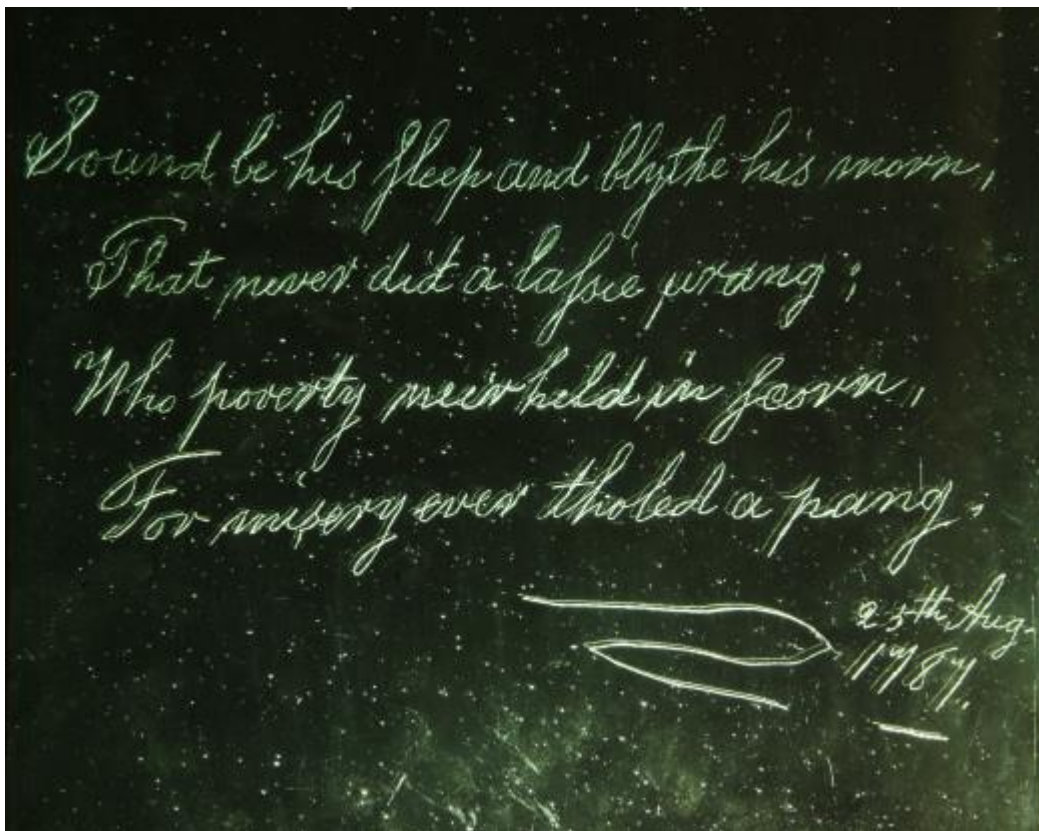




Robert Burns – A Writer on Windows



Written by Tony Grace for the Carnie Group of the Calgary Burns Club; September 2020.

It is well known that James Cunningham, the fourteenth Earl of Glencairn played a very significant role in helping Robert Burns not only publish the second edition of his poems but in his influence on the poet's

life and the success he enjoyed; he was indeed Burns' first and strongest sponsor and the void created when he died was never really filled again. Burns wrote of the Earl "*a man whose worth and brotherly kindness to me I shall remember when time will be no more.*" They met when Burns arrived in Edinburgh at the end of 1786 with a letter of introduction from James Dalrymple of Orangefield, who was married to Lady Glencairn's sister. The Earl received the poet warmly in his house, introducing him to his friends and giving him several gifts, among which was a diamond point pen, which Burns went on to use to write on windowpanes throughout Scotland. This paper will endeavour to track down the windows that Burns wrote on and to try to understand what motivated him to do so at that time.

The Edinburgh Edition was published in April 1787 and following that Burns undertook four tours to different parts of Scotland, each time taking with him the diamond stylus. Burns was starting to style himself as Scotia's Bard and wanted to see as much of the country as he could for himself, as well as to make himself known to the many people who had read his poems and possibly even owned a copy of one of his two books, both of which had sold out very quickly. Looking back it seems incredible how quickly his fame and his name spread around the country seeing as how limited communications were in those days.

