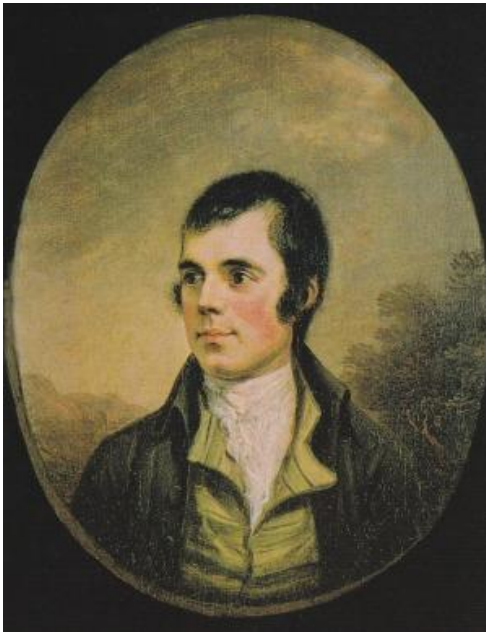


The Life of Robert Burns: A Brief Biography

The Calgary Burns Club

Introduction



*The following is a condensed biography of the life of Robert Burns, Scotland's National Bard. While comparatively short in length, it is intended to cover all of the important events in the poet's life. It is a project of the **Bob Carnie Group**, comprised of a few members of the Calgary Burns Club and formed in 2007 to study and report to club members on interesting and relevant works of Scottish literature and other published materials that touch on the history, culture and literary treasures of Scotland, with special emphasis - but by no means exclusively so - on the life and works of Robert Burns. The author regrets any inaccuracies that might have gone unnoticed, and hopes that this account will prove informative and enjoyable to Burnsians and general readers alike.*

Acknowledgements

The author is particularly indebted to James Mackay. His voluminous and near-definitive bicentenary edition of **BURNS: A Biography of Robert Burns** was the principle source of information for this undertaking, while the chronology is based on (but not identical to) that printed in his edition of **The Complete Poetical Works**. Also consulted was **The Bard** by Robert Crawford, as was the online version of **The Burns Encyclopedia** on the Burns Country website, and a variety of other materials and internet sources.

I am also indebted to Calgary Burns Club member and founder of the Bob Carnie Group, Ron Budd, for his meticulous editing of the text as well as his insights and advice concerning some of the facts and the subtleties of this account. Last, but certainly not least, I am pleased to acknowledge Professor Bob Carnie (deceased), past-president and former Bard of the Calgary Burns Club, not only for the use of part of one of his papers, but for the knowledge he generously shared with myself and all of the other members of the Calgary Burns Club over many years. Bob was a true scholar of the life and works of Robert Burns, as well as of Scottish literature in general. He is missed.

Researched and written by Jim McLaughlin, Calgary Burns Club: January 2013

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William Burnes and Agnes Broun: A Family in the Making

Beginnings

Robert Burns was the first child born to William and Agnes Burnes. The family name at that time was variously spelled *Burness* or *Burnes*; William seems to have favoured the latter spelling, although most of the rest of his clan stuck with Burness. Before proceeding with this account of Robert's progress through life, a brief summary of his parents' history to this point will provide important context.

William Burnes was born on November 11, 1721 to Robert Burness and Isabella Keith. His birthplace is often given as Clochnahill in the Mearns district of Kincardineshire; biographer James Mackay believes it was at nearby Upper Kinmonth. William had three brothers, two of whom - James and Robert - survived into adulthood. William trained as a gardener and at about age 26 in 1748 he and his oldest brother, Robert, turned their backs on the Mearns forever, most likely because of the collapsed financial affairs of their father who lost his farm and the family livelihood. William headed for Edinburgh (or *Auld Reekie*, the unflattering sobriquet at that time for the smoke-filled city) where he quickly found employment working for Thomas Hope who had secured a 57-year lease on a large acreage just a mile from Edinburgh. For two years he helped develop Hope Park, later known as The Meadows, into a beautiful recreational space for public enjoyment.

From here he headed for Ayrshire. It is not known why, but that would have been a more congenial environment for a farm boy than Edinburgh. For the next six or seven years he was employed as a gardener in four different Ayrshire estates until finally being engaged as head gardener to Provost William Fergusson, a wealthy doctor, who was developing and expanding his Doonholm Estate near Alloway. William remained in Fergusson's employ until 1766. A year or two before this engagement he feud a seven and a half acre smallholding in Alloway (located about two miles south of Ayr) and began to develop most of it as a market garden. In his spare time he began building the thatched cottage that was to become the iconic birthplace of Scotland's national bard. He seems to have been highly esteemed by all of his employers during these errant years.

William met his future bride, Agnes Broun, at the annual Maybole Fair of 1756. Agnes had not long before broken off a seven-year courtship with Will Nelson. It seems that the virtuous Agnes came from a strictly observant Presbyterian background and insisted on Will waiting until the nuptials before claiming his reward. After seven years of abstinence poor long-suffering Will found comfort in the arms of another woman. Agnes discovered his duplicity, which she could not abide, and broke off the long engagement. But we should be eternally grateful for Will's impatient libido, for without it Scotland would have been deprived of a great and lasting national

In December 1757 they married and Agnes immediately assumed her role as mistress of the new cottage at Alloway. Just over a year later, on January 25th, 1759, the subject of our memoir was born. As the Bard himself playfully recorded, the event was followed ten days later by a fierce gale:

Our monarch's hindmost year but ane. *one*
Was five-and-twenty days begun,
'Twas then a blast o' Janwar win'
Blew hansel in on Robin. *a good-luck gift*

The storm demolished the gable wall of the Alloway cottage that William had recently constructed with his own hands, necessitating a hasty evacuation of mother and infant to the safety of a neighbour's house. A second child, Gilbert, joined the family twenty months later, followed by Agnes (1762), Anabella (1764), William (1767), John (1769) and Isabella (1771), all more or less at two year intervals. So the modest two-room 'clay biggin' must have become increasingly cramped with each new arrival.

As Robert and Gilbert grew beyond infancy their father turned his attention to the important matter of their education. As a child, William had benefitted from a good basic schooling, which made him a strong believer in the importance of education. The cost of employing a tutor would



impressed by Murdoch's display of scholarship and a religious fervour that conformed to William's own Christian ideals, and so he was engaged. As time would attest, this proved to be an excellent choice. During the brief three year life of that small ad-hoc school in Alloway, at least in the case of the two Burns children, John Murdoch succeeded remarkably well in providing his young charges with a good grounding in the rudiments of education. In many ways the young Robert was a temperamentally challenging student, sometimes sullen and obstinate and slow to warm to forced learning, but who, with the right encouragement might grow to

achieve the exceptional promise that was reflected in the deep pools of his intelligent dark eyes - that and the quickness of his mind and his remarkably retentive memory. His restive spirit needed balance and direction, which the firm, but patient Murdoch was able to provide. Through Murdoch's coaching and encouragement Robert soon began to display a passion for reading and literature that persisted throughout his short life and that prepared him to embrace and cultivate his muse.

Despite Murdoch's apparent excellence as a teacher, it is ironic that in a written commentary from him years after the poet's death, he admitted that while tutoring Robert and Gilbert he formed the opinion that Robert had an ear that '...was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable', and that anyone who knew the two boys (no doubt himself included) would never have chosen Robert over Gilbert as a likely poet. He was so wrong on both counts. Not only did Gilbert fail to show any inclination to be a poet, but as an adult Robert had a fine ear for music and became almost a walking encyclopedia of Scottish traditional airs which he was able to match with so many of the old Scots songs that he rescued and restored, many of which did not come with suitable melodies. He proved to be brilliant at picking just the right melodies for these songs.

Not long after establishing the school, William came to realize more and more that the family was outgrowing the Alloway cottage and that he could not hope to continue to support his growing brood on the meagre wages he earned as a gardener. He had made some efforts to develop the seven acres that adjoined the cottage into a market garden as a way of supplementing the family income, but that seems to have come to little. He decided that the solution was to lease a farm that would not only yield an adequate income but also provide employment for his two sons. Otherwise, like other young lads of employable age, they would soon have to leave the nurture of the family home to work in near slave-like conditions as farm labourers for other land owners in the area, or even farther afield. And so, in early 1766 the family took over the lease of the 90 English-acre Mount Oliphant farm located about two miles east of Alloway at a cost of £40 per annum. He attempted to sell the cottage and land, but to no avail, and instead had to sub-lease it. In fact it was not sold until fifteen years later for £160.

Mount Oliphant Farm - The Teenage Years

The family farmed Mount Oliphant for the next eleven years...eleven difficult years, especially for Robert's father William. The soil was heavy, acidic and boggy, and remained so despite his strenuous attempts to improve it. William's landlord and former employer, Provost Fergusson, was understanding and generous in allowing him time to meet his rent obligations, but towards the end of the lease Fergusson died and they were left to the less-than-tender mercies of his estate trustees. More of that later.



We have few details of the daily life and events at Mount Oliphant in the early years. The picture Robert paints in *The Cotter's Saturday Night* offers some insights, but despite the belief that the patriarch portrayed in the poem was modeled on Robert's father, their lives were unlikely to have been quite as idyllic as in this sentimental portrayal. However, the description of evening worship might not have been far short of the mark:

The chearfu' supper done, wi' serious face,	
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide ;	
The sire turns o'er, wi' patriarchal grace,	
The big ha'-Bible, ance his father's pride,	<i>hall Bible, once</i>
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,	
His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare ;	<i>grey locks</i>
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,	
He wales a portion with judicious care,	<i>selects</i>
And 'Let us worship God' he says, with solemn air.	

Soon after the move to the farm, Robert would have been expected to shoulder his share of the farm's labours, which would have increased as he grew older and stronger. Also not long after the move to Mount Oliphant, he and Gilbert ended their brief formal education under John Murdoch, partly because they were living so far from Alloway, but also because of their involvement in the work of the farm. The next few years would have been filled mainly with long days of working and evenings of close family interaction, including some learning; William did his best to home-school all of his children, particularly the boys.

At about the age of fifteen Robert was paired with a winsome young field hand at harvest time whom he immortalized in **Handsome Nell**, his first known attempt at rhyme. Her real identity is uncertain, but she may have been Helen Blair.

**Once I lov'd a bonie lass,
Ay, and I love her still;
And whilst that virtue warms my breast,
I'll love my handsome Nell.**

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

There is good reason to believe that this song (set to an existing melody) really was inspired by a partnering at harvest time. In a letter to a friend later in life, Burns did allude to just such an incident. Coming from the pen of such a young farm boy, we can imagine that the surprising

quality and pathos of these verses was a reflection of the latent sensuality and romantic yearnings that this budding Venus awakened in the teenage poet. In his own words, she was a *‘bewitching creature’* that inspired a *‘delicious passion’*. Ah well, we all know how that feels, and there’s no liniment for it!

Despite the school in Alloway having been disbanded, Robert’s education was far from over. Murdoch had become a friend of the family and had moved to take a teaching position in nearby Ayr; an added duty of his position was to serve as the librarian of the modestly stocked Ayr Library. This proved of considerable benefit to Robert and his other siblings as Murdoch stayed in touch and continued to encourage both Robert and his brother Gilbert, often sending them books of literature and poetry, as well as other literary and topical materials. Robert devoured everything he could lay his hands on, and his learning grew apace. When he was about thirteen years of age he and Gilbert were allowed to attend school in Dalrymple during the summer, week about. A year later he was dispatched to Ayr for further instruction in English under Murdoch. This opportunity was for a brief three weeks, but knowledge favours the prepared mind and Robert gained much by this intensive one-on-one tuition, including learning the rudiments of French which he supplemented with self-study over the next few years.

In the meantime, and despite his comparative youth, Robert was performing the work normally expected of a much older farm labourer. By the time he had reached his early teens he considering himself as accomplished a ploughman as any in the neighbourhood, adults not excepted. But it was hard going for one so young, and it is possible (speculation only) that the punishing efforts that would have been required of him in order to manage a plough team contributed to the heart condition to which he eventually succumbed.

Kirkoswald

In the summer of 1775 Robert embarked on the final phase of his formal education. William once again proved his commitment to providing the best education he could afford for both his sons. This time Robert was off to Kirkoswald on the Carrick coast. It seems to have been quite a wild town whose economy was based more on the proceeds of smuggling than honest commerce. But it was also the location of a school headed by a self-taught dominie of considerable reputation, one Hugh Rodger. He was a mathematics master who taught ‘mensuration, surveying and dialling’ as well as geometry and trigonometry. It is not clear why William thought these particular areas of knowledge would benefit his son, and in fact Robert does not seem to have applied himself as well to them as to his literary studies; but while these specialized studies may have seemed redundant to him at that time, in fact a knowledge of mathematics, mensuration and surveying would have helped to prepare him for the instruction he would eventually receive as part of his training to become an excise officer.

But the real value of this adventure for an otherwise naïve young country lad would have been his exposure to the new and exciting experiences of this wayward enclave on Scotland's wild Carrick coast. There was much drinking and womanizing going on, although at sixteen and a half and comparatively penniless the young scholar would have been more a spectator than a participant. Nevertheless he did find the time and energy to pay court to the bonnie Peggy Thomson. Peggy was only thirteen or so at the time, but still we see Robert setting a pattern for the future by losing his heart to any sweet young lass who crossed his path. He maintained a friendship with her and her future husband for nearly ten more years, during which time he dedicated more than a few verses to her nubile charms. So, a little learning and a little romance, and an eye-opening insight into the seamier side of life were mostly what Robert took away from his nearly three month sojourn in Kirkoswald - not a complete waste of time for any young man. But there was one other possible bonus that accrued from this interlude. There is some reason to believe that some of the ideas and character models for his defining work - **Tam O'Shanter** - were conceived during this stay in Kirkoswald and stored away in his retentive mind. One of his contemporaries claimed that he developed a rough draft of the 'tale' at this time, but without some corroboration we must be skeptical of that.

And so, it was back to Mount Oliphant Farm. Robert refers to the original lease as being a 'ruinous bargain'. William could barely keep up with his rent payments and when his considerate and patient landlord - Provost Fergusson - died in 1776, William was forced to deal with the estate executors, or factors, who demanded payment forthwith of all rent arrears on threat of imminent legal action. These painful dealings gave Robert his model for the cruel factor referred to in the tale of *'The Twa Dogs'*:

Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,	
How they maun thole a factor's snash;	<i>must put up with, rudeness</i>
He'll stamp and threaten, curse an' swear,	
He'll apprehend them, poind their gear;	<i>seize</i>
While they maun stan', wi' aspect humble,	
An' hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!	

Fortunately, the dispute was resolved quite amicably when the executors agreed to place a mortgage against the cottage in Alloway as security for the arrears, which allowed William to leave Mount Oliphant at the end of the lease period in 1777.

2 - Lochlea Farm and Tarbolton

The Early Period

William entered into a 7-year lease on the 130 acre Lochlea (sometimes spelled Lochlie) farm located about 2½ miles from each of the towns of Mauchline and Tarbolton. Relations with his



new landlord, David McClure, were at first very cordial, so cosy and trusting in fact that McClure omitted to draw up a lease with clear understandings of their respective obligations. This was to give rise to very unfortunate and protracted legal problems at a later date. At £1 per acre annual rent, this farm was no more a bargain than Mount Oliphant had been. It was boggy and the soil mostly heavy clay, and despite extensive improvements undertaken by William as part of the lease agreement, it too remained a pretty ruinous enterprise.

But for the first four years all seemed well. Given the poor fertility of the soil and the efforts to improve it, the work on the farm was hard, but not all-consuming, leaving Robert (who was on the cusp of adulthood) to grow and flourish. According to comments made later by his siblings, at about the time the family moved to Lochlea Robert was a shy, reserved young man, and awkward in his dealings with young women. But he seems to have overcome those fledgling traits quite quickly, and soon began to build social relationships and to insert himself into the local scene. He certainly overcame his reserve towards the 'fair enslavers', apparently falling in love with one after another during this period. Many inspired him sufficiently to be immortalized in a variety of early poems and songs which, according to Gilbert, often greatly exaggerated their actual charms and graces. Gilbert leaves the impression that most were quite rough and rustic around the edges, but they appeared as nymph-like goddesses to Robert's bardic eye. However, in 1781 one refined young lady that Gilbert might well have approved of - probably Elizabeth Gebbie, although many biographers have identified her as Alison or Ellison Begbie - so enthralled him that he proposed marriage to her, only to suffer angry mortification when she turned him down. He was quite unmanned by this apparently unexpected refusal, but even more so at the humiliation of being 'jilted', as he later described it, than the loss of conjugal bliss.

Robert cemented a number of male friendships in Mauchline and Tarbolton in the early years and quickly seems to have assumed a leadership role, the result perhaps of his keen intelligence and force of personality. One of his earliest acquaintances was David Sillar who later also tried his hand at rhyming, with modest success, managing to have a small volume of his poems published. But he never enjoyed the acclaim of his older "Brother Poet", a title Robert himself

generously bestowed on young Davie. There were several other young men who were drawn to him like moths to the flame, kindred spirits who joined with him to form the Tarbolton Bachelor's Club, conceived mainly as a debating society for single young men. It was inaugurated in November 1780 and met regularly on the upper floor of an ale house in Tarbolton. There can be little doubt that it was very much the brainchild of the precocious Robert, who probably first hatched the idea during his time in Kirkoswald where he developed a taste for rhetorical debate. It was chiefly he who drafted the now much-quoted rules of the club, the opening lines of which insisted that:

'Every man proper for a member of this Society, must have a frank, honest, open heart; above anything dirty or mean; and must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex...'

It is tempting to assume that the '...or more' was inserted to legitimize Robert's lifelong inclination to play in more than one sandbox at a time.

Drinking was part of the social interaction of the club, but expressly in limited quantities. In later years Gilbert provided an interesting perspective on his older brother's drinking habits at this period of his life, particularly in light of the careless and unjust characterization of the poet by early biographers as a dissipated drunk. Gilbert stated that at least during the whole of the Lochlea period he had never seen Robert intoxicated.

Largely coinciding with the arrival of the family at Lochlea, Robert's output of verse markedly increased and the genius he was soon to display to the world began to become apparent in much of his work. At the same time, his reading and study of literature and other self-improving subjects was quite remarkable considering the burden of his farming responsibilities. And in spite of a strident interdiction from his father, he defiantly proceeded to attend dancing classes in the village in another attempt at self-improvement, not intellectual this time, but in the attainment of a social skill that he thought important to him if he were to give a good account of himself in 'polite society'. Later he began to appear in town and at the Kirk on Sundays attired in a style of dress that was verging on the flamboyant; more the fashion of an urban dandy than a country farm boy. This sartorial boldness was rakishly set off by a mane of tied-back hair, all of which proclaimed that he was no mere ploughman.

Irvine

Not long after the family took over Lochlea, Robert and Gilbert had sequestered three acres of land to grow flax, an attempt to diversify into higher income crops for which they later received a subsidy of £3 from a quasi-government agency set up to encourage such innovative practices in both farming and industry in Scotland. Flax was seen at the time as a wonder crop from which linseed oil and high quality cattle feed could be extracted, as well as fibre for the manufacture of

cloth. But it was a difficult and very labour-intensive crop to grow and harvest, as well as to process for its by-products.

By the early summer of 1781 (not long after his failed marriage proposal) Robert was preparing to leave for Irvine to apprentice to the trade of a flax dresser, an intriguing and quite puzzling decision for someone with Robert's intelligence and ambitious outlook, and who must have known what a hard road he would have to travel in this quest, but for such a poor return. Perhaps he entertained thoughts of entrepreneurial possibilities. This venture would occupy about a seven month period spanning part of the summer and winter of 1781-82. It was a major attempt at a career change, yet he acknowledged it only quite casually in an autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore in 1787:

'My 23rd year was to me an important era – partly thro' whim and partly that I wished to set about doing something in life, I joined with a flax dresser in a neighbouring town to join his trade and carry on the business of manufacturing and retailing flax.'

Irvine was Ayrshire's largest town, located on the coast about ten miles northwest of Lochlea with a population of well over four thousand in 1781. He described this undertaking as a partnership, which would seem to imply that he was required to put up some capital of his own.

But the whole business proved to be, in his words, *'a sad and unlucky affair'*. The work of a flax dresser involved unremitting toil in cramped and chokingly dusty conditions not at all suited to Robert's already delicate health. Added to that, he was housed above the heckling shed in a room that was virtually uninhabitable; he later moved to other rented space that was only marginally better. Eventually he suffered a severe nervous depression along with an undisclosed infection and fever which he genuinely thought he would not survive, and possibly nearly did not. The illness lasted for the best part of three months until about the end of December 1781, although throughout the period he made heroic efforts to carry on with his flax dressing work to the best of his abilities. Those efforts proved futile; a fire on New Year's Eve burned down the heckling shed that Burns claimed had been caused by the drunken carelessness of his partner's wife. These sheds were notorious fire hazards owing to the extreme flammability of the flax dust. This, added to Robert's suspicion that his partner was cheating him, left him penniless and dispirited. And yet for some unknown reason he did not return to Lochlea until early March 1782.

(As an interesting footnote, we derive our modern definition of a 'heckler' from the activities of flax dressers who had to comb and separate out the flax impurities from the fibres. Hence a modern heckler harangues politicians and other public speakers to separate out the truth from their lies and obfuscations.)

Bridging the time before and following Burns's move to Irvine was his induction into freemasonry. It is likely that Robert was introduced by Alexander Wood, a Tarbolton tailor. He became a member of the Lodge St David on July 4th 1781. The lodge minute simply states that **'Robt. Burns in Lochly was entered as an Apprentice'**. The meeting was held in a room in John Richard's alehouse in Tarbolton where the Tarbolton Bachelors Club meetings were held. He returned a few weeks later from Irvine on October 1st when the minute book reads: **'Robert Burns of Lochly was passed and raised (followed by a list of member names) and others of the Brethren being present'**. Not long after, a faction of the members separated to form St James' Lodge, with which Burns aligned himself, and he was first mentioned in the minutes of that lodge on 27th July 1784 when, at just twenty-five years of age, he was elected 'Depute Master'. To this office was assigned the primary responsibility for running the lodge, and we know that he thrust himself into the role with energy and enthusiasm.

In his 'Burns: A Biography of Robert Burns', James Mackay notes that an examination of lodge records illustrates that prior to March 1786 Robert signed his surname either as 'Burness' (despite his father favouring 'Burnes') or 'Burns', but after that date he and Gilbert both stuck with 'Burns'. All of his letters from 1781 on were signed 'Burns'. Why he and Gilbert took this significant step is not known.

Disastrous as it was, Robert's time in Irvine was not without its lighter, happier intervals. He was a frequent customer of William Templeton's bookshop where he was able to pick up and devour many new works of literature; and he did manage to compose a few poetical pieces, although most were of a melancholy tone consistent with his mood during this period. But he also met and fell under the spell of a Captain Richard Brown who, aside from John Murdoch and his father, probably influenced him more than any other person, at least up to that point in his life.

Brown was a seafaring man who was six years older than Burns. As a world traveller he was indisputably a man of the world, and became Robert's much admired mentor during the two to three months of their friendship in Irvine. He seems to have instilled a level of town-based confidence in the younger man, although this seems to have included some of a sailor's taste for adventure and the libertine lifestyle. In one letter Robert remarks, with a hint of incredulity, that Brown's near mad obsession with the ladies easily eclipsed his own, including keeping company with prostitutes, which rather horrified Burns. Upon leaving Irvine, the two men were known to have exchanged at least seven letters, the last in about 1787; after that, silence. They may have fallen out over something or other, but there is no record of that.

Lochlea Farm - The Last Few Years

At the time of Robert's return from Irvine to Lochlea sometime in March of 1782, his father had been embroiled in disputes and litigation with his landlord, David McClure, which were weighing heavily on the ailing William. The issues between them revolved around ancillary

undocumented conditions under the lease agreement, principally involving their respective obligations to undertake measures to improve the acidic, clay soil of Lochlea farm. William agreed to apply a prescribed number of tons of limestone to the soil, his costs to be reimbursed by the landlord. William claimed that he had done all that was required of him but that McClure had not compensated him as agreed. Accordingly, William withheld most of the rent payable over a five and a half year period. William's position in the dispute was eventually largely upheld by an independent court-appointed arbitrator, leaving only about one third of the withheld rent (i.e. £231 of £775) that was claimed by McClure to be paid into court by William - which he promptly did. But the fight had taken a heavy toll of William, who in any case was in serious declining health from the effects of consumption. According to Robert, his father had started to display symptoms about two years prior to his death on February 13, 1784 at the age of 62.

