

## Burns' Autobiographical Letter to Dr. John Moore – A Review

This presentation is a discussion of Robert Burns' first letter to Dr. John Moore. The letter is dated August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1787.

This letter has long been regarded as the seminal story of Burns' life. It is an autobiographical piece, written at the zenith of Burns' popularity in the polite society of Scottish aristocracy, if not at the same heights of regard in his Ayrshire roots.

The letter is quite long – about 3000 words. I must say that the volume of words Burns used to write the letter was not a bother to me. It is written in the finest king's English of the time, with nary a hint of his delightful "Scottish dialect". I give you this sample from the introductory paragraph:

"After you have perused these pages, should you think them trifling and impertinent, I only beg leave to tell you that the poor Author wrote them under some very twitching qualms of conscience, that, perhaps he was doing what he ought not to do: a predicament he has more than once been in before.

I have not the most distant pretensions to what the pyecoated guardians of escutcheons call, A Gentleman. When at Edinburgh last winter, I got acquainted in the Herald's Office, and looking through that granary of Honors I there found almost every name in the kingdom; but for me.

'My ancient but ignoble blood, Has crept thro' Scoundrels since the flood'

Gules, Purpure, Argent, etc. quite disowned me."

Before I get into any depth as to what the letter says about Burns – or more accurately – what Burns says about himself, I should tell you a little about its recipient, Dr. John Moore.

Dr. Moore was first and foremost, a medical doctor. His father was the Rev. Charles Moore. He was born, raised and educated in Glasgow, attending Glasgow University. In 1747, some 12 years before Burns was even born, Moore spent a year learning practical surgery for the Duke of Argyll's 54<sup>th</sup> regiment. Then he went to Paris to continue his medical education. There, he became surgeon to the Earl of Albermarle, who was the British Ambassador to France. It was only in 1770 that he returned to Glasgow University where the formal degree of "Medical Doctor" was conferred upon him. For 6 years, he tutored and toured with two successive Dukes of Hamilton. Then, while practicing medicine in London, he produced a book entitled *View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland and Germany*. The book was a hit and subsequent printings included translations into German and Italian. In 1781, he did a sequel on manners in Italy, which was not as well-received – perhaps reviewed as being akin to *the Great Italian Book of War Heroes*.

He also produced a book of *Natural Sketches* and, later, wrote a series of novels, including his first: the highly regarded *Zeluco*.

This bit of Moore's biography is necessary for us to understand just who Burns' reader of the letter was. It should be noted that at the time Burns wrote to Moore, Dr. Moore was having some eye problems, so Burns surmised that the letter would likely be read to Moore by a young poet

protégé, Helen Maria Williams, whom Moore was mentoring. And it was our auld acquaintance, Frances Dunlop, a dowager of some means, who had arranged Moore's first contact with our Robin by enthusiastically writing to Burns to ask for additional copies of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. It was she who recommended *Poems* to Dr. Moore, sending him his own volume. It was through Mrs. Dunlop that Dr. Moore liaised with Burns and encouraged Burns to write to him. Burns, of course, knew well of the renowned and eloquent Dr. Moore. Thus the context for the letter was then set for Burns and now is set for you.

Burns starts out to explain his humble beginnings. He credits his father with providing him with lessons learned through hard toil and servitude. At the same time, he holds his father's irascibility responsible for his own low station of birth. But Burns goes on to state that it was his father's tenacity that kept the family together, saying "but it was his dearest wish and prayer to have it in his power to keep his children under his own eye till they could discern between good and evil".

Burns acknowledges his early schooling but never mentions John Murdoch by name. Interesting, but frustrating, is that throughout the letter Burns does not mention by name any of the people who had an influence on his life. He recalls simply that it was "an old maid of my mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition" sewing the seeds of ghostly apparitions, devils and warlocks in his fertile young mind; confessing that such images stayed with him into adulthood and very much influenced some of his poetry and song.

He mentions his two favourite books while growing up: *The life of Hannibal* and *The History of Sir William Wallace*, crediting the latter for "pour[ing] a Scottish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest".

In a single sentence, he deals with his religious views; views that so often saw him at odds with Kirk Session and resulted in some of his best descriptive poetry. There is no mention of the Rev. William Dalrymple, for whom he had every respect and from whom he had received his fundamental beliefs. "Polemical divinity about this time was putting the country half-mad: and I, ambitious of shining in conversation parties on Sundays between sermons, funerals, etc. used in a few years more to puzzle Calvinism with so much heat and indiscretion that I raised a hue and cry of heresy against me which has not ceased to this hour."

Yet, this sentence is telling. Burns loved to hold court; to be the centre of the conversation.

In the letter, this sentence sets the stage for what could clearly be called a rant. He allows as how his "social disposition ... was 'without bounds or limits'". So he made acquaintance with many of the upper crust; i.e. "[those] who possessed superior advantages...". He observes, in fairly strong language, how those people – often reared in the same village – could have "unnoticing disregard for the poor, insignificant, stupid devils, the mechanics and peasantry around [them]".

