

Frances Anna Dunlop – A Character Sketch

Born in 1730, Frances Anna Wallace was the eldest daughter of Sir Thomas Wallace of Craigie and Dame Eleanora Agnew. Sir Thomas claimed to have been a descendant of Sir Richard, cousin to Braveheart: Sir William Wallace – a connection which, later, delighted Robert Burns.

In 1745 John Dunlop of Dunlop, 19th of that Ilk, had been deputized by the gentlemen of Ayr, together with Sir Thomas Wallace of Craigie, to assist the Duke of Cumberland against the Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie. After Charlie's defeat at Culloden, John and Sir Thomas returned to Ayr as fast friends. Thomas encouraged his daughter, Frances, to get to know his friend, John Dunlop, and at the age of 17, she married him.

Frances loved John. Together, they produced 7 sons and 6 daughters. Frances also loved Dunlop House. (At that time, it was the house built by James Dunlop in 1599. It has since been replaced by the Hamilton-designed 1834 Dunlop House.) The couple's eldest son, Thomas Dunlop, succeeded his maternal grandfather as Laird of Craigie and assumed the name and arms of Wallace.

Alas, their happily wedded bliss came to an end with John's death, in 1785. Frances fell into a "long and severe illness, which reduced her mind to the most distressing state of depression". This would have been an affliction Burns was also all too familiar with.

It was as she was recovering from this illness that a friend gave her a copy of *The Cotter's Saturday Night* to read. So delighted was she with it that she sent, according to Gilbert Burns, "a very obliging letter to my brother, desiring him to send her half a dozen copies of his *Poems*, if he had them to spare, and begging he would do her the pleasure of calling at Dunlop House as soon as convenient".

[It is worthy to note here that although *The Cotter's Saturday Night* was written for inclusion in the Kilmarnock Edition, this long sentimental poem was hardly one of Burns' best works. As agreed from other presentations of the Carnie Group, we would not regard it as a *major* work of the Bard. True; the poem does contain some beautiful imagery and no doubt appealed to the genteel audience to whom Burns catered in his attempts to curry its favour. It treads the moral high ground and, as a result, it comes across as somewhat artificial. The original inspiration for *The Cotter's Saturday Night* came from *The Farmer's Ingle* by Robert Fergusson. Fergusson's poem is a simple portrait of the honest, hard-toiling Scottish peasant farmer at home. By expanding the scope of the poem into a self-indulgent moralistic treatise, Burns' turn of phrase and colourful descriptions fade. Nevertheless, the poem accomplished a purpose: It resonated with the right audience and thereby furthered Burns' reputation and eventual success.

(As a footnote to illustrate the point, Mrs. Dunlop roundly criticized *Tam o' Shanter*: "Had I seen the whole of that performance, all its beauties could not have extracted one word of mine in its praise...", she said. Contrast that with her effusive praise of *Cotter's*.)]

Burns replied to Mrs. Dunlop's note on the 15th of November 1786. This letter, the first in their long exchange, shows the importance Burns placed on the fact of the lady's heritage when he said, "Madam, you could not have touched my darling heart-chord more sweetly, than by noticing my attempts to celebrate you illustrious Ancestor, the SAVIOR OF HIS COUNTRY- 'Great Patriot Hero! Ill-requited Chief!'" Then he went on to recall his own personal "pilgrimage" to Leglen wood, which he fondly recalled was also a retreat of William Wallace. (We, of the Calgary Burns Club, recall our own pilgrimage of sorts back in 2009: When we traveled to Leglen Wood to rededicate the gate, which we had paid to have refurbished, at the entry to the monument to Wallace and Burns there. Our own brush with greatness, as it was.)

The letter concludes, almost as an afterthought, "I have only been able to send you 5 copies [of the book]: they are all I command. I am thinking to go to Edinburgh in a week or two at farthest, to throw off a second impression of my book; but on my return, I shall certainly do myself the honor to wait on you."

Mrs. Dunlop wrote to Burns in late December 1786, still full of praise for his work, but making it clear that she wanted to establish herself as the "Approver" of his writings. She cited the example of Voltaire, who apparently had a lady-friend with whom he shared practically all his writings before sending them to the publisher. Burns never did name her to the post, so she simply adopted the role unto herself. She gossiped about him; she criticized him. She introduced his writings to Dr. John Moore and urged Burns to write to Dr. Moore. As I told you in an earlier presentation, Burns finally did write his long autobiographical letter to Moore, which, as it turned out, greatly enhanced Burns' career.

