

Margaret “Peggy” Chalmers and Robert Burns



(Prepared by George Muir for the Carnie Group 2022)

Preface

The association between Margaret (Peggy) Chalmers and Robert Burns was short lived, 1787 – 1792, and with the exception brief meetings in the home of Dr. Blacklock and eight days at Harvieston in 1787, was conducted by written correspondence. Burns sent twelve to fourteen letters to Peggy of which about eleven copies have survived. Catherine Carswell writes in her *‘Robert Burns a Biography’* that Peggy destroyed all of Burns intimate letters to her but Cromek attributes this to her cousin Charlotte Hamilton. Apparently Peggy sent five letters to Burns of which no copies have survived. Most of the information available on their association is based mainly from Burns’ letters and second hand sources.

Opinions on Burns’ letters to Peggy vary from praise to lack of sincerity. In the 1944 Burns Chronicle, C. Angus ⁽¹⁾ writes that –

“His friendship with her was one of the finest episodes in his life, and Lockhart says of his letters to her that ‘with the exception of his letters to Mrs. Dunlop, there is perhaps no part of his correspondence which may be quoted so uniformly to his honour.’”

In a paper by Kenneth Simpson ⁽²⁾ published in Studies in Scottish Literature, University of South Carolina we find -

“Lewis P. Curtis remarks of Sterne, [Laurence Sterne 1713-1768, a contemporary of Burns], ‘He was preoccupied with the absorbing drama of his own existence.’”

“Exactly the same might be said of Burns. He is emphatically a man of his age” [says Simpson]

When it came to communication with women Mrs. Maria Riddell wrote of him - *“... none certainly ever outshone Burns in the charms – the sorcery I would almost call it, he was, in short, a charmer and a womaniser.”*

A publication in The Johns Hopkins University Press dated 1948 by Kenneth Porter ⁽³⁾ describes a visit to Stirling of a young American merchant, Henry Lee Jr. in June 1842, about nine months before Peggy’s death. There he happened to be a guest of a Mr. and Mrs. McMicking and had expressed an interest in Robert Burns and his works. It transpired that Peggy was a friend of Mrs. McMicking in whom she had confided with regard to Burns and had so passed on a few of Peggy’s opinions on Burns to Henry during his stay in Stirling.

In this paper I have attempted to blend actual correspondence, historical fact including Scottish National Records, popular beliefs, folk lore, and second hand personal stories. It attempts to show whether there was any true love between.

Peggy Chalmers and Robert Burns

It is generally accepted that Margaret (Peggy) Chalmers was born in 1763 to James and Euphemia Chalmers (née Murdoch) on the Fingland Estate close to St. John's Town of Dalry in Kirkcudbrightshire (now Dumfries and Galloway). [Note: The National Records of Scotland show a Margaret Chalmers born in Mauchline on June 13th 1760, father being James Chalmers but mother not named]. Peggy's mother was one of the three daughters of the last Laird of Cumloden in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright; the family name was Murdoch.

The family was forced to sell up due to serious financial difficulties and James rented Braehead Farm about two miles south of Mauchline. The time of this move is not known. Old Parish Registers show a James Chalmers, a Squireman, was buried in Dumfries on November 10th 1770. Euphemia then raised her two daughters with family support from her sister Barbara, who was Gavin Hamilton's stepmother. Barbara had married Gavin's father John Hamilton on 21st September 1761.

Robert Chambers, a Scottish publisher, printed (date unknown but possibly following Peggy's death in 1843) in his weekly '*Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*', the following, which was written by a relative of Peggy's - - - most likely on her mother's side through the relationship to Gavin Hamilton's family..

'In early life, when her hazel eyes were large and bright and her teeth white and regular, her face must have had a charm not always the result or the accompaniment of fine features. She was little, but her figure must have been perfect. . . . Her conversation was cheerful and intelligent. She rarely talked of books, yet greatly liked reading. She spoke readily and well, but preferred listening to others her religion not only supported her under affliction, but guided her whole conduct. She judged correctly of light literature, yet her general reading was serious and instructive. Her heart was warm, her temper even, and her conversation lively.'

