

Col. Walter Scott – a Burns supporter

Col. Walter Scott – not the author – died in 1935 aged of 74, laden with honours at home and abroad. This account celebrates philanthropy which included support for organisations memorialising Robert Louis Stevenson and Robert Burns. Born in Montreal in 1861, of Scots-Canadian parents, the family moved to Boston, Massachusetts in 1864.

Young Walter found a job in the grocery business, probably as a messenger boy, at \$2 a week; by the age of 10, he was managing a small fruit store near Harvard University. At age 15, the precocious young businessman joined Butler Brothers, a firm of general wholesalers, with which he stayed for all 55 years of his working life.

He philanthropically donated to many causes. Being Honorary Police Commissioner of New York, he sent a cheque to the family of any policeman or fireman who lost his life in the performance of his duty. He was a founder member of the New York Broad Street Hospital (no longer in existence). In WW1, he served as Colonel of the New York Scottish Highlanders, and helped to organise the McLean Kilties, who recruited for the War in Canada. He funded the Walter Scott Free Industrial School for Crippled Children in New York, and endowed numerous hospital beds. In 1923, he gave the Irish Garda a one thousand dollar gold Bond, to pay in perpetuity for the Walter Scott Medal for Valor, a gold medal awarded for an act of personal bravery and still awarded today. He endowed scholarships at many colleges.

He himself was appointed a knight of the French Legion of Honour and a member of the Belgian Order of Leopold and held the Silver Grand Cross of Austria. He was a familiar figure at Scottish gatherings in the USA, and was a member of many Scottish societies.

The R L Stevenson connection is his saving for posterity of the cottage where Robert Louis Stevenson had stayed in upstate New York in 1887-88, at Saranac Lake, searching for a cure for his lung ailment; there RLS wrote many essays, and his celebrity played a significant part in the growing fame of Saranac Lake as a health resort. The cottage had opened as a Stevenson Museum in 1915, but the removal of relics in 1922 prompted Col. Scott to suggest that “Quick action should be taken on securing the shrine.” Through his efforts, the Stevenson Society of America purchased the house in the following years. You can still visit.

In 1922, at the Vernacular Circle of the Burns Club of London, he gave \$1000 to fund a Colonel Walter Scott Prize to be awarded at the University of Glasgow for the best composition in prose or verse in Lowland Scots on a prescribed subject. The prize seems to have lapsed in recent years.

In August 1924, Col. Scott was interviewed at the Carlton Hotel, London, on a plan for an international war on criminals. At about this time, he stayed with Mr & Mrs Harry Lumsden in Irvine, so it is safe to assume that his Irvine visit was part of his 1924 UK trip. Dr Harry Lumsden, a partner in the legal firm of Biggar and Lumsden in Glasgow, had been President of the Irvine Burns Club in 1903 (as his father Alexander Lumsden, a local teacher, had been in 1877). In 1896 Harry had been appointed as Clerk to the Trades House of Glasgow and held that position for 43 years; his trade, in Glasgow and in Irvine, was the Hammermen, and

Col. Scott became a Hammerman. In Irvine Harry Lumsden served as Deacon Convener of Irvine Incorporated Trades from 1910 to 1920. He also published books, namely "The History of the Hammermen of Glasgow", "The History of the Skinners of Glasgow" and the "Bibliography of John Galt" (copies are held in the Club library).

In 1925, Col. Scott cabled a tribute to the memory of Burns – one which was read at the 'Burns Nicht' concert in the Royal Albert Hall.

In 1928, he was nominated for Honorary Membership of Irvine Burns Club, on the proposal of Harry Lumsden. Col. Scott's acceptance letter, from 860 Broadway, refers to Burns as 'the World's Poet' and to his visit to the 'interesting city' of Irvine as guests of the Lumsdens.

At that time, Irvine Burns Club directors were concerned to improve storage of the Club's autograph letters from Honorary Members. In April 1930, John N Hall (President 1926) offered a bookcase, but the difficulty of finding a place for it led to a decision on the offer being postponed. In the following year, 1931, there was a meeting in the house of James Hogg (Secretary Provost Hogg, President in 1905, having died, his son had stepped into the position) to receive the bookcase, to go over the autograph letters, and to "arrange some method for their better preservation and exhibition". In 1932, the January press report on the Annual Celebration records that the letters had been "simply lying about in boxes" but were now in three volumes and was "one the finest collection[s] of autograph letters [the secretary] had ever seen anywhere".

In August 1932, on another visit to the UK, he was entertained at a private dinner in the Trades House, Glasgow, as a guest of Mr Harry Lumsden, clerk to the Glasgow Trades House, and during a visit to Irvine had been shown the priceless Burns manuscripts belonging to the Irvine Burns Club and the site of Burns' heckling shops; he had also been introduced to Miss MacMillan of Parklea, a descendant of Galt, and to Miss Smith, a personal friend of R L Stevenson; Col. Scott said he was "amazed that a town of Irvine's size possessed such a wealth of tradition".

His visit was detailed at the 1933 Annual Celebration, when attenders were told: "As the guest of Mr Harry Lumsden, he was shown the treasures of the Club, and was conducted round the town by Mr John N Hall and Mr R F Longmuir. The town's link with Edgar Allan Poe also interested him very much and he suggested that the fact should be widely advertised to attract more of his countrymen to the town and he suggested that an artist could produce a portrait of Poe's schoolmaster in Irvine (the first Rector of Irvine Academy). He was so much impressed by the Club's manuscripts and other possessions that he urged on [his guides] the necessity of having them housed where they could be accessible to the public."

Col. Scott was not the type to suggest something on his August visit without thinking of how he could assist! In November 1932 he wrote to the Club, enclosing a gift of \$100 as a nucleus of a fund, if required, to provide a Burns House in Irvine. After considerable discussion the Directors agreed that Col. Scott's gift be funded as a first capital sum towards the provision of a Burns House in Irvine."

The \$100, at the then exchange rate (c. \$3.3 dollars to the £), converted to about £30 at the time. John Strawhorn, in his 'History of Irvine' (1985, p.198), records the donation, using the

1970s equivalent value of £300. However, the equivalent today is over £2,500 – a significant donation.

The Club decided not to act hastily on a building scheme but to take time to consider. The manuscripts were at that time in the custody of Mr Currie of the Clydesdale Bank, who was complimented on the cordial manner in which he exhibited the manuscripts to visitors.

In March 1933, the Club accepted the offer of James Hogg to set aside a room in his house at 21 Bank Street, free of rent, to house the library his brother Provost Robert Hogg had bequeathed to the Club, as well as the manuscripts and other Burns relics belonging to the Club – the manuscripts would be kept in a safe.

Two years later, in 1935, this arrangement was clearly working, as directors decided “that no appeal be made for Capital Funds”. When James Hogg died in Jan. 1936, the Annual Dinner was cancelled in respect for his generosity in housing Club artefacts.

The whole story is interesting in many ways – particularly as Irvine Burns Club approaches its bicentenary (in 2026) and looks back at past events.

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Sources include:

Irvine Burns Club minutes

Kilmarnock Herald, 18 August 1932

Irvine Herald, Jan. 1932

Irvine Herald, Jan. 1933

Strawhorn, John, ‘History of Irvine’, p.198

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Irvine Incorporated Trades 350th Anniversary booklet

Dundee ‘Evening Telegraph’ 14/8/1924

‘Kilmarnock Herald’ 18/8/1932