

The Lass O' Ballochmyle

Burns set eyes upon a young lady while out for an evening stroll, and being the great romantic, was so excited by her beauty that he composed the following verses in her honour. In an attempt to ingratiate himself with the lass, Wilhelmina Alexander, he wrote to her, enclosing the poem in the obvious hope that they might form some sort of relationship. However, Wilhelmina was not prepared to play the poet's game. Possibly she was aware of his reputation, and she chose to ignore Burns' advances. She never married, but kept the poet's tribute throughout her life.

'Twas even, the dewy field were green,
On every blade the pearls hang;
The zephyrs wanton'd round the bean,
And bore its fragrant sweets along;
In every glen the mavis sang,
All Nature listening seem'd the while,
Except where greenwood echoes rang,
Among the braes o' Ballochmyle.

With careless step I onward stray'd,
My heart rejoic'd in Nature's joy,
When musing in a lonely glade,
A maiden fair I chanc'd to spy:
Her look was like the morning's eye,
Her air like Nature's vernal smile;
The lilies' hue and roses die
Bespoke the Lass o' Ballochmyle.

Fair is the morn in flow'ry May
And sweet is night in autumn mild;
When roving thro' the garden gay,
Or wand'ring in the lonely wild;
But Woman, Nature's darling child!
There all her charms she does compile,
Even there her other works are foild,
By th' bonie Lass o' Ballochmyle.

O! had she been a country maid,
And I the happy country swain,
Tho' shelter'd in the lowest shed
That ever rose on Scotland's plain!
Thro' weary winter's wind and rain,
With joy, with rapture, I would toil;
And nightly to my bosom strain
The bonie Lass o' Ballochmyle!

Then Pride might climb the slippry steep,
Where fame and honours lofty shine;
And thirst of gold might tempt the deep,
Or downward seek the Indian mine;
Give me the cot below the pine,
To tend the flocks or till the soil;
And every day have joys divine
With the bonie Lass o' Ballochmyle.

Adam Armour's Prayer

It must be said that not everything written by Burns was beautiful and romantic. Indeed, some of his works are unsavoury in the extreme. This is a sordid tale of how a gang of local youths, which included Jean Armour's brother, took the law into their own hands and inflicted painful punishment upon a lass who had a reputation as a prostitute. The girl had certainly been before the Kirk Session to answer for her conduct, but so had many others, as Burns was all too aware.

Gude pity me, because I'm little,
For though I am an elf o' mettle
And can, like ony wabster's shuttle
Jink there or here;
Yet scarce as lang's a guid kail whittle,
I'm unco queer.

An' now thou kens our woefu' case;
For Geordie's Jurr we're in disgrace,
Because we stang'd her through the place,
An' hurt her spleuchan',
For which we daurna show our face
Within the clachan.

And now we're dern'd in glens and hollows,
And hunted, as was William Wallace,
Wi' constables, thae blackguard fallows,
An' sodgers baith;
But Gude preserve us frae the gallows,
That shamefu' death!

Auld, grim, black-bearded Geordie's sel';
O, shake him owre the mouth o' Hell!
There let him hing, and roar, an' yell
Wi' hideous din,
And if he offers to rebel,
Then heave him in!

Adam may be little but he can move quickly and he thinks he's got worth.

Gude = God; *wabster* = weaver; *kail-whittle* = cabbage knife

They've run the girl through the village tied to a pole, causing her serious injury, and now they're on the run.

kens = knows; *jurr* = maidservant; *stang'd* = rode her on a pole; *spleuchan* = genitalia; *daurna* = dare not; *clachan* = village

They're now in hiding from the forces of law.
dern'd = concealed; *sodgers* = soldiers

Geordie = George Gibson, the girl's employer and landlord of Poosie Nansies.

When Death comes in wi' glimmerin blink,
 An' tips auld drucken Nanse the wink,
 May Sautan gie her doup a clink
 Within his yett,
 An' fill her up wi' brimstone drink,
 Red-reekin het.

There's Jockie an' the hav'rel Jenny,
 Some devil seize them in a hurry,
 And waft them in th' infernal wherry
 Straught through the lake,
 An' gie their hides a noble curry
 Wi' oil of aik!

As for the jurr, puir worthless body!
 She's got mischief enough already;
 Wi' stranget hips and buttocks bluidy
 She suffer'd sair!
 But may she wintle in a woody,
 If she whore mair!

