

# ROBERT BURNS - FREEMASON

by

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Among the great men whose memories Scotsmen in particular have been delighted to perpetuate few, if any, have been held in greater love and admiration than Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland. Indeed, the enthusiasm which is aroused as each succeeding January comes round is a source of continual wonder to other nations and it certainly has no parallel in any other country. In this article we shall deal mainly with Burn's activities as a Freemason and as such Scotsmen should be immensely proud that the Bard was a member of the Fraternity. As we shall see, Masonry and Scottish Masonry at that, played no mean part in giving to the world the poetry of Robert Burns.

According to Dr Halliday, "One prime factor which assisted to unite all classes in eighteenth-century Scotland into a recognised brotherhood, and provided the opportunity and sanction for voluntary co-operation, was the bond of Freemasonry; not Freemasonry as we know it to-day with all its modern trappings and symbolic teaching, but the earlier jolly Brotherhood with its gatherings at the local inn. There is no cause for wonder or surprise that in the fullness of time Robert Burns became a Freemason: the wonder would have been if he had not." The heart of the poet was a soil ideal to the seeds of Freemasonry, for the beautiful teaching of the Craft is alive with the very essence of poetry. His abiding interest in, and love of all that was in any way connected with the Order no doubt coloured much of his poetry and ultimately found expression in "A man's a man for a' that," the great poem on the Brotherhood of Man. In that poem, and especially in the last verse, we find expressed the whole of the grand ideal of Freemasonry. This is not to say, however, that such a poem was wholly inspired by Freemasonry, because Burns would have written in this vein had he never entered the door of a Masonic Lodge.

Masonry made a direct appeal to one of his temperament, loving as he did social companions, and who himself was the life and soul in any congenial company. Not only so, but Freemasonry was flourishing so strongly in Tarbolton at the time that it was to be expected that in due course he would enter fervently into everything concerned with the Order. Freemasonry gave him an impetus, and we cannot doubt that the hours he spent with the Brethren helped in no small way to lighten many a dark hour in his life and cheered him between his periods of despondency.

***"The social, friendly, honest man  
Whate'er he be,  
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan  
And none but he."***

Another typically Masonic verse by him is:--

***"A' ye whom social pleasure charms,  
Whose heart the tide of kindness warms,  
Wha hold your being on the terms  
`Each aid the others,'  
Come to my bowl come to my arms,  
My friends, my brothers."***

His enthusiasm for Freemasonry was mainly attributable to his sociable disposition, and there is sufficient testimony that Burns was not given to conviviality merely to satisfy a craving for strong drink. But the influence of Masonry on his life must be put into its proper perspective, for there is no denying that the part it played in the publication of his poems cannot be overlooked. It would appear to be manifestly unfair on the part of Carlyle and several other of his biographers that either not a word has come from their pen or, if it did, it was to depreciate his connection with the Craft. In fact, to omit or slight Burns's Masonic career is surely unjust to him and to Freemasonry. His association with the Brethren indeed was a means of enabling him to meet persons of a higher social status than himself and of introducing him to families of distinction, especially during his stay in Edinburgh, and at the same time helping to raise him from obscurity to the place he so richly deserves - the national poet of Scotland.

During the fifteen years (1781-1796) which covered his Masonic career he devoted himself wholeheartedly to all that pertained to the Brotherhood, making that "daily advancement" of which our First Charge stresses the importance.

Burns's Masonic life might conveniently be divided, like all Gaul, into three parts. The first part includes his initiation into the Fraternity and his active work in his native county of Ayr, the historic home of Freemasonry. Included also in this period is the publication of the now famous and priceless Kilmarnock Edition of his poems. The second comprises the two periods he spent in Edinburgh, where Masonry did not enter particularly prominently into his life, probably because of the assiduous attention he was giving to the publication of his Edinburgh Edition. The chief matter of interest in his visit to the Capital is the controversy surrounding his supposed inauguration as Poet Laureate of Lodge Canongato Kilwinning. The third division concerns his declining years in Dumfriesshire, where

he again resumed his Masonic interests though, partly owing to illness, to a lesser extent.

In 1781 the Burns family tenanted the farm of Lochlea, near Tarbolton, having come there from Mount Oliphant in 1777. Robert, before joining the Craft, had attended a school in Kirkoswald in the practical use of instruments concerned with mensuration and surveying, the Square, the Level, etc., and so, at the beginning of his Masonic career he was already well versed in the operative uses of a mason's working tools. He tells us that while in Kirkoswald he went on with a high hand at his geometry till the sun entered Virgo, which was always a carnival in his bosom.

The history of Freemasonry round about the period with which we are dealing was of a somewhat turbulent nature. On 17th May 1771 Lodge Tarbolton Kilwinning had received its Charter from Mother Kilwinning. Twenty of the Brethren, seeing clearly that the power of the latter was on the decline, wished to erect a Lodge under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Scotland which since 1736 was steadily growing in power and so St David's, Tarbolton, No. 174, was chartered on 5th February 1773. Those who were left in the original Tarbolton Kilwinning Lodge also saw the wisdom of working under Grand Lodge and so they too applied for recognition. This resulted in 1774 in the erection of a new Lodge, St James's Tarbolton, No. 178. The Grand Master Mason at the time was John, 3rd Duke of Athole. No doubt a little jealousy in this case crept in over the original secession. At the same time the Brethren were fully aware that there was not room in such a small village as Tarbolton for two Lodges. It was accordingly agreed to sink all differences and the two Lodges combined on 25th June 1781, under the name of Lodge St David, Tarbolton, since this Lodge held "the oldest charter" from Grand Lodge, "probably a compliment or concession," according to Chambers, "designed to appease the schismatic body."

Into this united Lodge Burns, nine days after the union, was initiated in his twenty-third year, and his name recorded in the Minute Book as follows: -"Sederant for 4th July. Robert Burns in Lochly was entered an Apprentice, Joph. Norman, M." His initiation fee was 12s. 6d., and was paid on the same day.

