of some practice in extempore elocution." Dugald Stewart was a member of the Lodge Canongate Kilwinning and was later admitted an honorary member of the St. James Lodge Tarbolton with the Minute recording his admission signed by Robert Burns, D.M. It is generally accepted that Burns visited a number of Lodges depending on where he happened to be. On the 27th March, 1786 he attended the Lodge Loudoun Kilwinning, Newmills where his friend Gavin Hamilton was Master and was admitted as a Member. Similarly he attended both the Lodge at Sorn as well as the Craft in St. Andrews in Irvine.

While living at Lochlea and later at Mossgiel he had long distances to travel to attend the Lodge. He never found these journeys wearisome as he thought of the meeting to come as well as mentally composing his next poems. Masonic themes are readily detectable in some of his poems and can no doubt be traced to his thoughts on these evening walks. There are lingering rumours that Burns suffered to excesses of drink as a result of his enjoying the convivial company of the Lodge. However, a letter written later by his brother challenges these rumours; "During this period, also, he became a Freemason, which was his first introduction to the life of a boon companion. Yet, notwithstanding these circumstances, and the praise he has bestowed on Scotch Drink (which seems to have misled his historians) I do not recollect during these seven years, nor till towards the end of his commencing author (when growing celebrity occasioned his often being in company), to have ever seen him intoxicated; nor was he at all given to drinking."

1786 was almost certainly the most tumultuous year in Burns' life. It was back during his time in Irvine that he had met with a Captain Richard Brown who had first suggested that he should put his poems into print. Some four years later he had had a particularly productive winter in writing many of the poems that today are immediately associated with his name. He was starting to be recognized as an outstanding poet, if only locally. In reality his poems were known to comparatively few people but among those few were the Brethren of his own Lodge and with them there was an acknowledgement of his true genius. On the advice of his good friend Gavin Hamilton, a lawyer and incidentally the landlord

of Mossgiel Farm, Burns was persuaded to collect his writings and publish them by subscription. So in early 1786 he went to Kilmarnock to arrange for this to be done and sought the help of the one printer in the county, John Wilson. Burns may well have known Wilson before this as the two of them were both active Masons. Regardless of their friendship however, Wilson protected himself against a possible financial loss by having enough copies of the book sold in advance to cover his costs. Burns own Lodge wholeheartedly supported him and committed to buy a significant number of copies. The Brethren of the St. John's Lodge, Kilmarnock where Burns was well known and John Wilson was a Member, also outdid themselves, subscribing to take 150 copies. Burns himself did not have the means to publish the book but his Masonic Brethren, loyally supported him in ensuring the success of the venture. This edition truly could be described as a Masonic Edition, as of the 620 copies published, some 567 were ordered by Freemasons It cannot fail to be noticed that contact with and support from Freemasons and Freemasonry runs like a golden thread throughout the poet's life, and the friends he met in the Craft had no small share in shaping his destiny.

It is no surprise that the volume of verses was dedicated to Gavin Hamilton, although the way he dedicated the book was far from normal. Usually this is done on one of the title pages in flowery language, acknowledging the debt that the author owes to the dedicatee. In Burns' book the title pages contain only two names – that of the Poet and that of the Publisher. However on checking the index of contents the eye cannot fail to notice the title of a poem "A Dedication," the twenty fifth poem listed out of a total of thirty six. On turning to that page the heading declares "A Dedication to G.H." The poem goes on to state that there will be no flummery flattering of this patron; but suggests he is no better than he should be, but has a pedigree, whereas the author has no such thing. After a lengthy discourse on divinity and morality the Dedication emerges, short and pithy;

I will not wind a lang conclusion,
With complimentary effusion,
But whilst your wishes and endeavours,
Are blest with Fortune's smiles and favours,
I am, Dear Sir, with zeal most fervent,
Your much indebted, humble servant.

After further lines the Dedication concludes;

If Friendless, low, we meet together,
Then, Sir, your hand – my Friend and Brother!