By all accounts Robert had loved and respected his father as much as any son could. But they were birds of a different feather, William being solidly responsible in all that he did and deeply committed to his religious beliefs and observances. Robert was very much a free spirit who was more often driven by passion and impulse. William recognized these disturbing traits in his oldest child, and it caused him great anxiety. On his deathbed he agonized that there was one of his children whose future conduct he feared. When Robert approached and asked: "Oh father, is it me you mean?" William confirmed that it was. Robert made no reply; but moved to the window and silently wept over this last, heart-wrenching rebuke.

The much loved and respected patriarch was interred in Alloway Kirk's cemetery, eight miles from Lochlea. His resting place is marked by a headstone bearing an eight line tribute composed by Robert, except for the last line that ends with a quotation from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*:

**The friend of man - to vice alone a foe;
For 'ev'n his failings lean'd to virtue's side'.**

The current headstone that can be seen at Alloway Kirk is a replica of the original.

In their extant correspondence, neither Robert nor Gilbert made much mention of the dreadful pall of anxiety all of the family members must have experienced between 1781 until their father's death in 1784 as a result of the grinding and relentless legal dispute with McClure which at one point even resulted in all of the farm's assets being placed under a seizure order, although not actually removed. It must indeed have been a very difficult time for the whole family, and it was to that unhappy home that Robert returned from Irvine in early 1782. But Robert and Gilbert did not sit idly by. In about July 1783 they entered into secret negotiations to secure the lease of another farm, and those arrangements were finalized in November 1783 with their agreement to lease Mossgiel farm. The two brothers would have been well aware that their father would soon be gone and that it would fall to them to maintain and support the family.

Arguably, the death of William Burnes marks the end of Robert's early life. As the oldest son, it was Robert's place and his duty to assume the role of head of the Burns household, but with the intelligent and well-grounded Gilbert ably sharing the burden.

The Early Influences – A Look Back

The formative years of any individual's life are critical to an understanding of their adult behaviour, so before moving on let us pause and reflect on some of the events and influences that the young Robert Burns encountered that might help us fathom the mind and the temperament of this very complex man, subjective as those speculations may be.

The periods Robert spent in Kirkoswald and Irvine are each in their way a study of his passage into adulthood that opened him up to more worldly experiences than he ever would have been exposed to had he stayed on the farm. And in each case we see him embracing the more risqué aspects of this shady 'other' world. His letters that described his experiences in Kirkoswald boast, with some embellishment no doubt, of his introduction to tavern life. This would have appealed to his wilder side and its complete juxtaposition with the benign family-centred Cotter's Saturday Night style of life back home. As well, there was his first exposure to the recklessly adventurous world of smuggling and other illegal goings on in Kirkoswald. After Mauchline, it must have seemed like a cross between the Arabian Nights and the Wild West!

In Irvine we see him coming under the spell of Richard Brown, that well-travelled swashbuckling mariner whose careless promiscuity shocked even Robert, although we have to suspect it also won his coveted admiration. He was sufficiently God-fearing to disapprove, but rebel enough to withhold condemnation. We have few real details of Robert's interactions with Richard Brown, but in the short time they were friends he impressed the bard mightily. Brown would probably not have had this near Svengali-like effect had the two men met in later years, but he was a persuasive and influential guide who pulled back the curtain on a hitherto unfamiliar world that fascinated the younger man.

As Robert developed through the awkward phases from teenager to young adult, his brother Gilbert began to notice that he was dealing with more than his share of pubescent demons. He was frequently moody and withdrawn, and often suffered from headaches, stomach spasms and periods of depression when he would take himself off to bed. It is likely that these were the early symptoms of the nervous depression that was to bedevil him throughout his life. This reached crisis level during his time in Irvine with the onset of what modern observers believe may have been a nervous breakdown, but at the very least was a severe, long-lasting depression. It was so intense that the memory of its alarming effects stayed with the poet throughout his life, and he anxiously dreaded its return.

Despite mood swings, his sometimes reckless behaviour and the distractedness of a restless mind, Robert seems to have got on well with his family, including his mother, Gilbert and his siblings. His relationship with his father was more tenuous, but, as noted above, there is no question that Robert loved and respected him very much. William was a kind and deeply caring father to all of his children, but he could be a stern disciplinarian in that Scottish Presbyterian kind of way. He was not easily opposed, but Robert did defy him in the stubborn confrontation over his enrolling in dance lessons in Mauchline. For Robert, it was about acquiring one of the social graces that no young man with ambitions of upward mobility could afford to lack. For William, it was taking a step along a path that might well lead to immoral behaviour. Robert stood his ground. Interestingly, William seems to have yielded, eventually even allowing his daughters to join the classes. But William must also have been aware of Robert's particular weakness for the lasses, and of the streak of recklessness that posed a threat to his future well-being and happiness.

And indeed it was during these early years that our young Lothario discovered the delicious charms of the opposite sex. As mentioned earlier, he took his first faltering steps into the world of courtship when he was paired with Helen Blair, his 'Handsome Nell'. Peggy Thomson of Kirkoswald was his next inspiration. Given her age (13), that encounter likely did not involve any overt intimacy, but she made a very real impression nevertheless. We don't have many details of his other amours during this first period of his life up until 1784, but we know from Gilbert's later remarks that there were quite a few of them, and most seem to have beguiled and enchanted him.

We know a little more of the events surrounding Elizabeth Gebbie's refusal of his marriage proposal. The profound effect of that rejection tells us something about his emotional vulnerability. No young man likes to be rejected by a woman he thinks he loves and must surely love him. But most youths can take the blow and move on with casual resignation. Not so Rob Mossgiel it would seem. He was not just turned down, but in his view 'jilted', with all the attendant hurt and humiliation. Throughout his life we see recurring examples of this temperamental hypersensitivity and his quick and often vindictive response to any perceived slight. As an adult, he was quick to take offense and equally quick to retaliate with the power of stinging satire that he could command at will, but often with damaging consequences to himself.

It is interesting that while Robert had ample confidence in his unique literary talents, his superior intellect and the inherent worth of all mankind, he was nevertheless always keenly aware of the lowly place he occupied in society, and while his fame and achievements would admit him to the drawing rooms of the gentry and even the aristocracy, at the end of the day he was still a poor farmer in their eyes, and lacking in a 'formal' education. In Britain and in Europe the rank was more than *just* the guinea's stamp. This harsh and seemingly unchanging reality can easily explain the poet's later support for the revolutions in France and in America. That support

- manifest in his writings for all to see, but also in his conversations - came close to branding him as a republican sympathizer of the despised reform movements and their 'seditious' agenda. It could have ruined him, financially and in every other way.

3 - Mossgiel Farm and Mauchline

The family moved to the new farm in March 1784, not long after the death of William. Mossgiel farm was, and still is, located not far from Lochlea, but nearer Mauchline (population then about 1000, or 1700 if the surrounding parish is included) than Tarbolton. The farm was owned by Mauchline lawyer Gavin Hamilton, who would soon become the poet's friend as well as his landlord; like others, he would be immortalized in Burns's poetry, particularly as a protagonist in **Holy Willie's Prayer**. The farm was no more fertile or productive than either of the last two, comprising as it did 118 acres of thin acidic soil over a layer of almost impermeable clay. Add to that a bitter, wet, cold climate spanning the next several years - a period that is now referred to as the mini ice age in Europe - and one can appreciate the harsh and unprofitable environment that the eight members of the Burns family were to continue to endure. However, in an account given by Robert at this time he claims that despite all of their travails and bad luck he nevertheless applied himself rigorously to the study of farming in the hope of becoming better at it.

Life at Mossgiel would have been difficult in other ways. The farmhouse was no bigger than the one at Lochlea with just a kitchen and one bedroom on the ground floor where Robert's mother and his three sisters would have slept. The men occupied the loft, which had three small rooms.

Elizabeth Paton and Dear-bought Bess

Shortly before leaving Lochlea Robert began a secret courtship with the family's servant girl, Elizabeth (Betsey) Paton. It was said that she had a fine figure and was of good character, but was plain featured and wanting in some of the social graces. A year after moving to Mossgiel, in May of 1785, she presented her lover with his first child, christened Elizabeth after its mother. Robert's mother wanted him to marry the girl and he seems to have thought well enough of her to agree, but the union was strenuously opposed by Gilbert and his other siblings, so poor Betsey (who seems to have been genuinely very much in love with Robert) was forsaken. But unlike many men in his time, Robert openly admitted his paternity - loud and proud - and with the help and support of the family he agreed to raise the infant. However, this gallantry easily marked him out as a 'fornicator' in the eyes of the sometimes hypocritical righteous, a crude and unforgiving label attached to those (particularly men) who had children out of wedlock. Being thus stigmatized, he and Betsey were obliged to suffer the humiliation of the kirk's 'creepy stool' and all that went with it, including a fine of one guinea payable to Tarbolton parish. In his defiant poem, **The Fornicator**, Robert bawdily dismisses the fine as merely the price of 'the buttock hire'. At least among his friends, and probably as push-back in reaction to all of his public humiliation, he displayed a defiantly cavalier attitude to the whole business. In yet another snub directed at the kirk elders and a growing clique of detractors, he penned a second celebratory poem entitled **A Poet's Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter** sub-titled **Welcome to a Bastart Wean**. Not surprisingly, neither of these poems was published in his lifetime, but he would have been sure to circulate them widely in the neighbourhood.

Making His Mark in Mauchline

During the first year or two at Mossiel Robert struggled with occasional bouts of illness, both mental and physical. He seems to have continued to have to battle a shadowy condition that was likely a form of depression (alluded to earlier) similar to that experienced in Irvine three years previously, and with the more ominous early symptoms of heart irregularities and recurring fevers. But despite these at-times serious health issues, he still managed to maintain an active and productive life during this difficult year of 1784. His social network expanded considerably, encompassing Mauchline as well as his old stomping ground of Tarbolton. This was partly as a result of his increasing involvement in freemasonry, but also to the blossoming of his intellect and his larger-than-life persona that attracted and inspired those around him and marked him as a leader among his young cohorts. He was also starting to display the poetical and literary genius that would soon launch him onto the national stage.

These manifestations of maturity closely coincided with his commencing the first *Commonplace Book* in April 1783 - not his name for it, but coined by his first biographer. In so doing he was following a popular fashion of the time, particularly among aspiring writers. It was a journal-cum-diary-cum-notebook of miscellany where he recorded many fragments of thought, ideas and snatches or drafts of verses, philosophical musings and much else, as well as transcriptions in his own hand of admired works of others. By his own account a few years later, he tells us that he had set out to create a permanent repository of important thoughts and fragmentary material that might prove useful to him in his literary and intellectual pursuits, but with rare prescience he imagined it serving another purpose. Mindful of his great talent, he was also providing a record for posterity that would reveal those thoughts and inner workings of his mind that he believed might one day be a source of insight for students of his work. Was that conceit, or was he merely anticipating his place in history and leaving this gift for posterity?

Much of his output at this time was inspired by local events and personalities, but we see evolving in his work the first insightful understanding and treatment of contemporary politics, and a risk-fraught boldness in expressing views that could be considered seditious. The two-year period of 1785-86 saw a flood of poetical output that included several of his verse epistles, most notably his **Epistle to Davie** (Siller) and the three **Epistles to Lapraik**, but also: **Holy Willie's Prayer, Death and Doctor Hornbook, The Vision, To a Mouse, The Holy Fair, The Twa Dogs, The Cotter's Saturday Night, The Jolly Beggars, The Calf...**the list goes on. Many of these would appear in the Kilmarnock Edition of his poems.

Gavin Hamilton's 'Tulzie' (quarrel) with the Kirk Session

As noted earlier, Mossiel had been leased from Gavin Hamilton, a gentrified Mauchline lawyer who had become a friend of the young poet. Both seem to have shared cynical contempt for the local Kirk Session headed by William 'Daddy' Auld, Mauchline's stern auld licht Calvinist minister. A long-standing dispute between Hamilton and the Mauchline Kirk Session came to a

head in this period, and while the details are too lengthy and convoluted to relate fully here, a brief summary may suffice.

The dispute started around 1777. From 1776-78 Hamilton had been the volunteer collector of the 'poor stent', being donations of cash intended to provide relief to the poor of the parish. Hamilton seems to have distributed some of the funds himself rather than turn all of them over to the Kirk Session which considered this its role. When challenged to account for a sum of £7, Hamilton claimed (almost certainly truthfully) that he had already dispensed the money. The demands from the Session and the denials and stonewalling from Hamilton went on through 1785, still unresolved. In frustration, the Session leveled other offenses against Hamilton, including irreligion and sabbath-breaking. A truce of sorts was reached in July 1785, the war-weary Session essentially conceding defeat in the face of Hamilton's dogged resistance. The whole distasteful episode became the subject of **Holy Willie's Prayer** which Burns composed immediately following a ruling in January 1785, issued by the Presbytery of Ayr acting as a church appeal court that was favourable to Hamilton. The 'Willie' in the poem was Willie Fisher, a Mauchline kirk elder and one of Minister Auld's foot soldiers in the corps of the righteous that were tasked to pursue Hamilton. Willie's role in the process was minor, but he appealed to Burns as a useful foil to ridicule Auld and all of his '*...holy beagles, the houghmagandie* (i.e. fornicating) *pack*'. Willie was already something of an object of fun to the locals, and that would have made him a convenient choice for the role. Some biographers have cast Willie Fisher as a hypocrite and a drunk, but he was probably little more than a sincere, but harmless, dupe of Auld. In his mock prayer, Willie complains to the almighty:

**Lord, mind Gau'n Hamilton's deserts:
He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at cartes,
Yet has sae monie takin' arts,
 Wi great an sma'.
Frae God's ain Priest the people's hearts
 He steals awa.**

Another player in the drama was Robert Aiken.

**O Lord my God! that glib-tongu'd Aiken,
My vera heart and flesh are quakin',
To think how we stood sweatin, shakin',
 An pish'd wi dread,
While he, wi' hingin lip, an snakin',
 Held up his head.**

Robert Aiken, a lawyer in Ayr, was a friend of both Burns and Gavin Hamilton. Aiken had the reputation of being a fine, 'glib-tongu'd' advocate who frequently appeared before the Scottish

courts, and it was he who argued successfully for Hamilton before the Presbytery of Ayr. He was also the lawyer to whom Jean Armour's father went in order to have Robert's and Jean's form of marriage certificate nullified. That curious incident will be described later.

Holy Willie's Prayer was a glorious satire (surely the finest in English literature?) on the hubris and hypocrisy of the auld licht Calvinist establishment that ruled its domain with rigid and often repressive zeal. The 'auld lights' (old lights) was an expression coined by the newly emerging liberal clergy and their supporters – of which Robert was one – who styled themselves the 'new lights'. This was not the poet's first stab at ridiculing the worst elements – as he saw them – of the established church. Prior to this we have **Address to the Unco Guid** and **The Twa Herds**, the latter alternatively titled **The Holy Tulzie**. There would be other shots across the kirk's bow in later lampoons, including **The Holy Fair**, **The Ordination** and **The Kirk's Alarm**. As a self-admitted 'fornicator', on more than one occasion Robert had been forced to endure the humiliation of the 'cutty (or creepy) stool' under the sanctimonious glare of the grim-faced righteous of the parish, '*...made a Sunday laughing stock, and abused like a pickpocket.*' The deep sense of enmity crackled on both sides.

Despite the various confrontations young Robert had with Minister Auld, the contempt he displayed for some of the Mauchline kirk elders and his apparent disaffection with at least the more extreme precepts of auld licht Calvinism (ridiculed in **Holy Willie's Prayer**), there is every indication that Robert Burns was a thoroughly convinced Christian. His parents were piously devout Presbyterians who raised their children to believe as they did, and while this would not have deterred a free thinker such as Robert from challenging or even rejecting a diet of forced dogma, throughout all of his correspondence and other writings – including his reported conversations – there is no record of him ever having expressed any apostasy or disrespect for mainstream Christian beliefs or values. In fact, he frequently displayed an impressively thorough knowledge and understanding of scripture that could only have been acquired through careful and conscientious study. And as a general comment, while Burns can be lauded for exposing some of the less desirable aspects of eighteenth century church strictures and practices in Scotland (including in particular the oppressive over-zealousness of some of the clergy and elders), there can be little doubt that the institution of the Kirk and the religious observances it encouraged were sources of comfort and security for most of the population.

The Courtship of Jean Armour - From Delight to Disgust

This was the period of Robert's early courtship of Jean Armour. It is likely that they would have been casually known to one another during at least part of the year following the Burns family move to Mossgiel, both probably being present at some of the local village dances. But their first direct encounter is thought to have been sometime in April 1785. Jean was out on the common green in Mauchline bleaching some of the family's linens when Robert's new Collie puppy ran across one of her sheets, leading to a brief expression of annoyance from Jean, followed by some

casual conversation. But the incident produced a spark that became a flame at their next meeting. At just turned 20 years of age, and one of the celebrated 'Mauchline Belles', Jean would have been in the prime of her young maidenhood, and by all accounts she was a fetchingly attractive young woman – slim but well-rounded, pretty and spirited:

**I see thee dancing o'er the green,
Thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean, *slender*
Thy tempting lips, thy roguish een - *eyes*
By Heaven and Earth I love thee.**

Robert had long since broken off his affair with the unfortunate Betsey Paton, although his 'dear-bought Bess' would not see the light of day for another month. He had tried to win the favour of another of the Mauchline Belles, Bess Miller, but she rejected him for a wealthier prospect. But Jean (*'...the jewel o' them a'*) took the bait. Right from the start Jean's father, James Armour, was resolutely opposed to his daughter associating with the rakish 'young Mossiel', but love will not be so easily denied. By the autumn of 1785 they had become a committed couple and towards the end of that year Jean became pregnant...the harbinger of a tempestuous courtship spanning nearly two years. It was not until nearly a month after the birth of their second set of twins on March 9th, 1787 that they were finally married, but in a manner that was considered 'irregular', and therefore of questionable legality in the eyes of the Kirk Session.

In about September 1785 Jean convinced her lover to sign a 'declaration' or 'certificate' of marriage, but whatever it was (and no copy has survived), it probably had no solid validity in Scots law. It served mainly as an undertaking in good faith that Robert would stand by Jean and eventually marry her. In about early December Jean became pregnant, but the couple delayed announcing the news, knowing as they did that Jean's parents would be furious. In March 1786 she could no longer conceal the obvious. Armed with the certificate of marriage Jean was able to pluck up the courage to confront her parents, but with near-calamitous results. On hearing the news James Armour is reputed to have fainted, so revolted was he at the thought of having that penniless rascal Burns as a son-in-law. He was doggedly resolved that his favourite daughter would never marry this man, and - probably sometime in March - he proceeded to have lawyer Robert Aiken (curiously, a good friend of Robert) mutilate the promissory document by cutting out the names of the couple in the naïve belief that this treacherous redaction would legally annul it. To Robert's disgust and consternation, Jean bent to her father's wishes and effectively broke off their engagement. On April 23rd she was sent to live with relatives in Paisley with the intention that she remain there until after the birth. Much as he loved Jean, he could not abide such disloyalty and abandonment. She returned to Mauchline nine weeks later, but the damage was done. Having submitted to the Kirk's three required public prostrations of penitence (although delivered from his pew in the church rather than perched on the demeaning cutty stool), Robert proceeded to claim his certificate of bachelorhood from minister Auld, which

in his mind released him of all obligations to the wretched Jean. And indeed, Jean herself seems to have considered their unorthodox union at an end.

Margaret Campbell - His Highland Mary

He was a free man once more, and he wasted no time in finding another inamorata; this time it was Margaret Campbell whom he chose in verse to call his Highland Mary. The story of Robert's involvement with Margaret is obscured by a lack of known facts, made all the more shadowy by Burns's own secrecy on the subject. She had been a nursemaid to Gavin Hamilton's family, and then a dairymaid at nearby Coilsfield, the home of the future Earl of Eglinton. Their union was intense, but tragically short. It was probably just after the certificate mutilation incident sometime in late March or early April 1786 that Robert began this new courtship, but the couple parted within not much more than a month, on May 14th. They privately exchanged matrimonial vows and bibles, intending to reunite a few months later. The bible Robert gave Margaret came to light and can be viewed in the Burns Monument at Alloway, but hers to him seems to have been lost. But while the bard said very little about this love affair later in life, he did write an intriguing note (not addressed to anyone in particular) that is worth reproducing here as it does reveal at least something of his feelings and impressions of the lass. Alluding to a song he composed in the spring of 1786, **The Highland Lassie, O**, he wrote :

'This was a composition of mine in very early life, before I was known to all in the world. My Highland lassie was a warm-hearted charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love. After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment we met by appointment, on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the Banks of Ayr, where we spent a day in taking farewell, before she should embark for the West Highlands to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change of life. At the close of Autumn following she crossed the sea to meet me at Greenock, where she had scarce landed when she was seized with a malignant fever, which hurried my dear girl to the grave in a few days, before I could even hear of her illness'

Two parallel developments were tied with this event: Robert's decision to try to have his poems published and a plan to take up a position as a 'bookkeeper' (really a supervisor of slaves) at a plantation in Jamaica. When and precisely why the latter scheme came to mind is not known with certainty, but it was seriously intended and was probably in the main a reaction to the disastrous Jean Armour incident. It would have removed him from the confusion and mess of it all, including the possibility of financial ruin at the hands of James Armour who had bullied Jean into issuing a writ against him and in so doing forced Robert to flee Mauchline and go into hiding for a while. There may have been some thought of his making at least a modest fortune as some enterprising young nabobs had done in similar circumstances, but Robert had agreed to a salary of only £30 per annum and to this point in his life had displayed no business flair that might have encouraged such an entrepreneurial prospect.

It seems fairly certain that Margaret Campbell was part of his Jamaica plan. They had agreed to marry before that May parting, and in his note above he implies some scheme that will be life-changing. Margaret travelled to Greenock in early October 1785 accompanied by her younger brother Robert, prior to taking on a planned new temporary job in Glasgow beginning November 11th. But upon reaching Greenock her brother Robert became ill with typhus. Margaret nursed him back to health but unfortunately contracted the disease herself and died sometime in late October. It was a stunningly tragic loss for Robert. He was bereft. Although he had known her for a short time only, she had become the great love of his life, although he seemed unusually susceptible to forming such deep attachments on short acquaintance. Jean Armour would at least nearly fill that void later, but there is every indication that his love for Margaret prevailed, as all lost loves tend to do.

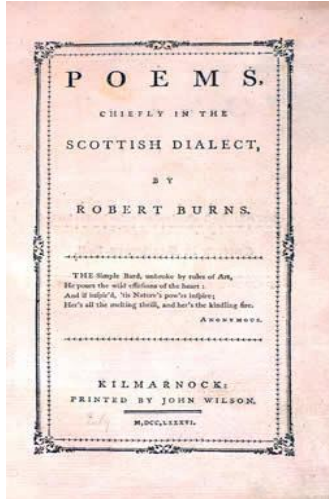
This heartbreaking event may either have reduced the incentive to carry through with his emigration plan, or made it even more imperative as an escape from his seemingly endless troubles in Scotland. He could still hope that his plan to publish his poems would succeed. Had it not, we may indeed have lost him to that distant colony. Given his delicate state of health and the risks of infection in tropical backwaters, that may have ended in an even more premature death. But for the time being it would remain an option. He purchased a ticket of passage valid through December 1786.

From the earliest biographies until now, there has been much speculation among Burns scholars over the possibility that Margaret was carrying Robert's child at the time of her death and whether this may have contributed to her succumbing to the fever. There is some circumstantial support for the hypothesis, but it has never been proven. Evidence of a child's coffin sharing the grave plot was found when Margaret's body was exhumed in 1920. The child may not have been Robert's in any case, there being a suggestion that the father could have been a brother of Lord Eglinton. And, given that the couple had met only six months prior to Margaret's death, if Robert had been the father the infant would not have had time to come to term. There is also a question as to Margaret's sexual conduct which might have some bearing on the likelihood of the poet's paternity...that is, was she at least averagely morally sound as the Mariolaters (her posthumous supporters) would have us believe, or was she a 'lightskirt' as some researchers have postulated. That debate may never be resolved.

