



ROBERT BURNS AND HIS TIME IN IRVINE



Written by Tony Grace for the Carnie Group of the Calgary Burns Club, September 2024.
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In 1781 Robert Burns moved to Irvine with one purpose in mind, and that was to learn the skills of flax dressing. I believe there were two factors that caused him to make that move: first, he and his brother Gilbert had been

growing flax for several years and Robert had decided that he should become skilled in flax dressing, which would then result in increased revenue to them, but to do this he would have to go to somewhere like Irvine where flax dressing was routinely carried out, in order to learn the trade; secondly, but probably equally importantly, he had been carrying on an unusual courtship-by-letter with Peggy Chalmers, and he had finally proposed to the lady in his fourth letter, but been politely rejected, much to his surprise and chagrin. These were the main reasons, although it must be remembered that he was 22 years old, and had always been living at home in fairly isolated circumstances with limited social contacts, and was probably anxious to spread his wings more.

Burns moved to Irvine about the middle of July of 1781, but must have been planning his trip before that, as somewhere along the way he had entered into an agreement with an Alexander Peacock to learn the trade of flax dressing, in return for investing in the latter's business. Peacock was kin with Burns' mother – possibly even a half-brother. Whatever, Burns was soon at work in Peacock's heckling shop – as the place where flax dressing was carried out was called. This arrangement did not last long, as Peacock turned out to be dishonest and was cheating Burns, in the poet's words: *"my partner was a scoundrel of the first water who made money by the mystery of thieving"*. After a bitter argument they parted company, but Burns was able soon after to come up with an arrangement with another person in the flax dressing business, and was soon at work with him. The dates of these changes and who the second person he went into business with, are not known, but the change happened well before the end of 1781, during which time Burns life had been further complicated by a severe depression.

It was at Hogmanay that disaster struck; in Burns own words: *"while we were giving a welcoming carousel to the New Year, our shop, by the drunken carelessness of my Partner's wife, took fire and was burnt to ashes; and left me like a true poet, not worth sixpence. I was obliged to give up the business"*. And he did – he made no further attempt to learn the flax dressing business.

But flax was not the only thing that had been taking his time and interest in Irvine. He had been exploring the town and meeting people, using his contacts through the Masonic lodges as well as the church, both of which reputedly saw his attendance regularly. He soon discovered Templeton's bookshop, where he became a regular, to stay current with the news, not only in Britain but in Europe and beyond, and to take advantage of the extensive collection of ballads that Templeton carried. Sitting at the counter he devoured these avidly, reading out loud to all present anything that caught his fancy.

It was reported that Burns would regularly meet with a group of friends, quite often after the parish church service on a Sunday finished, to discuss and debate various religious topics, particularly the Calvinist doctrine. The same source claimed that before Burns left Irvine he was questioning some of the Calvinist tenets he had held before, and was definitely become more liberal in his beliefs. The idea of man being a helpless being in the hands of a relentless deity was in his view, totally unwarranted. The God he believed in was a God of perfect justice and of perfect love. Rejecting completely the Calvinist doctrine of a limited atonement, he wanted hope of eternal life for all – that was his belief.

Burns formed a strong friendship with Captain Richard Brown, a sailor some six years older than him, and who had lived a somewhat full, if unusual, life. It was thanks to Brown that Burns rapidly changed from a somewhat naïve person who had a limited upbringing on the farm, to a much more "street-wise" individual, much more familiar with the ways of the world. Burns admired the man and together they formed a life-long friendship - in his own words: *"From this adventure I learned something of town life. But the principal thing which gave my mind a turn was, I formed a bosom-friendship with a young fellow, the first created being I had ever seen but a hapless son of misfortune..... This gentleman's mind was fraught with courage, independence, magnanimity, and every noble, manly virtue. I love him, I admired him, to a degree of enthusiasm; and I strove to imitate him. In some measure I succeeded: I had the pride before, but he taught it to flow in proper channels. His knowledge of the world was vastly superior to mine, and I was all intention to learn. He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater than*

myself when WOMAN was the presiding star". His brother Gilbert summed it up somewhat more succinctly: "In Irvine he had contracted some acquaintance of a freer manner of thinking and living than he had been used to, whose society prepared him for over-leaping the bounds of rigid virtue which had hitherto restrained him".

However, it is to his everlasting credit that Brown discerned the genius of his poetic ability and the potential that he had. He was the first to suggest that his verses had sufficient merit to warrant going into 'guid black prent,' and who fired his ambition 'to endeavour at the character of a poet.'

Burns' stay in Irvine was unfortunately dominated by an extremely severe period of suffering with what we might call today a psychosomatic ailment, brought on by acute depression, but which did not in any way lessen the severity of the physical aspects of the illness, which in turn was compounded by the ravages of overwork, and an unhealthy working environment, resulting in a nervous breakdown; tragically this was only the first of such incidents he was to experience in his life. The illness was so bad that his father visited him in Irvine, following which Burns wrote to his father stressing the comfort he got from the Bible and including the following words: *"Sometimes, indeed, when for an hour or two, as is sometimes the case, my spirits are a little lightened I glimmer a little into futurity; but my principal, and indeed my only pleasurable employment is looking backwards & forwards in a moral and religious way – I am quite transported at the thought that ere long, perhaps very soon, I shall bid an eternal adieu to all the pains, & uneasiness and disquietudes of this weary life; for I assure you I am heartily tired of it, and, if I do not very much deceive myself I could contentedly & gladly resign it".*

During this period Burns wrote several poems that reflect his mood of depression. Although these poems are not among those that are considered his best, I sense in them a powerful force that trumpets his illness and his frustration as he battles it.; particularly with his continual beseeching to his God to take the pain away. In **To Ruin;**

When shall my soul, in silent peace,
Resign Life's joyless day?
My weary heart its throbbing cease,
Cold-mould'ring in the clay?
No fear more, no tear more
To stain my lifeless face,
Enclasped and grasped,
Within thy cold embrace!

Again in **A Prayer in the Prospect of Death;**

O Thou unknown, Almighty Cause
Of all my hope and fear!
In whose dread presence, ere an hour,
Perhaps I must appear!

Where human weakness has come short,
Or frailty stept aside,
Do Thou, All-Good – for such Thou art –
In shades of darkness hide.

Note the title of all these poems – and one more – **Stanzas on the Same Occasion:**

Why am I loth to leave this earthly scene?

Have I so found it full of pleasing charms?
Some drops of joy with draughts of ill between;
Some gleams of sunshine 'mid renewing storms?
Is it departing pangs my soul alarms?
Or death's unlovely, dreary, dark abode?
For guilt, for guilt, my terrors are in arms;
I tremble to approach an angry God,
And justly smart beneath His sin-avenging rod.

I believe these poems – and others of the same ilk, are unfortunately the real legacy of Burns' stay in Irvine.

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