



Scottish Poets and Poetry



Robert Burns

Robert Burns was born on 25 January 1759.

He spent his first seven years at his father's home in Alloway, before moving to Mount Oliphant farm in 1766.

In 1777, when he was 18, the family moved to Lochlea (or Lochlie) farm. During these formative years Burns had to turn his hand to farm work.

But, following the established Scottish tradition, his education was not neglected. He attended a local school set up by his father and four neighbours, with the 18-year-old John Murdoch as teacher, and also received additional instruction in Latin, French and mathematics.

These years saw his social life developing, and it was also during this time — when he was about 15 — that, according to his own account, he first turned his hand to poetry.

Burns became a freemason of St David's Lodge, Tarbolton, in 1781. His lifelong connection with Freemasonry provided a constant social support for him.

Burns remained at Lochlea until his father's death in 1784, after which the family moved to Mossgiel farm, near Mauchline.

In Burns's day, the Kirk played a central spiritual role in rural society, but it also functioned as the guardian of public morality. Burns' womanising and choice of friends brought him into frequent conflict with the Kirk, but his criticism of the Kirk was largely reserved for the double standards of some of its leading members.

Between 1784 and 1785 was one of Burns's most prolific periods. In these years he wrote such well-known poems as *Holy Willie's Prayer*, *To A Mouse*, *The Jolly Beggars* and *The Holy Fair*.

Burns financial difficulties. The farm was not profitable, and his willingness to marry Jean Armour, who was pregnant by him, was opposed by her father. The only way out, it seemed, was to emigrate.

His plans to sail for Jamaica were well advanced when events took an unexpected turn. He had been advised by a local lawyer to finance the voyage by publishing some of his poems, but the success of that volume — the 'Kilmarnock edition' — caused him to reconsider his plans to emigrate.

Printed by John Wilson of Kilmarnock in July 1786, Burns' "Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect" cost three shillings and the entire print-run of 612 copies sold out within a month, justifying his belief in his abilities and in the merit of his poems.

Following the Kilmarnock edition's success, Burns decided to further his literary ambitions by visiting Edinburgh. Soon he was being fêted by an Edinburgh society eager to meet the man described by Henry Mackenzie as the 'Heaven-taught ploughman'.

For the next 18 months he stayed frequently in Edinburgh to arrange the publication of a second edition of his poems, and to join in the social round.

One of the people he met was Mrs Agnes McLehose, with whom he established a platonic relationship. Their ensuing correspondence — using the pseudonyms 'Clarinda' and 'Sylvander' — is one of the most famous examples of stylised romantic letter-writing. But even more famous is *Ae fond kiss*, the parting song which Burns sent to Mrs McLehose after their final meeting in December 1791.

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Burns spent the final years of his life in Dumfriesshire. From 1788 he attempted to farm at Ellisland, but the ground was so exhausted that this ultimately proved fruitless. In September 1789 he began work for the Excise at Dumfries. Though he performed these duties diligently and compassionately, charges of political disloyalty were raised against him.

At the same time failing health, which he sought to remedy by sea-bathing, overshadowed his literary and musical output. Years of hard physical labour working on a series of unproductive farms aggravated his long-standing heart condition. This led to his premature death at the age of 37 on 21 July 1796.

On the day of his funeral, his wife gave birth to their youngest son, Maxwell.