

Burns, Robert

(1759–1796)

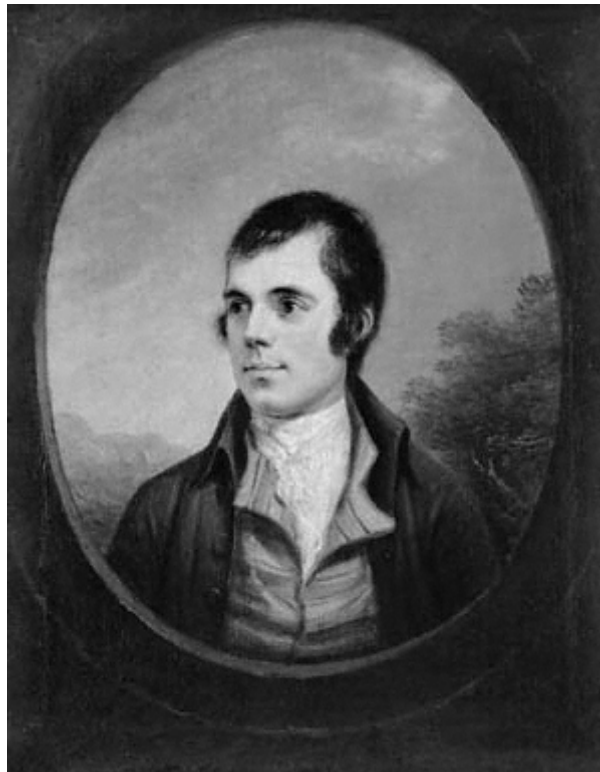
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Robert Burns (1759–1796)

by Alexander Nasmyth, 1787

Scottish National Portrait Gallery <http://www.natgalscot.ac.uk/>

Burns, Robert (1759–1796), poet, was born on 25 January 1759 in a two-room clay cottage built by his father (and now restored as Burns's Cottage) at Alloway, Ayrshire, the eldest of the four sons and three daughters of William Burnes (1721–1784), gardener and tenant farmer, and his wife, Agnes Brown (1732–1820), of Maybole, Ayrshire.

Ancestry and childhood

Burns's grandfather Robert Burnes (c.1685–c.1760) had worked as gardener to the Earl Marischal at Inverugie Castle, Aberdeenshire. Burns believed that this Robert Burnes had suffered for his Jacobite sympathies at the time of the 1715 Jacobite rising; afterwards he became a struggling farmer in

Kincardineshire, and his third son, William (born at Clochnahill farm, Dunnottar, Kincardineshire), headed south, working as a gardener first in Edinburgh and then in Ayrshire. In 1754 William engaged himself for two years to work as gardener for John Crawford of Doonside House, near Alloway, 2 miles south of Ayr. By 1756 he had feued from Dr Alexander Campbell of Ayr 7½ acres of land near Alloway with the intention of setting up a market garden. There he began to build his cottage while also working as head gardener for Provost William Fergusson of Doonholm, Alloway. In the summer of 1756 William Burnes met Agnes Brown at Maybole fair; they married on 15 December 1757. William Burnes was comparatively well educated for a Scottish peasant. He valued learning and sought to procure education for his sons and daughters; later he prepared a short catechism for the instruction of his children, and instigated attempts to care for the historic local church, Kirk Alloway. Agnes Brown could not write but had a good knowledge of ballads and songs, having come from an extended family in which such lore was valued.

Burns was born into a small, Scots-speaking, west-of-Scotland rural community in which vernacular culture was strong. Betty Davidson (widow of Agnes's cousin) lived with the Burnes family and, as the poet put it later, 'cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy' in the wee boy Robert (*Letters*, 1.135). Superstitious and unlettered, Betty entertained the children with what Burns recalled in his 1787 autobiographical letter to the London Scottish novelist Dr John Moore as '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'. Such accounts preoccupied the young boy, who also heard from his mother frankly erotic traditional Scots songs and ballads. Although local vernacular culture was strong the community was linked to the wider world and to English-language culture through church, education, and other channels. William Burnes became a private subscriber to Ayr Library (founded in 1762). Moreover William and Agnes were friendly with, for instance, William Paterson, Latin master of Ayr's grammar school, and with that school's writing master, while William Dalrymple, the young Ayr minister who baptized Robert on 26 January 1759, went on to become moderator of the Church of Scotland. By the age of seven Robert had been taught some reading and writing, having been enrolled by his father in William Campbell's short-lived school at Alloway Mill in 1765; when Campbell left William Burnes obtained a tutor for his children and those of four other local families. This was John Murdoch (1747–1824), an Ayr man, who worked with William Burnes to teach Robert to comprehend and to commit to memory passages of English. Robert was sometimes punished by Murdoch for pranks, but he and his younger brother Gilbert (1760–1827) were usually near the top of Murdoch's class in spelling and parsing. Murdoch recalled how he taught his young pupils 'to turn verse into its natural prose order; and sometimes to substitute synonymous expressions for poetical words' (Mackay, 34). Among the schoolbooks used were the *Bible* and Arthur Masson's *A Collection of Prose and Verse, from the Best English Authors*, in which Robert particularly enjoyed passages of Addison. He also read 'in private' for the first time, devouring accounts of Hannibal and of Sir William Wallace, whose narrative 'poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins' (*Letters*, 1.135–6).

Late in 1765 Burns's father, seeking a larger house, took out a lease on Provost Fergusson's farm at the more isolated, less easily cultivated Mount Oliphant, near Alloway, but William Burnes had to keep paying the lease of his Alloway land too, since he could find no taker for it. So began a series of financial struggles that were to affect the Burnes family. By 1768, when John Murdoch moved to Dumfries, William and Agnes Burnes were living at Mount Oliphant with five children and no school nearby. William worked on the farm

by day and taught the children arithmetic by candlelight, talking to his sons as if they were fellow men. In 1768 John Murdoch visited and reduced the family to tears with his reading from *Titus Andronicus*. Robert's father borrowed and passed to his sons such improving volumes as William Derham's *Astro-Theology* (1714) and John Ray's *Wisdom of God Manifest in the Works of Creation* (1691). The young boy began to take a sometimes puzzled and sceptical interest in questions of Calvinist theology, much debated in the local area, where (as elsewhere in Scotland) the more extreme faction of Auld Licht presbyterians was in contention with the more moderate New Licht wing of the Church of Scotland; he also devoured a collection of '*Letters by the most eminent writers*' and was inspired to imitate their English-language eloquence (Mackay, 43).

By his early teens Burns was familiar with the work of ploughing, though for a time his father also sent him and Gilbert 'week about during a summer quarter' to the parish school of Dalrymple, near Maybole (Mackay, 45). About this time Robert also encountered a version of Richardson's *Pamela* and some fiction by Smollett. By 1772 he had access to the *Edinburgh Magazine* and (thanks to a gift from Murdoch) the works of Pope. In 1773 his father sent him to Ayr for some sporadic teaching from Murdoch, including lessons in French and an amount of Latin. He was also acquainted with the more vernacular chapbooks and broadsheets of printed ballads sold by rural hawkers. Like several other Scottish writers Burns was in important ways bicultural, brought up on traditional (largely oral) Scots-language songs and narratives, as well as on English-language book culture.