The Burns family moved into Mossgiel farm, which was sub-let from Gavin Hamilton, about one mile north of Mauchline on February 13th 1784. Peggy was twenty years of age and by all accounts a very attractive young woman. She does not however, get a mention in Burns' poem '*The Belles of Mauchline*' written in 1784 nor in any of his other poetic works around that time.

At this point I think that it is relevant to introduce James Smith, one of Burns' closest confidants. He was born in Mauchline in 1765 where he eventually ran a drapery shop in his old home. He was described as 'a wily young rake of a fellow who was never out of trouble'. He, Burns and another of similar ilk, John Richmond, probably knew all the young girls in the area including Peggy Chalmers; his sister Jean Smith is that mentioned in '*The Belles of Mauchline.*' Smith moved to Avon, near Linlithgow around the end of 1785, where he became a partner in a calico-printing company.

Peggy moved with her mother to Edinburgh in 1786; there is no record of where they lived but it was more than likely at the home of her mother's second sister Charlotte who had married John Tait (born in Dumfries in 1746), a prominent lawyer and Writer to the Signet and friend of fellow lawyer Gavin Hamilton.



In 1780 the Harviestoun Estate (left), between Stirling and Dollar and close to the river Devon, was bought by John Tait. When his wife died, date unknown but probably 1786, he asked her sister, Mrs. Barbara Hamilton, to come with her family, the attractive Charlotte, her daughter, and siblings, to Harviestoun and keep house for him. Peggy and her mother Euphemia more than likely then moved back and forth between the estate and Edinburgh from 1786 until Peggy's marriage in 1788, although most of the time seems to have been spent at Harviestoun.

Whilst living in Edinburgh/Harviestoun Peggy was a regular visitor to the West Nicholson Street home of the blind Dr. Blacklock for whom she would sing and play the piano. Blacklock had been sent a copy of the Kilmarnock edition of Burns' poems in the autumn of 1786 by the Rev. George Lawrie of Loudon and had heard of Burns' intention of going to Jamaica. On September 4th, 1786 he wrote to Burns and it was this letter that convinced Burns to abandon the idea of going to Jamaica and go to Edinburgh where he arrived on November 29th 1786. He delayed his visit to Dr. Blacklock for two weeks as he was busy with Creech on the Edinburgh edition.

Burns may have met Peggy Chalmers in Edinburgh on this his first visit to Blacklock or not until early in 1787 after which he visited frequently until May 5th when he set off on his tour of the Borders with Robert Ainsley. Her singing and piano playing impressed him greatly as he later described her as *"one of the most accomplished women"*. Was it here she first heard of Mary Campbell as Dr. Blacklock knew of Burns' plan to emigrate? Peggy did have knowledge of his relationship with Mary Campbell and told her confidante Mrs. McMicking of - *'.....his love for Highland Mary, whom he had known as a servant in Lord Eglinton's [11th Earl of Eglinton] service, and a most excellent and interesting girl-that she felt sure Burns would have been utterly different, had she lived to cherish and support him,'*

By June 8th he was back in Mauchline from his Border tour and in late June made a solitary tour of the West Highlands. On the last day of this tour he was injured in a riding accident which incapacitated him for about ten days.

In a letter dated June 30th 1787 to his friend James Smith of Linlithgow, and formerly of Mauchline, Burns describes the last day of his tour but then lapses into one of his *'puzzled depression'* states as Carswell calls it, in which he describes an unsuccessful attempt to win over a young lady whom he describes as *'a distant acquaintance'* of Smith's. It is generally accepted that the young lady in question is Peggy Chalmers as he describes her as *'having a fine figure, and elegant manners; and in the train of some great folks whom you know, has seen the politest quarters in Europe'* and the timing is most likely within the first four months of 1787. During this time he met her frequently and talked to her of *'friendship in rather ambiguous terms'*. On one occasion he followed up with a letter written in the same ambiguous style. Peggy, according to Burns, misconstrued his intensions *'flew off in a tangent of female dignity and reserve'* and wrote him a letter which essentially gave him a complete dressing down and thoroughly set him back. Both of those letters have been lost. Burns was not used to women standing up for themselves in such a manner but after recovering from the shock of her response, he responded, according to him, with a *'cool, deliberate, prudent reply as brought my bird from her aerial towerings, pop down at my foot'* ---- rather an arrogant attitude don't you think, *'Gothic times'* even ----. Maybe it did, but we will see from their later meeting at Harviestoun.

