

Charles Gray

The Search

Some time ago I became curious as to why the Scottish folk-ballad titled *The Road and the Miles to Dundee*, which was to be included in a CD of the Burns Club Singers, was shown as 'traditional', meaning that it was not held under copyright and was available free for public use. This was not unusual but still was not expected for a song that was popular in current recordings by well-known 20th Century Scottish singers. The oldest references that were readily found to this ballad were from the early 1900s and even these showed the song status as traditional; I began a further search.

In scanning older song lists I was intrigued to find a song called *Sweet Dreel* since the Dreel is the burn in Fife that separates West Anstruther from East Anstruther, my hometowns which the author at least must have visited. Later, while checking other lists of songs from schools, colleges, universities, a variety of clubs and Scottish communities and organisations, I found a song, called 'Song', with an opening verse remarkably similar to my target and the same objective of traveling the Road to Dundee.

Names of the authors of songs on the list with 'Song' were noted and that was where the name Charles Gray first showed. From a variety of sources I learned that Gray was born in Anstruther in 1782, joined the Royal Marines at age 23, was known as a songwriter, retired to Edinburgh with the rank of captain on full pay after 36 years' service, was the member of a Burns Club and died in 1851. I also found a photo but eventually learned the photo was dated 1855, four years after the captain died. Wrong Charles.

While the travelers in the modern ballad came from the north to Dundee, the *Song* led from the south, through Fife. I began a search for the Burns connection in Fife Burns Clubs but had no success. More information was available in Stephanie Stevenson's book *Anstruther* and in a second run through the lists I had started with. Knowing the author's name I gained the information that Gray had published two books of his works and the first of those, *Poems and Songs* was published with over 200 pages in 1811. This book shows without a doubt that Gray was a devoted fan of Robert Burns, to the extent that, although his poetry was original, the style, meter and in some cases the themes are patterned after Burns' works. In order to publish such a book within 15 years of the Bard's death Gray must have found an early copy of his works and taken it with him when he became an officer in the Marines in 1805. Perhaps

before he left he spent some time in Ayrshire and made his first contact in Irvine with David Sillar, the good friend of Burns. Sillar could have helped Gray learn a lot about the Bard.

Irvine

I had finally found that the Burns Club connection of Gray was with Irvine, not Fife and through the media of Henry Cairney, jointly a member of the Irvine Club and Bill Nolan also in Irvine and a past president of the Federation, whom several of us met on his official visit to Calgary and who then passed me on to Club member Ian Dickson. While I was busy catching up with Charles Gray, Ian Dickson of the Irvine Burns Club had, for a break, set aside a report he had been preparing about the same individual, who had been an eminent member of the Irvine Burns Club from its early years.

Ian revived his report and prepared an excellent video to accompany it. With the means of ZOOM I arranged for him to give a presentation of his talk and video to the Carnie group and this took place in April 2021. Ian has kindly provided the Calgary Burns Club with a copy of his presentation and it is available for viewing by members. The Irvine Club was formed in 1826 and David Sillar was one of the two leaders of the important founding members and quite possibly was the contact for Gray to join in 1829. Gray became a prominent member in bringing humour, song and poetic entertainment to the Club meetings when his duties permitted his attendance. His song *Blythe, Blythe and Merry are We* became the Club song and he frequently wrote and sang musical items relevant to Club activities. He also encouraged many of the Edinburgh literati to become interested in the Club and whom he then nominated as potential honorary members. Several of those who became honorary members, such as Patrick Maxwell, Thomas Latto and James Smart offered one or more of their works to the Club. During his membership, in addition to his other contributions Gray served twice as president of the Irvine Club.

Anstruther

The rival Royal Burghs of Anstruther Wester, Anstruther Easter and Kilrenny (& Cellardyke) were inaugurated some four hundred years ago and they have struggled, squabbled and to some degree thrived in their past, eventually becoming The United Burghs in 1929. They are separated by small burns, with the Dreel running between the Anstruthers as the only one of significant size. The history of the local Gray family starts with Charles Senior who was born probably in the 1740s and whose seafaring career well-suited him for his later job as an excise officer aboard a revenue cutter. Although there is a slip-way to the Dreel from the door of his house I doubt that the flow would

have allowed a cutter access. The location of a ford is a further barrier to any such craft passing that point. This ford is well known as being the location where the Beggar's Benison story arose, when the disguised King James V was 'ferried' on 'piggy-back' by a 'beggar-wench' to keep his shoes dry. He rewarded her with a gold coin for her help and in gratitude she gave him her famous blessing "May yer purse ne'er be toom an' yer horn ay in bloom."

