

Honorary members 1828 – John Galt, James Montgomery

John Galt (1779-1839)

John Galt was born in Irvine, the son of a sea captain. His family moved to Greenock in 1789. Working there, and later, from 1804, in London, where he printed an epic on the Battle of Largs, he tried both commerce and law, but failed in each, and went abroad for some years with the sole purpose of re-establishing his health. Travelling to the Mediterranean, he had the good luck to make the acquaintance of Lord Byron. As Galt travelled, via Malta and Constantinople, he gathered materials for his book 'Voyages and Travels'. Returning in 1812, he made his name as a writer with 'The Ayrshire Legatees' (1820), 'Annals of the Parish' (1821), 'The Provost' (1822), 'Sir Andrew Wyllie' (1822) and 'The Entail' (1823). The work mentioned in the minute of his nomination is 'The Ayrshire Legatees'.

He unsuccessfully represented Canadian claimants in their attempt to recoup war losses of 1812. His life was one of imaginative enterprises, and scheme after scheme, although prosperous for a while, brought only disappointment and bitterness in the end.

In 1826, he was awarded the freedom of the Burgh of Irvine by Bailie Fullarton (a councillor for 42 years, 1790-1832), his model for Provost Pawkie in The Provost.

In Canada, as manager of a land development company, from 1826, John Galt enjoyed short-lived success. Leading ox-teams from the town of Galt in 1827, he established Guelph, so named to honour King George IV. Later accused of overspending on the new settlement, in 1829 he returned to Britain as an impoverished adventurer, lost his case, and spent the rest of his life in poverty. In total, John Galt wrote about 50 novels, 30 dramas and many poems. He died in Greenock. In 2007, the City of Guelph initiated an annual John Galt Day on the first Monday in August.

Letter of acceptance, written from Guelph, Ontario, on 20 July 1828

Sir,

When an opportunity occurs you will have the goodness to intimate to the Irvine Burns Club that I feel exceedingly gratified with the honour conferred in electing me as honorary member. The distinction is the more agreeable as it has been, probably in part, bestowed by the goodwill of some of my old schoolfellows & longsyne companions.

For the manner in which you have been pleased to communicate the circumstance of my election I can only beg your acceptance of my best acknowledgements.

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your most obedient humble servant

John Galt

Notes:

His letter is addressed to the then Secretary of Irvine Burns Club: James Dobie, Esq., Beith, N.B. [*North Britain*] and is postmarked "Lewiston / July 30 / N.Y."

A plaque marking the site of his birthplace is on the wall of the Bank of Scotland building on the High Street.

James Montgomery (1771-1854)

Between 1771 and 1776, James Montgomery's parents, Brother and Sister John Montgomery, attempted to set up a church of the Moravian Brethren at the Braid Close in the Halfway district of the town. Though there was as yet no church of any kind in Fullarton, their efforts met with little success. In 1776, they moved to Ireland and, shortly afterwards, to Yorkshire. Thus, by the time he was eight, he had lived in Scotland, Ireland and England. He was born at 26 Montgomery St (now demolished). Our minutes record him as "the Author of 'The World before the Flood'".

James Montgomery was greatly esteemed by his contemporaries, first as a journalist and reformer (he was one of the main campaigners against the practice of using children as chimney-sweepers), then as a poet, (including numerous epitaphs for Sheffield graves, and many hymns, of which thirteen are still in today's Church of Scotland hymnary) giving him the title 'the Christian poet', and finally as an editor (of the weekly 'Sheffield Iris') and critic. His work and character were praised by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and many others, on both sides of the Atlantic. William Howitt (hon. member 1851) wrote: "Perhaps there are no lyrics in the language that are so truly Christian."

His 'West Indies' is an impressive anti-slavery document, born from the experiences of his parents, sent as missionaries in 1783 to the West Indies, where they died and were buried.

Aged 70, he re-visited Irvine, and was presented with the freedom of the burgh. When he died in Sheffield in 1854, the cortege and procession took over four hours to pass by. [Marking the Club's purchase of his birthplace, and his help to a Derbyshire friend after a business failure, the friend's son presented the Club with a Loving Cup in January 1870.]

Letter of acceptance, written from Sheffield on 16 Feb., 1828

Sir,

Please to accept my best thanks for the kind manner in which you have communicated to me the honour, which so respectable a class of my native townspeople have conferred on me, in token of their approbation of my sincere and strenuous endeavours (however humble and feeble comparatively) to deserve the regard of my countrymen. I was removed from Irvine at so early a period that it is now remembered only as the first, perhaps the loveliest, of my morning dreams in life. Though naturalized in England, my pulse has ever beat true to the land of my birth, and while it beats at all, I trust it will always quicken at the sound of whatever is said or done to the glory of Scotland. My estimate of the talents of Robert Burns, the members of your Society may perhaps have found in my latest publication, the volume containing "The Pelican Island", etc.

Please to present my grateful acknowledgements to the Irvine Burns Club and believe me, truly, your obliged friend & servt,

J Montgomery

Notes:

'The Pelican Island' (1827), his last and greatest long poem, also his most original and most powerful, shows a sympathetic and humanistic approach to Man.

His surname appears as Montgomery both in the Church of Scotland hymnary and in Strawhorn's "History of Irvine"; however, while the end of his signature is unclear in the letter, the spelling on its reverse is the older version 'Montgomerie'.

The Moravian Brethren were a Protestant sect holding Hussite doctrines (from John Huss, a Bohemian religious reformer of the 15th c.), founded in Saxony by emigrants from Moravia (now the eastern half of the Czech Republic).

His 'Robert Burns' (1820) begins: "What bird, in beauty, flight, or song, Can with the Bard compare?" and ends: "Peace to the dead! - in Scotia's choir / Of Minstrels great and small, / He sprang from his spontaneous fire, / The Phoenix of them all". (A rather ornithological tribute, with 19 birds in its 11 verses.)

The plaque which once marked his birthplace is now in the nearby Fullarton Parish Church.