Apparently this poem was originally intended to be the last one in the book, but during the printing process Burns added several more poems that were included after those initially planned.

While the book was in production and Burns' input no longer required, he finally decided his only future course was to emigrate to Jamaica to take up a position he had been offered there. It is somewhat contradictory that a few days after making that decision, he allowed his name to stand once more as his Lodge's Depute Master and was re-elected, along with his brother Gilbert as Senior Warden. Further

contradicting his re-election as Depute Master, his poem *Farewell to the Brethren of St. James Lodge* was read to the members either at the June or July meeting of the Lodge. It concludes with;

A last request permit me here,
When yearly ye assemble a'
One round, I ask it with a tear
To him, the Bard that's far awa.

By the end of the recital there were tears in the eyes of many of the Brethren. The poet's request to be remembered yearly at the festive board is still regularly honoured in the St. James Lodge.

In the middle of all this Burns first book of poems was published on the 31st of July 1786 in an edition of 612 and a price of three shillings. This was met with instant success and in a couple of weeks no copies were available. He had suddenly leapt to fame, and rapidly the possibilities in his future changed dramatically. Doctor Blacklock, a blind poet in Edinburgh, somehow got a copy of the book and thought it outstanding. He wrote a letter to a friend, which eventually found its way to Burns in which the Doctor urged Burns to produce a second volume of his works.

On October 26th, 1786 Burns was made an honorary member of the Kilmarnock Kilwinning St. James Lodge No. 24. This was the first of several honorary memberships he was to be granted and the first one to describe him as a Poet. In appreciation he wrote the stanzas that start "Ye Sons of Old Killie, assembled by Willie," recognizing the name of the Master William Parker. He then presided over a meeting of his own Lodge on November 10th, following which he started out for Edinburgh, arriving there on November 28th. It was mainly because of his Masonic connections that Burns was so widely received when he finally arrived in Edinburgh. For among his fellow masons in Ayrshire who were known in Edinburgh were Sir John Whitefoord; James Dalrymple of Orangefield; Gavin Hamilton; John Ballantyne later Provost of Ayr; Professor Dugald Stewart; Dr. John Mackenzie of Mauchline; William Parker, Master of the Kilmarnock Kilwinning Lodge, and many others. John Ballantyne and Burns were old acquaintances and John had been instrumental in getting the 'New Brig' built in Ayr with Burns dedicating his poem *The Brigs of Ayr* to him. When John learned that Burns was interested in a second edition of his poems he offered him a loan and suggested that Edinburgh would be the place to do it. The poet took his advice but not his money. He had arranged to stay with his friend John Richmond – another Mason and Gavin Hamilton's former clerk, who was staying at Baxter's Close in the Lawnmarket. Within a few days he was introduced to Lodge Canongate Kilwinning by James Dalrymple of Orangefield, being an amateur versifier in his own right. By introducing Burns to the Lodge, he played a major role in setting up Burns for the success and support he would receive. At the Lodge he talked to Lord Glencairn and Henry Erskine and in a letter to Gavin Hamilton that night he said, "I am in a fair way to becoming as eminent as Thomas a Kempis or John Bunyan.... My Lord Glencairn and the Dean of Faculty, Mr. H. Erskine, have taken me under their wing; and by all probability I shall soon be the tenth worthy, and the eighth wise man of the world.... I have met in Mr. Dalrymple, of Orangefield, what Solomon emphatically calls 'A friend that sticketh closer than a brother.'" Among members of this Lodge were Lord Elcho; Lord Torpichen; the Earl of Eglington; the Earl of Glencairn; Patrick Miller of Dalswinton; Lord Pitsligo; Alexander Cunningham, the lawyer; Sir John Whitefoord; Henry Erskine;

William Nichol, the schoolmaster, William Creech, the publisher; William Smellie, the printer; Henry Mackenzie, the lawyer and author; Allan Masterton, the musician; Professor Dugald Stewart; James Boswell; Robert Ainslie, writer; as well as Alexander Nasmyth, the painter. As Burns' life unfolds, these names will re-appear regularly as friends and supporters.