On his first tour into the West Highlands he had planned to stop at Inverary Castle the home of John Campbell, the Fifth Duke of Argyll. Why he was so determined to visit the Duke is not clear although both the Duke and his wife had headed the list of subscribers for the Edinburgh Edition. However it was a bad time for a visit as the Duke being President of the British Fishery Society was hosting a large gathering in Inverary before heading west the next day to select a site for a new fishing port on Mull – later confirmed as being Tobermory. Not only was Inverary Castle full of guests but the local Inn also was very busy, with the innkeeper John Frazer unable to look after Burns and his travelling companion George Grierson. In a fit of pique Burns inscribed a windowpane at the Inn with the following lines;

Whoe'er he be that sojourns here,
I pity much his case,
Unless he comes to wait upon
The lord their God, 'His Grace.'

There's naething here but Highland pride,
And Highland scab and hunger:
If Providence has sent me here,
'Twas surely in an anger.

This was quite possibly the first time Burns had used the stylus, and subsequently three different variants of these verses have been published. The fate of the original windowpane together with its inscription has long been lost.

Burns longest Tour followed and that was to the Highlands, lasting some twenty two days and covering about six hundred miles, while reaching beyond Inverness to Castle Urquhart. However at the start just ten miles from Edinburgh, Burns and his travelling companion Willie Nicol, the Edinburgh schoolmaster, paused at Kirkliston to write the following words on a window pane at an Inn now called Castle House;

The ants about their clod employ their care,
And think the business of the world is theirs;

Lo; Waxen combs seem palaces to bees.
And mites conceive the world to be a cheese.

Locally Kirkliston was sometimes referred to as "Cheesetown," a name first recorded in print in 1902. A suggested origin for this is the Burns' verse quoted above, but the most widely accepted explanation is that when the Forth Bridge was being built, the workers who lodged in Kirkliston often had cheese sandwiches for lunch. No satisfactory explanation has ever been given for Burns stopping at Kirkliston (for lunch possibly?), and he has left no record of the event and supposedly the windowpane is held in a Vancouver Museum, at least according to Wikipedia.

Continuing west, the pair passed Linlithgow and went on to Falkirk where they stayed at the Cross Keys Inn on the High Street. Here it is claimed he inscribed a glass windowpane with four lines in which the Poet asks for men who treat women well to be rewarded;

Sound be his sleep and blithe his morn',
That never did a lassie wrang;
Who poverty ne'er held in scorn,
For misery ever tholed a pang.
25th Aug. 1787.

Burns never acknowledged writing these particular lines but local tradition strongly suggests he did, and there is still no real agreement on their authenticity. The owners of the Inn supposedly took the glass pane to Australia with them and it was thought to be lost for a time, but it is now reputed to be on display in the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway, again according to Wikipedia.

The day following, the 26th of August, Burns planned to visit the Carron Ironworks at Camelon near Falkirk but was refused admission by the caretaker as it was Sunday and the works were closed. In high dudgeon Burns crossed the road to the Carron Inn and breakfasted on the second floor where he vented his annoyance by writing on a windowpane the following;

We cam here to view your warks
In hopes to be mair wise,
But only, lest we gang to hell,
It may be nae surprise.
But when we tirl'd at your door
Your porter dought na hear us;
Sae may, shou'd we to Hell's yetts come,
Your billy Satan sair us!

A clerk at the Carron Works, one William Benson who was also an amateur poet, saw these lines and copied them into an order book and then penned the following reply;

If you came here to view our works,
You should have been more civil,
Than to give a fictitious name,
In hopes to cheat the devil.

Six days a week to you and all,

We think it very well;
The other if you go to church,
May keep you out of hell.

These verses were subsequently published in the 5th October 1789 edition of the Edinburgh Evening Courant, and the inscription survived on the window for many years until it was eventually blown out on a stormy night.

