

Honorary members of 1829 – William Motherwell, William Tennant, Rev. David Landsborough, James Stirrat, Allan Cunningham

also William Dobie

William Motherwell (1797-1835)

Being invited to become an Honorary Member at the age of only 31 demonstrates the regard which his contemporaries had for the talents and achievements of William Motherwell, poet, antiquary and journalist. His first known poem was written while at school in Edinburgh, where he was inspired by Jeannie Morrison, who sat next to him ("I've wandered east, I've wandered west, / Through mony a weary way; / But never, never can forget / The luvie o' life's young day!"); also in those early years, Motherwell developed an interest in copying and imitating old manuscripts. He was Secretary of Paisley Burns Club at the age of 20. For him and others like him, Scotland's ballads and songs compensated for the lack of political Scottish identity, and his concern was to preserve such evidence of a Scottish cultural heritage before it was lost through the deaths of the older generation or obliterated by political and social change.

At 15, he was placed as clerk in the office of the sheriff-clerk of Paisley, and, at only 21, was appointed sheriff-clerk depute of the county of Renfrew. This office brought both a considerable income and no little danger, due to the Radical movements of the period among the weavers of the district. Indeed, in his first year, he was hustled by a frantic mob to the parapet of a bridge and almost thrown into the river. Motherwell kept his ardent poetical temperament under check, and pursued literary interests, enlarging his library, writing in prose and verse, and contributing to periodicals. His major work was published in 1827: "Minstrelsy, Ancient and Modern", based on his researches into Scottish antiquarianism. In 1828, he launched the "Paisley Magazine", contributing to it some of his best poetry, and took a keen interest in the collecting of Scotland's songs and ballads (eg subscribing to Peter Buchan's 1828 book "Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland", containing such tales as 'The Virginian Maid's Lament' about one of the many Scots children stolen from their parents and transported and sold as slaves, between 1735 and 1753). From May 1828 to October 1830, Motherwell was editor of the "Paisley Advertiser", a Conservative newspaper. At this point he had gained a considerable reputation not only as a poet but as a political journalist. His appointment to the 'Advertiser' not only brought financial remuneration but also allowed him to resign his position as depute sheriff clerk, a repetitive and routine job that must have frustrated his creative and literary interests.

Motherwell associated with the poets Robert Tannahill and James Hogg (the Ettrick Shepherd). Such was the reputation of Paisley that he once described the town as "a nest of singing birds". In 1830, he was appointed editor of the "Glasgow Courier", championing Toryism at a time of political upheaval in Europe, and, as a traditionalist and antiquarian, totally opposed to the Reform Bill, passed in 1832. He worked with Hogg on an edition of Burns, but did not live to see it completed, dying during the publication of its five volumes in

1834-36. He was able to trace linking themes and influences among the Scottish, Gaelic and English ballads and songs. His work was a great influence on Francis James Child (1825-96), the Boston-born American collector and researcher of ballads - Child's research was international, covering 37 languages, and, like Motherwell's, focused on the words and themes rather than the music. Influenced by Motherwell, Child sought to publish all extant versions in copies as close to oral tradition as possible; thus Motherwell's work "was the sine qua non for ballad scholarship in the modern sense" (Brown, 2001).

William Motherwell's work was cut short by his death less than three weeks after his 38th birthday, from apoplexy (a stroke), caused, some say, by overwork - the "Glasgow Courier" appeared thrice weekly, and he "found it impossible to command his attention to every scene of action, and his temper upon every variety of subject". His funeral was attended by mourners of every political opinion. His monument in Glasgow Necropolis (1851) was executed by James Fillans (1808-52; his most famous work are the Corinthian capitals on Glasgow Royal Exchange, now GOMA, for which he was nicknamed 'the young Athenian'), who had particularly admired Motherwell, and had executed a number of portraits of him; the monument lost its Parian marble bust of the poet c.1970s, and its incised friezes of scenes from Motherwell's works (eg Halberd The Grim) are decaying rapidly. Apart from the edition of Burns, also unfinished at his death was a prose collection of Norse legends, said to be of great power and beauty, and materials for a life of Tannahill. More of his poetry appeared in "The American Whig Review" and "The United States Democratic Review" (both in 1851).

William Motherwell's fame continues into the 21st century. Research for this article led to a Czech version of one of his poems. It also led to "The Wars of Germany", lyrics by Motherwell, melody traditional, arranged and sung by the Tannahill Weavers; the song capturing, with all the emotion of a possibly final parting, the departure of a girl's "sodger lad" to "bluidy wars in High Germany". This century, Mary Ellen Brown, Professor of Folklore and Adjunct Professor of English at Indiana University, has published "William Motherwell's Cultural Politics" (2001, Univ. of Kentucky Press), as well as a book on Child (2001) and a book on Burns and Tradition (Macmillan, 1984) - the bulk of her academic career has been spent on researching 18th & 19th century Scottish materials, and her book on Motherwell is fascinating for its Motherwell-oriented insights to West of Scotland culture and politics of the time.