I agree with Cromeck that Burns' *'cool, deliberate, prudent reply'* could well be his undated letter *'TO MISS —, AYRSHIRE'*, and that *'the person addressed was the "Peggy" of the Commonplace Book'*. Robert Chambers in his *'Life and Works of Robert Burns, Volume II, 1851'* says that *'No safe conjecture can be formed as to the person meant, beyond that of her being an Ayrshire lady'*. The letter begins ----

MY DEAR COUNTRYWOMAN,—I am so impatient to show you that I am once more at peace with you, that I send you the book I mentioned, directly, rather than wait the uncertain time of my seeing you.....'

The addressee, although not named, is undoubtedly Peggy Chalmers and includes *'AYRSHIRE'* to emphasise her background and not her location or where the letter was written. *'MY DEAR COUNTRYWOMAN'* does not reflect her nationality but is to remind her of her roots, viz a farmer's daughter, although *'of the higher sort'*, - - - her father being a Squireman. The letter begins, with an indirect reference to the incident described in Peggy's account to Mrs. McMicking and so I see this letter as close to an apology as he could make. It touches on his depressed state of mind then expands into praise for her musical talents, the impact that their meeting her has had on him, and finally a request to *'... just let us meet, if you please, in the old beaten way of friendship'*. We will never know if Peggy replied to this letter. The book that he sent with this letter could have been a copy of the Second Commonplace Book or the Kilmarnock Edition or the Edinburgh Edition but the Kilmarnock Edition is the most likely.

Peggy had told her friend Mrs. McMicking that Burns ---

'.....for with all his appreciation of the beautiful & delicate, his appearance was dark and coarse, and his manners tintured also, and how could it be otherwise, with his early associations and habits, but only needed to be in the company of those who respected themselves to be himself respectful, that once upon leaving her at her door after an evening of great excitement, and when he was inspired by the company in which he had been, he said " Now let us part like an honest lad & lassie, permit me to salute you! "

---- to which Peggy, according to Mrs. McMicking *"... lent a deaf ear, and talked on, Burns recoiled, was mortified and checked at once, and ever after respectful & attentive."*

A good understanding of Burns' meetings with Peggy on his initial and subsequent visits to Edinburgh is best described by Catherine Carswell which supports Peggy's impression of Burns as told to Henry Lee by Mrs. McMicking in 1842. Carswell writes- *'This second sojourn in Edinburgh, though less spectacular, was not less important than the first. Burns was no longer rustic adventurer, a prodigy to be gaped at like the learned pig, but a proved member of good society.'*

Peggy's talent, vibrant and friendly nature endeared her to the social elite of Edinburgh as can be seen in a 1787 painting of 'Burns in Edinburgh' by Charles Martin Hardie, which shows a soireé given by Jane, Duchess of Gordon in her drawing room in late August 1787 where he first read his poem, 'A Winter Night', to Edinburgh society. The segment below from this painting shows Peggy leaning on the back of the Duchess's chair and to her right is the Earl of Glencairn; the arm and leg to the left of the Duchess are those of Dr. Blacklock.



A member of Peggy's family once remarked -- *'I have often been told that her gentleness and vivacity had a favourable influence on the manner of Burns, and that he appeared to advantage in her presence'* -- and when we look at this painting we can see why.

On August 25th Burns set off from Edinburgh on his tour of the highlands with his friend William Nichol. He reached Stirling on the 26th and early the following morning rode up to Harviestoun; a journey of about one to two hours. He received a warm welcome and had breakfast. Burns was disappointed that Peggy was still in Edinburgh that day but was pleased to meet her mother and members of the Hamilton family. A party, including Charlotte, was formed and they went riding along the Devon River which flows close-by the estate. He took leave of Harviestoun that evening and returned to Stirling to meet up with Nichol for the continuation of their tour the following morning. On his departure he was invited to return to Harviestoun in October.

