

MR CROUPIER, FRIENDS AND FELLOW MEMBERS

“It is with infinite pleasure that I see at this moment so many men of taste,so many fond and enthusiastic lovers of Scottish Song, met on this evening to celebrate the birth of our Immortal Bard”. These are not my words but those of William McLaren, President of the Burns Anniversary Society of Paisley on January 29th, 1805 at the world’s first documented Immortal Memory Toast. Within around a dozen years, one of the members, working as a music teacher in Ayr, discovered the correct date of the poet’s birth as the 25th and subsequent Minutes noted the eventual change of name to Paisley Burns Club. It is traditional that friends of members are invited to the dinner but not dignitaries. In Scotland, it is traditional that the vast majority of speakers are Scots born but almost sixty years ago, a Dinner was held at the North British hotel in Edinburgh. Almost typically one of the toasts was not “To the Lassies” but “The Ladies of Scotland”. It was proposed by my aunt, Mrs Ranji Aaron, and being entirely teetotal by choice, her act of raising her crystal glass containing water was next morning featured on the front page of Glasgow’s The Bulletin newspaper with the caption “Indian toasts lassies with water”. It appears that she was invited because of India’s independence being planned later that year. Those of us who did history at school will be aware that links between Britain and India were firmly established in 1757 after the battle of Plassey, where a small but well armed British Army under Robert Clive, partly it must be said helped by bribes to Indian Generals, established the beginnings of the future “Jewel” of the British empire. That very same year William Burns, a gardener originally from Kincardineshire, married Agnes Broun and the couple moved into a small cottage in Alloway, leading in due course to consequences which are familiar to you all. As an indirect, and possibly improbable result of the Battle of Plassey, I stand before you this evening, suitably attired, supported by my guests one of whom is my brother who is tonight, by right, wearing the Lindsay tartan.

I propose this evening to reflect on some of the friends who helped and supported Robert Burns during the flowering of his genius while living in Mossgiel Farm near the village of Mauchline which to this day remains a living memorial.

As you know, Robert spent the first seven years of his life as the eldest son with his parents, his brother Gilbert and two sisters in the cottage in Alloway helping his mother grow vegetables in the four acres of land behind the cottage. Thereafter, his father, whose family for two generations had been unsuccessful farmers in Kincardineshire took on seventy acres of barren land at Mount Oliphant for £40 per year, not far from Alloway, where the family then lived with the addition of two further sisters and a brother until Robert reached the age of eighteen years.

During this time, the two boys were expected to work as farm hands, and had few opportunities to develop long-term friendships. They received a basic education from John Murdoch a young schoolteacher hired by a small group of families and subsequently from their own father and a small local school. Both boys became literate, but Robert developed a life-long love of reading. At that stage, their father took on an ambitious new lease at Lochlea Farm near Tarbolton, taking on almost twice the land area for £130 per annum. They lived there for seven years and again the boys in the family had to work extremely hard but they were still unable to make ends meet. Here the boys were much nearer village life in Tarbolton, and their social life expanded with their founding of the Bachelors’ Club, a young men’s debating society when Burns was aged twenty-one. This Club remains the basic model for many of the Burns Clubs around the world to this day, although its activity withered after the Burns family moved away to Mauchline. During the Lochlea years, Robert was inducted at the age of twenty-two into the Masonic Lodge St David, one of two Lodges in the village. These Lodges were to briefly join, and then split again within two years, Robert opting to remain with the older St James’ Lodge. He was to be an active member for the next few

years and greatly increased his circle of friends. By the age of twenty-five, within some months of moving to Mossgiel Farm, he was elected Depute Master for the Lodge, effectively making him Convenor or Secretary. In taking this step, Burns was placing himself within the protection of an organisation that succours its members in times of need.

During these years he began to spend increasing time on his writing and was producing lines such as

*“Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Tho they may gang a kennin wrang, to step aside is human”*
from the Address To The Unco Guid.

*“Auld Nature swears, the lovely dears
Her noblest work she classes, O:
Her prentice han’ she try’d on man,
An then she made the lasses, O”*

You all know those lines.

