

## **ROBERT TANNAHILL – THE WEAVER POET (1774-1810)**

Robert Tannahill was born at Castle Street in Paisley on 3 June 1774, the fourth son in a family of seven. Soon after his birth the family moved to a newly built cottage in nearby Queen Street, which became both the family home and a weaving shop. The Queen Street cottage was to be the only home Robert knew. It has been preserved through the efforts of the Paisley Burns club, especially after a serious fire in 2003, which required extensive restoration, including the slate roof you see today in place of the original thatched roof. That home at 11 Queen Street is still the meeting place of the Paisley Tannahill Club.

Upon leaving school at age twelve, Robert was apprenticed to his father as a handloom weaver. It was during this apprenticeship that Tannahill began to show a real talent for poetry. However, in 1802 his father died, so he was left to look after his widowed mother and to work in the family weaving shop. In spite of this added responsibility, Tannahill became more engrossed in his poetry. He even fashioned a writing desk which was attached to his loom so that he could jot down ideas or lines of verse while not interrupting his work.

He revered Robert Burns. He was so inspired by Tam o' Shanter, that he walked to Alloway Kirk in 1794 and spent time visiting the localities connected with Burns.

But unlike his contemporary, Tannahill had a delicate constitution and was somewhat shy. He was born with a deformity in his right leg. He spent hours as a child manipulating his ankle so that it toed the right way. Although the right leg would always be slightly smaller than the left, he compensated through using extra socks and padding in his right shoe, such that his limp was barely noticeable and he was able to hike on his favoured braes of Gleniffer above the town of Paisley. He also was quite capable of dancing, although the opportunities for him to do so were few. That is not to say he was a recluse because he did enjoy the company of his friends in the Paisley Literary and Convivial Association where he was an enthusiastic member.

Like Burns, the braes and glens of Scotland and the wilds of the highlands were his refuge and an enduring source of ideas for his songs and poetry. Titles like "Loudoun's Bonny Woods and Braes", "The Braes o' Gleniffer", "Langsyne Beside the Woodland Burn", and "The Braes of Balquither", which we now sing as "Wild Mountain Thyme" or "Will You Go, Lassie, Go".

Tannahill had a terrific ear for music. He taught himself to play the flute and was capable enough to perform in concerts. He loved to seek out neglected folk tunes and unite them with his own words. He was a prolific song writer, in large part because he joined up with Robert Archibald Smith, who was six years his junior, and a genius as a music composer. The two collaborated on many songs: Tannahill taking the lead by producing the verses on some and Smith taking the lead with the music on others. Smith was a master in his own right; producing a wide variety of tunes. Everything from military marches, to the haunting notes to such songs as Burns's Red, Red Rose.

In 1805, Tannahill was one of the founders of the Paisley Burns Club, which is reputed to be the oldest continuing Burns Club in the world. He was persuaded to write and read a piece for Burns's birthday in 1805. It is entitled simply "Ode":

It opens with:

“Once on a time, almighty Jove  
Invited all the minor gods above,  
To spend one day in social festive pleasure;  
His legal robes were laid aside,  
His crown, his scepter, and his pride;  
And wing’d with joy,  
The hours did fly,  
The happiest ever Time did measure.

Of love and social harmony they sung,  
Till Heav’n’s high gold arches echoing rung;  
And as they quaff’d the nectar-flowing can,  
Their toast was,  
“Universal peace twixt man and man.”

The poem goes on to describe “the yellow-blossomed broom”, the “massy thistles ... twin’d”, the people “with every virtue that the heart approves, warm in their friendships, rapt’rous in their loves, profusely generous, obstinately just, inflexible as death in their vows of trust”, which is the essence of Caledonia; Caledonia appearing before the gods to plea for the delivery to the country of “one true patriot bard”.

And the Ode concludes with lines that confirm the gods’ gift to Scotland:

“But Fate forbade the blast, so premature,  
Till worth should sanction it beyond the critic’s power.  
His merits proven – Fame her blast hath blown,  
Now Scotia’s Bard o’er all the world is known-  
But trembling doubts here check my unpolished lays,  
What can they add to a whole world’s praise?  
Yet, while revolving time this day returns,  
Let Scotsmen glory in the name of Burns.”

This poem shows the deep respect and admiration in which Tannahill held Burns. He was cajoled into writing a similar tribute for the society in 1807 and again in 1810. He was not entirely comfortable about being thrust into the role of poet laureate as he saw it. Both poems are effusive in their praise of the memory of Burns. But the few concluding lines of the last one in 1810 seem to portend Tannahill’s own immediate future. The lines are as follows:

“Yet who can hear without a tear,  
What sorrow wrung his manly breast,  
To see his little helpless filial band,  
Imploring succour from a father’s hand,  
And there no succour near?  
Himself the while with sick’ning woes opprest,  
Fast hast’ning on to where the weary rest:-  
For this let Scotia’s bitter tears atone,  
She reck’d not half his worth till he was gone.”

Tannahill had self-published his one and only book of poetry in 1807 under the title “The Sodger’s Return”. Its 900 copies of a 175 page volume were fully subscribed in a couple of weeks, from which he netted 20 pounds. But he intensely disliked the process of seeking subscriptions, which he regarded as begging for approval. So the next volume of poetry he prepared, he submitted to professional publishers. Following one rejection, he submitted his work to second professional - Edinburgh publisher Archibald Constable. Constable turned him down as well.

As with many a creative mind, Robert Tannahill was prone to bouts of depression. About this time, he received a visit from James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, (whom I have profiled for you at a club meeting last year.) Had Tannahill not been so immersed in despondency, this might have been a real opportunity to restore his confidence. Unfortunately, the two barely spoke and Hogg, who arrived in the morning, had departed by evening. Robert Tannahill simply could not take the publishers’ rejection on top of other real or perceived slights. Shortly after, he took his own life by drowning in a culvert in the Candren burn, not far from his home on Queen Street. The date was May 7, 1810. He was just shy of his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday.

#