August 26th and the 27th saw Burns and Nicol reach Stirling and he was saddened to see how much the old royal palace had been allowed to fall into disrepair. That evening he and Nicol supped at James Wingate's Inn with Messrs. Doig the Schoolmaster, Bell and Captn. Forrester of the Castle. "*D is a queerish fellow and a pedant, B a joyous, vacant fellow who sings a good song, Forrester a merry swearing kind of man with a dash of the Sodger.*" Later taking up his trusty stylus he attacked a nearby window at the Inn where they were staying, with the following words which I believe are the most memorable ones in all of his window inscriptions;

Here Stewarts once in glory reign'd,
And laws for Scotland's weal ordain'd;
But now unroof'd their palace stands,
Their sceptre's fallen to other hands;
Fallen indeed and to the earth,
Whence groveling reptiles take their birth,
The injur'd Stewart line is gone,
A race outlandish fills their throne;
An idiot race to honour lost -
Who know them best despise them most.

As can be envisaged these lines did not help his application to join the Excise and he was closely questioned about them. It was later claimed by Allan Cunningham, but only by Allan Cunningham, that Burns added the lines;

Rash mortal, and slanderous Poet! Thy name,
Shall no longer appear in the records of fame,
Dost not know that old Mansfield, who writes like the Bible,
Says – the more 'tis a truth, sir, the more 'tis a libel?

It is said that two months later on October 4th, Burns returned to the Inn and smashed the pane with the head of his riding switch. But it was too late as several travelers had made notes of the verse and circulated them to their friends. However it is interesting to note that the first set of lines is recorded in the Glenriddell Manuscript.

By August 29th they had reached the village of Kenmore, an idyllic eighteenth century model village, little changed even today, and paused on a small bridge which gave Burns the chance to admire the view of Loch Tay, the source of the River Tay; he was so moved that he started composing a poem to capture the beauty he saw, a poem which he wrote in pencil over the chimney piece of the Inn (now The Kenmore Hotel), and which can still be seen there today in a nook called the Poet's Corner. Note that on this occasion Burns did not use his diamond stylus on a windowpane – perhaps the verses were too long for a windowpane? The verses were published in the Edinburgh Evening Courant on 6th September 1787

just a week after they had been written, allegedly communicated by “O.B. of Kenmore who, a few days ago, being on a visit to Taymouth,.... Found the following verses (by the celebrated Ayrshire bard) written on the walls of the Hermitage there.” It is more likely that Burns himself contributed the poem to the newspaper.

Admiring Nature in her wildest grace,
These northern scenes with weary feet I trace;
O'er many a winding dale and gainful step,
Th' abodes of covey'd grouse and timid sheep,
My savage journey, curious, I pursue,
Till fam'd Breadalbane opens to my view.
The meeting cliffs each deep-sunk glen divides;
The woods, wild-scatter'd, clothe their ample sides;
Th' outstretching lake, imbosomed 'mong the hills,
The eye with wonder and amazement fills;
The Tay meand'ring sweet in infant pride,
The palace rising on his verdant side,
The lawns wood-fring'd in Nature's native taste,
The hillocks dropt in Nature's careless haste,
The arches striding o'er the new born stream,
The village glittering in the noontide beam -

Poetic ardors in my bosom swell,
Lone wand'ring by the hermit's mossy cell;
The sweeping theatre of hanging woods,
Th' incessant roar of headlong tumbling floods –

Here Poesy might wake her heav'n-taught lyre,
And look through Nature with creative fire;
Here, to the wrongs of Fate half reconcil'd,
Misfortune's lighten'd steps might wander wild;
And Disappointmnet, in these lonely bounds,
Fine balm to soothe her bitter rankling wounds;
Here heart-struck Grief might heav'nward stretch her scan,
And injur'd Worth forget and pardon man.

Burns journal for August 29th 1887 summarizes all this with the entry “*Taymouth – described in rhyme.*”

The travelers continued their journey and on the last day of August Burns caught up with Neil Gow at Inver. Neil being the well-known Scots fiddle composer from whom Burns later drew many of the airs for his songs. The two repaired to the Inver Inn in Dunkeld where they saw and heard an irate woman which made such an impression that the Poet inscribed an epigram to the event on a nearby window, using his ever present diamond stylus;

Ye gods, ye gave me a wife, out of your grace and pleasure,
To be a partner of my life and I was glad to have her.