The Lodge met in John Richard's public house where the Bachelors' Club, founded in 1780 by Burns and other kindred spirits, had a room. This house has been recently renovated and is now in an excellent state of repair. The following is from the preamble which Burns himself wrote regarding this club:

***"Of birth or blood we do not boast,  
Nor gentry does our club afford;  
But ploughmen and mechanics we  
In nature's simple dress record."***

The social urge and the opportunities he had for expressing his thoughts fluently there were very soon to bear fruit in his Lodge.

Shortly after his initiation he removed to Irvine to learn flax-dressing. This upset for a time his Masonic attendances, but on 1st October 1781, he was passed to the Fellowcraft Degree and raised to the Degree of Master as set forth in the brief Minute: "Robert Burns in Lochly was passed and raised," signed by the Master, the Wardens, Secretary and Treasurer.

The united Lodge enjoyed a brief history of only a few months, but a history rendered glorious for all time by having the peculiar distinction of making Burns a Freemason. Nor did the union appear to have been a happy one. Apparently that harmony which should characterise Masons the world over was lacking. At any rate, a fresh disruption took place the following year, June 1782. Burns was one of the seceders. Some of the members doubtless objected to Lodge St James losing its identity and it was to be expected that it was only a matter of time before a separate Lodge would be formed. This materialised on 17th June 1782, under its former name of St James, Tarbolton. Some years later, a list of its members was sent in to Grand Lodge, and the names of these members are found engrossed in the books there. Burns's name does not appear in this list, possibly because only the names of intrants, after the Lodge had become a separate body, were submitted to Grand Lodge. This is borne out by the fact that the name of Gilbert Burns, who was made a Mason five years after the erection of St James's Lodge, appears only about a dozen names from the top. On the other hand, this neglect may have been occasioned by the carelessness of Grand Lodge officials at the time who have been alleged to have been very much averse to such dry labour as the enrolment of names. Lodge Tarbolton Kilwinning St James now appears on the Roll of the Grand Lodge of Scotland as No. 135 and possesses a large commodious hall of its own in the centre of the village. Lodge St David became dormant in 1843, but was reponed in 1869 as No. 133, with Mauchline as its meeting place. It has some interesting relics consisting of jewels, plate for printing Diplomas of the Lodge, Master's chair, chest, Lodge glasses, toddy-ladles, and a Minute Book. These are now believed to be in safe custody in Ayr.

At a meeting of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in May 1951, it was reported that the Minute Books containing details of the initiation of Burns into Freemasonry, now in private hands, were valued at

£3,000. The Grand Librarian informed the Grand Committee that a lady in Kilmarnock had in her possession certain old Minute Books and other items lately belonging to Lodge St David, No. 133. When the Lodge became dormant in 1843 the Charter was recovered by the Provincial Grand Master and returned to Grand Lodge. The Minute Books passed into private hands. The Lodge was reopened in 1869 and, although the Charter was returned, the Minute Books were not. In 1925 the law agent advised the Grand Committee that an action would have to be raised against the lady if it were decided to prove title. No action was taken.

Burns's name is not recorded in the Minutes of St James's Lodge until 1784. But his keen interest in the Lodge is evident from the following letter in his handwriting, but not necessarily composed by him addressed to the Master, Sir John Whitefoord, Bart., of Ballochmyle, on behalf of the seceders in connection with the dispute, towards the end of 1782:

*" Sir -- We who subscribe to this are members of St James's Lodge, Tarbolton, and one of us is in the office of Warden, and as we have the honour of having you for Master of our Lodge, we hope you will excuse this freedom, as you are the proper person to whom we ought to apply. We look on our Mason Lodge to be a serious matter, both with respect to the character of Masonry itself, and likewise as it is a charitable society. This last, indeed, does not interest you farther than a benevolent heart is interested in the welfare of its fellow creatures; but to us, Sir, who are of the lower orders of mankind, to have a fund in view, on which we may with certainty depend to be kept from want should we be in circumstances of distress, or old age, that is a matter of high importance.*

*We are sorry to observe that our Lodge's affairs, with respect to its finances, have for a good while been in a wretched condition. We have considerable sums in bills which lie by without being paid, or put in execution, and many of our members never mind their yearly dues, or anything else belonging to our Lodge. And since the separation from St David's we are not even sure of our existence as a Lodge. There has been a dispute before the Grand Lodge, but how decided, or if decided at all, we know not.*

*For these and other reasons we humbly beg the favour of you, as soon as convenient, to call a meeting, and let us consider on some means to retrieve our wretched affairs.*

*We are, etc."*

On 30th June 1784 the famous Manson's Inn, the Cross Keys, became the meeting place, the proprietor being Treasurer to the Lodge. This old inn is no longer in existence, but its locus has been indicated by a tablet placed in a corner of the garden. A month later, on 27th July, Burns was elected Depute Master, an office which was then elective and of much more practical importance than it is today. This position carried with it the active duties of a Master, who in these days was little more than a figurehead, and attended meetings but rarely. So Burns was in reality the virtual head of the Lodge, and it is on record that he carried through his work with marked ability. He held the Depute Mastership till St John's Day, 1788.

***"Oft have I met your social band,  
And spent the cheerful festive night;  
Oft honour'd with supreme command,  
Presided o'er the Sons of Light."***

His first Minute as Depute Master, and which is wholly in his handwriting, although unsigned, shows his keen interest in the Lodge:

*"This night the Lodge met and ordered four pounds of candles and one quire of eightpence paper for the use of the Lodge, which money was laid out by the Treasurer and the candles and paper laid in accordingly."*

By his enthusiasm he justified his election to the leading place in the Lodge. Robert Chambers tells us "that according to the reports of old associates he was so keen a Mason that he would hold Lodges for the admission of new members in his own house," and it was at one of these that his brother Gilbert was admitted to the Craft.

