

To the Guid Wife of Wauchope House

MRS SCOTT

This is Burns' reply to Mrs Elizabeth Scott's wonderful poem.

I mind it weel, in early date,
When I was beardless, young, and blate,
An' first cou'd thresh the barn,
Or haud a yokin at the pleugh,
An' tho' fu' foughten sair enough,
Yet unco proud to learn;
When first amang the yellow corn
A man I reckon'd was,
An' wi' the lave ilk merry morn
Could rank my rig an' lass:
Still shearing, and clearing
The tither stooked raw,
Wi' clavers an' havers,
Wearing the time awa'.

E'n then, a wish (I mind its pow'r),
A wish that to my latest hour
Shall strongly heave my breast,
That I for poor auld Scotland's sake
Some useful plan, or book could make,
Or sing a sang at least.
The rough burr-thistle spreading wide
Amang the bearded bear,
I turn'd the weeding heuk aside,
An' spar'd the symbol dear.
No nation, no station,
My envy e'er could raise:
A Scot still, but blot still,
I knew nae higher praise.

Burns harks back to his early years when he was learning the business of farming. He and the girl he worked with could do a full days work although it was exhausting. He gathered the corn and she put it into sheaves or stooks.

mind it weel = remember it well; *blate* = shy; *haud a yokin* = do a day's work; *foughten* = tired; *lave* = others; *ilk* = each; *tither* = other; *clavers an' havers* = nonsense and chatter; *An' tho' fu' foughten sair enough* = and though tired and sore

Even when he was so young he wished that he could write a book or compose a song for the glory of Scotland. He was so proud of his country that he would not cut down thistles, (the emblem of Scotland) when weeding. He can think of no higher station in life than being born a Scot.

beardy bear = barley; *weeding heuk* = hook

But still the elements o' sang
 In formless jumble, right an' wrang,
 Wild floated in my brain;
 'Till on the that hairst I said before,
 My partner in the merry core,
 She rous'd the forming strain.
 I see her yet, the sonsie quean
 That lighted up my jingle,
 Her pauky smile, her kittle een,
 That gart my heart-strings tingle!
 So tiched, bewitched,
 I rav'd ay to myself;
 But bashing and dashing,
 I kend na how to tell.

Hale to the sex, ilk guid chiel says,
 Wi' merry dance on winter-days,
 An' we to share in common!
 The gust o' joy, the balm of woe,
 The saul o' life, the heav'n below
 Is rapture-giving Woman.
 Ye surly sumphs, who hate the name,
 Be mindfu' o' your mither;
 She, honest woman, may think shame
 That ye're connect'd with her!
 Ye're wae men, ye're nae men,
 That slight the lovely dears;
 To shame ye, disclaim ye,
 Ilk honest birkie swears.

The words tumbled around in his head until one harvest when he was inspired to write a poem about his partner. (Nelly Kilpatrick of Handsome Nell fame). Her smile and her eyes were his inspiration but he was too shy to tell her how he felt about her.

hairst = harvest; *core* = crowd; *sonsie quean* = good-natured girl; *kittle een* = shrewd eyes; *gart* = made

He wishes good health to all women, who he feels give joy to life, but mocks any man who thinks ill of women as their own mothers might disown them for being so churlish.

saul = soul; *sumphs* = boorish people; *birkie* = fellow

For you, na bred to barn an' byre,
 Wha sweetly tune the Scottish lyre,
 Thanks to you for your line.
 The marl'd plaid ye kindly spare,
 By me should gratefully be ware;
 'Twad please me to the Nine.
 I'd be mair vauntie o' my hap,
 Douce hingin owre my curple,
 Than onie ermine ever lap,
 Or proud imperial purple.
 Farewell then, lang hale then,
 An' plenty be your fa'
 May losses and crosses
 Ne'er at your hallan ca'.

He thanks Mrs Scott for her epistle and appreciates that she was not bred for country work. She has given him a partly coloured plaid which he will wear more proudly than if it were an ermine robe, and he hopes her life will be free from tragedy.

marl'd = partly coloured; *ware* = worn; *vauntie* = proud; *hap* = covering; *douce* = soberly; *curple* = leather strap which holds saddle on horse; *lang hale* = long health; *fa'* = lot; *hallan* = hallway, porch

March, 1787, R. Burns

To Mr McAdam of Craigengillan

IN ANSWER TO AN OBLIGING LETTER HE SENT IN THE COMMENCEMENT OF MY
POETIC CAREER

McAdam had acquired wealth and status through his work in improving methods of agriculture, and had written to Burns, apparently to congratulate him upon his poetry. There is a certain amount of hypocrisy contained in poems such as this, that show that although Burns scorned the rich and famous in his verses, he was nevertheless flattered to receive their accolades.

Sir, o'er a gill I gat your card,
I trow it made me proud;
'See wha tak's notice o' the Bard!
I lap, and cry'd fu loud.

Now deil-ma-care about their jaw,
The senseless, gawky million;
I'll cock my nose aboon them a',
I'm roos'd by Craigengillan!

'Twas noble, Sir; 'twas like yoursel,
To grant your high protection:
A great man's smile, ye ken fu' well,
Is ay a blest infection.

Tho', by his banes wha in a tub
Match'd Macedonian Sandy!
On my ain legs thro dirt and dub,
I independent stand ay.

And when those legs to guid, warm kail,
Wi' welcome canna bear me,
A lee dyke-side, a sybow-tail,
An' barley-scone shall cheer me.

Burns thanks McAdam for his card, he's delighted that he's been noticed.

o'er a gill = over a drink; *trow* = promise;
lap = jumped

He doesn't care what the masses think of him for he has been praised by the gentry.
jaw = gossip; *gawky* = clumsy; *roos'd* = praised

Burns flatters McAdam by saying that MacAdam smiling upon Burns' work has truly blessed it.