Early compositions

By 1774 Burns was beginning to compose songs. In his autobiographical letter to Dr Moore in 1787 he recalled that in his 'fifteenth autumn' he 'first committed the sin of RHYME' by making a song for a 'bewitching' girl with whom he had been partnered at harvest time, and for whom he had conceived a reciprocated passion: 'twas her favourite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme' (*Letters*, 1.137). Though Burns lacked any formal musical education the sense here of a traditional Scottish tune underlying the poet's words, which become an 'embodied vehicle' for it, is important to much of his work, as is his linking of poetry with the 'bewitching', the erotic, and a mercurial consciousness of 'sin'. His earliest songs were not 'like printed ones, composed by men who had Greek and Latin' but were suited to those 'living in the moors' (*ibid.*, 137–8). This may have been so but Burns's first poems often appear exercises in the rhetoric of eighteenth-century book-verse:

Avaunt, away! the cruel sway,
Tyrannic man's dominion.

R. Burns, Song, Composed in AugustBy 1775 Burns was at school again, for a time studying 'Mensuration, Surveying, Dialling, &c.' under Hugh Rodger (1726–1797), the parish dominie in Kirkoswald, not far from the farm of Shanter, in Carrick, on the Firth of Clyde (*Letters*, 1.140). There he had a passionate encounter with a local girl, thirteen-year-old Peggy Thomson, with whom he kept in touch for some years; he also larked, and debated Calvinist theology with local lads. In Kirkoswald he read Thomson and Shenstone, and developed his own, studied epistolary eloquence.

Dr Fergusson, William Burnes's landlord, died in 1776 and the struggling Burnes moved inland from Mount Oliphant to the windswept, boggy 130-acre farm of Lochlie, in the nearby parish of Tarbolton. There the young Burns romanced local girls and read the works of Allan Ramsay, alongside a collection of English songs, while he developed his own poetic gifts in the composition of songs to local girls and celebrations of the local terrain. As a young man he developed a great fondness for dancing and assumed a slightly dandified appearance. His teenage friend David Sillar recalled the young Burns attending kirk in Tarbolton regularly with his family, when he 'wore the only tied hair in the parish; and in the church, his plaid, which was of a particular colour, I think *fillemot*, he wrapped in a particular manner round his shoulders' (Mackay, 76). Reading theology and (by 1781) *Tristram Shandy*, confident with women, and maturing as a poet, Burns was sociable and popular in the local community. Working hard on his father's farm, he also found time to practise the fiddle. Though he never became adept at this instrument he learned to read music with some competence, and later attempted to play the German flute. As well as Scots songs addressed to various sweethearts the young Burns was turning verses of the psalms into quatrains, and several early English-language poems reflect a concern with the precariousness of existence ('*To Ruin*', for instance, and '*A Prayer, under the Pressure of Violent Anguish*'). While such works may have the quality of exercises they represent a fear of despair that dogged Burns, counterpointing his normal joviality. So among his early works the dark and the jaunty are often hand in hand.

On 11 November 1780 in a top-floor room in John Richards's alehouse in the Sandgate, Tarbolton (a room also used for masonic meetings), Burns founded the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, perhaps the earliest Scottish rural debating society. This all-male fraternity, whose rules were drafted by Burns, swore its members to secrecy and demanded that each 'must be a professed lover of one or more of the female sex'. Swearing was forbidden, social drinking encouraged, and haughtiness prohibited, so that 'the proper person for this society is a cheerful, honest-hearted lad'. Topics debated by the club included suitable marriage partners and 'Whether is the savage man or the peasant of a civilized society in the most happy situation' (Mackay, 82–3). Such a topic is at one with the Scottish Enlightenment interest in the progress of 'civil society', and it is evident that the young Burns was developing an interest in such works as Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), with its ethic of sympathy as a social bond. By 1781 he was also praising Henry Mackenzie's novel of sympathetic sentimentality, *The Man of Feeling* (1771), which he carried so frequently on his person that his copy disintegrated and had to be replaced. In 1783 he described Mackenzie's novel as 'a book I prize next to the *Bible*' (*Letters*, 1.17).

Sometimes happy, but also sometimes hurt and rebuffed in his own affairs of the heart, Burns in 1781 decided to strike out in a new direction and become a flax-dresser in the Ayrshire town of Irvine; this venture failed, the shop in which he worked burned down, and Burns suffered a bout of depression in late 1781. At this time he also read with great appreciation the Scots and English poems of Robert Fergusson (1750–1774), who had died in Edinburgh's madhouse. While in Irvine, Burns enjoyed a very close 'bosom-friendship' with the sailor Captain Richard Brown (1753–1833), with whom he walked in Eglinton Woods, where Brown suggested to the still unpublished poet that he send his poems to a magazine (*Letters*, 1.142). Though Burns does not seem to have acted on this suggestion he sent Brown one of the very few personal presentation copies of the first, Kilmarnock, edition of his poems when that volume appeared in 1786.

During 1781 Burns had also become a freemason, having been 'entered an Apprentice' in the combined Lodge St David, Tarbolton, on 4 July (Mackay, 119). He became an active mason, rising to depute master of St James Lodge, Tarbolton, by 1784. During Burns's deputy mastership Professor Dugald Stewart of Catrine, who later championed the poet's work, was made an honorary member of the lodge. Through masonic contacts Burns also came to know Sir John Whitefoord (1734–1803), the agricultural improver, whose own contacts were later of use to the aspiring poet. Burns returned to Lochlie in 1782 to find matters there deteriorating. Struggling with the farm's acidic soil, William Burnes was facing severe financial problems. By 1783 his property had been sequestrated, and he was being pursued through the courts for rent arrears. Bad summers in 1782 and 1783 added to William's troubles and, though he succeeded in winning his law case before Lord Braxfield, the disastrous harvest of 1783 saw him a broken man, fighting tuberculosis; he died on 13 February 1784, and his body was taken for burial at the ruined Kirk Alloway. Burns's admiration for his father was great and is reflected in *'The Cotter's Saturday Night'*, with its portrait of noble paternal concern and undaunted domestic virtue.

