



HIGHLAND MARY

AN ATTEMPT TO UNTANGLE THE REAL STORY



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In Maureen Bell's 2001 book **Tae The Lasses**, she chronicles some forty women who impacted the life of Robert Burns in some way. Undoubtedly there were more but these are a good start. The one most written about but the one we know the least about for sure, was known as Highland Mary. Although known universally as Highland Mary it was only with the publication of James Mackay's biography of Burns in 1992 that we discover she was actually christened Margaret Campbell. It is probable that although her parents were committed to the name Margaret originally, this later morphed to Mary within the family. It is interesting to note that her mother used both Agnes and Ann as her name. Burns himself only referred to her once as Highland Mary and that was not until 1792 well after her death.

Mary (as I shall call her), was born to Archibald Campbell and Agnes (Anne) Campbell in Auchamore and baptized in Dunoon on March 18th 1766. All in all the Campbells had eight children but only four survived infancy – with Mary as the oldest, followed by Robert (February 1769), Annie (February 1772) and Archibald (October 1778). Her father had been a seaman on a Revenue cutter but had lost an eye in a skirmish with smugglers and had later gone into partnership with two others and purchased a coal sloop of which he was the captain. His maritime beat was carrying coal between Ayrshire and Kintyre, and the family subsequently moved to Campbeltown in 1768, being a more suitable location for his work. Mary later attended a small school near her home, and was known for her pleasant manners, good temper and her willingness to help others. In appearance she was reported as being tall with a fair complexion, light yellow hair, blue eyes and carried herself in a graceful manner. Above all she was sincere and honest. She was considered to be a good singer as were her mother and sister, with her first language being Gaelic not English.

Tradition would have it that Mary entered domestic service when she was twelve years old in 1778 when she started work with a family called Kirk who resided in Campbeltown. However her mother objected to the long hours Mary was expected to work which exceeded the original agreement and insisted she quit. By the end of that year she had obtained another position with the family of the Reverend David Campbell, allegedly a kinsman of her mother's, in Lochranza on Arran. Following this, Mary's story starts to become unclear. It appears that she moved to the mainland sometime in 1780 but her movements over the years before and after this date are uncertain. One story has it that she was working in Irvine in 1782, and another that she was employed at Coilsfield by a Colonel Hugh Montgomerie in 1784.

What seems to be more definite is that Mary was employed by Gavin Hamilton in the post of nursemaid to his children in Mauchline in 1785 as his wife was expecting a further addition to the family, although the actual months she was there are in dispute. Hamilton's son was born on July 13th, 1785 and by the end of that year Mary had moved on, some say back to Coilsfield and others possibly to a certain Stairaird Farm. Gavin Hamilton's second daughter Williamina later recalled that Mary was "very pleasant and winning, though not a beauty," it being reported that she had traces of smallpox scars on her face.

The likely scenario seems to be that Mary returned to Coilsfield at the end of 1785 to her role as byre-woman for a six months period until Whitsunday 1786. The customary length of time for this type of employment was six months – usually running from Martinmas to Whitsunday or from Whitsunday to Martinmas. With other members of the Coilsfield household, Mary worshipped at Tarbolton Parish Church and it may well have been at this time that with her noticeable highland accent she began to be known as Highland Mary. She was supposedly very devout and she assiduously followed the church services in her Bible.

It is not clear when Robert met his Mary, but their being in the church at Tarbolton at the same time in 1785 does fit with some other details of events we know. Burns himself insinuates that he met Mary in the spring of 1786 when he was dealing with the rebuff from Jean Armour and her family, but he is evasive and even contradictory about the actual date they met. In the spring of 1786 Jean was pregnant and Robert had offered to marry her – and in fact had gone through a ceremony that probably would have been recognized as a valid marriage contract under Scots Law at that time. Jean's father was having none of it and had their names cut out of the contract by the lawyer Robert Aiken, who also happened to be a good friend of Burns, and then he shipped Jean off to Paisley supposedly until after the birth. Why did old Armour detest Burns so much that he went to these extremes? Robert's reputation with the ladies was not a good one with potential fathers-in-law, but a specific reason might be that Mary could have been around since the beginning of 1785 and that there was something going on between her and Burns during that time and old Armour did not appreciate that. After all, Mauchline was a small place and few secrets or liaisons could be kept secret for very long.