Although McAdam is a match for Alexander the Great, Burns can always stand independent.

banes = bones; *Macedonian Sandy* = Alexander the Great; *dub* = puddle

When he gets old and infirm, Burns will be content with a simple life and diet.

kail = broth; *lee dyke-side* = sheltered wall;
sybow-tail = spring onion

Heaven spare you lang to kiss the breath
O' monie flow'ry simmers,
An' bless your bonie lasses baith,
I'm tauld they're loosome kimmers!

An' God bless young Dunaskin's laird,
The blossom of our gentry!
An' may he wear an auld man's beard,
A credit to his country!

He hopes McAdam will enjoy long life, and
blesses his beautiful daughters.
simmers = summers; *loosome* = lovable;
kimmers = young girls

Burns then blesses him again, wishing
that he lives to be an old man.

Lament For the Absence of William Creech

William Creech was a prominent figure within the literati in Edinburgh. His bookshop in the High Street was the central meeting point for writers, lawyers, and men of letters. He was also responsible for publishing much of Burns' works and the two had an amicable relationship until Creech became reticent about paying Burns his due fees. This led to a distinct cooling down of the relationship, but the following poem was written before that occurrence when the two were still friendly.

Auld chuckie Reekie's sair distrest
Down droops her ance weel-burnish'd crest,
Nae joy her bonie buskit nest
Can yield ava:
Her darling bird that she lo'es best,
Willie's awa.

O, Willie was a witty wight,
And had o' things an unco sleight!
Auld Reekie' ay he keepit tight,
An' trig an' braw;
But now they'll busk her like a fright,
Willie's awa!

The stiffest o' them a' he bow'd;
The bauldest o' them a' he cow'd;
They durst nae mair than he allow'd,
That was a law:
We've lost a birkie well worth gowd—
Willie's awa!

Now gawkies, tawpies, gowks, and fools,
Frae colleges and boarding-schools
May sprout like simmer puddock-stools
In glen or shaw:
He wha could brush them down to mools,
Willies awa!

Edinburgh is distressed as the darling of her society, Willie, has gone away.
Auld Reekie = Edinburgh; *chuckie* = motherhen; *buskit* = well-trimmed; *ava* = at all; *droops* = drops

Willie was a man of wit who kept things running smoothly, but now he's away, there's trouble
wight = chap; *sleight* = skill; *trig and braw* = neat and handsome; *busk* = dress; *fright* = freak; *unco sleight* = uncommon skill

He was a leader in society and his word was considered to be law.
bauldest = boldest; *durst* = dared; *birkie* = fellow; *gowd* = gold

Now all those pretentious people will be unrestrained.
gawkies = silly people; *tawpies* = silly girls; *gowks* = fools; *simmer* = summer; *puddock-stools* = tadpoles; *mools* = dust

The brethren o' the Commerce Chaumer
 May mourn their loss wi' doolful clamour:
 He was a dictionar and grammar
 Among them a':
 I fear they'll now mak monie a stammer:
 Willie's awa!

Nae mair we see his levee door
 Philosophers and Poets pour,
 And toothy Critics by the score,
 In bloody raw:
 The adjutant o' a' the core,
 Willie's awa!

Now worthy Greg'rys Latin face,
 Tyler's and Greenfield's modest grace,
 McKenzie, Stewart, such a brace
 As Rome ne'er saw,
 They a' maun meet some ither place—
 Willie's awa!

Poor Burns ev'n 'Scotch Drink' canna
 quicken,
 He cheeps like some bewilder'd chicken
 Scar'd frae its minnie and the cleckin,
 By hoodie-craw.
 Grief's gien his heart an unco kickin,
 Willie's awa!

Now ev'ry sour-mou'd, girnin blellum,
 And Calvin's folk, are fit to tell him;
 Ilk self-conceited critic-skellum
 His quill may draw:
 He wha could brawlie ward their blellum,
 Willie's awa!

The business community relied on him
 to correct their spelling and grammar,
 but mistakes will now be made.
Chaumer = Chamber; *doolful* = doleful

No more morning receptions will take
 place while he's away.
levee = early morning reception by a
 person of distinction

Edinburgh's men of letters must find
 another meeting place.

Even a drop of Scotch cannot inspire
 Burns. He feels quite lost without Creech.
minnie = mother; *cleckin* = brood;
hoodie-craw = carrion crow

All of his critics can now write
 about him without trepidation
girnin = crying; whining; *blellum* =
 babblers; *skellum* = scoundrel

Up wimpling, stately Tweed I've sped,
 And Eden scenes on crystal Jed,
 And Ettrick banks, now roaring red
 While tempests blow;
 But every joy and pleasure's fled,
 Willie's awa!

May I be Slander's common speech,
 A text for Infamy to preach,
 And lastly, streekit out to bleach
 In winter snaw,
 When I forget thee, Willie Creech,
 Tho' far awa!

May never wicked Fortune touzle him,
 May never wicked men bamboozle him,
 Until a pow as auld's Methusalem
 He canty claw!
 Then to the blessed new Jerusalem,
 Fleet-wing awa!

Although he's witnessed the beauty of
 the border counties, it seems
 meaningless without Creech.

May Burns be slandered and infamous
 and stretched out in the snow
 to bleach should he forget Creech.
streekit = stretched

May Creech never have bad luck or be
 cheated and grow old in peace.
pow = head; *canty claw* = cheerfully
 scratch

Sonnet on William Creech

In sharp contrast to the previous poem, Burns composed this sonnet about Creech some time afterwards. His feelings towards the publisher had been soured over a dispute about money, and the adulation in which he held Creech has long since evaporated.