The following day he wrote a letter to Gavin Hamilton, most of which is devoted to describing Gavin's extended family. He does however tell Gavin that he was fascinated by Peggy's cousin Charlotte, about one year her younger, and wrote –

'Of Charlotte I cannot speak in common terms of admiration: she is not only beautiful but lovely. Her form is elegant; her features not regular, but they have the smile of sweetness, and the settled complacency of good nature in the highest degree; and her complexion, now that she has happily recovered her wonted health, is equal to Miss Burnet's. Her eyes are fascinating; at once expressive of good sense, tenderness, and a noble mind.'

Burns returned to Edinburgh from his Highland Tour on September 16th 1787. There is no record as to what Burns did on his return or whether he met up with Peggy. According to Cromek he wrote to her on September 26th but the identical letter in Project Gutenberg's publication, *'The Letters of Robert Burns, by Y J. Logie Robertson, M.A.'* gives the date as October 26. From the events in the lives of both Peggy and Burns in September and October, October seems to be the correct date.

Burns had been introduced to Dr. James McKittrick Adair, the son of an Ayr doctor and a relative of Mrs. Dunlop, by the Rev. George Lawrie of Loudon, who had also sent Dr. Blacklock a copy of Burns' poems. On October 4, 1787 the two left Edinburgh and went off on a tour of Stirlingshire. The initial part of their tour took them to Carron Iron works and Stirling Castle where they stayed at the Wingate Hotel. The following morning they set off through the fertile Vale of Devon to Harviestoun thus fulfilling the invitation he had received on his brief August visit. The intent was to stay eight days there, but on a ride out to the Ochil Hills with John Tait

and a Mr. Johnston of Alva, a small town situated immediately to the south of the Ochil Hills about four miles from Harviestoun. There they were, according to Burns, *'stormsteaded two days at the foot of the Ochel Hills'*.

There is no more detail either by Burns or Adair re this stay in Alva but there is local lore regarding this visit to Alva during his stay at Harviestoun. A Mauchline friend, Betty Black, now Mrs. Stewart, kept a public house in the village. Betty was born in Mauchline in 1754 and had been an intimate friend of Burns. She claimed that she featured in his poem *'The Holy Fair'* as *'Fun'* and that it was she who *'cam' up as ony lambie'*. It seems that Betty arranged for some of the locals to come and have *'twa gills'* with him and they observed that he was very silent on that occasion. Some have put this down to women being present and some have suggested that Peggy had just turned down his proposal of marriage. The latter is the most likely reason as years later she told the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell (1777 – 1844) that Burns had proposed to her, but that she had refused him.. In any event he did stay overnight in Alva and returned the next day to Harviestoun. They were in the Harviestoun area for ten days including the eight at the Harviestoun estate for Burns. A strong attraction developed between Dr. Adair and Charlotte Hamilton and they eventually married on October 1789. On leaving Harviestoun, Burns and Adair went on to Ochertyre to visit Sir William Murray and his wife Lady Augusta MacKenzie. Sir William was the son of Sir Patrick Murray of Ochertyre and Helen Hamilton, a relative of Gavin Hamilton. Lady MacKenzie was a regular visitor to Harviestoun where she met Burns. The travelling companions left Ochertyre on the 20th of October and returned to Edinburgh.

Six days later, October 26th, he wrote to Peggy. This letter mentions Charlotte in the opening lines and indicates that he wants to send her a song if he could find the right music, but she would find *'a small attempt'* on a scrap of paper in *'the book'*, but no mention was made of enclosing a book with the letter but could well have been the book referred to in his letter to *'Miss —, Ayrshire'*. He goes on to give her best wishes from Miss Nimmo whom he was unable to persuade to go to Harviestoun and says *'My rhetoric seems quite to have lost its effect on the lovely half of mankind. I have seen the day—but this is "a tale of other years."* And after bemoaning the fact he concludes with *'As for friendship, you and Charlotte have given me pleasure, permanent pleasure, "which the world cannot give, nor take away," I hope, and which will outlast the heavens and the earth'* acknowledging the fact that courtship and marriage is over but friendship will endure.