From Robert's point of view he was insulted by the attitude of James Armour and even more so when Jean denounced their relationship and was banished to Paisley on April 2nd of 1786 by her father. In a letter written shortly after, Burns writes "I would gladly have covered my Inamorata from the darts of Calumny with the conjugal Shield, nay had actually made up some sort of wedlock; but I was at that time deep in the guilt of being unfortunate, for which good and lawful objection, the Lady's friends broke all our measures, and drove me au desespoir."

Robert had been deserted and had already been thinking about a new start by emigrating to the West Indies, that haven of refuge for Scots with problems at that time, leaving Jean and her betrayal, as well as her loathsome family, to their own devices. Always ready for some emotional healing and particularly now in April 1786, this was when, according to Burns, Mary Campbell appeared, or possibly re-appeared on the scene. A whirlwind romance resulted in her agreeing to go to the West Indies with him. According to Burns' own words in Robert Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns*, they met on the second Sunday in May 1786, stood on opposite banks of a small stream called the Faile, just before it joins the river Ayr, and plighted their troth in the ancient way of Scotland. The couple washed their hands in the water, to show purity, clasping them over the running stream, and held Mary's Bible between them, the significance being that "as long as the stream continued to run and as long as the book held true, for that length of time they would be true to one another." They then exchanged Bibles and made their last (although they were not to know this) farewells to each other. This intense relationship supposedly all took place in a four week period - that is if they did meet in April for the first time. But if they had met earlier possibly in 1785 as some would have it, their association would have been much longer.

Here the story starts to get even murkier. Most accepted versions suggest Mary stayed with her family in Campbeltown from May of 1786 until October of that year. In October she travelled by boat from Campbeltown to Greenock, probably in her father's boat, as the first step in her journey to the Indies with Burns. She was accompanied by her brother, another Robert, who had been accepted as a carpenter's apprentice at Scott's shipyard there. A brothing-feast was held to celebrate Robert's entry to the craft, at which Mary helped wait on the company. Next day Robert was ill and unable to report for work. This illness turned out to be typhus which was very serious, and Mary attended him with great care and assiduity. Over the following days he began to recover but at the same time Mary started to sicken as she became infected by the disease. It is not known exactly when she died but it was sometime in mid to late October 1786.

Going back to Jean's story shows that Holy Willie Fisher had picked up the scent of scandal and the minutes of the Mauchline Kirk Session of June 10th, 1786 show that a letter had been received from Jean reading "I am heartily sorry that I have given and must give your Session trouble on my account. I acknowledge that I am with child, and Robert Burns of Mossgiel is the father. I am, with great respect your most humble servant." It is also worth noting that at this same time Jean unexpectedly returned to Mauchline against the wishes of her parents, and we can only speculate as to why. Did she know that Robert had courted Mary? Did she so love him that she went to defend her 'territory'?

One can only imagine what the state of Burns' mind was at this time. His immediate reaction on hearing that Jean was pregnant was to do 'the right thing' as we have seen. However when Jean gave her father the paper of the so-called marriage contract which he promptly had mutilated, and then meekly departed for Paisley, Burns felt betrayed. It was at this time that he met up with Mary and they agreed to leave Scotland together. To complicate the issue still further he confessed to David Brice on June 12th, 1786 that he had been guilty of "dissipation and riot... and other mischief." Had he compromised himself with Highland Mary Campbell, to the extent that she might also be carrying his child?