But if your providence divine for better things design her,
I obey your will at any time, I'm willing to resign her.

These lines were not new having been published some years before in the Glen Collection of Printed Music with the music and words set by a Mr. Seedo, although Burns may have tinkered with them somewhat. Unfortunately in an attempt to preserve the window for prosperity, in the middle of the nineteenth century it was broken.

As regards Burns' Tour of the Highlands it would appear that he packed his stylus away after Dunkeld as I can find no further reports of windowpanes being inscribed. However there are further reports of such efforts and these are considered below. Apart from the inscriptions listed above, Burns wrote a number of poems during his Tour and also used information he picked up during his time away to compose other verses later on. Probably the best known of his poems actually written "on the spot" so to speak were **The Birks of Aberfeldy** with **The Humble Petition of Bruar Water** and **Lines on the Falls of Foyers** deserving honourable mentions. Other works include **Theniel Menzies' Bonie Mary, Castle Gordon** and **Hey, Ca' Thro**.

Burns started to organize activities at his Ellisland farm in the late spring of 1788 but it was not until October of that year that his family moved in. During that time he made the acquaintance of several of his new neighbours including Robert Riddell who lived at Friars Carse just to the north of Burns' farm, and it turned out that the two men had a shared passion for Scottish music which helped cement their friendship. The property of Friars Carse included a small Hermitage on the boundary between their two properties and Riddell offered its use to Burns as a place where he could write and compose in quiet solitude, with the first fruit being, **Verses in Friars Carse, Hermitage** written well before Jean and the children arrived. During his contemplative moments at the Hermitage his thoughts turned to his diamond stylus and he inscribed one of the windows;

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

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

There are two versions of this poem with the first two stanzas as above being identical in both. The second version was longer and composed later in 1788 and was sent to Mrs. Dunlop; both versions were eventually put into the Glenriddell Manuscript. The original windowpane with these words is still preserved in the Ellisland Farm Museum. Following Robert Riddell's early death in 1794, Burns had visited the Hermitage for the last time and added the following lines to the second original windowpane;

To Riddell, much lamented man,
This ivied cot was dear,

Wand'rer, dost value matchless worth?
This ivied cot revere.

The current Hermitage was built in 1874 on the same site but to a different design, and sad to say has no inscribed windows for the curious Burnsian. When the Hermitage was rebuilt the new windows had the same lines inscribed but these replicas were subsequently moved to the Mansion House where they can still be seen.

When Burns was working as an Exciseman out of Ellisland he regularly passed through the village of Sanquhar and would stop and sometimes stay overnight at the New Inn; this later became the Queensberry Arms, and was owned by Edward Whigham, who went on to become the provost. It has been assumed for a long time that sometime in 1789 Burns had inscribed a window at the Inn with the following six lines extolling the virtues of the service provided at the Inn;

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

Recent research by Patrick Scott confirms the poem was in fact originally written by a John Hughes (1677-1720), although the words are slightly modified here, and with the original version having two extra lines. Burns himself never claimed authorship so what his actual involvement in the wording and even the inscribing of the poem on the window were, is debatable.

Close by Sanquhar lies Drumlanrig Castle where the chamberlain James McMurdo became a good friend of the Poet after they initially met in 1788. Burns wrote some eight letters to McMurdo over time and at one point sent him his collection of bawdy verse for his enjoyment, and of course these eventually saw the light of day in 1799 as **The Merry Muses of Caledonia**. As a tribute to his friend Burns etched the following lines onto a windowpane at McMurdo's house which was on the Drumlanrig estate;

Blest be McMurdo to his latest day!
No envious cloud o'er cast his evening ray!
No wrinkle furrow'd by the hand of care,
Nor ever sorrow, add one silver hair!
O may no son the father's honor stain,
Nor ever daughter give the mother pain!