The Kilmarnock Edition of the Poems

For quite some time prior to 1786 Robert had entertained the dream of publishing his body of poetry and songs. There is not much direct information about the inception of this idea, but from two observations it could be inferred that he had nursed the idea for some two years prior to the publishing of the Kilmarnock Edition. First, the fact that he was circulating many of his pieces among friends, not only as entertainment, but perhaps also to test their level of popular appeal; in fact, most of the feedback he received was not just positive, but effusive. Second, we see a rapid

increase in the volume of composition during the early Mossgiel years. The need for money was a further motivator, including the cash (£9) to finance his planned passage to the Indies. In any case, sometime in early 1786 he established contact with John Wilson, one of the few experienced publishers in Ayrshire. Not many compilations of verse in the Scottish vernacular



had been published in a commercially successful manner, so Wilson was not prepared to take a risk with the works of an unknown country rhymers. He insisted on a subscription-based approach and ninety six subscription sheets were printed up and distributed, largely to Robert's friends and acquaintances. Burns spent a great deal of his time from mid-April through to the publication date of July 31st 1786 working on the subscriptions and checking the printer's proofs.

The final result was a run of 612 soft-backed volumes subscribed at three shillings per copy. The edition comprised forty-one poems and three songs on 235 pages. A verbose, even rambling, three-and-a-half page preface introduced the opus. A further five-pages of glossary appeared at the end of the book, offering standard English definitions of lallans words. **The Twa Dogs** was given pride of place as the first poem, followed by many of what have become his best-known pieces. Among these were: **To a Mouse**, **The Holy Fair**, **To a Louse** and **The Cotter's Saturday Night**. As if to pad out the bulk of the volume, the last ten entries were relatively trivial epigrams and epitaphs

But many of his best poems were excluded. Caution demanded that he leave out those wonderfully offensive satires that were critical of the church establishment, including **Holy Willie's Prayer**, **The Twa Herds** and **Address to the Unco Guid**, but also ribald or scandalous pieces such as **The Jolly Beggars** (which was politically provocative to boot) and **The Fornicator**. The pity of it was that some of these excluded gems were among his most brilliant. And while they would have circulated locally at the time, they would not appear in 'bold black prent' until after the sanctuary of the grave.

The success of the printing was phenomenal. Despite only 600 copies at most ending up in circulation, it was a keenly sought-after book, not only by the gentry and the literati, but by ploughmen and milkmaids alike. With the encouragement of the eminent Dr. Blacklock and other influential supporters, Robert was persuaded that a second edition of at least 1000 copies would be feasible, but he could not persuade Wilson to bankroll it. In spite of the success of the first printing, Wilson was still not confident enough of a sell-out to take on the financial risk and in so doing relegated himself to the status of a footnote in Scotland's publishing history.

Dr John Moore and the Autobiographical Letter

At about this time, Robert became acquainted with a Mrs Dunlop (of whom more later), who in turn was a friend of Dr John Moore. On a personal level, Moore was to play a minor role in the poet's life, but he was instrumental in inspiring Burns to produce his epistolary autobiography. Originally a medical doctor by profession, Moore had become a writer of both non-fiction and fiction, a *métier* that had earned him national acclaim. Mrs Dunlop had sent him a copy of the Kilmarnock Edition of the poems, which he admired, and he asked her to act as a go-between in putting him in touch with the poet. Burns took his time writing to the good doctor, telling Mrs Dunlop in a letter of January 15th, 1787 that he was too much in awe of the great man's intellect and feared that '*genius polished with learning*' made him '*...tremble at its approach*'. He need not have subordinated his own intellect to that of such a minor literary figure, but he did finally write to Moore a couple of days later. They never met, but exchanged a few letters. Dr Moore made the suggestion - farcical in retrospect - that Burns should focus his genius on verse written solely in standard English, advice the poet fortunately chose to ignore. Moore sent him a copy of two of his books (one a novel) which Robert seems genuinely to have admired and enjoyed.

Dr Moore would have rated no more than a mention in the story of the Bard but for the autobiographical letter that Burns sent him on August 2nd, 1787 from Mauchline. After a brief preamble, it opened with: '*I have taken a whim to give you a history of MYSELF*', but why he chose Moore to be the recipient of this surprisingly revealing account of his life is unknown; we can be only be grateful to him for appearing to have inspired this unique, first-hand history. Burns later sent Moore an update in a letter dated January 4th, 1789 from Ellisland.

Note: See appendix for a full copy of both of these autobiographical letters.

4 - The First Winter in Edinburgh

On the morning of November 27, 1786, the tentative, but hopeful, poet set off for Edinburgh mounted on a borrowed pony. His main purpose was to arrange for the publication of a new and expanded second edition of his poems and songs. But also in the back of his mind he was



planning to explore the possibility of joining the Excise Service as a means of securing an adequate income in the long term. After completing the sixty mile journey, he arrived in the capital two days later on the evening of the 28th. Although Burns claimed to have cleared only £20 profit on the Kilmarnock Poems, James Mackay estimates that the figure must have been over £50, which was seven times the annual

salary he and Gilbert allowed themselves out of the meagre profits of Mossgiel. Why he deliberately understated his take is puzzling. Perhaps he was unconsciously discounting the sum to allow for a number of personal disbursements he had made around that time, including the £9 laid out for his passage to Jamaica and some provisions for the care of his daughter Elizabeth (by Betsey Paton), which earmarked a good portion of the funds available to him. In Edinburgh he lodged with an old acquaintance from Mauchline, John Richmond, sharing the rent of a rather mean little room in Baxter's Close in the Lawnmarket.

As a country lad Burns may have found the conditions that existed in Auld Reekie a little disconcerting. According to an account of the time, as little as twenty-five years prior to Robert's first visit to the city it was much more orderly and temperate, but by 1786 it had degenerated into a veritable cesspit of filth, overcrowding and licentiousness. One wonders if his friends thought to give him timely warning of the need to step nimbly upon hearing the traditional cry of "Gardylloo!" from overhead, followed almost immediately by a cascade of noxious contents from a chamber pot. His surviving correspondence makes no mention of these chaotic or unsanitary conditions, so they may not have been quite so abnormal in his experience.

Making Important Contacts

Very soon after his arrival Burns was able to establish a number of contacts with socially well-placed individuals; some were Ayrshire acquaintances while others were admirers of his Kilmarnock Poems. But he also began to gain the support and material help of more influential worthies, including members of the gentry, the nobility and the literati. Of particular value to him was James Cunningham, 14th Earl of Glencairn, who became his principal benefactor in the new publishing venture. Glencairn (who was nine years older than Robert, handsome and very personable) was highly ranked in the pecking order of the nobility of Scotland and was held in very high personal esteem by most of Scotland's Who's Who. He also made a deep impression

on Burns. Despite Robert's general contempt for strutting lords, he seems to have both liked and respected this particular nobleman, in fact almost to the point of hero worship; quite a twist for such a young radical, although it had not been the first time that his prejudice of the nobility had had to be suspended. In October 1786 he had been invited by Professor Dugald Stewart to a reception at his country home in Ayrshire where he met Viscount Daer, the son of Lord Selkirk whom Burns would later also meet and befriend. Daer not only impressed the poet by his kind and gracious manner, but much more importantly for Burns, he found to his surprise that Daer was sincerely treating him as an equal. Daer and his father were closet supporters of the reform movement in Scotland - unusual among the aristocracy - which would have recommended them to the poet even further.

It was very soon after being taken under the wing of Glencairn as well as other leading lights such as Henry Erskine, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, that the oft cited 'lionizing' of the poet by the Edinburgh populace took place. He and his known works (at this point largely those that had been published in the Kilmarnock Edition) became the subject of spirited discussion in the news media of the day and in reviews in literary publications such as **The Lounger** and **The Edinburgh Magazine**, and a debate soon raged over whether he was merely a 'Heaven-taught ploughman' as eulogized by the renowned author Henry MacKenzie, or a more intellectually sophisticated, self-educated initiate as Professor Dougald Stewart and others believed.

Dr Thomas Blacklock

Dr Blacklock was another important influence in the poet's life who befriended him after being introduced to the Kilmarnock Edition. He had become blind from the effects of smallpox when he was just one year old. He trained as a minister but had to give up his first living because of the limitations of his blindness. He retired to Edinburgh on a small annuity which he supplemented by writing and tutoring. He was acknowledged by many of the great men of the age as a genius and counted among his friends and acquaintances several celebrated sages such as Dr Johnson, Benjamin Franklin and David Hume. Blacklock was a published poet also, but with nowhere near the native talent of his young friend. His own genius lay in the breadth of his knowledge and culture and reputedly possessed of great intellectual power.

He first wrote to Robert on September 4th, 1786 after having the poems of the Kilmarnock Edition read to him. Robert's life was in turmoil at the time, mainly as a result of having to deal with Jean's flight to Paisley and being hounded by her father. In the autobiographical epistle to Dr Moore, he credits Blacklock with having dissuaded him from hieing off to Jamaica. Blacklock offered the young bard high praise, lauding his great talent (much to Robert's delight, given the source of such plaudits) and encouraging him to plan a second edition that Blacklock believed would seal his greatness.

After arriving in Edinburgh that first winter, the poet delayed calling on the Doctor, but when he did they immediately became great friends and continued as such until Blacklock's death in 1791. Over the intervening years they engaged in lively correspondence, often enclosing verses for enjoyment or critique, including his **Epistle to Dr Blacklock**, although this was not one of his best efforts. While Blacklock was a poet of indifferent ability, he did contribute ten songs to the Scots Musical Museum.

One legacy of the Edinburgh period is the stock of detailed and credible eyewitness accounts we now have from very literate and perceptive contemporary commentators. They provide rare and valuable insights into aspects of the poet's character and conduct, and how impressively he held his own in the company of those who considered themselves by far his betters in social standing and education. These included references to his gentlemanly comportment, his learned knowledge and intelligence and his dignified sophistication. To quote in part from just one description by Professor Adam Ferguson who later recorded his impressions upon first meeting Burns:

'His conversation expressed perfect self-confidence, without the slightest presumption. Among the men who were the most learned of their time and country, he expressed himself with perfect firmness, but without the least intrusive forwardness; and when he differed in opinion, he did not hesitate to express it firmly, yet at the same time with modesty.'

This constrained and dignified manner of speech was not necessarily his practice when discoursing with friends, when he would display a more aggressive and argumentative nature, but, much to his credit, he knew how to rein that in.

The Edinburgh Edition of the Poems - Making a Start

James Cunningham (Lord Glencairn) put Burns in touch with William Creech, who was the leading publisher in Edinburgh at the time. By mid-December he had entered into a contract with Creech to publish up to 5000 copies of the new Edinburgh Edition at a selling price of five shillings per copy. As with the Kilmarnock Edition, the bulk of the sales had to be backed by subscriptions. As a result, Creech would act more as an agent than a publisher, taking on no real financial risk should the edition fail to sell out, although he did agree to subscribe to 500 copies himself which he sold as a retailer at a fair profit. Glencairn was particularly useful in using his influence and contacts to fill a large number of the subscription sheets that were distributed shortly following Robert's agreement with Creech.

The first Edinburgh Edition contained about a hundred additional poems and songs, including some that were excluded from the Kilmarnock Edition for fear of ruffling feathers. These included **Address to the Unco Guid** and **The Ordination**. And yet, on the advice of some members of the literati, the poet was persuaded, reluctantly, to leave out **The Lass O'**

Ballochmyle and **Young Peggy** on the basis that these were in bad taste and would cause distress to their subjects. The heroines of each piece were high society ladies, so their sensibilities were to be guarded at all cost! In fact, the subject of the first of these, Wilhelmina Alexander, did originally display her disdain of the young poet. Shortly after composing the song, he had had the temerity to write to the lady, attaching a copy of the verses for her appreciation and approval, but that was at a time when (in her exalted mind) he was just a rough tenant farmer, and so she simply ignored him. Later in life, she basked in the fame of being one of the great man's poetical inspirations.

Most of the additional material that was included was composed prior to the spring of 1786. One notable exception was his **Address to a Haggis**. It was claimed that the **Address** pre-dated Edinburgh, which is probably true of the final stanza, but the rest was written in Edinburgh. His personal life was just too hectic in the early part of 1786 to allow him the time or the peace of mind to be creative, while most of his time spent in Edinburgh was taken up with publishing arrangements and social engagements. He did manage to compose a few minor pieces, but his six months in the Capital marked a comparatively barren period. However, he did take the time to sit for the famous Nasmyth portrait that was commissioned by Creech for the frontispiece of the first Edinburgh Edition.

Burns's Tribute to Robert Fergusson

One other task that he managed to accomplish while in Edinburgh was to right a wrong that had been done to the poet Robert Fergusson, whom he had described as:

**My elder brother in misfortune,
By far my elder brother in the muse.**

Burns had been introduced to the works of Fergusson several years before during his stay in Irvine. He was so influenced and inspired by the poetical genius of this unlucky poet that he truly meant the praise reflected in the above two lines, and modern opinion supports the view that Fergusson may well have excelled Burns in some of his works. He had suffered crushing poverty in his short lifespan of barely 24 years and had died in an insane asylum after sustaining a head injury. Burns had always been bitter about the fact that most of Fergusson's contemporaries - particularly those in Edinburgh society who he thought should have known better - had failed to recognize his great talent and did virtually nothing to help him financially when he was destitute. On a visit to his resting place in the Canongate Kirkyard, Burns was outraged to discover that the grave was unmarked. He obtained permission from the city to erect a headstone and commissioned his near-namesake, architect Robert Burn, to design and oversee the installation of a suitable memorial. Mr. Burn took an unreasonable two years to complete the assignment; in a deliberate act of retribution, Robert waited two more years to settle the account...*'so he and I are quits.'* When the architect demanded interest on the late payment, Robert replied to the effect

that since it was one poor poet commissioning a headstone for another poor poet '*...he may, with grateful surprise, thank Heaven that ever he saw a farthing of it.*'

William Creech and the First Edinburgh Edition

Burns encountered many problems in his dealings with William Creech as well as with William Smellie, his brilliant but eccentric printer who was renowned for his scruffy, disordered dress and shambling comportment. Smellie's main claim to fame was his editorship of the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1768. Both men proved to be lax and un-businesslike throughout the period that led up to the publication and, in the case of Creech, long beyond it. Creech was flamboyant and amiable and Robert formed a good impression of him at first. Indeed, Creech would go on to become the Lord Provost in 1811 and served as Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, posts that would be awarded more on personality than proven commercial success. But Robert would soon fall victim to Creech's lacklustre ability and his interminable tardiness (probably intended) in remitting the proceeds of sales due to Robert. But that was in the future, and despite Creech's shortcomings, the job did get done. Just a few less than 3000 copies of the first Edinburgh Edition were published on April 17, 1787. At first a run of only about 1500 was planned, but as the subscriptions poured in it became obvious that this number would be far short of the demand. Owing to a shortage of metal typesetting, the type from the first half of the book had already been broken up to be used for the remaining pages, so it had to be reset all over again and re-proofed. It was an unfortunate and expensive miscalculation, and as Robert was the main proof reader, a tiresome waste of his time.

The volume ran to four hundred and eight pages and was quite handsomely bound in French grey paper boards. About one hundred pages of new poetical material were added to the Kilmarnock content. The glossary of Scottish vernacular was expanded to twenty-five pages compared to the five printed in the Kilmarnock Edition, done to appeal to 'English' readers and thus widen the potential readership and subscribers.

It is uncertain how much Robert netted from the first Edinburgh Edition. Repeating his underestimate of the proceeds of the Kilmarnock Edition, Burns claimed the figure was £400-450, but it was almost certainly much greater, £750 being a more likely sum. In addition, Burns sold the copyright to all of the new material contained in the first Edinburgh Edition to Creech for £105, a sum that may seem like daylight robbery to us now, and indeed the shrewd Creech did eventually make a handsome return on his investment. Whether the poet was cheated or not is a moot point. It was a well considered transaction on his part, agreed to with some enthusiasm in fact, which is not altogether surprising when we consider that the amount was probably the equivalent of £40-50,000 today. But Creech made the poet wait for his money. It took nearly two years for the account to be settled in full.

It's Who You Know

Progress in finalizing the publication of the Edinburgh Edition was necessarily slow and Robert had plenty of time on his hands to savour the pleasures of his new-found recognition and fame. While Lord Glencairn was his principal benefactor throughout this long process, there were many more of Scotland's nobility and intelligentsia who he met and befriended, and who not only helped him in this project but were to prove useful to him in the future. Having said that, the exaggerated attention bestowed on him during this period really did not stand the test of time. Within no more than a year he found himself back in Ayrshire struggling to manage his finances and his life in much the same old way. Fame can be fleeting, and to a large extent it was for Burns during his lifetime. If only he could have been able to enjoy the universal acclaim and enthusiasm for his works that developed through the 20th Century and beyond (and the wealth that would have brought him), and had witnessed the adoption of his image as one of only a few select symbols of Scotland's national identity...if only!

On a more mundane level, at least some of his new Edinburgh friends and benefactors would help launch his career in the Excise Service, as would other friends he was yet to meet during his 'tours'. The Excise option was a project he had intended to actively pursue during this first stay in Edinburgh but he seems to have done little directly to advance it. However, the success of his Edinburgh Edition did at least put to rest his ill-conceived plan to languish in the Indies. We hear no more of that after Edinburgh.

5 - The Tours

Following publication of the first Edinburgh Edition, Burns invested £4 in a horse - the legendary Jenny Geddes, playfully named after a colourful 17th Century religious objector. Weel mounted on his guid grey mare, he left Edinburgh on May 5th, 1787 to tour the Borders of Scotland. For the first two weeks he was accompanied by Robert Ainslie, an articling law clerk he had befriended in Edinburgh in January 1787. This series of wanderings was not intended so much as vacations or pleasant diversions before returning to the drudgery of farming, but as opportunities for Scotland's unofficial National Bard (an honour informally bestowed on him by the Grand lodge of Scotland that January) to introduce himself across the land. Burns was also genuinely keen to see more of his beloved Scotland. The tours would provide an opportunity to promote the sale of those remaining volumes of the Edinburgh Edition as yet unsold. Over the next few months, from early spring through the end of August 1787, Robert would embark on three tours, one to each of the Borders, the West Highlands and the Highlands - the latter including a separate tour of Stirlingshire.

The Borders

Burns maintained a log of his travels, but mostly only in brief, disjointed form. Originally, he must have intended to use this to develop a fuller account at some future time, but its paucity of detail made it unfit for this purpose. Fortunately, Ainslie was able to flesh out some of the details much later. But true to form, the poet did find time to record some of his impressions of the bonnie lassies he encountered along the way, most of them being the daughters of hosts with whom he and Ainslie stayed en route. He was particularly enamoured of Isabella Lindsey, but as so often in his short lifetime, ladies of social standing seldom gave him hope of anything more than temporary friendship however much they may have admired his achievements and his eloquent and sometimes riveting conversation. All said and done, he was still but a poor farmer with no wealth or prospects worthy of a patrician spouse.

On the way to Jedburgh, seemingly on a whim, the two Roberts crossed the Tweed at Coldstream into England, but quickly returned to the poet's beloved Scotia. In Jedburgh, Burns was made an honorary Burgess. He seems to have been much taken with the town and he was uncharacteristically chagrined at the thought of leaving it, although it was more likely the prospect of parting from the lovely Isabella Lindsey that was the source of his reluctance.

Then it was on to Kelso for a whistle-stop visit and from there to Melrose and its abbey. They hurriedly pressed on to Selkirk and then Berwick, from whence Ainslie returned to Edinburgh as his leave from work was at an end. From that point on Burns often travelled alone, although sometimes accompanied by one or more new acquaintances. He passed through Dunbar and a few other small border towns before taking a side trip through part of the north of England, visiting Morpeth, Newcastle and eventually Carlisle where he met and spent some time with

another young female distraction, although reputedly of questionable morals; but she bolted before he had time to complete the seduction.

In Carlisle, Jenny Geddes allegedly strayed on to some municipal park land, and as a result was impounded. Robert was brought before a magistrate, but his true identity and fame became known to the mayor, who promptly ordered his release. Apparently the mayor feared Burns's reputation for poetical retribution but it wasn't in the Bard's DNA to pass up such an opportunity. In response, the unappeased master of the errant cuddie is reputed to have penned the following quatrain:

**Was e'er puir poet sae befitted,
The maister drunk – the horse committed;
Puir harmless beast! tak thee nae care,
Thou'll be a horse when he's nae mair.**
(*'mair'* carrying the double entendre of mayor.)

Researchers have questioned whether this incident ever actually happened, and likewise whether or not the poetical riposte should be attributed to Burns; but why pass on such a good yarn?

From Carlisle, it was straight back to Scotland and through Annan to Dumfries where he stayed for three days. He was given a warm reception by the townsfolk and made a Burgess by the magistrates ...his second such honour on this tour. He was impressed with the town, which might explain his willingness to take up an Excise position in the area in September 1789. But his otherwise pleasant stay in Dumfries was disturbingly interrupted on his first day (June 1st) by news that an Edinburgh dalliance had seemingly resulted in unwanted paternity. Margaret Cameron had become pregnant and half-heartedly pointed the finger at Robert. She later issued a writ against him in order to claim support. Robert had reason to be suspicious that he was being set up as the fall-guy for another man's folly, but with the help of Ainslie and a small financial offering of ten or twelve shillings, Burns was able to take care of the mother's immediate needs. It is thought that shortly thereafter she married her cousin, a cattle drover. In any event the writ was cancelled in August 1787, so it has been assumed that the fetus may have miscarried or been stillborn, thus saving the careless lover from yet another costly embarrassment.

His visit to Dumfries would mark the end of his Borders tour, but just before setting out to return to Mauchline Robert met with Patrick Miller, the owner of a group of farms at Dalswinton just over six miles from Dumfries. He had first met Miller in Edinburgh in December 1786 shortly after his arrival there. Acting as a supportive benefactor, Miller had made him a generous gift of 10 guineas, but later they discussed the possibility of the bard entering into a lease of one of the Dalswinton farms. He may still not have made a final decision concerning his alternate plan to emigrate to Jamaica, but whatever his reasons, he did not seem to have been ready to commit to a lease; he was tempted, and agreed to meet with Miller again in August.

Back in Mauchline

Robert arrived back in Mauchline in the early part of June to a welcome fit for a returning prodigal. Six short months earlier his friends and neighbours had regarded him as a mere tenant farmer, while his detractors dismissed him as a serial womanizer who had far too high an opinion of himself. But with his new-found fame, most now treated him with obsequious admiration. Far from enjoying this acclaim, he found it strangely disturbing. Many of those who had formerly treated him with the greatest disdain were now extravagantly solicitous. This was especially true of the Armours. From setting the legal hounds on him just a few months before, Jean's father had made a complete volte face and was shamelessly pushing Jean at him, apparently now happy to have him for a son-in-law. The change in attitude was so sickeningly opportunistic that Robert's inclination was to throw Jean right back at the old hypocrite; and he would have done, but he had fallen in love with her all over again. While not wholly reconciled to all of Jean's past misdemeanors, he was soon back in her arms and under that old magical spell.

The West Highlands

Understandably after Edinburgh and the Borders tour, Mauchline would have seemed much duller than he had remembered, and so very provincial by comparison. The attractions of Jean notwithstanding, by about the middle of June he was relieved to be setting off on his planned West Highlands tour. He had some business to settle in Glasgow first, but we know that he soon reached Arrochar on the way to Inverary and then Dumbarton. As was the case with the Borders tour, he took few notes of his adventures. Most of what we know of them is gleaned indirectly and with questionable accuracy from the content of a few extant letters and the accounts of his travelling companions.

On the West Highlands tour Burns was at first accompanied by one fellow traveller, and later by another. The first was Dr George Grierson, a brother mason who, with an order of thirty six copies, was the biggest subscriber to the Edinburgh edition of the poems, not counting Creech with his five hundred. We know that Grierson was with him at Inverary but may even have rendezvoused at an earlier destination. They were later joined by George Gairdner of Ladykirk. Inverary was the furthest outward point of the tour, and they may have been heading that way to attend a previously arranged audience with the Duke of Argyll. If that was the intent, it went awry when the Duke's time was taken up with other commitments.