It is possible that at this time he realized that he could be considered a bigamist as he thought that the promises and exchanges he had made with both Jean and Mary could have been legally enforceable in Scotland at that time. But for whatever reason he was keen to have his situation simplified and clarified and he agreed to admit his sins with Jean (and others) in order to be absolved of his sins and to receive a certificate testifying that he was absolved in the Kirk's eyes, and was a single man. By the end of August this was done and he got his certificate from Daddy Auld, the minister at Mauchline.

It is true that by April 1786 Burns had made plans to emigrate and in fact had obtained employment in Jamaica with a Charles Douglas who would not only pay him GBP30 a year but would finance his passage there. His thoughts now turned to his poetry and he was reluctant to leave the large volume of verses he had recently written, as well as his growing reputation among influential folk in Ayrshire. He realized that if he was ever to publish, now was the time - not specifically to raise the fare to emigrate as has been suggested, but to put his work before a larger audience. So on April 14th, 1786 the very day that James Armour despoiled the marriage document of Robert and Jean, the proposal for his book was printed to be sent out to potential subscribers. He learnt that James Armour had forced his daughter to sign a complaint against him requiring the payment of a large sum of money, which had resulted in a warrant being issued. To counteract this, Burns laid low and arranged for his lawyer to draw up a deed

of trust on July 22nd 1786, making over all his property and profits from his soon-to-be-published book, to his brother Gilbert, on condition that he used it in the bringing up of his 'Dear-bought Bess.' This deed would also suggest that money was not the primary reason for publishing his poems as surely he would have kept the money for the journey at least. He was still in hiding in July 1786 when his **Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect** was published, completely changing his status, his finances and his thoughts on emigration.

This change in his circumstances softened James Armour's opinion of him and although the warrant was still in existence, the possibility of it being acted on was dramatically reduced. In early September of that same year he learned that Jean had given birth to twins – Robert and Jean. As has been indicated above, Mary died the following month in October 1786 and a few days after her death Robert received a letter from Greenock. His youngest sister Isobel vividly recalled the incident years later, stating that as she watched him read over the letter a look of anguish flashed across his countenance; he crumpled the letter tightly into his pocket, and left the room. Although he never divulged the contents of the letter, Isobel was certain that he had that day learned of the death of his Highland Mary. She was equally sure that it had been her brother's intention to marry her. Writing to his friend the lawyer Robert Aiken about October the 8th, he says *"I have for some time been pining under secret wretchedness, from causes which you pretty well know – the pang of disappointment, the sting of pride, with some wandering stabs of remorse, which never fail to settle on my vitals like vultures, when attention is not called away by the calls of society or the vagaries of the muse. Even in this hour of social mirth, my gaiety is the madness of an intoxicated criminal under the hands of an executioner. . All these reasons urge me to go abroad; and to all these reasons I have only one answer – the feelings of a father."* Was he referring to Jean and their new-born twins or did he know something about Mary and a possible impending birth there? Remembering that he had not seen her since early May after a very short relationship and had not as far as we know had any further communication from her, it seems highly unlikely that he would know of any pregnancy, although it must be acknowledged that she could have been pregnant but hadn't got word to him of that fact. He did write to her during this period but her father reputedly destroyed the letters after her death. Nothing is known about what he might have told her in any letters, including the decision he had made in September not to go to the Indies.

Mary was buried in the West Highland Churchyard in Greenock and subsequently a statue of her was erected on the Castle Hill, Dunoon, where she is faced looking over to Ayrshire, for eternity still waiting for her lover. An acquaintance, Peter McPherson, had very recently purchased a lair in the burial grounds for use by his family and he gave permission for Mary to be buried there. During the First World War the ship building company of Caird and Company applied for an extension of their shipyard that would have entailed the demolition of the Old West Parish Church together with its Kirkyard. One of the objections to this was the possible destruction of Highland Mary's grave which by this time had been much neglected and was in a squalid and dilapidated condition, and it would have been a greater offence to leave things as they were as opposed to removing the remains and to re-inter them elsewhere. Eventually after much debate it was agreed by the Greenock Corporation and Harland and Wolf (successors to Caird) to have the remains removed to a more suitable location. Accordingly, in early November 1920 the remains were exhumed, the scene being described by Archibald Macphail, a member of the Greenock Burns Club;

