

The Alison Affair

It was November 1780; Robert was 21 and the family was in Lochlie farm. Mauchline lay three miles SE of Lochlie; SW three miles was Tarbolton. Robert, Gilbert and five friends had formed the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club; 'A member must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex.' Robert drafted the rules but at the time he himself had no girlfriend; He did, however, have one in mind; who was she? Did they ever meet?

As elsewhere, there were many ways for young folks to meet in Ayrshire; At fairs, markets, celebrations - weddings, funerals, holy days, church; At barn-dances and joining entertainers with their campfire sing-alongs . More likely, even on the way, walking or riding by cart, to or from events. The opportunity could come at work; Robert could have met her thus . It maybe was not the first time they saw each other but their paths crossed.

Robert knew little about this girl but either enquired or overheard her name; He heard she was Alison Begbie, aged 18 and in service at Cairnhill House; On Cessnock Banks, Cairnhill is on higher ground two miles E of Lochlie. Meandering west to the sea, the Cessnock Water was turned N by the Banks. The cut the stream made in the Banks exposed a bed of useful limestone; This limestone (presumably quarried and ground) was available to farmers; The farmers spread lime to reduce the acidity of their soil and improve crops. Lochlie was a customer; Robert when purchasing lime perchance saw Alison.

The way in which Robert progressed with his affair was strange indeed; He was apparently very impressed with this farmer's daughter from Galston; He considered that his attraction was what people called 'love'. Yet there is reason to believe he never had a personal arrangement with her; It is likely that he never even had a conversation with her; never held hands, Never gave her any indication of his feelings; he viewed her from afar. Later in a letter he tells her his facial expressions should have been enough; Instead there is apparent proof of no contact; he had her name wrong! Surely with any degree of intimacy she would have corrected him on that.

Gilbert has said that Robert, until 23, was always shy in female company. This would be consistent with the early purity of thought in *Handsome Nell*; The juvenile bravado of his report of his experiences at Kirkoswald; And in regard to 'Alison' the lack of passion in *The Lass of Cessnock Banks*. 'Alison's' name became known at Lochlie; maybe to Tarbolton Bachelors too.

Robert recognised that he was getting nowhere and needed to change course; 'Alison', with two sparkling roguish eyes, would be popular with other admirers. He was already a skilled correspondent; he knew she was educated and literate. Before the end of November he completed his first letter to her; '..My dear A...'. In it he expects her surprise that he is the writer and declares his love for her. He confesses not being sure what 'love' is; 'maybe just expanded friendship'. He advises that he is embarked on courtship and proceeds to note his virtues.

How Burns arranged for delivery of his mail has not been explained.; A government-run postal service had been established but was very costly. Within two miles of a postal service office the cost per item was two pence; Outside that range (Robert's nearest depot was Ayr) the cost was four pence; This might equate today to five to six dollars (Canadian). Most likely there were local messengers who would be much less expensive.

After a week or two and having received no reply Robert prepared letter No.2. The content was a continuation of the first letter, with warnings of rogue lovers. His love is founded on sacred principles, he says, scorning flames and raptures. Significantly there is no mention of there having been any meeting or contact. He mentions never hearing her state an opinion on how people fall in love. It sounds like it is from a communal discussion rather than private discourse. The most important feature in this letter is the expression of '..My dear E.....'. Alison's real name has been discovered; she is Elizabeth Gebbie;

Galston parish has records of Elizabeth and her family; she worked at Cairnhill; All that was known about Alison belongs to Elizabeth; there was no Alison. It seems that Robert chose not to disclose this embarrassing news to his family. Anyone familiar with the name Elizabeth knows the many abbreviations in use; eg: Elie, Ellis, Elissa, Lisa, Lilibet (our Queen), Liz. Lizzie, Beth, Bette. Betty; Similarly there are contractions for Alison, particularly, Alice, Alissa and Lisa; There is little doubt that this led to some of the confusion over the girl's name. The surnames Begbie and Gebbie are similar, easily confused, anagrams, rare. (We do have a club member whose Grannie was a Begbie from Ayrshire).

The turn of the year sees yet another letter sent, again affirming Robert's merits. Once more there is no mention of a reply or meeting; no contact at all. The letter shows a hint of uncertainty; perhaps this is not working; what else? Robert is aware that others in love have been writing love-letters to their dears. Weren't prose declarations of his virtue and anticipated successful union better?