William Motherwell therefore is a significant figure not only at the time of his acceptance as an Honorary Member but also in the overall picture of cross-cultural influences, then and today, in the field of research into culture, politics and tradition. Like Burns and so many others, his life was short but his legacy significant.

contributed by I J Dickson (who much enjoyed doing the research for this appreciation)

Letter of acceptance, written from the Advertiser Office in Paisley on 14 Feb., 1829

Sir,

I had the honour of receiving your gratifying communication of the 2d Instant announcing that the Irvine Burns Club at their Anniversary held on the 26 Ult had conferred on me the distinction of adding my name to their list of Honorary Members.

Though perfectly unconscious of any adequate literary exertion on my part which could lead me to expect such an honor I feel the worth of being so distinguished by the Club; and, while I gratefully accept of this mark of their regard, I beg you will, at your first meeting, convey to them my sincere thanks for the distinction they have been pleased to confer on me.

But though on the score of literary talent I disclaim all title to be ranked among your numbers allow me to say that in honest admiration of the highly gifted Son of Genius to whom the Club is dedicated I would be unfond to yield in intensity of feeling to the most enthusiastic of those with whom I am now proud to recognize myself as associated in the character of an Honorary Member.

On reference to the date of your letter I am under the necessity of apologizing for my delay in answering it, which arose from my having entrusted myself with depositing an answer in the post office. My answer which I had written on receipt found its way to my pocket but never to the mail bag. Only this evening I discovered my omission and have now endeavoured to repair an unintentional piece of impoliteness.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most Obedt. Servt.

W Motherwell

Notes:

(The word 'unfond' is recognised in the Scots Dictionary.)

William Tennant (1784-1848)

William Tennant, an accomplished linguist, enjoyed immediate success with his long epic poem "Anster Fair" (of which more below) published in 1812 and revised for a second edition in 1814. Of his several other works in the following fifteen years, none approached "Anster Fair" either in merit or in popularity. Nevertheless, that initial success, coupled with his prodigious mastery of languages, ensured his continuing high regard.

Born in Anstruther, Fife, he was lame, from infancy, in both legs and used crutches all his life. At 15, he went to St Andrews University and studied Latin and Greek for two years until financial pressures caused his return home, where he taught himself Hebrew and read the whole Hebrew Bible. Employed as a clerk by his brother, a corn factor, he studied language after language - even Gaelic ("the most impracticable of all living languages") well enough to read the Highland New Testament with ease and fluency.

On the collapse of the corn-factor business, he devoted his time to writing "Anster Fair", in six cantos. A popular Scottish ballad (dated 1642; attributed to Francis Sempill) tells of Maggie Lauder, a bonnie and lively lass, captivated by Rab the Ranter. Tennant's mock-heroic work tells of the contest for her hand at Anstruther Fair, "our famous market-day". The description is vivid and amusing; the contests include sack-racing, ass-racing and bagpiping; the style is one of exuberant wit, with fantastical classical allusions contrasting with the simple scenes of a Scottish town. The 'ottava rima' metre, previously long-neglected in English poetry, but known to Tennant from his studies of Italian verse, was adopted

thereafter by, among others, Lord Byron in 'Don Juan', and may have had some influence on James Hogg (Gioia Angeletti, Università di Bologna, 1998).

William Tennant then became schoolmaster at a village conveniently near to St Andrews and its college library, and taught himself Syriac, Persian and Arabic languages. In 1816 he was promoted to a post at Lasswade (chiefly through the kind offices of George Thomson, the friend and correspondent of Burns), bringing him into contact with Edinburgh literary society. In 1819 he was appointed teacher of classical and oriental languages at what was to become Dollar Academy. Settled into this post, he was made an honorary member of Dumfries Burns Club in 1822 and of Irvine Burns Club in 1829.

In 1834 (or '35) Tennant was appointed Professor of Oriental Languages at St Andrews University. Devongrove, a pleasant villa, remained his home, and its library was his world. He died there, weakened by a cold of two years' standing.

A longer biography is available on the Web at electricscotland.com, but web-searching for "Anster Fair" may also lead you to a totally different poem "The Culprit Fay" (1817) by American poet Joseph Rodman Drake - though it takes its cue from one verse of Tennant's work, it bears no resemblance to it. Let us remember this Honorary Member as the author of the real "Anster Fair" and as a figure who, in his determination to overcome the limitations imposed by lameness, encouraged a love of literature and languages among the young minds in his care and among his many friends.

contributed by I J Dickson (who much enjoyed doing the research for this appreciation)

Letter of acceptance, written from Devongrove, Dollar Institute, on 5 Feb., 1829

Sir,

I am favoured with your much esteemed letter of 2d informing me that the Burns Club of Irvine, of which you are Chairman, elected me on the 26th ulto an Honorary Member of that joyous association.

I beg, Sir, you will accept for yourself as Chairman, for the Secretary and for the other members, my warmest acknowledgements for the honour conferred upon me. It rejoices me, at this distance, to have my name enrolled as a partaking and sympathising brother, among those, or the sons of those, who were nearest and dearest to the great Poet of the west - in a town rendered to me of something like classical attraction by its being the scene of his juvenile amusements, enthusiastic friendships, and most exuberant jollity, the spirit of which, as originally excited by the Bard will I hope ever continue to animate and beatify all your meetings.

I have the honour to be, Sir, with all best wishes and respects

Your very faithful and most obliged <servant>

Wm Tennant

Notes:

The letter was written to George Johnston (of Redburn Cottage), who, as President 1828-29, had invited him to accept Honorary Membership.

(The word 'beatify' is used to mean 'bless'.)

Tennant's "Anster Fair" - a few stanzas to give the flavour of the style:

The elf from Maggie Lauder's mustard pot plays the pipes and gets her, and her kitchen, to dance:

He [spoke], and to his wee mouth dewy-wet,
His bagpipe's tube of silver up he held,
And, underneath his down-press'd arm he set
His purple bag that with a tempest swell'd;
He play'd and pip'd so sweet, that never yet
Mag had a piper heard that Puck excell'd;
Had Midas heard a tune so exquisite,
By heav'n! his long base ears had quiver'd with delight.

Tingle the fire-ir'ns, poker, tongs, and grate,
Responsive to the blithesome melody;
The tables and the chairs inanimate
Wish they had muscles now to trip it high;
Wave back and forwards at a wondrous rate,
The window-curtains, touch'd with sympathy;
Fork, knife, and trencher, almost break their sloth,
And caper on their ends upon the table-cloth.

How then could Maggie, sprightly, smart and young,
Withstand that bagpipe's blithe awak'ning air?
She, as her ear-drum caught the sounds, up-sprung
Like lightning, and despis'd her idle chair,
And into all the dance's graces flung
The bounding members of her body fair;
From nook to nook through all her room she tript,
And whirl'd like whirligig, and reel'd, and bobb'd, and skipt.

Rev. David Landsborough (1782-1854)

Dr Landsborough was the well-respected minister, first of the parish of Stevenston from 1811, then, from the time of the disruption in 1843, of the Free Church congregation at Saltcoats until his death in 1854, when he fell victim to cholera while helping to alleviate the suffering of the people of Saltcoats during the plague. His name continues in Saltcoats, though not on the building in which he preached. Born In Dalry, Galloway, he was educated there, then at Dumfries Academy, then gained his D.D. at the University of Edinburgh. While studying for the ministry, he was tutor in the family of Lord Glenluce. As a minister, he won the respect and veneration of adherents of all religious denominations.

His first published work was a poem on "Arran" (Blackwood, 1828); it was this that prompted the members of Irvine Burns Club to offer him honorary membership. However, his over-riding interest was in the natural history of the island, his scientific research leading to successful works such as a "Popular History of British Sea-weeds" (1847) and a "Popular History of British Zoophytes", with his research focussed primarily on the Ayrshire and Arran shores. An alga was named after him, and a shell, and he maintained an extensive correspondence with naturalists throughout Britain. He proclaimed the praise of his favourite island in "Excursions", in which he describes its natural history in a very readable manner. He has been described as "a gentleman who is familiar with every mountain, glen and bay in Arran". Therefore, though his honorary membership initially celebrated one poem, it in the end celebrates his life's second calling - careful and loving research on the shores of that unique island.

His son William (1825-86) walked a 12-mile round trip each day to attend Irvine Royal Academy, emigrated to Australia in 1841 and there became a noted explorer, writer and sketcher in the 1850s and 1860s.

Letter of acceptance, written from Stevenston Manse on 4 Feb., 1829

Notes:

The letter was written to George Johnston (of Redburn Cottage), who, as President 1828-29, had invited him to accept Honorary Membership.

James Stirrat (1781-1843)

James Stirrat was (quoting the site www.beith.org) "proud of his position as postmaster in Dalry, Ayrshire, where his local knowledge of the people and the district were a distinct advantage, having been brought up and educated in the town". The postmaster in a small village was respected almost as much as the minister and doctor.

He was a great admirer of Robert Burns, both as a man and a poet, and often contributed verse of his own to local functions in honour of the Bard, although not a formal member of the Dalry Burns Club. He contributed poems to our 1828, 1829 and 1830 Annual Dinners.

The last verse of the poem he wrote for the 1829 anniversary gives a flavour of his work:

He needs nae monumental stanes
To keep alive his fame;
Auld Granny Scotland and her weans
Will ever sing his name.
For nae name does Fame record,
Nae name ava,
By Caledonia mair adored
Than Robin's that's awa'.

Letter of acceptance, written from Dalry on 5th Feb., 1829

Sir,

I have just now recedu yours intimating that the Irvine Burns' Club had done me the favour of adding my name to the list of their Honorary Members, for which I beg to make my warmest acknowledgements. That my humble efforts in the literary way should have been so fortunate as to attract the favourable notice of the Gentlemen who form the Irvine Club is, to me, a gratifying circumstance and would be doubly so were I conscious of meriting so flattering a distinction.

I am, Sir,

Yours respectfully,

James Stirrat

Allan Cunningham (1784-1842)

Born in Dumfriesshire, he claimed to remember Burns recite Tam O' Shanter to his father in 1790. Although apprenticed at the age of 10 to a stone-mason, Cunningham's interest in poetry and song led to his being employed, in 1809, by Robert Hartley Cromek (1770-1812; the English author of *Reliques of Robert Burns*, 1808) to collect ballads for his *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810) - instead he sent his own productions (probably with Cromek's knowledge), which were quickly recognised as forgeries. Cunningham then went to London in 1810, where he at first supported himself by journalism, but afterwards, from 1814, was clerk of the works in the studio of Francis Chantrey, the sculptor, until the sculptor's death in 1841.

Donald A Low has written (in *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*): "Several Scots-born writers contributed significantly in this period to the continuously expanding discussion of Burns. Among them . . . Allan Cunningham, in addition to linking a description of the funerals of Burns [which he witnessed in Dumfries in 1796 at the age of 12] and Byron, started to develop criticism of the songs based on knowledge - not always exact - of Burns' local sources of inspiration. . . . While there was general agreement in Scotland about Burns' quality as a poet, many aspects of his work were only beginning to be explored."

It is against this background that Allan Cunningham's honorary membership should be viewed. He had become a well-established editor, poet and journalist in London, publishing, for example, *The Songs of Scotland, Ancient and Modern*, with introduction and notes, in four volumes in 1825. A drama, *Sir Marmaduke Maxwell* (1820) and two novels *Paul Jones* and *Sir Michael Scott* were beautiful and stirring products of a wild imagination but never achieved public acclaim. *The Works of Burns*, with notes and a life, in eight volumes, was published after his honorary membership of this Club, in 1834. Snyder (1968) regarded Cunningham's biography as "absolutely unreliable", but we should perhaps appreciate the achievement of those early editors, in popularising and celebrating Robert Burns, rather than apply today's more critical standards too strictly to their publications. Cunningham wrote: "Burns was one of the first to teach the world that high moral poetry resided in the humblest subjects: whatever he touched became elevated; his spirit possessed and inspired the commonest topics, and endowed them with life and beauty."

Letter of acceptance, written from Lower Belgrave Place on 7th Dec., 1829

My dear Sir,

I beg that you will express my acknowledgements to the Burns Club of Irvine for the distinction they have conferred in making me an Honorary Member. At present circumstances prevent me taking my place amongst you, but I hope the day is not distant when I shall appear at the social board of my Brethren and like a true subject offer my homage to the memory of the Prince of Peasant Poets.

No confession of faith in the genius of Burns is necessary from one who can say all his poetry by heart but even this merit I am glad to say is not great for I meet not with a Scotchman who could not quote him largely. Lockhart's manly life of a very manly Poet - of a poet who spoke passionately of the present and intensely of the future - has left little to be devised and perhaps nothing to be got; but I would advise the Club to keep a Burns' Memorandum Book and insert in it all well authenticated anecdotes or sayings of his with the names of those who related them. I need not tell a good Antiquarian that all letters and scraps touched with the pen of the Bard are of importance. I wish you a full Meeting - a pithy grace - a plentiful dinner - short speeches - and six gladsome hours.

Yours ever,

Allan Cunningham

another 1829 nominee: William Dobie (1790-1868)

William Dobie, of Beith, brother of James Dobie, the second President, was also elected as an Honorary Member in 1829, but there is **no letter of acceptance** in our files, nor was one mentioned when the receipt of the other five 1829 letters are minuted. (The Dobie letter filed is a routine business letter from James Dobie.)

William Dobie entered 'a mechanical profession' in Beith but did not care for such practical work. When 'the munificence of a wealthy relative enabled him to retire' (in 1822, aged 32), he did so, and devoted the rest of his life to travelling in Britain and abroad and recording history. Amongst his published works are a manuscript volume 'Perambulations in Kintyre' with detailed descriptions of emblems and inscriptions on sculptured grave-slabs and tombstones, 'Parish Churches and Burying-grounds of Ayrshire' and the Kilbirnie entry in the 1840 'Statistical Account of Scotland'.