“Fourteen men were present at the exhumation on 8 November, including the Superintendent of Cemetery and Parks, the Chief Constable, the Convener of the Parks Committee, ex-Baillie Hillhouse Carmichael, Ninian McWhannell (President of the Burns Federation), four members of the Greenock Burns Club, and staff of the Cemetery. The first earth had been removed before the Burns contingent arrived and already several small bones had been unearthed. The grave turned out to be only four feet deep, ‘stopping at gravel and clay.’ The excavation took two hours, four men relieving each other by turns. four large boxes had been provided to hold the soil and a smaller box for bones and other remains. Three skulls were unearthed, as well as a thigh and smaller bones and part of a jawbone ‘with four teeth in good state of preservation.’ There were also some human remains which were black and quite hard. ‘One got a better idea of the number of internments from the considerable quantity of wood unearthed..... At the foot of the grave the bottom of an infant’s coffin was found. This while sodden was quite sound.”

Three skulls, a jawbone and a large quantity of wood suggest there had been other occupants of the lair. Perhaps Peter McPherson himself and his wife – another Mary Campbell? No forensic examination was apparently carried out so we have no idea of the ages or sexes of the bodies. Interestingly enough the infant’s coffin board got little mention and it was only with the publication of Catherine Carswell’s biography of Burns in 1930 that the matter came to the fore, when she wrote ‘She gave birth to a premature infant,’ although without any explanation or supporting evidence. However the possibility of yet another “bastard wean” by Burns set tongues wagging and a number of people tried to discover the truth of the matter and to determine whether it was possible that Mary had been pregnant when she died, or for that matter had died in childbirth, as it was thought at the time that pregnant women were more susceptible to die of typhus than to survive. The Reverend Lauchlan MacLean Watt of the Glasgow Cathedral wrote in the Burns Chronicle of 1933 that he had investigated the matter and found that a certain Agnes Hendry born on January 4th, 1827, had died on February 27th of the same year, and that Peter MacPherson had given the family permission to bury the child in the family burying-place, in Highland Mary’s grave. This fact was common knowledge in the Hendry family and was further confirmed in the recorded family tree of the Hendrys. The Reverend Watt goes on to state “had Mary borne an illegitimate child to anybody – but especially to Burns – it could not have been kept secret, for Greenock was a small place then, and gossip would have found in this a real tit-bit.” All this was confirmed by W. Hillhouse Carmichael, the convener of the Cemetery and Parks Committee in October 1932, who was also present when the lairs were opened. So that particular myth can be put to bed – Mary was not pregnant at the time of her death. Finally, in a solemn ceremony on November 13th, 1920 Mary’s remains were re-interred in Greenock Cemetery under the 1842 monument designed by John Mossman, which was moved from the old West Kirkyard, and depicts the romantic couple, in memory of Robert Burns’ lost love; and there she remains to this day.

This is the life of Mary, or Margaret, Campbell as I best understand and believe, but her life is not without its mysteries and I will try to untangle some of the more persistent ones. Whilst details of her early life are sketchy with many gaps, the first serious question arises as to when Mary moved to Ayrshire and in what capacity, as well as how and when she and Burns became acquainted. As mentioned above they probably met while attending church services in Tarbolton in 1785, although Burns himself hints that it was 1786.