A little upright, pert, tart, tripping wight, *wight = fellow*
And still his precious self his dear delight;
Who loves his own smart shadow in the streets
Better than e'er the fairest She he meets.
Much spacious lore, but little understood.
(Veneering oft outshines the solid wood),
His solid sense by inches you must tell,
But mete his subtle cunning by the ell!
A man of fashion, too, he made his tour,
Learnd 'Vive la bagatelle et vive l'amour':
So travell'd monkies their grimaces improve,
Polish their grin – nay, sigh for ladies love!
His meddling vanity, a busy fiend,
Still making work his selfish craft must mend.

Bonnie Dundee

An old ballad revised by the Bard. The central theme is of a young maiden left pregnant by a passing soldier. The opening line which refers to a 'hauver-meal bannock' is an early version of the modern 'having a bun in the oven.'

'O whar gat ye that hauver-meal bannock?
'O silly blind body, O dinna ye see?
I gat it frae a young brisk sodger laddie
Between Saint Johnston and bonie Dundee.

The girl is asked who got her pregnant and she replies that the father is a soldier.

'O gin I saw the laddie that gae me 't!
Aft has he doudl'd me upon his knee;
May Heaven protect my bonie Scots laddie,
And send him safe hame to his babie and me!

She wishes that he'll be protected and return home safe.

O, *gin* = Oh that; *doudl'd* = dandled

'My blessin's upon thy sweet, wee lippie!
My blessin's upon thy bonie e'e-brie!
Thy smiles are sae like my blyth sodger laddie,
Thou's ay the dearer and dearer to me!

The mother blesses her child who reminds her of the father.

'But I'll big a bow'r on yon bonie banks,
Whare Tay rins wimplin by sae clear;
An' I'll cleed thee in the tartan sae fine,
And mak thee a man like thy daddie dear.'

She will build a shelter for them and clothe the boy in tartan just as his father was.

big = build; *cleed* = clothe

To Symon Gray

Robert Burns may have been inclined to offer advice to Andrew Aiken, but when pestered by a retired London businessman, Symon Gray, who had taken up residence in the Borders and who fancied himself to be a fellow poet, his response was very different. Gray must have been a very thick-skinned individual for he sent three samples of his poems to Burns for approval, and the replies simply became coarser and ruder.

Symon Gray,
You're dull today.
Dullness, with redoubted sway,
Has seized the wits of Symon Gray.

Dear Cimon Gray,
The other day,
When you sent me some rhyme,
I could not then just ascertain
Its worth, for want of time.

But now today, good Mr. Gray,
I've read it o'er and o'er.
Tried all my skill, but find I'm still
Just where I was before.

We auld wives' minions gie our opinions, *auld wives minions* = old women's darlings
Solicited or no';
Then of its fau'ts my honest thoughts *fau'ts* = faults
I'll give – and here they go.

Such damn'd bombast no time that past
Will show, or time to come,
So, Cimon dear, your song I'll tear,
And with it wipe my bum.

On Scaring Some Water-fowl in Loch Turit

Robert Burns detested hunting and had nothing but contempt for those who enjoyed killing any form of wildlife in the supposed pursuit of pleasure. This poem demonstrates his sympathies towards the water-fowl that fell under the hunter's gun, and although he appreciates the need of wild creatures to hunt in order to survive, he cannot excuse his fellow man for the atrocities which they commit upon nature's innocents.

Why, ye tenants of the lake,
For me your wat'ry haunts forsake?
Tell me, fellow creatures, why
At my presence thus you fly?
Why disturb your social joys,
Parent, filial, kindred ties?

Burns asks why the waterfowl fly away when he is present.

Common friend to you and me,
Nature's gifts to all are free:
Peaceful keep your dimpling wave,
Busy feed, or wanton lave;
Or, beneath the sheltering rock,
Bide the surging billows shock.

wanton lave = idly rest

bide = endure

Conscious, blushing for our race,
Soon, too soon, your fears I trace.
Man, your proud, usurping foe,
Would be lord of all below:
Plumes himself in freedom's pride,
Tyrant stern to all beside.

He talks of man's tyranny and is embarrassed.

The eagle, from the clifty brow,
Marking you his prey below,
In his breast no pity dwells,
Strong necessity compels.
But Man, to whom alone is giv'n
A ray direct from pitying Heav'n,
Glories in his heart humane –
And creatures for his pleasure slain.

The eagle also preys on the waterfowl, yet this is necessary. Man slays for pleasure.

In these savage, liquid plains,
Only known to wand'ring swains,
Where the mossy riv'let strays,
Far from human haunts and ways;
All on Nature you depend,
And life's poor season peaceful spend.

Or, if Man's superior might
Dare invade your native right,
On the lofty ether borne,
Man with all his powers you scorn;
Swiftly seek, on clanging wings,
Other lakes, and other springs;
And the foe you cannot brave,
Scorn at least to be his slave.

The waterfowl hides where no-one goes.
wand'ring swains = wandering lovers
riv'let = rivulet or stream

What if man invades the birds right of
flight?
lofty ether borne = carried high in the air

Epitaph For William Michie

SCHOOLMASTER OF CLEISH PARISH, FIFESHIRE

Burns wrote many epitaphs in his day, some sad, some amusing, some cutting. This one however was a spoof, for following a night of hard drinking, William, or Ebenezer Michie, as was his correct name, keeled over in drunken stupor prompting Burns to write the following few lines.