The Lodge Canongate Kilwinning story deserves a few words in its own right. It was established in 1677 when Masons from Canongate petitioned the Lodge at Kilwinning to issue them a charter to form their own Lodge. When granted it was the first known example in the world of a Lodge being granted a charter by an existing Lodge. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Canongate was the home to a great number of the nobility and wealthy and many became Members of the Lodge. It also became a wealthy institution and built its own very fine building known as the Chapel of St. John, which is the oldest purpose-built Masonic meeting room in the world, and incidentally is still in use today. During this same time Edinburgh was at the centre of the world of philosophical thought as the Enlightenment gathered momentum. Lodge Canongate Kilwinning attracted a very large number of men of learning, many of whom are recognized Enlightenment figures through their published works.

Burns left for Edinburgh on November 28th, 1786 with a letter of introduction written by his friend and fellow-mason James Dalrymple of Orangefield to his cousin-german the Earl of Glencairn who received him warmly, introducing him to his friends many of whom were Members of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge. Burns reputedly attended his first meeting of that Lodge on December 7th, 1786 although his name is not mentioned in the minutes, with his introduction to the Lodge being made by James Dalrymple of Orangefield. At a later visit on February 1st, 1787, the minutes reflect "The RW Master having observed that Brother Burns was at present in the Lodge, who is well known as a great poetic writer, and for a late publication of his works, which have been universally commended, submitted that he should be assumed a Member of this Lodge, which was unanimously agreed to, and he was assumed accordingly." Legend has it that Robert Burns was inaugurated as Poet Laureate of the Lodge on March 1st, 1787, but this was never substantiated although a painting was made in 1845 by Stewart Watson that purported to represent the scene of the inauguration; John Marshall published his *A Winter with Robert Burns* in 1846 in which there were biographical details of all those represented in Watson's painting. It is interesting to note that these personages include some non-masons; one who did not set foot in Scotland until some two years after the supposed event; one who had left the country six years earlier and one who would have been 108 years old! No mention of the inauguration is made in the Lodge minutes for that night and it is inconceivable that Burns himself would have been silent over such an honour. Much later in 1892 the Grand Lodge launched a formal investigation into the matter and concluded that the inauguration had never taken place.

In contrast to this, Burns is known to have attended the Lodge St. Andrews on January 12th, 1787 as he himself makes extended mention of it in a letter to James Ballantine on January 14th, 1787. "I went to a Mason Lodge yesternight where the Most Worshipful Grand Master Charteris and all the Grand Lodge of Scotland visited. The meeting was most numerous and elegant; all the different Lodges about town were present in all their pomp. The Grand Master, who presided with great solemnity, and honour to himself as a Gentlemen and Mason, among other general toasts gave 'Caledonia and Caledonia's Bard, Brother Burns,' which rung through the whole Assembly with multiplied honours and repeated acclamations. As I had no idea that such a thing would happen, I was downright thunder-struck, and

trembling in every nerve made the best return in my power. Just as I finished, some of the Grand Officers said so loud as I could hear, with a most comforting accent, 'Very well indeed,' which set me something to rights again."

His purpose in going to Edinburgh of course was to arrange for the publication of a second and enlarged volume of his poems. He was to find that Masonic associations which had proved so helpful in the issue of the Kilmarnock Edition were to stand him in good stead again. Whereas previously the support had come from his own friends and countrymen, many of long standing familiarity, this time it came from new friends and acquaintances most of whom he had met in the previous months and even weeks since his arrival in the capital. The Earl of Glencairn never wavered in his support for Burns. He introduced him to William Creech the publisher, secured the patronage of the Caledonian Hunt for the proposed book, did everything in his power to obtain subscribers among the nobility and later used his influence to get Burns into the Excise. The Edinburgh Edition of Burns' poems was published on 21 April, 1787 in a handsome octavo volume, price five shillings. It was dedicated to the Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt and a list of subscribers was included comprising some 1500 persons requesting 2800 copies of the book, many of whom were fellow Masons and many of those being members of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge. His printer William Smellie and his publisher William Creech were both fellow Masons, as was Alexander Nasmyth who painted the most reliable portrait we have of Burns to this day, while John Beugo, yet another member of the craft, engraved this picture for the forthcoming book. The Edinburgh Edition faithfully reproduced all of the Poems in the Kilmarnock Edition and added some 21 new ones. The Edinburgh Edition was initially over-subscribed during the early production run and had to be re-set and reprinted more or less simultaneously, with the final number of copies printed being 3000. In the second run, there was an error in a line of *The Address to a Haggis* whereby 'Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware' appeared as "Auld Scotland wants nae stinking ware.' This second run of the 1787 Edinburgh Edition became known as the 'Stinking Burns.' There were one or two other discrepancies as well. There is no doubt that his connection with Freemasonry in Edinburgh was the most interesting and to him the most enjoyable period of his life, and it was during the few months spent there that his genius was widely firstly recognized and appreciated.

In May Burns rewarded himself with a tour to the South of Scotland with Robert Ainslie, a young lawyer with whom he had become friendly after meeting him at the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge. They ventured into England and visited Eyemouth where they were both made Royal Arch Masons by the Lodge St. Ebbe. Travelling west across the north of England he eventually returned to Mossgiel in June, where, as already stated, he was re-elected Depute Master in his own Tarbolton Lodge. In August he returned to Edinburgh to settle his affairs with William Creech, but having limited success set out on his most ambitious tour yet, this time to the Highlands. Accompanied by yet another fellow Mason, Willie Nicol, a schoolmaster in Edinburgh, they travelled beyond Inverness covering nearly 600 miles in a period of 22 days and meeting many Brethren along the way. Returning to Edinburgh for the winter he eventually settled with Creech and also managed to arrange with Brother Patrick Millar of Dalswinton a lease on the farm at Ellisland. At the same time he was calling on the influence of other brother Masons to obtain a position in the Excise.

Burns finally returned to Mossgiel in March and promptly married Jean Armour, while at the same time lending his brother Gilbert two hundred pounds to ease the condition of his mother and her family.

Twice in May he attended his Lodge, on the latter occasion signing the minute as Depute Master for the last time. On St. John's Day 1787 James Findlay, a fellow Exciseman was elected Depute Master, the Master being his old friend James Ballantyne of Orangefield. Twice more before the end of 1788 he attended the St. James Lodge, the last time on November 11th being his final attendance at his beloved Lodge.

Burns lived at Ellisland for three and a half years and Freemasonry did not feature so prominently in his life during that period and there was a number of reasons for this. Dumfries was the nearest town and with a population of around eight thousand boasted a total of five Lodges, and it is worthy of note that he had been granted the Freedom of the Royal Burgh at the end of his Border Tour. Still he was a newcomer to that area and it was over six miles distance from his place of residence to the town itself. The Dumfries Brethren did not have the Masonic enthusiasm that he was used to in the Ayrshire circles which were heavily influenced by the presence of Kilwinning. Remember too he was a very busy man, just married and establishing a home and organizing his new farm, and after the first year, taking on this new duties in the Excise. Then of course there was the state of his health which was beginning to undermine his constitution at that time.

The senior Lodge was "Ye Olde Lodge of Dumfries" but Burns decided to become a Member of Dumfries St. Andrew's, No. 179 in December 1788, possibly because it was favoured by Members of the Customs and Excise service, and he remained an active Member there until his death. It is interesting that his son Robert was initiated into The Olde Lodge of Dumfries when he retired from London to Dumfries in 1833, serving as secretary for some years and the Master in 1845.

It is not clear how many Lodge meetings Burns attended while living at Ellisland but in August of 1791 the Lodge took part in the laying of the foundation stone of the new bridge over the River Nith. Although there is no known record of who was present on that occasion it seems highly improbable that he would miss out on such an outstanding Masonic event in his immediate vicinity and one in which his own Lodge bore a share. Later that year he gave up on Ellisland when the farm was sold, and moved into Dumfries itself. Obviously from this time on he was much freer to attend the Lodge and of the sixteen meetings held from then until the time of his death, he attended eleven. In February 1792 he was appointed Steward of the Lodge, and in November of that year elected Senior Warden. In January 1796 he sponsored Mr. James Georgeson as an Apprentice into the Lodge and then on April 14 1796 made what was to be his last attendance, as he had promised to see his friend Captain Adam Gordon initiated. The most notable of the relics of his connection with this Lodge is the apron presented to him by the Laird of Hoddam, Master of the Lodge and provincial Grand Master of Dumfriesshire. It is described as of "chamois leather, very fine, with figures of gold some of them relieved with green, others with a dark red colour. On the underside of the semicircular part of which is turned down at the top is written in a bold fair hand, 'Charles Sharpe of Hotham to Rabbie Burns. Dumfries, Dec. 12, 1791.'" In those days there was no restriction on the embroidery or embellishments of the Masonic apron, such as are in force today. This apron can still be seen in Dumfries.

Some of Burns' poems contain specific references to the Mason's Craft, and of these a few of the more interesting ones will not fail to be acceptable to all Masons everywhere. Whatever his failings, Burns' name will shed a lustre on Freemasonry by his poetic genius, which time will never dim, and whose

name will ever be held by Masons in honoured reverence. One of these poems is *The Farewell to the Brethren of St. James' Lodge* as he prepared to sail for Jamaica which has already been commented on – it truly is the gem of his Masonic poetry;

May Freedom, Harmony, and Love,
Unite you in the Grand Design,
Beneath th' Omniscient Eye above,
The glorious Architect Divine,
That you may keep th' unerring line,
Still rising by the Plummet's Law,
Till Order bright completely shine,
Shall be my pray'r when far awa.

And you, farewell! whose merits claim
Justly that Highest Badge to wear;
Heav'n bless your honour'd noble name,
To Masonry and Scotia dear!
A last request permit me here,
When yearly ye assemble a'
One round, I ask it with a tear,
To him, the Bard, that's far awa.

The well-known poem *Death and Doctor Hornbook* whilst arguably not a Masonic poem does have strong Masonic origins and would not have seen the light of day if Burns had not been a Mason. Burns was inspired to write this satirical poem in 1785 after listening to the schoolmaster John Wilson airing his medical knowledge at a meeting of the Tarbolton Lodge. Although written in time to be included in the Kilmarnock Edition, it was not featured until it appeared in the Edinburgh Edition.

One of the best known and best loved drinking song of course is *Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Malt*. This poem celebrated a joyous reunion in Moffat of three Masons – Robert Burns; Allan Masterton and Willis Nichol the schoolmaster from Edinburgh. The three had initially met at the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge in the capital and become good friends. They spent a riotous evening together in what could be called an informal Lodge meeting and later Masterton and Burns agreed that the meeting deserved to be honoured with a song, with Burns writing the words and Masterton the music.

O, Willie brew'd a peck o' malt,
And Rob and Allan cam to pree.
Three blyther hearts, that lee-lang nicht,
Ye wad na fund in Christendie.

We are na fou, we're nae that fou,
But just a drappie in our e'e!

The cock may crawl, the day may daw,
And ay we'll taste the barley bree!

While working on the Kilmarnock Edition, Burns was living in Kilmarnock and attended the Lodge there – in fact was made a Member. At one of these festive meetings presided over by the Master William Parker, the following *Masonic Song* was sung;

Ye sons of old Killie, assembled by Willie
To follow the noble vocation,
Your thrifty old mother has scarce such another
To sit in that honoured station!
I've little to say, but only to pray,
(As praying's the ton of your fashion);
A prayer from the muse you well may excuse,
('Tis seldom her favourite passion) –

“Ye powers who preside o'er the wind and the tide,
Who marked each element's border,
Who formed this frame with beneficent aim,
Whose sovereign statute is order,
Within this dear mansion, may wayward Contention
Or withered Envy ne'er enter!
May secrecy round be the mystical bound,
And brotherly Love be the centre!”

In 1783 Burns penned *No Churchman am I* in which the last line of each verse referred to a big-belly'd bottle and he later added a stanza in a Mason's Lodge;

Then fill up a bumper and make it o'erflow,
And honours Masonic prepare for to throw;
May ev'ry true Brother of the Compass and Square
Have a big-belly'd bottle, when harass'd with care!

Of course there is that beloved anthem of Brotherhood; *A Man's a Man for a That*;

What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey, an' a' that?
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, tho e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men 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,
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.

(A man's a Man)

There are many other isolated references to Freemasonry that are readily detectable in other poems and some of them are;

That hour, o' nicht's black arch the key-stane.
That dreary hour Tam mounts his beast in:

(Tam O Shanter)

If friendless, low, we meet together,
Then, Sir, your hand – my Friend and Brother!

(A Dedication)

But ye whom social pleasure charms,
Whose hearts the tide of kindness warms,
Who hold your being on the terms,
 'Each aid the others',
Come to my bowl, come to my arms,
 My Friends, my Brothers!

(Epistle to J. Lapraik)

When Masons' mystic word an' grip,
In storms an' tempests raise you up,
Some cock or cat your rage maun stop,
 Or, strange to tell!
The youngest Brother ye wad whip
 Aff straught to hell!

(Address to the De'il)

Many and sharp the num'rous ills
Inwoven with our frame!
More pointed still we make ourselves,
Regret, remorse and shame!
And Man, whose heav'n-erected face

The smiles of Love adorn, -
Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn!

(Man was Made to Mourn)

Then there's the poem *The Mason's Apron* which some Mason's believe was written by Burns while the experts say "no" and in fact is not included in the Poet's published works;

There's mony a badge that's unco braw,
Wi' ribbon, lace and tape on;
Let Kings and Princes wear them a',
Gie me the Master's apron!
Be he at hame, or roam afar
Before his touch fa's bolt an' bar
The gates of fortune fly ajar,
'Gin he wears the apron!
For w'alsh and honour, pride an' power,
Are crumbling stanes to base on;
Fraternity sh'u'd rule the hour
And ilka worthy Mason!
Each Free Accepted Mason!
Each Ancient Crafted Mason,
Then, brithers, let a halesome sang,
Arise your friendly ranks along!
Gudewives and bairnies blithely sing
To the ancient badge wi' the apron string
That is worn by the Master Mason!

Robert Burns' poetical output dropped off during his time in Ellisland and Dumfries. During his visits to Edinburgh he had made the acquaintance of a James Johnson and later a George Thomson. Both these gentlemen had each set themselves a task of collecting and publishing the songs of Scotland in order that they would not be lost. In the case of Johnson, Burns met him through the Crochallan Fencibles in 1787 and worked with him on the six volumes that comprise the Scots Musical Museum. At the end he had contributed over a third of the total number of songs. George Thomson had a different approach in that he commissioned contemporary European composers such as Pleyel, Joseph Hayden, Ludwig von Beethoven and Carl Maria von Weber to produce musical settings of Scots songs, which he in turn commissioned from writers including Robert Burns, Walter Scott, Anne Grant, Joanna Baillie and Alexander Boswell asking them to write or collect suitable songs. It would appear that neither Johnson nor Thomson was a Mason. It is truly noteworthy that Burns himself said that he would rather be remembered for his work on restoring and saving the songs of Scotland than for any other thing he might do.