During the final months of their father’s life the family was in fear of being evicted due to a sequestration action by the landlord for nonpayment. Gavin Hamilton, a young Mauchline lawyer, who had come to know the Burns’ boys and was an admirer of Robert’s poetry, came to their assistance and secretly offered to sublet Mossgiel Farm nearby. Gavin came from a prosperous legal family and had earlier purchased the old medieval tower in Mauchline village centre and built a modern villa beside it. He subsequently sold both to the Earl of Loudon and leased them back. At the time, he was in a prolonged dispute with the local Kirk Session about failure to pass on a form of village “Poor Tax”. Following the death of their father Burns accepted Hamilton’s offer and the family took up the tenancy of Mossgiel which comprised 118 acres at £90 per annum. Their friendship was to continue for several years until the ongoing failure of crops at the farm led to increasing debts and sadly a cooling of the friendship.

During these years, his best friend remained his younger brother Gilbert who accepted the role of acting head of the family and full-time farmer to allow Robert to develop his writing. Like his father before him, Gilbert was of a much more serious nature than Robert and was not as much at ease with the lasses as his older brother. Over the three out of four years of their stay at Mossgiel, Gilbert cared for his younger siblings and his mother. He eventually married Jean Breckenbridge three years after Robert

moved to Nithsdale and was eventually to give up the Mossgiel lease two years after Robert died. He briefly moved the family to Dumfries-shire before moving the entire family to East Lothian to manage an estate belonging to captain John Dunlop and was later to buy a house at Grant’s Brae near Haddington where he provided care for his two spinster sisters, his mother Agnes and his own family. A memorial stone erected there to acknowledge Gilbert’s importance in the poet’s life has over the years been poorly maintained and one of our senior members in this Club, Hugh Crawford, is involved in the movement to restore it.

John Richmond and James Smith were two young blades who befriended Burns and, being six years younger, looked up to him. Richmond was working as a clerk in Gavin Hamilton’s office while Smith, having rebelled against a rigidly righteous stepfather set up a drapery business in the middle of the village. The three, together with shoemaker William Hunter, formed a mini Bachelors’ Club

which met regularly, to great merriment, at the Whitefoord Arms and known jocularly as “The Court of Equity”. Robert would be the Chairman, Smith the Prosecutor, Richmond the Clerk of the Court and Hunter the Messenger at Arms. This mock court proceeded to examine some of the Mauchline scandals and identify offenders who had escaped penalty for their transgressions. Richmond and Smith also had the same amatory inclinations as the poet with the same inevitable results. Smith seems to have made pregnant his mother’s servant, a woman fifteen years his senior, and left Mauchline to start a calico printing business in Linlithgow. It was to there that Robert sent him the verse epistle which makes fun of the hypocritical religious bigots of the time. Smith eventually emigrated to Jamaica. Richmond on the other hand made pregnant Jenny Surgeoner as a result of which he was publicly rebuked before the Mauchline congregation and compelled to do penance. Jenny subsequently bore a daughter but Richmond went off to Edinburgh to work as a clerk in a lawyer’s office. He was staying in a fourth floor rented room with sparse furnishings for two and six a week, and the landlady allowed Robert to share the room when he arrived in Edinburgh for his first winter with nowhere to stay for an increased rent of three and six. For this grand sum they got a chair, a table and a chaff mattress. The pair seem to have shared this spartan room for over a year. Richmond then returned to Mauchline and a few years later married Jenny and became a respectable member of village society.

Frances Dunlop, a member of the Ayrshire gentry, was descended from the brother of Sir William Wallace. At the age of eighteen she married John Dunlop of Dunlop by whom she had seven sons and six daughters. While raising this family, she had inherited further lands, but debts resulting from the collapse of the Ayr Bank, and the death of her husband, put her into a deep depression. It was not medication but “The Cotters Saturday Night”, particularly its last verse with its reference to Sir William Wallace, which proved curative. She was to start a correspondence with the poet, which only ended with his last letter to her ten days before his death. Throughout his life she had acted as his “mother confessor”, confidante, helper of young genius and even sometimes censor. She was almost thirty years older than him and this probably protected her from his predatory instincts towards women. Seventy-nine of his letters to her have survived. She was the first to suggest to the poet that a Civil Service job such as with the Excise might provide greater security for his family than farming.

Sir John Whitefoord was the first member of the landed gentry that Robert got to know personally, and was Master of the Tarbolton Lodge when Robert became the Depute Master. Sir John had been the owner of Ballochmyle Estate but, after the collapse of the Ayr Bank, debts caused him to put it up for sale. The purchaser was Sir Claud Alexander, former Pay Master General of the British Army in Bengal. Sir Claud moved in with his family and his sister Wilhelmina, a rather plain lady in her mid-thirties. Sir Claud and Professor Dugald Stewart, who was later helpful in promoting the Kilmarnock Edition, were later inducted into the same Lodge. Neither Sir Claud nor his sister, of course, acknowledged “The Lass of Ballochmyle” which Robert sent them, an omission which the poet resented. They may have suspected he was “taking the mickey” and seemed not to appreciate a verse such as -

*“Thro weary winter’s wind and rain
With joy, with rapture, I would toil,
And nightly to my bosom strain
The bonie lass o Ballochmyle”!*

After the sale of the estates Sir John Whitefoord moved to Edinburgh and continued to prove helpful to Burns in that city.

