JOHN KELSO HUNTER

"THE COBBLER ARTIST"

PRESIDENT OF IRVINE BURNS’ CLUB

1862

by Jack Lovie

Paper presented to Irvine Burns’ Club library by Jack Lovie 2008
JOHN KELSO HUNTER 1802-1873. A BREIF ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE AND WORK.

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Sources
1 “Retroспект of an Artist’s Life. Memorials of West Countrymen & Manners of the Past Half Century” by John Kelso Hunter, 1868
   Reprinted with an introduction by Dr Findlay (“George Umber”) by the Standard Press, Kilmarnock, 1912.
2 “Life Studies of Character” by John Kelso Hunter, Greenock, 1870
   Printed by Orr, Pollock & Co.
   Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd
   Glasgow: David Robertson
   Greenock: D L Pollock
3 The Dick Institute, Kilmarnock
4 The Burlington Magazine, London
5 The Royal Academy of Arts, London
7 The Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh
8 The Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh
9 The British Library, London
10 The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts, Glasgow
11 The Minutes of Irvine Burns’ Club
12 “The History of Irvine: Royal Burgh and New Town” by John Strawhorn, 1985
13 “The Royal Burgh of Irvine” by Arnold McJannet
14 “The History of Kilmarnock” by Archibald MacKay
15 S K Gaw, Director and Past President of Irvine Burns’ Club
16 Richard Johnston, the Secretary of Kilwinning Curling Club, 2002
17 Gordon Stewart, the Session clerk of Dundonald Parish Church, 2002
18 “Burns. A Biography of Robert Burns” by James Mackay
   Mainstream Publishing, 1992
19 The Mitchell Library, Glasgow
20 David Wilson, Secretary and Past Master of Mother Lodge, Kilwinning
21 “History of the Mother Lodge of Kilwinning” by Robert Wylie, published ca. 1878
22 “Kilmarnock Burns’ Monument Catalogue of the McKie Burnsiana Library”
   Compiled by David Sneddon, published by the Kilmarnock Standard Printing October 1909
Subject

John Kelso Hunter, a Past President of Irvine Burns’ Club, was born in the parish of Symington on 15 December 1802 and died in Glasgow on 3 February 1873.

Kilmarnock Period

As a young boy he was employed as a herdsman on Dankeith Estate and then went on to serve his apprenticeship as a shoemaker in Dundonald. On completion of his apprenticeship, he moved to Kilmarnock to pursue his trade. In the lodgings which he found in Kilmarnock he made friends with a young apprentice painter called William Pattinson Reid and he it was who first fired Hunter’s ambition to be a painter. He bought a box of watercolours for fivence “and to the bargain I received a camel-hair pencil”. With this and no tuition whatsoever, he set out to be a painter. He painted his first picture in 1819 when he was 17. It was a watercolour landscape and, of course, was a total disaster because not only did he have no idea of perspective, but also, perhaps, because he mixed his colours with spittle. Throughout his artistic life he received no formal tuition or real guidance and he was almost totally self taught.

His first totally untutored attempts at painting landscapes were, not surprisingly, not very successful and then he tried his hand at portraiture both in watercolour and oil by copying portraits that he studied in books and in the library. His first commissioned oil portrait was also a disaster, so much so that the sitter displayed it for the amusement of his guests at dinner parties. Nevertheless, Hunter was single minded in his intention to become an artist and especially a portrait painter and spent all his spare time practising by using his workmates as sitters and by copying the work of established artists. At this time, in Kilmarnock, there were a number of men who shared an interest in painting and, in 1820, a man called John Ingram opened a class for drawing and painting; a second class was held by a Mr Clooney from Ireland. This interest led to a proposal by the Kilmarnock painters that an academy be set up in the town and, in 1831, J. K. Hunter called the first meeting of the Kilmarnock Drawing Academy and twelve people attended. The first task that the members undertook was the making of flags for the processions preceding the passing of the Reform Bill. Until the Drawing Academy was wound up due to a cholera outbreak in July 1832, Hunter was its most enthusiastic and industrious member. “Visit the Academy during daylight”, said the Kilmarnock newspaper of that time, “and you will find the shoemaker a devoted student of Titian; and at night go to his dwelling, and you will find him the hard-working son of Crispin; instead of delineating with a pencil the divine features of the human face, he is beating out the soles of a pair of shoes with his hammer – labouring to support a wife and family”.