However it is quite possible that Mary was employed by Gavin Hamilton from February 1785 to August of that year, in which case the two could well have met somewhat earlier than the spring of 1786. If that was the case however there is no evidence that a relationship developed at that time. It should be pointed out that Burns met Jean Armour in April of 1785 and spent the next twelve months or so in romancing her, impregnating her and then being rejected by her family, so he did not have much time or inclination to pursue Highland Mary until that rejection in the spring of 1786. Of course it is possible that he courted both Jean and Mary at the same time, making Jean – and possibly Mary as well – pregnant. In submitting his song *The Highland Lassie, O* for inclusion in the Scots Musical Museum, Burns wrote *“After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment we met by appointment, on the second Sunday in May.”* This quote would suggest that they had met earlier than a few weeks before they parted in May 1786. In 1850 Miss Agnes Begg wrote to Dr. Robert Chambers, one of the most painstaking editors of the poet: *“It was in 1786, just as he supposes; at least so my mother has all along thought, from a revulsion of feeling attendant on the heartless desertion of him by Jean Armour. He just then became acquainted with Mary Campbell, who was acting as nurserymaid in the family of Gavin Hamilton. He must have known her previously to that time, though his love – fit had only begun then. My mother has no doubt that he meant to marry her.”* On balance, the two seem to have been acquainted for some time – since early 1785? – but the “love-fit” only lasted a few weeks in 1786.

Another long running controversy concerns the character of Highland Mary – was she the innocent, virginal maiden from the Highlands or was she just another naïve country girl who fell for the silver-tongued poet? What little we know of Mary suggests that she was “very pleasant and winning” and during the nineteenth century opinion came to acknowledge her image as pure and unsullied and even the one true love of Burns (more on this later). However as always there was a contrary view that Mary was not so pure and in fact even had a somewhat loose character. An old friend of Burns was John Richmond whom he likely met during the negotiations to rent Mossiel Farm in late 1783. John himself was also a victim of Daddy Auld when he sat on the cutty stool in 1785 and was chastised for fornication and impregnating one Jenny Surgeoner, who subsequently produced a daughter. Burns finally persuaded Richmond to do the honourable thing and in 1791 he married Jenny. John had moved to Edinburgh and met up again with Burns when the latter was in the city to produce the Edinburgh edition of his poems. Interestingly enough, John held the manuscript of **The Jolly Beggars**, which was never published in Burns’ lifetime due to its licentious nature, but finally appeared in imperfect form in a chapbook in 1799 and then in complete form in 1802 through the efforts of Richmond’s nephew, Thomas Stewart. Burns also wrote to Richmond more than once during the summer of 1786 at the height of all this activity.

Sometime about 1817 Richmond gave information about Burns to James Grierson of Dalgoner, who was an antiquarian and avid collector of every scrap of information concerning the poet. Grierson passed his notes to Joseph Train, who subsequently supplied John Lockart with the following story when he was writing his biography of Burns.

Highland Mary – Truth deprives her history of much of its charm. Her character was loose in the extreme. She was kept for some time by a brother of Lord Eglinton’s, and even while

a servant with Gavin Hamilton and during the period of Burns' attachment it was well known that her meetings with Montgomerie were open and frequent. The friends of Burns represented to him the impropriety of his devotedness to her, but without producing any change in his sentiments. Richmond told Grierson that Montgomerie and Highland Mary frequently met in a small alehouse called the Elbow – and upon occasion he and some of Burns' friends knowing they were actually together in the Elbow – and having often in vain tried to convince Robert of her infidelity, upon this occasion they promised to give ocular proof of their assertions. The party retired to the Elbow – Richmond (Mr. Grierson's informant) was one and they took their seats in the kitchen (sic) from which two rooms branched off to the right and left – being all the accommodation the house contained. They had taken their positions in the kitchen to be sure that no one could leave the other room without being observed. After waiting long, and when Burns was beginning to ridicule their suspicions, at last Mary Campbell appeared from one of the rooms – was jeered by the party in a general way – blushed and retired. Another long interval elapsed and Burns began to rally his spirits which were very much sunk – and Montgomerie (Colonel or Capt.) walked out of the same room. Burns coloured deeply – compressed his lips – and muttered “*damn it.*” After enduring considerable bantering from his friends he soon gave way to the general hilarity of the evening, and his friends thought he had seen enough of Highland Mary but in a few days after he returned “like the dog to its vomit.”