When Nansie dies, he hopes that Satan
 will be extremely cruel to her.
drucken = drunken; *gie her doup a clink* =
 smack her backside; *yett* = gate; *het* = hot

Their family are also in the request for
 cruel treatment.

straught = straight
aik = oak

The girl has suffered enough, but should
 she go back to her old ways then he hopes
 she will hang.

stanget hips = bruised by the pole; *wintle in
 a woody* = hang from a noose

The Inventory

Following in the aftermath of the war in America, William Pitt introduced a whole range of taxes to bolster the country's sagging finances. These included tax on carriage horses, carriages and servants. Burns responded to his demand in a very amusing, tongue in cheek rhyme.

Sir, as your mandate did request,

I send you here a faithfu' list

O' guid's an' gear, an' a' my graith

To which I'm clear to gi'e my aith.

guids an' gear = worldly goods

aith = oath

Imprimis, then, for carriage cattle:

I hae four beasts o' gallant mettle,

As ever drew afore a pettle:

My *Lan'-afore's* a guid auld 'has been'

An' wight an' wilfu' a' his days been:

My *Lan'-ahins* a weel gaun fillie,

That aft has borne me hame frae Killie,

An' your auld borough monie a time,

In days when riding was nae crime.

But ance, when in my wooing pride

I, like a blockhead, boost to ride,

The wilfu' crearure sae I pat to,—

(Lord pardon a' my sins, an' that too!)

I play'd my fillie sic a shavie,

She's a' bedevil'd wi' the spavie.

My *Fur-ahin's* a wordy beast

As e'er in tug or tow was trac'd.

The fourth's a Highland Donald hastie,

A damn'd red-wud Kilburnie blastie!

Foreby, a cowte o' cowtes the wale,

As ever ran afore a tail:

If he be spar'd to be a beast,

He'll draw me fifteen pund at least.

carriage cattle = cart-horses

pettle = plough-scraper

Lan'-afore's = front, left hand horse of the

four; *wight an' wilfu'* = strong-willed

Lan'-ahins = rear, left hand horse

Killie = Kilmarnock

auld borough = (old town) the town of Ayr

boost = had to

shavie = trick

spavie = swelling on her shanks

Fur-ahin's = rear, right-hand horse

tug or trow = harness

blastie = mad pest

cowte o' cowtes = pick of the colts

pund = pound

Wheel-carriages I hae but few,
 Three carts, an' twa are feckly new;
 An auld wheelbarrow, mair for token,
 Ae leg an' baith the trams are broken;
 I made a poker o' the spin'le,
 An' my auld mither brunt the trin'le.

feckly = partly

trams = shafts

brunt the trin'le = burnt the wheel

For men, I've three mischievous boys,
 Run-deils for fechtin an' for noise:
 A gaudsman ane, a thresher t'other,
 Wee Davoc hauds the nowte in fother.
 I rule them as I ought, discreetly,
 An' aften labour them compleatly;
 An' ay on Sundays duly nightly,
 I on the *Questions* targe them tightly,
 Till, faith! wee Davoc's grown sae gleg,
 Tho scarcely langer than your leg,
 He'll screed you aff 'Effectual Calling',
 As fast as onie in the dwelling.

deils for fechtin = devils for fighting

gaudsman = cattle-drover

hauds the nowte in fother = feeds the cattle

Questions = Catechisms, discipline

gleg = clever

screed = recite

dwalling = house

I've nane in female servan' station,
 (Lord keep me ay frae my temptation!):
 I hae nae wife; and that my bliss is,
 An' ye hae laid nae tax on misses;
 An' then, if kirk folk dinna clutch me,
 I ken the deevils darena touch me.
 Wi' weans I'm mair than than weel
 contented;

misses = mistresses

weans = children

Heav'n sent mae ane mair than I wanted!
 My sonsie, smirking, dear-bought Bess,
 She stares the daddie in her face,
 Enough of ought, ye like but grace:
 But her, my bonie, sweet wee lady,
 I've paid enough for her already;
 An' gin ye tax her or her mither,
 By the Lord, ye'se get them a' thegither!