In April 1783 Burns at Lochlie began to keep a commonplace book of 'Observations, Hints, Songs, Scraps of Poetry, etc.', including his own shrewd critical appraisals of his verse. He was conscious of the curious interest that a ploughman's literary concerns might have for future readers. As well as reworking comic and erotic song and ballad materials he composed several poems relating to his father's death; a strange fusion of the comic and elegiac is evident in *'The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie, the Author's Only Pet Yowe: an Unco Mournfu' Tale'*, which builds on earlier works such as *'The Last Dying Words of Bonnie Heck'* (a greyhound) by Allan Ramsay's friend William Hamilton of Gilbertfield (c.1665–1751). Appearing in his commonplace book along with several mock epitaphs, Burns's poem treats with a tenderly comic voice the anxieties of death and the agricultural grind; at once mock-elegy and genuine lament, this poem led to another, *'Poor Mailie's Elegy'* (composed about 1785), which uses the six-line 'Standard Habbie' verse form inherited from the comic elegy *'The Life and Death of Habbie Simson, the Piper of Kilbarchan'* by Robert Sempill of Beltrees (c.1595–c.1665). Burns's verse artistry led him to give new life to several Scottish stanza forms, making them 'crucial to the national spirit of his poetry' (Crawford, 84). He made such great use of the Standard Habbie stanza form in such works as *'Holy Willie's Prayer'* (1785), which mocks Calvinist hypocrisy, and in his verse letters that it acquired the name 'Burns stanza'. Its flicking short lines towards the end of each stanza lend themselves to speedy nods and winks:

Maybe thou lets this fleshy thorn
Buffet thy servant e'en and morn,
Lest he o'er proud and high should turn,
That he's sae gifted;
If sae, thy hand maun e'en be borne
Untill thou lift it.

R. Burns, *Holy Willie's Prayer* Burns comes to use this stanza form in the period in the mid-1780s when he clearly blossoms as a poet. The form, already over a century old, transmits metrically an impulse to fuse the solemn and the lightly risible, the dark and the boisterous, which Burns inherited, developed, and transmitted with mischievous grace. Many of his finest poems delight in juxtaposing or blending uneasily

defended respectability with gleefully subversive energy. His commonplace book functioned as a literary laboratory in this regard, and by about 1785 most elements of his literary personality had been assembled, including a humorous and purposeful tendency to view himself as what Robert Fergusson had called a 'Bardie'—at once an ambitious poet of his people in full flight and a snook-cocking belittler of the grandiose tendencies in himself and others.

Burns knew about bards from his enthusiastic reading of the poems of Ossian, but his own mundane struggles were far removed from the nobly misty realms of that bard. In 1784, following their father's death, Gilbert and Robert took a lease on another farm, at Mossgiel, in the neighbouring parish of Mauchline. Drainage there was poor, and for all the brothers' efforts they were beset with problems of bad seed, hard frosts, and late harvests. During that summer and autumn, troubled by 'a kind of slow fever' and 'langor of my spirits' (*Letters*, 1.23), Burns seems to have suffered another bout of depressive or psychosomatic illness, though he was also enjoying the 'honours masonic' and the 'big-belly'd bottle' of the lodge (R. Burns, No churchman am I). On 22 May 1785 an uneducated servant woman in her early twenties, Elizabeth Paton, gave birth to Burns's daughter Elizabeth (1785–1817)—'Dear-bought Bess' (Mackay, 137). Burns had made no promise to wed his lover, who later married a farmworker and widower, John Andrew, in 1788, after the poet and 'handsome Betsey' had apparently paid a fine and done penance for fornication before Tarbolton Kirk Session (R. Burns, *The Fornicator*). Burns's poem '*The Fornicator*' details these events, but was not published in his lifetime.

Styling himself Rab Mossgiel, Burns wrote flirtatious as well as satirical verse at this time, when he was paying court to Jean Armour (1765–1834), the literate daughter of a Mauchline stonemason, though he also dallied with other local girls. By summer 1785, recovered from his illness and fired up by the poetry of those whom he called in his first commonplace book 'the excellent Ramsay, and the still more excellent [Robert] Fergus[s]on', Burns was committing himself to a concentrated and ambitious aesthetic of the local, eager to write poems that celebrated his native ground (Mackay, 156). His sense of himself as a Scottish poet was developing, and Gilbert was encouraging him to go into print, though the shock of the death of his youngest brother, John (aged sixteen), on 1 November 1785 meant that his awareness of tribulation also remained heightened. To this period belong some of Burns's major verse epistles as well as '*Holy Willie's Prayer*', a spirited and sly dramatic monologue that satirizes the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and its hypocritical exponent William Fisher (1737–1809), an elder in the parish of Mauchline who had been involved in a series of vigorously prosecuted kirk disputes with Burns's Mossgiel landlord and friend, the lawyer Gavin Hamilton (1751–1805). In his prefatory headnote, setting out the argument of '*Holy Willie's Prayer*', Burns describes Holy Willie as 'justly famed for that polemical chattering which ends in tipping Orthodoxy, and for that Spiritualized Bawdry which refines to Liquorish Devotion'; the poem that follows is equally devastating. This work is one of a group of contemporary satires on local kirk politics and arguments featuring neighbouring ministers and worthies; these poems include '*The Holy Fair*', '*The Twa Herds, or, The Holy Tulzie*', and '*Death and Dr Hornbook*'. 1785 was also the year of the composition of Burns's '*Address to the Deil*', in which the devil (hailed variously as 'auld Cloots', 'Hornie', and 'Nick') is spoken to with confident wonder as well as familiar vernacular directness; as in '*Hallowe'en*' this is one of the poems in which Burns clearly delights in his repertory of folklore and superstitious tales. A mischievously confident tone married to a sense of inexhaustible and undeflected purposefulness characterizes these poems, as it does such different works as '*The Twa Dogs: a Tale*' (about social

inequality), *'The Vision'* (presenting Burns's local muse in Ossianic 'duans'), and a superb series of verse epistles in Standard Habbie. These poetic letters were actually sent, and should be seen as reinforcing Burns's emphasis on vernacular communion and on the local as paramount. This poetic outpouring in 1785 shows a determined confidence, though poems of the same period such as *'To a Mouse'* demonstrate a continuing sense of vulnerability and the need for social sympathy.

By early 1786, when Burns was composing such works as *'The Cotter's Saturday Night'* (that pious celebration of impoverished domestic virtue), it became evident that Jean Armour was going to have Burns's child. He was reluctant to marry her but seems to have given her some documentary assurance (now lost) that he would stick by her. Jean Armour's father reacted angrily, had resort to law, and had this 'unlucky paper' mutilated, sending off his daughter to Paisley (*Letters*, 1.30). While the kirk investigated the affair Burns was well advanced with arranging for the publication (by subscription) of his first volume of poems. With Jean in Paisley he made eyes at Margaret Campbell ('another wife', who appears to have died young and is remembered as the shadowy 'Highland Mary'), though when Jean returned in early summer 1786 Burns protested that he adored her and had tried to forget her by running into 'all kinds of dissipation and riot, Mason-meetings, drinking matches, and other mischief' (*ibid.*, 37, 39). Emotionally upset, he resolved to sail as an emigrant to Jamaica ('farewel dear old Scotland, and farewel dear, ungrateful Jean'), but was called to do public penance on the stool of repentance ('the creepy chair') at Mauchline kirk on 25 June 1786, with further public rebukes on 23 July and on 3 August, when Burns, Jean Armour, and three other fornicators were 'absolved from scandal' by the Auld Licht minister, the Revd William ('Daddy') Auld (*ibid.*, 39; Mackay, 191). On 22 July Burns had made over his share in Mossgiel and all his property to his brother Gilbert. Jean Armour's father took out a writ for damages against Burns, threatening him with imprisonment. Burns fled towards Kilmarnock, wrote letters to friends about his forthcoming volume of poems, and planned his emigration to Jamaica on 1 September. Backed by local Kilmarnock businessmen and published by John Wilson of Kilmarnock, Burns's *Poems* appeared at the end of July, and during August he collected money from subscribers to the book. His departure for Jamaica from Greenock was now rescheduled for the end of September. On 3 September he received news of the birth of his twins: a son, Robert, and a daughter, Jean. Paternal emotions and the possibility of a second edition of his book seem to have led him to abandon his Jamaica plans, though he arranged for a ticket that would have allowed him to emigrate in October.