Glasgow Period

In 1838, Hunter moved to Glasgow where he doggedly pursued the profession of portrait painting and where he died on 3 February 1873.
In Glasgow, he made a determined effort over many years to further his career as a portrait painter but was never able to make a good living at it and was forced, every now and again, to return to shoe-making to support his large family. In his own words, “I had always looked on the cobbling as the foundation of my independence. I had been often beat in attempting to live by art, but the cobbling never failed me. Many a man and woman I had set on a steady footing in the world. Almost every patron in the shoe trade had two feet, but in art only one head. Thus the feet gave two chances to one and necessity was on my side in the lower stratum: while often in the lofty walk, means as well as taste were at a discount”.

His first wife having died, he married for a second time and, in total, had 15 children. At the time of writing his autobiography at the age of 65, his second wife and seven of his children were alive.

During his life in Glasgow, he dabbled in politics and tried his hand at lecturing and at journalism, writing for the “Kilmarnock Chronicle”, the “Glasgow Sentinel”, the “Greenock Telegraph”, the “Falkirk Herald” and, at the invitation of Arthur Guthrie, contributing articles for the “Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald”.

He was a determined self-publicist and wrote the most outrageous adverts for his work (APPENDIX 1). He was accepted, to some extent, into Glasgow society and he had formal, tongue in cheek, cards printed for presentation at formal dinners:

JOHN KELSO HUNTER F.R.S. & C. (First-rate Shoemaker & Cobbler)
PROFESSOR IN AND PRESIDENT OF THE COBBLER’S SCHOOL OF ART.

He must have been fairly personable because he did manage to get some influential patronage that enabled him to visit Belfast and, on two occasions, London where he was not backward at coming forward and was received by a number of the London domiciled Scots nobility.

He wrote his autobiography at the age of 65, six years before his death and he subsequently recorded that Maxwell Dick, Irvine was one of the “representative subscribers”.

Quality of Work

Despite the fact that he was largely self-educated, had no formal tuition in painting, and had to support a wife and a large family, he had the talent and determination to make something of himself as an artist. He seemed to have had the ability to catch a striking likeness of his subject and he painted the portraits of scores of West of Scotland people. His talent was such that he was also successful in having some of his work recognised at the highest level.
He had a self-portrait accepted by the Royal Academy for their 1847 exhibition, catalogue number 479 (APPENDIX 2).

He also had a number of works accepted by the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts over the period 1861-1872. To quote the present Secretary, "His work must have had some merit because, even in those days, the Institute was a highly critical body". These are detailed in the "Dictionary of Exhibitors at the Annual Exhibitions of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts 1861-1979" (APPENDIX 3).

Although there is no mention in his autobiography of any approach to the Royal Scottish Academy, he had a number of works accepted by them for their exhibitions of 1849, 1858, 1868 and 1872 (APPENDIX 4).

Despite being exhibited by both the Royal Academy and the Royal Scottish Academy, he was not appointed an RA nor an RSA.

**Work Located**

(i) The Dick Institute, Kilmarnock has five attributed paintings:
   (a) Mr Mitchell, Angel Inn, Kilmarnock
   (b) Mrs Mitchell
   (c) Self-portrait ##
   (d) William Anderson, Session Clerk of Kilmarnock Parish Church, 1830-1855
   (e) An unfinished oil sketch of "The Cobbler" with some notes on his life written by his son, Harry Johnson Hunter

(ii) Two paintings are on display in the session room of Dundonald Church: "portraits of a lady and gentleman". The subjects have not bee identified.

(iii) Some records mention that "the Burns’ Museum” (sic) has a self-portrait of him "cobbled on his shoemaker’s seat”. It is more than likely that this work is located in Kilmarnock.

(iv) The Witt Library has a photograph, gifted by the Burlington Magazine, of a painting, oil on canvas, by Hunter, entitled “Early Industrial Town”, 1839. The whereabouts of the original is not known.

(v) Two portraits, unsigned but of undoubted provenance, are in the possession of the family of Matthew Mackie Marshall of Kilbirnie. They are of Ann Knox (1798-1849) and James Jameson Mackie (1829-1852). (APPENDIX 12).

## This may be the work described in page 146 of the catalogue of the McKie Burnsiana Library (see above) and described as “Portrait of J.K. Hunter, Kilmarnock (Cobbler, Artist & Author). A sketch painted by himself 1859. [Presented by his son, H.J. Hunter, Glasgow 1880]

**Irvine Connections**

According to his autobiography, Hunter "had once, before the Great Reform Demonstration, gone to Irvine, along with an acquaintance, canvassing for flags and sashes for the grand meeting which took place on Irvine moor. The only men I knew
there were James Harvey, captain of the “Nancies”, a brig for coal traffic; Robert Orr, pilot, and Robert Wyllie, harbourmaster. They had interested themselves to get flags to paint, and to my mind represented the men of Irvine. I painted a flag for the sailors, with Hope and an Anchor”.

