

President Stewart McDougall - Immortal Memory 2011

The recent completion of the rock tunnelling required to link Switzerland and Italy by way of the 35 mile long Gothard Tunnel, 14 years after the start of construction, indicates the lengths that man will go to in order to make it easier to travel.

Yet earlier last year Eyjafjallajökull was a name that meant nothing to Scots, yet inconvenience, aggravation and finally dire annoyance was rife as that previously innocuous Icelandic volcano caused disruption to air travel across western and northern Europe.

And then there was the series of British Airways cabin crew strikes, planned to disrupt the travel plans of holidaymakers and business travellers at times when these would cause the maximum of inconvenience. And just last month, we had the chaos created by a wee bit of snow and plunging temperatures.

But all of this is not new, for travel has never been never been 'plain sailing'.

In the 18th century, travelling was not for the faint hearted as there were few options in relation to the comfort and method of making a journey. If the trip was overland, it was made either by foot, by horse or by carriage and if a long sea crossing was unavoidable, a strong constitution was essential if the journey was to be survived. And it was still many years until 1825, when travel by steam train became commonplace. That was to change travel forever.

But what of Robert Burns and travel? We know that our national poet made a number of journeys but were these through the natural curiosity of a tourist? Did he travel to take advantage of fame that had come from the publishing of the editions of his poetry? Did he make trips to take up the invitation of hospitality, or was he simply looking for further and wider inspiration for his poetry?

But more to the point, how would these trips affect his future artistic output?

Surely the spirit of travel was implanted in the soul of Burns by his study of the history, songs and ballads of his native Scotland. At an early age, he developed a passionate desire to visit the places that he had become so well acquainted with through the study of poetry and by listening to the tales of battle, strife and struggle from his mother and father at the fireside in the kitchen of the farm at Mount Oliphant.

There he described his life as consisting of:

"The cheerless gloom of a hermit, with the un-easing toil of a galley slave"

It was at Mt Oliphant, aged 15, that he wrote his first love poem, for Nelly Kilpatrick. Nelly's father was a local blacksmith and he had lent Burns a book, "The History of Sir William Wallace," written by Hamilton of Gilbertfield. Burns later said that reading this book gave him more pleasure than anything else. The book was based on Blind Harry's 15th century ballad "The Actis and Deidis of... Schir William Wallace," but was written in the more readable language of the 18th century.

Some years after reading it, Burns wrote:

"The story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins, which will boil along there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest."

The original ballad and subsequent book often refer to Leglen Wood on the banks of the River Ayr, which was a regular hiding place used by Wallace in his quest to avoid capture by the English.

It was natural that when time allowed, the young Burns would follow in the steps of Wallace. He later wrote;

"Many a solitary hour, have I stole out, after the laborious vocations of the day, to shed a tear over the glorious but unfortunate story of Wallace"

And as he continued,

"My heart glowed with a wish to be able to make a song on him in some measure equal to his merits."

It was many years later, in 1793, after mulling over nationalistic ideas, that this wish was fulfilled when he completed 'Scots Wa Hae'.

Although the seeds of travel were implanted in the mind of Burns at a young age, in the early years of toiling for his father and then with his brother Gilbert on the farm, there was little time or money for excursions beyond Ayrshire. Publication of The Kilmarnock Edition in July 1786 and then the success of the Edinburgh Edition the following year were the catalysts for change. He was suddenly, temporarily and briefly, taken out of a life of hard labour and destitution and placed in one of comparative, yet brief affluence.

Burns had always made his intentions clear,

"I have no greater, no dearer aim than to make leisurely pilgrimages through Caledonia; to sit on the fields of her battles; to wander on the romantic banks of her rivers; and to muse by the honoured abodes of her heroes."

Now was his chance to loosen his ties to Ayrshire and explore his native Scotland.

In 1787, it was natural that his first adventure as an 18th century traveller should be to the Borders, followed that same year by separate journeys to Argyllshire, then the Highlands and finally to Clackmannan and Kinross. It was almost as if the prospect of future success had broken the chains that bound him to a life of misery working the Ayrshire soil.

Burns referred to his first trip as being to, "The classic ground of Caledonia – Cowden Knowes, Banks of Yarrow ." And in a letter to Dr Moore, in describing the outline of his trip, he added,

"I shall return to my mural shades, in all likelihood never more to quit them." – this was to be an eerily accurate forecast of his future life."

