

William Burnes - The Saint, the Father and the Husband

In our early childhood development - and even later - we are all influenced in so many ways by those around us, and of course particularly by our parents. It is manifest that William Burnes - the father of Robert Burns - exerted a strong influence over the development of his oldest son's character and beliefs, and therefore no study or understanding of the Bard and his work can be complete without first knowing more about this demure but strong-minded figure and the relationship that existed between them. We know comparatively little of those dynamics in detail, but indirectly we can surmise a good deal from the events that shaped their lives. And we have been handed down some usefully comments on the topic by their contemporaries. And so this evening I would like to focus mainly on the life of William Burnes. I realize that in much of what I have to say about the Burnes family life Robert's mother Agnes would obviously have played a key role, but I will make only passing references to her contributions. Maybe she can be the subject of a future study.

William was born on November 11, 1721 to Robert Burnes and Isabella Keith. His birthplace is often given as Clochnahill in the Mearns district of Kincardineshire, but 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 brother abandoned the Mearns, most likely because of the collapsed financial affairs of their father. William headed for Edinburgh where he quickly found employment working for Thomas Hope who had secured a 57-year lease on a large acreage just a mile from Auld Reekie. 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's not known why, but that would have been a more congenial environment for a country-bred lad than Edinburgh. For the next 6 or 7 years he was employed as a gardener in about four different Ayrshire estates, until finally being employed 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 leased a 7½ acres smallholding in Alloway and began to develop most of it as a market garden. In his spare time he began building the clay biggin that was to become the birthplace of Scotland's Bard. He seems to have been highly esteemed by all of his employers during these errant years.

William met his future bride - Agnes Brown - at the annual Maybole Fair of 1756. Agnes had not long before broken off a 7-year courtship with a Will Nelson. It seems that the virtuous Agnes came from a strictly observant Presbyterian background and insisted that Will would have to await the nuptials before claiming his reward. After 7 years of abstinence, poor long-suffering Will helped himself some comfort on the side. Who could blame him, but Hell knows no fury like a God-fearing maiden deceived, so when Agnes discovered his intolerable duplicity she broke off the long engagement. But we should be eternally grateful for Will's erupting libido, for without it we would surely not be sitting here this evening. But Agnes was attracted to Willys, for it was not long after that she met

William Burnes, and they fell in love. William was nearly 11 years her senior, although at nearly 26 she herself was pushing matronhood.

In December 1757 they were wed, and Agnes immediately took her place as mistress of the new cottage at Alloway. Just over a year later the subject of all our admiration, Robert Burns, was born.

**“Our monarch’s hindmost year but ane
Was five-and-twenty days begun,
Twas then a blast o’ Janwar win’
Blew Hansel in on Robin.”**

In fact, the storm responsible for this little calamity arrived on February 4th, some 10 days after the birth.

It might be worth noting that aside from two stone jams, the Alloway cottage is constructed entirely of clay walls covered in lime, with a roof of thatch. The walls are very thick, but slope back somewhat from the exterior base to the roof. The floors were of stone slabs. It had two rooms, a living room and a kitchen, the latter having a door leading into the byre. The living room included the sleeping accommodation, which over time must have become very cramped as three children would eventually share the space with mother and father.

The William that Agnes married would likely have suited her much more than Will Nelson. Not only was William apparently more of an earnest Christian, but he was of fine character, keenly intelligent, and he was determined to be a good provider.

Over a period of 12½ years, between 1759 and 1771, William and Agnes produced a total of 7 children, 4 boys and three girls. Surprisingly for the times, all survived childhood; only John, the youngest son, died young, at age 16, from an unrecorded cause.

William himself had received a schooling which, though basic, probably exceeded that of most boys of his time. Certainly, we know he was very competent in the three Rs, and displayed a very neat hand. He believed strongly in the value of a good education for his sons, but also gave some modest instruction to his daughters as well. A suitable school local to Alloway appears not to have been available, and so William took steps to establish one. He enlisted the participation of some of his neighbours and in May 1765 engaged the services of the young dominie, John Murdoch. Murdoch received sixpence a day (which would be an annual salary of perhaps £6 or £7 pounds) and full board. He maintained his position at the little Alloway school until the early part of 1768, when he found a teaching post in Dumfries. A few years later upon his return to Ayr, he was engaged again by William, briefly - but with considerable useful effect - to provide supplemental lessons in writing to Robert and Gilbert, and, at least in Robert’s case, beginner lessons in French and Latin.