He was himself most faithful in his attendance at Lodge meetings. During 1785 he was present at nine meetings, and it was because of an incident at one of these where the "vainglorious tendencies" of the village schoolmaster gave birth to his amusing poem, "Death and Doctor Hornbook." The story is so well known that there is no need to detail it here. The famous colloquy between himself and Death has been read by thousands with amusement and delight and has conferred an immortality on John Wilson, the dominie, which he scarcely deserved.

A quaint regulation, dated 7th December 1785, written by John Wilson (Dr Hornbook) and signed " Robert Burness " is worthy of mention at this point.

*"The Lodge thought proper to writing that old regulation. That who ever stands as Master shall be bound at the entry of a new member for that members dues if the money is not paid or security such as the Lodge shall approve of."*

In 1786 Burns again attended nine meetings, at the second of which, on 1st March, he passed and raised his brother Gilbert. It is interesting to note that he signed the Minute of this meeting "Robert Burns." Up to this date he had used the signature "Robert Burness." Apparently during all this time, though living some miles from the village, he never missed a single meeting of his Lodge and on several occasions, as we have seen, he held subordinate meetings in Mauchline, thus doing his utmost to promote the tenets of Freemasonry.

For a time at least Gilbert Burns took an active part in the affairs of the Lodge. His name appears in the Minute Book on five separate occasions between 11th December 1786 and 21st December 1787, and he occupied the Chair on two occasions, when the Lodge met at Mauchline on 18th and 20th November 1788. In July 1787 he had a loan from the Lodge of £6, 5s. (a not uncommon practice in those days), which he repaid in June 1788.

It soon became apparent that the Brethren were not satisfied with their meeting place in Manson's Tavern, and they began to look around for more suitable quarters. We find a curious proposition recorded in the Minute of 15th June:

*"It was proposed by the Lodge that, as they much wanted a Lodge-room, a proposal be laid before the heritors, who are intending to build a steeple here, that the Lodge will contribute to the building of a Lodge-room, as the basis of that steeple; and that, from the funds of the Lodge, they offer fifteen pounds, besides what will be advanced from the particular friends of the Lodge.*

*In order that this proposal be properly laid before the heritors, five persons, namely the Right Worshipful Master, Brother McMath, Brother Burns, Brother Wodrow, Brother William Andrew are appointed to meet on Saturday at one o'clock, to draw up a proposal to lay before the heritors on Friday first."*

What became of the proposal is unknown. There is no record of the Lodge ever having assembled in the base of the proposed steeple.

In all Burns signed twenty-nine Minutes as Depute Master, and three are wholly his penmanship. He also subscribed his initials to a postscript. One of these signatures was stolen and never recovered. A second attempt was made to steal another part of the precious

volume, but the theft was discovered in time and the stolen portion returned. It can be seen neatly pasted in its original setting. This Minute Book is, of course, of especial interest and is fully preserved in the Lodge which also treasures the Master's chair, footstool, apron and the mallet used by him when presiding at its meetings, the candlesticks and other articles associated with him during his term of office. Also to be seen is an old Tyler's sword. The Lodge Bible, which bears the date 1775, was one of the poet's possessions and was presented to the Lodge by his brother Gilbert and himself. It was purchased by the Lodge on 29th July 1786. The Minute reads- "Bible cost 13s., lettering (i.e., the printed name of the Lodge outside) cost 3s." The Lodge has also the oftquoted letter addressed by him from Edinburgh to his Lodge Brethren, prior to his Highland tour, intimating the reason for his inability to be present at one of their important meetings.

At this point it might be interesting and enlightening to enumerate some of the Rules applicable to St James's Lodge in Burns's day:

*"At the third stroke of the Grand Masters hammer silence shall be maintained under a penalty of twopence.*

*"Whosoever shall break a drinking glass at any meeting shall be liable to the instant payment of sixpence sterling for it, and the same sum for every other he may break before he leaves the room or company*

*"Those not at meetings within an hour of the fixed time shall be fined*

*"If any Brother be so unfortunate as to have disordered his senses by strong liquors and thereby rendered himself incapable of behaving himself decently, peaceably and kind towards those around him, such Brother coming to the Lodge in that condition to the disturbance and disgust of his Brethren, shall be prudently ordered away to some place of safety in the meantime and at the next meeting shall submit to such censure and admonition from the Chair, and to such a fine inflicted by the Lodge on him as to them may appear proper to his crime, and deter him from it in all time coming.*

*"Whereas a Lodge always means a company of worthy men and circumspect, gathered together in order to promote charity, friendship, civility and good neighbourhood, it is enacted that no member of this Lodge shall speak slightingly, detractingly or calumniously of any of his Brethren behind their backs, so as to damage them in their professions or reputations without any certain grounds, and any member committing any such offence must*

*humble himself by asking on his knees the pardon of such person or persons as his folly or malice hath aggrieved. Obstinate refusal to comply with this rule of the Brethren assembled shall be met with expulsion from the Lodge with every mark of ignominy and disgrace that is consistent with Justice and Freemasonry."*

The excellent manner in which Burns carried out his duties may be gauged not only from his attendance record and his care of the Minutes of Proceedings, but also from the following letter written by Professor Dugald Stewart: -

*"In Summer 1787 I passed some weeks in Ayrshire, and saw Burns occasionally . . . . I was led by curiosity to attend for an hour or two a Masonic Lodge in Mauchline, where Burns presided. He had occasion to make some short unpremeditated compliments to different individuals from whom he had no occasion to expect a visit, and everything he said was happily conceived and forcibly as well as fluently expressed. His manner of speaking in public had evidently the marks of some practice in extempore elocution."*

Professor Dugald Stewart, who was then resident in Catrine, was admitted an honorary member of St James's Lodge, and the Minute recording his admission was signed "Robert Burns, D.M." The Professor was a member of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning and proved himself a very good friend to the poet during his residence in Edinburgh and according to Burns was "the most perfect character I ever saw." Their early morning walks on the Braid Hills were greatly enjoyed by both. During Burns's term of office as Depute Master the Brethren were convened no fewer than seventy times, at thirty-three of which he was present, and his attendances would doubtless have been more numerous had he not been away from the district for lengthy periods in these two momentous years, 1787-1788.