This first tour took Burns on an erratic journey through the Borders country and the north of England. Initially, Burns had as a travelling companion, Robert Ainslie, a genial young Edinburgh law clerk but for the latter part of his weeks away, it was two farmers, named Hood and Kerr. They provided much less convivial company. Throughout it all, he was mounted on his trusted steed, Jenny Geddes, his *"auld, ja'd, gleyde o' a mere"* later to be celebrated in prose and rhyme, *"up hill and down brae in Scotland and England as teuch and birnie as a very devil."*

He traversed the banks of the rivers Tweed and Jed, but did not seem to be overly impressed by the ruins of the abbeys of Melrose, Jedburgh, Kelso and Coldingham. But wherever he went, in particular in the larger towns, he was feted as a minor celebrity since the success of the two editions had travelled before him. He moved from there into north east England and went as far south as Newcastle and as far west as Carlisle

One unusual aspect of this trip was that it was almost unproductive in terms of poetry or prose. Burns kept a few notes and random jottings but with the exception of the Epistle to William Creech, the publisher of the Edinburgh Edition, which was sent on 13 May from a solitary inn in Selkirk after a miserable wet day's riding, artistically, there was nothing.

From Selkirk, they travelled east to Eyemouth and eventually to Carlisle from where he wrote to 'Kind honest hearted Willie' -Willie Nicol - , the most perfect and almost unique piece of pure Scots prose to be found anywhere in his letters.

There have been several theories put forward for this vacuum, because, the poet's Highland Tour was to prove the opposite and produce several poems and many songs that were worthy of being included in print. You must remember that his Borders Tour was Burns's first real escape from drudgery. He had enjoyed his brief stay in Edinburgh and now he was relishing the role as an 18th century tourist.....or was he?

Professor Shairp, an academic, took the opposite view, preferring to blame the physical and mental state of the poet and stated,

“When all these are remembered, is it to be wondered that Burns should have wandered by the banks of the Tweed in no mood to chant beside it, a music sweeter than its own?”

Shairp felt that Burns’s mental state was such that he could not enjoy or take inspiration from the spectacular scenery.

Whatever the reason for the lack of poetic output, he returned briefly to Mossgiel on 9 June and then on to Edinburgh to take advantage of his continuing and widening fame. He had left Mossgiel barely six months earlier, a rustic Ayrshire rhymer, with only a local reputation and had returned as ‘Caledonia’s Bard, brother Burns’.

Later that month, he was off again, this time heading west to Argyll and Dumbarton, but this trip was anything but a success and little is known of this tour or why he decided to go there.

As he wrote to Ainslie who had been his travelling companion on the first part of his journey to the Borders, he described Argyllshire as;

“One where savage streams tumble over savage mountains, thinly overspread with savage flocks, which sparingly support as savage inhabitants.”

“My last stage was Inverary—to-morrow night’s stage Dumbarton. I ought sooner to have answered your kind letter, but you know I am a man of many sins.”

It was not a good trip and when he reached Inverary he was anticipating, if not a ‘civic’ reception, certainly a better one than he did receive. When he arrived at the Inn, he was completely ignored on account of the presence of some northern chiefs, and when subsequently overlooked by his Grace the Duke of Argyll, the poet let loose his wrath.

*‘Whoe’er he be that sojourns here, I pity much his case,
Unless he’s come to wait upon The Lord their God, his Grace.
There’s naething here but Highland pride
And Highland cauld and hunger;
If Providence has sent me here,
T’was surely in his anger’*

But things improved slightly because on 30 July, he wrote to James Smith from Loch Lomondside, giving him a description of the entertainment at a ‘Highland gentleman’s hospitable mansion’, probably the seat of the Smolletts at Cameron House. He again

underlined why he was discontented with the prospect of returning to the life of a humble tenant farmer and reflected on his enthusiasm for Scottish song and dance.

“Our dancing was none of the French or English insipid formal movements; the ladies sung Scotch songs like angels, at intervals.....”

Burns relished this galavantin’ round the countryside, particularly when it included hospitality from the landed gentry and their attractive daughters, but he realised that he could not live this way indefinitely. As he said in the same letter to Smith,

“I have yet fixed on nothing with respect to the serious business of life. I am, just as usual a rhyming, mason-making, raking, aimless, idle fellow.”

Like the Borders Tour, his trip to Argyllshire was barren in relation to poetic output.