After Inverary the party weaved their way south through Clachan and other minor stopping points back to Arrochar. Following a day spent on Loch Lomond, they reached Dumbarton where, on June 29th 1787, the poet was once again made an honorary Burgess on payment of a fee of 3s 6d. Obviously, at that time, one had to pay for honours bestowed! The journey was marked by interludes of frivolous adventure, such as when Robert was thrown from his horse during an impromptu race with a local country bumpkin they had encountered on the road, and

punctuated by evenings of conviviality during which the merry threesome and their hosts indulged in all-night revelries, with Robert later confessing to being '*no vera fou, but gaylie yet*'.

The Reverend James Oliphant, who had been one of the auld licht ministers mercilessly lampooned by the poet in **The Ordination** in 1786, was now a minister in Dumbarton. Next day from the pulpit, still evidently smarting from his earlier humiliations, Oliphant reportedly denounced the city magistrates for conferring these honours '*on the author of vile, detestable and immoral publications*', a petulant rebuke that Robert must have gleefully enjoyed.

Robert continued his travels alone in the area, but mainly in order to settle business connected with his Edinburgh Edition. By about early July he was back at Mossgiel farm. In a letter written shortly after his return, he denied having any intention of marrying Jean Armour, although ironically unknown to him Jean was already pregnant with their second set of twins conceived in mid-June just before Robert headed off on his West Highlands tour. For the next month he seems to have lain low in Mauchline. But on August 7th he returned to Edinburgh to settle some matters related to his Edinburgh Edition. At first he again stayed with his old friend John Richmond, but soon moved into the more comfortable home of William Nicol, the crusty middle-aged Latin master and soon-to-be travelling companion on the first leg of the tour of the Highlands. Nicol was the inspiration for *O, Willie Brewed a Peck o Maut*:

O, Willie brew'd a peck o maut,	<i>malt</i>
And Rob and Allan cam to pree,	<i>taste</i>
Three blyther hearts, that lea-lang night,	<i>live-long</i>
Ye wad na found in Christendie.	

On August 24th they set out on their adventure, but on Nicol's insistence this time in a more comfortable post-chaise rather than on horseback. Given Nicol's notorious penury, Robert probably covered the lion's share of the tab for this luxury. Of the three, the Highlands tour was the longest and the most eventful.

The Highlands

As with the other tours, although Burns kept a diary of sorts, the entries tended to be sparing in detail and often disjointed and imprecise. We know they visited Linlithgow spending quite some time in Linlithgow Palace, the birthplace of Mary Queen of Scots. Their next stop was Falkirk and on to Stirling and Bannockburn. The desolate landscape of Bannockburn, with the still palpable clash and din of battle hanging in the air, made a deep impression on the poet. He would revisit it in his imagination several years later when it became the inspiration for **Scots Wha Hae**, originally titled **Bruce to his Troops**. On August 28th they left Stirling, travelling via Crieff to Taymouth, following the Tay to Aberfeldy and the Falls of Moness, which were deserving of another composition, **The Birks of Aberfeldy**. After that the travellers took advantage of a letter of introduction to the Duke of Atholl provided by Hugh Blair. Burns was

graciously received and fêted by the Duke and his family at Blair Castle. Indeed, the family (particularly the ladies) were quite in awe of him, and for his part Robert forever cherished his brief time there. Very importantly, during his two-day stay at the castle he had been introduced to a number of influential guests, one of whom - Robert Graham of Fintry - was a Commissioner of the Scottish Board of Excise. Graham would soon prove very useful not only in helping Burns secure a position in the Excise, but also in advancing his career in other ways.

The next phase of their travels took them via Aviemore, Strathspey and Fort George to Inverness. They spent two days taking in the highlights of the Capital of the Highlands, and the desolate and tragic Culloden Moor. They continued on through Nairn and Elgin and crossed the Spey to arrive at Fochabers. Having met the Duchess of Gordon in Edinburgh, Burns proceeded on his own to Gordon Castle, the grandiloquent seat of the Duke and Duchess, leaving a sulking Nicol behind at the village inn. As at Blair Castle, he was warmly received and invited to stay for dinner, which he accepted, but soon excused himself in order to rejoin his neglected companion. The Duke suggested that Nicol be asked to join them, and so Robert made his way back to the inn with the Duke's emissary in tow to formally extend this invitation. However, the irascible Nicol - already enraged at not being invited in the first place - point blank refused and threatened to proceed forthwith on his travels alone. Robert had to choose between returning as the Duke's honoured guest or appeasing his furious friend. He felt that he had no option but to follow the latter course, and with great reluctance passed up the opportunity of a long and leisurely stay at the castle with the almost assured opportunity of meeting other influential movers and shakers of the day, some of whom almost certainly would have proved useful in supporting his life goals, as well as advancing his career.

They journeyed south again, no doubt mutually 'nursing their wrath'. They stopped briefly in Banff before carrying on to Aberdeen where they stayed for a day. Then it was on through Kincardineshire (the land of the poet's paternal ancestors) to Stonehaven, Montrose, Arbroath and Perth, finishing their journey in Edinburgh on September 16th 1787.

Burns planned to remain in Edinburgh for only a few days to settle his business affairs with William Creech but underestimated the evasive wiliness of his publisher. He also addressed his mind to the thorny issue of his future living. He knew only farming, but it was a difficult business fraught with risk. He wrote to Patrick Miller concerning the earlier proposal to lease a farm near Dumfries, but intentionally dumored on that decision, agreeing to meet with Miller upon the latter's return to Edinburgh at the end of October.

The Stirlingshire Leg of the Highlands Tour

In the interim, Burns set off on a second and final two-week leg of his Highlands tour (sometimes referred to as the Stirlingshire tour), this time with a new companion, Dr James Adair. They left Edinburgh on October 4, 1787, heading for Stirling and its environs. It is

believed that one of his main objectives in the planning of his itinerary was to pursue the possibility of a romantic attachment with Margaret (Peggy) Chalmers who resided at Harvieston, and whom he had met some time earlier, probably during his first Edinburgh stay. He had become quite infatuated with this charming young woman who was far above his rank in society. During his eight-day stay in Harvieston (among the happiest of his life he was later to remark), he proposed marriage to Peggy. She turned him down, explaining that she was already promised to a banker, but she appears to have done so with such grace and consideration for his sometimes over-sensitive feelings that he continued to count her a good friend and confidante for more than a year, until her eventual marriage when all contact seems to have ended.

The Stirlingshire tour took in other stops, including principally Ochtertyre, but also Clackmannan and Dunfermline. Robert and his companion arrived back in Edinburgh on October 20th. Thus ended his three tours.

As noted earlier, it is interesting to speculate what value Burns actually derived from them. Certainly, he would have hoped to acquire inspirational material on the people, places and natural beauties that he was sure to encounter, but although he did compose a few minor gems (most polished up following his return), they were relatively few in number and scarcely notable. But as travel is sure to broaden the mind, Burns did experience the Scottish landscape - as well as a little of England's - for which he would have been much the poorer had he not undertaken this project. A further benefit of lasting value was the contacts and friends he made with a number of Scotland's political and intellectual giants of the day, some of whom would prove very useful to him at a later time.

6 - Edinburgh Redux

Upon his return to Edinburgh Robert moved in with another schoolmaster friend, William Cruikshank. Settling matters with his publisher was at the top of his agenda, but he was diverted somewhat in his purpose by a new and very important undertaking. He had become aware of an Edinburgh engraver - James Johnson - who, with the assistance of other talented literary and musical volunteers, had embarked on a hugely ambitious scheme to collect and publish as many as possible of Scotland's traditional songs, setting melodies to those that lacked them. The first volume of the resulting **Scots Musical Museum** had just recently been published, but there would be five others. Robert dedicated much of his time and energy to this project throughout the remainder of his life, contributing massively to all but the posthumous final volume. Without his creative and meticulous involvement, as well as his poetical genius, these masterpieces of collection and emendation would not have attained the success that they did and many of Scotland's traditional songs almost certainly would have faded into obscurity.

Shortly after his return to Auld Reekie, Robert heard of the death of his 'baby Jean', one of the first of two sets of twins he and Jean would produce. The baby had died on October 20th. Added to this grief was his concern for Jean Armour's well-being and over whether her new pregnancy, now four months on, was showing yet. Being a repeat occurrence, there was sure to be trouble to face both from Jean's parents and Mauchline's ever vigilant holy beagles.

On about October 26th, Robert once more undertook the arduous journey to Dalswinton to honour his commitment to view the farms on offer for lease by Patrick Miller. He did so, but again put off making a decision.

Robert's main reason for lingering in Edinburgh at this time was to settle matters with Creech, including collecting the outstanding proceeds of the sale of the Edinburgh Edition and the hundred guineas that Creech had agreed to pay for the purchase of the copyright of all of the poems and songs published in that edition. These excluded those first published in the Kilmarnock Edition that had been entailed to Gilbert on a holding basis to frustrate any attempts by James Armour to bring him to book over his first paternity event with Jean. A Memorandum of Agreement on the copyright was issued in late October 1787, but living up to his well-earned reputation whenever the outlay of money was involved, Creech was excessively dilatory and evasive in paying up. It was not until May 30th of the following year that he finally settled accounts with the poet.

Agnes (Nancy) McLehose - Clarinda

Annoyed and frustrated, Robert decided to return to Mossgiel in early December, but his 'best laid schemes' were pleasantly thwarted when on December 4th he made the acquaintance of the



captivating Agnes McLehose, or Nancy as she known to her friends. She was the daughter of a prominent Glasgow surgeon and was looked upon as quite a beauty. She had married at seventeen, but had long been separated from her abusive and dissolute lawyer husband who at that time was employed in the Caribbean. Supplementing a good formal education, her conscientious self-schooling made her particularly knowledgeable of literature and poetry as well as being a poet of middling talent. Nancy was about nine months older than Burns and a mother to four children, three surviving. Being estranged from her husband, she was forced to rely on the financial support of a cousin, but was nevertheless well connected in Edinburgh society. Like most

socially prominent women of her day, she was careful to maintain an impeccable reputation, and indeed her cousin's continued generosity would have depended on it.

She was familiar with the bard's work and had been keen to meet him, which she did - by chance perhaps, but probably by design - at the home of Mrs. Nimmo, a mutual friend. She and Robert were drawn to one another and instantly became friends. That same evening she sent Robert an invitation to have tea at her flat a couple of days later, which he accepted with unrestrained enthusiasm. But no sooner had he done so when he suffered a serious and painful knee injury resulting from an accident while riding in a hackney cab. It was sufficiently debilitating to keep him housebound for most of the next month...which is fortunate for us, though not for the luckless and already bewitched Robin. Being unable to communicate tête-à-tête, they exchanged more than eighty letters over the period of his incapacity, providing us with an intriguing feast of insights into the minds and manners of the two furtive correspondents. This amazing flood of letters was made all the more possible by a privately run and very efficient penny-post service operating in Edinburgh at that time which provided one-hour delivery. What need email?

At Nancy's suggestion they agreed to adopt playful pseudonyms, a not uncommon foible at the time; he would be Sylvander (man of the woods) to her Clarinda! Nom de plumes offered some degree of anonymity should the letters fall into unfriendly hands, but also pandered to an Arcadian poetical romanticism that had developed between them. The precocious duo touched on many topics, including literature, poetry and philosophy. But Robert being Robert - and despite having passed only a brief time in the company of this admittedly lovely lady - it is evident that with each exchange of letters he was becoming more and more captivated. At one point following an indiscrete outpouring of romantic affection, Clarinda was obliged to remind Sylvander that she was, after all, a married woman. While enjoying his attentions, she was

mindful of the need to restrain his euphoria in order to at least maintain the appearance of a purely platonic relationship.

It was not until the 4th of January that Robert was at last able to attend in person at Nancy's flat. The meeting was a great success and over the coming few weeks he is known to have called on her at least six more times. Nancy was clearly conflicted over her feelings for this brilliant, beguiling man. She seems at times to have more than tacitly encouraged his passion for her, only to gently but firmly deny his final conquest. From remarks made by Nancy in one letter, it appears that on at least one occasion they toyed with intimacy but stopped tantalizingly short. Robert must have been baffled and perplexed. On a second occasion she seems almost to have had to fight off his advances (or act to cool off both their passions), an incident that was followed by a few days of terse and recriminatory exchanges.

By about the end of January Nancy was tipped off that their *affaire de cœur* had become common knowledge among her circle in Edinburgh. She was mortified and distraught, not only because her reputation (that fragile possession!) was now in jeopardy, but also because the financial support from her cousin - William Craig, later Lord Craig, a Court of Sessions judge - might be withdrawn should he hear the rumour. She and Robert continued their trysts, but were more careful and circumspect in their actions in order to avoid detection. The final meeting before Robert left Edinburgh was on March 18th when he presented his (still) beloved with a pair of lovers' drinking glasses and a copy of his verses to **My Clarinda**. They continued to exchange letters sporadically for another three years and met for one last time in December 1791. For Robert, the flame was never quite extinguished, but not long after his second winter in Edinburgh he came to accept in his heart that the beautiful Clarinda would never be his. Nevertheless, the hope and the romantic posturing would survive for a while longer in a continued, but diminishing, exchange of letters, most of which were from him.

The question that is always asked is: did they become lovers? Understandably, given the societal intolerances of the time, Nancy never admitted to it, and while Robert had an ungentlemanly tendency to boast of his exploits (although generally only in his earlier years), the fact that as far as we know he did not in this case is no guide; he too would have been sensitive to the need to protect his friend's reputation, and by now he was married. With the evidence of the passion more than hinted at in their correspondence (his at least), it is hard to accept that intimacy did not take place, but it is possible that the lady was just too afraid of the consequences to yield, even to her own temptation. It seems we will just never know.

Other Business

Despite his preoccupation with Clarinda in that winter of 1787/88, Robert did find time to pursue other matters. While his feud with Creech raged on, he cultivated influential patrons to lay the groundwork for a position in the Excise. These included Robert Graham of Fintry and Lord

Glencairn. He also submitted to a personal screening interview (curiously conducted by Mrs. Nimmo, a casual friend) preliminary to the processing of a formal application. But accepting that his efforts to secure a post with the Excise Service might come to naught, he continued to engage with Patrick Miller in order to keep open the option of taking a lease on one of his farms. He also continued to be closely involved in developing the second volume of the Scots Musical Museum.

In mid-February, Robert found it necessary to interrupt his stay in Edinburgh to take care of neglected business back in Ayrshire, first heading for Glasgow where he had a short but pleasant reunion with his brother William and his swashbuckling friend from his months in Irvine, Richard Brown. Young William delivered the neglected Jenny Geddes, who took Robert back to Mossgiel via Paisley and Kilmarnock, stopping off at Tarbolton to meet up with Jean so that he could convoy her back to Mauchline. As expected, she had been banished from her parents' home after her second pregnancy by that blackguard Burns began to show. Robert had made arrangements for both of them to move into rental accommodation within the home of a friend, Dr John Mackenzie, and in a testament to the timeless maxim that actions speak louder than words, his next priority was the purchase of a mahogany bed for Jean, a practical step for any husband setting up in his first home, but not without its comedic symbolism. He spent a short time at Mossgiel before setting out for Dumfriesshire to again inspect the farms on offer by Patrick Miller. This time, finally, he opted for Ellisland, despite his own misgivings over the quality of the soil. He was persuaded in part by the opinion of John Tennant, a knowledgeable and trusted farmer friend he had brought along on this occasion, that the land was viable as a farm. That same day he wrote to Miller proposing terms for a lease, which included £300 to be supplied by the landlord to build a new farmhouse.

He returned to Mossgiel shortly before Jean delivered their second set of twins, the births probably taking place on either March 9th or 10th. Unfortunately, both baby girls died, one on the day of the birthing or on the following day, and the other about ten days later. There is nothing recorded that gives us a clear picture of Robert's reaction to these sad events, but we must assume that he was devastated in himself and for his poor wife. Nevertheless, he seems to have set out for a return to Edinburgh at about this time. He travelled via Glasgow and was back in Edinburgh by the 13th. He remained in the Capital for only one week, but what a week that was. He had his final meeting with 'the arch-rascal Creech', received his appointment to the Excise, and signed a 76-year lease to Ellisland farm at an annual rent of £50 for the first three years and £70 thereafter. And, as noted above, he said his melancholy farewell to Nancy.

7 - Ellisland Farm

Robert had long agonized over whether his future lay in farming or in the Excise. Upon leaving Edinburgh on March 20th he had effectively committed to both. For the next three years he would carry the burden of two occupations, each one of which should have been deserving of his full attention and energies. His first priority was to complete a six-week course of Excise



instruction. He was originally told that he would be required to take his instructions under an assigned officer in Edinburgh, but he managed to persuade his superiors to allow him to report instead to James Findlay, the officer for Tarbolton, starting in early April. Tarbolton is only 40 miles from Ellisland, which enabled Robert to allocate some of his time to his nascent farming project. It was a financially challenging time for him. Not only would he receive no remuneration during his training period, but he

was required to pay for his instruction and for the purchase of a sturdier horse than Jenny Geddes. Being thus short of cash, he again put pressure on Creech to pay him for his copyright, but alas to no avail.

In the meantime he lived openly with Jean Armour in Mauchline. They appear to have entered into an unconventional civil marriage, which nevertheless would likely have been binding under Scots law. Importantly, it was accepted as such by the Daddy Auld and the Kirk Session on August 5th, and from then on Robert would always refer to Jean as Mrs. Burns.

Burns's lease of Ellisland ran from May 25th 1788, but he did not 'commence a farmer' there until June 11th. His choice of Ellisland over some of the other farms on offer by Patrick Miller may have been dictated more by its scenic position on the banks of the river Nith than for the quality of its soil and other factors that might have made it a successful farm. The decision was surely reflective more of Burns the poet than Burns the farmer. A visit to Ellisland now will attest to the unusual riparian beauty of its surroundings. But he was still concerned about the quality of the soil and in expressing this to Miller, the latter agreed to more advantageous lease conditions which included a reduction in the annual rental. In the end he described it as an 'altogether a ruinous bargain', which may have been an overly pessimistic judgement.

Jenny Clow

Sometime in June Robert received another all-too-familiar shock: Robert Ainslie informed him of another putative paternity, this time with the now noticeably pregnant Jenny (Janet) Clow. Jenny had been the maidservant of none other than Nancy McLehose. At Nancy's bidding, on

January 25th, 1788 Jenny had called at Robert's rooms to deliver a letter to him (a birthday greeting perhaps?) and returned later to pick up a reply. Jenny acted as a courier on a number of other occasions for about the next month. Relations between Robert and Nancy were strained at that point principally (we might conjecture) because of Nancy's refusal to yield to Robert's advances. In this state of mind - a poor surrogate for Nancy as she must have seemed - the compliant Jenny was recruited to assuage his pent-up frustrations, and that probably on more than one occasion. In any case, by June the brief liaison had put 'a whaup i' the nest'. Robert's response on learning of Jenny's predicament leaves an impression of callous unconcern, but we must assume that Nancy's discovering of his treachery would have evoked a reaction that would have been anything but unconcerned. Jenny took out a writ against him, but this seems to have been withdrawn upon his providing the poor waif with a small financial settlement. Robert did offer to take and care for his young son and namesake, but Jenny refused to give him up. Three years later Jenny succumbed to tuberculosis. Very little information about the life of Robert junior has survived, but he may have been cared for by suitable foster parents in that he is known to have married well and prospered as a successful merchant.

Settling in at Ellisland

While in Ellisland, Robert lodged with the outgoing tenants (David and Agnes Cullie) in the nearly derelict old farm dwelling while the new farmhouse was being constructed. While in Mauchline he continued to live with Jean in the Back Causeyway house of Dr Mackenzie. Particularly during the times when Robert was away attending to the farm, Jean busied herself at Mossgiel learning the skills and duties of a farm wife that she would soon have the opportunity to put to good use.

Despite these lengthy journeys, the poet found time to compose or 'mend' many of the songs that would form the basis of the third volume of the Scots Musical Museum, as well as writing a few original pieces. Meanwhile, life continued to present other trials and challenges. Robert had been concerned for some time about his younger brother William. Robert was eight years older than him and, doubtless as a result of their father's death a few years before, his relationship with the young lad was more filial than brotherly. William seems to have lacked drive and ambition, and although having completed his apprenticeship as a saddler he had trouble finding employment. He moved in with Robert and Jean for a few months at Ellisland before finding work in England. Sadly, on July 24th, 1790 he died there of a fever.



Soon after first taking on Ellisland, Robert met and befriended a local member of the gentry who was four years his senior and who would figure prominently in the next phase of his life. Robert Riddell of Glenriddell was a retired Captain of the Scots Greys who had inherited the nearby Glenriddell estate. He promptly sold off most of the land, but retained the country house that was

known as Friars' Carse. Riddell was a talented musician and already a published composer and he and Robert shared an interest in Scots songs. It was he who allowed the poet free access to Friar's Carse Hermitage, a small summerhouse on the property which Robert used to much effect as a quiet retreat for contemplation and writing.

In March 1789, through the formation of The Monkland Friendly Society, Burns and Riddell started a lending library for the benefit of the local population, particularly '*to store the minds of the lower classes with useful knowledge*'. It was mainly Riddell's idea, and mostly he who saw to its implementation. Burns acted as librarian, treasurer and general factotum. At any given time the society had up to 150 books in its collection available for circulation, some of which can still be seen at the Ellisland museum. Remarkably, the library continued to operate until 1931.

Jean moved from Mauchline to temporary rented accommodation near the farm at Ellisland in early December 1788, accompanied by a maid and two servant lads she had recently hired. They all moved into the new farmhouse the following April when it was completed. The Ellisland farmhouse museum that can be visited today is an expanded version of the original house. Only the kitchen and parlour form part of the 1789 structure; most of what we see now was built in 1812.

In 1790 Burns switched from arable to mainly dairy farming, which meant that Jean could supervise the farm hands while he concentrated on his Excise duties. It was a good decision. He introduced Ayrshire cattle to Nithsdale, which thrived, giving much greater quantities of milk than the local breeds.

Captain Francis Grose - Antiquarian

Sometime in June of 1789 Robert made the acquaintance of Captain Francis Grose, a well-known and respected antiquarian who had published a six-volume opus, **Antiquities of England and Wales** between 1773-1787 and then the two volume set of his **The Antiquities of Scotland**, the first volume of that in 1789 and the second in 1791. Burns met him when he was residing with the Riddells at Friar's Carse while he was collecting material for his second volume.

Burns hit it off almost immediately with this jolly, frumpily overweight eccentric and urged him to include an engraving of Alloway's Kirk in his second volume of the Scots anthology. Grose agreed, as long as Robert provided an appropriate witch's tale to go with it. Burns sent him three stories in prose, all about the old Kirk, the second of which mirrored aspects of his later narrative poem, **Tam o' Shanter**. Then in December 1790 he sent Grose a copy of the poem itself and of course Grose much preferred this, which duly appeared in the publication. It was not the first outing for Tam o' Shanter as it had been scooped by The Edinburgh Magazine for its issue of March 1791. It seems likely that whatever prior inspirations Burns may have entertained in relation to this tale, his interaction with Grose must have been key in galvanizing him into action.

His new friendship with Grose also inspired the poet to write the witty poem **On the Late Captain Grose's Perigrinations Through Scotland**, followed later by **On Captain Grose**. Unfortunately, the worthy gentleman died soon after in 1791 at just sixty years of age (eliciting the **Epigram on Francis Grose the Antiquary**), otherwise his friendship with the Bard must surely have produced other poetical gems.

