

## **The Final Eighteen Months of the Life of the Poet Robert Burns**

### **Club Presentation – January 14/25**

Gentlemen, as we all know, Robert Burns was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1759, and that of course is why we celebrate the amazing life and works of Scotland's National Bard this month each year. But the downside is that he died at the very young age of thirty-seven-and-a-half, on July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1796. Why so young? This evening I'd like to focus on the final 18 months or so of his life, which was both a very positive and productive phase, but also hastened his failing health and his early death.

So where do we start. Well, by late 1794 Burns had put in close to five years as an Excise Officer, all of that time in the Dumfries Excise District. He proved himself to be very knowledgeable and effective in his post, and on December 22<sup>nd</sup> of that year he was appointed as Acting Supervisor of the Dumfries District, temporarily replacing his own Supervisor, Alexander Finlander, owing to the latter taking ill. This assignment lasted for four months that exposed him to two major physical onslaughts, the first being a tremendous increase in his workload. Instead of a more-or less 9 to 5 workday, his new duties required many more hours and much more travelling. He had to cover all of the Dumfries Excise District supervising and checking on the other Excise officers, assessing the quality of their work and writing up performance reports among other duties. This lengthened his own workdays often to 14 hours. The second challenge was the weather. That four months coincided with one of the worst winters in the living memory of that era, forcing him to struggle through bitter cold, many sleet-filled days and having to ride through frequent blizzards, trapping him in several feet of snow. It was no wonder that his health suffered so badly.

But that wasn't all; it coincided with the Poet becoming a founding member of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers, a bit of a Dad's Army put together to face the possible impending invasion of the French army led by that little shit, Napoleon Bonaparte. It comprised 63 local civilians, Burns being part of the management committee. From the records of the Volunteer Corps, we know that Burns put in many hours drilling and weapons training.

We might wonder why the Poet put himself through all of this stress at that time. He could have turned down the role of Dumfries Division Supervisor, yet he would likely have been motivated in hoping that his exemplary performance in that temporary role would have been proof of his suitability for substantial promotion, not just to the level of Supervisor, but eventually to that of 'Collector'. Such a promotion would have raised his very modest current salary of around £50 per annum to as much as a prodigious £1000. The duties of a Collector were surprisingly light and would have given him much more personal time to focus on his poetry. Had it not been for his plunge into fatal bad health, it seems very likely that he would eventually have risen to one of these select positions, especially with the help of supportive friends of high social and political standing, and others of high rank

within the Excise Service. And as already being hailed as Scotland's National Bard...well, no doubt that would have helped also!

Another event around this time was his support of a friend, Patrick Heron, who was standing for the Whig party in a by-election in the Spring of 1795. He put almost all of his poetic persuasion behind Heron by penning three ballads praising him and taking scurrilous swipes at his opponents. Quite likely because of that very effective power-of-the-pen support, Heron won. A General Election was called in May of 1796 and Burns composed a fourth supportive ballad that proved also a leg-up for Heron, who then also won over his opponent. Sadly, our Robert passed away before the victory was decided.

Beginning in early 1795 Burns reconnected with a young woman named Maria Riddell whom he had met and befriended in late 1791 shortly after he took over Ellisland Farm. He had first become a close friend with her brother-in-law, Robert Riddell, owner of a large estate bordering on Ellisland, known as Friar's Carse. Despite a considerable age difference, she impressed the Poet, not only because of her marked attractiveness, but also because she was a fairly competent poetess. Partly for that reason, they met rather often - too often in the opinion of some of the Riddell family. In December of 1793, an incident took place at a social gathering at Friars Carse - too involved to detail this evening - but that caused the intoxicated Burns to appear to commit a sexual indiscretion against Maria, witnessed by most of the guests, although it was almost certainly not nearly as bad as it seemed. However, it resulted in the Riddell family, including Maria, cutting him off completely, much to his distress.

So, his renewed contact with Maria would have been very uplifting, especially at the time of his deteriorating health problems. If nothing else, she would have been somewhat of a shoulder to cry on. At first they only exchanged a few letters but were destined to get together again at a critical time a little over a year later, in fact only about two weeks before Robert's demise. I'll come back to that later.

