

## The Belles of Mauchline

So who were the Mauchline Belles and where is Mauchline? Mauchline is a village situated about 12 miles northeast of Ayr and 9 miles southeast of Kilmarnock. Burns and Gilbert moved to Mauchline in 1784 and took over the tenancy of the Mossgiel farm, which was just outside the village. In addition to farming, Burns continued to write poems and songs and accordingly build on his reputation as a celebrity.

Burns wrote the poem, 'The Mauchline Belles' in 1784 about six women living in the village. It's unclear why he wrote the poem or even why he chose the particular women mentioned in the poem, except for one of the six, Jean Armour.

### The Mauchline Belles

In Mauchline there dwells six proper young belles,  
The pride of the place and its neighbourhood a';  
Their carriage and dress, a stranger would guess,  
In Lon'on or Paris, they'd gotten it a'.

Miss Miller is fine, Miss Markland's divine,  
Miss Smith she has wit, and Miss Betty is brow:  
There's beauty and fortune to get wi' Miss Morton,  
But Armour's the jewel for me o' them a'.

For the remainder of the year, 1784, Burns seemed to want to build on his reputation as a celebrity and an attraction for the local lasses. He wore a fillemot (green and navy) plaid often in an unusual fashion, wrapped around his shoulders, in defiance of the conventional mode and was reputedly the only man in the village who wore his long hair tied back when attending church. Burns then added to the impact of his celebrity impression by assuming the role of the 'rake, Rob Mossgiel,' as identified in his song, 'O leave your novels, ye Mauchline Belles' written later in 1784 after the poem "Mauchline Belles'.

O leave novels, ye Mauchline belles,  
Ye're safer at your spinning-wheel;  
Such witching books are baited hooks  
For rakish rooks, like Rob Mossgiel;  
Your fine Tom Jones and Grandisons,  
They make your youthful fancies reel;  
They heat your brains, and fire your veins,  
And then you're prey for Rob Mossgiel.

Beware a tongue that's smoothly hung,  
A heart that warmly seems to feel;  
That feeling heart but acts a part-  
'Tis rakish art in Rob Mossgiel.  
The frank address, the soft caress,  
Are worse than poisoned darts of steel;  
The frank address, and politesse,  
Are all finesse in Rob Mossgiel.

It is generally agreed that Burns used some poetic licence investing them with qualities they did not possess in any great degree. In fact, Gilbert was heard to remark that “there was often a great disparity between his fair captivator, and her attributes” when describing the belles. According to witnesses living at the time only one belle could be considered a beauty. Of the rest, one was blind in one eye, another was badly marked with small pox scars and three were somewhat ordinary in their attractiveness. That left only one, Jean Armour, who was regarded as the ‘plainest of them all’, but somehow was able to capture the heart of Burns.

The six Mauchline girls were, Helen Miller, Jean Markland, Jean Smith, Betty Miller, Christina Morton and Jean Armour.

### **Helen Miller ()**

The first belle mentioned in the poem is Helen Miller, ‘Miss Miller is fine,’ daughter of John Miller, who had the Sue Inn at Mauchline. Helen might have been considered beautiful had it not been that she was blind in one eye, likely a birth defect. She was regarded as a ‘guid catch’ as her brother, Sandy, who had made his fortune in India had left her with a sizeable dowry. In 1791 she married Burns’ friend, Dr. John Mackenzie, the Mauchline village doctor. Helen died in Irvine in March 1827.

Helen Miller was the Nell mentioned in the poem ‘A Mauchline Wedding’.

### **Jean Markland (1765-1851)**

When describing the second belle, Jean, as ‘divine’ ‘Miss Markland’s divine’ it is generally acknowledged that Burns was using his poetic licence for she was generally considered to be ‘neat with a fine figure and a pleasant manner’. The main linkage noted between Burns and Jean is through the poem, ‘To a Louse’ as it is generally considered to be in Jean’s bonnet whilst in church that Burns saw a ‘crawlin fairlie’ and led to the incomparable opening lines of the final verse,

‘O wad some power the gift to gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us’

The only other connection noted between Burns and Jean is through the man she was later to marry, James Findlay, the Excise officer from Tarbolton, who had instructed Burns in gauging and bookkeeping as part of his excise duties.