Book publication and visits to Edinburgh

Burns's preface to the 240-page Kilmarnock *Poems*, *Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, published in 1786, presents the author as one who lacked 'all the advantages of learned art' and who, being 'Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule', instead 'sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language'. The book, published in an edition of just over 600 copies, contained forty-four poems, in Scots and in English, including such substantial recent works as *'Scotch Drink'*, *'The Twa Dogs'*, *'The Vision'*, and *'The Cotter's Saturday Night'*. Thanks not least to the large number of subscribers obtained by Gilbert Burns and the poet's friends, the edition sold out in a month, making Burns a profit of over £50. John Wilson wished Burns to advance money for a second edition, but the poet was reluctant to hazard this. The book had won

him intense local admiration among the common people and gentry. A local minister, the Revd George Lawrie of Loudoun, sent Burns's *Poems* to an Edinburgh literary friend, the blind poet the Revd Thomas Blacklock, who asked his friend Professor Dugald Stewart to read some of the poems aloud to him. Blacklock wrote enthusiastically to Lawrie, hoping that there would be a second edition of the poems, and his letter was passed on to Burns, who soon gave up his emigration plans. In autumn 1786 he visited the Lawries, lent George's son Archibald a two-volume edition of *Ossian* and some books of songs and Scottish poetry, and got on well with the family. By 23 October he was dining with Lord Daer (recently returned from France, where he had met leading revolutionaries) and Dugald Stewart at the latter's house near Mauchline. Stewart recalled Burns then and later as 'simple, manly, and independent', noting that:

Nothing, perhaps, was more remarkable among his various attainments than the fluency, and precision, and originality of his language, when he spoke in company; more particularly as he aimed at purity in his turn of expression, and avoided, more successfully than most Scotchmen, the peculiarities of Scottish phraseology.

Mackay, 243

Burns and his poetry also appealed to other local figures, including the widowed grandmother Frances Anna Wallace, Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop, who began to correspond with the poet. By November, encouraged by his new acquaintances, Burns was proposing to visit Edinburgh, with plans for a second edition of his poems to be published there. He was also exploring the possibility of earning his living as an excise officer, a plan that would later bear fruit.

Late in November 1786 Burns rode to Edinburgh, fêted along the way by lowland farmers who had read his verse. On arrival he shared lodgings in the house of a Mrs Carfrae ('a flesh-disciplining, godly Matron') in a tenement, now demolished, at Baxter's Close, Lawnmarket (*Letters*, 1.83). Using his network of masonic connections, as well as other supporters, Burns investigated the likelihood of a new edition of his *Poems*. Dugald Stewart had given a copy of the Kilmarnock edition to the novelist and Edinburgh man of letters Henry Mackenzie, who reviewed the book in his magazine, *The Lounger*, on 9 December 1786, calling attention to Burns as a 'Heaven-taught ploughman' whose 'neglected merit' Scotland should recognize. Other Edinburgh reviewers also praised Burns in November and December 1786, while the influential earl of Glencairn secured the agreement of the hundred or so gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt that they would all subscribe to a second edition of Burns's *Poems*, which (with its dedication to the Caledonian Hunt) was published by subscription on 17 April 1787 by the famous and tight-fisted Edinburgh bookseller William Creech, who eventually paid Burns £100 for the copyright. The typesetter was William Smellie, one of the founders of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; he introduced Burns to the all-male club that he had founded, the Crochallan Fencibles, for which Burns collected bawdy songs and where he met several of his fellow masons. Published in an edition of about 3000 copies, the 408-page Edinburgh volume of his poems was an immediate success, with ploughman Burns cannily presenting what his preface called 'my wild, artless notes'. Among the new poems added to the volume were the vigorous, slyly modulated Scots poems '*Address to the Unco Guid*' and '*Death and Dr Hornbook*', as well as the '*Address to Edinburgh*', in which Burns on his best behaviour delivers a paean to 'Edina! *Scotia's* darling seat!'

During winter 1786–7 Burns seems to have engaged in several dalliances (resulting in at least one child) but also met many of Edinburgh's distinguished literati, and was given star treatment. At the house of the philosopher and historian Professor Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) he met the scientists James Hutton and William Black, along with the playwright John Home and the sixteen-year-old Walter Scott. Scott recalled that Burns wept on seeing a print of a soldier lying dead in the snow beside his widow, with a child in her arms. According to Scott the twenty-eight-year-old Burns (5 feet 10 inches tall) 'was strong and robust: his manners rustic, not clownish'; he had 'a sort of dignified plainness and simplicity' that made Scott think of:

a very sagacious country farmer of the old Scotch school—*i.e.* none of your modern agriculturists, who keep labourers for their drudgery, but the *douce gudeman* who held his own plough. There was a strong expression of sense and shrewdness in all his lineaments; the eye alone, I think, indicated the poetical character and temperament. It was large, and of a dark cast, and glowed (I say literally *glowed*) when he spoke with feeling or interest.

Lockhart, 115–17

Scott recalled also that Burns, who talked of Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson 'with too much humility as his models', was at that time 'much caressed in Edinburgh, but (considering what literary emoluments have been since his day) the efforts made for his relief were extremely trifling'. For the young Scott, Burns's 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 ... his dress corresponded with his manner. He was like a farmer dressed in his best to dine with the laird ... his address to females was extremely deferential, and always with a turn either to the pathetic or humorous, which engaged their attention particularly.

Mackay, 267

The Revd Hugh Blair, the elderly professor of rhetoric and belles-lettres at Edinburgh University, pronounced himself 'a great friend to Mr. Burns's *Poems*' and made suggestions about what Burns should include and exclude from his second, Edinburgh, edition, judging that his rollicking cantata '*Love and Liberty*' ('*The Jolly Beggars*') was 'too licentious' and 'altogether unfit' for publication (Low, 82). This spirited work of 1785 is set in Poosie (that is, Pussy) Nancie's doss-house (then disreputable, now splendidly preserved) for the 'lowest orders' in Mauchline, and it is hard to think of Hugh Blair warming to a text one of whose boozy singers proclaims:

A fig for those by LAW protected
LIBERTY's a glorious feast!
COURTS for Cowards were erected,
CHURCHES built to please the Priest.

