

Robert Burns – His Lovers and his Bairns

So much has been written about the Bard concerning his love of the lassies, and his seemingly careless fecundity. All too often the emphasis has been not so much on Bonnie Jean and his legitimate issue, but rather on his numerous actual and rumoured affairs, and the resulting wee surprises - or 'whaups in the nest' as he once irreverently remarked - that resulted from those couplings. I would like this evening to try to present the facts, so far as they are known, about the romantic interests in his life and the children that resulted both from his union with Jean Armour (four of which were illegitimate) and his other paramours. Perhaps it may serve as a kind of catalogue and chronology, giving some order to this sometimes confusing part of his history.

In his poems and songs, Burns immortalized a considerable number of women. Not surprisingly in view of the fact that he was bent on publishing his works, most of the ladies he lauded and romanticized were either fictional foils for his muse, or simply acquaintances that he either admired from afar for their beauty, for their talents, or, I suspect, to gain favour through flattery. Only very occasionally does he risk shining the spotlight on those he might more wisely have left in the closet.

The first poem published by Burns was dedicated to **Handsome Nell**, who was likely the first object of his romantic interest. The Nell of this poem was once thought to be Helen Kirkpatrick, but is more likely to have been one Helen Blair. She was a young harvest helpmate with whom he was paired "in the autumn of my 15th year" as he described it, which would be a few months before his 15th birthday. It seems probable that other than perhaps some pubescent fumbling, his interest in Helen would have been relatively innocent. I mention her here because not only is the poem Handsome Nell a surprisingly mature and touching accomplishment for such a youth - and according to Burns his first poetical work - it is also testament to the role young Helen played in sparking Robert's latent interest in the lassies, and how that in turn could inspire his formidable muse.

**A gaudy dress and gentle air
May slightly touch the heart;
But it's innocence and modesty
That polishes the dart.**

**'Tis this in Nelly pleases me,
'Tis this enchants my soul;
For absolutely in my breast
She reigns without control.**

His next romance seems to have been with a young lady variously identified as Allison Begbie, Ellison Begbie or Elizabeth Gebbie. The biographer James Mackay believes the shadowy figure was Elizabeth Gebbie, but little is known of her or the details of her involvement with Robert. It does seem, however, that they starting seeing one another probably in late 1780 or early 1781,

conveniently for Robin at just about the time he started the Tarbolton Bachelor's Club, the constitution of which required that every member, "must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex". Robert would soon display a preference for the "or more"! He proposed marriage to Elizabeth, but she turned him down. He lamented bitterly to one confidant that she had jilted him, but that was likely an exaggeration arising from his mortification over her refusal. His virginity may well have survived in tact through this brief courtship, but we'll never know for sure!

Prize for the first known intimate involvement in the poet's life goes to Elizabeth Paton, or Betsy as she was better known. She was a servant of the Burns family for a brief period at Lochlie farm, but became pregnant in the summer of 1784 after having left the family's service, and when they were already tenants of Mossgiel farm. "Dear-bought Bess" as Robert referred to the child, was born on May 22nd, 1785. He seemed surprisingly sanguine about an event that for other young men might have been shame-making and traumatic. We can only assume this from the many lines of verse he devoted to the event, and the frank admissions in some of his extant correspondence. **My Girl She's Airy** is a short, bawdy piece that is thought to describe Betsy herself, including attributes that no young lady of the time would find flattering. I would blush to quote from it, so leave you to look it up yourselves. And in his **Epistle to John Rankine** he employs the masterful analogy of a poacher to describe the affair and its outcome.

The well-known poem, **The Fornicator** is also dedicated to the event, boldly and boastfully acknowledging his sin and his appearance before the Kirk's congregation where he and Betsy were made to repent in public. Aye well, repentance may have been what the elders had in mind, but Robert was scarcely contrite. As they stood before the congregation and its admonishment, Robert passed the time in lascivious contemplation:

**But my downcast eye by chance did spy
What made my lips to water,
Those limbs so clean where I, between,
Commenced a Fornicator.**

And Robert dismissed the resulting guinea fine levied by the Tarbolton Kirk Session with contempt, reporting that he had "...pay'd the buttock-hire", a small fee for "...monie a merry dint."