Appointment to a Position in the Excise

Having completed his Excise training in May of 1788 and obtaining his Commission in July, Burns was eligible to be appointed to a post. It was no easy matter to ensure that he would be given the territory he wanted, namely the Upper Nithsdale Division, which included Ellisland. Once more he managed to enlist the support of Commissioner Robert Graham, now not only a powerful advocate but also a personal friend. There was an officer (Leonard Smith) already covering this post, but Burns proposed having him moved or forced into retirement. This seems like a ruthlessly self-serving proposal to advance, but Smith had been documented as a poor performer in the job and so the suggestion and the encouragement to advocate for it may have come from one or more of the local excise supervisors. Smith had also recently come into a large inheritance, making him financially impervious to the outcome. The Board of Excise gave its approval, appointing Burns to the Upper Nithsdale Division as a riding officer (or gauger), and he took up his new duties on September 7th, 1789. His division was the largest in the Dumfries district, requiring him to cover nearly 200 miles each week on horseback:

**Searching auld wives' barrels,
Ochon, the day!**

The annual salary of newly appointed excise officers was £50, but with a share of fines and of the value of contraband seized by them they could more than double that. At first he took some pleasure in the work, even the long hours spent on the road that he would use to compose verse. But with the arrival of winter, that changed; the grueling rounds in winter's hoary chill began to affect his health. The solution, he decided, was to seek a transfer to a foot-walk in a Port Division, of which Dumfries was one. Once again he lobbied Commissioner Graham, and in July 1790 got his transfer along with an increase in pay to £70. Although his beat required him to walk only about 4 miles each day, it was a busy, demanding placement. He still had to ride the 13-mile round trip distance between Ellisland and Dumfries on a daily basis, which he did for another year and a half, but when the weather was especially inclement he put up at the Globe Inn in the centre of the town. For the rest of his short life, the Globe would be the poet's 'local'.

The Affair with Helen Anne Park

Robert's frequent sleepovers at the Globe placed him in temptation's way once more. The owner's 18 year old grand-niece, Anne Park (familiarily known as Anna), had started work as a barmaid at the Globe in 1789, and soon after Robert began to lodge there the two had an affair. Robert seemed fated in such matters as Anna became pregnant...of course! In the cruelest of

ironies, Jean presented Robert with a son (William Nicol Burns) nine days after Anna's daughter Elizabeth was born, which leaves us to conclude with certainty that they were impregnated within a few days of one another.

A few weeks later, displaying the generosity of a saint, Jean took in and raised little Elizabeth alongside her own infant. Later in life when asked about this, Jean shrugged and laughingly remarked that: **"Oor Rab should have had twa wives"**. Anna moved to Edinburgh and married in 1794, but unfortunately died sometime prior to 1799.

Leaving Ellisland

Burns had long since decided that he wanted to give up the lease on Ellisland. Fortunately for him, Patrick Miller was anxious to sell the farm. In a rare stroke of serendipity for Robert, in mid-1791 Miller was approached by a purchaser (for a price of £1900) and generously agreed to buy out the balance of Robert's lease effective September 10th, 1791. The family delayed their move to Dumfries until November 11th.

The three years spent at Ellisland had been very difficult ones for the poet as he worked very hard to make a success of the farm while striving to give a good account of himself as a gauger. Whether as a consequence of that or not, soon after taking up his Excise position there was a noticeable deterioration in his health. But he had come through the Ellisland ordeal with a tidy accretion of capital; there were the modest proceeds from the buyout of his lease and he had done quite well from the sale of his animals and farm equipment. Added to that, from a poetical point of view these were surprisingly productive years. Robert continued his work as the unofficial editor of the Scots Musical Museum as well as being its major contributor of songs. The third volume of this work-in-progress was published in February 1790 and the fourth in August 1792. At least 130 poems and songs – about a quarter of the Bard's lifetime output – are attributed to this period, including (to list just a few): **Auld Lang Syne; O, Were I On Parnassus Hill; Willie Brew'd a Peck O' Maut; Flow Gently Sweet Afton**, and arguably his greatest masterpiece, **Tam O Shanter**:



Ah, Tam! Ah, Tam! thou'll get thy fairin!	<i>reward</i>
In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!	
In vain thy Kate awaits thy comin!	
Kate soon will be a woefu woman!	
Now, do thy speedy utmost, Meg,	
And win the key-stane of the brig;	<i>bridge</i>
There, at them thou thy tail may toss,	
A running stream they dare na cross!	
But ere the key-stane she could make,	
The fient a tail she had to shake!	<i>absence of</i>
For Nannie, far before the rest,	<i>a young witch that was pursuing him</i>
Hard upon noble Maggie prest,	
And flew at Tam wi' furious ettle;	<i>aim</i>
But little wist she Maggie's mettle!	<i>guessed</i>
Ae spring brought off her master hale,	<i>one, whole</i>
But left behind her ain grey tail:	
The carlin clautht her by the rump,	<i>beldam, clawed</i>
And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.	

8 - Dumfries

The Wee Vennel

The Burns family, by now comprising Robert, Jean and their three sons, moved from the comparative spaciousness of the Ellisland farmhouse to a small apartment in the Wee Vennel



(now 11 Bank Street) in Dumfries town on November 11th, 1791. Little Bess, from the liaison with Anna Park, had been sent to Mossgiel to live with Gilbert and his new wife, Jean Breckenridge, until she was able to be moved in with Robert and Jean almost exactly one year later. Their new home was just a few steps up the vennel from the riverfront at what is still named the Whitesands. This being the dockyard for the many ships that berthed in Dumfries, it was a favourite hang-out for visiting sailors. As such, their building was located in a quite

seedy part of the town, and was home to a few spit-and-sawdust taverns as well as some very unsavory houses of prostitution. As if to add further insult, in 1791 the Wee Vennel was more commonly referred to as the Stinking Vennel for the open sewer that ran down the middle of it.

The apartment was on the first, or middle, floor of a three-storey tenement, comprising three small rooms and a kitchen; shops occupied the street level. Fortunately, the family were no strangers to confined living spaces and they seem to have settled well enough into what Jean and Robert must have intended as interim quarters. At least Robert would be spared the grinding daily commute back and forth to Ellisland in all weathers - as well as the temptations that sleepovers at the Globe Inn might present - while Jean could enjoy the shops and other conveniences of a bustling town of about seven thousand inhabitants and look forward to making friends among other young family women in her new surroundings.

Dumfries was the county town of Dumfriesshire, a port and prosperous market town.

Contemporary accounts laud its appearance, its livability and the quality of its inhabitants in quite glowing terms, and Robert was clearly impressed by its aspect and importance. The town could already boast a long and important history. Among its most notable claims to historical significance was the slaying of the Red Comyn by Robert the Bruce in Grey Friars Church on February 4th, 1306, opening the way for Bruce to successfully claim the throne of Scotland and subsequently win Scotland's independence from its despised English overlords.

More appealing to the newly appointed gauger would have been that Dumfries was the busiest port in south-west Scotland. The river Nith was navigable from the Solway Firth up to the weir near the middle of the town and therefore accessible to sea-going vessels. In Burns's time around 200 ships carrying varied cargoes cleared the port annually, making it a lucrative posting for the excise officers employed there who had the opportunity to share in the value of seized contraband and other 'bonus' payments.

Keeping in Touch with Clarinda

Robert and Nancy continued their busy correspondence, although more solicitous from him than her. In fact, he wrote to her just days after moving to the Dumfries. Nancy broke the news to him that Jenny Clow was dying and urged him to return to Edinburgh as soon as possible. That raised the matter of their now three year old son Robert. In late November the poet took several days leave to travel to the Capital where he settled a few shillings on the unfortunate Jenny. He also briefly rekindled his friendship with Nancy, meeting with her for the last time on December 6th. She was preparing to leave for the West Indies to join her husband in an attempt at a reconciliation, so the poet believed that this would be their final farewell, as indeed it turned out to be. In January 1792, Nancy did set sail for Kingston, Jamaica (interestingly on the *Roselle*, the same ship the poet had booked passage on to sail to the Indies), but her husband treated her with disdain and broke the news that he was openly co-habiting with a native girl who had borne him a child. One wonders why the foolish man sent for her in the first place. She returned to Scotland three months later on the same ship claiming that the climate and the mosquitoes did not agree with her, but those reasons were likely contrived to cover her shame at being shunned by her husband.

She and Robert never again met, although they did continue to exchange letters until 1793. On December 27th - three weeks after their last meeting - Robert sent Nancy a copy of **Ae Fond Kiss**. These inspired verses are an outpouring of the deep distress he was feeling at their parting, more poignant by far than any attempt he might have expressed in wordy prose. His gift to posterity is surely (in the opinion of this writer) the most hauntingly beautiful love song in the English language...or in any language. The middle verse laments:

**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 a letter to Clarinda, Robert claimed that shortly following the news of Jenny Clow's pregnancy he had offered to assume custody of the child, but that she had refused. Surprisingly, there is

nothing recorded to suggest that he attempted to pursue that course following Jenny's death. It may have been because he thought that whatever arrangements she had made for young Robert's care were satisfactory, or simply to avoid imposing yet another illegitimate child on his long-suffering wife, especially at a time when they were shoehorned into the tiny Dumfries flat.

Seizure of the Rosamond

In early 1792 exciseman Burns participated in what was probably the most exciting incident of his career and one that threw up a controversy that early biographers dramatized, arguably beyond its merits. The Solway coast was a favourite landing spot for contraband by smugglers operating out of the Isle of Man. In the latter part of February, Customs and Excise officials became aware that a landing was imminent, so a party of five excise officers including Burns, backed by about 20 soldiers, was dispatched to intercept it. The ship carrying the illicit cargo - the Rosamond - was found stranded at anchor awaiting a favourable tide. An attempt at boarding her on February 27th was thwarted by the boldness of the 24 crewmen who threatened to fire on the outgunned government men and their supporting dragoons. Reinforcements were sent for, but in the meantime the ship managed to slip a mile down the firth to deeper waters at Sarkfoot, near Gretna. On February 29th a force deemed sufficiently large and well armed made the assault. The crew resisted fiercely but eventually fled the vessel in the face of a courageous and sustained attack. The early biographers credited Burns as being the fearless leader of the attacking force. He may have been, but there is no conclusive evidence to credit him with the lion's share of courage, although, given the character of the man, it is a credible possibility. Regardless, he and his four colleagues all acted bravely and with singular determination, seizing the vessel along with a good deal of its original contraband. It had been sabotaged by the crew, but was later restored to seaworthy condition.

As bounty, the ship and its contents were sold at auction for £121 net of expenses, each of the excise officers involved being entitled to a share of the proceeds. There is an unconfirmed story that for the sum of £4 at auction Robert purchased four four-pounder carronades with all their carriages and accoutrements. He is then alleged to have donated and shipped them to the French revolutionary forces, an act that likely would have been seen as politically reckless, or even bordering on seditious in light of Britain's tensions with France that eventually led to war between the two countries. There is little factual evidence that this purchase and donation actually took place, but even if it did, relations between the two nations had not yet become openly hostile. His actions might have been regarded as unwise, but not scandalous or treasonous. If the whole incident did happen as conjectured, it testifies to the poet's profound belief in the goals of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* that he shared with the French revolutionaries and that he espoused so powerfully in *A Man's a Man For a' That*:

**Then let us pray that come it may
(As come it will for a' that),
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth,**

Shall bear the gree an a' that.

have priority

For a' that an a' that,

It's comin' yet for a' that,

That man to man the world o'er,

Will brothers be for a' that.

These were provocative sentiments for their time...almost a call to arms!

A Second Edinburgh Edition

In April 1792 Robert received an unexpected letter from William Creech. The publisher was proposing a third edition of the poems (a second Edinburgh Edition) in two volumes and he presumptuously enquired as to how many new pieces Robert would be willing to provide; Burns suggested sufficient to fill about fifty pages. There was no mention of payment (why not?), and Robert advised that he would settle for a few books of his choosing and an undefined number of the new volumes that he could gift as presentation copies to friends and patrons. The two men cooperated with one another only grudgingly and Robert peevishly contrived mischievous strategies of delay and inaction in carrying out the tasks he had committed to, undoubtedly as payback for Creech's earlier foot-dragging in finalizing settlement for the copyright. Following publication in early 1793 he asked for 20 sets, which Creech promptly provided. It is interesting that one of these was sent to Mossgiel for his 12-year old firstborn (to Elizabeth Paton), his 'Dear-bought Bess'. The inscription on the flyleaf reads simply: *'her father's gift - THE AUTHOR'*.

George Thomson and the Select Scottish Airs

The fourth volume of The Scots Musical Museum, two-thirds of its content having been provided by the bard, had been published in August 1792, followed shortly after by the second Edinburgh Edition of the poems. In the summer of 1793 Robert was contacted by George Thomson (1757-1851), a career civil servant and keen amateur musician. Thomson was planning a compilation of the best Scottish airs, to be published in a quality volume. He approached Robert to lend his poetical skills to the project, to which the poet enthusiastically agreed. It was fortunate timing by Thomson as Burns was bored and at loose ends. He needed a winter project to occupy his attention and save him from the ennui and depression that often enveloped him in that dreariest of seasons. The poet's role was to improve or rewrite twenty-five songs matched with their melodies. Burns wasted no time in tackling his assignment, and the first volume of the **Select Scottish Airs** was published in June 1793. Robert had at first declined payment for his work, by some obscure logic fearing that any remuneration would only serve to cheapen his efforts. But in later forwarding a copy of the publication to Burns Thomson enclosed £5 as a token of thanks. Under different circumstances the poet might have returned the fee, but he was in difficult financial straits at the time and the payment was a welcome windfall.

Burns continued to work on this project almost until the day of his death. Altogether he contributed at least one hundred and fourteen songs, with others being polished or mended. The

second volume would not appear until 1799. Four others were published sporadically up until 1841.

The New Dumfries Theatre Royal

Another area of great interest for the poet in the Dumfries years was public theatre. There was no theatre building in the town when Burns first arrived, but itinerant companies performed in the old Assembly Rooms on George Street, usually to sold-out audiences. Burns had long been interested in drama and performance, and on December 31st 1789 he offered a **Prologue Spoken at the Theatre of Dumfries** to George Stephens Sutherland, actor/manager of a company performing in Dumfries in 1789-90. Attaching a copy of this prologue to a letter addressed to his brother Gilbert, Robert reported that on the evening of New Year's day Sutherland had '*spouted to his audience with great applause*'. Thus encouraged, Robert wrote **Another Prologue for Mrs Sutherland** the following March to be recited at a benefit night for George Sutherland's wife, again to great acclaim.

Sutherland was so encouraged by the success of his players in Dumfries that he spearheaded an initiative to build a new theatre by subscription. Robert Riddell was enlisted as the major backer and underwriter behind the financing and management of the project. Investors would purchase subscriptions that entitled them to certain prescribed attendance benefits such as free admission to all performances and other creative reward packages. Robert was not a subscriber, but thanks to the patronage of Robert Riddell he was placed on the 'free list' and frequently attended new performances. The quid pro quo for Riddell's generosity was Robert's supply of prologues and addresses. £300 was subscribed almost immediately, enabling land to be purchased on what is now Shakespeare Street at Queen Street. A design for a 600-seat theatre based on Bristol's Theatre Royal was chosen, and architect Robert Boyd drew up the plans. A further £500 was raised to complete the building which was opened on Saturday, 29th September 1792. It has gone through expansion (1830), rebuilding (1876), conversion to a cinema (1911), disuse (1954), and finally refurbishment again as a theatre in 1960. It has thrived ever since as the oldest surviving theatre in Scotland.

The company's leading lady was the petite, charming and beautiful Louisa Fontanelle, who, quite naturally, entranced Robert. The highlight of her benefit night on November 26, 1792 (at only 19 years of age) was her recitation of Burns's **The Rights of Woman**. She married and emigrated to the United States, but died of yellow fever in 1799 in her mid-20s.

The French Revolution - Robert's Precarious Politics

On the continent, chaos reigned as the French revolutionary forces carried out their murderous cleansing of everything bourgeois while waging war on their neighbours so that the proletariat of those nations would be free to do likewise. This cauldron of anarchy and destruction was a source of fear and angst for the British governing aristocracy. Reform movements were springing

up everywhere throughout Britain and the skittish government was reacting by banning assemblies and prosecuting many prominent reform activists for sedition - former exciseman Thomas Payne, author of the **Rights of Man**, being one of the best known. War with France was believed to be just a matter of time and the British government was acting to stifle dissent, as well as moving to secure the loyalty of all government officials. The Tories in Westminster handed responsibility for maintaining order in Scotland to Henry Dundas, waggishly re-christened Henry the 9th, or the uncrowned King of Scotland by his many critics and opponents. He soon became the de facto dictator of Scotland and ruled with an iron fist. Patronage was his carrot to achieve this, but he was ruthless in wielding the big stick of repression when he felt it was needed. He was at once feared and supported by most members of the ruling classes, but deeply unpopular with the less privileged masses in Scotland. Many of the Scottish gentry, such as Robert Riddell and Patrick Miller, sympathized with the goals of the reformers but did not dare show their hands in open support. An assembly of more than four people was deemed seditious.

This dangerous shift towards greater intolerance of dissent was moving so fast that it caught Burns off balance. Particularly in the face of the alarming events taking place on the continent, but also as a reaction to the number of reform groups springing up across the country, there was a belief within the government and among the ruling elite that Britain was under great threat of revolution. No dissent was being tolerated and many prominent individuals were being tried for criminal sedition, often being sentenced to transportation.

Much of the poetry and prose produced by Burns around this time was rife with politically provocative satire and thinly disguised support for rebel causes. In late 1792 he published a contemporary rewrite of an old Jacobite rant, **Here's a Health to Them That's Awa**, in the Edinburgh Gazetteer which was ultra reformist to the point of being seen by many as a seditious rag. Shortly after that he composed **The Tree of Liberty**, glorifying the French revolution. Even his **The Rights of Woman**, while more a call for the better treatment of women in a male-dominated society, in the final line contained the cry of "ça ira!" (the meaning not unlike Burns's own 'It's comin' yet for a' that'), a thinly disguised tipping of the hat at a revolutionary marching song popular with the French revolutionaries and many rabid British reformers:

**But truce with kings, and truce with constitutions,
With bloody armaments and revolutions:
Let Majesty your first attention summon,
Ah! ça ira! THE MAJESTY OF WOMAN!**

As a writer with obvious Jacobite and rights-based leanings, this kind of provocation (especially the 'ça ira!') made him an easy target for the ever-vigilant guardians of Tory political conformism.

An incident took place in the Theatre Royal on October 30th, 1792 that was to cause Burns great trouble and embarrassment. A call for God Save the King prior to the start of a performance was objected to by a rabble insisting on the singing of 'Ça Ira' instead. The Anthem commenced, but Burns remained seated throughout its playing and without removing his hat. This gave rise to an anonymous complaint lodged with his supervisors that Burns was a person 'disaffected towards the government'. He was accordingly summoned to answer to it. He became terrified that he might lose his position with the Excise and found it necessary to lobby influential friends to intervene with his superiors to put his case that he truly was a loyal supporter of the establishment and the monarchy, and that while he had been sympathetic to the aims of the French proletariat in the early days of their revolution, he had withdrawn his support in light of the violent bloodletting of the new regime and its disregard for constitutional rights. These were not entirely credible defenses given that his political ideologies were still clearly aligned with the reformers who were campaigning for universal adult suffrage, the secret ballot and other rights we now take for granted, but were strictly proscribed at that time by the ruling Tories and the establishment as a whole. In the end, the accusation (investigated by Collector John Mitchell on the orders of the Board of Excise) seems not to have stuck, although Robert was suitably chastened. He made a conscious effort to keep his head down from then on, but still often could not resist spouting the occasional rebellious slogan or comment, particularly in friendly gatherings or in letters to confidantes. He displayed a naïve trust in the discretion of his friends while ignoring the obvious possibility that private letters can sometimes fall into unsympathetic hands or that loose tongues can sink radical poets.

Family Matters

Amidst all of this, the affairs of the family were an ongoing preoccupation of the bard. On November 21st, 1792 he became a father once more, Jean presenting him with a daughter - Elizabeth Riddell Burns. At around this time Robert became concerned about providing for the education of his children. He believed that young Robert in particular was showing great promise as a bright and capable child (a chip off the old block!), but the cost of enrolment in a good school was beyond the stretch of the family budget. Because of the conflicts with France and other continental impacts of the French Revolution, the importation of goods into Scotland was substantially less than in prior years, which had adversely affected the additional emoluments of the excise officers of the town. During the tours of 1787 Burns had been appointed an *honorary* burgess of Dumfries, which carried no practical benefits. He decided to appeal to the Provost and Town Council to be made a full burgess, as the sons of burgesses were assessed much lower school fees (a pittance by comparison) than those demanded of ordinary residents. In support of his case, he correctly pointed out that he should be credited with having generated substantial additional revenues for the town by previously alerting them to a tax loophole. The town had been missing out on an opportunity to tax brewers of ale who produced their product outside the town limits (versus Dumfries brewers from whom the tax was being collected), but were selling it to Dumfries residents. As a result, action was taken to remedy the oversight to the town's

benefit. Council agreed to his request, making him a full burgess with all of the attendant rights and privileges. Burns was therefore able to enroll his sons in good schools at virtually no cost.

9 - Dumfries: A New Home

With the birth of Elizabeth Riddell Burns, and her namesake Betty (born to Anna Park) joining the family in Dumfries, late 1792 saw the Burns household expand to outgrow the very confined apartments at Mill Vennel. They persevered for a while longer, but in May 1793 moved to a



much larger two-storey house at 24 Mill Hole Brae, later renamed Mill Street and finally Burns Street as it is known today. Jean continued to live there for the rest of her life. The annual rent was £8 per annum, very reasonable for the amenities it offered; in fact, the landlord almost certainly lowered the asking rent as a concession to the famous poet. But as a result of his reduced Excise income referred to earlier, Burns soon fell into arrears. Fortunately, his landlord, Captain John Hamilton (who had also been his landlord at Mill Vennel), was graciously indulgent.

There is an account of life at the new home provided by the poet's eldest son, Robert, that is worth reproducing for its clarity and its first-hand credibility:

'My father and mother always had a maid-servant, and sat in their parlour. That apartment, together with two bedrooms, was well furnished and carpeted; and when good company assembled, which was often the case, the hospitable board that they surrounded was of a patrician mahogany. There was much rough comfort in the house, not to have been found in those of ordinary citizens; for, besides the spoils of smugglers, the poet received many presents of game and country produce from the rural gentlefolk, besides occasional barrels of oysters from Hill, Cunningham, and other friends in the town; so that he possibly was as much envied by some of his neighbours, as he has since been pitied by the general body of his countrymen.'

The First Galloway Tour

On July 27th, 1793 shortly after moving to the new home, Robert embarked on the first of two tours through Galloway with John Syme, with whom he had recently become acquainted. Syme was the local Collector of Stamps and his office occupied the ground floor of the Wee Vennel tenement directly beneath the former Burns apartment. They soon became very close friends and Syme would play a major role in helping Jean and the family after the poet's death. Their first notable stop was at Kenmure Castle where they spent three enjoyable days. It was the home of John Gordon, whose father – Viscount Kenmure – had been stripped of his title for having taken part in the rebellion of 1715. The title was restored to John Gordon only in 1824. The affinity Burns felt for the Gordons was based on their shared Jacobite sympathies, another manifestation of Robert's rebellious inclinations at this time despite his recent denials to the contrary. They travelled on to Gatehouse when the weather turned very wet, cool and dour. Syme related a

story, amusing in itself, but illustrative of how the poet could so easily surrender to dark moods. It is the unco (very) sad tale of his ruined boots.

Robert had recently bought a pair of fashionable new top-boots that cost him £1 2s, equivalent to a full week's wages. Unfortunately, they were subjected to a thorough soaking and were ruined. Syme treats us to the perversely comedic image of Burns mounted on his sheltie pony, unshod (the rider, not the horse) and plodding along under a dark cowl of festering fury throughout the next two days. Syme gave an account of how the boots got drenched that was more sympathetic to his friend's feelings, but another witness told a very different tale that would have been more embarrassing to him. These contradictory stories are only mildly interesting (and too lengthy to relate here), except that they have been fodder for much trivial debate among biographers over the intervening two centuries. More interesting is how the incident illustrates how easily the poet could become so discombobulated over an annoying, but comparatively unimportant, occurrence.

At Kirkudbright they stayed at The Heid Inn, later renamed The Selkirk Arms, and in the evening they dined at St Mary's Isle, the seat of the Fourth Earl of Selkirk, John Dalzell. Dalzell was the father of Viscount Daer, who Burns had met in October 1786 and who had so impressed him with his gracious, genuine acceptance of the poet as an equal. Like his son, the Earl was a radical who had always opposed Westminster Tory dominance of the Scottish representative peers, and that made him more acceptable to Robert, Earl or no Earl. Among the house guests on that day was Pietro Urbani who had published **Selection of Scots Songs** in 1792.