It is generally believed that he visited a number of Lodges in his immediate vicinity. At a meeting, on 27th March 1786, of Lodge Loudoun Kilwinning Newmilns, of which his friend Gavin Hamilton was Master, he was introduced to the Brethren and "much to the satisfaction of the Lodge," was admitted a member, Brother John Morton being "answerable for" his "admission money."

A writer in the Burns Chronicle of 1893 states that the poet was present at a Mason Lodge held at Sorn on 5th October 1786, and in the same Annual for 1905 we have it that he "mixed with the Brethren of the Craft in St Andrew's Lodge in Irvine," and that "it is conjectured that it was in that town" that the "stanza added in a Mason Lodge" was tacked on to his bacchanalian song, whose refrain is the "big-bellied bottle":

***"Then fill up a bumper, and make it o'erflow,  
And honours Masonic prepare for to throw;  
May every true Brother of the Compass and Square  
Have a big-bellied bottle when harass'd with care!"***

Notwithstanding the long distance he had to travel he never found the road to and from the Lodge wearisome. The thought of the meeting ahead and poetical composition so intruded into his mind that the miles would seem shorter. Masonic thoughts which are easily detectable in his poems can no doubt be traced to these evening walks. It has been said that Burns's attendances at Masonic meetings led him into excesses. His brother Gilbert's testimony on this point is surely an effective answer to those who would cast this slur on the poet:

*"Towards the end of the period under review (in his twenty-fourth year), and soon after his father's death, he was furnished with the subject of his epistle to John Rankin. During this period, also, he became a Freemason, which was his first introduction to the life of a boon companion. Yet, notwithstanding these circumstances, and the praise he has bestowed on Scotch Drink (which seems to have misled his historians) I do not recollect during these seven years, nor till towards the end of his commencing author (when his growing celebrity occasioned his often being in company), to have ever seen him intoxicated; nor was he at all given to drinking."*

By this time Burns had become recognised as an outstanding poet and his poems had been well received by those who heard them. It was during the winter of 1785-1786 that the full strength of his genius shone forth as at no other time. His poems were known to comparatively few, however, but among those few were the members of his own Lodge, and they from the first recognised the poet's merits. On the suggestion of Gavin Hamilton, a lawyer, and landlord of Mossgiel Farm, Burns was persuaded to collect his writings and publish them by subscription, and so early in 1786 he went to Kilmarnock to arrange for this being done. He took up the suggestion with enthusiasm, and it is not too much to say that the Brethren of his Lodge were, out of friendship to their brother Mason, largely responsible for the first edition of his poems. The Brethren of St John's Lodge, Kilmarnock, which he frequently visited, also assisted very handsomely by subscribing freely themselves and getting others to supplement their action. They agreed to take 350 copies as soon as they were printed, the Right Worshipful Master subscribing for 35 copies and another Brother for 75. This volume might with every justification be called a Masonic Edition. Burns himself could not find the means to publish it, but his Masonic

Brethren loyally supported him in ensuring the success of the venture, which was, as might be expected, dedicated to Gavin Hamilton. John Wilson, an enthusiastic Mason, was the printer of this First Edition. It cannot fail to be noticed that contact with Freemasons and Freemasonry runs like a golden thread throughout the poet's life, and the friends he met in the Craft had no small share in shaping his destiny. Well may Scottish Masons claim to have "deserved well of humanity," for they saved from oblivion these gems of poetry and song which came from "the soul of a man."

Meantime he was having serious domestic troubles, Jean Armour and Mary Campbell had entered into his life, and his farming losses were heavy. The Highland Mary episode wherein Mary Campbell and Robert Burns enacted their betrothal, on opposite banks of the River Ayr, with ritualistic ceremony had a Masonic touch about it: vows of fidelity were pronounced, Bibles exchanged, the names of the contracting parties being written on the fly-leaves, along with Burns's Masonic Mark with, on the one leaf, "And ye shall not swear by my name falsely. . . I am the Lord" from Leviticus, Chap. xix., v. 12, and on the other, "Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths" from St Matthew, Chap. v., v. 33. This historic Bible with the signatures erased and part of the "Mark" obliterated fell into the hands of a relative of Mary Campbell after her death, was purchased in Canada for £25, and may be seen in the Burns Museum in the Monument on the banks of the Doon.

Burns was so weighed down by despondency that it was in the hope of bettering his position that he made up his mind on 12th June to proceed to Jamaica to take up an appointment there. One can easily understand in what stress he must have been when he entertained such a thought. Freemasonry had taught him "ever to remember that the Almighty had implanted in his breast a sacred attachment towards that country whence he derived his birth and infant nurture." In his early years he had again and again nourished the hope that he would "for puir auld Scotland's sake" make "some usefu' plan or book" or "sing a sang at least."

He was re-elected to the Depute Mastership on 16th June 1786, his brother Gilbert going into the Senior Warden's Chair. It is rather curious that he should have allowed his name to go forward on that date for re-election to this office as he had already set his mind on Jamaica, and on 23rd June he recited his "Farewell to the Brethren of St James's Lodge." This meeting was probably that to which he had sent his poetical invitation to his doctor, Dr Mackenzie of Mauchline.

***"Friday first's the day appointed  
By our Right Worshipful anointed,  
To hold our grand procession;  
To get a blad o' Johnny's morals,  
And taste a swatch o' Manson's barrels  
I' the way of our profession.***

***Our Master and the Brotherhood  
Would a' be glad to see you;  
For me I would be mair than proud  
To share the mercies wi' you.  
If Death, then, wi' skaith, then,  
Some mortal heart is hechtin',  
That Saturday you'll fecht him."***

The "Day appointed" was the anniversary of St John the Baptist, and this was observed by the Brethren walking in procession. It was "Carnival day in Tarbolton." As Mid-summer Day was one of the few occasions on which Freemasonry came before the public, Burns was especially anxious that there should be a good muster of the Brethren and so used to address the members personally. The poem quoted above has been preserved with the signature "Robert Burns, D.M." and dated from "Mossgiel, 14th June, A.M. 1790."

