

## Burns Reading : Paisley Burns Club February 2009

# Holy Willie's Prayer

Detailed below is a close study of the background, which gave rise to one of Robert Burns' real masterpieces - Holy Willie's Prayer.

The dramatis personae are:

**Firstly** - The Rev Dr William Auld ,the younger son of the Laird of Ellanton near Symington : born in 1709 he gained an M.A. from Edinburgh and thereafter studied theology at Glasgow and Leyden. He was ordained minister of Mauchline Parish Kirk in 1742 and proved to be a popular if somewhat rigid pastor, a zealous upholder of good old fashioned Calvinist doctrine. He compiled the Mauchline parochial report for the 1791 Statistical Account.

**Secondly** - William Fisher [1737- 1809], who was tenant farmer at Montgarswood, and one of Daddy Auld's leading lieutenants. Though disparaged by Burns, he was well thought of by the Kirk Session ; indeed in 1798 he was appointed to engage with new communicants in the exercise of prayer. His misfortune was to be one of a sub committee of the Session charged with the task of seeking a satisfactory outcome to the dispute with Hamilton, and thereafter being targeted by Burns who probably did not know him well claiming erroneously in a letter to the Rev John McMath that William Fisher was a bachelor. Interestingly Fisher was one of the two elders appointed to inquire of the Armours about the rumour that Jean had been sent to relatives in Paisley to wait out her first pregnancy. Perhaps this explains Burns' accusation in 'The Kirk's Alarms' written in 1789 that Holy Will had "pilfered the alms of the poor". William Fisher died on 13th February 1809 aged 72 having been caught in a snowstorm on his way home from a meeting with his landlord in Mauchline.

**Thirdly** - Gavin Hamilton [1751 - 1805]> a Mauchline lawyer who became a friend and patron of Burns. He subscribed for 40 copies of the Kilmamock Edition and was a regular recipient of letters from Burns up to the spring of 1788 when it would appear that there was a complete breakdown in their friendship, possibly because Hamilton wanted Robert to stand surety for his brother Gilbert re Mossgiel the farm rented to the Burns by Hamilton. Robert having already lent Gilbert £180 from the profit from the Edinburgh Edition refused to risk any more. Hamilton's dispute with the Kirk Session over three different matters between 1777 and 1787 was the catalyst for the poem.

**Finally** - Robert Aitken, orator Bob, a genteel, eloquent lawyer twenty years Burns' senior became a close friend and patron of Burns and gave advice to him about the poems which should be included in the Kilmamock Edition . Indeed Aitken subscribed for 120 copies . Aitken represented Gavin Hamilton in his disputes with the Mauchline Kirk Session.

To counter the influx of travelling beggars , mainly Irish, parishes established a stent, or tax for the relief of the parochial poor. In Mauchline the stent was set at a penny in the pound of rental value and in 1775 Gavin Hamilton was appointed collector of the stent in Mauchline. Five minutes of the Kirk Session in 1777 show that the Kirk Session was having difficulty in getting its hands on the stent collected by Hamilton. The matter spluttered on for some time with Hamilton turning a deaf ear to the Session's pleas : indeed as late as 20th July 1784 a minute showed that Hamilton was continuing to refuse to settle the outstanding sum on his stent

accounts for 1776" 78. The sum involved was just under £7- Hamilton claimed that this shortfall was due to the fact that some people had been unable to pay. The Session eventually took out a summons against Hamilton and in November 1784 Hamilton wrote to the Session taking exception to the manner in which the case against him was being minuted, Session affairs having been relayed to him by members of the Session. In turn the Session took exception to the tone of Hamilton's letter and reserved the right to bring their complaint against Hamilton before the Presbytery and the Commissary of Glasgow. An attempt at conciliation was turned down by Hamilton, who submitted his own 20-page complaint. The Kirk Session now counterattacked by accusing Hamilton of poor attendance at the Kirk, of travelling to Carrick on the Sabbath in spite of being warned by Daddy Auld against so doing, and finally of neglecting family worship. He was cited to appear before the Session to answer these charges.

Hamilton presented himself on January 30th 1785 and admitted to the charges. He then played his trump card - the decision of the Presbytery, as gained by Robert Aitken, that the minutes which had offended him should be struck out of the Mauchline Kirk Session Minute Book.

The Session appealed to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr. In the interim both parties tried to score points off each other but eventually on 17th June 1785 the Session finally admitted defeat and granted Hamilton a certificate stating that he was "free from public scandal or ground of church censure". Holy Willie's Prayer' appeared in the autumn partly in celebration of Hamilton's victory and partly as a stinging attack by Burns on repressive Calvinism. Subsequent to the appearance of the poem in 1785, a third dispute brewed up at the end of July 1787 when Hamilton was again in hot water for having one of his servants dig up potatoes on a Sabbath morning. Incredibly this dispute was carried all the way to the Synod of Glasgow before being thrown out in March 1788. Whatever the rights or wrongs of these matters it seems to be clear that Daddy Auld, an Auld Licht Sabbatarian found the presence of a New Licht Official in Church affairs hard to bear.

As previously stated, towards the end of the aforementioned shenanigans in late 1785, Burns sprang to the defence of his friend Hamilton and produced Holy Willie's Prayer to attack the Kirk's repressive Calvinism and its doctrine of Predestination which he found so offensive. The notion that one was saved by the grace of God and not by the quality of one's actions angered Burns especially when such a philosophy gave a sneak and a hypocrite like Willie Fisher the right to sit in judgement of his fellow man. In the poem one of the elect, Willie Fisher, is shown to be a hypocritical bounder full of bigotry and religious fanaticism. Holy Willie condemns himself and his doctrine as his prayer ranges marvelously from initially appearing to be seemingly religious, through the boastful, the superior, the hypocritical to the viciously belligerent tone of one who calls down God's wrath upon his enemies. Such was the nature of the poem that it was not printed during Burns lifetime but was only available in manuscript. This probably explains why there are different versions in print today. In addition to various minor differences the two major ones which appear are firstly that the stanza

O lord thou kens what zeal I bear.,  
When drinkers drink, and swearers swear,  
And singin' there, and dancin' here,  
Wi 'great and sma',  
For I am keepit by thy fear.  
Free frae them a '

Is not usually included as it is felt to be somewhat weak and it is suspected that it only appeared in an early manuscript and was probably dumped by Burns when he issue later copies of the poem. The second major difference is located in the third last stanza where the last two lines vary significantly

one version reads - While Auld wi' hingin' lip gaed sneaking

And hid his heid.

the other version is While he , wi' hingin' lip an snakin'

Held up his heid.

The 'he' in this latter version is Robert Aitken

Gentlemen if we can sympathize with the anger which Willie Fisher felt at being bested by Hamilton and Aitken, we can better appreciate the magnificence of this work. Some presenters of the poem like to engage their audiences and play for laughs; but it is surely better appreciated if the audience realizes that it is simply eavesdropping upon the outburst of Willie Fisher who through his deep set beliefs, expressed with passion and conviction, condemns not only himself but his religion.

**There then followed a memorable recitation of  
the poem by the speaker, John Mercer**