Syme claims that the words to **Scots Wha Hae** were composed by Burns during the ride from Kenmure to St Mary's Isle. Robert had been 'rapt in meditation' crossing the wilds of Kenmure in a storm. The desolate landscape reminded him of Bannockburn where he had been deeply moved during a visit there while on his Stirlingshire tour in 1787. The song treats of Robert Bruce's address to his troops before the battle. George Thomson contradicted Syme's version of events by claiming Robert told him that Urbani had given him the idea while both were at St Mary's Isle. The truth is probably that Burns toyed with the idea on the ride from Kenmure, but wrote down the verses at St Mary's Isle after discussing the tune with Urbani. The inspiration for the song may well have been triggered by Robert associating the desolate Kenmure with Bannockburn, combined with his outrage over the Tory government's persecution (as he would have seen it) of so many right-minded Scottish reformers - some of whom he knew personally - and the consequent prospects of enslavement and ruination of his country. That would have been motive enough to celebrate Bruce's victory after extolling his troops to '**Lay the proud usurpers low!**' We can imagine that Burns would have welcomed another Bruce at that moment in Scotland's history.

It is believed that it was at St Mary's Isle that the poet recited extempore an anglicized version of what has become known as **The Selkirk Grace**. A plaque was mounted on the exterior wall of the Selkirk Arms claiming that it was here in 1794 (the year following the visit to Lord Selkirk) that Burns composed the grace, but that is almost certainly not correct.

The leaving of St Mary's Isle marks the end of the Galloway tour. The two travelers embarked on a second tour - again of Galloway - in June 1794, but it lasted only three days and few details of it were recorded. But on that tour we know they passed through Castle Douglas (where it is thought he wrote his last letter to Agnes McLehose) on the way to Gatehouse and then on to Kirroughtree, the country estate of Patrick Heron who co-founded the Ayr Bank. Robert's friendship with Heron would later prompt him to employ his poetical talents on Heron's behalf, composing four controversial election ballads. This episode will be recounted later.

Renewed Attention to the Songs

Throughout the remainder of 1794 and beyond, Robert immersed himself in the work of writing and revising the songs that were being submitted to both Johnson's Scots Musical Museum and Thomson's Select Collection of Scottish Airs. He considered the latter project to be the most important of his life's work for which - unlike the poems - he adamantly refused recompense. He saw himself as the recorder and guardian of Scotland's stock of traditional songs, their preservation being his sacred mission and destiny in life. He even assigned the copyright of all of the songs he had written for the Select Collection to Thomson, seemingly as a way of affirming to the world that Thomson had the sole right to publish them in his Select Collection. He also asked Thomson to sue anyone pirating them or claiming them as their own. At the same time he preserved the right to publish all of his songs himself and envisioned bringing them all together in a single inexpensive edition. It is known with reasonable certainty that 160 songs in the Museum and 114 in the Select Collection were his work, with a number of others that cannot now be unequivocally attributed to him. It is a great pity that he did not live long enough to oversee the publication of that compilation that would have identified for all time which songs in both the Thomson and Johnson collections were solely his.

Of the two song collectors, James Johnson was by far the easier of the two for Robert to deal with. Johnson recognized Burns's unchallengeable genius in both poetical composition and his skill in selecting the most appropriate melodies to which each of the songs should be matched. One might take it for granted (especially with the advantage of hindsight) that Burns was a superb poet, but he also possessed a formidable knowledge of Scots airs, and while Johnson may have been just a little too compliant in always accepting the poet's judgment, he was wise to leave it to the expert.

Thomson, on the other hand, had pretensions to musical and poetical ability that he simply did not possess. He never tired of challenging and contradicting aspects of Robert's poetical compositions and his choice of those melodies most suited to particular songs. Too often Burns

gave in to Thomson's incessant meddling, reluctantly agreeing to what he must surely have known were inferior choices. Being no shrinking violet, it is very puzzling why he did this. Occasionally he dug in his heels and insisted on his judgment being accepted, but surprisingly often he agreed to changes that were patently wrong. Robert may have thought that he was dealing with a man of greater sophistication and taste in these matters while having too little confidence in his own superior knowledge and genius.

Dumfries and the War with France

With the commencement of hostilities between Britain and France, the military were more and more in evidence in Dumfries from the middle of 1793. The commerce of the town was coming to depend on the business they brought and the officers were having a marked impact on the social scene. Burns bristled at the pretentiousness of many of these officers, with '*Their tinsel show and a' that*'. He and his questionable politics were known to many of them and they sometimes managed to provoke him into showing his true colours. There were a few times when he proposed toasts or made comments in public that appeared to be hostile to the government or critical of the war effort. And so, once again he was making himself vulnerable to accusations of disaffection or outright sedition. And as in the crisis that followed the Theatre Royal farce, on at least one occasion he was obliged to seek support among his friends to use their influence and speak on his behalf in order to mitigate the damage of some of those careless indiscretions.

Maria Riddell: Incident of The Mock Rape of the Sabine Women

Near the end of 1791, Robert met the young, charming and precocious Maria Riddell at Friar's Carse. She had recently married Walter Riddell, the brother of the poet's good friend Robert. Maria had an interest in literature and poetry and was a reasonably good poet in her own right. As Robert was so often a guest at Friar's Carse, they inevitably became friends; at just turned 19 years of age, Maria's youthful bloom was sure to draw him in.

Beginning in October 1792, we find them exchanging a number of letters, most accompanied by verses and flattering critiques by Robert interspersed with the usual flirtatious comments he could not seem to resist making when dealing with 'the fair enslavers'. Despite her youth, Maria had produced the manuscript of a book she was hoping to have published, privately if necessary. She sought Robert's help with his Edinburgh connections and he introduced her to William Smellie who was very impressed by her manuscript and did in fact publish it for general distribution and sale. Starting in late 1793, we have a number of letters passing back and forth and Robert encouraging the young poetess. However, Burns's relationship with the whole Riddell family would soon end on a very sour note, although he and Maria would reconnect at a later time.

The precise facts are not fully known and have been the subject of some confusion over the years, but James Mackay offers the following account (abbreviated here) as being the most likely. A reception was arranged at Friar's Carse in December 1793 attended by Robert and a number of other guests, including some of the military officers stationed in Dumfries. Robert



Riddell was the host, his brother Walter (husband of Maria) being away at the time. As was the custom, at a certain point in the evening the women retired to the drawing room leaving the men free to indulge their taste for port wine and male braggadocio. Burns later put out an unlikely defense of his actions that Robert Riddell deliberately contrived to feed the poet with more than his share of the fortified wine. The conversation got round to a discussion

of the Roman story of the 'Rape of the Sabine Women' and someone suggested that it would be ripping good fun to act out the myth. They were to rush the ladies in the adjoining room en masse and simulate the original event as realistically as propriety would permit. Somehow Burns found himself in the vanguard, thinking that his fellow conspirators were right behind him. The real conspiracy seems to have been to let the over-zealous poet take the lead, then fall back and let him carry out the assault on the unsuspecting ladies on his own. Robert had been assigned Maria Riddell as his target victim, and in his very intoxicated state displayed a little too much exuberance for the game; among other invasive acts, he is thought to have kissed her in too personal a manner. The ladies were thoroughly scandalized and the men refused to back up Robert's defense that he had been duped into believing that it would be a group prank.

He was banished from the house in disgrace and despite next day delivering what he thought would serve as a sufficiently contrite apology addressed to Elizabeth Riddell, the hostess of the evening, it was not accepted by her or her husband Robert Riddell, the erstwhile good friend of the poet. Burns was understandably mortified by the experience and by the resulting estrangement from the Riddell family. His anger and humiliation would have been further inflamed by the knowledge that a group of 'gentlemen' had played the rough ploughman for a fool.

Robert wrote to Maria on at least two occasions in the coming days in an obvious attempt at reconciliation, but she simply ignored his peace offerings. This infuriated him and he turned from affection and admiration (real or pretended) for his young protégé to contempt. He expressed these new feelings in a few particularly cutting satirical verses, including the infamous quatrain mockingly addressed to Maria's carriage, beginning **'If you rattle along like your**

mistress's tongue.', followed at a later date by **From Esopus to Maria** which contained verses both insulting to Maria and that toyed with politically inflammatory comments. Finally, there was **Monody on a Lady Famed for her Caprice**, another cheap and unworthy shot at the subject of his wrath, who at just twenty-one years of age was barely even an adult. Robert and Maria were reconciled late in 1794 when they resumed their correspondence, in most cases enclosing verses of sentimental songs, some by him and others by her. It is possible that at least during his lifetime she did not become aware of his cruel and spiteful poetical invective.

There is no record of how Robert Riddell acted towards his once-valued friend after the Sabine incident, and it is interesting to note that Burns seems not to have harboured no grudge against him. Riddell died from a heart attack the following April at the very youthful age of thirty-eight, and Burns deeply mourned him. On the day of Riddell's death the Dumfries Weekly Journal published a **Sonnet On The Death of Robert Riddell** composed by Burns, proving that if there had been any disaffection on the part of the bard, it was short-lived. Robert Riddell's two younger brothers also died prematurely from heart attacks, Walter at age thirty-seven and the youngest, Alexander, at thirty. There must surely have been an unfortunate abnormality in the family's genes. The effects of aristocratic in-breeding has been suggested, but we will probably never know.

Chloris - Jean Lorimer

Jean Lorimer, with whom Burns became acquainted during his Ellisland period, was the daughter of a neighbour. He renewed that acquaintance in the summer of 1794 after she had married in haste at eighteen. Just three weeks later she was abandoned by her feckless husband who was fleeing from creditors. As a married woman she had no option but to return to her family home where she became housekeeper to her father. By contemporary accounts, she was exceptionally bonnie, with beautiful flaxen hair, so no surprise that Robert was drawn to her.

In the winter of 1794/95 their friendship intensified and it is more than likely that they became lovers, particularly after his being promoted to Acting Supervisor of Excise, an appointment that required him to travel to the town of Moffat. On these occasions he lodged overnight with Jean and her father on his way to Moffat. Yet she bore him no weans, so he must have been uncharacteristically careful, or lucky. In the same spirit of intrigue that saw him bestowing on Agnes McLehose the nom d'amour 'Clarinda' six years earlier, Jean became his Chloris. Over the next couple of years at least twenty four poems and songs were inspired by the lovely Jean, a few wrongly thought to have referred to Jean Armour.

After her father's death (by which time Robert was also deceased), she found herself penniless and alone and having to make her own way in life. At first she found work as a governess, but that did not last long. With the exception of about six years towards the end of her life when she found a kindly protector, she was forced into a pitifully impoverished existence, even allegedly

'walking the streets' of Edinburgh for several years. What a fate for a heroine of Scotland's national bard. She died of a lung disease - probably TB - in 1831 at the age of fifty-six.

The Excise and other Preoccupations

Beginning in January 1794, we see something of a flurry of letters from exciseman Burns to his superiors. In one addressed to Graham of Fintry he proposes a radical reorganization of the Dumfries divisions, including the elimination of one of them along with the incumbent's position. There is no evidence that this proposal was ever given serious consideration, still less implemented. Robert and his fellow excise officers in Dumfries presumably would have benefited had it been adopted as they would have divided the spoils (seizures and other emoluments) of the division that was proposed to be cut. As noted earlier, with the war against France and the resulting chaos in continental Europe, trade had been substantially curtailed, which in turn reduced the bonus income enjoyed by the officers. Burns himself was increasingly concerned about his straightened finances.

Also at this time, Burns was strenuously lobbying his superiors to secure promotion for himself, a desperate and quite undignified reaction to his deteriorating affairs. He knew that some of the immediate supervisory officers in the region were being considered for promotions in the near future which in turn would create opportunities for others; Robert was at pains to make quite sure that he would be considered for these vacancies. But his appeals had the ring of desperation, made worse by solicitous pandering.

Tantalizingly, a totally unexpected offer came his way that might have solved all of his financial troubles had he been able to accept it. He was asked to be a literary contributor to the *Morning Chronicle* with generous compensation (amounting to about £50 a year) for little effort. However, with painful reluctance he turned it down. We see him at this time being ultra cautious in order to avoid unwelcome attention from his Excise masters. So many of his poems and songs betrayed his questionable politics; if these were published he could risk losing his position and he could not trust himself to stifle his strongly-felt sentiments, even in future compositions. He had decided that his security and that of his growing family was firmly tied to his career with the Excise Service, with its chances for promotion and its generous pension scheme. And given the precarious state of his health there was also the all-important widows and orphans benefits. With the birth of another son in August 1794 (James Glencairn Burns), Robert and Jean were now responsible to provide for a brood of six children.

In December 1794 a much wished-for promotional opportunity did materialize. His supervisor, Alexander Findlater, became ill and Robert was appointed to act in his place. Findlater would be out of action for four months during which time Robert shouldered the full load of what turned out to be an exhausting assignment. The work itself was punishingly demanding, regularly calling for fourteen hour days, much of that time in the saddle; and the weather that particular

winter was diabolical. Storms throughout most of February resulted in snowdrifts of between ten and up to one hundred feet deep in many parts of Scotland, and the cold was intense and unrelenting. He knew that a full time position as a supervisor was a necessary stepping-stone to a better paid and less arduous post, but one can imagine his anxious anticipation of what that would demand of him and how it would curtail his literary ambitions, the benefits of which he noted to a friend: *'A supervisor's income varies from about a hundred and twenty to two hundred a year; but the business is incessant drudgery, and would be nearly a complete bar to every species of literary pursuit.'* But the drudgery would have to be borne in order to achieve that irresistible £200 income, which in turn could lead to his being appointed a Collector, a largely political position that was more a sinecure than a real job. It could pay up to £1000 and leave ample leisure time to pursue his true calling. This coveted career path was no pipe dream; he had friends in high places both within the excise service and in more lofty regions. Robert was well regarded by the Excise senior management, and that, together with his other connections, was already at work at the time of his death. But for his approaching demise, his star was in the ascendant.

But the effects of that awful winter of 1794/95 must have had a serious impact on his already fragile health, almost assuredly hastening his end.

The Breach with Mrs Dunlop

Although mentioned only briefly up to this point, Frances Anna Dunlop - or simply Mrs Dunlop - played a very important role in the life of Robert Burns. She was born Frances Anna Wallace in 1730 and was intensely proud of a heritage that she believed led back in a direct line to Sir William Wallace. This was not quite the case, but she was not far wrong. Her ancestor in fact was William's cousin, Sir Richard Wallace. She had married John Dunlop of Dunlop in 1748. He was twenty-three years older than his bride of eighteen, but they were very happy together and she bore him thirteen children. In 1761 she inherited her mother's estate of Lochryan in Galloway, thus gentrifying her family. In the throes of a serious depression at the death of her husband, as well as having to deal with other family-related misfortunes, she was given a copy of **The Cotter's Saturday Night** which so touched her that in late 1786 she wrote to the poet at Mossgiel asking for six copies of the Kilmarnock Edition. They subsequently struck up a friendship that would last until eighteen months short of Robert's death.

Given the disparity in their ages and Mrs Dunlop's elevated social status, the relationship was mainly confined to exchanges of letters, but Robert did call on her on about half a dozen occasions between June 1787 and December 1792, and even stayed as her guest for a few days at a time on three of his visits. Early in their association Mrs Dunlop pompously offered her services as critic and final arbiter of all new verses produced by the poet. Needless to say, he ignored that suggestion. But she did become a kind of maternal confidante to him and he often sent her verses for her comment, or simply to impress or inform her. At times she would scold

him as a mother would, and she clearly hoped to positively influence his more extreme sexual and other wayward inclinations. They exchanged an enormous volume of letters over the years and he greatly valued her friendship and counsel. On occasions, she proved a useful intermediary with persons of rank and position, even trying to arrange careers for him that were almost all completely unsuited to his knowledge or experience.

Politics was the one area of friction between them. As a member of the gentry, Mrs Dunlop was patriotically British (i.e. not solely Scottish), a firm supporter of the Tory policies of the day and an unwavering monarchist. Robert's sentiments, as we have seen, were almost diametrically opposite to hers. In many of his letters to Mrs Dunlop he made comments that were sure to upset her. Occasionally she would issue a gentle reproof as a sign that he had offended her political or moral canons, but more often than not she remained disapprovingly silent. However, in early January 1795 Robert took a step too far. In a long letter to her dealing with many subjects (including criticism of her good friend Dr Moore) he made a remark to the effect that Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette had deserved their awful fate. As a monarchist and a mother of two daughters who had married refugee French aristocrats, these and other comments were abhorrent to Mrs Dunlop and she expressed her deep disapproval by not responding to his letter. He wrote to her two more times, one of those being a pathetically entreating letter just a few days before his death, but to no avail. He died without a word of forgiveness from one whose opinion, friendship and affection he most craved in those last days of his life. It can be inferred in later correspondence from her that she regretted withholding her friendship in those final days. She died on May 24th, 1815 at the age of 84.

Robert had only himself to blame for the suspicion that he was an unpatriotic radical sympathetic to the French revolutionaries; some of his comments and a number of his poems and songs could hardly fail to lend credence to these aspersions. France declared war on Britain on February 1st, 1793. A French invasion was feared, in response to which patriotic volunteer regiments were springing up all over Britain. In most cases the Corps that were formed were no 'Dads' armies'; the volunteers took their duties very seriously, devoting hours of their time each week to drilling and practicing their musketry. When the Royal Dumfries Volunteers were formed in January 1795, the name of Robert Burns appeared on the Corps' inaugural list, and to those early biographers who dismissed his membership as a smokescreen or rendering mere lip service, records of the Volunteers later came to light that proved beyond doubt that he was very active in the affairs of the Corps, including being a member of the eight-man Management Committee. And so it would seem that, radical as his reform sentiments were, he was ready and willing to fight off any French 'loons' foolish enough to set foot on British soil. His jingoistically patriotic song, **Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat**, became the defiant marching song of the Dumfries Volunteers, and was soon enthusiastically adopted by all of the volunteer militias throughout Scotland.

Patrick Heron's Political Campaign

In early 1795 Burns bizarrely turned his talents to electioneering. Following the death of the incumbent MP for the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, Patrick Heron stood for the seat as the Whig candidate. The Tories attacked Heron for his part in the collapse of the Ayr bank - Douglas, Heron and Company - in 1773, which caused such terrible financial distress and even ruin for many of its depositors. Robert liked and respected Heron and was incensed by these tactics; he thought that to smear Heron with this ancient history (especially as Burns thought that Heron was personally largely blameless for the disaster) amounted in his mind to dirty-tricks campaigning. He offered to compose some election ballads designed to discredit the Tory candidate, or at least make him look foolish. In the end Robert wrote and published four ballads filled with acerbic satire. Heron was elected, as he was again at the next election, but what role Robert's poetical lampoons played can only be surmised. But the poet probably inflicted harm on himself (or at least would have done so if he had lived long enough to reap the whirlwind) in that he himself came in for some rabid abuse when he placed himself in the crosshairs of several powerful people who were in a position to exact revenge on him in the future.

In the summer of 1795 Robert was suffering from a mysterious illness. It was at about the same time that he was dealing with the excruciating pain of toothache, which could have led to general infection that may have undermined his already compromised constitution. Then in late September, just as he was getting over the worst of his health issues, he received news of the death of his only surviving daughter, Elizabeth Riddell Burns. She had always been a sickly child and so her death would have been no great surprise, but it was bound to exact a heavy emotional toll on her father, as well as on Jean and the other family members. She had died during a visit to the poet's family in Mauchline, but Robert had been too ill and weak to even attend the funeral.

In December his health took another turn for the worse. The nature of this illness is also unknown, as well as its severity, but it kept him confined to home for much of December and January. At the beginning of February 1796 he returned to work and resumed sending Thomson and Johnson new and corrected materials for their respective publications. But by about April, or even a little earlier, there is evidence that the poet was missing a good deal of time at work, made apparent by reductions in his pay and reinforced by surviving examples of his handwriting which were becoming more and more illegible. In a letter to Thomson in April he complains of **'...PAIN! Rheumatism, Cold & Fever...'** Then he seems briefly to have improved, but by May we find him declining an invitation from Maria Riddell to attend a Ball, telling her that: ***'I am in such miserable health...'***

To add to his health woes, in the last few weeks of his life he was becoming more and more anxious about his worsening finances. These concerns were largely a direct result of the reduction in his income during his illness. Believing that he was unlikely to recover, he became

increasingly worried over the prospect of leaving his wife a widow and his four children fatherless, impoverished and unprotected. How were they to live?

Brow Well - Kill or Cure

The poet left Dumfries at the beginning of July for the hamlet of Brow, ten miles south-east of Dumfries. He travelled there to follow a regimen of curative therapies that included sea-bathing, the taking of fresh country air and riding. It has long been held that he took this desperate step on the advice of his doctors, including his good friend Dr. William Maxwell. It seems scarcely believable to our enlightened understanding that doctors would recommend such treatment for someone so weak and emaciated and suffering symptoms of the final stages of a serious heart disease. New research has cast doubt on this contention; he may in fact have taken this decision on his own. On July 5th he was able to meet up with Maria Riddell for the last time, after she arranged to have him picked up in her carriage. She later provided a lengthy description of his appearance on that occasion, including the observation that *'The stamp of death was imprinted on his features. He seemed already touching the brink of eternity.'* She also described his state of mind which she said was reconciled to his impending death, but he was tortured by thoughts of what would become of his four young children, with a fifth soon to be born. He even speculated gloomily on his poetical legacy, regretting all of the indiscretions he had carelessly expressed in his letters and some of his unpublished verses that would now be thrust into the public view to denigrate his other accomplishments and provide ample brickbats for those who *'...would blast his fame'*, along with his many indifferent poetical pieces *'...with all of their imperfections on their head, be thrust upon the world'*.

From his Spartan lodgings by the sea, he had one final humiliation to endure. He wrote to both his cousin and George Thomson to beg for money to fend off debtors who were insisting on settlement of their outstanding accounts, in particular that *'cruel scoundrel of a haberdasher'*, David Williamson. Both responded quickly, his cousin sending £10 and Thomson £5. Burns demonized Williamson, claiming that he was threatening the dying poet with debtors' prison. This was a rash and misguided accusation. Robert owed Williamson over £7 (a very sizable sum) for a military uniform, and the bill by this time had been outstanding for well over a year. Ironically, this was probably the uniform in which the poet was buried not many days later. The tailor had every right to press for settlement, but in his sickly, confused frame of mind, and in a flux of anxiety over his lack of money, he seems to have been unfairly critical of Williamson.

Jessie Lewars

Robert's state of health in the final months placed an almost unmanageable burden on Jean. She had to care for her husband and her four young children while imminently expecting their last baby; the crisis cried out for an angel of mercy. Such an angel appeared in the form of young Jessie Lewars. She was the eighteen year-old daughter of a neighbour, and in the last few months of the poet's life Jessie came to the rescue, selflessly volunteering her time to help the hard-

pressed Burns household. She was particularly attentive to the needs of the ever declining poet, and it touched him deeply that one so young would give so much of herself in that way. She was a bonnie lass and of course he fell in love with her, but more in response to her kindness than on account of her charms. He rewarded her in the best way he could by immortalizing her in some of the most tender, heartfelt verses he had ever written. And all of that pseudo romantic intensity was played out under the watchful eye of his wife, Jean Armour. But as always, we can be sure that Jean viewed the whole episode with sympathetic forbearance. Knowing as we now do the circumstances under which the poet composed these touching gems, they can hardly fail to bring a tear to the eye.

Of all of the several verses that were inspired by Jessie during these last fateful months, the jewel of his poetical adoration of this young seraph must be: **O, Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast**, a love song perhaps second only to **Ae Fond Kiss** as arguably one of the finest known expressions of that most blissful of mankind's emotions. It may have been the last song that Burns wrote. The two verses express a man's instinct to protect his lover, but we can detect a subtle sense that this will not happen in this case...not when he is gone:

O, wert thou in the cauld blast

On yonder lea, on yonder lea.

My plaidie to the angry airts

woolen shawl or cloak, wind directions

I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee.

Or did misfortune's bitter storms

Around thee blaw, around thee blaw,

Thy bield should be my bosom,

shelter

To share it a', to share it a'.

Felix Mendelssohn set these words to a soulful melody that uncannily captures the mood and pathos conveyed by the dying poet.

The Coming of Night

Robert returned to Dumfries from his ill-advised two week sea and country-air treatments on July 18th. At one point near the end of his stay at Brow he imagined that he was feeling some relief from his rheumatic pains, but it was short-lived. By the time he arrived back at Mill Vennel he had grown so weak that he was barely able to climb the short distance up the hill to his front door, when he was seen to tremble and his steps were faltering.