But surely he redeems his crude bravura in **A Poet's Welcome to a Love-Begotten Daughter**. In this, he proudly acknowledges his paternity and his lack of regret on beholding his "bonnie, sweet wee dochter", and with tender avowals never to abandon or neglect child or mother. He was announcing to the world that he would not abrogate his responsibilities, or hide from the shame. We know little about any continuing association with Betsy Paton. It seems he was willing to marry her, and she him, but the family exerted a strong veto at the prospect, and Robert surprisingly acquiesced. But little Bess was taken in and lovingly raised by the Burns family, principally by Robert's mother Agnes.

We hear no more of bastard weans until Robert's courting of Jean Armour. The first mention of Jean is in his two stanza tribute to **The Belles of Mauchline**, ending with:

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

In fact Robert did have a brief courtship with one other of the Mauchline Belles - Betty Miller, described rather tamely in the above lines as 'braw' - but it didn't last long. Robert met his Bonnie Jean in Mauchline in April 1785, and they soon started their courting. Jean's father, James Armour, was a dour, unco guid, auld licht stalwart who was adamantly opposed to his favourite daughter's association with that renowned fornicator, young Mossgiel. But Jean became pregnant in about December 1785, and, perhaps at Jean's insistence, they both signed a form of certificate of marriage that many at the time regarded as de facto proof of marriage. When Jean broke the news to her parents, her father - so despising his dissolute fornicator of a putative son-in-law - is said to have fainted at the horror of such a prospect. He took the marriage contract to a lawyer and had him crudely, and probably ineffectively, expurgate the names from the document.

Jean was swiftly packed off to a relative in Paisley, partly to hide her pregnancy from the holy legion in Mauchline, and partly to keep Jean from her seducer's influence. When Robert was advised of this, he was disgusted by her pliant submission to her parents' wishes over their own commitment to one another, and also that their certificate of marriage had been so mutilated. As a result, he considered his relationship with Jean severed, and accordingly that he was a bachelor once more, and indeed managed to get a certificate to that effect from the Kirk.

And so, within a very few weeks in the spring of 1786, and on the rebound from Jean, he took up with the shadowy Margaret Campbell (but apparently preferring to be addressed as Mary), his so-called Highland Mary. In fact there is some possibility that he was seeing both women more or less simultaneously. But with the pregnant Jean out of the picture, and all the recent turmoil in his life, Robert set in motion a plan to emigrate to Jamaica and take Mary with him as his wife. She had been working in Mauchline for a brief time first as a nursemaid and then as a milkmaid, but returned to her parents in Campbeltown to prepare for this change in both their lives. But tragically, Mary died in Greenock in October of that year after a short bout of fever, before she and her lover could be reunited. There is a real possibility that Mary was with his child when she died, but that has never been proven conclusively.

In the meantime, part way through this drama, Jean returned to Mauchline in July 1786. They remained estranged at first, but after much time and many bizarre turnings, Robert and Jean were eventually reconciled, and on August 5th 1788 were formally married. However, this was long after the birth of their first set of illegitimate twins on September 3rd 1786, and a second set on March 3rd 1788. Jean was eventually to bear him nine children, but sadly only three survived infancy. Likely because of her pregnancy with the second set of twins, Jean had been cast out of

her parents' house and left destitute and homeless, and Robert had had to come to her aid and find her accommodation. This may have done much to soften Robert's attitude towards her and to proceed with their marriage.

But moving back a little in time, fame and even fortune beckoned after the publication of his Kilmarnock edition in 1786, and Robert, free of his obligations to Jean, had many adventures and romantic exploits in store. In November of 1786, flush with the national acclaim that his published works bestowed on him, he set off for Edinburgh. His purpose was to pursue the possibility of a second edition of his poems, but also to better position himself to secure a post with the Excise. He remained in Edinburgh for the winter of 1786/87, and returned to spend the following winter there also. During these sojourns, he managed to fit in three more liaisons.

