

## Honorary members of 1851 - William Howitt, Dr Charles Mackay, Charles Dickens

### William Howitt (1792-1879)

Born of a Quaker family, William Howitt began early to publish verses. In conjunction with his wife, Mary, also a recognised writer, he published a volume of poems, *The Forest Minstrel*, in 1823, shortly after their marriage. By the time of this honorary membership, he had produced three other books in England, one being the popular *Rural Life in England*; in 1840 they settled at Heidelberg and devoted themselves to introducing the literature of the north, especially Sweden, to English readers. He also published, in 1847, *Homes and Haunts of the British Poets*.

He visited Australia in 1852-54, and at least two of his books dealt with that country. Afterwards, both he and his wife became converts to spiritualism. The Howitts are remembered for their untiring efforts to provide wholesome and instructive literature. They were well acquainted with two other honorary members, Charles Dickens (also nominated in 1851) and William Thackeray (see 1854).

In his appreciation of Robert Burns (*Homes and Haunts of British Poets*, 1847, p.389), he comments thus on a verse from "A man's a man for a' that": "Brave words! Glorious truth! The soul of poetry and the whole science of social philosophy compressed into a single stanza, to serve as the stay and comfort of millions of hearts in every moment when most needed."

Letter of acceptance: written from 28 Upper Avenue Road (St John's Wood), Regent's Park, on Feb. 5th, 1851

Dear Sir,

Pray present to your Club my best thanks for the honour which it has done me in electing me an Honorary Member of it.

Be so good also as to present my best compliments to Mr Maxwell Dick, by whose kindness I was permitted to see the autographs of the "Cottar's Saturday Night" and to whom I am indebted for an admirable likeness of the great Bard of Nature and of Scotland, which is often admired here by distinguished members of the literary and artistic world.

I remain, with best thanks,

Dear Sir,

Yours very truly,

William Howitt

#### Notes:

The letter is addressed to Alexander Robertson, Esq., the Club Secretary.

In 'Homes and Haunts of British Poets', 1847, p.357, Howitt records that the most complete and accurate description of the Burns Festival in Ayr on 6th August, 1844, is "The Full Report", published by **Mr Maxwell Dick**, the worthy publisher of the *Ayrshire News Letter* at Irvine, one of the most enthusiastic admirers of the genius of Burns, and of genius in general. There was a procession in the morning, followed immediately by a surprise appearance of

Tam o' Shanter with a flight of witches in full pursuit. In the afternoon, the (13th) Earl of Eglinton chaired the banquet in the pavilion, with Prof. Wilson as croupier, and guests including the three sons of the poet, other members of their family, Robert Chambers and Douglas Jerrold.

Howitt also mentions that **Maxwell Dick** published an admirable coloured print of Burns, from Nasmyth's picture.

### **Dr Charles Mackay (1814-1889)**

Charles Mackay, the Scottish poet, journalist and song writer, although born in Perth, was educated in London and Brussels, worked as a journalist in London, had edited the Glasgow Argus from 1844-48, and, by the time of his nomination as an honorary member, had moved to the Illustrated London News, of which he became editor in 1852. During his lifetime, his fame chiefly rested upon his songs, some of which, including Cheer, Boys, Cheer, were in 1846 set to music by Henry Russell, and had an astonishing popularity.

Mackay acted as Times correspondent during the American Civil War, and in that capacity discovered and disclosed the Fenian conspiracy. He had the degree of LL.D. from the University of Glasgow in 1846. His lively writing style and ability to document the facts of extraordinary financial bubbles and political upheavals from the South Sea Bubble to tulipomania to the Crusades influenced reporters and economists from his time to this day. With two others in 1849, he was recruited to assist Henry Mayhew, editor of the Morning Chronicle, with an investigation into the condition of the labouring classes in England and Wales.

His daughter became known as the novelist Marie Corelli. Dr Mackay was a friend of another 1851 honorary member, Charles Dickens.

Letter of acceptance, written from 21 Brecknock Crescent, Camden Road, London, on 5th Feb., 1851

Sir,

I am much flattered by the notification conveyed in your letter of the 29th of January and shall become with great pleasure an honorary member of the Irvine Burns' Club.

You do not state whether any duties are attached to the membership - or what the qualifications are. If the latter consist in admiration of the genius of Scotland's poet - and of the manly independance [*sic*] of his character - and in sympathy for every effort to exalt his name and keep it fresh in the remembrance of his people; - I think I shall be equal to any of you in these respects whatever my other deficiencies may be -

Believe me with best wishes

Ever yours truly

Chas. Mackay

#### Notes:

This letter is addressed to Alex Robertson, Esq., Irvine, Club Secretary.

## Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

### Life and work:

The most important and popular author of the Victorian era, Charles John Huffam Dickens first achieved fame through magazine contributions and pamphlets in the years from 1835, and 'The Pickwick Papers' appeared in 1837. The novels thereafter appeared - about ten in the ten years before his nomination as an honorary member. It is claimed that his novels have never gone out of print. His career as a journalist in the 1830s is less well known, but, as stories were unsigned, may have been more extensive than can be proved ('The Times', 3.12.2011, Review pp.10-11).