Here lie Willie Michie's banes:
O Satan, when you tak him,
Gie him the schulin o your weans,
For clever deils he'll mak them!

banes = bones; *schulin* = schooling;
weans = children; *deils* = devils

Where, Braving Angry Winter's Storms

Margaret, or Peggy, Chalmers was yet another young lady whose beauty had bewitched Robert Burns, and who joined the ranks of those who had turned down his proposal of marriage. He was certainly distressed to discover that she was to be married to a banker and wrote to her outlining his feelings.

Where braving angry winter's storms,
The lofty Ochils rise,
Far in their shade my Peggy's charms
First blest my wondering eyes:

As one who by some savage stream
A lonely gem surveys,
Astonish'd doubly marks its beam
With art's most polish'd blaze.

Blest be the wild, sequester'd glade,
And blest the day and hour,
Where Peggy's charms I first survey'd,
When first I felt their pow'r!

The tyrant Death, with grim controul
May seize my fleeting breath,
But tearing Peggy from my soul
Must be a stronger death.

Ca' the Yowes to the Knowes

This particularly beautiful ballad has a melody that is always a joy to hear. It is the Bard's second version of the song. The Clouden refers to a tributary of the River Nith, and the silent towers are the remains of Lincluden Abbey.

Chorus

Ca' the yowes to the knowes,
Ca' them where the heather grows,
Ca' them where the burnie rowes,
My bonie dearie.

ca' the yowes to the knowes = call the sheep to the hills; *yowes* = ewes; *knowes* = knolls; *where the burnie rowes* = where the stream is running

Hark the mavis e'ening sang
Sounding Clouden's woods amang,
Then a-faulding let us gang,
My bonie dearie.

Once the sheep are safely settled, they will set off.
mavis = thrush; *a-faulding* = through the gates of the sheep-fold

We'll gae down by Clouden side,
Thro' the hazels spreading wide,
O'er the waves that gently glide,
To the moon sae clearly.

They will walk by the riverside and watch the moonbeams reflect from the water.

Yonder Clouden's silent towers,
Where, at moonshine's midnight hours,
O'er the dewy bending flowers
Fairies dance sae cheery.

The ruined abbey is where one can see fairies dance at midnight.

Ghaist nor bogle shalt thou fear,
Thou'rt to Love and Heav'n sae dear
Nocht of ill may come thee near,
My bonie dearie.

The lass is too precious for any harm to befall her.
ghaist nor bogle = ghost or demon, *nocht* = nought

I'm O'er Young to Marry Yet

This is another old song revitalised by Burns and which is a particular favourite at any Burns Supper. A young girl is apparently not overjoyed at the prospect of marriage and is using her tender years as an excuse.

CHORUS

*I'm o'er young, I'm o'er young,
I'm o'er young to marry yet!
I'm o'er young, 'twad be a sin
To tak me frae my mammie yet.*

I am my mammie's ae bairn,
Wi' unco folk I weary, Sir;
And lying in a man's bed,
I fley'd it make me eerie, Sir.

Hallowmass is come and gane,
The nights are lang in winter, Sir,
And you an' I in ae bed,
In trowth, I dare na venture, Sir!

Fu' loud an' shrill the frosty wind
Blaws thro' the leafless timmer, Sir;
But if ye come this gate again,
I'll aulder be gin simmer, Sir.

I'm far too young to marry, it would be a sin to take me from home.

She's an only child and finds strangers boring. She's frightened of going to bed with a man.

ae bairn = only child; *fley'd* = afraid;
erie = frightened

It's deep winter and she dares not go to bed with him.

Hallowmass = first week of November;
trowth = truth

timmer = trees; *gin simmer* = by summer

O, That I Were Where Helen Lies

Anyone who holds a preconceived idea that the Scots are rather dour and unromantic will surely have a different view after reading this poem. It is an old ballad, rewritten by the Bard, and is the true, tragic tale of a lass who was just too popular.

Helen Irvine lived in the village of Kirkconnel in the sixteenth century and had a lover named Adam Fleming. A rival suitor, besotted with jealousy, fired a shot at Fleming, but Helen tried to come between the two men and was fatally wounded by the bullet. Fleming drew his sword and immediately slew the assailant, but rather than face trial, he fled to Spain where he joined the army. Years later, he returned to Kirkconnel where he died and was buried in a grave beside his beloved Helen.

O that I were where Helen lies,
Night and day on me she cries;
O that I were where Helen lies
In fair Kirkconnel lee.

lee = lea; *evermair* = evermore

O Helen fair beyond compare,
A ringlet of thy flowing hair,
I'll wear it still for ever mair
Until the day I die.

Curs'd be the hand that shot the shot,
And curs'd be the gun that gave the crack!

Into my arms bird Helen lap,
And died for sake o' me!

lap = leapt; *na ye* = not you; *sair* = sore; *spake nae mair* = spoke no more; *meikle* = much

O think na ye but my heart was sair;
My Love fell down and spake nae mair;
There did she swoon wi' meikle care
On fair Kirkconnel lee.

I lighted down, my sword did draw,
I cutted him in pieces sma';
I cutted him in pieces sma'
On fair Kirkconnel lee.

lighted down = dismounted; *sma'* = small

O Helen chaste, thou wert modest,
If I were with thee I were blest,
Where thou lies low and takes thy rest
On fair Kirkconnel lee.

I wish my grave was growing green,
A winding sheet put o'er my e'en,
And I in Helen's arms lying
In fair Kirkconnel lee!

I wish I were where Helen lies!
Night and day on me she cries:
O, that I were where Helen lies
On fair Kirkconnel lee.

winding sheet = shroud
o'er my e'en = over my eyes

The Birks of Aberfeldie

The Bard was inspired to write these verses as he stood admiring the falls of Aberfeldy. This is a simple and beautiful song, written in 1787, which remains a favourite at Burns Suppers and ceillidhs to this day. This song has a particularly haunting melody which will stay with you forever once you hear it played.