Burns' health throughout 1795 fluctuated between OK and seemingly quite concerning. I use the word 'seemingly' because details about how often he took ill, how badly and for how long on each of these occasions were scarce. We know that for much of that year he was suffering from quite severe bouts of rheumatic pain, and other debilitating, but unnamed conditions. In one of his letters to Maria Riddell in the summer of 1795 he complained of being in bed, adding: "*The health is, I think flown from me forever.*" One of his less threatening ailments was painful bouts of the toothache...no threat to his survival, but very disturbing to him as conveyed in his poetical *Address to the Toothache*, written in whimsical language, but a serious complaint, nevertheless, ending with a veiled threat to impose it on Scotland's foes for a twelvemonth:

*Gie a' the faes o' Scotland's weal*

*A towmond's toothache!*

*twelve month's*

The first four months of 1795 seem to have been his worst, but by about May he seemed to be quite spirited and active, physically and in his letters. He sent a great deal of material to George Thomson, publisher of *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* which was a compendium of old Scottish songs, many of which Burns 'improved'. He also contributed many of his own poems and songs to James Johnson who eventually published six volumes of *The Scots Musical Museum*, about a third of their content provided by Burns, who did not ask for a fee from either publisher. He embraced both of these ventures with enthusiasm and deserved enormous credit for his huge volunteer contributions. In fact, he was so recognized, but mostly following his death when the to publications were in wide circulation.

In the September of 1795 he received news of the sudden death of his four-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Riddell Burns, who had been very ill for the past two years. She was in Mauchlin at the time, and he had been too sickly to visit her near the end; he was not even well enough to attend her funeral. This incredibly sad event may well have intensified his illnesses. In fact, he was confined to his bed for most of October through to January 1796. Over the following few months up to his death in July, there is scant detail about his health, but what there is suggests frequent ups and downs, but more downs than ups! In early June he wrote to Maria reporting that he was "*in such miserable health...Rackt as I am in rheumatism*". Rhematic pain was no doubt a big part of his overall debility, but he would have been suffering from at least one other more death threatening conditions. The limitations of medical science at the time appear to have been missing the true major threat to his life, but modern medical specialists who have focused on his reported symptoms have expressed the view that the probable cause of his demise was heart related, likely myocardial infarction, or something very close. But we'll probably never know for sure.

Moving on now to the critical three weeks or so of his life, near the end of June 1796, his two attending doctor friends - not being able to identify or treat his deteriorating condition - proposed a highly questionable alternative, persuading him to embark on a short period of sea-bathing and horse-riding, while taking in the sea air. Perhaps mostly out of desperation, he agreed and made the tortuous ten-mile journey to the village near Brow on the Solway Firth at the beginning of July. He spent three weeks there, most days immersing himself in the ice-cold sea, riding horses and sipping the reputed medicinal waters of Brow Well. He was housed in a low-rated hostelry, but that was probably the least of his discomforts. In letters he wrote from there, in some he expressed the view that he thought the sea air was helping him, but in others complained of having almost no appetite and very little energy.

During his stay, on July 5th he visited and dined with Maria Riddell who was also having health problems and had moved to the nearby town of Lochmaben for similar remedial treatment. After his death she wrote about how her first glance of him as he entered the

room “*The stamp of death was imprinted on his features. He seemed to be touching the brink of eternity*”. He was open in expressing the belief that he was near to death, but he was most concerned about his wife Jean and his children, worrying about their financial well being after his passing.

He returned to Dumfries on July 18<sup>th</sup>; a witness observing that he was physically shaking as he exited the cart that he arrived in, and, in seeming pain, he tottered to the door of his house on Mile-Hole-Bray looking hollow and ghastly. Details of his final three days are scarce, and in some instances questionable. But we know Jean and the children returned home from Mauchline before Robert did, and the lovely Jessie Lewers attended diligently to help look after the failing Poet and also to assist Jean and the children, Jean being about to give birth.

Robert died at 5am on July 21<sup>st</sup>. His good friend John Syme took charge of the funeral arrangements. Placed in his coffin dressed in his Royal Volunteer uniform, Burns was moved to the Dumfries Town Hall on Sunday evening, July 24<sup>th</sup>. The following day at 1pm the funeral cortege procession began its half-mile journey to St. Michael’s Churchyard, led by twenty members of the Dumfries Volunteers, armed with their rifles and moving in time to the *Dead March in Saul*. His relatives followed, then other dignitaries, plus the remaining Volunteers and additional military men. The streets on the route were lined with the Cinqueport Cavalry and the AngusShire Fencibles, as well as a huge public turn out. It has been claimed that a total of about 10,000 people attended.

At the churchyard, the bells were being tolled as the Bier was carried to the prepared grave and the twenty armed Dumfries Volunteers fired three volleys over the coffin after it had been lowered. Robert Burns was finally at rest.

It was sadly ironic that as the procession neared the churchyard, it came very close to actually passing the Burns’ house where Jean had been in labour that morning delivering their son, Maxwell Burns. Unfortunately, a sickly Maxwell followed his father to the grave a little less than three years later, and another son, Francis Wallace, who died in 1803 at the age of thirteen. Both were buried in the same grave as their father in the northeast corner of St. Michael’s Churchyard. However, the existing Mausoleum was completed in 1815 and Robert and his two sons were disinterred and re-buried there. Bonnie Jean joined them on April 1, 1834.