

## **Irvine Burns Club Schools' Programme**

### **A (very) Short Biography of Robert Burns**

Robert Burns was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1759 in a cottage in Alloway. Robert's mother was Agnes Brown, who was born in Craigenton, Maybole and his father was William Burnes from Clochnahill, Kincardineshire.

William had built their home ("Burns Cottage"), a two-roomed cottage on nursery land in Alloway, which is now seen as part of Ayr. Robert's brother Gilbert was born in 1760 and was always close to his older brother. At the ages of six and seven the two boys started their "formal" education with a young man called John Murdoch, who was hired by William Burnes and some neighbours to educate their sons. During this time a great deal of time was spent on the basics of English and Robert began his great love of reading. Robert was able to get access to a wide variety of books and he became a voracious reader.

Around a year after the start of their time with Murdoch as their teacher, the family moved to a farm called Mount Oliphant and the two boys travelled to Alloway to continue their education. After another year or so Murdoch moved from the area and William spent a great deal of his time in continuation of the boys' education. When Robert was thirteen, the boys attended a summer school at Dalrymple for a week. Robert was now spending more and more time helping his father with work on the farm, which did not have good growing conditions and life was very difficult. However, he did continue with his love of reading and at the age of fifteen he wrote his first poem, dedicated to Nellie Kilpatrick. He described the work as "when I first committed the sin of rhyme".

In 1777 William rented a farm at Lochlie, near Tarbolton. This was a very "boggy" farm and the owners agreed that they would do work to improve the drainage of the land. This did not take place and life was very difficult for the family. Now eighteen years old, Robert spent more time in the company of friends and he and some of these friends formed the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club.

In 1781 Robert arrived in Irvine to learn the trade of Flax Dressing, so that the family farm could "cut out the middleman", in the process of getting from flax to the threads from which linen is woven. Much more will be learned about this part of Robert's life and its effect on Robert's future, when the audio-visual presentation on "Burns in Irvine" is viewed at Irvine Burns Club.

Mr Burnes took his case against the owners of Lochlie to the Court of Session in Edinburgh and won. However the strain of his fight for justice took its toll and he died very soon after his legal victory. Robert and Gilbert had arranged to move the family (1784) to a farm near Mauchline, called Mossiel. Robert's poetry blossomed while there and he met his future wife, Jean Armour, in the town of Mauchline, which has a great number of buildings and memorabilia connected with the couple. In late 1785/early 1786 The couple were married by attestation, but her father, was less than delighted and had the contract of marriage defaced and it was then believed that the marriage was invalid/annulled. Jean gave birth to twins, Robert and Jean.

Robert planned to leave Scotland for Jamaica in 1786 but, having been encouraged to publish his poetry, the success of his "Kilmarnock Edition" convinced him to abandon the idea. 612 copies of "Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect", his "Kilmarnock Edition" were printed by John Wilson of Kilmarnock. The books were printed after Robert was able to find a large number of subscribers,

who paid for the books before they were printed. When classes visit Irvine Burns Club they will be able to see some of the original manuscripts, which Robert prepared for the printer. The Club also has one of the original 612 copies of the book.

The success of his book led to invitations for Robert to travel to Edinburgh, where he was treated as a celebrity and later published two further (Edinburgh) editions of his poetry. He also set out on several tours of different areas of Scotland, where he heard many old songs. Many of these songs had little more than a chorus and often barely recognisable tunes. Robert made notes on all of these, many of which had never been committed to print. This eventually led to publication of Robert's prodigious number of songs by two men James Johnston and George Thomson. Johnston published much of the work in volumes of his "Scots Musical Museum". Thomson published many songs of Burns in "Select Scottish Airs" and he collaborated (as "junior partner") with Robert in the selection of appropriate tunes for each item in his wonderful collection, including much that was original Burns' work and much was adaptation of those collected during his tours.

In 1788 he married Jean, a marriage which was recognised, even by Jean's father. He took a lease on Ellisland farm near Dumfries and they moved to the farm, where Jean had twin girls who died within a few weeks. Robert was able to find a post with The Excise and travelled around 200 miles per week to perform his duties. He was also able to continue to write poetry and his masterpiece "Tam o' Shanter" was written while he was living at Ellisland.

He gave up the lease on Ellisland in 1791, moving to Dumfries to a flat in a street known as "The Stinking Vennel". During the eighteen months living there he completed many songs for Thomson's "Scots Musical Museum" and continued to work many hours on Excise work. His health was gradually worsening during this time.

In 1793 the family moved from the flat to a house in Millbrae Vennel, which was/is very close to the flat. Although he continued to work hard at his poetry, being a loving father to his children and earn his living with the excise, Robert's health continued to deteriorate. Much of the medical advice that was given to Robert seems strange now but was as good as was available at the time. He was advised to bathe in the Solway waters, just off the South West coast of Scotland-not the warmest water in the world. He died, not very many weeks after his last bathing experience. He died on 21<sup>st</sup> of July 1796 and his funeral took place on July 25<sup>th</sup>. The last of his children, Maxwell was born on the day of his funeral.

This is a very brief note on the life of Robert Burns, which I hope will be of help to teachers. We at Irvine Burns Club also hope that the morning at Wellwood will fill in at least a few of the many gaps and that teachers and children enjoy the experience.

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