If Richmond's story is true, it means that Burns was so besotted that he was prepared to marry someone who was known to be the mistress of another, and that Gavin Hamilton employed a woman of easy virtue as a servant in his household. It is also worthy of note that Richmond left Mauchline in November 1785 before these events of 1786 took place. To cloud the waters even more, it turns out there was a lass called Margaret McCrae living in Mauchline at this time and who had been called before the Kirk Session on a number of occasions for the sin of fornication, and it was further reported that she was having an affair with Thomas Montgomerie, a brother of the Laird. Are these two stories getting mixed up some thirty years later? Digging deeper we find there is yet another Mary Campbell, this one also of reputedly dubious character, who gave birth to an illegitimate child by one John Hay of Paulstone. Was Richmond's story true so many years after Mary died, and with other similar cases in play? Was his memory playing tricks? History does not attach much veracity with his story.

Moving on to the question as to whether Burns proposed marriage to Mary Campbell and planned to go to the Indies with her. Receiving the news of his rejection by the Armour family, he wrote to John Arnot that he was lifting up his grief-worn eye to look for another wife and who did he see – Mary Campbell of course. He had almost certainly known of her for some time but only now turned his full attention on her. I believe that day in May 1786 that they did promise to marry and go to the Indies together, but events conspired to thwart those plans. Jean did return to Mauchline and his life in June and clearly he still had strong feelings for her – he wrote to David Brice at that time “never man lov'd, or rather ador'd, a woman more than I did her; and confess a truth between you and me, do still love her to distraction after all, tho' I won't tell her so”. Then later of course there was the success of his book of poems. Also in June Burns went through the process of absolution with the Kirk at the same time that Jean did, and

they were finally rebuked and absolved together with Burns being acknowledged as a bachelor. During August the success of his book was making him well known and he was enjoying the recognition and adulation that were starting to flow. He travelled locally to say his farewells to friends and family but got sidetracked with his departure date slipping from the first of September to the end of that month. Contact with Mary at this time was very limited but no letters exist as they were reportedly burnt by her father. There are also no letters known from her to him. He did write a number of letters through the summer – including some to John Richmond, and these contain numerous references to Jean, but none to Mary. There is also the curious fact that he only ever purchased a single ticket for the journey to the Indies.

If Mary was pregnant, it would have been obvious by this time, but there are no reports or even rumours that she was, or had actually given birth. She was supposedly living with her family in Campbeltown from May, before moving to Greenock in October, where she died. In Robert Cromek's Reliques of Robert Burns there is a quote from the poet – *"...where we spent the day taking a farewell, before she should embark for the West Highlands, to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change in life."* Support for his intention to marry her? But to counter this, Mary had apparently agreed to take up an appointment with a Colonel Mclvor of Glasgow at Martinmas – November 1786. Did Robert's plans change in September? Clearly his circumstances did – suddenly he was faced with the real possibility of a life as a recognized poet in his homeland, the pressure from the Armours lessened dramatically as they realized that maybe he would be an acceptable catch for Jean after all, and of course in early September Jean produced her twins. Then in October he heard of the passing of his Mary.

