

Who was Capt. Gray (Chairman, i.e. President, 1834 and 1846)?

(The full version of a post-business-meeting talk given to the Directors, by Past President Ian Dickson, in 2013.)

He was **Capt Charles Gray (1782-1851), R.M.** He first attended the Annual Celebration in 1829. He saw active service in the Royal Marines from 1805 to 1841 – “a considerable part of which was spent in the Mediterranean” (Conolly, “Eminent Men of Fife”, 1866).

I suspect that we are today unaware of **the standing of Capt. Gray in the literary circles of his day**, and of the certainty that his friendship with certain honorary members is the reason for their nominations. We will start with William Tennant.

William Tennant (1784-1848) – Honorary Member 1829 – was at that time a master at Dollar Academy, later (1834) appointed Professor of Oriental Languages at St Andrews (biography on the website). He was the author of the then-popular mock-heroic poem “Anster Fair” (1812) – an amusing account of the marriage of “Maggie Lauder”.

‘Maggie Lauder’ was a 1600s folk song, revived in 1987 by the Tannahill Weavers (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8Owj8HpHU8>). Burns held it in high esteem and wrote [*where?*]: “This old song, so pregnant with Scottish *naïveté* and energy, is much relished by all ranks, notwithstanding its broad wit and palpable allusions.—Its language is a precious model of imitation: sly, sprightly, and forcibly expressive.—Maggie’s tongue wags out the nicknames of Rob the Piper, with all the careless lightsomeness of unrestrained gaiety.”

Chancing on a mention of Gray in a biography of Tennant led me to the realisation that Gray was not of Ayrshire, but of Fife and Edinburgh, thereby enabling the links described below to be made.

Captain Gray, born in Anstruther, had been a schoolfellow of Professor Tennant at Anstruther, and himself published a “Sequel to Maggie Lauder”. In 1811 he published “Poems and Songs” which went into a second edition three years later. In 1813 he joined Tennant and some other local poets in establishing the “Musomanik Society of Anstruther” – lasting four years, it “gave to the world a collection of respectable verses”.

The Club 1829 minutes record: “In addition to the poet’s “brither Davie” [David Sillar], the meeting this year was honored [*sic*] with the presence of Charles Gray Esq Captain in the Royal Marines, an ardent admirer of the Ayrshire Bard, and himself an author and a Poet of celebrity. – Besides chaunting with joyous glee several songs of his own Muse, Capt Gray with much animation and in true poetical style recited an address to the Club with several stanzas prepared by him for the occasion, which afforded sufficient testimony that this son of Mars is neither a young nor a lame acquaintance of the Nine [Muses].” [His poetic address is on pp.30-31 of the Minute Book.]

It is reasonable to infer that Capt Gray’s presence in Irvine in 1829 occasioned that year’s nomination of William Tennant as an Honorary Member – Tennant was minuted as “the far-famed author of An’ster Fair”. The Club wrote to him on Feb. 2nd.

The 1829 minutes also mention the “Address to the Shade of Burns” written for the Third Anniversary of the Irvine Burns Club 1829 by Capt. Gray.

There is no indication as to what prompted his attendance at Irvine. Though Dr Mackenzie, our first President, had moved to the capital (at Shandwick Place) in 1827, there is no evidence of his move being the connection..

Capt Gray was admitted as a member in 1829. He had not been present in 1827 or 1828; in 1830 he is “one of the old [ie existing] members”.

1830 minutes: “Capt Gray sang his Song “Blythe, blythe and merry are we” which was formerly [*sic*] voted a standing Song of the Club” and is on p.47 of the minute book. (Incidentally, Bailie Sillar did not attend, due to “severe illness”, and died later that year. Thus, by 1830, both of the leading founder members had ceased to be active.)

1831 minutes: nothing relevant

1832, 1833, 1834: no minutes extant

1835: nothing relevant

1836: no minutes extant

Capt Gray did not attend in 1837 / 1838 / 1839 / 1840 and probably not in 1841. Later in 1841 he retired from service (on a captain’s full pay).

He attended for seven consecutive years, in 1842, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1847, and 1848.

There was no meeting in 1849 (‘disease’ – cholera), no minutes for 1850, and he was too ill in 1851.

In 1841, on the requests of his many friends, Capt Gray published a second volume of verses, “Lays and Lyrics”, dedicated to his friend Prof. Tennant. Subsequently his article “Cursory Remarks on Scottish Song” appeared in the ‘Glasgow Citizen’.

In 1844, the subscribers to “The Poems of Sir Robert Aytoun” include, among many others, Capt Gray, Thomas C Latto, and William Tennant.

The 1845 minutes: “An excellent poem promised last year by Capt Gray was read by him and listened to with the greatest delight.”