Well, it hadn't worked, so he wrote his love-poem, *The lass of Cessnock Banks*;

Having sworn in his letters he would always be truthful to her was a problem. Elizabeth/Alison was no cover girl; her attractiveness lay in her personality. Robert struggled through her physical features, comparing them expansively.; In the last verse he stated it is her mind he loves and not the beauty she has; The work stands with wonderful similes showing his admiration and ability ; But, as a love-poem, however, it lacks warmth, a smile, any expression of love.

Robert's confidence in a successful outcome to this courtship was waning. In early spring letter 4 went off further describing the benefits of their marrying; This time, however, there was an appeal for a 'yea' or 'nay' to the offer to wed. The wait must have been agonising for Robert but no more so than the reply.

In the spring of 1781 Elizabeth/Alison rejected Robert's offer of matrimony. Sadly her letter has not survived though its fate may be readily surmised. How Robert received the rebuffal is seen in his fifth and last letter to her; In it he apologised for delaying writing this letter acknowledging her refusal; He expressed his dismay and rejected her good wishes for his future happiness; He says - "How can I be happy? You have denied happiness for me."

More of Robert's feelings are spread in his letter of June 1781 to Wm. Niven; Niven was a former schoolmate at Kirkoswald and he and Robert corresponded. Robert described his station as being 'jilted', hardly depicting Elizabeth's part. "I am intirely(sic) got rid of all connections with the tender sex in... courtship ; "

Robert was now 22 and was beginning to shed some of his shyness' Quite a hint of this is in his poem Peggy Alison with its rousing opening lines.

*I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
And I'll kiss thee o'er again,
And I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
My bonnie Peggy Alison.*

With Peggy's poem Robert gave notice things were going to be different next time.

Like Alison Begbie, Peggy's name was not found in records of 1780's Ayrshire; In fact, Peggy Alison sounds very much like a guised reversal of Alison Begbie; Much coincidence. Gilbert was certain that Robert was writing of the same girl.

Further, Gilbert thought that *Mary Morison* also may have been portrayed by her.

At this time there was a Mary Morison in Mauchline but she was only 10.

Although clearly ineligible for the role, Mauchline Mary thought otherwise. By the time of her tragic death aged 20 she had claimed that she was the model. Fame was valuable and her family even asserted an association on her tombstone.

Having dismissed Robert, Elizabeth married Hugh Brown in November, 1781. Hugh, a stocking maker, could have been the reason Robert's courtship failed. Elizabeth's seeming lack of interest in this entire affair would be explained. Robert's admitted awkwardness didn't help; inaction was Elizabeth's response. The Browns later left Ayrshire to set up home in Glasgow.

Elizabeth's story might have ended here but for the researcher Robert Cromek. Cromek was the author of *The Reliques of Robert Burns*, published in 1808. This book contains letters, poems, songs, notes, criticisms and various fragments.

In about 1803 Cromek successfully sought Elizabeth (as Alison?) in Glasgow. She admitted knowing Burns in her younger days when she was at Cairnhill. He noted that she recited 12 (of the 14) verses of *The Lass of Cessnock Banks*; This verified that she did receive the poem though may not have acknowledged it.

With Cromek's book came the first publication but not the validation of this poem.

Many of the verses carry differences from the eventually-discovered manuscript. *The Reliques* include the melody *The Butcher Boy* and connects it to the poem. It was more than 20 years later that the song with all verses received verification.

Burns' sister Isobel Begg, 11 in 1781, was in her seventies when interviewed; She told Burns' biographer, Chambers, she recalled a name, *Alison Begbie*. Robert had communicated to the family only what he first thought her name to be.

Now it was the first link to the name of the mystery girl who puzzled researchers;

Cromek presumably found Mrs Hugh Brown; never disclosed she was Elizabeth. Early biographers had only the letters but no one to whom to ascribe them.

It was in 1780 that Burns learned to preserve the copies of letters he wanted kept.

Sadly, earlier letters were inadequately stored and were found to be unreadable. These referred to here were among the earliest Burns successfully preserved. Prior to the letters to Elizabeth/Alison, only one readable letter (to Niven) exists.

Though the girl's name was Elizabeth Gebbie, it is not her name that highlights the story of Burns's first known love, but rather the fictitious name, unrecorded in Ayrshire documents, of Alison Begbie, star of **The Alison Affair**,

Many of the facts are gleaned or corroborated from Mackay's *Robert Burns* . The fault for any speculation, subsequently proved erroneous, is entirely mine.

Ron Budd, for the Carnie Group

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