Burns excluded *'Love and Liberty'* from the Edinburgh edition, and it was not published until 1799. While he respected Blair, Burns got on better with Blair's younger colleague and professorial successor, the Revd William Greenfield, who became moderator of the Church of Scotland but was later dismissed after a homosexual scandal. Promoted in Edinburgh society by such figures as the duchess of Gordon, Burns was also toasted at Edinburgh's St Andrew's masonic lodge as 'Caledonia's bard, brother Burns' (*Letters*, 1.83). In Edinburgh he made friends not only with noble patrons but also with people such as the printer Smellie and the borders law clerk Robert Ainslie (1766–1838), who became a close companion and confidant.

Burns composed comparatively little verse during his six-month stay in Edinburgh, but one of his most revealing acts was to write to the bailies of the Canongate to complain that the remains of the poet Robert Fergusson, 'a man whose talents for ages to come will do honor to our Caledonian name', lay buried in the Canongate churchyard 'unnoticed and unknown'; the bailies granted Burns permission to erect a headstone on Fergusson's grave (*ibid.*, 90). Though the clerkly Fergusson, educated at St Andrews University, came from a background rather different from that of Burns he was the Scottish poet to whom Burns felt closest. Early in 1787 Burns wrote three poems to Fergusson's memory, calling him:

my elder brother in Misfortune,
By far my elder Brother in the muse.

Fergusson's vivid vernacularity, his poetically vigorous championing of Scots language and of Scottish culture, and his depressive decline all struck chords with Burns, who modelled several of his poems, including *'The Cotter's Saturday Night'*, on Fergusson's originals. Burns recognized in Allan Ramsay and in Fergusson channels of vernacular skill and poetic vitality; his own verse launches out from such Scottish examples. Early in 1787 he wrote to his admirer Mrs Dunlop that 'The appellation of, a Scotch Bard, is by far my highest pride', and that he hoped to visit patriotic sights, making 'leisurely pilgrimages through Caledonia' (*Letters*, 1.101). Several works of this period celebrate peculiarly Scottish subjects. Where Fergusson had dreamed of feeding haggis to Samuel Johnson, Burns celebrated that Scottish delicacy with humorously patriotic glee in his address *'To a Haggis'*, apparently the first of his poems to be published in a newspaper; celebrating the 'honest, sonsie face' of the 'Great Chieftain o' the Puddin-race', it appeared in the *Caledonian Mercury* in December 1786.

Several portraits of Burns were painted during his first Edinburgh visit. The first, by the coach painter and sign writer Peter Taylor, is in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. Alexander Nasmyth, commissioned by Creech to paint a portrait of Burns from which John Beugo made an engraving for the Edinburgh edition of the *Poems*, became a walking companion of the poet. In entries from his second commonplace book that date from this period Burns recorded with a certain self-mocking tone comments on some of the people whom he encountered, including Blair, Greenfield, and the Creech who was slow to pass on to the poet profits from the Edinburgh edition. Reviews of this, published on 17 April 1787, were generally laudatory, and on 5 July the first London edition was published by Cadell, followed later in the year by pirated editions in Belfast, Dublin, Philadelphia, and New York.

Acclaimed, and fired by poetic and patriotic ambition, Burns embarked on a series of tours in Scotland and northern England in 1787. First, with his friend Ainslie, he set off for the borders on 5 May, visiting Duns, then crossing the border at the Coldstream bridge before returning to Scotland and progressing to Kelso, Melrose, Innerleithen, Berwick, Alnwick, and sites famous from the border ballads and Scottish songs. At Carlisle on 1 June 1787 Burns wrote to his friend William Nicol, classics master at Edinburgh High School, his only surviving letter in Scots; he then proceeded to Dumfries, where he was awarded the freedom of the burgh, and to Dalswinton, where he met his admirer Patrick Miller, before returning to Mauchline (where he was warmly reunited with Jean Armour) and Mossgiel. At this time Burns was reading Milton and admiring 'the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great Personage, Satan' (*Letters*, 1.123). Later in June he set off on a west Highland tour that took in Argyll and Loch Lomond; he returned, having resolved not to marry Jean Armour, though he resumed his affair with her. By August he and the Jacobite William Nicol were on another highland tour, setting off via the battlesite of Bannockburn associated with 'glorious Bruce' and heading north to Glenlyon (where Burns was fascinated by a supposed druids' temple) and Dunkeld, where he met the 'honest highland figure' of the great fiddler Niel Gow (1727–1807), whose 'kind open-heartedness' appealed to him (Mackay, 334). The forthright Jacobite Nicol and Burns went on to Crieff, Glen Almond, and the supposed site of Ossian's grave; at Blair Castle, Burns was a guest of the duke of Atholl, before he and Nicol headed for Aviemore, Cawdor, Inverness, Loch Ness, and Culloden; *en route* Burns collected some highland ballads and wrote some short poems celebrating his time 'Among the heathy hills and ragged woods' (R. Burns, *Written with a pencil, standing by the fall of Fyers, near Loch-Ness*). Returning south via Aberdeen, where he encountered some local writers and academics, Burns met some of his Kincardineshire relatives at Stonehaven in mid-September, then visited his cousin James in Montrose. Burns and Nicol sailed from the fishing village of Auchmithie to Arbroath, visited Scone Palace, near Perth, on 15 September, then headed to Edinburgh.

Burns's last tour of 1787 was to Stirlingshire, in October; there, though Jean Armour was again pregnant by him, he pursued Margaret Chalmers and visited local historical and patriotic sites. While they may have had a business angle (since he visited some of his subscribers), Burns's 1787 Scottish tours developed and confirmed his interest in lowland ballad and song culture, as well as Ossianically refracted highland lore; the tours suggest his wish to assemble a sense of different Scotlands that would nourish him in his role as 'Caledonia's bard', and they undergird his developing work as a collector and remaker of songs and folk poetry.

By October 1787 Burns was back in Edinburgh, renting a room in what is now part of Register House, overlooking St Andrew Square, in the New Town. Robert Ainslie, Alexander Nasmyth, John Beugo, and Burns's new friend the law student Alexander Cunningham (1763–1812) were near neighbours. At this time Burns seems to have suffered some depression ('bitter hours of blue-devilism', as he called it, in Fergusson's phrase), which may be connected with the fact that his baby daughter, Jean, died on 20 October, though Burns, miles away in Edinburgh, refers to the child's death almost glancingly; as is often the case, it is hard to gauge accurately his innermost emotions, since his correspondence exhibits not infrequently notes of self-protective bravado (see *Letters*, 1.166). He examined himself closely (as in his long autobiographical letter of summer 1787 written to the London Scottish novelist Dr John Moore in a 'miserable fog of Ennui'), yet he also liked to adopt protean poses in his highly readable correspondence (*ibid.*, 133). Sympathetic to the 'honest Scotch enthusiasm' of the Edinburgh engraver James Johnson, who

was collecting 'all our native Songs' (ibid., 163) for a large, six-volume anthology with music, Burns had contributed work that he had collected to Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, the first volume of which appeared in May 1787 and the last in 1803. Burns was for the rest of his life *de facto* editor of this publication, contributing well over 150 of his own songs and reworking others that he collected. Mixing his own voice with the inherited and contemporary voices of Scottish popular poetry and song, he achieved some of his finest, world-class work, by turns piercingly lyrical, challenging, and playfully companionable. These are songs such as the male-voiced '*O my luve's like a red, red rose*' or the female-voiced '*John Anderson my jo*' that sound warmly direct. Yet any autobiographical matter that they contain is subsumed into a nurturing traditional form, so that the poet appears at least as much a transmitter, editor, or bearer of tradition as a creator who imposes his own personality on the material. Repeatedly Burns intensified the emotional charge of the work that he collected and remade, but he did this through instinctive and calculated artistry rather than through direct revelation.

