

Introduction

I discovered when starting to research material for this paper that it is a vast topic. I used the Burns' Encyclopaedia as my main reference source and which contains many references to ministers (50?). I have therefore tried to be somewhat selective in writing for the paper and concentrated on the more prominent 'Auld Licht' and 'New Licht' ministers who had the greatest 'impact' on Burns, one way or another.

To write a paper on Burns and his relationship with Scottish ministers I believe it is necessary to provide some background on the religion prevailing in Scotland during the 18th century of Burns' time. Religion in Scotland in Burns' time can be perceived as a consuming way of life for the inhabitants. The two main religions were Presbyterianism and Catholicism, with Burns being brought up in a staunchly Presbyterian family by his father, William Burnes, with William embracing the 'Auld Licht' aspects of Calvinism.

It seems like it didn't take Burns too long, as he grew older, to recognize certain aspects of the 'Auld Licht' with which he disagreed. The 'Auld Lichts' represented a more severe and unforgiving form of Presbyterianism, which involved fire and brimstone sermons and the idea of predestination as a route to heaven, which Burns so despised. The Calvinist influence was strong and Burns found himself in opposition to its theology and social attitudes. Orthodoxy ruled in the church and views that ran contrary to it were not tolerated. It is apparent when reading Burns' poems and letters that he felt profoundly about the problems and issues within the Calvin aspects of the Presbyterian Church, namely the hypocrisy of certain ministers and the Kirk session. The latter serving as a moral watchdog, summoning congregants who strayed from the 'straight and narrow' and handing out censure and punishment, as Burns was to find out when Jean Armour became pregnant. These aspects were hypocritical and counter to his beliefs as a Christian and he found himself more comfortable with embracing the theory and teachings of the 'New Licht', who tended to be more 'liberal in their theology and less moralistic in their preaching'. The 'New Licht' tended to be a more moderate form of Presbyterianism, which emphasized the human aspects of religion.

Burns was a poet with a deep social conscience; he could not accept the orthodox position of the so called 'Auld Lichts'. He believed in the power of good works to determine salvation and sincerely believed that all humans were to be treated with dignity and equality. Amongst some of the stories and legends written about Burns is one concerning his stance on being anti-religion. Now is that because of poems like '**Holy Willie's Prayer**' or is it because of his many letters written about hypocritical aspects of Calvinism and Presbyterianism that drew his ire and his satirical pointed jabs. To Burns, religion was in the simplest and most literal meaning of the phrase, "the religion of humanity."

In researching for this paper, I was able to locate a large number, of references, and interactions in his poems and letters that Burns had with various ministers, all of whom had some sort of affect, positive or negative, on Burns. Ministers in the 'Auld Licht' camp were subject to Burns' scathing and satirical comments. Some however in the 'New Licht' camp were entirely the opposite and to whom he was highly complimentary, especially those pertaining to 'fellow poets' such as the Reverend John Skinner, author of 'Tullochgorum'.

'Auld Licht' Ministers

The Reverend William 'Daddy' Auld 1709-91,

Auld was the Minister at Mauchline for 50 years, from 1742, the minister to Elder William Fisher and Burns and died unmarried.

A zealous, hardworking man, though very opinionated, he seems to have lacked ambition, and to have been quite content to remain a parish minister. Although he was a rigid Whig and an upholder of the 'Auld Lichts', his attitude was described more as old fashioned, rather than bigoted, but he was said to have been 'kindly and courteous'. This kindness being demonstrated when Jean and Robert had to make their three appearances in the church before Auld, due to Jean's pregnancy, the poet was allowed to stand in his own pew next to Jean, instead of in the 'place of repentance'. By keeping silent about his verbal vows, Burns then got from Auld his certificate as a 'blameless single man'.

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

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

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

One other claim to fame due to Auld was that in 1791 he contributed to Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account*, his observations on the village of Mauchline.