Again, after a brief spell on his farm, the attraction of Edinburgh took him there early in August but was restless so was soon off again, on 25 August, this time on a 22-day journey on what is normally referred to as his ‘Highland Tour’, covering 600 miles.

In the course of these 22 days he would...

Offend the King.....

Convince a lord to plant several million trees at a barren beauty spot.....

Take inspiration from locations that were firmly established in Scotland’s history and culture.....

Socialise with the nobility and men of letters.....

Meet up with the relations of his father.....

And finally....he would decide to concentrate his talent on song rather than poetry.....

The trip north was planned with a travelling companion, Willie Nicol, an Edinburgh schoolmaster and a renowned Latin scholar. Nicol was a man of great talent but his vanity and irascibility made him an embarrassing friend. No one knows when the two met as he does not feature in the list of celebrities and socialites that Burns met at Edinburgh gatherings and whose names he mentioned often in his letters.

It was at the insistence of Nicol that the two should travel in a post-chaise – a wheeled carriage pulled on this occasion by two horses - rather than on horseback, since Nicol was anything but a good horseman. So as Burns writes, “Jenny Geddes goes back to Ayrshire, to use a phrase of my mother’s, ‘wi’ her finger in her mouth”

The two set off from Edinburgh in high spirits and travelled by way of Linlithgow to Bannockburn and then Stirling. Burns had planned that this tour would prove more prolific in artistic output than his Borders tour. He kept a diary, wrote a number of letters and produced about a dozen poems and songs, many of which indicated that he had been moved by the scenery through which they had travelled.

On reaching Bannockburn he described how he, *“said a fervent prayer for old Caledonia over the hole in the blue whinstone where Robert de Bruce fixed his royal standard.”*

He wrote in his diary,

“I fancy to myself that I see my gallant, heroic countrymen coming o’er the hill and down upon the plunderers of their country, the murderers of their fathers, noble revenge and just hate glowing in every vein, striding more and more eagerly as they approach the oppressive, insulting and blood-thirsty foe. I see them meet in gloriously triumphant congratulation on the victorious field. Exulting in their heroic royal leader, and in rescued liberty and independence.”

Burns and Nicol then travelled the short distance to Stirling where Burns was suitably impressed by the Castle; the view over the Carse of Stirling from the ramparts and then the Grand Hall where the Scottish kings used to preside over parliament.

On the night of his stay in Stirling, in James Wingate’s Inn, perhaps egged on by Nicol and fortified by a glass or two of French claret, he scratched, using his diamond ring, lines that were less than complementary to the House of Hanover:

*‘An idiot race to honour lost
Who know them best despise them most.’*

Later, he returned to attempt to remove the offending lines, but by that time, they had been reported in newspapers and taken as further evidence of his continuing disloyalty to the Crown.

From Stirling, the travellers went up Strathallan to Strathearn and through Glenalmond to Dunkeld, then by way of Killiecrankie and Tummell to Blair Athole. The stop at Dunkeld almost certainly had a great influence on Burns’s later artistic output for it was there that he met Neil Gow, the grand old man of Scottish fiddling and by far, the best known of the Scots fiddle composers. I would not claim to have anything near to his ability, but, unlike Gow, I might be unique in having my fiddling described by a past president of Paisley Burns Club as having, ‘a certain rustic charm’. Was that a complement?

Gow was a full-time musician with 87 Scottish airs to his name and was supported by the patronage of the Duke of Athole. As he and Burns conversed and exchanged their knowledge of Scottish airs, the old man became increasingly impressed with Burns’s musical knowledge and of his love of Scottish song – much of this coming from his mother Agnes who had fine singing voice. It is likely that this meeting convinced Burns not only that

the artistic road ahead should be in song, but that he should take up the offer of hospitality from the Duke of Athole at Blair Castle.

The invitation to Blair Athole had come from the Duchess but it was her sisters and in particular Mrs Graham who really caught Burns's eye. All three were taken by the poet's wit, incisive conversation and certainly his flattery and they tried really hard to persuade him to stay a bit longer. But while Burns wanted to remain, Willie who was envious at the attention from the 'girls', would have none of it and refused to extend the stay.