The 1846 minutes, referring to Chairman, Capt Gray: “His address, in proposing the Toast of the Evening, shewed the attention he had paid to his subject and displayed an affection for the departed as only a Poet could feel or express. He sung several of his own Songs in his happiest manner, and in particular one that he had composed last month & which was quite a gem. He produced also the “Lines” written for the present Anniversary by Alexander Smart, which were with acclamation appointed to be put up with the other Memorabilia of the Club.”

M H Conolly, op. cit., p207, records: “Of cheerful and amiable dispositions, Captain Gray was much cherished by his friends. Intimately acquainted with the productions of the modern Scottish poets, he took delight in discussing their merits; and he enlivened the social circle by singing his favourite songs. . . An ardent admirer of Burns, he was led to imitate the style of the great national Bard; and on one occasion, he was selected to preside at a great anniversary celebration of his birth in Ayrshire, which he did with great *eclat*. In person, Captain Gray was of low stature; his gray [*sic*], weather-beaten countenance, wore a constant smile.”

Also from the 1846 minutes, referring to 1847: “Bailie Balsillie was appointed the new Chairman [for 1847]; and Capt Gray having, as he said, been raised to his present Seat without having held the Vice-Chair, volunteered to act as Croupier to the Bailie, at the next Anniversary, which was rapturously agreed to.”

The 1846 honorary members were Patrick Maxwell, Thomas C Latto, Alex Smart, James Fillans, Mr Fyffe & Mr Willox. The first three of these were his friends, well-known figures in Edinburgh literary circles and beyond. Acceptance letters exist from those three, but not from the other three.

Patrick Maxwell (c.1794-?1857), writing from 5 Archibald Place on 31st Jan. 1846: “Dear Sir, Accept of my best thanks for the kind communication of my being admitted an Honorary Member of The Irvine Burns' Club, which communication reached me to-day. I so assure you I esteem it a great honour, and the no less so from my being proposed by my friend Captain Gray.” (The minute book contains, p71, “lines by Charles Gray addressed extempore to Patrick Maxwell”.)

Alex Smart (1798-1866) accepted from Edinburgh on 1st Feb. 1846.

Thomas C Latto (1818-1894) accepted from 29 Charlotte Square a few weeks later (“I was harassed with business at the moment I received [the invitation], & the note slipped aside.”), on 3rd March 1846.

Later that year, Thomas Latto wrote, on 29th December 1846:

Sir, I venture to send you the prefixed song, which I should be particularly gratified to find sung in honour of the amiable subject of it, & in his personal presence at the Irvine Burns Club festivity next month in honour of the immortal Burns. I should have had much pleasure in attending myself to croak it, but fear that will not be in my power. If you know of any skilful musician who intends to be present, it will oblige me much. Could you prevail on him to undertake it. It will require skill to adapt the second verse of each stanza to the the air I have prefixed. I know of no other one that will suit - the measure is so very peculiar. The Capt is quite in the dark as to the plot, so I hope you won't let the cat out of the bag. If you are musical, I think you will find that the tail piece I have added by way of Chorus chimes in well at the end of the Air "Oft in the Stilly Night".

Shd none be able to sing it to that air, please let me know & I shall try to get our Minstrel P Macleod to ferret out or construct a melody for it. Wishing you a large & happy gathering of the Burns Club & admirers of the great ploughman in Jan^y - I remain Sir, Your very obed^t Serv^t

Thomas C Latto.

Hon. Member

P.S. Perhaps I ought to have mentioned that "Lauriston" is the suburb of Edin. where the Bard resides.

Capt Gray, as we know from the record of his death a few years later, lived at 11 Archibald Place (off Lauriston Place) – three doors along from the home of Patrick Maxwell.

The 1847 minutes record Capt Gray as present, also “Capt Gray’s Campaign”, a 16-line poem by Mr Maxwell Dick (p.75), and “The Bard o’ Lauriston (Capt Gray)”, the 63-line poem by Thos C Latto referred to in his December letter. “Dr Allan was appointed chairman for 1848: Capt Gray agreed to be Croupier.”

The 1848 minutes include Capt Gray in the list of members, and Mr Maxwell of Edinburgh in the list of guests, in the list of those present, but “In consequence of Dr Allan having removed from Irvine, Mr Montgomerie was elected Chairman, and Mr Dick Croupier in the absence of Capt Gray.” The explanation comes later: “Capt Gray and his friend

Mr Maxwell having been detained in coming out by the Railway did not join the meeting till after dinner.”

(1849 – no meeting, due to disease (cholera); 1850 – no minutes, though the 1851 minutes imply an 1850 meeting.)