The Reverend William Dalrymple, (1723 — 1814)

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

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

The Reverend Dr. James Mackinlay (1756-1841)

James MacKinlay was inducted to the second charge of Kilmarnock, that of the Laigh Kirk, on the death of the Rev. John Mutrie in 1785. Mackinlay was an 'Auld Licht' minister, and it was to the considerable disappointment of the parish moderates at his being given the charge. He was appointed to the charge by the Earl of Glencairn; because Glencairn believed the majority of the parishioners wanted an 'Auld Licht' man. Mackinlay's induction inspired Burns to write '**The Ordination**', which sets forth the vigorous treatment that Mackinlay and his colleagues would mete out to 'Curst 'Common-Sense':

'This day M'Kinlay takes the flail,
An' he's the boy will blaud her! [*slap*
He'll clap a shangan on her tail, [*stick put on the tail of a dog*
An' set the bairns to daud her [*bespatter*
Wi' dirt this day.'

Burns sent out a number of manuscript copies of this poem, not all of them in his own name, as some of them were signed 'Rob Rhymer'.

The Reverend Alexander Moodie (1722 — 1799)

Educated at Glasgow University, he started his ministry in Culross in 1759, and moved two years later to Riccarton. Moodie was a staunch member of the 'Auld Licht' party, and, as such, a target for Burns. He was a zealous Calvinist preacher, with a hellfire and damnation, bellicose preaching style. He is identified as one of the 'herds' in the poem '**The Twa Herds**' or '**Holy Tulzie**', which is a satire on an unseemly quarrel between him and the Rev. John Russell of Kilmarnock, over parish boundaries, in which Moodie is described as 'Singet Sawnie'

O, Moddie, man, an' wordy Russell,
How could you raise so vile a bustle;
Ye'll see how New-Light herds will whistle,
An' think it fine!
The Lord's cause ne'er gat sic a twistle,
Sin' I hae min'.

The Reverend James Oliphant (1734-1818)

The evangelical Minister of Kilmarnock High Church from 1764-73, having been called from the Gorbals Chapel of Ease, he later, obtained a charge in Dumbarton. He was an 'Auld Licht' minister with a powerful voice. Burns referred to him in '**The Ordination**' as making the church 'yell'. On 29th June, 1787, at the conclusion of his West Highland Tour, Burns was made a freeman of the Royal Burgh of Dumbarton. According to Dr. George Grierson, who was Burns' travelling companion, at least for the latter part of the journey, the Dumbarton Magistrates were denounced publicly the following day by the Reverend James Oliphant, Minister of Dumbarton Parish Kirk, 'for conferring honours on the author of vile, detestable and immoral publications. It is generally assumed that Oliphant's opposition was no doubt due to the fact that he had been satirised in Burns' poem **The Ordination**, written the previous year of 1786. Although considered ultra-Calvinistic, records of the period show that Oliphant did not allow the demands of the next world to interfere with his enjoyment of this: yet another example of the hypocrisy prevalent in the Presbyterian Church at the time. Throughout his ministry he was noted for his

good deeds, and his sense of humour, which often enlivened his conversation and his way of life. When he died in 1818, his passing was mourned by his parishioners, who had, over the years, come to regard him with deep affection and appreciation.

In addition to his ministerial duties, Oliphant was an author of religious books as he wrote '*A Mother's Catechism*, and *A Sacramental Catechism*,' both of which were popular in his day.

The Reverend John Russell, (1740 -1817)

A native of Moray, who, after a period of teaching in the Parish School at Cromarty, was ordained minister of the High Church in Kilmarnock and was called to Stirling in 1800. Russell was described as being 'a large, robust, dark-complexioned man, imperturbably grave, and with a sullen expression seated in the deep folds of his forehead' leading to his nickname 'Black Russell'. There were also rumours of a woman attending his church who suddenly saw Russell in a pulpit, and was 'so overcome with terror that she fainted away'.

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

Russell was also quite a prolific author writing several books and pamphlets on religion and ending up becoming involved in a wordy doctrinal battle with a fellow 'Auld Licht' Minister, the Reverend Alexander Moodie of Riccarton. It was the undignified spectacle of two members of the 'unco guid' fighting between themselves that inspired Burns to write '**The Twa Herds**'.

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

One cannot discuss Burns' satirical views of the 'Auld Licht' aspects of religion, without mentioning '**Holy Willie's Prayer**.' The poem is a tale of an insignificant little church elder of Mauchline, who becomes the prototype of hypocrisy in what is perhaps the greatest religious satire written.

The poem was prompted by the defeat of the 'Auld Licht' censure of his friend Gavin Hamilton for his failure to participate in public worship. The poem, shaped like a prayer, is put into the mouth of the 'Auld Licht' adherent 'Holy Willie.' It begins with an invocation, which articulates Willie's doctrinal stance on predestination.

O Thou that in the heavens does dwell!
Wha, as it pleases best thysel,
Sends ane to heaven an ten to hell,
A' for thy glory!
And no for ony gude or ill
They've done before thee.

The poem continues with Willie's thanks for his own "elected" status and reaches its highest moments in Willie's confession that 'At times I'm fash'd wi' fleshly lust.' Burns has Willie condemn himself by describing moments of fornication and justifying them as temptations

visited on him by God. The concluding stanzas recount Willie's opinion of Hamilton, 'He drinks, and swears, and plays at cartes', and his chagrin that Minister Auld was defeated. The poem ends with the requisite petition, calling for divine vengeance on those who disagree with him and asking blessings for himself and his like.

'New Licht Ministers'

Reverend William Burnside (1751 — 1806)

Minister of the New Church in Dumfries, he moved to St Michael's in the same town in 1794. Burns in his letter to William Nicol from Mauchline, dated 18th June 1787, described the minister as: 'a man whom I shall ever gratefully remember'. Burns then goes into eulogies over Anne, the minister's wife; 'and his wife, Gude forgie me! I had almost broke the tenth commandment on her account. Simplicity, elegance, good sense, sweetness of disposition, good humour, kind hospitality, are the constituents of her manner and heart: in short — but if I say one word more about her, I shall be directly in love with her.'

Burnside later wrote a history of Dumfries, part of which was incorporated in Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account*.

Bishop John Geddes (1735 — 99)

John Geddes was Roman Catholic Bishop of Dunkeld, who first met Burns at the house of Lord Monboddo in Edinburgh during the winter of 1786-7. Geddes took an interest in the poet's work, and was responsible for getting 5 Catholic Seminaries, including that of the Scots College at Valladolid, of which he had once been Rector, to subscribe to the Edinburgh Edition of 1787. Burns took Geddes's own copy, bound with blank sheets at both ends, with him on his Highland tour, and delayed returning it for almost 2 years. Writing to Geddes from Ellisland on 3rd February 1789, the poet apologised for having kept the book so long: 'You will see in your book, which I beg your pardon for detaining so long, that I have been turning my lyre on the banks of the Nith. Some larger poetic plans that are floating in my imagination, or partly put in execution, I shall impart to you when I have the pleasure of meeting with you.. .'

Reverend William McGill (1732-1807)

William McGill was educated at Glasgow University, licensed to preach in 1759, and appointed assistant to the minister of Kilwinning. McGill was ordained to the charge of Ayr in 1760 and was a friend of William Burnes, resulting in Burns and his Father approving of his New Licht doctrines.

When his essay, *The Death of Jesus Christ*, published in 1786, he was denounced by 'Auld Licht' minister William Peebles of Newton-on-Ayr; McGill published a defence, **The Benefits of the Revolution**, in 1789. The charge was that, while receiving the privileges of the Church, he was at the same time plunging a dagger into her heart. In May 1789, the General Assembly ordered an inquiry into the affair. The Ayr magistrates published their appreciation of McGill's services, but McGill brought the proceedings to a close by offering an apology to the court, and the case was dropped.

McGill, however, was a timid man for all his liberality, 'a mixture of simplicity and stoicism' that resulted in Mrs. Dunlop calling him 'a poor little white rabbit'. An explanation of the timidity is to be found in the letter Burns wrote to Graham of Fintry, in December 1789:

'I think you must have heard of Dr. McGill, one of the clergymen of Ayr, and his heretical book. God help him, poor man! Though he is one of the worthiest as well as one of the ablest, of the whole priesthood of the Kirk of Scotland,

To the Reverend John Logan, (1748—88, these dates are subject to confirmation) Burns had written in 7th August 1789: 'If I could be of any service to Dr. McGill, I would do it though it should be at a much greater expence than irritating a few bigoted Priests.'