CHORUS

Bonie lassie, will ye go,

Will ye go, will ye go;

Bonie lassie, will ye go

To the birks of Aberfeldie.

birks = birches

Now simmer blinks on flow'ry braes,
And o'er the crystal streamlets plays,
Come, let us spend the lightsome days
In the birks of Aberfeldie!

The little birdies blythely sing,
While o'er their heads the hazels hing,
Or lighty flit on wanton wing
In the birks of Aberfeldie.

hing = hang

The braes ascend like lofty wa's,
The foamy stream, deep-roaring, fa's
O'erhung wi' fragrant-spreading shaws,
The birks of Aberfeldie.

fa's = falls

The hoary cliffs are crown'd wi' flowers,
White o'er the linns the burnie pours,
And rising weets wi' misty showers
The birks of Aberfeldie.

linns = waterfalls

Let Fortune's gifts at random flee,
They ne'er shall draw a wish frae me;
Supremely blest wi' love and thee
In the birks of Aberfeldie.

A Rose-bud by My Early Walk

The young lady to whom this tribute was penned was a mere twelve-year old at the time of writing. Jean Cruikshank was the daughter of an Edinburgh school-master and was already an accomplished musician when the Bard wrote the following verses in her honour.

A rose-bud by my early walk
Adown a corn-inclosed bawk,
Sae gently bent its thorny stalk,
All on a dewy morning.

bawk = footpath

Ere twice the shades o' dawn are fled,
In a' its crimson glory spread,
And drooping rich the dewy head,
It scents the early morning.

Within the bush her covert nest
A little linnnet fondly prest,
The dew sat chilly on her breast,
Sae early in the morning.

She soon shall see her tender brood,
The pride, the pleasure o' the wood,
Amang the fresh green leaves bedew'd,
Awake the early morning.

So thou dear bird, young Jeany fair,
On trembling string or vocal air,
Shall sweetly pay the tender care
That tents thy early morning!

tents = guards

So thou, sweet rose-bud, young and gay,
Shalt beauteous blaze upon the day,
And bless the parent's evening ray
That watch'd thy early morning!

Clarinda, Mistress of My Soul

Robert Burns' affair with Agnes McLehose, or Nancy, as she was known to her friends, stretched out over some five years. Nancy was a married woman, estranged from her husband, so in order to avoid scandal they devised a code whereby she would become Clarinda, and he Sylvander. Nancy eventually sailed off to Jamaica to attempt a reconciliation with her husband, a departure which prompted the writing of one of the Bard's most beautiful and famous songs, *Ae Fond Kiss*. The affair was the source of many other romantic letters and verses that are still enthralling to read today. Sadly, Nancy's voyage to Jamaica was a lost cause. Her husband had taken a mistress, and Nancy had no option but to return home, only to find that her beloved Sylvander had also moved to pastures new and had lost interest in her.

Clarinda, mistress of my soul,
The measur'd time is run!
The wretch beneath the dreary pole
So marks his latest sun.

To what dark cave of frozen night
Shall poor Sylvander hie, *hie* = hasten
Depriv'd of thee, his life and light,
The sun of all his joy?

We part – but by these precious drops
That fill thy lovely eyes,
No other light shall guide my steps
Till thy bright beams arise !

She, the fair sun of all her sex,
Has blest my glorious day;
And shall a glimmering planet fix
My worship to its ray.

Verses to Clarinda

Sent with a pair of wine glasses.

Fair Empress of the Poet's soul
And Queen of poetesses,
Clarinda, take this little boon,
This humble pair of glasses;

boon = gift

And fill them high with generous juice,
As generous as your mind;
And pledge me in the generous toast:
'The whole of human kind!'

'To those who love us!' second fill;
But not to those whom *we* love,
Lest we love those who love not us!
A third— 'To thee and me, love!'

'Long may we live! Long may we love!
And long may we be happy!
And may we never want a glass
Well charg'd with generous nappy!'

nappy = ale or liquor

Rattlin', Roarin' Willie

William Dunbar was one the Bard's drinking cronies in Edinburgh. He was a Writer to the Signet and was also a very active member of a drinking club known as the Crochallan Fencibles in which he was given the rank of colonel. It seems likely that this club was the source of many of Burns' bawdy ballads and tales.

O, rattlin, roarin Willie,
O, he held to the fair,
An' for to sell his fiddle
And buy some other ware;
But parting wi' his fiddle,
The saut tear blin't his e'e——
And rattlin, roarin Willie,
Ye're welcome hame to me.

O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
O, sell your fiddle sae fine!
O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
And buy a pint o wine!
If I should sell my fiddle,
The warld would think I was mad;
For monie a rantin day
My fiddle and I hae had.

As I came by Crochallan,
I cannily keekit ben,
Rattlin, roarin Willie,
Was sitting at yon boord-en';
And amang guid companie;
Rattlin, roarin Willie,
Ye're welcome hame to me.

Willie went to the fair to sell his fiddle,
but on parting with it he began to cry.
rattlin = roistering; *saut* = salt; *blin't* =
blinded

He's encouraged to sell it and buy drink,
but he and the fiddle have had some great
times together.

rantin = rollicking

cannily keeked = looked cautiously

boord-en' = table-end

Of A' the Airts The Wind Can Blaw

In this eloquent tribute to his new bride, Jean Armour, the Bard expresses his joy and delight at being with her, and explains how the beauties of nature constantly bring her to mind.