The famous Kilmarnock Edition of his poems was published on 31st July, met with instant success, and he suddenly leapt into fame. The whole 600 copies were bought up in the matter of a few weeks, he himself being richer by £20. What these volumes are worth to-day it would be difficult to assess.

His passage to Jamaica had been booked. His vessel was due to sail at the end of November. He had written his "Farewell to the Brethren," and Scotland seemed on the point of losing her illustrious son, when a letter written by Doctor Blacklock to a friend, and which Burns received, caused him to change his mind, overthrow all his schemes, and remain in his native land, where new prospects to his poetic ambition were opened up. To quote his own words:

*"I had just taken the last farewell of a few friends; my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed the last song I should ever measure in Caledonia; when Dr Blacklock's opinion that I would meet with encouragement in Edinburgh for a second edition fired me so much that I posted away to that city."*

This "last song" was "The gloomy night is gathering fast." Had Burns's intention to emigrate been fulfilled it is more than likely that his great "Farewell" poem would have concluded his active connection with Scottish Freemasonry.

*"Adieu! a heart-warm, fond adieu  
Dear brothers of the mystic tie!  
Ye favour'd, ye enlighten'd few,  
Companions of my social joy!  
Tho' I to foreign lands must hie,  
Pursuing Fortune's slidd'ry ba',  
With melting heart, and brimful eye,  
I'll mind you still, tho' far awa'.*

*Oft have I met your social band,  
And spent the cheerful festive night;  
Oft honour'd with supreme command,  
Presided o'er the sons of light;  
And by that hieroglyphic bright,  
Which none but craftsmen ever saw!  
Strong mem'ry on my heart shall write  
Those happy scenes when far awa'.*

*May freedom, harmony and love,  
Unite you in the grand design,  
Beneath th'omniscient eye above,  
The glorious architect divine!  
That you may keep th'unerring line,  
Still rising by the plummet's law,  
Till order bright completely shine,  
Shall be my prayer when far awa'.*

*And you, farewell! whose merits claim,  
Justly that highest badge to wear!  
Heav'n bless your honour'd, noble name,  
To masonry and Scotia dear!  
A last request, permit me here,  
When yearly ye assemble a',  
One round, I ask it with a tear,  
To him, the bard that's far awa' ! "*

Some of his biographers have stated that by the time he reached the last stanza many of the Brethren were in tears.

The person entitled to wear the " Highest Badge " was the Master of the Lodge, and the Master of St James's at that date was Captain, afterwards Major-General James Montgomerie, a younger brother of Colonel Hugh Montgomerie, afterwards Earl of Eglinton. Some authorities assert that the reference is to the Grand Master Mason of Scotland, William Wallace, Sheriff of Ayr. The poet's request to be remembered yearly at the festive board is regularly honoured in St James's Lodge.

On 26th October Burns was made an honorary member of Kilmarnock Kilwinning St John, No. 24 (now No. 22), which met in the old Commercial Inn, now demolished, in Croft Street. He was pleased at the honour conferred upon him and in recognition wrote the stanzas beginning "Ye sons of Old Killie, assembled by Willie," the Christian name of the reigning Master whose name appears at the close of the following Minute: "

*"Oct. 26th, 1786."*

*"Present the Right Worshipful Master, Deputy Master and several Brethren, when John Galt, farmer, in Cressland, was, upon his petition, made and entered Apprentice. At same time Robert Burns, poet, Mauchline, a member of St James's, Tarbolton, was made an honorary member of this Lodge."*

*(Signed) "Will Parker."*

***"Ye sons of Old Killie, assembled by Willie,  
To follow the noble vocation;  
Your thrifty old mother has scarce such another  
To sit in that honoured station.***

***Within this dear Mansion, may wayward Contention  
Or withered Envy ne'er enter;  
May Secrecy round be the mystical bound,  
And brotherly Love be the Centre! "***

Several Lodges now began to recognise the genius of the poet and also to show their appreciation of the man. In this connection it is noteworthy that Kilmarnock Kilwinning conferred on him his first honorary membership, and it was the first occasion on which he is described as a poet. This Lodge has amongst its many treasured possessions a Master's mallet presented to the Lodge by Burns, and a holograph letter from Sir Walter Scott. Here is a copy of the letter:

*"Sir,- I am much gratified by the sight of the portrait of Robert Burns. I saw that distinguished poet only once, and that many years since, and being a . bad marker of likenesses and recollector of faces, I should in an ordinary case have hesitated to offer an opinion upon the resemblance, especially as I make no pretension to judge of the fine arts. But Burns was so remarkable a man that his features remain impressed on my mind as I had seen him only yesterday, and I could not hesitate to recognise this portrait as a striking resemblance of the poet, though it had been presented to me amid a whole exhibition.*

*I am, sir,  
Your obedient servant,  
WALTER SCOTT.*

*Edinburgh, 14 November (1829)."*

Burns presided at a meeting of his Lodge on 10th November 1786, soon after which he set his face towards Edinburgh, reaching there on 28th November and taking up his residence with his friend John Richmond in Baxter's Close, Lawnmarket. In the metropolis he was to spend some of the happiest moments of his life, and these were closely bound up with Freemasonry. Two days after his arrival the Grand Lodge of Scotland celebrated the Festival of Saint Andrew. The Brethren assembled in the aisle of St Giles and walked in procession to St Andrew's Church, where a Masonic service was conducted. Burns may have been in that procession as invitations were issued to Brethren of country Lodges requesting their presence at the function. Shortly after his arrival in the city he was introduced to Lodge Canongate Kilwinning by Brother James Dalrymple of Orangefield near Ayr, and who had previously known the poet. He is reputed to have attended a meeting of this Lodge on 7th December, but Brother D. Murray Lyon does not admit to definite evidence on the point. If he was there, and whether or not, he met Lord Glencairn and the Hon. Henry Erskine, both introduced by Brother Dalrymple. Of these three Brethren Burns writes in terms of the highest praise.