Most of the last three or four days of his life were spent in bed, and towards the end he was showing signs of delirium. Many fanciful accounts of his last moments found their way into early biographies, some dubiously attributed to eye-witnesses. But most of them are now viewed as highly suspect and over-dramatized. It is natural to want to hang on the last words and actions



of a dying man - more especially a great one - but considering that he was delirious towards the end, anything he may have said or any gestures he might have made would have signified little.

Robert Burns died at 5am on Thursday July 21st, 1796. His friend John Syme made most of the arrangements for the funeral, which took place in the early

afternoon of Monday the 25th. As might be expected for Scotland's National Bard, it was a grand and solemn affair. Robert's membership of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers entitled him to a military funeral and he was duly accorded full military honours. At about 1 pm the coffin was carried from the courthouse (located within the Town Hall where it had been taken on the morning of his funeral) and the cortège - led by the Volunteer Corps with a number of other Scottish regiments in train - rolled through the streets of the town to St Michael's Churchyard. Three volleys of musket fire preceded the lowering of his casket into a modest plot in the north-east corner of the churchyard.

Of his Ayrshire family, only Gilbert travelled up from Mauchline to attend the mournful proceedings. Jean was back in Dumfries but she had gone into labour on the very morning of the funeral, and in the saddest of ironies gave birth to a son as the procession was making its steady march towards St Michael's Churchyard located a mere couple of hundred yards or so from the family home. The boy was christened Maxwell Burns after the family friend and doctor who delivered him. Unfortunately, Maxwell proved to be a sickly child and died less than three years later.

There have been a great many opinions offered by modern medical experts as to the likely cause of Burns's death, possibly with more to come. Mackay (who was nothing if not a disciple of detail) discusses the alternative opinions at some length. On balance, he favours the diagnosis of 'bacterial endocarditis complicating rheumatic heart disease'. One definition of endocarditis is an inflammation of the inner layer of the heart (the endocardium), usually involving the heart valves.

The Last Word



**Now Robin lies in his last lair,
He'll gabble rhyme nor sing nay mair;
Cauld poverty wi' hungry stare
Nae mair shall fear him;
Nor anxious fear, nor cankert care
E'er mair come near him**

The original grave plot, with its poor positioning and lack of a suitable monument, was soon deemed to be unworthy of the great man, so in late 1813 a subscription was launched to build the mausoleum and interior monument that now exist. The appeal for funds was overwhelmingly successful (Sir Walter Scott being a major instigator and contributor), and work on the new structure in a less crowded part of the churchyard was begun in June 1815, completed in September 1817. Robert and two of his sons who had been buried in the original plot - Maxwell (2) and Francis Wallace (13) - were re-interred in the new, grander location.

10 - From Denigration to Rehabilitation and other Posthumous Matters

Over the days and weeks following his death various obituaries and notices of the Bard's passing appeared in several of the nation's newspapers and magazines. Many of these were written by men who had known him, including the Scottish Airds publisher, George Thomson, but while generally glowing in their descriptions of his genius, too often these obsequies dwelt on the alleged but quite erroneous 'frailties' and dissipation of his final years. In other words, he was an inspired, poetical genius...too bad he was such a drunk! Especially coming from those who should have known better, these early character assassinations were taken up by the poet's early biographers and soon accepted as received truth. They should have been vigorously denied by his friends and by his brother Gilbert, but for unaccountable reasons these people let him down by remaining strangely silent in the face of such calumnies. Years later a few did make some attempts to set the record straight, but the damage was done. Gilbert must take most of the blame in this because although he offered small amends later, in 1820 he accepted £250 from the publisher of the eighth edition of the first full biography of the poet by James Currie - ***The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns*** - for new material he provided, on condition that he not publically challenge the accuracy of any of the details in Currie's work. And so, the sad reputation of drunken decay persisted into the 20th century, only being debunked in recent years by more thorough biographers (see below).

Like a great many of his cohorts, Robert frequently did seek the solace and pleasure that was to be found in a bottle or two of good port wine. He lived in an age when so many men, both among the wealthy and the ordinary population, sought relief from the harshness and unremitting toil of daily life through an occasional visit to the tavern where not just alcohol, but social discourse and companionship were to be found...this at a time when there were few other diversions. Existing in a parallel universe were those who believed that anything short of strict temperance would surely lead to perdition.

While Burns was a social drinker, contemporary accounts of his behaviour make it clear that he only appeared to be seriously intoxicated very occasionally. Perhaps the best evidence (albeit indirect) that lends strong support to a more moderate judgment can be deduced from two separate aspects of his life. The first was his amazing output of poetry and song along with an even more impressive volume of correspondence. These speak for themselves in that no one stumbling through life in a fog of alcohol could possibly have produced even a fraction of the output of this impressively cerebral material. The second proof (if more be needed) was his performance as an excise officer. It is very clear from the documentary evidence available that his supervisors were more than pleased with his competence and his performance on the job. As noted in more detail above, upon Findlater taking extended sick leave, Robert was appointed to act in his place. He spent four months in the position working at a frantic pace, so much so that he was thoroughly exhausted – but still standing – at the end of it, and his supervisor's reports for

that period speak of his exemplary performance. It is likely that the rash and irresponsible judgments concerning his sobriety can be explained largely by the narrow view held by his contemporaries, many of whom were firm disciples of temperance and who were therefore incapable of distinguishing between what today would be seen as normal social drinking habits (with the occasional incident of over-imbibing) versus persistent alcoholic abuse.

But the last word on this reckless opprobrium should rest with the poet himself. In commenting on an accusation that he was '*a drunken dissipated character*' he remarked to a friend that: *"I might be all of this, you know, & yet be an honest fellow, but you know that I am an honest fellow and am nothing of this."*

He certainly wasn't drunk when he phrased this clever rejoinder...a circle of logical expression that may even out-Shakespeare Shakespeare.

The Creation of a Trust Fund for the Family

The Excise service awarded a pension of £8 per annum to his widow and children which many years later was increased to £12. But unquestionably, more was due to the family of so great a national treasure. On the day before the poet's death, Alexander Cunningham wrote to John Syme on the subject of a campaign to raise funds to secure the financial future of Jean and her young family. It was hoped that sufficient monies would be donated to establish a trust fund large enough to allow them to continue to live in modest comfort. Cunningham had met and become a friend of Burns during his Edinburgh days, while Syme had known him only since the poet's arrival in Dumfries five years prior, but had become a close friend. Later a number of other fundraisers joined the effort, including his first biographer, Dr James Currie.

The effort to raise subscriptions for Jean and the family was a difficult and arduous one for a variety of reasons that are outside the scope of this account. In the end, a disappointing £1200 only was raised. But added to this was £1400 from the proceeds of the sale of the four-volume biography of the poet written by James Currie. The total of £2600 formed the basis of a trust that provided Jean with an annuity of £60, plus the Excise pension. This income was sufficient to allow Jean and the family to live comfortably, indeed much more so than during the lifetime of the poet. Later, in 1817, William Maule of Panmure settled an annuity of a further £50 on Jean. Thus, Robert's harried concerns in the final days of his life over the fate of his family proved happily unfounded.

The Early Biographies

The first attempt at a biography - or memoir - was undertaken by Robert Heron (no relation of Patrick Heron, the one-time Ayr banker) who had briefly met the poet at Ellisland but did not know him to any degree. He was a hack writer who carried out only a minimum of serious research prior to putting pen to paper on the short memoir; at 13,600 words, it was less than a

third as long as this condensed history. Predictably, it was shallow in its treatment and suffered from a host of inaccuracies. Worst of all, it helped to lay the foundation for the erroneous and fatuously moralistic judgment that Burns was a drunk that so many of the later biographers embraced and perpetuated.

Shortly following the poet's death, Dr James Currie (a medical doctor by profession) was selected by a group of Robert's friends to be the official biographer. He had no experience as a writer and had met Burns only once in a passing encounter; his only real qualification seems to have been his admiration for Burns's work and a hesitant willingness to take on the project. He was given access to most of the letters, manuscripts and other documents from the poet's own collection as well as other documentary materials that Syme, Cunningham and Maxwell had collected and catalogued. The result was **The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns**, a four-volume biography published in 1800 that was peppered with comments about the poet's dissolute lifestyle, followed by sanctimonious moralizing about the consequences of such depravity. It seems likely that Currie, with the zeal of a reformed alcoholic (that he in fact was), allowed Robert Heron's careless slanders to inform his own opinion so thoroughly. In fairness, Currie made a creditable effort to give a comprehensive account of the poet's life, but it was lacking in scholarly research, inaccurate in many details and opinionated to a fault. Its best outcome was the substantial funds it raised for Jean and the family.

Later biographies by John Gibson Lockhart (1828) and Allan Cunningham (1834) were almost equally flawed and unreliable, and these too emphasized and perpetuated the 'drunken' profile of Burns. It was not until the Chambers-Wallace publication of 1896 that a more objective and scholarly treatment of the poet's life began to disavow the myths, but it was left to Snyder (1932) and subsequent biographers to complete this process.

Bonnie Jean - The Loving and Faithful Wife

While Robert's wife, lover and soul mate has been mentioned throughout this account in



connection with their shared history, something more of this important character in the poet's life needs to be said. For that, I would like to offer an extract from a paper written by a former much esteemed member of the Calgary Burns Club, Professor Bob Carnie, after whom the club's Bob Carnie literary group is named. In a 1999 paper presented at a club meeting entitled **Biography of Robert Burns**, Bob speculated on what Jean might have had to say about her illustrious husband had she been asked to provide a biographical overview. As part of that (but mainly describing Jean herself), Bob wrote:

'Jean Armour knew him best. She was married to him for ten years and she bore him nine children, the first of whom was born before their formal marriage; the last was born the day of his funeral. Jean was not yet thirty when Rabbie died, and she remained his faithful widow for 38 years before she died at the age of 69. Although Robert's brother Gilbert was asked to write a biography of the poet, no one thought, in the early 19th century, to ask his wife to do the same! Robert & Jean's tempestuous love started with strong sexual attraction and mutual passion. When they were reconciled after her temporary exile, Burns rented a room for them in Mauchline, supported her financially and bought a mahogany bed, in which they made love (and I quote) 'Till she rejoiced with joy unspeakable, and full of glory'. It's quite clear that at this early stage of their relationship, Jean and Robert were gloriously happy. That passionate relationship grew gradually to another stage where Bonnie Jean was now Robert's dearest love from whom he could not bear to be parted for even short periods. This extraordinary woman has been greatly undervalued by Burns's male critics and biographers. They tell us that she was not his intellectual equal, and that her lack of desire to improve herself socially held the poet back. Burns knew better. As his marriage went on, he realised more and more how dependent he was on Jean's good judgement, on her tolerance of his black moods, and on her stoical acceptance of his numerous short-lived affairs, and of his lack of financial and commercial success. If the people who knew her personally are to be believed, Jean's musical and critical talents were considerable (I quote):

"She moved with great grace on the floor, and sang in a style rarely equalled by non-professional singers. Her memory too was strong, and she could quote at great length and with much aptitude."

Of these powers the Bard was so aware that he read almost every piece he composed to her, and was not ashamed to own that he had profited by her judgement. Jean Armour, I believe, had a much fuller understanding of her genius of a husband than she has ever been given credit for. Jean Armour's hypothetical biography of her husband would surely have not only extolled the poet's poetic genius and his talents as a lover but would have shown her loving tolerance of his human failings.'

Gilbert Burns and the Remaining Mossgiel Family

If his brother was the celebrity, Gilbert was the foot soldier of the family. He remained at Mossgiel, assuming the role of head of a household that included his mother and his siblings until each was either married or died, including Annabella who remained a spinster. He effectively adopted 'dear-bought Bess', the child of Robert and Elizabeth Paton, and for a while took in Robert's child Elizabeth by Anna Park until she could join Robert and Jean in Dumfries.

Gilbert married Jean Breckenridge in June 1791, a Kilmarnock lass with whom he had eleven children. After Mossgiel, he moved with his wife, mother and unmarried sister to a farm in

Dinning in Nithsdale for two years, followed by a post as manager of Morham farm in East Lothian. Four years later he became the factor of the East Lothian Estates of Lady Blantyre, where he remained until his death in 1827.

The Fate of Jean and the Poet's Surviving Children

As noted above, Robert's posthumous son Maxwell died on April 25th, 1799, three months short of his third birthday. His second son, Francis Wallace, died on August 9th, 1803, aged fourteen. Robert junior, the poet's oldest son, died in 1857 at the age of seventy. Robert had great expectations for his young namesake, but although he inherited some of his father's formidable intellect, his achievements in life were modest. William Nicol – the poet's second oldest surviving son – died in 1872 at eighty-one, and his younger brother James Glencairn in 1865, aged seventy-one. Both had military careers, William rising to the rank of Colonel, and James to Lieutenant-Colonel.

Jean died on March 26th, 1834 at the age of sixty-nine. Beginning about ten years before her death, she suffered a series of strokes which left her partially paralyzed. She is buried in the Dumfries Mausoleum with the poet and three of their sons, Robert Junior being the last to be interred there in 1857. Jean's death and the consequent opening of the tomb presented an opportunity to examine the remains of the poet. According to a reliable eyewitness who attended the opening of his casket:

'There lay the remains of the great poet, to all appearances entire, retaining various traces of recent vitality, or, to speak more correctly, exhibiting the features of one who had recently sunk into the sleep of death'.

But – goes the account – when the body was disturbed, the head separated from the body and what had appeared to be preserved flesh disintegrated into dust, leaving only the skeleton. Most of his teeth were surprisingly white and in very good condition...despite the ordeal that prompted his **Address to the Toothache**.

How Many Children did Robert Burns Father?

This may seem like a frivolous topic to include in a document of this kind, serious as the author is trying to be. But it always seems to be a question raised or debated among Burnsians, and too often a consensus seems to evade them. All moralizing aside, it is a matter that is relevant to an account of his life.

The answer to the question is obscured by the fact that there are at least two maybes, however remote. Was Margaret (Highland Mary) Campbell pregnant when she died, or did she give birth before expiring? As observed earlier, there was evidence of a child having been buried in her grave plot when it was excavated in 1920, but it is not known if the infant was pre or post natal,

or even if it was her child...or Robert's for that matter. This one should not be counted as it is not only doubtfully attributable to Burns, but would most likely have been non-viable at the time of Margaret's death, given that their courting only commenced six months prior.

Next, was Margaret Cameron pregnant with Robert's child as she claimed? If so, did the child survive through to delivery? The evidence that she was even pregnant by Burns let alone went to term is so speculative as to be a non-consideration. This should be dismissed as a probable 'no'.

An intriguing wild card in this discussion is a young beauty by the name of Helen (or Ellen) Hyslop of Moffat, born in about 1766. She bore a child by the same name, out of wedlock, around 1788/89. Robert was known to visit Moffat frequently around this time, and the putative offspring was said to strongly resemble the poet in her youth, and her keen intellect was remarkably akin to his. She lived to the impressive age of 98. Biographer James Mackay came to believe that this was indeed Robert's child, so I must declare it 'likely' and countable.

That leaves us with the known births, divided into legitimate and illegitimate, including Helen Hyslop in the latter. The first four listed below under 'To Jean Armour' marked by asterisks were illegitimate at birth, but by custom in 18th Century Scotland were considered legitimate when their parents eventually married.

Legitimate To Jean Armour

*Robert Burns: September 3, 1786 to May 14, 1857	} First set of twins
*Jean Burns: September 3, 1786 to October 20, 1787	}
*Unnamed: March 3, 1788 to about March 13, 1788	} Second set of twins
*Unnamed: March 3, 1788 to March 3, 1788	}
Francis Wallace Burns: August 18, 1789 to July 9, 1803	
William Nicol Burns: April 9, 1791 to February 21, 1872	
Elizabeth Riddell Burns: November 21, 1792 to September 1795	
James Glencairn Burns: August 12, 1794 to November 18, 1865	
Maxwell Burns: July 25, 1796 to April 25, 1799	

Illegitimate

Elizabeth Burns (to Elizabeth Paton): May 22, 1785 to January 8, 1817
 Robert Burns (to Janet Clow): November 1788 to ?
 Helen/Ellen Hyslop (to Helen Hyslop): 1788/89 to April 13, 1886
 Elizabeth Burns (to Anna Park): March 31, 1791 to June 13, 1873

And so the best answer to the question is twelve for sure, but probably thirteen in total, eight of whom were illegitimate by modern definition, or only four if we accept that the first four were retroactively legitimized by their parents' later marriage.

Chronology of the Life of Robert Burns

- 1757 - William Burnes and Agnes Broun - the future parents of Robert - marry at Maybole.
- 1759 - On January 25th, Robert Burns is born at Alloway in Ayrshire.
- 1760 - On September 28th, the poet's brother Gilbert is born.
- 1765 - John Murdoch hired to teach Robert and Gilbert and the sons of four other neighbours.
The school would continue for three years.
- 1766 - The family moves to Mount Oliphant Farm.
- 1772 - During the summer, Robert and Gilbert attend school in Dalrymple, week about.
- 1773 - Robert receives three weeks of tutoring from John Murdoch, mainly in English grammar, but with an introduction to the rudiments of French.
- 1774 - Robert pens his first poetical piece that would be published – the song, Handsome Nell, inspired by Helen Blair.
- 1775 - Robert attends Hugh Roger's school in Kirkoswald, studying mainly mathematics.
- 1777 - In May, the family move to Lochlea Farm, near Tarbolton. Robert defies his father and takes dancing lessons.
- 1780 - November, the formation of the Tarbolton Bachelor's Club.
- 1781 - Robert courts and proposes to Elizabeth Gebbie (identified by some biographers as Alison or Ellison Begbie). She refuses ('jilts') him.
- On July 4th, he joins St David's Lodge...passed and raised in October. Later that year, he joins the breakaway St James's Lodge with a few other members of St David's.
- In late summer, goes to Irvine to learn flax-dressing. Befriends Captain Richard Brown. Becomes very ill, probably suffering from severe depression combined with an undefined physical ailment.
- 1782 - On January 1st the heckling shed burns down. Returns to Lochlea in March.
- 1783 - In April, Robert begins his first Commonplace Book.
His father was at this time deeply immersed in a long-running legal dispute with his landlord, David McClure, now coming to a head.
Robert and Gilbert secretly enter into an agreement with Gavin Hamilton to take a lease on Mossgiel Farm.
- 1784 - William Burnes, the poet's father, dies of consumption on February 13th.
- In March, the family moves to Mossgiel Farm in Mauchline township.
- On July 25th Robert is appointed Deputy Master of St James' Lodge.
- 1785 - In April, Robert meets and soon begins to court Jean Armour.
- May 22nd, his daughter Elizabeth ('dear-bought Bess') to Elizabeth Paton is born.
- In July, the Mauchline Kirk Session finally surrenders in its fight with Robert's friend, Gavin Hamilton. The 'tulzie' results in the poet writing his brilliant **Holy Willie's Prayer**.
- In September, he provides Jean Armour with an informal 'certificate of marriage'.
- In late October, his youngest brother John (b. 1769) dies of undisclosed cause.
- 1786 - In late March, armed with her certificate of marriage, Jean tells her parents she is pregnant with Robert's child, but in response to their extreme reaction, soon acquiesces in the mutilation of the certificate.
- On March 3rd, Robert enters into an agreement with a Kilmarnock publisher to launch a subscription process to have his poems published.

- April 23rd, Jean sent off to relatives in Paisley, and the informal 'marriage' is ended. Some time towards the middle of April he begins to court Margaret Campbell.
- May 14th, Robert meets with Margaret Campbell for the last time after a brief courtship and an exchange of matrimonial vows, doomed by her later death.
- June 25th, Robert makes his penitent appearance before the Kirk Session, with required second and third appearances in July and August.
- July 22nd, Robert transfers his share of Mossgiel to Gilbert to shelter it against claims made by Jean's father on her behalf...going into hiding on July 30th to avoid arrest.
- July 31st, **Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect** (the Kilmarnock Edition) published, price 3 shillings.
- September 3rd, Jean Armour gives birth to twins – Robert and Jean.
- October, Margaret Campbell dies in Greenock of typhus (pregnancy or premature childbirth being a possible aggravating factor).
- November 15th, Robert begins to correspond with Mrs Dunlop.
- November 27th, he sets out for Edinburgh, arriving on November 29th.
- December 14th, proposal issued (by William Creech) for the First Edinburgh Edition.
- 1787 - January 13th, The Grand Lodge of Scotland toasts Burns as 'Caledonia's Bard'. The following day he first meets with Patrick Miller to discuss the possible lease of one of Miller's farms near Dumfries.
- April 17th, **First Edinburgh Edition** of the poems published.
- May 5th to June 1st, begins his tour of the Borders.
- June 4th, Robert made an honorary Burgess of Dumfries.
- August 25th, starts the Highlands tour with William Nicol, returning to Edinburgh September 16th.
- October 4th, begins tour of Stirlingshire with Dr Adair, returning to Edinburgh October 20th when he hears of the death of his infant daughter Jean.
- **First London Edition** of the poems published.
- December 4th, first meeting with Agnes McLehose (Clarinda).
- December 7th, he dislocates his knee in a carriage accident.
- December 8th, beginning of correspondence with Clarinda.
- 1788 - January 4th, his first visit with Clarinda at her flat.
- February 14th, second volume of the **Scots Musical Museum** published, to which Robert contributed greatly.
- February 18th, leaves Edinburgh for Ayr.
- February 23rd, returns to Mauchline, buys Jean a mahogany bed and sets up house with her, declaring them to be husband and wife.
- February 27th (?), visits Ellisland with John Tennant as his agricultural adviser.
- March 9th, Jean gives birth to their second set of twins, one dying that day or the day following and the other about ten days later.
- March 13th (approx.), Robert returns to Edinburgh.
- March 18th, he signs the lease for Ellisland (to begin May 25th), leaving Edinburgh on the 20th.
- Late March through April, Robert receives his Excise instruction at Tarbolton from James Findlay. Receives his Excise commission on April 28th.
- June 11th, settles at Ellisland, but because no house is available yet, Jean remains in Mauchline.

- November, Jenny Clow gives him a son, Robert. The poet had known of Jenny's condition since early June.
- Early December, Jean moves to Ellisland to join her husband in rental accommodation.
- 1789 - February 16th, Robert travels to Edinburgh to deal with the business of Jenny Clow. She issues a writ, but he settles on February 27th, returning to Ellisland next day.
- June/July, meets and befriends well-known antiquarian, Captain Francis Grose.
- August 18th, Jean gives birth to Francis Wallace Burns.
- September 7th, Robert commences as an Excise Officer at £50/annum.
- 1790 - January, his farming labours and the duties of the Excise are proving difficult.
- February, third volume of the Scots Musical Museum published.
- July, Burns transferred to the Dumfries Third Division.
- July 24th, the poet's brother William (b. 1767) dies of a fever while working in England.
- November: Robert composes Tam O'Shanter.
- 1791 - March 31st, Anna Park gives birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, by Robert.
- April 9th, Jean gives birth to William Nicol Burns.
- June 19-22nd, Robert attends the wedding of his brother Gilbert to Jean Breckenridge.
- August 25th, the crops at Ellisland are auctioned off amid a three-hour near-riot.
- September 10th, end of the Ellisland lease.
- November 11th, the Burns family moves to Dumfries – to the Wee Vennel.
- November 29th to December 11th, upon hearing that Jenny Clow is dying of consumption, Robert travels to Edinburgh.
- December 6th, the last meeting between Robert and Agnes McLehose.
- 1792 - February: Burns promoted to the Dumfries Port Division.
- February 29th, Robert is one of a party of Excise Officers to capture the brig Rosamund near Gretna.
- April 16th, the poet offers Creech about 50 pages of new material for a proposed second Edinburgh Edition of the poems.
- August: Fourth volume of the Scots Musical Museum published, to which Burns had contributed about 60 songs.
- September 16th, Robert agrees to contribute generously to George Thomson's **Select Collection of Scottish Airs**.
- September 29th, the new Dumfries Royal Theatre opens on Shakespeare Street.
- November 21st, a daughter, Elizabeth Riddell Burns, is born.
- December 31st, the Board of Excise orders Collector John Mitchell to investigate Burns for his alleged political conduct 'as a person disaffected towards the Government'.
- 1793 - January 5th, exciseman Burns successfully defends himself over the 'disaffection' accusation.
- February 18th, **Second Edinburgh Edition** of the poems published by Creech.
- March: Burns successfully petitions for full Burgess status in Dumfries, allowing him to have his sons educated at a fraction of the non-burgess cost.
- May 19th, the family moves from the Wee Vennel to a house on Millbrae Vennel (now Burns Street), which will be the poet's final home.
- May: First set of Thomson's **Select Collection** published with Robert's contributions.
- July 27th to August 2nd, Burns tours Galloway with John Syme.
- Late December: the mock Rape of the Sabine Women fiasco takes place at Friar's Carse, causing an estrangement with the Riddells.