His work as a novelist was based on a wide and keen observation, and his characters exhibited great vitality and humour. His novels often appeared as serials, each episode eagerly awaited by his public, before publication as books. Also, on popular, over-subscribed, tours, including a second visit to America in 1867-68, he gave many public readings of his work. His success brought its financial rewards - the American tour netted profits of £20K, perhaps £1.5m today, and his 1864 advance of £6K for 'our Mutual Friend' would be nearing £420K today; he was probably never richer than in the years before he died.

His father was sent to Marshalsea debtors' prison when Charles was aged 12 - a circumstance which led to his miserable experience of working in a boot-blackening factory for 10 hours a day for six shillings (30p) a week, as well as to Marshalsea featuring in 'Little Dorrit' (1856), and to his determination to fight against the legal and social abuses heaped upon the poor. After his father inherited a tidy sum, Dickens returned to school and started work as a law clerk at 16. By 22, he was working as a parliamentary reporter and writing short fictional sketches. The rest of his career is well known.

His wife Catherine (daughter of musicologist George Hogarth and Georgina Thomson) was a grand-daughter of George Thomson, the publisher and friend of Burns who assembled the 'Select Collection Of Original Scottish Airs For The Voice', including work by Burns and Walter Scott and music by Beethoven and Haydn. Charles and 'Kate' had ten children - though later, in 1858, Catherine was cast out of the family home when Dickens met the 18-year-old actress Ellen Ternan. Friendship ties linked him with Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Carlyle. British publishing was at that time dominated by Scots. Dickens visited Edinburgh in 1834, again in 1841, when, at the age of 29, he was awarded the Freedom of the City of Edinburgh, and again in 1847. On 28th Dec., 1847, he gave the inaugural address at the Glasgow Athenaeum. Of his Glasgow visit, Dickens said: "I have never been more heartily received anywhere, or enjoyed myself more completely." By 1851, when nominated as an Honorary Member, he was well known.

His memories of early childhood Christmas days which were happy (before his father fell into debt) and usually white (as the 1810s was the coldest decade in Britain since the 1690s) influenced the snowy scenes of 'A Christmas Carol' (1843) and in turn established the Victorian and, to some extent, today's, style of Christmas celebrations.

Dickens and Thackeray were very good friends with Douglas Jerrold (1803-1857), a major contributor to 'Punch', and mentioned in our minutes as a 1854 nominee, though he seems not to have accepted. They were the principal pall-bearers at Jerrold's funeral. The Directors of the 1840s had approached many of the Edinburgh literary figures, and were now approaching the London literary set.

For a review of his Scottish connections, see [www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/books/charles-dickens-the-scottish-story-1-2021927](http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/books/charles-dickens-the-scottish-story-1-2021927) from which the following quote is taken: "Nobody would argue that we can turn Dickens into an honorary Scotsman, but his relationship with Scotland was deeper and more significant than the standard caricatures of him might suggest. Scots were involved in his literary breakthrough, his family life and his charity work; it was Scotland that provided the genesis of his most enduring character and a Scot lies at the heart of one of the mysteries about Dickens." The name Scrooge is from Ebenezer Scroggie in Canongate Kirkyard.)

Letter of acceptance , written from Devonshire Terrace, London on 10th February, 1851

Sir,

I beg to assure you that I have the greatest pleasure in becoming an honorary member of the Irvine Burns Club, originated in remembrance of that immortal genius. Oblige me by having the kindness to convey my cordial good wishes and thanks to my unknown friends who have held me in such gratifying recollection.

With many thanks for your obliging favor, I am

Faithfully yours

Charles Dickens

Notes:

From 1839-51, Dickens leased 1 Devonshire Terrace, now Marleybone Rd.

The letter is addressed to Alexander Robertson, Esq., the Club Secretary.

Some Burns' quotes from "David Copperfield" (supplied by Past President Michael Murray)

(1) "Meeting with the Micawbers and having celebrated with punch...we sang 'Auld Lang Syne'. When we came to 'here's a hand, my trusty fiere', and we declared we would 'take a right gude Willie Waught', and hadn't the least idea what it meant we were really affected."

(2) In a celebration with the Micawbers and Traddles . . . "I may say, of myself and Copperfield, in words we have sung together before now, that 'We twa hae run about the braes and pu'd the gowans fine' – in a figurative point of view - on several occasions. I am not entirely aware," said Mr Micawber "what gowans may be, but I have no doubt that Copperfield and myself would frequently have taken a pull at them if that had been possible."

(3) "Where Mrs Micawber and myself once had the honour of uniting our voices to yours in the well known strain of the Immortal Exciseman, nurtured beyond the Tweed."

(4) "Now's the day and now's the hour, see the front of battle lower, See approach proud Edward's power - Chains and slavery." Micawber on being jailed over a debt owed to Uriah Heep.

(5) Micawber writing (in a newspaper in Australia) to/on David Copperfield - "Though seas between us braid hae roared - (Burns) - from participating in the intellectual feasts he has spread before us."