Of a' the airts the wind can blaw
I dearly like the west,
For there the bonie lassie lives,
The lassie I lo'e best;

airts = directions; *blaw* = blow;
rowe = roll

There's wild-woods grow, and rivers row
And monie a hill between;
But day and night my fancy's flight
Is ever wi' my Jean.

I see her in the dewy flowers,
I see her sweet and fair;
I hear her in the tunefu' birds,
I hear her charm the air;

There's not a bonie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw or green;
There's not a bonie bird that sings
But minds me o' my Jean.

shaw = wooded dell

The Banks of Nith

Burns was extremely fond of the River Nith and was inspired to write the following verses in compliment as he ran by the banks of the river one morning.

The Thames flows proudly to the sea,
Where royal cities stately stand;
But sweeter flows the Nith to me,
Where Cummins ance had high command. *Cummins* = probably a reference to the
When shall I see my honor'd land, Comyn family
That winding stream I love so dear?
Must wayward Fortune's adverse hand
For ever, ever keep me here?

How lovely, Nith, thy fruitful vales,
Where bounding hawthorns gaily bloom;
How sweetly wind thy sloping dales,
Where lambkins wanton thro' the broom! *lambkins wanton thro' the broom* =
Tho' wandering, now, must be my doom, lambs wander through the broom
Far from thy bonie banks and braes,
May there my latest hours consume,
Amang the friends of early days!

Tam Glen

The Bard had a total aversion to the custom of marrying daughters off to rich suitors and was always in favour of loving relationships. This song relates to an old St. Valentine's Day tradition of drawing lots for sweethearts.

My heart is a-breaking, dear tittie,
Some counsel unto me come len',
To anger them a' is a pity,
But what will I do wi' Tam Glen?

I'm thinking, wi' sic a poor fellow,
In poortith I might mak a fen';
What care I in riches to wallow,
If I maunna marry Tam Glen?

There's Lowrie the laird o' Dumeller ;
'Guid day to you' – brute! he comes ben,
He brags and he blaws o' his siller,
But when will he dance like Tam Glen?

My minnie does constantly deave me,
And bids me beware o' young men,
They flatter, she says, to deceive me –
But wha can think sae o' Tam Glen?

My daddie says, gin I'll forsake him,
He'd gie me guid hunder marks ten,
But if it's ordain'd I maun take him,
O, wha will I get but Tam Glen?

Yestreen at the Valentines' dealing,
My heart to my mou gied a sten,
For thrice I drew ane without failing,
And thrice it was written "Tam Glen!"

The lass pleads with her sister to advise her on how to prevent a quarrel with her parents over her choice of suitors.
tittie = sister

Poverty may be her destiny, but that would be preferable to losing her sweetheart.
wi' sic = with such; *poortith* = poverty; *fen'* = shift; *maunna* = must not

The local laird may be rich, but he'll never be able to dance like the man she loves.
comes ben = comes in; *blaws o' his siller* = boasts of his riches

Her mother has warned her to beware of flattery from young men, but Tam would not deceive her.
minnie = mother; *deave* = deafen

Her father has offered her a cash bribe to take the laird, but her heart still says no.
gin = if; *guid hunder* = good hundred; *maun* = must

At the Valentine's draw she was startled to pick Tam's name out three times in a row.
yestreen = last night; *my heart to my mou gied a sten* = my heart jumped to my mouth

The last Hallowe'en I was waukin
 My droukit sark-sleeve, as ye ken—
 His likeness came up the house staukin,
 And the very grey breeks o' Tam Glen!

Come, counsel, dear tittie, don't tarry!
 I'll gie you my bonie black hen,
 Gif you will advise me to marry,
 The lad I lo'e dearly, Tam Glen.

An old Halloween tradition where a lass puts
 her arm in a stream to reveal her true love.
wauken = awake; *droukit sark-sleeve* =
 drenched shirt sleeve; *staukin* = stalking;
breeks = breeches

Finally, she offers her sister her hen if she
 will back her up in her choice of
 sweetheart.
gif = if

Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson

A GENTLEMAN WHO HELD THE PATENT FOR HIS
HONOURS IMMEDIATELY FROM ALMIGHTY GOD.

Burns and Captain Henderson became acquainted during the poet's stay in Edinburgh where they were fellow lodgers in a house in St. James Square. Henderson had been a man of considerable wealth, but had blown his fortune on the high life and gambling. He certainly made a great impression upon Burns.

This poem is also a wonderful indication of the amount of wildlife to be found in Ayrshire in the eighteenth century, particularly interesting to hear Burns referring to bitterns — long gone from Scotland.

*But now his radiant course is run,
For Matthew's course was bright:
His soul was like the glorious sun,
A matchless, Heavenly light.*

O Death, thou tyrant fell and bloody!
The meikle Devil wi' a woodie
Haurl thee hame to his black smiddie,
O'er hurcheon hides,
And like stock-fish come o'er his studdie
Wi' thy auld sides.

He's gane, he's gane! he's frae us torn,
The ae best fellow e'er was born!
Thee, Matthew, Nature's sel' shall mourn,
By wood and wild,
Where, haply, Pity strays forlorn,
Frae man exil'd.

Ye hills, near neebors o' the starns,
That proudly cock your cresting cairns!
Ye cliffs, the haunts of sailing yearns,
Where Echo slumbers!
Come join ye, Nature's sturdiest bairns,
My wailing numbers.