At the time of the turn of the year though, Burns, although gratified by the praise Mrs. Dunlop heaped upon him, was a little taken aback with her enthusiasm.

On 15th January 1787, he cautioned her:

"You are afraid I shall grow intoxicated with my prosperity as Poet; alas! Madam, I know myself and the world too well. I do not mean any airs of affected modesty; I am willing to believe that my abilities deserve some notice; but in a most enlightened, informed age and nation, when poetry is and has been the study of men of the first natural genius, aided with all the powers of polite learning, polite books, and polite company — to be dragged forth to the full glare of learned and polite observation, with all my imperfections of rusticity and crude unpolished ideas on my head — I assure you, Madam, I do not dissemble when I tell you I tremble for the consequences. The novelty of a Poet in my obscure station, without any of those advantages which are reckoned necessary for that character, at least at the time of day, has raised a partial tide of public notice which has borne me to a height, where I am absolutely, feelingly certain my abilities are inadequate to support me; and too surely do I see that time when the same tide will leave me, and recede, perhaps, as far below the mark or truth ... Your patronising me and interesting yourself in my fame and character as a Poet, I rejoice in; it exalts me in my own idea; and whether you can or cannot aid me in my subscription is a trifle. Has a paltry subscription bill any charms to the heart of a bard, compared with the patronage of the descendant of the immortal Wallace?"

When her copies of the first Edinburgh Edition reached her, she was angry with the poet for failing to sanitise some of his pieces, as she had suggested. Burns replied from Edinburgh on 30th April 1787: “Your criticisms, Madam, I understand very well, and could have wished to pleased you better. You are right in your guess that I am not very amenable to counsel. Poets, much my superiors, have so flattered those who possessed the adventitious qualities of wealth and power that I am determined to flatter no created being, either in prose or verse, so help me God!”

Her criticism was candid: “You ought to take off a few patches which consummate beauty has no use for, which in a polite and enlightened age are seldom wore, and which a delicate, manly mind cannot regret the want of. Forgive my saying that every indecency is below you, and sinks the voice of your fame by putting to silence your female admirers.”

Although Burns never gratified Mrs. Dunlop by officially acknowledging her as his editor or even his conscience, he routinely wrote to her about his works, asking her reaction or even reacting to her letters with verse. In a letter to her dated the 17th December 1788, Burns said “Your meeting which you so well describe with your old schoolfellow and friend was truly interesting ... Apropos, is not the Scotch phrase *Auld Lang Syne* exceedingly expressive? There is an old song and tune which often thrilled me through my soul. You know I am an enthusiast in the old Scotch songs. I shall give you the verses on the other sheet. ...Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired poet who composed this glorious fragment! There is more fire of native genius in it than in half a dozen of modern English Bacchanalians.” The song on the other sheet was Burns’ first written version of “Auld Lang Syne”. While Burns readily admitted that he did not originate the tune and some of the verse, it is his version now sung every New Year’s Eve and Burns’ night by millions around the globe.

Burns visited Mrs. Dunlop at least five times throughout his life - June 1787; February 1788 for two days; May 1789 for two days; 21st June 1791; and December 1792, when he stayed at Dunlop House for 4 days. Burns wrote more often to her than to any other correspondent, sending her copies of his poems and drafts of letters intended for others. She, in turn, wrote to him of her family troubles, as well as counselling him on career choices and urging him to modify what she described as his “undecency” in relation to his affairs with women. She described his correspondence as “an acquisition for which mine can make no return, as a commerce in which I alone am the gainer; the sight of your hand gives me inexpressible pleasure...” It would appear, in saying this, that she underestimated the value Burns placed on her friendship, as his increasingly desperate attempts to elicit a response from her after their falling out demonstrate.

The falling out occurred in 1794. With two of her daughters marrying French emigres and various members of her family having military connections, Mrs. Dunlop had made known to Burns her disapproval of his apparent sympathies with revolutionaries in France. He failed to take the hint and wrote in a letter datelined Dumfries December 20 1794 but actually penned on January 12th 1795, referring to Dr. Moore’s sympathies for King Louis and Marie Antoinette, “What is there in the delivering over a purged Blockhead & an unprincipled Prostitute to the hands of the hangman, that it should arrest for a moment, attention in an eventful hour...?”