On 4 December 1787, at an Edinburgh tea party, Burns met Mrs Agnes Macle hose (1758–1841), who had separated from her rakish husband. Writing as 'Sylvander' and 'Clarinda', Burns and Mrs Macle hose began a remarkable, intense, and mannered epistolary affair, one made all the more heated by the fact that for some of the time Burns was housebound with a dislocated kneecap and suffered depressive episodes. While conducting this passionate correspondence he was also applying for a post as an excise officer, and was made anxious by news from Gilbert that the farm at Mossgiel was doing badly and that Jean Armour's parents had expelled their pregnant daughter from their house. In mid-February Burns returned to Ayrshire, saw Jean Armour, and made arrangements to move to another, run-down, farm at Ellisland, in Dunscore parish, on the River Nith, north of Dumfries, which he would lease from his literary admirer the inventor Patrick Miller of Dalswinton. Burns meanwhile was still corresponding amorously with Clarinda, and had got with child her maidservant Jenny Clow of Newburgh (1768–1792), whose son Robert Burns was born in November 1788. His dalliance with Clarinda did not stop Burns making love to the pregnant Jean Armour early in 1788 ('I took the opportunity of some dry horse litter, and gave her such a thundering scalade that electrified the very marrow of her bones'; *Letters*, 1.251). Shortly afterwards Jean gave birth to twins, who lived only a few days. Burns returned to Edinburgh in March, was inducted into the excise, and ended his affair with Clarinda.

Exciseman and farmer

In spring 1788 Burns was trained as an excise officer by James Findlay, the Tarbolton exciseman. He also began to refer to Jean Armour as his wife, having apparently married her privately in a civil ceremony at the office of his Mauchline lawyer friend Gavin Hamilton. In mid-June Burns moved into Ellisland; on 14 July 1788 his excise commission was issued; and in August, having admitted to 'Daddy' Auld the irregularity of their marriage, Burns and Jean Armour were rebuked by Mauchline Kirk Session, who 'took them solemnly bound to adhere to one another as Husband & Wife all the days of their life' (Mackay, 427). Burns ordered for Jean 15 yards of 'black lute string silk' (*Letters*, 1.304).

After Edinburgh, Burns felt 'at the very elbow of Existence' on the demanding, 170-acre farm of Ellisland, and complained that the locals had 'as much idea of a Rhinoceros as of a Poet', though he continued to collect songs and made friends with some of his country gentlemen neighbours, such as the amateur

musician Robert Riddell of Glenriddell, for whom he prepared a two-volume collection of his unpublished poems and letters (now the Glenriddell Manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland) and whose interleaved copy of *The Scots Musical Museum* (now in the Burns birthplace museum, Alloway) Burns annotated (*Letters*, 1.311–12). By the end of 1788 Jean Armour had joined Burns at Ellisland, though work on their farmhouse there (paid for by Patrick Miller) was not completed until the following year. Burns at Ellisland was to switch from arable to dairy farming, taking some interest in milk yields. William Clark, one of his hired ploughmen, recalled him in 1789 wearing at home 'a broad blue bonnet, a blue or drab long-tailed coat, corduroy breeches, dark-blue stockings and cootikens, and in cold weather a black-and-white-checked plaid wrapped round his shoulders' (Mackay, 442). On 18 August 1789 Jean gave birth to Burns's son Francis Wallace, and on 1 September Burns began work as exciseman for the Dumfries first itinerary, at a salary of £50 per annum. This work involved riding often 30 or 40 miles a day, four or five days a week, searching for contraband materials; attempting to combine this work with farming exhausted Burns, who suffered from headaches and depression that winter. However, in July 1790 he was promoted to the Dumfries third foot-walk division, at a salary of £70 per annum; there his duties demanded only a walk around the town of Dumfries. At The Globe inn he had an affair with the barmaid, Ann Park, who gave birth to his daughter Elizabeth on 31 March 1791, nine days before William Nicol Burns was born to Jean Armour. She went on to raise both children.

At Ellisland Burns wrote a good deal of poetry, including the erotic lyrics '*I love my Jean*' and '*O, were I on Parnassus hill*'. As a collector of songs and ballads he reworked many traditional lyrics, including '*My Heart's in the Highlands*' and—perhaps his most widely known work—'*Auld Lang Syne*', a poem of healing sociability. Having found a 'kind funny friend' in the English antiquary, relisher of slang, and bon viveur Captain Francis Grose (*bap.* 1731, *d.* 1791), 'a cheerful-looking grig of an old, fat fellow' who was researching his *Antiquities of Scotland*, Burns in 1790 wrote for Grose '*Tam o' Shanter: a Tale*', which accompanies the account of Kirk Alloway in the second volume (1791) of Grose's work (*Letters*, 2.52, 1.423). This substantial, carnivalesque, mock-heroic narrative poem begins with Tam (minus wife) and his male 'drouthy cronies' in the pub, then sends its drunken protagonist on a storm-swept night ride to Kirk Alloway, where he sees 'Warlocks and witches in a dance'. Excited by a witch in a short shirt ('cutty sark'), Tam cries out and is chased by all the 'hellish legion', but his 'grey mare, Meg' rescues him, at the cost of losing her own tail to a pursuing witch; the poem ends with a po-faced mock-moral. Varying pace and diction, and characterized by power surges of excitement and reeling humour, this poem in Hudibrastic couplets is one of Burns's greatest achievements.

In the late summer of 1791 Burns extricated himself from the Ellisland lease, sold his crops in a roup, and then in November moved with his family to a tenement in the Wee Vennel (now 11 Bank Street), Dumfries. Almost immediately he needed to visit Edinburgh, where he had to deal with Jenny Clow, who was dying of tuberculosis, and where he and Agnes Macle hose exchanged locks of hair and the final, parting kiss; this appears to have given rise to Burns's slow and tender song beginning:

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, and then for ever!

Though Burns and Agnes Macle hose exchanged further letters early in 1792, she sailed to Jamaica at the end of January in a failed attempt at rapprochement with her husband, after which she returned to Scotland.