Here was the first example of Willie's jealousy and petulance that was to plague the rest of the trip. As Burns said later, *"It was like travelling with a loaded blunderbuss at full cock."*

Fortunately, The Duke managed to persuade Burns, accompanied by his future biographer, Professor Walker, to visit the Falls of Bruar on his way north. Even then, the Falls were a popular beauty spot, but the area surrounding them was devoid of trees. Burns believed that a bit of planting would do no harm and later wrote an 11 verse poem, 'The Humble petition of Bruar Water to the Noble Duke of Athole', in which he made the case for the Duke to over-plant the barren landscape

*' Would then my noble master please
To grant my highest wishes,
He'll shade my banks wi' tow'ring trees,
And bonnie spreading bushes.
Delighted doubly then, my Lord,
You'll wander on my banks,
And listen mony a grateful bird
Return you tuneful thanks.'*

Next, Burns and Nicol traversed the Grampians, crossed the Spey and Findhorn and then reached Fort George, visiting Cawdor in passing. Heading west, they briefly stopped at Culloden, then reached Inverness and went down Loch Ness as far as the Falls of Fyers which he commemorated in verse.

At Fochabers, the travellers visited Castle Gordon and it was here that Nicol really showed the petulance that had irked Burns since the start of the journey. As always, Burns was charmed by the adulation of the noble proprietors, but forgot that he had left his companion at the Fochabers Inn, and when he tried to pacify Nicol, the scholar insisted on pressing on.

Off they set once again with the poet ruing a missed opportunity for a few pleasant days in convivial company. As an apology to his hosts, Burns sent the countess a number of short poems that included. 'On the Duchess of Gordon's Reel Dancing.

*'She kiltit up her kirtle weel
To show her bonie cutes sae sma',
And walloped about the reel,
The lightest louter o' them a'!*

Their next stops were at Forres, Cullen, Aberdeen and Stonehaven where Burns had arranged to meet relations of his father's.

Montrose he thought a fine handsome town, then to Dundee, along the banks of the Tay to Perth and then through what he described as 'a cold, barren country by way of Kinross', to Queensferry and across the Forth to Edinburgh.

He parted with fond memories of the Highlands but not of the East coast where he was less than impressed. These memories he would recall in both conversation and song, but in the next few winter months he began to have doubts over his long term commitment to poetry. His popularity in Edinburgh, while on the surface polite and socially correct, was not genuine or deep seated and he quickly became disillusioned with life in the capitol, perhaps because payments from Creech were slow in coming forward and patronage of the nobility was eclipsed by political intrigue.

He remarked;

"My journey through the Highlands was perfectly inspiring; and I hope I have laid in a good stock of new poetical ideas from it. I have done nothing else but visited cascades, prospects, ruins and Druidical temples, learned Highland tunes and pickt up Scotch songs, Jacobite anecdotes, these two months."

He was to make another, brief, two-week tour that year to Clackmannan and Fife, but for the next six years, his duties as an exciseman gave him little time to travel as a tourist.

It can argued that Burns had embarked on his tours, not simply as the naive tourist, eager to see more of his native country, but in an attempt to capitalise on and reinforce the fame that had come from the publishing of the two editions of his poetry. He enjoyed fame, he relished hospitality from the landed gentry, he kept in touch with his true supporters and benefactors and he left a lasting record in verse, prose and song of little more than half of the 37 years of his short life.

Yet after the publication of the two editions of his poetry, the great body of Burns's poetic output between early 1787 and late 1792 went into the Scots Musical Museum, Edinburgh engraver James Johnston's 'Collection of Scots, English and Irish Songs'. Before 1788, Burns had written less than 50 songs, yet under his influence and editing, the Scots Musical Museum ran to six volumes, reflecting his enthusiasm for Scots song for the remainder of his life. In total he contributed over 200 songs to the 'Museum' out of his lifetime's effort of more than 350

Burns did not always write completely new, original lyrics. On the contrary, he was often interested in perpetuating an old song by remodelling it, by adding his creative touch to it, while preserving as much as possible of the traditional form and words. In a number of songs, he retained only the chorus of the original model, or a traditional line or key-phrase, creating new lyrics to fill out the rest of the song-form. Often enough he left an old song basically intact, at most adding a touch here and there. Some Burns scholars even suggest that only in a minority of the songs did he compose completely new lyrics.

I prefer to think the opposite!

Whatever the debate, Robert Burns's poetry, his letters, his notes and particularly his songs, are a legacy, as are the stone and mortar of the cottage in which we meet each month to commemorate his life; a legacy that will endure long after we are gone.

Gentlemen, please be upstanding and join me in the toast.....

'The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns'