

Honorary members of 1854:
W Edmondstoune Aytoun, Archibald T Boyle,
Baron Thomas Babington Macaulay, Benjamin Disraeli, Alexander Smith,
William Makepeace Thackeray & Bulwer Lytton

also Sir Archibald Allison, Douglas Jerrold & Richard Doyle,
named as nominees in Club minutes, but with no filed acceptances

William Edmondstoune Aytoun (1813-1865)

A poet and prose writer, he studied at the University of Edinburgh (his home town), became a writer to the signet in 1835, and passed as an advocate in 1840. He issued a volume on poems in 1832, by 1836 was a contributor to 'Blackwood's Magazine', and published several books from 1840 onwards. The most popular of his works proved to be his 'Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers' (1848) which ran through 17 editions in as many years. He followed his father-in-law Professor Wilson, 'Christopher North', as editor of Blackwood's Magazine. Prof. Wilson had been nominated as an Honorary Member in 1830, and this connection could well have prompted Prof. Aytoun's nomination, though the many links with the capital's literary figures suggest that much wider networking was current. Another honorary member, Thomas C Latto (see 1846), had been private secretary to Prof. Aytoun for a time.

In 1845 he became Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the University of Edinburgh - a position which he held until his death. His lectures attracted large numbers of students, raising the attendance from 30 to 150. In 1852 he was appointed Sheriff of Orkney and Shetland.

That year, 1845, also saw the publication of the 'Bon Gaultier Ballads', co-authored with Theodore Martin, who later wrote a 'Memoir of Aytoun'. As Martin is another hon. member, you could check his 1868 entry in these archives.

In 1867, he published a volume containing, along with many other vigorous and enjoyable pieces, 'Firmilian, A Spasmodic Tragedy' (originally written later in 1854 under the pen-name of T Percy Jones) - this work, according to the 'North British Review' of 1866, effectively satirised "the kind of stuff that was produced, in all seriousness, by our younger poets in 1853-'54" (one of whom was Alexander Smith, another Honorary Member of 1854). The Rev. George Gilfillan (hon. memb. 1875) was also a Spasmodic poet.

While his signature on the letter to Irvine Burns Club clearly shows the 'd' in his middle name, spelled as it appeared in his 1867 volume, and in the New York Times obituary, yet for some reason it usually appears without the 'd' in 20th century reference books.

His enjoyment of hunting, shooting and other country recreations led to him spending his last summers at Blackhills, Elgin, in poor health.

(Aytoun appears a second time in our minutes as a nominee, in 1863 - perhaps over the intervening years, someone forgot he was already an honorary member.)

Letter of acceptance, 16 Gt Stuart Street, Edinburgh, on 27th January 1854

Sir,

I have your favour of the 25th announcing that the members of the Irvine Burns Club have done me the honour of electing me a honorary member. I assure you that I esteem the favour highly, for I fully acknowledge the greatness of the debt which we owe to the genius of our unrivalled poet, and am proud to be associated with those who cherish his memory so dearly.

Believe me to remain

Sir,

Your very obed. servt,

W Edmondstoune Aytoun

Notes:

Prof. Aytoun lived in the same part of the capital as Archibald Boyle (see below) lived and worked.

Archibald T Boyle (1823(+/-1)-....)

Archibald T Boyle was an advocate in Edinburgh. In 1852, he stood as Conservative candidate in the Ayr Burghs constituency, gaining only nine votes less than the successful Liberal candidate.

He was Vice-President of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1857, at the time that plaster casts of five of the Lewis ivory chessmen (found in 1831, and held by the British Museum) were donated to the Society.

The reasons for his nomination may well include his links with Ayrshire (see his letter below) and his links with other literary figures, such as two other 1854 honorary members, Prof. Edmondstoune Aytoun and the young poet Alexander Smith.

Letter of acceptance, written from 11 Stafford Street, Edinburgh, on 27th January 1854

Dear Sir,

I have just received your letter of the 25th intimating my Election as an Honorary Member of the Irvine Burns' Club. And I beg through you to tender my best thanks to the club for the compliment they have been so kind as to pay me. I shall hope on some future occasion to be present at some of your meetings.

I may mention that I was appropriately employed on the evening of the 25th in assisting in the formation of an Ayrshire Club in Edin. which I hope from what we saw that evening will soon become a flourishing & useful Institution.

If my election involves any pecuniary or other obligations I must trust to you to let me know.

I am, Dear Sir,

Most faithfully yours

Archibald T Boyle

Notes:

We do not know whether the Edinburgh Ayrshire Club proved successful or not.

The Stafford St address may have been his business address - he was certainly residing, with 4 siblings, a housekeeper and 8 servants (one a 70-year-old native of Irvine, designated as Head Nurse) at 28 Charlotte Square a few years before.

Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859)

"Lars Porsena of Clusium / By the Nine Gods he swore / That the great house of Tarquin / Should suffer wrong no more." - these famous lines are from Macaulay's 'Horatius'.

His 'Lays of Ancient Rome' (published by Longmans) had appeared in 1842; 18,000 copies were sold in ten years (and 40,000 in 20 years). Volumes i and ii of his masterly 'History of England' were published in 1849, so by 1854 his work was well-known and extremely popular. He combined careers in literature and politics. He served as secretary of war in 1839-41 and was paymaster of the forces in 1846-47; he also contributed towards the structure of the Civil Service.

Macaulay had been a child prodigy. In his student days at Cambridge he had won the chancellor's medal for a poem on 'Pompeii', repeating his success the following year with a poem on 'Evening'; by those days he was already contributing to magazines. In 1825 he published his article on Milton in the 'Edinburgh Review', in 1826 he was called to the Bar, and in 1830 he entered Parliament as the member for Calne, in later years representing Leeds, then Edinburgh (from 1852, defeating W E Aytoun, hon. member 1854).

His nomination probably arose from a combination of several factors - the literary interests of that year's President, bookseller Maxwell Dick, the general high regard for his literary successes, and his representing a Scottish constituency.

Created Baron Macaulay in 1857, he is buried in Westminster Abbey. Volumes iii and iv of his 'History of England' appeared in 1855, and volume v was published posthumously by his sister, Lady Trevelyan. Though born in Leicestershire, he was the son of a Scottish Highlander who became a colonial governor and administrator.

Letter of acceptance, written from Albany, London, on 28th January 1854

Sir,

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 25th.

I beg you to inform the gentlemen in whose name you write that I am sincerely grateful for the distinction which they have conferred on me, & that I accept with much pleasure.

I thank you for the facsimile of Burns's handwriting.

I have the honor to be
Sir
Your faithful servant
T B Macaulay

Notes:

Albany (completed as Melbourne House in 1775, and converted into an apartment house in 1802) had become a fashionable residence for bachelors for over a hundred years - home not only to Macaulay from 1841 to 1856, but also to many other literary figures, including, in their young days, Byron, Lytton and Prime Minister Edward Heath. The Albany had become "a byword for the celebration of a kind of ostentatious privacy peculiar to the English".

Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881)

Disraeli's nomination was not prompted by his Premiership - that was to follow (in 1868 and in 1874-80). His party was in opposition. Disraeli had been Chancellor of the Exchequer in Lord Derby's government for a year (1852-53) before its defeat.

One possible reason for his nomination is his literary success - a first novel appearing in 1826 and books documenting his European and Near Eastern travels in the 1830s. He entered the House of Commons in 1837 and became a leader of the protectionists who opposed Peel's campaigns to abolish the corn laws. Two more novels followed in the 1840s. His Chancellor of the Exchequer post in 1852 was his first appointment to office.

Disraeli's later career led to the Premiership on the resignation of Lord Derby. His first term was short but his second enjoyed a strong Conservative majority. He took a prominent part in regard to the Eastern question and the conclusion of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. He was created Earl of Beaconsfield in 1872. His government's defeat in 1880 resulted from British reverses in Afghan and Zulu wars, from industrial recession and from his own ill health.

There is another possible reason for his nomination. In 1852, Disraeli published 'Lord George Bentinck, a Political Biography'. Lord Bentinck (1802-1848), son of the 4th Duke of Portland, was from 1846 the leader of the Protectionists in the House of Commons. Could it be that Irvine Burns Club was honouring a man who had assisted, and had written a biography of, a politician with nominal Ayrshire connections? And did the Club Directors of that day support the Corn Laws?

Disraeli's literary reputation arose from a number of novels, travel books, and poetry. The publication most likely to have been known to Club members of the day was his novel 'Sybil, or The Two Nations' (1845), depicting the conditions prevailing among the working classes in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, the overcrowding in miserable tenements, the inadequate wages, the 'truck' system (being paid in goods instead of in money), the selfishness of many landlords and employers, as well as relating the agitation leading to the Chartist riots. His book set a template for progressive, reforming Conservatism that has helped him remain a hero to centre-left Tories to this day.

Letter of acceptance, written on his behalf by Mrs Disraeli from Hughenden Manor (Bucks)
on April 24th, 1854

Sir,

I am requested by Mr Disraeli to acknowledge the receipt of your obliging communication of Jan.y 25 and to express his grateful sense of the honor conferred in electing him an honorary Member of the Irvine Burns Club. Should he ever be so fortunate as to be able to take advantage of the privilege you have bestowed, it will afford him a great gratification to inspect those invaluable memorials of the genius of your illustrious Bard which your Club so honorably preserves. He thanks you for the fac-similie which you enclose & begs you will accept his regrets that his numerous engagements have so long delayed this acknowledgement of your letter.

I have the honour
to be Sir
Your obedt servt
M A Disraeli

Notes:

His address is embossed on the writing paper, so does not show up in photocopies. He lived there from 1839 till his death in 1881.

The reply is from Mary Ann Disraeli - about twelve years older than Disraeli, her second husband. Created Viscountess Beaconsfield in her own right in 1868, at the end of her husband's first term as Prime Minister, thus allowing him to remain in the Commons, she died in 1872. When Disraeli was created Earl of Beaconsfield in 1872, he continued as Prime Minister, leading the Government from the House of Lords.

Alexander Smith (1829-1867)

This Scottish poet and essayist was only in his 24th year when nominated, but had made his name as author of 'A Life Drama and other poems' a year or two before, in 1852. This success led to his appointment, later in 1854, as secretary to the University of Edinburgh. Other volumes of poetry followed. The two works which have been said to be his finest work in verse came later - in 1857, 'City Poems', containing 'Glasgow', giving a sombre picture of the city, and in 1861, his longest work, 'Edwin of Deira'.

The two (rather under-whelming) quotations (both from "A Life Drama") which usually appear in Dictionaries of Quotations are

"Like a pale martyr in his shirt of fire"

and

"In winter, when the dismal rain
Came down in slanting lines,
And Wind, that grand old harper, smote
His thunder-harp of pines."

"A Life Drama and other poems" was received with much enthusiasm - this and his Ayrshire birthplace (Kilmarnock) probably explain his nomination for honorary membership at such a young age. However, the style of Smith and other young poets of 1853-54, the 'Spasmodic School', was superbly satirised, and effectively ended, by Aytoun (also an 1854 honorary member), in 'Firmilian' (written in 1854 and appearing more widely in 1867).

Described by John Macintosh ('The Poets of Ayrshire', 1910) as "one of the brightest gems in the literary crown of Ayrshire", he lived only four years in Kilmarnock before his father, a pattern designer, moved to Paisley. Smith was greatly encouraged in 1851 by George Gilfillan of Dundee (an honorary member of 1875; see entry there), who proclaimed Smith's talent and cast himself in the role of enthusiastic discoverer of a new star in the poetic firmament, writing articles in review magazines including extracts from Smith's poems. 'A Life Drama' brought him such fame that he travelled in England, was welcomed in London, spent a week as the guest of the Duke of Argyll at Inveraray Castle, was appointed secretary to the University of Edinburgh (and later Registrar to the University Council), married Flora Macdonald, a descendant of the heroine, and became the central figure of 'The Raleigh Club'. Messrs Macmillan paid £200 to publish 'City Poems'.

Alexander Smith also, though later than his nomination as an honorary member, published an edition of the 'Poetical Works of Burns', contributing an admirable memoir. He died at the same age as Burns, 37, of typhoid.

Letter of acceptance, written from Glasgow on 2nd February 1854

Sir,

Your note only came to hand yesterday, so that I have been unable to reply till now.

I thank you from my heart for the honour you have done me, and shall long remember it with pleasure.

Yours faithfully

A Smith

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863)

Literature, Thackeray decided in 1833, should be his profession. His unremarkable educational career shows that he was not of a mind to study seriously either for art (his inclination) or for law, and he had lost almost all his independent income in unfortunate investments. Starting with articles and reviews for magazines, including 'Punch' between 1844 and 1851, he made his name as a novelist in 1847 when 'Vanity Fair' was published in monthly parts. By the time of his nomination for honorary membership of Irvine Burns Club, he had published two more novels, consciously forming a style opposed to that of Dickens' indictment of social evils. He also delivered a course of lectures on the English humorists of the 18th century - first in London, afterwards in Scotland and America before large audiences.

More novels and more lectures followed in the later 1850s. Thackeray also stood as Radical candidate for Oxford city, losing by a small majority. His prodigious output also included graceful verses. His prose works were masterly depictions of the society of his time.

An interesting biography of Thackeray appears at <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/william-makepeace-thackeray/> which ends with the description: "A massive person, 6 feet 3 inches tall, Thackeray was a genial and modest man, fond of good food and wine. In the years of his success he candidly took great pleasure in the amenities of the society that he portrayed so critically in his novels."

Thackeray and Dickens were very good friends with Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), a major contributor to 'Punch', and mentioned in our minutes as another 1854 nominee, though he seems not to have accepted. They were the principal pall-bearers at Jerrold's funeral.

Letter of acceptance, written from 36 Onslow Sq., Brompton, on 18th May 1854

Sir,

I have just returned from abroad, and find your kind note informing me that the Irvine Burns Club has done me the favor to elect me an Honorary Member. I am much obliged to the Society for the honor that it has done me: and should I come north shall hope to avail myself of my privilege as a member of your Club.

Believe me

Your obliged servt

W M Thackeray

Notes:

The date of the letter is that on which the Thackeray family moved into this address.

The letter was addressed to Club Chairman (President) Maxwell Dick. It was entirely appropriate that Maxwell Dick, being a bookseller, should nominate such a number of literary figures as honorary members in his year of office.

Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873)

"It was a dark and stormy night" - the first words of the novel 'Paul Clifford' (1830) by Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton, (from 1866) first Baron Lytton of Knebworth, the youngest son of General Bulwer and Elizabeth Lytton.

In his student days at Cambridge, he gained the chancellor's medal for a poem on 'Sculpture'. His first novels appeared in 1828 and were closely followed by many more, including 'The Last Days of Pompeii'. He also wrote four plays - the first a failure, the other three instant successes, one containing the phrase 'the pen is mightier than the sword'. A poetical satire of 1845 attacked Tennyson, who replied vigorously. He entered Parliament in 1831, supporting the Reform Bill as a Whig, but subsequently supporting the Conservatives.

In the years following his nomination as an honorary member, he was (in 1856) elected rector of Glasgow University, served (1858-59) as secretary for the colonies, entered the House of Lords in 1866, and published more literary works (anonymously) in the 1870s. As lord of Knebworth Castle, he enjoyed its revenues, independent of his salary as Minister and his income as an author.

Those opening words of 'Paul Clifford' have led to the annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest (of San Jose State University English Dept.), the literary competition that sees entrants compose deliberately terrible openings to novels. Despite the opening line, the book was so successful that the publisher could, in 1854, quote 'The Times' on the policy of Routledge in making good books available at cheap prices: "The good books they now issue command a large sale. Cheap books sold at railway stations and similar places of human concourse have enabled Messrs Routledge to give Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton the extravagant sum of £20,000 for the exclusive sale of his works for the next ten years." Sir Edward was a mainstream author of his day.

Letter of acceptance, written from 1 Park Lane, London, on Wednesday (no date)

Sir,

Accept my best thanks for the honour the Burns Club has conferred upon me. I am sincerely pleased that you & its other members have so well comprehended my affectionate admiration for a great genius & a noble heart - which Scotland may justly reverence. If I ever come to Irvine I hope I shall see your valuable MSS. Meanwhile I shall treasure the facsimile. Yours most obliged B Lytton.

Notes:

A columnist in the New York Times of 1859 wrote: "Last evening I had the honor of dining with Sir EDWARD BULWER LYTTON, at his magnificent mansion No. 1 Park-lane, Piccadilly. Of all the living authors of England, Sir EDWARD was the one I most wished to see. As a novelist, a poet, an orator and a statesman - 'take him for all in all' - where shall we find his peer? For the last thirty years the reading world has fed upon his thoughts, and an entire generation has been stimulated and educated by his glowing poetry and his fine philosophy."

The trade name Bovril is mostly due to Bulwer Lytton. In the 1870s, when John Lawson Johnston launched his meat extract, he took the prefix 'bo' from the Latin for an ox and the second part from Bulwer-Lytton's then-popular 1871 novel 'The Coming Race', whose plot revolves around a powerful energy fluid named "Vril".

His son, the Rt Hon Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, first Earl of Lytton, was nominated as an honorary member in 1888 "in recognition of his eminence as a Statesman and Diplomatist and his distinction and celebrity as a Poet". Unfortunately, we have no acceptance letter. A career diplomat, he served in nine embassies before his appointment as Viceroy of India (by Lord Beaconsfield, Benjamin Disraeli, an honorary member) in 1876, being created an Earl on retirement in 1880. As a poet his pen name was 'Owen Meredith'.

other 1854 nominees, but no filed letters to indicate acceptance

Sir Archibald Allison (1792-1867), a lawyer and historian, published a ten-volume 'Modern History of Europe from the French Revolution to the Fall of Napoleon' from 1833 to 1842, with further volumes on later years appearing from 1852 to 1859. A work of vast industry, it proved popular and was translated into many languages. He was created a baronet in 1852, during Lord Derby's administration.

Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), the English dramatist and writer, wrote dramas, melodramas and sparkling comedies from the age of 14 till 1854, but he was possibly better known as a contributor to magazines, particularly 'Punch' from 1841 until his death. In politics a Liberal, he gave eager sympathy to revolutionists such as Kossuth and Mazzini (see our article on Blind in 1870). In social politics, he never tired of declaiming against the horrors of war, the luxury of bishops, or the iniquity of capital punishment. His friends included others approached by Irvine Burns Club.

Richard Doyle (1824-1883) was educated at home in London by his father, the cartoonist John Doyle. Richard Doyle, an illustrator, worked for Punch from 1842 to 1850, when he resigned in protest at that magazine's hostility to the Pope. He later illustrated books, including works by Dickens and Thackeray. However, he had a much closer link to Irvine, in that his first published work, at the age of 15 in 1839, was a great success - his book 'The Eglinton Tournament' (though it is other contemporary accounts which receive mention in John Strawhorn's 'History of Irvine').