Burns was no stranger to the town of Moffat either, as his rounds as an Exciseman took him there periodically. Willie's Mill near Craigeiburn on the outskirts of Moffat was the site of the glorious bacchanal which was later immortalized by Burns in **Willie Brew'd a Peck o Malt**, one of the greatest drinking songs ever written. However it was not there, but at another hostelry, The Black Bull Inn, that claimed fame by having one of its windows decorated by the stylus of Burns. He had originally met Deborah Duff Davies when she was visiting her relatives the Riddells at Friars Carse, and Burns was at Ellisland, and he was struck by both her beauty and her petite size, and featured her as was his habit, in some of his songs and epigrams including the lovely **Bonie Wee Thing**. On one of his visits to Moffat the

Poet was asked by a friend why God made Miss Davies so little, and a lady who was with her so large, and received the following answer which he promptly inscribed on a windowpane;

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

That pane of glass was taken by – or given to – Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia when he was on a triumphal tour of Britain in 1817 as one of the victorious allies who had defeated Napoleon at Waterloo; to this day the pane is reported to be in St. Petersburg, while a replica was hung in the Robert Burns Room at the Black Bull Inn by the Robert Burns World Federation in 1996.

Another hostelry regularly frequented by Burns while he lived at Ellisland was the Brownhill Inn in the parish of Closeburn, just a couple of miles north of his farm. One night the landlord's wife Mrs. Bacon locked the bar and sent Burns to his bed as she figured that her husband and the Poet had consumed way too much drink. The next day she found the following poem inscribed on one of the windowpanes, Burns having been busy late that night or early in the morning. The poem is known as **The Henpecked Husband** and appears in all editions of Burns' poems;

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

It was later reported that the offending windowpanes were carefully packed away by Sir Charles D. Stuart-Menteith, Bart of Closeburn, and when he died his son Sir James examined them and was so shocked that he had them destroyed in order to protect Burns' reputation. If that was the case, it was too late as the poem has become well known.

During the three years Burns lived at Ellisland he had inscribed a number of lines of poetry on several windows of his farmhouse for his own amusement. However when leaving for Dumfries in 1791 he failed to come to what he felt was an appropriate financial settlement with the new owner over the price of a heap of manure; so he paid his brother-in-law Adam Armour, of Adam Armour's Prayer fame, five shillings to smash every window in the farm that had been written upon. There is no record of what verses had been inscribed but it is accepted that one was a favourite quote of Burns of Alexander Pope "*An honest man's the noblest work of God.*"

Whilst little is known of what lines were inscribed on windows at Ellisland the opposite is true of writings on the windows of the Globe Inn in Dumfries. This Inn became Burns' favourite Howff, and he spent time there while still living at Ellisland, staying overnight at times, and even after moving to Dumfries he continued to frequent the place. Over time a number of windows in an upstairs bedroom

were inscribed, with two of these original ones still remaining. One of these has a stanza from **Lovely Polly Stewart** while the other has a variant on **Comin Thro the Rye**;

Gin a body meet a body
Coming through the grain.
Gin a body kiss a body
The thing's a body's ain.

The three verses of **Lines Written on Windows of the Globe Tavern** were also present;

The greybeard, old wisdom, may boast of his treasures,
Give me with gay folly to live;
I grant him his calm-blooded, time-settled pleasures,
But folly has raptures to give.

My bottle is a holy pool,
That heals the wounds o care an dool;
And pleasure is a wanton trout,
An ye drink it, ye'll find him out.

In politics if thou would'st mix,
And mean thy fortunes be;
Bear this in mind, be deaf and blind,
Let great folks hear and see.

The last stanza was Burns' response to the reprimand he received from the Excise as a result of the complaint about his "anti-government" attitude and behaviour, and he was sharply reminded that his duty "*was to act, not to think.*"

Also inscribed was the first stanza of **At the Globe Tavern, Dumfries**, probably as a comment on the French Revolutionary War;

I murder hate by field or flood,
Tho Glory's name may screen us;
In wars at hame I'll spend my blood –
Life-giving wars of Venus.
The deities that I adore
Are Social Peace and Plenty;
I'm better pleas'd to make one more,
Than be the death of twenty.