In conversation with his friend Gavin Hamilton the same evening, he says:

*"I am in a fair way to becoming as eminent as Thomas A Kempis or John Bunyan . . . . My Lord Glencairn and the Dean of Faculty, Mr H. Erskine, have taken me under their wing; and by all probability I shall soon be the tenth worthy, and the eighth wise man of the world . . . . I have met in Mr Dalrymple, of Orangefield, what Solomon emphatically calls 'A friend that sticketh closer than a brother.'"*

The Earl of Glencairn never lost interest in Burns. He introduced him to Creech the publisher, secured the patronage of the Caledonian Hunt, did everything in his power to obtain subscribers among the nobility, and used his influence to get Burns into the Excise. Burns was not the man to allow this kindness to pass without showing his appreciation. Some three years later Glencairn died, and when the poet learned of this he wrote to the factor in these words:

*"Dare I trouble you to let me know privately before the day of interment, that I may cross the country and steal among the crowd to pay a tear to the last sight of my ever revered benefactor? "*

And in addition to this he composed in his "Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn" one of the finest stanzas he ever wrote:

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

In Edinburgh he was to find many of the literati who thought highly of him. Principal Robertson, for example, owned that he scarcely ever met any man whose conversation displayed more intellectual vigour. Dugald Stewart's reference to him has already been noted. Dalzel, Professor of Greek in Edinburgh University says:

*"We have a poet in town just now, whom everybody is taking notice of a ploughman from Ayrshire - a man of unquestionable genius. He runs the risk of being spoiled by the excessive attention paid him just now by persons of all ranks. Those who know him best say he has too much good sense to allow himself to be spoiled."*

Burns's fame was now rapidly growing and he threw himself zealously into the work of publishing a second and enlarged volume of his poems. He was to find that the Masonic associations which had proved so helpful in the issue of his Kilmarnock Edition were to stand him in good stead again. These friends were practically all members of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning. >[? He definitely visited Lodge St Andrew on 12th January 1787, on the occasion of a visitation from Grand Lodge when the Grand Master Charteris unexpectedly gave the toast "Caledonia and Caledonia's Bard, Brother Burns." The following day Brother John Ballantine of Ayr received this letter from the poet describing his visit to the Lodge:

*"I went to a Mason Lodge yesternight where the Most Worshipful Grand Master Charteris and all the Grand Lodge of Scotland visited. The meeting was most numerous and elegant; all the different Lodges about town were present in all their pomp. The Grand Master, who presided with great solemnity, and honour to himself as a Gentleman and Mason, among other general toasts gave 'Caledonia and Caledonia's Bard, Brother Burns,' which rung through the whole Assembly with multiplied honours and repeated*

*acclamations. As I had no idea such a thing would happen, I was downright thunderstruck, and trembling in every nerve made the best return in my power. Just as I finished, some of the Grand Officers said so loud as I could hear, with a most comforting accent, 'Very well indeed,' which set me something to rights again."*

Two weeks afterwards, on 1st February, we find him in Canongate Kilwinning Lodge, surrounded by some of the literary personalities of Edinburgh, and there he was affiliated as set forth in the following short Minute:

*"The Right Worshipful Master (Alexander Fergusson of Craigdarroch) having observed that Brother Burns was at present in the Lodge, who is well known as a great poetic writer, and for a late publication of his works, which have been universally commended, and submitted that he should be assumed a member of this Lodge, which was unanimously agreed to, and he was assumed accordingly."*

The Minute concludes thus:

"Having spent the evening in a very social manner, as the meetings of the Lodge always have been, it was adjourned till next monthly meeting," and it was at this meeting on 1st March that Burns is supposed to have been installed as Poet Laureate. The Minute of 1st February went upon the Lodge Book, and it is preserved to-day in the Lodge among its choicest treasures. The meeting on 1st February was, so far as is known, the last Masonic meeting attended by Burns in Edinburgh, if we omit the ceremony of the Poet Laureateship on 1st March, about which there has been so much dispute. The matter has never been satisfactorily cleared up. Lodge books in those days were very imperfectly kept. Many of the Minutes were not even signed. For example, there is no Minute in the St Andrew's Lodge Books that Burns was ever in that Lodge, and his visit there might never have been remembered had he not happened to refer to it in the letter already quoted to one of his friends.

With regard to the much discussed meeting of Lodge Canongate Kilwinning on 1st March 1787, it has been assumed that the business which was to have come before the meeting was in the first place to send a letter of congratulation to the Prince of Wales, who had on 6th February been initiated into the mysteries of Freemasonry at the Star and Garter, London, and secondly to confer a mark of respect on Robert Burns. But the Minute in question as it appears in the Canongate Kilwinning records reads:

*"St John's Chapel, 1 st March 1787.-The Lodge being duly constituted, it was reported that since last meeting" (and here follow the names of newly made Entered Apprentices and Fellows of Craft) "no other business being before the meeting the Lodge adjourned."*

No word here of Burns's installation as Poet Laureate nor of any congratulatory epistle to the Prince of Wales.

Was he referring to the Laureateship when he penned the following lines in acknowledgement of a present from a friend?

***"But Latin Willie's reek noo raise (Willie Nicol)  
He'd seen that nicht Rab crown'd wi' bays."***

It would appear that as far as Lodge Canongate is concerned the first reference to Burns's inauguration to the Poet Laureateship was not until 1815, when the Brethren were asked to subscribe to the fund for the erection of the Mausoleum of Burns who, they said, "had been Poet Laureate to the Lodge," this being followed in 1835 when James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, was elected to succeed Burns as Poet Laureate, acknowledged the honour conferred upon him as well as the compliment of being Burns's successor. The Brethren drank to the memory of Burns as "the last Poet Laureate of the Lodge." if any of those who were members of the Lodge in 1787 were present on either or both of these dates they must have known the facts. Certain it is that the statements were never contradicted.

