

ANNUAL

# Burns Chronicle

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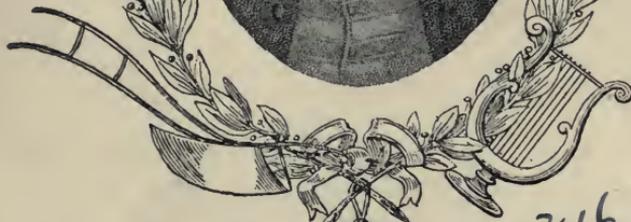
# Club Directory.

Edited by JOHN MUIR.



Born at Ayr  
25th January, 1759.

Died at Dumfries,  
21st July, 1796.



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All communications to be addressed: John Muir, 2 King Street, Kilmarnock, Scotland; and matter intended for publication must reach the office not later than 30th November of each year.

Books intended for review should be sent in early. Publishers and authors whose works are omitted in the Bibliography will oblige by sending a transcription of the title-pages of their books bearing on Burns.

THE ANNUAL BURNS CHRONICLE AND CLUB DIRECTORY is issued early in January of each year, and is the only publication wholly devoted to the interest of Burns students; being the official organ of The Burns Federation, Burns Clubs, and Scottish Societies throughout the world.

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BRIEF SUMMARY  
OF  
THE LIFE OF BURNS.

**T**HE fascinating life-story (more romantic almost than romance itself) of Robert Burns, the Scottish Poet, is already so widely known and familiar to the reading world, that it would seem an impertinence to obtrude it in any serious biographical shape into the forefront of this CHRONICLE, whose chief business, and we might say, justification, is to present in historical sequence the main facts and incidents in the posthumous history of Burns, which, of course, only properly begins after the Poet's death. Nevertheless, in order to give a certain amount of continuity and completeness to this historical narrative, it might, perhaps, be well to precede it with a very brief summary of the more conspicuous events in the Poet's life, from his birth at Alloway down to his death at Dumfries, where the record naturally merges into the narrative of Burns-worship, the subject-matter proper of this CHRONICLE.

One hundred and thirty-three years ago, then, this very month, on January 25th, 1759, Robert Burns, Scotland's dearly beloved, National Poet, first beheld the light of day at Alloway, parish of Ayr, in a clay-built cottage which had been erected by the hands of his own father, William Burnes, a native of Kincardineshire, who was at this period following the occupation of a gardener and farm over-seer in the neighbourhood of Alloway. His mother, Agnes Brown, was, like her husband, a child of the "mailen," being the daughter of a farmer in Carrick, Ayrshire; and the Poet was their first born.

When Burns was six years of age, he was sent to a school at Alloway Mill where he had the good luck to be under a young teacher, Mr. John Murdoch, a gentleman of uncommon merit.

This was a year before his father, wishing to try his fortune on a small farm, removed to Mount Oliphant, some two miles distant from Alloway. His children, however, continued to attend Mr. Murdoch's school for other two years, until indeed that gentleman left Alloway; then the father took his place, instructing them at his own fireside by candle light after his day's labour in such abstruse subjects as Arithmetic, Geography, Astronomy, and Natural History; besides building up their youthful characters by selected reading and conversation on religious and other high moral topics. His mother, who was a sweet singer, contributed her share towards her son's education from her excellent store of song and ballad; as did also an old woman, Betty Davidson, living in the family, from her well-filled wallet of tales, songs, ghost-stories, and legendary lore.

During the latter part, at least, of this most interesting period of domestic night-schooling at Mount Oliphant, Burns may be said to have been doing the larger half of a man's work on the farm. When he was thirteen, his father ever anxious about the progress of his children's education, sent his sons, Robert and Gilbert, week about, during the summer quarter, to the parish school of Dalrymple, two or three miles distant, to improve their penmanship. About this time, too, their old teacher and friend, Mr. Murdoch, was appointed English Master in Ayr; and Burns boarded with him for three weeks to revise his studies in that tongue. Mr. Murdoch, who was a frequent guest at the Mount Oliphant fireside, already noted for its high and serious talk,

“Such as grave livers do in Scotland use.”

also lent the family books, and introduced them to several new names in literature, both in poetry and prose. It was in his fifteenth year that love and poetry, in a twin-birth, dawned on the young bard, and he wrote his first song on his partner in the harvest field, Nelly Kilpatrick, the blacksmith's daughter, *O, once I loved a bonnie lass*. In his seventeenth year he went to Kirkoswald, a little place on the smuggling coast of Ayrshire, for the purpose of learning mensuration, surveying, etc. Here he was making good progress with these subjects, and likewise seeing a good deal of another subject, even more congenial to his tastes, viz., glimpses into life and character of the rough and free and easy sort, when the charms of a certain Peggy Thomson, “overset his trigonometry and set him off at a tangent from the

sphere of his studies." Returning to Mount Oliphant he next attended a dancing school for a season, "to give his manners a brush," as he puts it himself, which practically concluded his education—all at least that the schoolmaster could do for him.