Death is compared to the Devil carrying a noose, and is told to drag itself over hedgehog hides and be soundly beaten. *meikle* = large; *woodie* = noose; *haurl* = drag; *smiddie* = smithy; *hurcheon hide* = hedgehog skin; *studdie* = anvil; *stock-fish* = unsalted fish

Matthew has gone from us forever, and all of nature will mourn his passing. *gane* = gone; *ae* = one

The hills, the nearest neighbours of the stars, and the cliffs where eagles fly are called upon to join together in mourning. *neebors* = neighbours; *starns* = stars; *cresting cairns* = peaks; *yearns* = eagles; *bairns* = children

Mourn, ilka grove the cushat kens!
 Ye hazly shaws and briery dens!
 Ye burnies wimplin' down your glens,
 Wi' toddlin' din,
 Or foaming, strang, wi' hasty stens,
 Frae lin to lin!

Mourn, little harebells o'er the lea;
 Ye stately foxgloves, fair to see;
 Ye woodbines, hanging bonilie,
 In scented bowers;
 Ye roses on your thorny tree,
 The first o' flowers.

At dawn, when every glassy blade
 Droops with a diamond at his head;
 At ev'n, when beans their fragrance shed,
 I' the rustling gale;
 Ye maukins, whiddin' thro' the glade,
 Come join my wail!

Mourn, ye wee songsters o' the wood;
 Ye grouse that crap the heather bud;
 Ye curlews, calling thro' a clud;
 Ye whistling plover;
 And mourn, ye whirring paitrick brood;
 He's gane forever!

Mourn, sooty coots and speckled teals;
 Ye fisher herons, watching eels;
 Ye duck and drake, wi' airy wheels
 Circling the lake;
 Ye bitterns, till the quagmire reels,
 Rair for his sake!

Now, every grove, hollow and wood, as well
 as the meandering stream, must mourn.
ilka = every; *cushat* = wood-pigeon; *kens* =
 knows; *hazly shaws* = wooded dells; *burnies* =
 streams; *wimplin'* = meandering; *toddlin' din*
 = tinkling sound; *strang* = strong; *hasty stens*
 = short bursts; *frae* = from; *lin* = waterfall

It is now the turn of the flora to be called
 to mourn.

bonilie = beautifully

At dawn, every dew-tipped blade of grass
 will bow its head, and in the evening the
 violet-white flowers will lose their
 fragrance in the wind. Even the hares are
 called to mourn.

maukins = hares; *whiddin'* = scudding

Now it is the turn of all songbirds and
 game-birds to mourn as he is gone forever.
crap = crop; *clud* = cloud; *paitrick* =
 partridge; *gane* = gone

Waterfowl are next, with a request for the
 bittern to roar in his memory.

rair = roar

Mourn, clam'ring craiks, at close o' day,
 'Mang fields o' flow'ring clover, gay!
 And when you wing your annual way
 Frae our cauld shore,
 Tell thae far warlds, wha lies in clay
 Wham we deplore.

Ye houlets, frae yer ivy bower
 In some auld tree, or eldritch tower,
 What time the moon, wi' silent glow'r
 Sets up her horn,
 Wail thro' the dreary midnight hour,
 Till waukrife morn!

O, rivers, forests, hills and plains!
 Oft have ye heard my canty strains;
 But now, what else for me remains
 But tales of woe?
 And frae my een the drapping rains
 Maun ever flow.

Mourn, Spring, thou darling of the year!
 Ilk cowslip cup shall keep a tear;
 Thou, Simmer, while each corny spear
 Shoots up its head,
 Thy gay, green, flowery tresses shear,
 For him that's dead!

Thou, Autumn, wi' thy yellow hair,
 In grief thy sallow mantle tear!
 Thou, Winter, hurling thro' the air
 The roaring blast,
 Wide o'er the naked world declare
 The worth we've lost!

At dusk the corncrakes are called to mourn,
 and, when they leave for warmer climes, to
 tell the world who they have left buried
 behind them.

craiks = corncrakes; *cauld* = cold; *warlds* =
 worlds; *wha* = whom

He begs the owls, perched in an old tree or
 haunted tower, to wail from the rise of the
 moon until the sleepless dawn.

houlets = owls; *eldritch* = haunted; *glow'r* =
 stare; *horn* = the crescent moon; *waukrife* =
 wakeful

The countryside has often heard him in
 joyful song, but now there is nothing left but
 the shedding of tears.

canty strains = joyful songs; *frae my een* =
 from my eyes; *drappin rains* = teardrops;
maun = must

In Spring, that favourite season, cowslips
 will each catch a tear, and Summer should
 cut back on its beauty in respect of he who is
 dead.

ilk = each; *Simmer* = Summer

Autumn should show its grief, while
 Winter can send her roaring winds round
 a desolate world to declare just what a
 worthy man we've lost.

Mourn him, thou Sun, great source of light!
 Mourn, Empress of the silent night!
 And you twinkling starnies bright,
 My Matthew mourn!
 For through your orbs he's ta'en his flight,
 Ne'er to return.

The sun, the night, the stars should
 mourn, as he's never to return.
starnies = stars

O Henderson, the man! the brother!
 And art thou gone, and gone forever?
 And hast thou crost that unknown river,
 Life's dreary bound?
 Like thee, where shall I find another,
 The world around?

Now that Henderson has gone into the
 next life, the distraught poet begs to know
 where he will find such a true friend
 anywhere in the world.
crost = crossed

Go to your sculpter'd tombs, ye Great,
 In a' the tinsel trash o' state!
 But by thy honest turf I'll wait,
 Thou man o' worth!
 And weep the ae best fellow's fate
 E'er lay in earth!

Finally, the poet scorns those who are
 buried ceremoniously in great tombs, as
 the best man he ever knew lies under
 honest turf.

THE EPITAPH

Stop, passenger! my story's brief,
 And truth I shall relate, man:
 I tell nae common tale o' grief,
 For Matthew was a great man.

If thou uncommon merit hast,
 Yet spurn'd at Fortune's door, man;
 A look of pity hither cast,
 For Matthew was a poor man.