The first, and best known of his intended conquests was Agnes McLehose, his beloved Clarinda, whom he first met on his second trip to Edinburgh in the winter of 1787/88. She was far above his social station and the relationship, while scarcely platonic, may not have resulted in intimacy. The question will always be "did they or didn't they?". Even if they didn't, Agnes inspired what is probably the most beautiful and pathos-laden love song of all time: **Ae Fond Kiss**. In 1791, she was leaving to reunite with her estranged and reportedly abusive husband in the West Indies, and both Robert and Clarinda believed they were almost surely parting forever.

**I'll ne'er blame my partial fancy,
Naething could resist my Nancy:
But to see her was to love her;
Love but her, and love for ever.
Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.**

In fact, Agnes unexpectedly returned to Scotland within a relatively short time, and they did at least continue to correspond by letter until 1794. Long after his death (in fact when she was aged 82), she was reported as declaring that she longed for their eventual reunion in heaven. Well, that was retro of her! If she'd felt like that in 1787, the bold Rab would surely have had his way with her, and maybe had another wee bouncing bairn to add to his brood!

During that second stay in Edinburgh, understandingly frustrated by Agnes keeping him at a discreet distance, Burns sought solace in the arms of two other women. One was a servant girl named Margaret Cameron. Like Highland Mary, she was another shadowy figure about whom we know very little, except that he did make her pregnant...of course! She established her claim on him by issuing a writ in *meditation fugae* on 15th August 1787, but this action in law was inexplicably settled, possibly because Margaret miscarried or gave birth to a stillborn child.

His second dalliance was with none other than Clarinda's maid. In 1788 Jenny Clow became pregnant with his child, a son, and although Robert offered to take and care for the boy, Jenny

refused to part with him. He made some token payments of support to her, but the contact seems to have melted away quite quickly over time.

As far as we know, his final fling was with Anna Park, a barmaid at the Globe Tavern in Dumfries where Robert occasionally stayed in his early years as an Exciseman before actually moving to Dumfries. Anna gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, in March 1791, and, not to be outdone, nine days later, on 31st March 1791, Jean Armour presented Burns with a son, William Nicol Burns. Showing admirable forbearance of Robert's wandering ways, Jean brought up Anna's child as one of her own. It was in commenting many years after Robert's death about this further 'whaup in the nest' that Jean tolerantly remarked: "Oor Rab needed twa wives."

And so, assuming I haven't missed any, counting his nine bairns with Jean and four more he fathered with other women, and maybe another with Highland Mary; that's a baker's dozen confirmed, and a possible 14th. And who knows, maybe there were others. But to those who admire his unrivalled talent, yet condemn his wanton promiscuity, consider that the passionate nature that placed him so helplessly in the thrall of the lassies sprang from the same seed as the passion that inspired his inimitable muse and nourished the genius that we admire and celebrate today. I'll end with two very different thoughts from Robert Burns: first an admonishment to the hypocritical unco guid, some of them his nemeses in his unhappy run-ins with the kirk and with Daddy Auld:

**O ye *wha* are sae *guid* yoursel',
Sae pious and *sae* holy,
Ye've nought to do but *mark* and tell
Your neibours' fauts and folly!**

**Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Tho' they may *gang* a *kennin* wrang,
To step aside is human.**

But I am going to leave you with some kinder, gentler sentiments from the heart of the man we so admire, which he intended for his true, true love; one who served him tirelessly and with such generous spirit, and who forgave him everything...his bonie, bonie Jean:

**I see her in the dewy flowers –
I see her sweet and fair.
I hear her in the tunefu' birds –
I hear her charm the air.
There's not a bonie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw, or green,
There's not a bonie bird that sings,
But minds me o' my Jean.**

Calgary Burns Club monthly meeting, February 10, 2009.
Jim McLaughlin