Another key friendship was that of James Dalrymple, an Ayr businessman and nephew of the Burns family minister in Alloway, who inherited the Orangefield Estate which is now Prestwick Airport. Dalrymple's cousins were James Cunningham, Earl of Glencairn with an estate in Kilmarnock and, through marriage, the earl of Buchan and Henry Erskine, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates in Edinburgh. Of these, the Earl of Glencairn seems to have had the most personal contact with Burns, who subsequently described him as "a man whose worthy and brotherly kindness to me I shall remember when time will be no more". Glencairn was nine years older than the poet and had wealth, position, great charm and boyish good looks. His relaxed friendship with Burns made Robert at ease amongst the academics and the aristocracy in Edinburgh. A silver snuffbox and a jewelled signet ring were gifted to the poet and greatly treasured. The Earl was to die at aged forty-two, probably from tuberculosis and Burns wrote a moving Lament, which Drew Livingstone reviewed for us a few months ago, ending with the lines –

*"The bridegroom may forget the bride
Was made his wedded wife yestreen;
The monarch may forget the crown
That on his head an hour has been;
The mother may forget the child
That smiles sae sweetly on her knee;
But I'll remember thee, Glencairn,
And a' that thou has done for me!"*

Although they never met, another friend by correspondence was Dr John Moore, father of the General who was killed at Corunna in the Peninsular War. Moore learnt of Burns' poetry from a copy sent by Mrs Dunlop and, through her, asked Robert to get in touch. Moore studied medicine in Paris before graduating at Glasgow and acted initially as tutor and travelling companion to two successive Dukes of Hamilton. He subsequently settled in London where he practised for twenty-four years. The long autobiographical letter which Robert, aged twenty-eight, sent him proved invaluable for scholars in later years.

In Edinburgh Burns socialised with Robert Ainslie, who like John Richmond and Jamie Smith in Mauchline, was aged twenty-one, and became a friend and trusted confidante and the recipient of numerous letters from the poet. He was described as "thoughtless and light-hearted as a writer's apprentice could well be" and was really a womanising law student who in later years became a Writer to the Signet and an elder of the kirk. Robert was to write to him "I have not a friend upon earth beside yourself to whom I can talk nonsense without forfeiting some degree of his esteem". Ainslie was to accompany Robert on the first half of his tour to the border country the following summer.

The poet also developed a friendship with William Nicol who was fifteen years older and a Classics Master at an Edinburgh school. Robert moved in with Nicol's family to their attic apartment after a fall-out with John Richmond. In some ways he seems a strange choice of companion for his highland tour. At the insistence of Nicol, they set off in late August by chaise. Among the various places they stopped was Blair Athol where the Duchess had invited local gentry, one of whom fortunately, was Robert Graham of Fintry, later to be a help in finding Burns a post as an exciseman. Burns stayed two days at Blair Castle and the Duke's family entreated him to stay longer but Nicol had not been invited and insisted on their moving on. As it happened, Henry Dundas who virtually ran Scotland by patronage, at that time, arrived at Blair Castle the following day. He was Treasurer of the Navy at the time, and later elevated to the peerage as Viscount

Melville, (more powerful than Jack McConnel) raising the thought of how much Burns' future might have been improved if the two had met.