Charles senior moved into his White (white-washed) House in West Anstruther High Street when he married Elizabeth Burn, approximately in the 1760s. Elizabeth was the granddaughter of the Rev. Andrew Burn (1702 -1760) who was then the former minister of West Anstruther Church. In the following 15 years or so they had four sons and three daughters. With help from Elizabeth's uncle all four sons accepted commissions in the Royal Marines and all four lost their lives in the Mediterranean wars that were raging from the late 1790s till 1815. The eldest, George is the only one known to have left behind an heir; his son Charles, mentioned earlier, who had gone sheep-farming in Australia.

What happened to Elizabeth has not been determined but by about 1781 Charles senior was married to Margret Raiker, daughter of a prominent family at that time in Anstruther. Margret was the mother of the subject Charles in March 1782. There was no more issue though Charles senior is known to have married for a third time. What became of Margret is not known, nor has the name of wife number three been found. Charles served on the west Anstruther council and in non-clerical duties in West Anstruther Church.

Charles junior and his mother likely stayed with the rest of the family and he is reported to have received a reasonably good education, 'fitting him for the sea'. It is likely that the school would have been located at this time in West Anstruther Church, a short step from the family house. A life-long friend was one of his schoolmates, William Tennant who later was the author of *Ainster Fair*, about Maggie Lauder and though seriously physically handicapped, he rose to become a language professor at St. Andrews University.

When he finished school Charles became a weaver but he was destined to join the Royal Marines and go to sea. Before he left to go to Greenwich to receive his commission he had developed an engrossing enthusiasm for the works of Robert Burns and had taken to writing verse himself. Somewhere between his ages of 18 and 23 it is reasonable to expect that he made a trip to Ayrshire to relish learning all he could about Burns by 'being on the ground'. It is possible too that this was when he met David Sillar who had

opened a Navigation School in Irvine which would also have been of interest to Gray. As a new Marine and soon at sea, he had his book on Burns with him as several of his poems have an appended inscription with the date and Mediterranean location where they were written.

Charles would have been on hand to see his first book published in 1811 and it includes *An Epistle to Mr. David Sillar* encouraging the thought that they had met and several love poems introducing Jess as “*the one I love best*”. Jess was Jessie Carstairs, from nearby Kingsbarns, whose brother was an Anstruther minister, Rev. Dr. Andrew Carstairs. Two years after the Napoleonic wars ended in 1815, Charles and Jess were married.

Charles and Jessie had two sons Charles Edward Gray born in West Anstruther in 1819 and Thomas Carstairs Gray born in 1820 in Kingsbarns Parish when Charles was abroad. Probably being in Kingsbarns became a permanent move for Jessie as the family in the White House would likely be any unmarried stepsisters of her husband and an 80-year old Charles Senior, if he still survived. She would have felt more at home with her own relatives with Charles away most of the time. There is no more record of Gray family members in the house and the next reference to the building is in 1863 and shows it has been refitted as a public house and to benefit from the arrival of the Railway along the northwest edge of the town it was named the Railway Tavern.

Details are not available but Jessie died very young, in late 1820s. The sequence of vital events in Charles’ life is not clear around this time but Jessie’s death, his acquisition of the property in Lauriston and becoming a member of the Irvine Burns Club all occurred in the same time period and may have taken place in this order.

Both sons would probably have had their education in Kingsbarns but no detail has been found. It is less likely, but possible, that they would have been in Edinburgh where their father may have sought help for their security while he was on active service. Young Charles died in 1836 at the age of 18 but whether by accident or ailment is not known. Nothing is found about his brother Thomas until he is recognised in navy records of 1851 as Lieutenant Thomas Carstairs Gray of the Royal Navy. Since the Marines are part of the navy it later was shown that he had indeed joined the Marines in 1847 and became an officer in the renowned Shannon brigade. This unit earned its fame in the Crimea and India. In Thomas’s time the commanding officer, William Peel, was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery and was knighted for meritorious service. It has been suggested that it was while both Peel and Gray were on their way home that both contracted smallpox and died in 1958. It has not been established whether or not

Thomas, with the rank of Captain and aged 38, left any heirs or was married. A monument at Southsea shows the names.