The farm enterprise, for the last few years, at Mount Oliphant, had, on account of the unproductiveness of the soil, loss of cattle and other causes, been a failure, and William Burnes had got into pecuniary difficulties, which we are told, brought threatening letters from the factor, plunging the distressed family into tears. Mount Oliphant was at last abandoned for a larger farm, Lochlea, in the parish of Tarbolton. For a little the cloud showed its silver lining, and all went well. Robert and his brother Gilbert had £7 per annum each, as wages from their father, and they also took land from him for the purpose of raising flax on their own account. Burns was now in the full flush of opening manhood, between the years of nineteen and twenty-three—the most gifted member of the "Bachelor's Club," Tarbolton, and the most popular young gallant among all the lads and lasses of the countryside—writing, in his leisure moments, such poems as, *Winter.—a Dirge*; *The Death of Poor Mailie*; *John Barleycorn*; and such songs as, *It was upon a Lammas Night*; *Behind yon Hills where Stinchar Flows, &c.*; and passionately cultivating the society of Ellison Begbie, the daughter of a small farmer near Galston whose hand he had asked in marriage and been refused. In the height of all this love making, and song writing, and speechifying at Bachelors' Clubs, he was suddenly taken, partly by whim, and partly with a view to better his prospects in life, with a desire to go to Irvine to learn the business of flax-dressing. This, however, turned out a most unlucky venture. The shop, in which he and his partner wrought, took fire during a welcoming carousal to the New Year, and consumed his all. Returning to the plough again at Lochlea, he found his father's affairs in utter ruin, and the old man dying of consumption. His brother Gilbert and he rented a new farm, Mossgiel, parish of Mauchline, to which the whole family removed after the father's death, which took place on February 13th, 1784. Burns had been made a free-mason before leaving Lochlea.

During his residence at Mossgiel he became more popular, and even celebrated, than ever, among the wits and New-Light

Clergy of Ayrshire; and, though only twenty-six years of age, he had written nearly all the poems which were printed in the Kilmarnock edition.—“Such a body of original poetry,” says Alexander Smith, “written within about 12 months—poetry so natural, forcible, and picturesque, so quaint, sarcastic, humorous, and tender—had unquestionably not appeared since Shakespeare.” It was here that he made the acquaintance of Jean Armour, daughter of a stone-mason in Mauchline, a personality destined to tint his life with its “brightest lights and its darkest shadows.” In a fit of bitter resentment at Jean for consenting, at the urgent entreaty of her father, to the destruction of the written acknowledgement of marriage which Burns in her unhappy dilemma had given her, he renewed his intimacy with a former love, Mary Campbell, or Highland Mary. He proposed marriage to her; was accepted; thereafter she left her service at Coilsfield to go home to Argyleshire to make the necessary preparations, after a most romantic parting with her lover on the banks of Ayr, in which they exchanged Bibles and vows of eternal constancy. They never saw each other again. Mary, while on an ostensible visit to some friends in Greenock (but whether she had come to see Burns off to Jamaica, by a vessel sailing, Aug. 15th), caught fever and died, October 20th, 1786, and was buried in the West Church-yard of that town. To add to the Poet’s increasing embarrassments the farm had proved a failure, and his connection with the unhappy mason’s daughter brought him new entanglements, from which he saw no way of escape but by quitting his native country. In order to procure as much money as would pay his passage to Jamaica, whither he had resolved to go as a book-keeper on an estate, he published his poems by subscription in Kilmarnock. They were no sooner published than they attracted considerable notice. When on the eve of embarking, a letter from Dr. Blacklock, urging him to publish a second edition, led him to abandon the idea of going abroad, and to try his fortune in the Scottish Capital.