Back in Dumfries Burns joined the Dumfries St Andrew's masonic lodge on 27 December 1791; as an exciseman he was involved early in 1792 in the capture of a smuggling schooner in the Solway Firth, and in April was appointed to the Dumfries first foot-walk. On 10 April 1792 he received his diploma as a member of the Royal Archers of Scotland, the monarch's ceremonial bodyguard. Nevertheless about this time, in poems such as *'Here's a health to them that's awa'*, and *'Address to General Dumourier'*, as well as in his correspondence, Burns displayed sympathies with political radicalism and with the republican cause in France, though Britain was soon at war with that country. When his employer, the board of excise, began to investigate his political loyalties he anxiously protested that *'To the British Constitution, on Revolution principles, next after my God, I am most devoutly attached!'* (*Letters*, 2.169). Despite such protestations his politics, as articulated in verse, are more complex. As a poet he participated energetically in local election contests, but he was also very alert to larger issues. While in 1795–6 he wrote the seemingly loyal sentiment *'Does haughty Gaul invasion threat'* (R. Burns, *The Dumfries Volunteers*), in 1793 he had celebrated the overthrowing of *'Chains and Slavery'* in *'Robert Bruce's march to Bannockburn'*, and earlier had cursed the loss of Scottish political independence: *'Such a parcel of rogues in a nation'*. In 1795 he published in the *Glasgow Magazine* the song *'For a' that'*, which celebrates universal brotherhood and concludes with a stanza that Marilyn Butler calls *'probably the closest rendering in English of the letter and spirit of the notorious Jacobin 'Ça ira''* (Crawford, 102). Its last two lines express the hope:

That Man to Man the warld o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.

The scale of Burns's song-collecting activities is obvious from the publication of the fourth volume of *The Scots Musical Museum*, in August 1792; Burns composed or at least revised some sixty of the hundred songs in the book, while in the following month he agreed to contribute to the *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* being planned by the fussily genteel Edinburgh amateur musician George Thomson. Burns sought no pay for this work and intended that his contributions would contain *'at least a sprinkling of our native tongue'* (*Letters*, 2.149). He contributed over a hundred songs to the *Select Collection*, which appeared in six volumes between 1793 and 1841 and for which settings were written by Haydn, Beethoven, Weber, and Hummel.

On 21 November 1792 Jean Armour gave birth to Elizabeth Riddell Burns (who died while still a toddler), and on 30 November Burns was elected senior warden of the Dumfries St Andrew's masons. In mid-December he travelled to Ayrshire to spend a few days with his friend and patron Mrs Dunlop, who worried that he was drinking too much. He was acquiring something of a reputation as a drinker, though this was probably exaggerated by his early biographers. Like his father he showed considerable care for his children's education, one Dumfries friend recalling him explaining English poetry to his nine-year-old son. February 1793 saw the publication of the second Edinburgh edition of his *Poems* (including twenty new pieces) and May the publication of the first set of Thomson's *Select Collection*. Also in May the Burns family moved to a larger house, 24 Mill Hole Brae (now Burns Street), Dumfries, the poet's last home and one that

was occupied by Jean Armour until her death, in March 1834. In summer 1793, excited by his friend Thomas Fraser playing the air '*Hey Tutti Taitie*' on the oboe, Burns, familiar with the tradition that this tune had been Robert Bruce's march at the battle of Bannockburn, warmed 'to a pitch of enthusiasm on the theme of Liberty & Independance' and composed the lyric that begins:

SCOTS, wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,
SCOTS, wham BRUCE has aften led ...

R. Burns, Scots wha hae Burns confessed to Thomson that his thoughts of 'that glorious struggle for Freedom' were also linked to other struggles '*not quite so ancient*' (*Letters*, 2.235–6). Another account links the composition of this song to the poet's tour of Galloway with his friend John Syme in late July and early August 1793. That December a drunken Burns appears to have been one of a number of gentlemen who took part in a mock re-enactment of the rape of the Sabine women, during which Burns grabbed his admirer and friend the young poet and mother Maria Riddell. Though he was later stricken with awkward remorse the Riddell family broke off relations with him and ignored his efforts to atone. Burns attempted to exact revenge in several poems, and eventually achieved a measure of reconciliation with Maria, with whom he was again corresponding by December 1794.

Last years

Early in 1794 Burns again suffered 'low spirits & blue devils', yet he managed to propose a somewhat self-interested reorganization of the Dumfries excise divisions (the plan was not adopted) and to send James Johnson forty-one songs that he had collected or composed (*Letters*, 2.280). That summer he toured south-west Scotland and was at work on his '*Ode for General Washington's Birthday*', another celebration of a struggle for liberty. Drinking too much and feeling maudlin, he resumed his correspondence with Agnes Macle hose and addressed a number of poems to Jean Lorimer ('Chloris'). Jean Armour gave birth to Burns's son James Glencairn on 12 August. Though tempted by an offer of work on the *Morning Chronicle*, which would have paid him 1 guinea a week, Burns resolved to stay with the excise; he seems to have been worried about deteriorating health and comforted by the thought that in the event of his death the excise would pay a pension to his dependants. In December 1794 he was promoted acting supervisor in the excise service.

Burns's last eighteen months were marked by illness, family bereavement, and a falling-out with one of his oldest admirers. In late 1794 he sometimes worked fourteen-hour days, visiting the excise's Sanquhar division. These long hours worked by Supervisor Burns continued into early 1795, a particularly harsh winter of intense blizzards and 30 foot snowdrifts. At the very start of 1795, aged thirty-six, he was complaining about 'stiffening joints of Old Age coming fast o'er my frame' (*Letters*, 2.333). That January Mrs Dunlop took offence at his description of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette as 'a perjured Blockhead & an unprincipled Prostitute' and broke off relations with him, despite his pained attempts to revive their correspondence during the months before his death (*ibid.*, 334). From May 1795 onwards Burns suffered several bouts of illness. Continuing his long interest in local politics, he wrote in 1795 a series of poems in support of the successful whig candidate for the stewardry of Kirkcudbright by-election, Patrick Heron.

Despite his radical sympathies, and his close friendship with his doctor, William Maxwell of Kirkconnell (1760–1834), a Jacobin who had been involved in founding the London Correspondence Society, Burns also played a considerable part in organizing the Dumfries Volunteers. This uniformed band protested their loyalty to the crown and exercised locally with their weapons in the Dock Park, Dumfries. In November 1795 Burns helped to draft the volunteers' address to the king celebrating the 'lasting fabric of British Liberty' (Mackay, 595). Prolonged ill health (perhaps rheumatic fever) in 1795 resulted in Burns's '*Address to the Toothache*' ('My curse on your envenom'd stang'); then, when he was recovering from illness, in September his daughter Elizabeth Riddell died during a visit to Mauchline. After her death Burns, unable to travel to her funeral, suffered a severe depressive illness, which seems to have continued throughout the winter, though some visitors noted his animation in conversation, ability to hold his drink, and apparent health.