There is no doubt that the keen sensibility and social temperament of Burns fitted him to enter with enthusiasm into the business of Freemasonry. He had a heart that glowed with intense reverence

and love towards all the objects and manifestations of external nature. The hills, the glades, the woods, the streams, the 'fragrant birch,' 'the milk-white thorn,' the mountain daisy, 'wee, modest, crimson-tipped flower,' and all the vicissitudes of the varied year were dear to him, and he has sung their charms in undying strains. He demonstrates the same fondness and understanding for all animals; his dog Luath, his pet lamb Maillie, his auld grey mare Pegasus, and even the timorous mouse whose home he destroyed, and the hare limping past him, wounded by some sportsman. But above all, Burns had a warm and abiding love for the whole brotherhood of man. A man with a heart so full of love to every object around him, and with a mind elevated and refined by cultivation, and taught to look up with reverence to the Great Creator and Preserver of all, could not fail to be a good and zealous Mason.

In the Mason's Lodge, he would find an extension of the family circle, and a receptive field for the display of those kindly and fraternal feelings which were imbued in him, and which he had been taught to value and cherish at his father's fireside. He would enjoy social intercourse with the most generous and intelligent men of the district, and engage in those festivities of which Masonry approves and which serve to join the heart of man more closely to brother man. From these circumstances, it is easy to conclude that Burns would take a deep interest in Freemasonry, and this is evident from his regular attendance at the Lodge as well as the anecdotal evidence about his personal involvement and actions.

Undoubtedly Burns derived considerable advantages from Masonry. It is proved by statements he himself has made, that it contributed greatly to his happiness in admitting him into close and intimate fellowship with a wise, intelligent and social fraternity, and furnishing him with opportunities of enjoying the 'feast of reason and the flow of soul' in the most rational and uplifting manner. It also presented him with one of the best fields that he could find for the improvement of his own mind and the display of his talents. In no other society are all the Members treated with so much indulgence, and placed on a footing of so much equality. In the Mason's Lodge, merit and worth are appreciated and met with approbation and respect. Entering the Lodge he initially would have been unnoticed and unknown: but after receiving the masonic stamp of approval he took his place with the likes of Sir John Whitefoord of Ballochmyle; James Dalrymple of Orangefield; Gavin Hamilton, writer of Ayr; John Ballantyne, Provost of Ayr; and a whole host of Ayrshire worthies both high and low. By coming into contact with them, his manners became refined, his intellectual energies stimulated and his merits acknowledged and applauded. In the school of the Lodge, he must, in great measure, have acquired that coolness of demeanour, that dignity of deportment, the fluency and propriety of expression, and that acquaintance with philosophy and humanity, which so astounded the literati and nobles of Edinburgh, and made his advent there one of the most remarkable incidents in literary history.

On the other side of the coin Burns was truly indebted to Freemasonry for many of the good things that happened to him, and there weren't that many in his life. It was the Freemasons of Ayrshire who invited him to their tables, who gave him advice, who read his poems into fame and who subscribed, purchased and circulated the Kilmarnock Edition of his works. It was on the advice of a brother Mason that he travelled to Edinburgh to arrange for an expanded edition of his poems together with the offer of money to buy the required paper. Arriving in the capital with only a single

letter of introduction he fell into the literati and nobility through his fellow Brethren of the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge. It was they who in turn introduced him to the best circles of society; who put money in his purse to supply his wants; who procured subscribers for the new edition of his poems; who were the companions on his tours; who were his chief epistolary correspondents; who put him in possession of his farm at Ellisland and who obtained his appointment in the Excise.

Masons are proud that Robert Burns was among their numbers as well they might be, and they should also be proud that they raised him to the lofty pedestal that he occupies today. Even after his death it was the Masons who kept his memory alive by arranging the early Burns suppers and by arranging for the first monument, erected in Alloway.

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