Robert Burns was constantly reticent about his Mary. There are no letters extant that he wrote to her and supposedly those that he did write were destroyed by Mary's father. In his letters to others at that time there is the occasional oblique reference but her name is not mentioned. In his "autobiographical" letter to Dr. John Moore in August 1787 there is no mention or reference to Highland Mary at all, and he never indicated when or where they met. However once he learned of her death he was extremely remorseful. He wrote only four – possibly five – songs to his Mary but only mentions her name directly in one. The first song was **The Highland Lass O**, written shortly after Mary had died and the third one **Thou Ling'ring Star** three years later and the last two **Will Ye Go To The Indies** and **Highland Mary** six years later, all penned around the time of the anniversaries of her death. Whatever the reason, Robert was still haunted by her memory as each anniversary of her death came around – was it grief or conscience? This happened even after he was settled in marriage with Jean - he still mourned her passing. Jean later said that around the date of the third anniversary she noticed Robert sinking into a depressed state. He went out and walked along the banks of the Nith and stood staring at the brightest light in the sky. After sitting in the shelter of a corn stack for several hours contemplating this bright winter sky he returned home and immediately started to write **Thou Ling'ring Star**. On the sixth anniversary he wrote **Highland Mary** and sent it to Thomson who replied *"Your verses upon Highland Mary are just come to hand; they breathe the genuine spirit of poetry, and, like the music, will last forever..... I have heard the sad story of your Mary: you always seem inspired when you write of her."*

Now for the hardest imponderable – was Highland Mary the true love of Robert Burns? Trying to be objective, I believe that Burns did have a relationship with Highland Mary during 1785 and 1786, and

knowing how his relationships with other women went, that they were intimate, but I do not believe that she was ever pregnant. When spurned by Jean and hounded by her family he turned to Mary for comfort and reassurance, and proposed marriage and escape to the Indies. However after they parted in May the evidence we have suggests that he was still very much enamoured with his Jean, although his feelings swung violently between love and never wanting anything to do with her ever again – he could not get her out of his mind and mentions her constantly in his letters to others throughout this period. As the summer of 1786 passed, he finds himself on firmer ground. He gets his poetry to a wider audience and the response is everything he had hoped for and more and he can see a future as a poet. The thoughts about emigrating lessen – especially as the threats from James Armour recede and he finds the feelings of fatherhood caused by the birth of twins to Jean incredibly strong. With no physical contact and little written contact with Mary over the summer, she seems to fade into the background of his thoughts and life. Then came that enormous jolt in October – Mary had died and he was immediately remorseful and burdened with guilt at his neglect of her. These feelings never left him and steadily and constantly prayed on his mind, possibly reminding him of how he had led her on with promises and every intent of marriage at the time, but then had apparently abandoned her. Perhaps Mary had given up and really did plan to take up employment in Glasgow with Colonel Mclvor. That guilt remained with him and every year around the anniversary of her death he saddened and became depressed and possibly his regret at what might have been made him wonder if he had done the right thing.

This romantic scenario soon became the stuff of legends; people picked up on it and embellished it and over time it became the reality. The Victorians really lapped this sort of thing up. At the end of the day I don't think Mary was his true love but fantasy seems to be more attractive than reality, and a whole cult – referred to as mariolatry – developed around the lass to strengthen this fantasy.

Looking back, 1786 must have been an incredible and confusing year for Burns as several strands of his life wove together, each strand with a life of its own and moving at its own speed. The Jean strand – she announces her pregnancy in March, is banished to Paisley, returns unexpectedly in June, and acknowledges fornication with Burns, is absolved by the Kirk in August and gives birth to twins in September. The Mary strand – she takes up with Burns in March, is betrothed (?) to him in May, returns home to Campbeltown and dies in October. The Book strand – first proposals in April, sent to the printers in June, published in July. The Burns strand – repudiated by the Armours in March and plans to emigrate, acknowledges fornication with Jean in June, passes his worldly assets to brother Gilbert in July, is absolved by the Kirk in August, delays emigration in September, sets out for Edinburgh in November and has Creech issue proposals for the Edinburgh edition in December.

Thus ends the year of 1786 for Robert Burns and also marks the death of the mysterious Mary - or Margaret – Campbell, Robert Burns' Highland Mary. Although she may not have fully captivated Robert in life, in death she has captivated legions of fans, who have idolized her and raised her almost to sainthood. These fans have caused more statues of Mary to be erected than has of Jean. We know so little about her for sure, but she has left an indelible stamp on a world beyond Burns.

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