Later, more well-to-do individuals would become fellow members of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, which comprised all classes. There is no mention whatsoever of the club in the letter.

He shifts immediately to the plight of his family when the Master of the farm was replaced by the Factor whom Burns characterized in "*Twa Dogs*". The two years of mostly subjugated labour took Burns, and his letter, to his 16<sup>th</sup> year.

At this point in the letter, Burns provides a brief but poignant interlude. He describes his feelings for a girl we readily recognize as “Handsome Nell”. He states that his English is too inadequate to do her justice, so he calls upon the Scottish idiom with, “She was a bonie (sic), sweet, sonsie lass”. His description follows in what can best be described as poetry in free verse:

“[S]he altogether unwittingly to herself, initiated me in a certain delicious Passion, which in spite of acid Disappointment, gin-horse Prudence and bookworm Philosophy, I hold to be the first of human joys, our dearest pleasure here below. . . . I never expressly told her that I loved her. Indeed I did not well know myself, why I liked so much to loiter behind with her, when returning in the evening from our labors; why the tones of her voice made my heartstrings thrill like an Eolian harp; and particularly, why my pulse beat such a furious rattan when I looked and fingered over her hand, to pick out the nettle-stings and thistles. Among her other love-inspiring qualifications, she sung sweetly; and ‘twas her favorite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme.”

Burns pins this as the point where love and poetry became of the highest enjoyment of his life.

This takes the narrative to the family’s move to Lochlea. One sentence spans the first four years. Another couple of sentences describes the following three years through which his father flailed against his landlord’s lawsuit and the onset of consumption that would claim his life.

Although Burns seems to have given short shrift to this significant one-fifth of his life and that pivotal period of any young man’s life – from age 17 to 24 – what follows that perfunctory description of the facts of his reality is a deep personal reflection on the mental gyrations he experienced in trying to define who he was; what made him tick. While much of the letter is what you would expect from most of us in writing about ourselves, (that is, if not bald vanity, at least favouring those aspects of our being that are the most flattering), I believe these few pages of the letter are an honest attempt by Burns to reveal his inner self. I cannot describe it better than Burns does himself. Speaking of his impetuosity when he rebelled against his father’s discipline, which he called “the will-o-wisp meteors of thoughtless whim” he says:

“The great misfortune of my life was, never to have had ‘An Aim’. I had felt some early stirrings of Ambition, but they were only blind gropings of Homer’s Cyclops round the walls of his cave.”

Then he goes on to say:

“Thus, abandoned of aim or view of life; with a strong appetite for sociability, as well as from native hilarity as from a pride of observation and remark; a constitutional hypochondriac taint which made me fly solitude; add to all these incentives to social life, my reputation for bookish knowledge, a certain wild, logical talent, and a strength of thought something like the rudiments of good sense, made me generally a welcome guest; so ‘tis no great wonder that always “where two or three were met together, there was I in the midst of them.”

That observation of self would not be complete without his own confession. Again, you sense the poet’s turn of tongue:

“My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other.”

At that point, you can almost see Burns leaning back in his chair, reminiscing over other life experiences that formed his character.

He lights upon his sojourn to Hugh Rodger's school in Kirkoswald, which was his first extended absence from home. The beach at Kirkoswald, which is where the groomed fairways of the Turnberry Golf Course now lie, was then the landing spot for goods and liquor smuggled in from the Isle of Man. So it was a great spot for where a growing, impressionable lad might get an "education". But then in August – well, let Burns tell you:

"I went on with a high hand in my geometry; till the sun entered Virgo, a month which is always a carnival in my bosom, a charming Fillette who lived next door to the school upset my trigonometry and set me off in a tangent from the sphere of my studies. I struggled on with my sines and co-sines for a few days more; but stepping out to the garden one charming noon, to take the sun's altitude, I met with my Angel."

His "Angel" was Peggy Thomson. Like my old Labrador dog on the last day at obedience school when he was booted out for breeding the cocker spaniel next to him, Burns confessed:

"It was vain to think of doing any more good at school. The remaining week I staid (sic), I did nothing but craze the faculties of my soul about her, or steal out to meet with her: and the last two nights of my stay in the country, had sleep been a mortal sin, I was innocent."

Dear Peggy was a lasting memory for Robert Burns and the subject of at least two poems. Ten years after that brief and passionate encounter and after Peggy was married, Robin visited her and gave her a copy of his book, in which he'd written an amorous poem to her.

Again, interesting but frustrating, his whole recounting of this experience reveals no names. His time in Kirkoswald is described only as "summer on a smuggling coast".

Then, seemingly snapping out of his reverie, Burns quickly leaps forward 5 or 6 years – the same duration that he'd skipped earlier in the narrative.

It was then that he moved to Irvine to take up flax dressing. Without recounting whether he was suited to it or not (other biographers have speculated that his constitution could not handle the flax dust in the air), Burns' account summed it up: "... while we were giving a welcome carousal 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 six pence."