Reverend John McMath (1755-1825)

John McMath, ('Guid McMath') was assistant to Dr. Peter Wodrow at Tarbolton Parish Kirk, and later Dr. Wodrow's successor. McMath was a 'New Licht' liberal, who supported Gavin Hamilton in that lawyer's conflict with the kirk authorities. In his middle years, however, he took to drink, and had to resign his charge in 1791 and died in retirement at Rossul, Mull.

Burns wrote '**Holy Willie's Prayer**' in 1785 and sent McMath a copy of it along with an '**Epistle**' addressed to McMath. The 'Epistle' is important in that it sets out clearly Burns' attitude to sectarianism and to religion. Confessing his own weaknesses frankly, the poet pays homage to Religion, but says 'he would rather be an atheist than use the Gospel as talking of Mercy, Grace and Truth while at the same time ruining, pitilessly and hard-heartedly in the name of religion, an innocent man'.

Reverend John Skinner (1721 -1807)

John Skinner was the author of the song 'Tullochgorum' and was born at Balfour, Aberdeenshire. He was educated at Marischal College, Aberdeen, and took orders in the Scottish Episcopal Church in 1742. He spent two years in Shetland as preceptor in the Sinclair family of Scalloway, returning to Longside, Aberdeen, to minister for the rest of his life.

Burns was disappointed that he did not meet Skinner on his Highland tour, having unwittingly passed only four miles from the minister's home. Skinner wrote Burns a long verse epistle - 'by far the finest poetic compliment I ever got' said Burns, who answered on 25th October 1787, 'in plain dull prose'. Burns asked Skinner to send him any songs he had that would be suitable for inclusion in the Scots Musical Museum, telling him that '**Tullochgorum**', '**John of Badenyon**' and '**Ewie wi' the Crookit Horn**' were going into the second volume. Burns later sent Skinner the second volume of the *Museum* from Edinburgh on 14th February 1788: 'as a mark of the veneration I have long had, and shall ever have, for your character'

He was the author of an *Ecclesiastical History of Scotland* and many other theological works, as well as 'Tullochgorum' and other Scots' songs. His song '**Tullochgorum**' was described by Burns as 'the best Scotch Song ever Scotland saw'.

Reverend George Smith, (1748 - 1823)

George Smith was Minister at Galston, Ayrshire from 1778 until his death and was also a great-grandfather of R. L. Stevenson.

Burns would appear to have been quite conflicted in his dealings with Smith. In **'The Holy Fair'**, Burns apparently meant to compliment him for the rationalism of his preaching though his friends regarded the lines in question as having injured his popularity. Angered by the criticism of his lines on Smith in **'The Holy Fair'**, Burns did not spare him in **'The Kirk's Alarm'**.

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

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

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

Conclusion

The conclusion that can be reached when reviewing Burns' relationship with various ministers is that he wasn't 'anti-religious' as has often been stated. In my opinion, it is clear that any 'anti-religious' views Burns held on the Calvinist aspects of religion were solely related to the many religious hypocritical aspects, as was demonstrated by the 'Auld Licht' ministers, that he saw and heard in Ayrshire in his time.

Burns was not an enemy of religion, nor an overly pious Presbyterian as can be seen from his embracing of the 'New Lichts', but we can be sure from the satire contained within his poems e.g. in 'Holy Willie's Prayer' that he was concerned for the injustices that he saw in the society and remained outspoken until the end of his days. He believed in the power of good works to determine salvation and sincerely believed that all humans were to be treated with dignity and equality. Where he suspected insincerity, want of charity or bigotry no mercy was shown in his poems or letters to the offender, no matter who.