During that same year Burns met Agnes McLehose who was to become his Nancy in his poetry. She was the daughter of a Glasgow Surgeon who married hastily at the age of eighteen years and bore four children by the time she was twenty-three. Her husband then disappeared from the scene and failed to support her so that she ended up living in Edinburgh under the shelter of her wealthy cousin. When they met she was a slim, blond-haired, attractive woman of around the same age. It seems likely that she was infatuated with Burns' reputation even before they met at a tea party and arranged to meet in her apartment. Unfortunately, Robert came off his horse and probably sustained a tibial plateau fracture of the right knee which rendered him housebound for nearly four weeks. This led to an almost comically passionate exchange of a large number of letters but seems to have prevented a physical consummation of their friendship. On the other hand, although the Penny Post in Edinburgh at that time was more efficient in those days than it is now, some of the letters were delivered personally by Jenny Clow, a twenty year old girl from Fife who was Nancy's maid servant. Whatever the circumstances, by the time the correspondence ended and Robert moved back to Mauchline, it wasn't Nancy but Jenny who was pregnant. A few years later, Robert was to come back to Edinburgh to seek out Jenny who was seriously ill with tuberculosis to give her an undisclosed sum of money. As with Elizabeth Paton's child some years earlier, Robert by this time would happily have taken charge of their three year old son but for reasons unknown, Jenny seems to have declined. After his move to Nithsdale Robert was to meet Nancy for the last time, almost three years later, prior to her departure to Jamaica where her husband had offered her a reconciliation. They exchanged locks of hair and said their farewells and by Christmas Robert sent her three songs, the last of which we all know –

*“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”*

Nancy sailed to Jamaica on the very boat which Robert had booked to sail to the same island four years earlier, but her husband let her down and did not turn up to meet her. She found the climate unpleasant and took the next boat home. On the anniversary of their parting, Robert wrote a letter to her through an intermediary and sent with it a two volume edition of his poems which Creech had just published in Edinburgh.

Last but not least was Jean Armour who was his lover, best friend and wife. She lived in the Armour household immediately adjacent to the Whitefoord Arms where Robert and his friends often socialised. As her father's favourite she had been given a better than average education as she proved by the letters that she wrote in subsequent years. They met shortly after the move to Mossgiel when Robert was twenty-five and Jean was nineteen. Almost immediately, Robert was smitten and he wrote of the “Mauchline Belles” –

*“Miss Miller is fine, Miss Markland's devine,
Miss Smith she has wit, and Miss Betty is braw,
There's beauty and fortune to get wi Miss Morton,
but Armour's the jewel for me o them a’*

Within a year, he had attested in a written document his intention to take her for a wife. Unfortunately her father was not prepared to countenance a penniless farmer as a husband for his

daughter and banished her, not to India, but to Paisley where she stayed with her uncle and aunt. Worse, he took out an action for damages from Burns who had to go into hiding and still compile work for the Kilmarnock Edition. In order to secure the family's future, he booked a passage to Jamaica to work on a plantation to raise money. By June, Jean returned to Mauchline and wrote a letter of penitence to the Kirk Session. In July, the Kilmarnock Edition was published and in September, Jean delivered twins into the Armour household. Burns' time in Edinburgh, his four tours and a second winter in that city, which included the Nancy episode, resulted in virtual separation of the two for fifteen months. On his return, aged twenty-nine, the Armour family accepted him and he set up home with Jean, almost next door, in the centre of Mauchline. In between the various tours she had fallen pregnant and delivered a second set of twins, who died in infancy. There followed a further four months of separation during which he was at Ellisland Farm in Nithsdale, living in a small hut while a house was being slowly built for the family. At this stage, the marriage between Burns and Jean was recognised by the Kirk Session and for a few months he commuted the forty-six miles between Mauchline and Nithsdale on horseback. They spent their last seven years together in Nithsdale. Their son, Francis Wallace Burns was born when the poet was thirty. William Nicol Burns when he was thirty-two, Elizabeth Riddell Burns aged thirty-three and James Glencairn Burns when aged thirty-five. The last child, son Maxwell, was born on the day Burns died at the age of thirty-seven.

After her husband died, Jean took into the household, Elizabeth the five year old daughter of the poet by Ann Park. She was only thirty-one when he died and had lived in her parents' home for almost three-quarters of her life. She was to survive a further thirty-eight years and conduct herself with dignity, kindness and warmth not only to all those who came to see her in Dumfries but also when she went to Edinburgh to meet Robert's old acquaintances including his Nancy.

These then were some of the friends that surrounded Robert Burns during the height of his creativity.

During his lifetime another genius born in Salzburg and living in Vienna was writing prodigious quantities of music. Wolfgang Mozart lived virtually over the same time span as Burns and by the age of thirty-five had written forty symphonies, thirty piano concertos, numerous orchestral and instrumental pieces as well as three famous operas. A hundred years later, Vincent Van Gogh was to die at the age of thirty-seven years, having started serious painting only ten years earlier. His intense output of paintings culminated in seventy pictures in the last seventy days of his life.

We are fortunate in having as our National Bard a man with a similar level of creative output as these others. In material terms, Burns died a poor man but immeasurably he enriched the world.

Gentlemen, I invite you to be upstanding and join me in a toast
The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.