Following his retirement from the Marines in 1841, Charles was encouraged by the Irvine Club members to publish another book of his poetry and *Lays and Lyrics* appeared in the same year. Though mostly new items, a number of the included poems were some of his favourites from *Poems and Songs* even though it had a second printing three years after its original issue in 1811. In the preface of the new book there are many signatures of friends, interestingly assembled as on a circular plate. Particularly noteworthy are William Tennant his friend and William Burns, son of Robert. Tennant's masterpiece *Ainster Fair* was published in 1821 and Charles included his own thoughts on Maggie Lauder in *Lays and Lyrics*.

Another prominent connection with Tennant appeared in 1813 when they jointly established in Anstruther the Musomanik society, devoted to jovial fun found in song, dance and poetry, leaning to classical themes as represented by the Roman god Apollo. With a few other distinguished members like authors and poets Walter Scott and James Hogg, they met to write, exchange and enjoy primarily their own works and with music. It lasted only four years; perhaps they waned on expressing their ideas to others.

Edinburgh

Staying in Edinburgh was something that Charles must have enjoyed, with many of his literary friends in Lauriston in the same or a nearby street and possibly with his son Thomas then 21 when his father retired. There is very little family information about Charles; there is no indication that he married again. All recognition today of what he was writing is scattered and it appears that he did not keep a personal record and he did not publish anything by himself to show his later works such as he offered at Irvine Burns Club meetings. He was a much more regular attendee after he retired and was more often available being honoured as president again in 1846. How the two came into contact is not known but a letter from Charles to George Thomson, publisher of many of Burns' works, shows that he was having trouble getting Thomson to publish in accordance with the author's wishes and to Gray this was unacceptable. The notion that he had the better language skill was exactly where Thomson caused much of his disagreement with Burns.

My impression is that his description by a friend as “being of short stature with grey, weather-beaten features and always smiling...” fits the photo I have obtained and as the author of the poems and songs in his two books. At the same time it misses the Royal Marine Captain, battle-scarred veteran of Trafalgar and other battles and sieges, who retired to writing poetry pieces for newspapers and periodicals as well as critiques and edits of other poets. He wrote critically on fourteen of Burns’ works and these items are stored in National Biology records, previously known as National Archives.

In addition to William Burns, Charles has been described as ‘a good friend’ of Burns’ sister, Isobel Begg, in which case he doubtless gained much information from her about Robert. Charles was also a collector of Burnsiana and has original pieces in Burns’ handwriting on specially designed Excise paper, of which, for example are the verses of *O for Ane and Twenty, Tam*.

Charles Gray died in 1851 after suffering for some time from an unspecified illness. He died intestate and as a result, any copyrights he may have had became invalid.

Postscripts

Many items are noted as being unknown. Perhaps some may yet be found but that is for another searcher. From Ian Dickson’s work and what I have added, there are footholds.

Maybe Charles’ son did marry and a descendant may still be found. Thomas wrote too.

A strange situation arose following disastrous storm destruction to Anstruther Easter main harbour wall in 1896 or 1898 (record was indistinct). An appeal was sent out for public support as the cost was far above the Burgh’s means. Charles Gray from London made a donation. There may have been dozens of Charles Grays in London but how many had heard of Anstruther and how many of them would have donated? Who was he?

I stayed in West Anstruther, a short distance away from a gentleman named Captain Gray who died in the 1940s. I remember little about him but I think his title was for the Merchant Navy. I don’t remember another Gray family in the town.

I thought I had found a Gray heir when I met virtually Iain Gray an Anstruther resident but though passionate and talented in Poetry and knowledgeable on literature, his family is comparatively new to the district and he knows of no connection to the earlier Grays.

In 2019 before I knew of Charles and his family, I spent a short vacation in Anstruther and with relatives celebrated a birthday in the restaurant of the Dreel Tavern. The name used to be Railway Tavern, so while I was searching across Scotland for the author of a poem I was unaware that I was sitting in what had been the house he was born in!

I have had a great experience in being able to help in bringing a man and his works back into the open where they belong and in meeting a number of like-minded fine people.

All of this was because I was interested in the poetry and copyright of the Dundee poem.

I do believe that Charles Gray was the author of both poems examined. (Or Thomas was)

References:

Anstruther by Stephanie Stevenson.

Charles Gray by Ian Dickson.

The Road and the Miles to Dundee and *Song*, later named *Grim Winter was Howlin'*.

The Dictionary of National Biography and related national records.

Records of Burghs of Kilrenny and Anstruther; courtesy of Kevin Dunion

The History of Fife and Kinross by A J G Mackay

Ron Budd for The Carnie Group, Calgary Burns Club 30 Dec 2021