William’s plan to make his living as a market gardener utilizing the bulk of his 7½ acre Alloway smallholding never materialized. He continued to work as head gardener on the

Doonholm Estate. Agnes was the one who worked the acreage, raising cows for their milk and their meat, chickens, and sundry other farmyard animals, along with a kailyard for the family's vegetable needs. From the cows' milk, she made cheese for sale. Eventually William sold off much of this land, retaining only a modest plot surrounding the cottage.

In about 1765 Provost Fergusson bought Mount Oliphant farm located about 2 miles from Alloway, which was 70 Scot's acres in size - about 90 English acres. William entered into a 12-year lease, moving with the family in early 1766 when Robert was just gone 7 years of age. He tried to sell the Alloway cottage, but without success. He eventually sold it for £160 in 1781, just in time to supply him with some much-needed capital.

Taking the farm meant giving up his position as head gardener of Doonholm, and the modest but secure income that it brought in. It was a terrible risk, but William was ambitious to rise above his low-income status, and he had a growing family to support. James Mackay posits another important motive for this undertaking. Robert and Gilbert were fast approaching an age when children had to be put to work, and this usually meant being hired out as day labourers to farmers in the area. William did not want to entrust his sons to such uncertain influence, preferring to keep them under his own protective wing. The tenancy of the farm provided that option.

Fergusson and William Burnes both knew that the fertility of the soil at Mount Oliphant was very poor; the land was also stony and lacked proper drainage. The stone farmhouse was no bigger than the Alloway cottage, but it did have some useable attic space for the growing family to use as bedroom accommodation.

The rent was set at £40 for the first 6 years and £45 for the optional remaining years, but in Robert's words, it proved to be a ruinous bargain. Because he could not sell the cottage, William did not have the capital to stock the farm, but Provost Ferguson lent him £100 for that purpose. Generous as that gesture was, the farm was too poor to support such a heavy burden of debt and rent.

As the end of the first 6-year period of the lease approached, William thought of exercising his option not to renew, and to that end did look into the possibility of renting a better farm, but apparently to no avail; so he had no choice but to renew for another 6 year at the higher annual rent of £45 and soldier on.

Despite the straightened circumstances the family was facing all through the Mount Oliphant years, William demonstrated yet again his belief in the importance of learning for his sons, and to equip them with the knowledge to be able to pursue other and more lucrative careers than farming. For a period of nearly 3 months in the summer of 1775, Robert was sent off to a school in Kirkoswald run by one Hugh Rodger to study - in Robert's own words - mensuration), surveying, dialling etc. It seems this study involved a good deal of mathematics, although he may not have excelled in this subject. By the Bard's own account, he did apply himself reasonably well, but he likely learned more about the seamier business of life than about mathematics and surveying. He learned first-hand about the flourishing smuggling trade in Scotland, and spent too much of his time in the taverns,

running up tavern tabs that he and his father could ill afford.

Towards the end of the Mount Oliphant lease period - by which time Fergusson had died - William straightened finances were causing him to fall behind in his rent. While the tolerant Fergusson had been willing to wait for his arrears, quite understandably the estate's new factor was not. Robert used the incident to vilify the factor in **The Twa Dogs**, but probably rather unfairly. The exchanges with the factor were certainly alarming for William and the rest of the family, but the arrears were settled amicably by the estate taking a mortgage on the Alloway cottage. This left William free at the end of his lease in 1777 to move to another, larger farm - Lochlie (sometimes spelled Lochlea).

At 130 acres Scots, Lochlie was substantially larger. It lay more or less equidistantly between Tarbolton and Mauchline, being about 2½ miles to the northeast and 3 miles to the northwest of each town respectively. The rent was agreed at £130/annum, but William and his new landlord, David McClure, seemed too naively trusting of each other and too cavalier about the rules of good business practice to commit to writing the various other conditions of the agreement, and this would return to haunt them both. But initially all was smiles and cordiality, and McClure even advanced some capital to William to help him stock the new farm. And it appears that the first 4 years of life at Lochlie was trouble-free. Life was hard, of course, with all of the family engaged in what Robert described as 'unremitting toil', but during these years they seemed to enjoy domestic harmony and a relatively unworried existence.