In Edinburgh he instantly became the lion of the season. He was fêted, and feasted, and flattered by the nobility and gentry, and men of letters. Witty Duchesses, it is recorded, vied with each other in paying him homage; and even ostlers and waiters at Inns where he happened to arrive in the night, left

their warm beds and came crowding to hear him speak. He reached Edinburgh in November, 1786, his twenty-seventh year; and in the following April the second edition of his poems appeared, which included, *Death and Dr. Hornbook*; *The Ordination*, and, *Address to the Unco Guid*, which had been left out of the first edition; and also several new pieces, such as, *The Brigs of Ayr*, and, *Tam Samson's Elegy*. On the 5th May, he set off on a tour with a young friend, Robert Ainslie, through the south of Scotland, visiting Dumfries, where he was made an honorary burgess, arriving at Mossgiel and Mauchline on June 9th, when he renewed his intimacy with Jean Armour. Towards the end of the month he made a short tour in the West Highlands, the "calf-country" of his Highland Mary, returning to Mauchline at the end of July, on the 25th of which month he presided as Depute Grand Master of the Tarbolton Masons Lodge, when Professor Dugald Stewart, Mr. Alexander of Ballochmyle, and others were made honorary members. In the following month he was again in Edinburgh, and started on a northern tour with his friend William Nicol of the High School. He visited Bannockburn, spent a couple of days at Blair with the Duke of Athol and family, proceeded as far as Inverness, then by way of Elgin, Fochabers, (dining with the Duke and Duchess of Gordon), on to Aberdeen, Stonehaven, and Montrose, where he visited his relatives the Burneses. He arrived in Edinburgh in the end of September, and in December, he made the acquaintance of Mrs. M<sup>c</sup>Lehose (Clarinda), with whom he kept up a sentimental correspondence for about three months while detained in his room with an injury to his knee. As a provision against dependence, and the probable failure of future ventures, which from past experience he had too good reason to fear, he got his name at this period enrolled among the number of expectant Excise officers through the influence of the commissioner, Mr. Graham of Fintry. The necessity for settling in life became now more and more apparent to him every day. He frankly recognised that the Edinburgh drama was played out, and he exhibited both worldly wisdom and moral courage in resolving to return to the plough-tail, to use his own phrase. With a view to this end he left Edinburgh for Dumfries to inspect Mr. Miller's lands at Dalswinton, stopping by the way at Mossgiel to renew old friendships, Jean Armour's included. He returned to Edinburgh in March, and on the 13th took a

lease of the farm of Ellisland, on the banks of the Nith. On the 19th he settled accounts with Creech, his publisher, bade farewell to Edinburgh and all its brilliant lionizing, married Jean Armour privately at Mauchline in the end of April, and went to reside on the farm at Ellisland, his wife following in December after he had got his house built.

His four years farming experiences at Ellisland, owing to a variety of causes, some of which ought to have been within control of his own will, proved the reverse of prosperous, and he was glad to combine the duties of exciseman with those of farmer in order to live. If, however, fortune deserted him, and even friends, which was harder still to bear in Burns' case, the Muse, never forsook him. While at Ellisland he wrote, *O' a' the airts the wind can blaw*; *Verses in Friars-Carse Hermitage*; *To Mary in Heaven*; *Elegy on Capt. Matthew Henderson*; *Lament of Mary Queen of Scots*; *Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn*, and the immortal, *Tam O' Shanter*.

At Martinmas, November 11th, 1791, he sold his stock and other effects, and surrendered his lease, and removed with his wife and family to Bank Street, Dumfries, his sole occupation now being that of exciseman. In the course of another year, or little more, he removed to a better house in Mill-hole Brae (now Burns Street), where he resided till he died. This somewhat chequered, Dumfries life of his, extending over fully four years, is perhaps the most remarkable for poetic achievements, eclipsing even the Mossgiel record. In addition to the performance of his excise duties, which, it is alleged, he did very well; not to speak of his social pleasures and indulgencies, which, it is also alleged, he did not neglect, he performed an amount of literary work, which makes it a marvel how he found time for the performance of anything else. It was during these years that he wrote the greater part of his finest songs for his friend Thomson's publication, disclaiming, at the same time, all idea or acceptance of fee or reward. They were often produced under varying circumstances of gloom and misfortune, and even indifferent health, but neither in the effusions themselves, nor in the enthusiastic epistles which he was continually sending off, at all times and seasons, to Thomson with each new song, or old one amended and purified, is any trace of these circumstances discernible.

His strong constitution, which he was always the reverse of niggard in conserving, began to give way at last. He looked already prematurely old. An attack of rheumatic fever, from which he never properly recovered, hastened the catastrophe. In his intervals of relief, however, aye, and sometimes when racked with pain, both of body and mind, he still wrought on, building up that marvelous structure of Scottish song which is without its equal in the annals of the world's literature.

As a last resource he went on the 4th July to Brow, a sea bathing hamlet on the Solway, in search of that health which he was doomed never to recover. He returned home again on the 18th, if anything, weaker, and more feverish. The hand of death was evidently upon him. He had to be assisted into the house from the cart which brought him to the foot of the Mill-hole Brae, and to his bed. His condition rapidly became worse. His mind was lost in delirium, and he expired on the 21st, shortly after daybreak.