According to Strawhorn (p121), “On 10 August 1832, despite the cholera, Irvine had its day of rejoicing for the Reform Act. In the procession, in which the Trades were joined by others from Kilmarnock and Stewarton, the various crafts were represented by tableaux, as was customary”.

Hunter subsequently made several visits to Irvine to seek commissions and to sell paintings by “raffle”. During one of his visits to Irvine he was employed for fifty-seven weeks, doing one portrait a week and, during this time, held several sales (“raffles”) of his work. He commented that in Irvine, “A home feeling grew strong. I set the society of Irvine above that of any place I have ever seen. I was admitted at once into good society, and there received many acts of personal kindness”. The date of this visit is not clear.

For a list of the people that he met in Irvine see **APPENDIX 5**

In addition to portraits, he painted a number of landscapes, including views of Eglinton Castle. It was not all work, however. As Hunter tells it, “I used to visit the jail at nights. It was tenanted mostly by people who were scarce of sma’ change. I was in one night when some of the debtors thought that a glass of whisky would do them no harm. I was intrusted to bring the medicine, and not being acquainted with the laws of the jail, I asked the decent old jailor where I could get the whisky. He said, “There’s no drink allowed to come in here, sir. Go to Mr Wallace’s at the foot of the stair, get the best, keep it out of sight else I’ll take it from you”. I did as I was bidden. The bottle was soon swallowed, and other two to keep it down. The old jailor, true to his trust, shut his eyes the time it was going round, and no fewer than seven glasses came to his share, which he held out his hand most ingeniously for, and found the way to his mouth like one whose sight was of the most acute sort. Three of the prisoners played the fiddle, they had a dance amang themselves that night, and having cried names from the windows to some lieges in authority whom they saw in the street, were put under a month’s non-admittance of friends”.

As well as documenting his own time in Irvine, Hunter incorporated into his book a number of fascinating anecdotes about the life and times of the town.

**#This tale is the only reference to JKH in McJannet and Strawhorn. JCL**

**Irvine Burns’ Club Connection.**

Quoted from his autobiography:
“I was invited in 1861 to come to Irvine and dine with the Burns’ Club. I did so, and was elected a member of the club and also chairman for the ensuing year. There were great
hearts among the members. Poetry seemed to impress them with the spirit of man to man being brothers all the world over. Although it was not in their programme, during the night a proposal was made by William McJannet that a full length portrait of Hugh Conn, Kilwinning, be painted by me, between that time and the next meeting, a year hence. Mr Conn had been chairman at the centenary* meeting, and seemed a favourite. The proposal was carried by acclamation. Mr McJannet took in hand to collect the cash. The first thing was to get Mr Conn’s consent. I asked him if he was agreeable to stand? To stand before me for such a purpose, he was willing. When the light of spring came on Mr Conn and I were at our work in Adela Cottage**. We had the benefit of the room for the painting in which the portrait now hangs. We passed five weeks of as agreeable art connection as I experienced in the whole of my artistic pilgrimage. The likeness was good. It was one look, embracing much of the past history of the man, with emblems of the pastimes he had taken part in and excelled in. He stood as in the act of studying the speech which he had delivered to the centenary meeting in 1859. The stand-point was by the banks of the Garnock. The background stretched as far out and up as the highest peaks of Goatfell. An ideal stream swelled into a loch in one corner of the picture, on the icy surface of which a pair of curling stones sat,*** with which he played at some great match. His white hat, in which was a red napkin, was flung back into the opposite corner. The bow and arrows rested against a rock and shrub clad bank. The putting-stone, quoits, bowls, and fishing rod lay on the ground near his feet. The man rose mild and life-like over the emblems of his past life. It was the most ambitious work of my art life, and in its power and truth had the approval of all visitors, as well as of the club”.

* The centenary of the birth of Robert Burns. JCL

** Now 1 Stevenston Road, Kilwinning on the corner opposite Howie’s Garage. I am told that, in 1879, the cottage was owned by R K Gemmel. JCL

*** The present secretary of Kilwinning Curling Club tells me that Hugh Conn is mentioned prominently in the Minutes of that time and seems to have been a stalwart of the Club. JCL

There is no mention of any of this in the Minutes of Irvine Burns’ Club nor do the Minutes record that the portrait was handed over or paid for.

Irvine Burns’ Club Minutes: 1859-63 no mention of Hugh Conn portrait.
1859 there is no transcribed Minute for 1859 but Hugh Conn was in the Chair.
1861 Croupier was James Grieve who was a Customs Officer and who was moved to Bradford.
1861 Dr Shields appointed as President JKH elected.
1862 JKH in the Chair.