The three missing windowpanes from the Globe were sold by the Tavern's owner in the nineteenth century and their whereabouts are unknown. The other two original panes are kept at the Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway. Replicas of the missing verses were installed in the bedroom at the Globe Inn in 2011.

The Globe Inn was not the only tavern frequented by Burns in Dumfries, as he sometimes used the King's Arms for business, as this establishment was somewhat more "upscale" in nature. Neither did this

hostelry escape the diamond stylus as he left this message in 1789 in response to some witty and disrespectful comments he overheard about Excisemen;

Ye men of wit and wealth, why all this sneering
'Gainst poor Excisemen? Give the cause a hearing,
What are you Landlords' rent-rolls? Taxing ledgers!
What Premiers? What ev'n Monarchs? Mighty Gaugers!
Nay, what are Priests, (those seeming godly wise men)?
What are they, pray, but spiritual Excisemen?

The Reverend George Lawrie, who started the ball rolling for the Edinburgh Edition, lived at St. Margaret's Hill which was the Loudon Manse, in Newmilns. Burns was a regular visitor and scribed a brief message on a bedroom windowpane that said;

Lovely Mrs. Lawrie, she is all charms.

The windowpane and sash are still preserved in the modern Loudon Manse.

There are several other locations that may have a claim to be where Burns left messages but these are not as widely accepted or in some cases have no record, just rumours. At Finlaystone House, the home of James Cunningham, Earl of Glencairn an upstairs window is reputed to have carried Burns' signature; it is known that Burns visited the Earl so the claim may have substance. In the library a short message may also have been left;

R. Burns 1768.
Under an aged oak.
AMEN.

John Logan a fellow mason, lived at Laight Farm in New Cumnock and Burns is known to have visited him a number of times, including staying overnight on at least one occasion. A window in the west gable once carried an inscription by Burns but it was removed in the 1970s and its present whereabouts and what words it might have had inscribed are unknown.

When in Glasgow Burns spent a night at Richard Brown's House on Bay Street and Brown's daughter later claimed he had left a souvenir on a windowpane, but the house was later destroyed and again there are no known details of what might have been inscribed.

That brings an end to the list of windowpanes of which that I am aware, that Robert Burns inscribed during his lifetime. There are almost certainly others and there are definitely other unsubstantiated claims that have been questioned from time to time. In wondering how to finish this paper I have decided to quote two inscriptions that the Poet did on crystal goblets for Jessie Lewars, a variation of writing on glass with his diamond stylus. Jessie was the young lass who tended Burns in his last days, while at the same time looking after Jean in the final days of her pregnancy with her last child, who was eventually born on the day the Bard was buried. Not yet eighteen, Jessie must have been really devoted to the family as she not only supported the dying Poet and his heavily pregnant wife, but she attended to the household tasks as well as keeping the other children quiet and behaved. When Jessie had been

briefly indisposed Robert had written on a crystal goblet with his stylus the following lines and asked her to retain it as a keepsake;

Jessie's Illness

Say, sages, what's the charm on earth
Can turn Death's dart aside?
It is not purity and worth,
Else Jessie had not died!

On Her Recovery

But rarely seen since Nature's birth
The natives of the sky!
Yet still one seraph's left on earth
For Jessie did not die.

On a later occasion she gave him a glass of watered wine and after drinking he took up his pen to inscribe on the goblet these words, which may well have been the final ones to flow from the diamond stylus;

The Toast

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

That leaves only one question – what ever happened to the diamond stylus that Burns carried with him all those years? It may well survive to this day as there is a pen in existence made of a cylindrical, hollow piece of wood – probably elder – with a metal protrusion at one end and a wooden one at the other; there is a diamond in the tip of the metal piece and it was this that was used to mark the glass. The pen is reputed to be the one used by Burns and is held in the collection of the Rozelle House Galleries in Alloway. The original catalogue record for the object states that it is an *“old glass cutting diamond used by Robert Burns.”* Beyond that the provenance cannot be proved.

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