An interesting correspondence between Brother H. C. Peacock, Secretary of the Lodge, and Brother D. Murray Lyon is to be found in *The History of the Lodge Canongate Kilwinning, No. 2*, by Allan Mackenzie, R.W.M., in 1883-1887, regarding the controversy.

The Edinburgh Edition of Burns's poems was published on 21st April 1787, from the publishing shop of Mr Creech, in the Luckenbooths. It was in a handsome octavo volume, price five shillings. Creech's advertisement contained the following note: --

*"As the book is published for the sole benefit of the author, it is requested that subscribers will send for their copies: and none will be delivered without money."*

The Kilmarnock Preface was abandoned and in its place appeared

A  
DEDICATION

TO THE NOBLEMEN AND GENTLEMEN  
OF THE CALEDONIAN HUNT

and then follows the Preface by Burns. The list of Subscribers extended to over thirty-eight pages comprising 1,500 persons subscribing for 2,800 copies. Many of them were members of Canongate Kilwinning. Smellie, his printer, Creech, his publisher, and Naysmith, who provided the frontispiece to his works, were all Masons. In that connection it has been said that "surely never book came out of a more Masonic laboratory." It was, too, his Brother Mason, John Ballantyne of Ayr who, hearing that poverty prevented the publication of a second edition of his poems offered to lend him the money required for the purpose.

***"Affliction's sons are brothers in distress;  
A brother to relieve, how exquisite the bliss."***

There is no doubt that his connection with Freemasonry in Edinburgh was the most interesting and to him the most enjoyable period of his life, and it was during the few months spent there that his genius was appreciated and rewarded.

After having spent about five months in the Capital he set out on 6th May 1787 on a tour to the South of Scotland with Mr Robert Ainslie, a young lawyer, to whom he had been introduced at a Masonic meeting. They visited a number of interesting spots and met several distinguished people. On 7th May they reached Coldstream and crossed the border into England. Burns's love for his native land overcame him here and he could not refrain from uttering aloud, with deep emotion and devotion, the two concluding stanzas of "The Cottar's Saturday Night," four of the lines being:

***"O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!  
For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!  
Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil  
Be blest with health and peace and sweet content!"***

On 18th May they arrived at Eyemouth where, through the influence of their host, a meeting of the Lodge was convened for the next day, and there Burns and Ainslie were made Royal Arch Masons, as set forth in the following Minute: --

*"Eyemouth, 19th May 1787.*

*"At a general encampment held . . ." in Lodge St Ebbe, "the following Brethren were made Royal Arch Masons-namely Robert Burns . . . and Robert Ainslie . . . . Robert Ainslie paid one guinea*

*admission dues: but on account of R. Burns's remarkable poetical genius, the encampment unanimously agreed to admit him gratis, and considered themselves honoured by having a man of such shining abilities for one of their companions."*

The members of the Lodge forming this "general encampment" secured an English Charter some three months later authorising them to be erected into a Chapter, bearing the name of "Land of Cakes" R.A. Chapter, No. 52, on the English Roll. The Chapter is now Scottish, No. 15.

Having parted with Ainslie he crossed the north of England to Dumfries, where he stayed two days and was presented with the freedom of the burgh. Ayr and Mossgiel were reached on 9th June and ten days later he was re-elected Depute Master of his Lodge, but there is no record of his being at the meeting and the Minute is unsigned. St James's Lodge sometimes met by deputation at Mauchline. On 25th July he presided at a meeting there, honorary membership being conferred on several well-known Masons, including Professor Dugald Stewart, who had on more than one occasion befriended the poet.

In the early days of August Burns returned to Edinburgh to settle with his publisher. An important meeting of his Lodge was due, and he found himself unable to be present. He accordingly sent the following letter to his Tarbolton Lodge, addressed "Men and Brethren" and with the date "Edinburgh, 23rd August 1787:--

*"I am truly sorry it is not in my power to be at your quarterly meeting. If I must be absent in body, believe me I shall be present in spirit. I suppose those who owe us monies, by bill or otherwise, will appear - I mean those we summoned. If you please, I wish you would delay prosecuting defaulters till I come home. The court is up, and I will be home before it sits down. In the meantime to take a note of who appear and who do not, of our faulty debtors, will be right in my humble opinion; and those who confess debt and crave days, I think we should spare them. Farewell!*

***Within your dear Mansion may wayward Contention  
Or withered Envy ne'er enter;  
May Secrecy round be the mystical bound,  
And brotherly Love be the Center!!!***

***ROBERT BURNS."***

The quatrain above it will be recalled was the last of the verses he wrote to Lodge Kilmarnock Kilwinning on his receiving honorary

membership there. One word only was changed, viz.: -"your" replacing "their" in the first line.

Two days later he set out on his Highland tour with Willie Nicol, immortalised as having "brewed a peck o' maul," said to be the greatest drinking song in any language. They reached beyond Inverness, travelling in all nearly 600 miles over a period of twenty-two days, and meeting many Masonic Brethren en route. Tradition has it that he was made an honorary member of Lodge Ancient Brazen, No. 17, Linlithgow, but there is no record of this having taken place. Lodge Stirling Ancient, No. 30, also believes that he attended a meeting of the Brethren and entered his name in the Attendance Book. This register used to be displayed to visitors, but on one occasion it was found that the page containing the poet's signature had been removed, and at a subsequent date the register too disappeared. This would almost indicate that he was in reality a visitor there. Their arrival in Edinburgh on 16th September completed the tour.

Burns spent the winter in the Capital prodding his publisher for a settlement. When this was squared he found himself enriched to the extent of £500. He was also in communication with Brother Patrick Millar of Dalswinton for a lease of the farm of Ellisland, and at the same time was seeking, through the good offices of one of his brother Masons, an appointment in the Excise. There is very little documentary evidence to show that he interested himself in Masonry during this second Edinburgh period, though it has been asserted that he attended many meetings during these five months. On one occasion he states in an undated letter that "To-night the Grand Master and Lodge of Masons appear at the Theatre in form. I am determined to go to the play . . . . I will call on you a few minutes before the Theatre opens." Members of the Craft were patrons of the Drama and when a particular play was on they were wont to appear in full Masonic regalia.