If thou a noble sodger art,
 That passest by this grave, man;
 There moulders here a gallant heart.
 For Matthew was a brave man.

sodger = soldier

If thou on men, their works and ways,
 Canst throw uncommon light, man;
 Here lies wha weel had won thy praise,
 For Matthew was a bright man.

wha weel = who well

If thou, at friendship's sacred ca',
 Wad life itself resign, man;
 Thy sympathetic tear maun fa',
 For Matthew was a kind man,

maun fa' = must fall

If thou art staunch, without a stain,
 Like the unchanging blue, man;
 This was a kinsman o' thy ain,
 For Matthew was a true man.

art staunch = are trusty

If thou hast wit, and fun, and fire,
 And ne'er guid wine did fear, man;
 This was thy billie, dam, and sire,
 For Matthew was a queer man.

billie, dam and sire = brother, mother and father

If onie whiggish, whingin' sot,
 To blame poor Matthew dare, man;
 May dool and sorrow be his lot!
 For Matthew was a rare man.

onie whiggish, whingin' sot = any prudish, complaining fool; *dool* = misery

A Mother's Lament

A short poem written to commemorate a young man who died while attending a military academy in Strasbourg. This gives an insight into the hardship Robert Burns endured. When he wrote these lines he was on horseback, having left home at 3am to ride 46 miles to his farm, while holding down a job as an excise officer at the same time.

Fate gave the word – the arrow sped,
And pierc'd my darling's heart,
And with him all the joys are fled
Life can to me impart.

By cruel hands the sapling drops,
In dust dishonor'd laid:
So fell the pride of all my hopes,
My age's future shade.

The mother linnet in the brake
Bewails her ravish'd young;
So I, for my lost darling's sake,
Lament the live-day long.

Death, oft I've fear'd thy fatal blow!
Now fond I bare my breast;
O, do thou kindly lay me low
With him I love at rest!

Auld Lang Syne

This is certainly the most famous song to come from the pen of Robert Burns, the inspiration coming from an old Scots ballad. Sung at gatherings throughout the world, particularly at the beginning of each New Year, 'Auld Lang Syne' has become the International Anthem of the world as people of all creeds and colours join hands in celebration. However, unfortunately very few people actually know the words they are singing, and fewer still understand the meaning and relevance of these words. I can only hope that when you have read the words and understand what Burns was really saying, that you will give the song the respect that it truly deserves.

Chorus

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.*

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to min'?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne?

And surely ye'll be your pint stowp!
And surely I'll be mine!
And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

We twa hae run about the braes
And pu'd the gowans fine;
But we've wandered mony a weary fit
Sin' auld lang syne.

The message is that we should never forget old friends.
auld = old; *min'* = mind; *o' lang syne* = of long ago

Let us raise our glasses to toast their memories.
stowp = drinking vessel; *tak* = take

We played together, but grew up and went our independent ways.
twa = two; *hae* = have; *braes* = hills; *pu'd the gowans* = pulled the daisies; *mony a weary fit* = travelled great distances

We twa hae paidl't i' the burn,
 Frae mornin' sun till dine;
 But seas between us braid hae roar'd
 Sin' auld lang syne..

And there's a hand, my trusty fiere!
 And gie's a hand o' thine!
 And we'll tak a right guid-willie-waught,
 For auld lang syne.

As children, we paddled in the stream, but
 since then have been separated by the
 width of the oceans.

paidl't 'i the burn paddled in the burn; *frae
 mornin' sun till dine* = all day; *braid* = broad

Shake my hand my trusted friend and let
 us share a goodwill drink to the memory
 of these happy days.

fiere = friend; *a right guid-willie waught* = a
 goodwill drink

A Sonnet Upon Sonnets

Burns poetry had always flowed in an unrestricted manner, with no great thought given to the length of the finished work, and the fourteen-line sonnet does not sit naturally with his style of writing. However he was aware of how popular William Shakespeare had made sonnets and this was Burns' first attempt to write one.

Fourteen, a sonneteer thy praises sings;
What magic myst'ries in that number lie!
Your hen hath fourteen eggs beneath her wings
That fourteen chickens to the roost may fly.
Fourteen full pounds the jockey's stone must be;
His age fourteen – a horse's prime is past,
Fourteen long hours too oft the Bard must fast;
Fourteen bright bumpers – bliss he ne'er must see!
Before fourteen, a dozen yields the strife
Before fourteen – e'en thirteen's strength is vain.
Fourteen good years – a woman gives us life;
Fourteen good men – we lose that life again.
What lucubrations can be more upon it?
Fourteen good measur'd verses make a sonnet.

The Blue-eyed Lassie

Another lovely short poem extolling the beauty of yet another beautiful young girl. On this occasion the subject was Jean Jaffray, the daughter of a minister, who was in her mid-teens when Burns was enchanted by her eyes.

I gaed a waefu' gate yestreen,
A gate I fear I'll dearly rue,
I gat my death frae twa sweet een,
Twa lovely een o' bonie blue!
'Twas not her golden ringlets bright,
Her lips like roses wat wi' dew,
Her heaving bosom, lily-white:
It was her een sae bonie blue.

gaed a waefu gate yestreen =
went a miserable route yesterday;
een = eyes; wat = wet

She talk'd, she smil'd, my heart she wyl'd,
She charm'd my soul I wist na how;
And ay the stound, the deadly wound,
Cam frae her een sae bonie blue.
But 'spare to speak, and spare to speed,'
She'll aiblins listen to my vow
Should she refuse, I'll lay my dead
To her twa een sae bonie blue.

wyl'd = beguiled; stound = thrill;
aiblins = perhaps