By February 1796, however, when there was unrest in Dumfries, Burns was back at work for the excise and collecting songs for Thomson, but that same month saw further rheumatic attacks, which made him unfit for work. Burns may have rallied in the early spring (he attended a masons' meeting on 14 April) but was soon complaining in a letter to his musical friend George Thomson of 'the heavy hand of SICKNESS; & [I] have counted Time by the repercussions of PAIN! Rheumatism, Cold & Fever' (*Letters*, 2.378). Gravely ill, he presented a set of *The Scots Musical Museum* to his seventeen-year-old nurse, Jessie Lewars, having written verses for her in the flyleaf. Worried about money and complaining that sickness reduced an exciseman's salary from £50 to £35, he called in loans that he had made; he reacted with fearful gratitude to an offer of financial aid from his cousin James Burness of Montrose. He complained of 'excruciating rheumatism' and followed the advice of 'Medical folks' (among them Dr Maxwell) that his 'last & only chance is bathing & country quarters & riding' (*ibid.*, 385). Under advice the ailing Burns practised regular sea-bathing in the cold spring tides of the Solway at Brow, in the parish of Ruthwell. When the spring tides abated the rheumatic Burns returned to Dumfries, feeling no better. For Jessie Lewars he wrote his last song, '*Oh wert thou in the cauld blast*', and on 18 July returned from Brow to Dumfries; on the same day he wrote to his father-in-law, begging help for Jean Armour, who, about to be left with his five children, was in the last stages of pregnancy. Burns died at home, in Dumfries, on 21 July 1796, most probably of rheumatic heart disease complicated by bacterial endocarditis. On 25 July the Dumfries Volunteers fired over Burns's coffin at his burial, under a plain slab in St Michael's churchyard, Dumfries; on that same day his son Maxwell was born, but lived for only thirty-three months.

Posthumous reputation

After Burns's death there were published several volumes of work that had circulated only in private during his lifetime. These included *The Jolly Beggars* (1799), *The merry muses of Caledonia: a collection of favourite Scots songs, ancient and modern, selected for use of the Crochallan fencibles* (c.1800; a collection of bawdy verses), and *Letters Addressed to Clarinda* (1802). James Currie's *Works of Robert Burns, with an Account of his Life* (1800) and Robert H. Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808) assembled more poems and documents, Currie censuring Burns for drunkenness. Burns's attitudes to drink, poetry, politics, and

women have been argued over in a succession of biographies, distinguished among which are those by his friend Allan Cunningham (1834); by Robert Chambers (1851), Catherine Carswell (1930), and Franklyn Snyder (1932); and by David Daiches (1952), James Mackay (1992), and Ian McIntyre (1995).

Within a few years of the poet's death a number of clubs had been formed to honour his memory. The first was Greenock Burns Club (1801), which was soon followed by Paisley Burns Club (1805) and, as the century wore on, by literally hundreds of other Burns clubs in Scotland, Britain, and overseas. Accepted since his death as Scotland's national bard, Burns was the first poet of the English-speaking world to be honoured by a network of clubs dedicated to celebrating his life and works. The clubs were originally all-male and can be seen as drawing on masonic traditions as well as on the legacy of such associations as the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, the Crochallan Fencibles, and other clubs to which the poet belonged. An international network of Burns clubs is now co-ordinated by the Burns Federation, which publishes the *Burns Chronicle* and encourages the holding of Burns suppers around the world on 25 January each year. Sites associated with the poet in south-west Scotland are known collectively as 'the Burns country', and the Burns Mausoleum, in St Michael's churchyard, Dumfries, erected in 1815 to provide a grander memorial to the poet (whose remains were moved to a vault below it in 1815), is one of several destinations for tourists and literary pilgrims to the Burns country. Among the earliest of these were several of the Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, for whom Burns was an important exemplar. Burns was read enthusiastically throughout the British empire, and in America, where he mattered to poets as different as Whitman and Whittier.

Though the reputation of some poems, such as '*The Cotter's Saturday Night*' (much admired in the nineteenth century), has declined, Burns has remained widely admired. In his essay '*The study of poetry*' (1880) Matthew Arnold complained that Burns lacked 'high seriousness' and 'a beautiful world', but T. S. Eliot, in *The Use of Poetry*, thought Arnold's attitude to Burns 'patronising' (p. 106). In the twentieth century Burns has interested Robert Frost, D. H. Lawrence, Hugh MacDiarmid, Seamus Heaney, and Les Murray, among other poets. The modern scholarly edition of the verse is James Kinsley's three-volume *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (1968), while the letters were edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson (second edition by G. Ross Roy, 2 vols., 1985). A full, musicologically researched edition of *The Songs of Robert Burns* was edited by Donald A. Low in 1993. Burns has remained a genuinely popular poet, though not always one widely taught in universities. His work has been translated into most major and many minor languages, and his songs, still sung in Scotland and abroad, are available in a variety of recordings.

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Morgan L., letters to Peter Hill

Morgan L., letters to George Thomson

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NL Scot., Watson MS

Likenesses

A. Nasmyth, pencil drawing, 1786, Scot. NPG

P. Taylor, oil on panel, 1786, Scot. NPG

by or after J. Miers, ink silhouette, 1787, Scot. NPG

A. Nasmyth, oils, 1787, Scot. NPG [see illus.]

A. Nasmyth, pencil sketch, 1787, Irvine Burns Club; version, Scot. NPG

A. Reid, miniature, oils, 1795, Scot. NPG

A. Reid, watercolour on ivory, 1795–6, Scot. NPG

A. Skirving, chalk drawing, 1796–8 (after Nasmyth?), Scot. NPG

medallion, plaster replica, 1801 (after W. Tassie), Scot. NPG

J. Henning, plaster medallion, 1807, Scot. NPG

J. Flaxman, marble statue, begun 1824, Scot. NPG; on loan from the City of Edinburgh District Council

A. Nasmyth, oil on panel, 1828 (posthumous), Scot. NPG

D. Dunbar, plaster cast of skull, 1834, Scot. NPG

J. Edgar, group portrait, wash drawing, 1854 (*Robert Burns at an evening party of Lord Monboddo's, 1786*), Scot. NPG

J. Beugo, copperplate engraving (after unfinished portrait by A. Nasmyth; from life), repro. in R. Burns, *Poems* (1787), frontispiece

by or after P. Taylor, oils, Scot. NPG

S. Watson, group portrait, oils (*The inauguration of Robert Burns as poet laureate of the lodge Canongate, Kilwinning, 1787*), Scot. NPG

H. W. Williams, watercolour, Scot. NPG

portrait (after watercolour on ivory), Scot. NPG

Wealth at Death

£15 in drafts; £90 in library valuation; £183 16s. in debts owed to Burns: Mackay, *Burns*, 632

View the article for this person in the Dictionary of National Biography archive edition.

See also

Armour, Jean (1765–1834), wife of Robert Burns and subject of poetry

Maclehose [née Craig], Agnes (1758–1841), letter writer and poet

More on this topic

Burns, Robert <<https://oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000004402>> in Oxford Music Online <<http://oxfordmusiconline.com>>

External resources

Bibliography of British and Irish history <http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/incoming.cfm?odnb_id=4093>

British Library, Discovering Literature <<http://www.bl.uk/people/robert-burns>>

National Portrait Gallery <<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp00667>>

National Archives <<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F68926>>

Westminster Abbey, poets' corner <<http://westminster-abbey.org/our-history/people/robert-burns>>

Royal Academy <<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/robert-burns>>