Although Burns seemed ignorant of the affront such an insensitive statement could cause, he had clearly taken his irreverence too far.

Burns sent Mrs. Dunlop two further letters which received no reply. He was apparently completely oblivious to what could have caused her anger. “What sin of ignorance I have committed against so highly a valued friend I am utterly at a loss to guess” he wrote in January 1796, “...Will you be so obliging, dear Madam, as to condescend on that my offence which you seem determined to punish with a deprivation of that friendship which once was the source of my highest enjoyments?”

Burns’ final letter to Mrs. Dunlop is dated July 10, 1796, just days before his death. In it, he informed her that his illness would “speedily send me beyond that bourne whence no traveller returns”. He was effusive in his praise of her friendship. It was popular to believe that she did relent on receiving this, and that one of the last things Burns was able to read was a message of reconciliation from her.

At the time of my first writing of this sketch, I searched in vain for any text of a note from Mrs. Dunlop that might have reached Burns before his death and, through my failure; I concluded that no such correspondence was ever sent. I had reviewed James Mackay’s biography of Burns and Mackay’s volume of the complete letters of Burns, as well as Robert Crawford’s text, *The Bard*.

Crawford does not even speculate, saying that Mrs. Dunlop never sent anything Burns’ way after January 1795. Mackay investigated further and relied upon Jean Armour’s adamant statement that no such correspondence was ever received and, further, on the 20th of July, Mrs. Dunlop had written to Gilbert to inquire after Robert’s health. There was no urgency in Gilbert’s response and the poet died in the wee hours of the morning on the 21st. It seemed to me highly unlikely that she would have sent, and Burns would have received, any message from her in those fleeting hours.

In Adam’s compilation of the letters, he makes editorial comments, which I take as mere speculation, to the effect that the ceasing of communication from Mrs. Dunlop was simply due to inadvertence and not through any personal affront on Burns’ part. While there appears to have been no malice by Burns toward Mrs. Dunlop, it stretches credibility to think that Burns’ careless and insensitive remarks did not directly affect Mrs. Dunlop’s attitude towards him.

So convinced and confident in my research was I that I drew a conclusion and pontificated that the notion of a deathbed reconciliation “would seem simply a sop to sentimentality”.

Well, I was wrong; completely wrong.

As is more often the case than I like to admit, my good friend and oft mentor, Tony Grace, picked up my homework after I had abandoned it and ferreted out conclusive evidence which puts beyond doubt that Robert Burns *did* receive a communication from Mrs. Dunlop before he died. The evidence is in the form of a letter written and addressed to Mrs. Dunlop prepared and sent by Burns’ fellow officer in the Excise, John Lewars. For the sake of completeness and to assuage my *mia culpa*, I reproduce the letter here in its entirety:

“Madam, - At the desire of Mrs. Burns I have to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, and at the same time to inform you of the melancholy and much-regretted event of Mr. Burns’s death. He expired on the morning of the 21st, after a long and severe illness. Your kind letter gave him great ease and satisfaction, and was the last thing he was capable of perusing and understanding. The situation of his unfortunate widow and family of most promising boys, Mrs. Dunlop’s feelings and affection for them will much easier paint that I can possibly express, more particularly when Mrs. Dunlop is informed that Mrs. Burns’s situation is such that she is expected to ly-in daily. I am certain that a letter from Mrs. Dunlop to Mrs. Burns would be a very great consolation, and her kind advice most thankfully received. I am, with the greatest respect, your most obedient and very humble servant, Jno. Lewars.
Dumfries, 22nd July, 1796.”

After Burns' death, Mrs. Dunlop and her daughter Eleanor Perochon showed great kindness to his widow, Jean Armour and her family. When Burns' remains were moved from his tomb to the Burns Mausoleum on 19 September 1817, Jean Armour agreed that when Eleanor Perochon died, she could be laid to rest in the vacated tomb of the poet. Eleanor died on 10 October 1825. She lies in the tomb where Burns once lay.

Mrs. Dunlop survived the poet by another 19 years, dying in 1815. Burns greatly valued her friendship and matronage. Her impact upon the poet’s life and his works should be regarded as just as important as that of any of the other key women in his life. She is buried in Dumfries, Scotland but her words and thoughts live on in her letters to Scotland’s National Bard.

Prepared for the Calgary Burns Club Carnie Group and presented to the Club on February 11, 2020 by

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And revised by the author for publication on the Club’s website on April 28, 2020.

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