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

Then gently scan your brother man
Still gentler sister woman,
Tho' they may gang a kennin wrang,
To step aside is human

Burns and the Ministers

Name	Connection
Auld Licht	
1. William 'Daddy' Auld 1709-91	Minister at Mauchline and minister to Elder William Fisher and Burns
2. William Dalrymple 1723- 1814	Mentioned in the 'Kirk's Alarm' and 'Twa Herds'. Baptised Burns
3. James Mackinlay 1756- 1841	Mentioned in 'the Ordination'. Written by Burns as 'Rob Rhymer'
4. Alexander Miller 1804	Mentioned in 'Holy Fair' as 'Wee Miller'
5. Alexander Moodie 1722- 1799	Mentioned in 'The Twa Herds' as 'Singet Sawnie'
6. James Oliphant 1734- 1818	Mentioned in 'the Ordination'
7. William Peebles 1753- 1826	Mentioned in the 'Kirk's Alarm' as poet "Willie" and In 'The Twa Herds' he is described as 'Peebles shaul' (shallow).
8. John Russell 1740- 1817	Mentioned in 'Holy Fair' as 'Black Russell', 'wordy Russell in the 'Twa Herds' and 'Rumble John' in the 'Kirk's Alarm'
New Licht	
1. Hugh Blair 1718-1800	Made a number of suggestions for changes to Burns' poems, including 'The Holy Fair'
2. William Burnside 1751- 1806	Wrote history of Dumfries for Sinclair's 'Statistical Account'. Burns fancied his wife
3. William M'Quhae 1736 - 1823	Mentioned in 'Twa Herds' as that 'cursed rascal ca'd M'Q'
4. William McGill 1732 -1807	Wrote an essay called 'Death of Jesus Christ'
5. John (Guid) McMath 1755 -1825	Minister at Tarbolton and supported Gavin Hamilton in his conflicts
6. Hamilton Paul 1773 - 1854	Strong defender of Burns' satirical poems
7. John Skinner 1721 - 1807	Burns very impressed by his poem 'Tullochgorum'
8. George Smith 1748 - 1823	Mentioned in 'Holy Fair', 'Twa Herds' and the 'Kirk's Alarm'
Other Ministers	
Thomas Reid (1710-1796)	He was author of <i>An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense</i> (1764) which purported to answer the scepticism of David Hume.
Thomas Blacklock (1721-91)	A blind minor poet who played a major part in making Burns change his mind over going to Jamaica and instead, go to Edinburgh

Listing of Poems with References to Ministers

Poem	Minister references – 'New Licht'
Holy Willie's Prayer	Elder William Fisher
The Holy Fair	Alexander Moodie of Riccarton; George Smith of Galston William Peebles of Newton-upon-Ayr; Alexander Miller, of Kilmaurs
The Ordination	Alexander Moodie of Riccarton; James Oliphant of Kilmarnock; John Russell of Kilmarnock; Robert Duncan of Dundonald; William Peebles of Newton-on-Ayr; William McGill; William Auld of Mauchline; William Dalrymple of Ayr; Andrew Shaw of Craigie; David Shaw of Coylton; Peter Wodrow of Tarbolton; John McMath; George Smith of Galston
The Kirk of Scotland's Alarm	William McGill of Ayr; William Dalrymple of Ayr; John Russell of Kilmarnock; James Mackinlay of Kilmarnock; Alexander Moodie of Riccarton; William Peebles of Newton- upon-Ayr; James Young of New Cumnock; David Grant of Ochiltree; George Smith of Galston; John Shepherd of Muirkirk; Andrew Mitchel of Monkton; William Auld of Mauchline
The Twa Herds	Alexander Moodie of Riccarton; John Russell of Kilmarnock; Robert Duncan of Dundonald; William Peebles of Newton- on-Ayr; William Auld of Mauchline; William McGill; Andrew Shaw of Craigie; David Shaw of Coylton; Peter Wodrow of Tarbolton; John McMath; George Smith of Galston; William M'Quhae
Epistle to James Tennant Of Glenconner	Thomas Reid of New Machar;
Letter to William Nicol	William Burnside of Dumfries
Second Commonplace Book	Hugh Blair of Edinburgh