That all changed starting sometime in early 1782 when McClure started demanding arrears of rent which were far in excess of what William believed they should be. William believed that he was entitled to withhold the rental amounts that he did based on the agreed, but unwritten, ancillary conditions of their lease. These included allowances for capital William had invested in improvements, and important undertakings by McClure that were not honoured. A court Petition was filed by McClure claiming arrears of £500, but that was later increased to £775 to account for the current year's rent and other items. In May 1783 McClure applied for a Warrant of Sequestration whereby the Sheriff inventoried all of his farm stock - animals, equipment and implements - preventing William from selling any farm stock so that it would be preserved as collateral against McClure's anticipated court award. This sequestration was a very public process that was intensely embarrassing to William and the family. Without belabouring all of the details, in the end William's claims of legitimacy in holding back some of the rent were largely upheld by an independent panel of Arbiters who eventually set the claimed £775 outstanding arrears at only £231, which William was in a position to pay forthwith. However, in the meantime McClure was declared bankrupt with huge outstanding debts, so who was entitled to the money was thrown into doubt, and William was involuntarily drawn into yet further protracted legal wrangling. He was landed in an almost impossible dilemma, with all the stress and agony that entailed. He became the meat in the sandwich of a convoluted legal process he felt almost helpless to resolve.

All of this may well have further depleted his already frail constitution, but he was also dying from consumption which mercifully rescued him from the roiling tempest of

litigation and the very real threat of imprisonment for debt despite his avowed willingness to pay the arbitrator's settlement amount. His death did not relieve the family of the outstanding payment, but at least the incubus of incarceration and public humiliation were lifted. William Burnes succumbed to his illness on February 13th, 1784. His body was transported back to Alloway's auld kirkyard for burial.

I want briefly to address the matter of the overall relationship Robert had with his father. For this we have to rely mainly on comments by the Bard himself and brother Gilbert. We have Robert's account of his defiance of his father's express command that he not join a country dancing class. In his famous autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore, Robert described a surprisingly radical reaction from his father: "From that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe, was one cause of that dissipation that marked my later years." In providing material to the Bard's first biographer - Dr. Currie - Gilbert played this down, expressing disbelief at Robert's view. Indeed, at one point even the girls joined Robert in his pastime, and they would not have defied their father. Perhaps the old man just decided that the activity was not after all likely to lead to dissipation. (joke: Baptists and sex). The more likely explanation is that William was - with good reason - concerned that Robert was displaying signs of youthful rebellion and a wildness not unlike many pubescent young men, but which would certainly alarm a god-fearing man such as William. And Davy Sillar gives us a description of Robert's dress and comportment in the later Lochlie years that might suggest a certain cocky dandification, and an attitude to go with it.

Certainly Robert was discovering the lassies, as evidenced by his remark that: **"My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other"**. William was no doubt concerned about the possible consequences of such temptations, but mercifully Robert managed to avoid landing himself or any of these Goddesses on the cutty-stool during the lifetime of his father.

On the more general topic of William's qualities as a man, a husband and a father, we can give considerable credence to insightful comments provided by John Murdoch to Dr. Currie after the Poet's death. Regarding the conditions of family life in the Burnes home, he began by quoting a line from the Cottar's Saturday Night:

"The Saint, the father, and the husband, a tender and affectionate father of whose manly qualities and rational and Christian virtues I would not pretend to give a description."

And in speaking of the family during the Alloway years:

"In this mean cottage I really believe there dwelt a larger portion of content than any palace in Europe."

And again:

"...I myself have always considered William Burnes as by far the best of the human"

race that ever I had the pleasure of being acquainted with, and many a worthy character I have known. I can cheerfully join with Robert in the last line of his epitaph borrowed from Goldsmith - ‘For even his failings leaned to virtue’s side.’ He was a tender and affectionate father; he took pleasure in leading his children in the path of virtue; not in driving them as some parents do, to the performance of duties to which they are averse. He took care to find fault but seldom, and, therefore, when he did rebuke he was listened to with a kind of reverential awe.”

I would like to finish by commenting that despite some occasional tensions between William and Robert, there is strong evidence that William was proud of his clever son, but he was justifiably concerned that his piety and the sober conduct of his life might not be all that he would have wished. And Robert for his part clearly did love and admire his devoted father. The occasional discord between the two men was probably inevitable given their very different natures and Robert’s strong-willed youthful waywardness. But William must be credited with playing an active, crucial role in forming the character and values of Scotland’s Bard. It is surely fitting that Robert Burns left us with the last word on William Burnes - the saint, the husband and the father - in the lines he composed for his father’s headstone:

**O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains,
Draw near with pious rev’rence, and attend!
Here lie the loving husband’s dear remains,
The tender father, and the gen’rous friend.
The pitying heart that felt for human woe,
The dauntless heart that fear’d no human pride,
The friend of man - to vice alone a foe;
‘For even his failings lean’d to virtues side.’**