1851 minutes: “An apology was communicated from Mr Maxwell who was to have acted as Croupier at the present Anniversary, but who was not able to do so from the state of his health.” Neither did Capt Gray attend – it would be known that he was in poor health.

Death of Capt Gray – 13th April 1851, at 11 Archibald Place.

1852 minutes – “Since last meeting one of the principal and earliest of the Members had gone to that bourne from whence [*sic*] no traveller returns: he [the Chairman] meant Capt Gray R.M. and after paying a high and well-merited Eulogium to his Character proposed his Memory which was drunk in solemn silence.”

The connections continue, as we note two 1854 honorary members from Edinburgh:

Prof. W E Aytoun, residing at 16 Gt Stuart St and **Archibald Boyle**, who in 1851 lived in the same part of Edinburgh, at 28 Charlotte Square – next door to Thomas Latto at no.29 – this is almost turning into a Facebook group

Further, we speculate whether Capt Gray’s friendships in the 1840s overlap with the circles of Boyle’s Ayrshire links in 1854?

Several of Capt Gray’s poems and songs appeared in “Whistle-Binkie, or The Piper of the Party, A Collection of Songs for the Social Circle”, 1842.

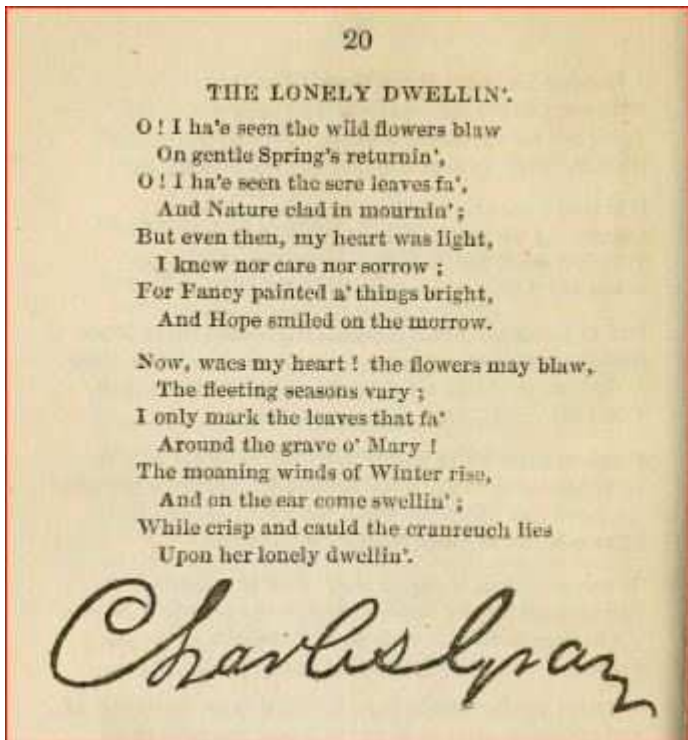
Other poets whose work appears therein include Susanna Blamire (1747-1795, a collection of whose work was edited by Patrick Maxwell), William Motherwell (Honorary Member 1829, ob. 1835), David Vedder (Honorary Member nominee 1830), Hugh Ainslie (Honorary Member nominee 1830), Alexander Rodger (Honorary Member nominee 1839), Robert Gilfillan (HM nominee 1839), Thomas Latto (Honorary Member 1846), Alexander Smart (Honorary Member 1846), Patrick Maxwell (Honorary Member 1846), and Conolly.

The Whistlebinkies, who have, now for almost 40 years, toured the world with Scottish traditional music, define a whistlebinkie as “someone who played the whistle whilst sitting on the bink (bench)”.

Conclusion:

Thanks to the links between (a) Capt. Gray & Tennant, and (b) Latto & Lauriston, we now know that Capt Gray is the then-well-known enthusiast of poems and songs and that several of the literary connections with Irvine arise from his friendships.

Capt Gray represents a long 22-year association of Irvine Burns Club with literary figures in Edinburgh, from 1829 till his death in 1851.



'Whistle-binkie', 1842, part 3, p20 – one of several poems by Capt Gray in this publication



from a song-sheet c. 1825

The lasses a', baith far and near,
 Hae heard o' Rob the Ranter;
 I'll shake my foot wi' right guid will,
 Gin ye'll blaw up your chanter.

Then to his bags he flew wi' speed,
 About the drone he twisted;
 Meg up and wallop'd owre the green,
 Fur brawly she could frisk it.



The remaining section of Archibald Place. The home of Capt Gray, at no.11, was to the right of the remaining section. (The current no. 11 is the result of re-numbering.) Built c.1825, the street took its name from the pre-1825 business at this location, Mr Archibald's Nursery.