Burns returned to Mossgiel in March 1788, married Jean Armour in April, and lent his brother Gilbert £200 to ease the condition of his widowed mother and her family. He attended his Lodge on 7th and 23rd May, the latter occasion being the last time he signed the Minute as Depute Master. It is reputed that he foregathered with the Brethren on 24th June, on the occasion of the annual Masonic procession. A few days before, on 13th June, he had taken possession of Ellisland, but does not seem to have been enamoured with the idea of residing in Dumfriesshire, for in a letter to his friend Hugh Parker, lamenting the fact that he was missing his Ayrshire friends, he pens a verse concluding with:

***"Tarbolton, twenty-fourth of June,  
Ye'll find me in a better tune."***

Another fact of regret to him was that there was not a "kenn'd face" in the district except his auld mare Jenny Geddes:

***"Dowie she saunters doon Nithside  
And aye a westlin' leuk she throws  
While tears hap ower her auld broon nose."***

On this 24th of June James Findlay, a fellow exciseman, was appointed Depute Master in succession to the poet, the Master being James Dalrymple of Orangefield, who has already been referred to as befriending Burns while in Edinburgh.

He paid flying visits to Mauchline on 21st October and 11th November, when his Lodge met under his presidency. This was the last meeting of St James's Lodge he attended and his association with this Lodge which he so much adorned was at an end.

While at Ellisland his Masonic interest was renewed. He affiliated to Lodge St Andrew, Dumfries, No. 179, erected in 1774, and with this Lodge he retained his connection to the end. It became known as "Burns's Lodge." His affiliation fee was 10s. The Minute which records his admission is a quaint one and full of inaccuracies, both as to spelling and figures:

*"The Brethren having selebrated the Anniversary of St John in the usual manner and Brother Burns in Aellisland of St Davids Strabolton Lodge, No. 178 being present The Lodge unanimously assumed him a member of the Lodge being a Master Masson he subscribed the regulations as a member Thereafter the Lodge was shut.*

*Signed Stmt MACKENZIE."*

The next mention of the poet is made in the Minute of 28th December 1789, when his name appears on the list of those present, and as having made payment, along with the other members, of his quarterly fees. Then again he is one of five Brethren who met in the Globe Tavern, Dumfries, in April 1790, when as usual friendships were established, one of his friends presenting him with an apron of

*"chamois leather, very fine, with figures of gold, some of them relieved with green, others with a dark red colour (while) on the under side of the semi circular part which is turned down at the top is written in a bold, fair hand:— Charles Sharpe, of Hotham, to Rabbie Burns, Dumfries, Dec. 12, 1791."*

Burns and Sharpe were mutually interested in music and verse.

His next appearance was at the meeting on 19th April 1791, but for some reason the blank space left for the Minute was never filled in. On 27th December of the same year, and on 6th February and 14th May 1792, he was again present at meetings of the Lodge when he acted as Steward. On 31st May of that year he took part in the proceedings, part of which was ordering the clerk to procure "a proper silver seal for the use of the Lodge." On 5th June he appears again. As he was now resident in Dumfries, having given up the farm at Ellisland, it was more convenient and easier for him to be present at Lodge meetings. He attended again on 22nd and 30th November of that year, and at the latter meeting (St Andrew's Day), was elected to the Senior Warden's chair, which office he filled for a year. Exactly a year later "The Senior Warden" (Burns) is noted as being present. His name does not appear again until 29th November 1794, when the election of office-bearers took place, and over a year elapses ere his name is mentioned on the sederunt, when on 28th January 1796 he stood sponsor for a candidate "a merchant in Liverpool who, being recommended by Burns, was admitted apprentice." At this meeting the Brethren agreed that the new Apprentice's "fees be applied towards defraying the expenses of this night." While a member of St Andrew's Lodge, out of a possible sixteen meetings he was present at eleven of them. His final attendance was on 14th April 1796.

The state of Burns's health at this time was such that Robert Chambers in his *Life of Burns*, speaking of these last two meetings says, "It is not unlikely that both on this occasion (14th April) and on the 28th of January Burns made an effort, if not a sacrifice, for the honour of persons whom he regarded as friends." The Lodge records contain no reference to his death, though we may be sure the members paid tribute and respect to the memory of one who had assisted so often in their Masonic labours.

The Lodge ceased to meet in 1805, and an attempt was made in 1815 to revive it, when the Minute closes with a resolution to support the Provincial Grand Master, now William Millar of Dalswinton, at laying the foundation stone (on 5th June) of the Mausoleum to be erected over the remains of Robert Burns, the most distinguished Brother that St Andrew's Lodge had been privileged to receive within its portals. Several Lodges attended the ceremony, but St Andrew is not mentioned as being represented, although over 400 Freemasons took part in the proceedings. Efforts to revive it proved futile and no other meetings are recorded. It was struck off the roll of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1816. No reference is made in any of the other Lodges, meeting regularly

while Burns lived in Dumfries, to his having paid them any visits, though no doubt he took his share in their proceedings from time to time, and thus it is to the precious Minute Book of the Lodge alone that we are indebted for some knowledge of the Masonic activities of our national poet during his stay in Dumfries.

In December 1879, at a public sale, certain articles, once the property of Lodge St Andrew, No. 179, were purchased and paid for by the then Grand Master Mason, Sir Michael Shaw Stewart, Baronet, who presented them to the Grand Lodge of Scotland. These were - (1) The Minute Book of Lodge St Andrew, Dumfries, No. 179, of which Burns was an affiliated member, bearing the poet's signature to the Bye-laws and containing the Minute of his admission; (2) the mallet of St Andrew's, and an apron used in the Lodge in Burns's time. These are on exhibit in the Grand Lodge Museum.

In this brief survey of the Masonic activities of our national poet some minor details have been omitted, but perhaps sufficient has been written to show that in the short span of life vouchsafed to him Robert Burns proved himself an adornment to the Fraternity of which he was one of the most illustrious members.