An account of the presentation of the portrait to Hugh Conn by the Directors of Irvine Burns’ Club, as well as an appreciation of him on his death is given in the history of the
Mother Lodge of Kilwinning by Robert Wylie (APPENDIX 6). On Hugh Conn’s death, the portrait was bequeathed to the Mother Lodge, of which he was a past Grand Master, and was displayed in the Lodge for many years. Unfortunately, due to serious deterioration, it appears that the portrait was destroyed in the 1970’s (APPENDIX 7).

That Hugh Conn remained a lifelong friend of Hunter’s is illustrated by the fact that the last Chapter of Hunter’s book, “Life Studies of Character”, dealing with the value of newspapers and the low cost of making them widely available, was included at the request of and was dedicated to Hugh Conn.

Publications

John Kelso Hunter wrote two books and, as noted above, contributed articles to the “Kilmarnock Chronicle”, the “Glasgow Sentinel”, the “Greenock Telegraph”, the “Falkirk Herald” and the “Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald”.


The above account of Hunter’s life is taken from this work. In addition to biographical details, the book also gives an interesting account of the life and times of the Dundonald and Kilmarnock areas and of Glasgow in the mid-nineteenth century.

2 “Life Studies of Character” by John Kelso Hunter, Greenock 1870
Printed by Orr, Pollock & Co.
2nd Edition, 1871
Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd
Glasgow: David Robertson
Greenock: DL Pollock

This work, as its title suggests, is an account of the characters, mainly in the Glasgow area, whom Hunter came across or heard tell of during his stay there. It is also of value, however, for its references to Robert Burns, the most interesting of which are summarised below.

Chapter III: Burns’ Characters

Agnes Brown
Hunter makes the claim that his Grandmother and Nanny (sic) Brown, the mother of Robert Burns, were girlhood friends and that this friendship continued after they were married. So much so, indeed, that, on the birth of Hunter’s mother in 1768, Nanny Brown, accompanied by the nine year old Robert came to see the new baby.

Hugh Andrew (“whipper-in, wee, blastit wonner” of the “Two Dogs”)
Hunter recounts a meeting that he had with Hugh Andrew who was huntsman at Collsfield, in which Andrew claims to have known Jean Armour and to have been a rival of Burns for the affections of Highland Mary Campbell. (APPENDIX 8)


“O Robin Chambers, 1 Doune Place, Edinburgh, when you in 1851 gave the world an edition o’ Burns’ Poems in four volumes, and complimented yoursel’ on the undertaking, did you really mean the Glossary placed at the end of the lines as “Information for the People”?

From these words it is clear that Hunter is less than impressed with Chambers’ knowledge of the Ayrshire tongue and devotes this Chapter to putting him right.

Chapter V: Some History of Hornbrook and a Nicht Wi’ Burns, Giving New and True Light on Both Characters.

John Wilson (Dr Hornbrook)

Hunter relates that when he had lodgings in South Coburg Street, Glasgow, Wilson who was then the Session Clerk of Gorbals Parish, had lodgings across the road in South Portland Street and Hunter often saw him through the window or walking in the street.

Hunter’s friend Thomas Borland who lived for a time in Torbolton claimed close acquaintance both with Burns and with Wilson through a literary group in Torbolton of which they were all members. Borland related to Hunter his version of the story behind the writing of “Death and Dr Hornbrook” and also of a farewell party held for Burns when it was thought that he was shortly leaving for the West Indies (APPENDIX 9).

No reference to a “Thomas Borland” appears in Mackay’s “Burns”.

Chapter VI: A Passage Illustrated.

John Rankine of Adamhill

Hunter relates that, as a boy, his friend Thomas Borland (see above) worked as a herd for John Rankine who was a close friend of Robert Burns during the Mossgiel period, 1784-1786.

When speaking of Burns’ rhyming epistle to Rankine, Borland gave his interpretation (APPENDIX 10) of the stanza:

“Ye hae sae monie cracks an cants,  
And in your wicked drucken rants,  
Ye mak a devil o the saunts,  
An fill them fou;
And then their failings, flaws, an wants,
    Are a seen thro’.

Borland’s tale bears a striking similarity to that told by Chambers (1851) which is related by Mackay (“Burns. A Biography of Robert Burns” pps. 137-8)

In addition to the above, JKH claims, in his autobiography, that his mentor from his early days in Symington, the cobbler Jock McPherson, was the unwitting model for the statue of Souter Johnie by James Thom. (APPENDIX 11)

J C Lovie   February 2003