### **Jean Smith (1767-1854)**

It would appear that Burns was accurate in his description of Jean Smith as being ‘the witty one’ of the Mauchline Belles, although examples of her wit and writings are unavailable.

Little is known about Jean’s relationship with Burns except that she was the sister of Burns’ youthful friend James Smith. A further connection was through her marriage to James Candlish, an Edinburgh lecturer in medicine who first met Burns when they attended Dalrymple Parish school in the summer of 1772 and who Burns described as ‘the earliest friend except my brother that I have on earth, and one of the worthiest fellows that ever any man called by name of Friend’. James died suddenly at age 46 and left Jean to struggle with four children and fend for herself. Jean was obviously a very resourceful woman as she moved from Edinburgh to

Glasgow, ran a successful finishing school for young ladies along with bringing up her children. She died in 1854 and outlived all the other belles.

### **Betty Miller (1768- 1795)**

In the poem she is described as 'Miss Betty is braw' and it would appear she might have been, but for her face suffering the ravages of smallpox. She was the daughter of John Miller and a sister of Helen Miller, another belle. Burns wrote her a number of letters, which show some degree of affection, but nothing too serious given that Jean Armour was also in the picture.

Betty married a Mauchline merchant, William Templeton, but died in 1795 at the birth of her first child. 'From thee, Eliza, I must go' was inspired by her.

The main connection to Burns is through the song 'From thee, Eliza, I must go' as it's generally agreed that Betty is the Eliza referred to in the song.

From thee, Eliza, I must go,  
And from my native shore;  
The cruel fates between us throw  
A boundless ocean's roar:  
But boundless oceans, roaring wide,  
Between my love and me,  
They never, never can divide  
My heart and soul from thee.

The other connection to Burns is through a poem called 'the Mauchline Wedding', probably written in 1786 about Betty's preparations for his brother's wedding. The poem was never actually published only sent to Mrs. Dunlop in 1788 in a letter.

### **Morton, Christina**

Christina Morton was reputed to be the most attractive of the 'Belles' 'There's beauty and fortune to get wi' Miss Morton.' She was also considered quite a wealthy woman having inherited 500 pounds. Interestingly, according to Blackie's edition of 'Burns' Christina had a secret passion for the poet and was quite disappointed when he showed preference for Jean Armour. She married a draper and general merchant, Robert Paterson, from Mauchline and had four sons and two daughters.

### **Jean Armour (1765 – 1834)**

Jean Armour was the sixth belle and described as the 'jewel of them a', although generally regarded as the plainest of them all. Jean bore Burns 9 children, the last on the day of her husband's funeral. Only three of them survived her. She seems to have been a generous, compliant woman, with a clear singing voice, though in no way her husband's intellectual equal, and willing to put up with his wildest extravagancies, even to the extent of taking in his bastard daughter by Anna Park with the remark 'Our Robbie should have had twa wives.'

Interestingly, no portrait of Jean is known until she became a grandmother, three of her in later years exist.

Burns wrote in all 14 songs commonly associated with Jean. One of my favourites being Parnassus Hill with Burns commenting on 'Of a' the Airts the Wind can Blaw', as a song special to him and composed out of compliment to Mrs. Burns', The song first appeared in 1790 in the *Scots Musical Museum*.

It's unclear the motive for Burns to write the Belles' poem, but it could be that he modeled it after his first attempt at capturing descriptions of local beauties, as in the 'Tarbolton Lasses' which was written in 1778.

### The Tarbolton Lasses

If ye gae up to yon hill-tap,  
Ye'll there see bonie Peggy;  
She kens her father is a laird,  
And she forsooth's a leddy.

There Sophy tight, a lassie bright,  
Besides a handsome fortune:  
Wha canna win her in a night,  
Has little art in courtin'.

Gae down by Faile, and taste the ale,  
And tak a look o' Mysie;  
She's dour and din, a deil within,  
But aiblins she may please ye.

If she be shy, her sister try,  
Ye'll maybe fancy Jenny;  
If ye'll dispense wi' want o' sense-  
She kens hersel she's bonie.

As ye gae up by yon hillside,  
Speir in for bonie Bessy;  
She'll gie ye a beck, and bid ye light,  
And handsomely address ye.

There's few sae bonie, nane sae guid,  
In a' King George' dominion;  
If ye should doubt the truth o' this-  
It's Bessy's ain opinion!