According to Ian Grimble, about a month after Burns had parted from Margaret Chalmers, he wrote to another woman whom he hardly knew *'I can say with truth, Madam, that I never met with a person in my life whom I more anxiously wished to meet again than yourself.'*

Burns did not write to Peggy again until November 21st and then regularly through December 1787. All of these letters were to Peggy. He never wrote to Charlotte although she was mentioned in all of them. To the December 12th letter he attached a proof copy of the song *'Banks of the Devon'* dedicated to Charlotte and a promise to send *'Where Braving Angry Winter's Storms'* dedicated to Peggy. These songs were written soon after his visit to Harviestoun. It was also around this time that he sent her the song *'My Peggy's Charms'*, which was not published until 1803.

He began his letter of December 19th with the words *'I begin this letter in answer to yours of the 17th current ...'* but as mentioned Peggy's no longer existed. In his letter dated simply *'Edinburgh, December 1787'* he starts *'I just now have read yours.'* From this letter it would appear that Peggy had expressed some timidity over the upcoming publication of the two songs, dedicated to her, in *'Johnson's Musical Museum'* which she thought too personal to show the world. He tries to quell her fears, telling her that the compliments he pays her in these songs cannot be understood – they are the truth. This letter also refers to a letter that Peggy had sent to

an unnamed gentleman – another suitor perhaps – known to both, that Burns refers to as ‘*a volatile school-boy*’.

Burns had become a celebrity in Edinburgh in 1787 and Mrs. Nancy MacLehose was determined to meet him. On 4th December Burns was invited to a tea-party given in the house of Miss Erskine Nimmo, a spinster friend of Peggy’s, and so Nancy’s wishes were fulfilled. Burns was more than happy to accept this invitation as Miss Nimmo’s nephew was an excise supervisor and he thought he might be able to help him achieve his ambition of becoming an exciseman.

On January of 1788 Burns wrote to Agnes MacLehose about his closest friends saying ‘*I had but one male friend: I have but two female. I should have a third, but she is surrounded by the blandishments of flattery and courtship. Her I register in my heart's core by Peggy Chalmers: Miss Nimmo can tell you how divine she is. She is worthy of a place in the same bosom with my Clarinda. That is the highest compliment*’

Burns had sent Agnes a selection of Peggy's letters and in a letter dated 31 January Agnes replied ‘*Miss Chalmers' letters are charming. Why did not such a woman secure your heart? O the caprice of human nature, to fix on impossibilities*’; she seems to have decided to use Peggy to deflect some of Burns’ attention away from herself.

Burns first letter of 1788 was on January 22nd written in a low period of his ‘*puzzled depression*’ as Carswell calls it, due to his dealings with Creech and another romantic episode. It ends with an impassioned plea not to desert him and continue their friendship. It was March 14th before he wrote again; a short letter telling her that he had completed the deal with Miller on the lease of Ellisland and an update on the health of their mutual friend Miss Kennedy. The following letter on April 7th is on a positive note and that if they were to meet she would approve of his plans for the future.

The memory of the eight days at Harvieston stayed with Burns for the rest of his life. As mentioned earlier Burns had great admiration for Charlotte Hamilton and of Peggy, Robert Chambers writes that Burns did say that her personal attractions ‘*...were above the medium. She was, however, a woman of spirit, talent and boundless love of all things literary.*’ He goes on to say that ‘*Burns delighted in the society of the two young ladies.*’ On September 16th 1788 some nine months after his stay at Harviestoun and about four months before Peggy’s marriage to Lewis Hay, he wrote her a long letter in which he said - ‘*—when I think I have met with you, and have lived more of real life with you in eight days than I can do with almost anybody I meet with in eight years—when I think on the improbability of meeting you in this world again—I could sit down and cry like a child!*’ This last phrase seems to have been based on that of Sterne,⁽²⁾ and supports the opinion of Kenneth Simpson namely “*He was preoccupied with the absorbing drama of his own existence*”.

