

MARGARET MATTEWS aka MARGARET BURNS

Margaret Matthews was born in Durham, England in 1769. She was one of three daughters from her father's first marriage. After her father's second marriage, Miss Matthews began calling herself Margaret "Burns" and moved from Durham to Edinburgh, arriving there in 1789. She met a girl about the same age, Sally Sanderson, and they moved into a house on Rose Street.

Burns (as she quickly became known) was very beautiful and fashionable. The frontispiece to this paper is a copy of an engraving by John Kay depicting her wearing the fashion of the time. The original of this engraving is in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

It was alleged that Margaret and Sally were involved in a number of "disturbances" around their home on Rose Street. On 6th August 1789, the city officers left a citation at their address requiring Miss Burns to appear before the Baillies in the Council Chambers. The citation alleged that Margaret Burns and Sally Sanderson, kept a 'very irregular and disorderly house' in Rose Street, Edinburgh', which caused great annoyance to their respectable neighbours. These outraged citizens alleged that there were great riots and disturbances in the house by licentious and profligate persons of both sexes, that there was fighting and cursing, (and worst of all) *singing* on Sundays.

At this point, it is worthy to note that the Baillie – or magistrate – who headed the hearing was William Creech, who was Robert Burns' publisher of the 1787 Edinburgh edition of Burns's Poems chiefly in the Scottish Dialect.

The hearing was not an open-and-shut case. Miss Burns denied the charges and said she had not been in the house at the time of the alleged offence. This, despite the Procurator-fiscal (the Scottish equivalent of a district attorney or prosecutor) producing witnesses, was challenged by Miss Burns' lawyer, who charged that the witnesses had been improperly questioned. Nevertheless, Baillie Creech found the two women guilty and sentenced them to be banished 'forth of the city and liberties forever'. If they returned to the city, they would have been subject to six months imprisonment in the House of Corrections for Women.

What next ensued was amazingly creative. I cannot put it in any better words than those of distinguished academic and U of C professor of Scottish Studies, great Burnsian, and this Club's first Bard, Robert H. Carnie, for whom our Carnie Group was named. I quote: "Miss Burns, already well known for her very fancy outfits, and her ladylike manners, with the help of her influential friends (I hesitate to use the word 'customers') now presented a bill of suspension on October 1 to the Lord Ordinary, Lord Dreghorn, who insisted that the Procurator-Fiscal provide written answers to Miss Burns's petition. The legal juggernaut was now moving and when the next Lord Ordinary (Lord Ankerville) surveyed the evidence from both sides he refused Miss Burns's bill of suspension. Miss Burns's legal friends now thought she could still win her case by appealing to the Court of Session (as a whole, fifteen judges). That court required new submissions from Miss Burns and the P.F. The judges were very impressed with Miss Burns's solicitor's new petition which alleged that it was still not proved that Miss Burns kept a disorderly house 'at the time libelled', and that there were two opposing sets of witnesses: the neighbours who swore that she did, and her high society friends described as 'persons

respectable in point of rank, or situation or character who were equally ready to swear that her house was **not** a disorderly house, at least when they had been in it. Miss Burns's lawyer also claimed for the second time that the baillies had used illegal procedures, and incredibly they persuaded one of the original complainers to assert that he had only signed the complaint because his neighbours had asked him to do so, and that he was sorry! The Lords of Session pronounced on 22 December, 1789 in favour of Miss Burns and suspended the sentence of banishment.” End quote.)

The verdict thus overturned, Margaret Burns returned to Edinburgh and renewed her practice in the world's oldest profession.

What did our Rabbie think of all this? He was not related to Margaret Burns, but he followed her case closely. There is no record that they ever met one another.

By this time, Robert Burns was no longer on good terms with William Creech. Creech had made it difficult for Robert to get his money from the sale of his book. Creech was respected in Edinburgh, but he was not very popular.

Burns was coming out of his latest bout of despair and depression as he approached his 31st birthday.

On February 2, 1790, Robert wrote from Ellisland to Peter Hill. Hill had been employed as Creech's clerk in the publishing house, but by this time he was on his own. It is believed that it was Hill who got Burns' final payment out of Creech. Burns not only had a business relationship with Hill, but they had also become good friends.

Although it was a business letter, Burns couldn't pass up the opportunity to rant: "...how is the fate of my poor namesake, Mademoiselle Burns decided? Which of their grave lordships can lay his hand on his heart and say that he has not taken advantage of such frailty; nay, if we may judge by near six thousand years of experience can the world do without such frailty?" The rant continued: "As for those flinty-bosomed, puritanical Prosecutors of Female Frailty & Persecutors of Female Charms – ... may Woman curse them! May Woman Blast them! May Woman damn them! May her lovely hand inexorably shut the Portal of Rapture to their most earnest prayers & fondest essays for entrance!"

Burns wrote this stanza on the bottom of his copy of the Kay's print mentioned at the outset of the address:

“Cease ye prudes, your envious railing!
Lovely Burns has charms – confess!
True it is she had one failing:
Had ae woman ever less?”

As mentioned, Margaret Burns remained in Edinburgh after the verdict was overturned but eventually moved to Roslyn, Midlothian, less than 10 miles from her Rose Street address. She died shortly after this at the age of 22.

After her death, Robert Burns wrote an epitaph on her:
(Only 2 stanzas quoted here.)

“Fair Burns for long the talk and toast
Of many a gaudy Beau
That Beauty has forever lost
That made each bosom glow.

Beneath this cold green sod lies dead
That once bewitching dame
That fired Edina's lustful sons,
And quenched their glowing flame.”

An amusing footnote to the Margaret Burns vs. William Creech saga can be found in the story of Miss Burns in the 1877 edition of artist John Kay's *Original Portraits II*: Creech was a life-long bachelor. Imagine his anger and disgust when he learned that a London newspaper had announced that "Baillie Creech, of literary celebrity in Edinburgh", was about to marry "the beautiful and accomplished Miss Burns". Creech wrote to the newspaper demanding a retraction. The paper's apology must have raised Creech's ire even higher. It did not say that there had been no such marriage planned, but that Creech and Miss Burns had decided not to get married ... "matters having been otherwise arranged to the mutual satisfaction of both parties".

Prepared for the Calgary Burns Club by
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With thanks to:

Robert H. Carnie: Law and Order in 18th C. Edinburgh
The Case of Miss Burns v. the Baillie, April 1988
Robert Crawford: The Bard – Robert Burns A Biography
Princeton University Press 2009
James A. Mackay: Robert Burns The Complete Letters & The Complete Poetical Works