- 1794 - January 7th, Burns submits his controversial proposals for the reorganization of the Dumfries Excise Service.
- April 20th, Robert Riddell dies.
- May 1st, Robert very reluctantly declines to become a paid contributor the London Morning Chronicle, fearing that his political views will become exposed, to the detriment of his Excise career.
- June 25-28th, the poet embarks on his second tour of Galloway with Robert Syme.
- August 12th, the birth of James Glencairn Burns.
- December 22nd, Burns promoted to Acting Supervisor of Excise upon the extended illness of Alexander Findlater.
- Correspondence between Robert and Maria Riddell resumes.
- 1795 - January 12th, Burns writes the letter that causes the rift with Mrs Dunlop.
- January 31st, Burns becomes a founding member of the Royal Corps of Dumfries Volunteers.
- March: Patrick Heron becomes a candidate for Parliament, prompting the poet to volunteer to write four satirical election ballads.
- September: Elizabeth Riddell Burns, the daughter of Jean and Robert, dies.
- December-January: Burns in ill-health, complaining of 'a most severe Rhematic'.
- 1796 - January-March: Famine-like shortages of grains in Dumfries. Food riots from March 12-14.
- July 3rd to 16th, Burns at Brow Well.
- July 12th, Robert writes to Thomson for the last time begging for £5 to pay his tailor.
- July 18th, Burns writes his last letter, addressed to his father-in-law, James Armour.
- July 21st, Burns dies.
- July 25th, the poet's funeral and the birth of his son Maxwell.

APPENDIX

Autobiographical Letters from Robert Burns to Dr John Moore

Editorial Note

The following two letters contain – certainly by today's standards, but even by those that prevailed in the 18th Century – many wrong spellings, errors in grammar, and unusual punctuation and emphasis, most notably in the first. While the original letters seem to be no longer extant, there are versions published that contain many fewer irregularities; which raises the question: which are most likely to be closest to the poet's original manuscripts? The quandary has been, as Burns is known to have been very knowledgeable in English composition and grammar, and more 'correct' in most of his other compositions that we have available to us, why would he have been so careless and cavalier in these instances? Nevertheless, the copies reproduced here are based primarily on the careful research of arguably the world's most respected Burns scholar, Ross Roy, and adopted by James Mackay (himself an acclaimed and thorough scholar of Burns) for his bi-centenary edition of **The Complete Letters of Robert Burns**. And so, for better or worse, they are offered here with all their imperfections intact. Perhaps Robert was just tired after a hard day's toil!

First Letter

Mauchline, 2nd August 1787

Sir

For some months past I have been rambling over the country, partly on account of some little business I have to settle in various places; but of late I have been confined with some lingering complaints originating as I take it in the stomach. To divert my spirits a little this miserable fog of Ennui, I have taken a whim to give you a history of MYSELF. - My name has made a small noise in the country; you have done me the honor to interest yourself very warmly in my behalf; and I think a faithful account of, what character of a man I am, and how I came by that character, may perhaps amuse you in an idle moment, I will give you an honest narrative, though I know it will be at the expence of frequently being laughed at; for I assure you, Sir, I have, like Solomon whose character, excepting the trifling affair of WISDOM, I sometimes think I resemble, I have, I say, like him "Turned my eyes to behold Madness and Folly;" and like him too, frequently shaken hands with their intoxicating friendship. In the very polite letter Miss Williams did me the honor to write me, she tells me you have got a complaint in your eyes. I pray to God that it may be removed; for considering that lady and you are my common friends, you will probably employ her to read this letter; and then goodnight to that esteem with which she was pleased to honor the Scotch Bard. 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 every since the flood"

Gules, Purpure, Argent, &c. quite disowned me. - My Fathers rented land of the noble Keiths of Marshal, and had the honor to share their fate. I do not use the word, Honor, with any reference to Political principles; loyal and disloyal I take to be merely relative terms in that ancient and formidable court known in this Country by the name of CLUB-LAW. Those who dare welcome Ruin and shake hands with Infamy for what they sincerely believe to be the cause of their God or their King "Brutus and Cassius are honorable men." I mention this circumstance because it threw my father on the world at large; where after many years' wanderings and sojournings, he pickt up a pretty large quantity of Observation and Experience, to which I am indebted for most of my little pretensions to wisdom.

I have met with few who understood "Men, their manners and their ways" equal to him; but stubborn, ungainly Integrity, and headlong, ungovernable Irrascibility are disqualifying circumstances: consequently I was born a very poor man's son. For the first six or seven years of my life, my father was gardiner to a worthy gentleman of small estate in the neighbourhood of Ayr. Had my father continued in that situation, I must have marched off to be one of the little underlings about a farm-house; 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; so with the assistance of his generous Master my father ventured on a small farm in his estate. At these years I was by no means a favorite with anybody. I was a good deal noted for a retentive memory, a stubborn, sturdy something in my disposition, and an enthusiastic, idiot I say idiot piety, because I was then but a child. Though I cost the schoolmaster some thrashings, I made an excellent English scholar, and against the years of ten or eleven, I was absolutely a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles. In my infant and boyish days too, I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition. She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery. This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors. The earliest thing of Composition that I recollect taking pleasure in was, The vision of Mirza and a hymn of Addison's beginning "How are Thy servants Blest, O Lord!" I particularly remember one half- stanza which was music to my boyish ear

"For though in dreadful whirls we hung,

"High on the broken wave" -

I met with these pieces in Masson's English Collection, one of my school-books. The two first books I ever read in private, and which gave me more pleasure than any two books I ever read again, were, the life of Hannibal and the history of Sir William Wallace. Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest. Polemical divinity about this time was putting the country half-mad; and I, ambitious of shining in conversation parties on sundays between sermons, funerals, &c. 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.

My vicinity to Ayr was of great advantage to me. My social disposition, when not checked by some modification of spited pride, like our catechism definition of Infinitude, was "without bounds or limits." I formed many connections with other Youngers who possessed superiour advantages; the youngling Actors who were busy with the rehearsal of PARTS in which they were shortly to appear on that STAGE where, Alas! I was destined to drudge behind the SCENES. It is not commonly at these green years that the young Noblesse and Gentry have a just sense of the immense distance between them and their ragged Playfellows. It takes a few dashes into the world to give the young Great man that proper, decent, unnoticing disregard for the poor, insignificant, stupid devils, the mechanics and peasantry around him; who perhaps were born in the same village. My young Superiours never insulted the clouterly appearance of my ploughboy carcase, the two extremes of which were often exposed to all the inclemencies of all the seasons. They would give me stray volumes of books; among them, even then, I could pick up some observations; and ONE, whose heart I am sure not even the MUNNY BEGUMS'S scenes have tainted, helped me to a little French. Parting with these, my young friends and benefactors, as they dropped off for the east or west Indies, was often to me a sore affliction; but I was soon called to more serious evils. My father's generous Master died; the farm proved a ruinous bargain; and, to clench the curse, we fell into the hands of a Factor who sat for the picture I have drawn of one in my Tale of two dogs. My father was advanced in life when he married; I was the eldest of seven children; and he, worn out by early hardship, was unfit for labour. My father's spirit was soon irritated, but not easily broken. There was a freedom in his lease in two years more, and to weather these two years we retrenched expences. We lived very poorly; I was a dextrous Ploughman for my years; and the next eldest to me was a brother, who could drive the plough very well and help me to thrash. A Novel-Writer might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I: My indignation yet boils at the recollection of the scoundrel tyrant's insolent, threatening epistles, which used to set us all in tears. -

This kind of life, the chearless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave, brought me to my sixteenth year; a little before which period I first committed the sin of RHYME. You know our country custom of coupling a man and woman together as Partners in the labors of Harvest. In my fifteenth autumn, my Partner was a bewitching creature who just

counted an autumn less. My scarcity of English denies me the power of doing her justice in that language; but you know the Scotch idiom, She was a bonie, sweet, sonsie lass. In short, she 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. How she caught the contagion I can't say; you medical folks talk much of infection by breathing the same air, the touch &c. but 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 ratann 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. I was not so presumptive as to imagine that I could make verses like printed ones, composed by men who had Greek and Latin; but my girl sung a song which was said to be composed by a small country laird's son, on one of his father's maids, with whom he was in love; and I saw no reason why I might not rhyme as well as he, for excepting smearing sheep and casting peats, his father living in the moors, he had no more Scholarcraft than I had.

Thus with me began Love and Poesy; which at times have been my only, and till within this last twelvemonth have been my highest enjoyment. My father struggled on till he reached the freedom in his lease, when he entered on a larger farm about ten miles farther in the country. The nature of the bargain was such as to throw a little ready money in his hand at the commencement, otherwise the affair would have been impracticable. For four years we lived comfortably here; but a lawsuit between him and his Landlord commencing, after three years tossing and whirling in the vortex of Litigation, my father was just saved from absorption in a jail by phthisical consumption, which after two years promises, kindly stepped in and snatch'd him away--"To where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary be at rest."

It is during this climacterick that my little story is most eventful. I was, at the beginning of this period, perhaps the most ungainly, awkward being in the parish. No Solitaire was less acquainted with the ways of the world. My knowledge of ancient story was gathered from Salmon's and Guthrie's geographical grammars; my knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator. These, with Pope's works, some plays of Shakespear, Tull and Dickson on Agriculture, The Pantheon, Locke's Essay on the human understanding, Stackhouse's history of the bible, Justice's British Gardiner's directory, Boyle's lectures, Allan Ramsay's works, Taylor's scripture doctrine of original sin, a select Collection of English songs, and Hervey's meditations had been the extent of my reading. The Collection of Songs was my vade mecum. I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is.

In my seventeenth year, to give my manners a brush, I went to a country dancing school. My father had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was, what to this

hour I repent, in absolute defiance of his commands. My father, as I said before, was the sport of strong passions: from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe was one cause of that dissipation which marked my future years. I only say, Dissipation, comparative with the strictness and sobriety of Presbyterean country life; for through the will-o'-wisp meteors of thoughtless Whim were almost the sole lights of my path, yet early ingrained Piety and Virtue never failed to point me out the line of Innocence. The great misfortune of my life was, never to have AN AIM. I had felt early some stirrings of Ambition, but they were the blind gropings of Homer's Cyclops round the walls of his cave: I saw my father's situation entailed on me perpetual labor. The only two doors by which I could enter the fields of fortune were, the most niggardly economy, or the little chicaning art of bargain- making: the first is so contracted an aperture, I never could squeeze myself into it; the last, I always hated the contamination of the threshold. Thus, abandoned of aim or view in life; with a strong appetite for sociability, as well 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." But far beyond all the other impulses of my heart was, un penchant l'adorable moitie du genre humain. My heart was compleatly tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other; and like every warfare in this world, I was sometimes crowned with success, and sometimes mortified with defeat. At the plough, scythe or reap- hook I feared no competitor, and set Want at defiance: and as I never cared farther for my labors than while I was in actual exercise, I spent the evening in the way after my own heart. A country lad rarely carries on an amour without an assisting confident. I possessed a curiosity, zeal and intrepid dexterity in these matters which recommended me a proper Second in duels of that kind; and I dare say, I felt as much pleasure at being in the secret of half the armours in the parish, as ever did Premier at knowing the intrigues of half the courts of Europe.

The very goosefeather in my hand seems instinctively to know the well-worn path of my imagination, the favorite theme of my song; and is with difficulty restrained from giving you a couple of paragraphs on the amours of my Compeers, the humble Inmates of the farm-house and cottage; but the grave sons of Science, Ambition or Avarice baptize these things by the name of Follies. To the sons and daughters of labor and poverty they are matters of the most serious nature: to them, the ardent hope, the stolen interview, the tender farewell, are the greatest and more delicious part of their enjoyments. -

Another circumstance in my life which made very considerable alterations in my mind and manners was, I spent my seventeenth summer on a smuggling coast a good distance from home at a noted school, to learn Mensuration, Surveying, Dialling, &c. in which I made a pretty good progress. But I made greater progress in the knowledge of mankind. The contraband trade was at that time very successful; scenes of swaggering riot and roaring dissipation were as yet new to me; and I was no enemy to social life. Here, though I learned to look unconcernedly on a large

tavern-bill, and mix without feat in a drunken squabble, yet 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 overset 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,

"Like Proserpine gathering flowers,
"Herself a fairer flower"

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

I returned home very considerably improved. - My reading was enlarged with the very important addition of Thomson's and Shenstone's works; I had seen mankind in a new phasis; and I engaged several of my schoolfellows to keep up a literary correspondence with me. This last helped me much on in composition. I had met with a collection of letters by the Wits of Queen Ann's reign, and I pored over them most devoutly. I kept between them and the composition of most of my correspondents flattered my vanity. I carried this whim so far that though I had not three farthings worth of business in the world, yet every post brought me as many letters as if I had been a broad, plodding son of Day-book & Ledger.-

My life flowed on much in the same tenor till my twenty third year. - *Vive l'amour et vive la bagatelle*, were my sole principles of action. The addition of two more authors to my library gave me great pleasure; Sterne and Mckenzie. Tristram Shandy and the Man of Feeling were my bosom favorites. Poesy was still a darling walk for my mind, but 'twas only the humour of the hour. I had usually half a dozen or more pieces on hand; I took up one or other as it suited the momentary tone of this mind, and dismissed it as it bordered on fatigue. My Passions when once they were lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme; and then conning over my verses, like a spell, soothed all into quiet. None of the rhymes of those days are in print, except, *Winter*, a dirge, the eldest of my printed pieces; *The death of Poor Mailie*, John Barleycorn, And songs first, second and third: song second was the ebullition of that passion which ended the forementioned school- business. -

My twenty third year was to me an important era. - Partly thro' whim, and partly that I wished to set about doing something in life, I joined with a flax-dresser in a neighbouring town, to learn his trade and carry on the business of manufacturing and retailing flax. - This turned out a sadly unlucky affair. - My Partner was a scoundrel of the first water who made money by the mystery of thieving; and to finish the whole, while we were given a welcoming 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 sixpence. I was obliged to give up business; the clouds of misfortune were gathering thick round my father's head, the darkest of which was, he was visibly far gone in a consumption; and to crown all, a belle-fille whom I adored and who had pledged her soul to meet me in the field of matrimony, jilted me with peculiar circumstances of

mortification. - The finishing evil that brought up the rear of this infernal file was my hypochondriac complaint being irritated to such a degree, that for three months I was in diseased state of body and mind, scarcely to be envied by the hopeless wretches who have just got their mittimus, "Depart from me, ye Cursed.

From this adventure I learned something of a town-life. But the principal thing which gave my mind a turn was, I formed a bosom- friendship with a young fellow, the first created being I had ever seen, but a hapless son of misfortune. He was the son of a plain mechanic; but a great Man in the neighbourhood taking him under his patronage gave him a genteel education with a view to bettering his situation in life. The Patron dieing just as he was ready to launch forth into the world, the poor fellow in despair went to sea; where after a variety of good and bad fortune, a little before I was acquainted with him, he had been set ashore by an American Privateer on the wild coast of Connaught, stript of every thing. I cannot quit this poor fellow's story without adding that he is at this moment Captain of a large westindian man belonging to the Thames. - This gentleman's mind was fraught with courage, independance, Magnanimity, and every noble, manly virtue. I loved him, I admired him, to a degree of enthusiasm; and I strove to imitate him. In some measure I succeeded; I had the pride before, but he taught it to flow in proper channels. His knowledge of the world was vastly superiour to mine, and I was all attention to learn. He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool than myself when WOMAN was the presiding star; but he spoke of a certain fashionable failing with levity, which hitherto I had regarded with horror. Here his friendship did me a mischief; and the consequence was, that soon after I resumed the plough, I wrote the WELCOME unclosed. My reading was only encreased by two stray volumes of Pamela, and one of Ferdinand Count Fathom, which gave me some idea of Novels. Rhyme, except some religious pieces which are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour. When my father died, his all went among the rapacious hell-hounds that growl in the kennel of justice; but we made a shift to scrape a little money in the family amongst us, with which, to keep us together, my brother and I took a neighbouring farm. My brother wanted my harebrained imagination as well as my social and amorous madness, but in good sense and every sober qualification he was far my superiour.-

I entered on this farm with a full resolution, "Come, go to, I will be wise! I read farming books; I calculated crops; I attended markets; and in short, in spite of "The devil, the world and the flesh," I believe I would have been a wise man; but the first year from unfortunately buying in bad seed, the second from a late harvest, we lost half of both our crops; this overset all my wisdom, and I returned "Like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her walling in the mire."

I now began to be known in the neighborhood as a maker of rhymes. The first of my poetic offspring that saw the light was a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two reverend Calvinists, both of them dramatis personae in my Holy Fair. I had an idea myself that the piece had some merit; but to prevent the worst, I gave a copy of it to a friend who was very fond of these things, and told him I could not guess who was the Author of it, but that I thought it pretty clever. With a certain side of both clergy and laity it met with a roar of applause. Holy Willie's

Prayer next made its appearance, and alarmed the kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers. Unluckily for me, my idle wanderings led me, on another wide, point blank within the reach of their heaviest metal. This is the unfortunate story alluded to in my printed poem, *The Lament*. 'Twas a shocking affair, which I cannot yet bear to recollect; and had very nearly given me one or two of the principal qualifications for the place among those who have lost the chart and mistake the reckoning of Rationality. I gave up my part of the farm to my brother, as in truth it was only nominally mine; and made what little preparation was in my power for Jamaica. Before leaving my native country for ever, I resolved to publish my Poems. I weighed my productions as impartially as in my power; I thought they had merit; and 'twas a delicious idea that I would be called a clever fellow, even though it should never reach my ears a poor Negro-driver, or perhaps a victim to that inhospitable clime gone to the world of Spirits. I can truly say that pauvre Inconnu as I then was, I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and my works as I have at this moment. It is ever my opinion that the great, unhappy mistakes and blunders, both in a rational and religious point of view. of which we see thousands daily guilty, are owing to their ignorance, or mistaken notions of themselves. To know myself had been all along my constant study. I weighed myself alone, I balanced myself with others; I watched every means of information how much ground I occupied both as a Man and as a Poet: I studied assiduously Nature's DESIGN where she seem'd to have intended the various LIGHTS and SHADES in my character. 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. -

I threw off six hundred copies, of which I had got subscriptions for about three hundred and fifty. My vanity was highly gratified by the reception I met with from the Publick; besides pocketing, all expences deducted, near twenty pounds. - This last came very seasonable, as I was about to indent myself for want of money to pay my freight. So soon as I was master of nine guineas, the price of wafting me to the torrid zone, I bespoke a passage in the very first ship that was to sail, for "Hungry ruin had me in the wind"

I had for some time been sculking from covert to covert under all the terrors of a Jail; as some ill-advised, ungrateful people had uncoupled the merciless legal Pack at my heels. I had taken the last farewell of my few friends; my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed my last song I should ever measure in Caledonia. "The gloomy night is gathering fast," when a letter from Dr. Blacklock to a friend of mine overthrew all my schemes by rousing my poetic ambition. The Doctor belonged to a set of Critics for whose applause I had not even dared to hope. His idea that I would meet with every encouragement for a second edition fired me to much that away I posted to Edinburgh without a single acquaintance in town, or a single letter of introduction in my pocket. The baneful Star that had so long shed its blasting influence in my Zenith, for once made a revolution to the Nadir; and the providential care of a good God placed me under the

patronage of one of his noblest creatures, the Earl of Glencairn: "Oublie moi, Grand Dieu, si jamais je l'oublie!" -

I need relate no farther. - At Edinburgh I was in a new world: I mingled among many classes of men, but all of them new to me; and I was all attention "to catch the manners living as they rise."

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You can now, Sir, form a pretty near guess what sort of a Wight he is whom for some time you have honored with your correspondence. - That Fancy & Whim, keen Sensibility and riotous Passions may still make him zig-zag in his future path of life, is far from being improbable; but come what will, I shall answer for him the most determinate integrity and honor; and though his evil star should again blaze in his meridian with tenfold more direful influence, he may reluctantly tax Friendship with Pity but no more. - My most respectful Compliments to Miss Williams. - Her very elegant and friendly letter I cannot answer at present, as my presence is requisite in Edinburgh, and I set off tomorrow. - If you will oblige me so highly and do me so much honor as now and then drop me a letter, Please direct to me at Mauchline, Ayrshire. -

I have the honor to be, Sir

your ever grateful humble servant Robt Burns

Second Letter

Ellisland near Dumfries - Jan. 4th 1789

Sir,

As often as I think of writing to you, which has been three or four times every week these six months, it gives me something so like the idea of an ordinary-sized Statue offering at a conversation with the Rhodian Colossus that my mind misgives me; and the affair always miscarries somewhere between Purpose and Resolve - I have at last got some business with you, and business-letters are written by the Style-book. I say my business is with you, Sir, for you never had any with me, except the business that Benevolence has in the mansion of Poverty.

The character and employment of a Poet were formerly my pleasure, but are now my pride. I know that a very great deal of my *éclat* was owing to the singularity of my situation, and the honest prejudice of Scotsmen; but still as I said in the preface to my first Edition, I do look upon myself as having some pretensions from Nature to the Poetic Character. I have not a doubt but the knack, the aptitude to learn the Muses' trade, is a gift bestowed by Him 'who forms the secret bias of the soul;' but I as firmly believe that excellence in the Profession is the fruit of the industry, labour, attention and pains. At least I am resolved to try my doctrine by the test of Experience. Another appearance from the Press, I put off to a very different day; a day that may never arrive; but Poesy I am determined to prosecute with all my vigor. Nature has given very few, if any, of the Profession, the talents of shining in every species of Composition: I shall try, for until trial it is impossible to know, whether she has qualified me to shine in any one. The worst of it is, by the time one has finished a Piece, it has been so often viewed and reviewed before the mental eye that one loses in a good measure the powers of critical discrimination. Here the best criterion I know is A friend; not only of abilities to judge, but with good nature enough, like a prudent teacher with a young learner, to give perhaps a little more than is exactly due, lest the thin-skinned animal fall into that most deplorable of all Poetical diseases, heart-breaking despondency of himself. Dare I, Sir, already immensely indebted to your goodness, ask the additional obligation of your being that Friend to me? I in lose you a essay of mine, in a walk of poesy to me entirely new; I mean the epistle addressed to R.G. esq. or Robert Graham, of Fintry, esq. a gentleman of uncommon worth, to whom I lie under very great obligations. The story of the poem, like most of my poems, is connected with my own story, and to give you the one, I must give you something of the other. I cannot boast of —

I believe I shall, in whole, £100 copy-right including, clear about £400 some little odds; and even part of this depends upon what the gentleman has yet to settle with me. I give you this information, because you did me the honor to interest yourself much in my welfare.

To give the rest of my story in brief, I have married 'my Jean' and taken a farm: with the first step I have every day more and more reason to be satisfied; with the last, it is rather the reverse. I have a younger brother, who supports my aged mother; another still younger brother, and three sisters in a farm. On my last return from Edinburgh, it cost me about £180 to save them from ruin. Not that I lost so much - I only interposed between my brother and his impending fate by the loan of so much. I give myself no airs on this, for it was mere selfishness on my part: I was conscious that the wrong scale of the balance was pretty heavily charged, and I thought that throwing a little filial piety, and fraternal affection, into the scale in my favor, might help to smooth matters at the '*grand-reckoning*'. There is still one thing would make my circumstances quite easy: I have an excise officers commission, and I live in the midst of a country division. My request to Mr Graham, who is one of the commissioners of excise, was, if in his power, to procure me that division. If I were very sanguine, I might hope that some of my great patrons might procure me a treasury warrant for supervisor, surveyor-general, &c.

Thus, secure of a livelihood, 'to thee, sweet poetry, delightful maid,' I would consecrate my future days.