In the same letter he tells Peggy of his marriage to Jean Armour and goes on to say - ‘*If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, and fashionable dress, I am not sickened and disgusted with the multiform curse of boarding-school affectation; and I have got the handsomest figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the county. Mrs. Burns believes, as firmly as her creed, that I am le plus bel esprit, et le plus honnête homme in the universe;*’ This would appear to support Peggy’s impression of Burns as described to Mrs. McMicking.

On December 6th 1788, after an engagement period that had been kept secret from her family, Peggy married Lewis Hay, a banker with Sir William Forbes James Hunter and Co. They had

three sons and three daughters and lived in the Forbes Bank premises in Parliament Square, Edinburgh.

The September 1788 letter appears to be the last one from Burns and the two letters from Peggy that were recorded no longer exist. The last letter from Peggy is believed to have been in 1792 inviting him to visit her at her home in Parliament Square. There is no evidence of this visit taking place or at any time during his visits to Edinburgh in 1789 and 1791.

On October 15th 1790 Burns wrote to Mr. Crauford Tait, son of Mr. John Tait of Harviestoun and cousin of Peggy, asking a favour of him in helping a young friend find a position in his law firm. He concludes with *'My best compliments to your father and Miss Tait. If you have an opportunity, please remember me in the solemn league and covenant of friendship to Mrs. Lewis Hay. I am a wretch for not writing her; but I am so hackneyed with self-accusation in that way, that my conscience lies in my bosom with scarce the sensibility of an oyster in its shell.'*

Mrs. McMicking mentioned to Henry Lee that Peggy told her that Burns *'married Jean Armour because he had promised to, not because she was pretty or sensible or good, for she was neither to a respectable degree, nor was she his bonnie Jean. This was Jean Lorrimer, the "lassie wi' the lint white locks" who was ruined by his admiration and attentions.....'* and that *'she herself could never have fallen in love, or even approached the feeling'* towards Burns for the reasons mentioned earlier. Since Burns song about Jean Lorimer was not written until 1794 the story told to Mrs. McMicking about Jean Lorimer would seem to be third hand and inaccurate.

About two weeks before his death Burns wrote his last song to Peggy and sent it to Thomson. That poem, *'Fairest Maid on Devon Banks'* is generally believed to have been for Peggy although many believe that it was a tribute to Charlotte, now Mrs. Adair.

After Burns' death, Lewis Hay ensured that his bank would assist with raising funds for Jean and the family.

Following Lewis's death on May 3rd 1800 Peggy and family moved to 12 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh and then around 1820 she moved to Pau Bearn, in the south of France where she died aged eighty years on March 3rd 1843 outliving Burns by almost forty seven years. There is no record of her burial place – either in France or Scotland.

Summation

Ev'n then, a wish, (I mind its power)
A wish, that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast;
That I for poor auld Scotland's sake
Some useful plan or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least.

It was this wish in his early years and expressed later in 1787 to Mrs. Scott, the *'Guidwife of Wauchope-House'*, which eventually led him to Edinburgh where he met Margaret (Peggy) Chalmers.

The association of Robert Burns and Peggy Chalmers was relatively brief and should be viewed within the context of Catherine Carswell's view of Burns' relationships with women, namely that *'It was impossible for him to keep clear of entanglements with women of one kind or another'*.

But here we have a young lady, *'a farmer's daughter of the higher sort, cousin to Gavin Hamilton, attractive, sympathetic, and well educated'* with whom he could relax, who could bring him out of his fits of depression, whose opinions he valued and who could possibly have fulfilled his idea of the role of Mrs. Burns in any situation.

According to Kenneth Porter, Professor Ferguson remarked that their association *'... began, as usual with love-making but Margaret gently put a stop to that – probably telling Burns that she was already engaged to Lewis Hay'*. The facts as described by Burns in his letter to his friend James Smith describing her reaction to his *'rustic courtship manners'* as Porter calls them, the reconciliation as evidenced in his letter to *'MY DEAR COUNTRYWOMAN'* and the later days at Harvieston don't seem to support Ferguson.

