



Robert Ainslie, was born in March 1766 in Duns and died in April 1838 in Edinburgh and became a very close friend of Robert Burns. He came from a well off family as his father was the land-steward of Lord Douglas' Berwickshire estates in the Borders. Ainslie met Burns in when he was a law student in Edinburgh in the spring of 1787, probably at a Masonic or Crochallan Fencibles event, as both were Freemasons.

In 1788 Ainslie, aged only 22, he became a Writer to the Signet, a Writer to the Signet being a Scottish judicial officer responsible for preparing warrants, writs, and other documents and being originally a clerk in the office of the Secretary of State. Interestingly, he took on Agnes McLehose's son Andrew, as an apprentice lawyer, and who also later became a Writer to the Signet.

At first glance, it would appear that Robert Ainslie was not the type of man with whom Burns would form a close friendship as he was seven years younger than Burns, just 21, when they met. He did obviously know of the Bard however, as he was listed as a subscriber to two copies of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.

Ainslie came from a middle-class background, with talents and accomplishments quite limited, but he was known for his carefree disposition and his zestful pleasure in wine and women, which obviously endeared him to Burns. I suppose it could be said that if Ainslie hadn't become a friend of Burns, we would never have heard of him. Nevertheless, Burns always seemed to need to take pleasure in having a friend or companion like Ainslie, whose attributes included a marked sense of humour and a devil may care attitude to life.

Robert Ainslie married Jean Cunningham on 22 December 1798, with whom he had a son and several daughters. He also fathered an illegitimate son, which obviously impressed Burns as according to William Scott Douglas, Burns sent Ainslie the poem '*Robin Shure in Hairst*' to fit the occasion. He added "*Welcome, Sir, to the venerable Society, of FATHERS!*" Then I suppose the ultimate compliment was when Burns also suggested that Ainslie's son's middle name should be 'Burns'. It is not known if Burns ever paid such a compliment to some of his other friends and one wonders what Ainslie thought of this compliment!

Their friendship must have been really close as Ainslie acted as an intermediary in the poet's relationships with Agnes M'Lehose, Jenny Clow and May Cameron. In fact, it was to Ainslie that he asked him to call on May Cameron, the Edinburgh servant girl, who Burns and seduced 'and give her ten shillings', but he also added, 'don't for Heaven's sake meddle with her as a Piece'

Their friendship continued when he accompanied the poet on the first part of his Border tour of May 1787, where they visited Ainslie's home, at Berrywell near Duns, and where they were both

made 'Royal Arch Masons' of the local lodge. After this initiation, Ainslie then decided to return to Edinburgh, although it is not known for his reason why. Burns continued the tour alone, but he obviously regretted the absence of Ainslie's companionship and laughter, as on his return to Mauchline, Burns wrote to him saying; 'There is one thing for which I set great store by you as a friend and it is this, that I have not a friend upon earth, besides yourself, to whom I can talk nonsense without forfeiting some degree of self esteem.'

As a further indication of their friendship and closeness was the fact that Burns had divulged to Ainslie that he had been a covert member of the [Society of the Friends of the People](#), a group which strived for parliamentary reform, until it was suppressed by the government. It must also be said that as an indication of how close the relationship really was, as Burns introduced Ainslie to Mrs. [McLehose](#) and even made him an early confidant in his affair with Agnes.

Ainslie went on to write several books on agricultural subjects and legal and financial matters affecting local landowners. In his later life Ainslie turned to religion and became an Elder of the Church of Scotland and was the author of two religious works: 'A Father's Gift to his Children' and 'Reasons for the Hope that is in us'.

Questions still arise however, over Ainslie's relationship with the Burns since Ainslie made certain that after the poet's death, none of his own letters to Burns were made public and he apparently destroyed them. Perhaps it could be said that after Ainslie qualified as a Writer to the Signet, he became much more conscious of his social rank and therefore socially superior to Burns and wanted to ensure all connections with Burns were severed.

Ainslie died in 1838, aged 71, in Edinburgh and is buried in St. Cuthbert's Churchyard.