He notes that his father's problems had deepened and that his father stood at death's door. And then, in the very same sentence, he says, "... and to crown it all, a belle-fille whom I adored and who had pledged her soul to me in the field of matrimony, jilted me with peculiar circumstances of mortification." (I am fairly confident that Burns did not intend the curious juxtaposition of the use of "mortify" in that one sentence.) The name of this "belle fille" is, again, omitted. It was almost certainly Eliza Gebbie (aka Alison Begbie).

Although he admits to three months of ennui attributable to the break-up, he does not dwell upon it.

He launches into a glowing portrait of a new friend and confidant. His description identifies Richard Brown, who had set to sea, was captured by pirates, and put ashore on "the wild coast of Connaught, stripped of everything". This swashbuckler really caught Burns' fancy and he set about to emulate and to imitate him, mostly in wine, women and song.

Although it was happening at the same time, there is very little about his father's struggles. He notes his father's death and matter-of-factly notes that he and Gilbert secured "a neighbouring farm".

He notes, without comment, that the farm failed for want of good seed grain the first year and an early frost the next. Nothing else, except to say that Gilbert was the farmer anyway so he gratuitously turned the farm over to him.

He became bolder with his poetry, taking aim at his old adversary, organized Calvinism. That very nearly landed him in very hot water and it was then that he plotted his escape to Jamaica. But he resolved to publish his poems "before leaving [his] native country forever".

He prattles on briefly, expressing that most men's downfall may be attributed to their own ignorance or mistaken notions of themselves. And - in would-be contrast - says that he constantly weighed himself: himself alone and in balance with others, measuring himself against... against? Well, against his own perception of Nature's design. Then, seemingly returning to lucidity, he says: "I was pretty sure my Poems would meet with some applause: but at the worst, the roar of the Atlantic would deafen the voice of Censure, and the novelty of west-Indian scenes make me forget Neglect."

The letter then reads as though all-of-a-sudden Burns, flush with success, readies himself to sail away, all sails unfurled. He was getting away from "some ill-advised, ungrateful people [who] had uncoupled the merciless legal pack at [his] heels." In fact, the only legal threat he was faced with was James Armour's warrant against Burns for his perceived injustices shown to Jean.

The facts also were that Burns dithered about leaving, missing his first ship's booking and lingering with friends - including his protracted visit to the married lady, Peggy Thomson. He postulated that his ship's passage had simply not afforded him enough time to get his affairs in order. There he was, back in Mossgiel. Then, miraculously, Dr. Blacklock, a known critic of things literary, endorsed Burns' work and endorsed a second edition, so Burns was off "to Edinburgh without a single acquaintance in town, or a single letter of introduction in [his] pocket."

It almost seems that the whole West Indies initiative was like a feeble attempt at suicide. It does not appear that he was ever really serious. He greatly procrastinated. He used the notion of his final departure as the drive behind publishing his works. That accomplished, he then dragged his heels, seemingly to receive an inkling as to the reception his book of verse would receive. And, of course, drowning the accolades in the waters of the Atlantic became a notion never to be reckoned with. Thus Robert drew his letter to a close: "I need relate no farther - At Edinburgh I was in a new world."

There is no doubt that the letter does contain insights into the formative aspects of Burns' life. In preparing this paper, that is what I wanted to capture. Certainly, the letter is subjective. Burns, like any other autobiographer, would not consciously debase or embarrass himself. I did not want to wander into the realm of speculation. I wanted to provide you with insights into Burns the man through his own perceptions. I think I did that.

But it is the omissions in the narrative that beg for us to speculate. In doing so, we must remember that we are mere voyeurs, peering over the shoulder of Dr. Moore as we read the letter.

Remember: Burns was writing to a man whom he regarded as a superior intellect; someone to whom he had been introduced by Mrs. Dunlop. He was flush with the novelty of instant success. He wanted to expose his humble rural roots, but he did not want to come across as an uneducated country bumpkin. He surmised that the letter would be read to Dr. Moore by Miss Williams. That, in itself, may have tempered his language and his turn of phrase.

It is at least curious that he disclosed no names. Not of his friends, not of his lovers, not even of his family. No locations are disclosed. Even when he was giving unreserved praise, he disclosed no names. Without locations, the reader must use his imagination to give the tale some context.

And there are glaring omissions. There is no mention of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, whose debates must have had some influence on Burns' take on the world.

There is absolutely no mention of Jean Armour. Was he that ashamed of the woman who was so clearly dedicated to him?

He expresses nothing of his children or even of his feelings toward infants or inquisitive youth.

As a result of these things, it is difficult to even use the letter to verify other stories of Burns' life.

I leave the speculation to you.

The writing style is entertaining. It reveals the way with words we expect from Robert Burns. Some of the passages I have included here show that talent. But if you are looking for notes to crib for an Immortal Memory, I'd give Burns' letter to Dr. Moore a pass.

*Presented to the Calgary Burns Club by Jim Hope-Ross*

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