Burns struggled constantly about marriage and who would make the right wife for him, and this question became more difficult once he had been exposed to the Edinburgh society. Did he want a wife who would travel with him and feel comfortable in the presence of the gentry or did he want a stay at home wife content with providing a good home and raising his children. After the incident in the early part 1787 he and Peggy had agreed to be friends. In the eight days in Peggy's presence at Harvieston he most likely learned that Peggy would never become Mrs. Burns due to her engagement to Lewis Hay. In some respects this was good as he found, according to Carswell, that the *'stateliness of the Edinburgh gentry sickened his soul'*; this meant there would be no need to be involved with the Edinburgh gentry although he certainly enjoyed the benefits from the Edinburgh Edition of his works which allayed his fear of not being able to provide financial security for Jean Armour. Burns never forgot his roots; he was an Ayrshire man through and through and held a high regard for its people. Burns reminded Peggy of her Ayrshire roots, which I'm sure she had not forgotten, but she enjoyed and could handle the society life of Edinburgh life; she was her own woman and could blend in and not be strongly influenced by it in any way.

From Peggy's perspective there was never any doubt about a marriage to Burns. To quote Catherine Carswell again - *'When he told her, as no doubt he did, of his obligations in Edinburgh and Ayrshire (by then he must have known that Jean was going to make him yet again a father in five months), she showed no disposition to prefer this "rantin", rovin' Robin" - accomplished wooer though he was - to the worthy young banker whom she ultimately married'*.

The letters that survived this association (excluding that to 'Miss -----, Ayrshire') are only those from Burns spanning the period from October 26th 1787 to September 16th 1788, and are concentrated between November 21st 1787, and April 7th 1788. Two letters from Peggy are referred to in Burns' letters but neither of them exists.

These letters are not love letters. They are sincere letters as would be written to a close friend. There is not much flowery poetic language. Most contain compliments to Charlotte and some mention his depressed state. His last letter, written at Ellisland during wet weather, on September 1788 reflects on their meeting at Harviestoun and tells her of his marriage to *'my Jean'*; about his building work at Ellisland; and reinforces their friendship saying *'When fellow-partakers of the same nature fear the same God, have the same benevolence of heart, the same nobleness of soul, the same detestation at everything dishonest, and the same scorn at everything unworthy why may they not be friends?'*

In August 1787 Burns wrote two songs in admiration of Peggy and Charlotte. The first entitled *'Banks of the Devon'* specifically for Charlotte and *'Where Braving Angry Winter's Storms'* specifically for Peggy. Burns felt that the songs were not his best work but he was so impressed

with these two young women that he was moved to give them a poetic compliment. The song *'My Peggy's Charms'* for Peggy was also written around this time but not published until 1803. A fourth song *'Fairest Maid on Devon Banks'* written about two weeks before his death is generally believed to be in praise of Peggy but some Burnsians believe that Charlotte was the subject.

Burns valued Peggy's judgement highly and apparently he would sometimes seek her counsel. It is Catherine Carswell's opinion that *'he had fallen, or at least imagined that he had fallen, in love with her.'*

WE WILL NEVER KNOW.

Chronology of Burns' letters to Peggy Chalmers

(Based on R.H. Cromek and Project Gutenberg 2003)

Burns did not always date his letters and the following is the best estimate based their content.

January, 1787	To Miss _____, Ayrshire. (Gutenberg 2003)
September 26, 1787	To Miss Margaret Chalmers (Cromek 1808)
October 26, 1787	To Miss Margaret Chalmers, Harvieston (Identical letter as above but different date, Gutenberg 2003)
November 21, 1787	To Miss Chalmers. <i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek, Gutenberg)
December 1, 1787	<i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek)
December 12, 1787	To Miss Chalmers. <i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek, Gutenberg) Enclosed was a proof copy of 'Banks of the Devon'
December 19, 1787	To Miss Chalmers. <i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek, Gutenberg)
December, 1787	<i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek)
January 22, 1788(?)	<i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek)
March 14, 1788	<i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek, Gutenberg)
April 7, 1788	<i>Mauchline</i> (Cromek)
No Date (Sunday)	<i>Edinburgh</i> (Cromek)
September 16, 1788	To Miss Chalmers, Edinburgh. <i>Ellisland</i> (Cromek, Gutenberg)

Sources

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9. Ian Grimble 1994 "Robert Burns"
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