She stares her daddie in her face = she's like her father

gin ye = should you

And now, remember, Mr Aiken,
 Nae kind o' licence out I'm takin:
 Frae this time forth, I do declare
 I'se ne'er ride horse nor hizzie mair;
 Thro dirt and dub for life I'll paidle,
 Ere I sae dear pay for a saddle;
 I've sturdy bearers, Gude be thankit!
 And a' my gates on foot I'll shank it
 The Kirk and you may tak you that,
 It puts but little in your pat;
 Sae dinna put me in your beuk,
 Nor for my ten white shillings leuk.

hizzie = *hussie*

dub = *puddles*

I'll shank it = *will walk*

pat = *pot*

beuk = *book*

This list wi' my ain han' I've wrote it,
 The day an' date as under notit;
 Then know all ye whom it concerns,

Ssubscripsi huic,
 ROBERT BURNS

Mossgiel, February 22nd, 1786.

To a Mountain Daisy

The Bard was going through a very unhappy period in his life when he wrote this poem and his deep unhappiness is clearly illustrated in the melancholy tone.

It would seem that the boredom of ploughing allowed him time for deep meditation, for it was on such an occasion that the sight of a daisy caught his eye and inspired the following words.

Wee, modest, crimson-tipped flow'r
Thou's met me in an evil hour;
For I maun crush amang the stoure
Thy slender stem:
To spare thee now is past my pow'r
Thou bonie gem

Alas, it's no thy neebor sweet,
The bonie lark, companion meet,
Bending thee 'mang the dewy weet,
Wi' spreckl'd breast!
When upward-springing, blythe, to greet
The purpling east.

Cauld blew the bitter-biting north
Upon thy early, humble birth;
Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth
Amid the storm,
Scarce rear'd above the parent-earth
Thy tender form.

The flaunting flow'rs our gardens yield,
High shelt'ring woods and wa's maun shield;
But thou, beneath the random bield
O' clod or stane,
Adorns the histie stibble field.
Unseen, alane.

The ploughman is speaking to the daisy and apologising for its accidental uprooting, but unfortunately, at this stage there is nothing he can do about it.

maun = must; *amang the stoure* = among the dust

He explains that sadly it was not a friendly lark which was bending the flower stalks as it sprang upward to meet the sun rising in the east. *no'* = not; *neebor* = neighbour; *'mang the dewy weet* = among the dewy wet; *spreckled* = speckled; *the purpling east* = the sunrise

Although the bitter north wind was blowing when it came through the surface, the daisy had still appeared bright and cheerful throughout the storm, although it was so small that its head barely rose above the earth.
Cauld = cold; *north* = north wind

Gardens may have beautiful flowers but they are sheltered by woods and walls. The daisy has to survive alone, surrounded by mud and earth and stone, seldom seen by anyone.

wa's = walls; *maun* = must; *bield o' clod or stane* = shelter of earth or stone; *histie stibble field* = field of dry stubble; *alane* = alone

There, in thy scanty mantle clad,
 Thy snawie bosom sun-ward spread,
 Thou lifts thy unassuming head
 In humble guise;
 But now the share uptears thy bed,
 And low thou lies!

Such is the fate of artless maid,
 Sweet flow'ret of the rural shade!
 By love's simplicity betray'd
 And guileless trust,
 Till she, like thee, all soil'd, is laid
 Low i' the dust.

Such is the fate of simple Bard,
 On life's rough ocean luckless starr'd
 Unskilful he to note the card
 Of prudent lore,
 Till billows rage, and gales blow hard,
 And whelm him o'er

Such fate to suffering worth is giv'n
 Who long with wants and woes has
 striv'n,
 By human pride or cunning driv'n
 To mis'rys brink;
 Till wrench'd of ev'ry stay but Heav'n
 He, ruin'd, sink!

Ev'n thou who mourn'st the Daisy's fate,
 That fate is thine – no distant date;
 Stern Ruin's plough-share drives, elate,
 Full on thy bloom;
 Till, crush'd beneath the furrow's weight
 Shall be thy doom!

There was the daisy with only a few petals
 to protect it as it rose humbly towards the
 sun, and now the plough has torn it from
 its bed and laid it low.

scanty mantle clad = barely covered; *snawie*
 = snowy; *share uptears* = plough uproots

Such is the fate of the innocent young
 maiden who has been betrayed by love
 and trust. She has nothing to look forward
 to until, like the daisy, she shares its fate
 and death returns her to the dust.

flow'ret = little flower; *guileless* = simple

The Bard has had little luck throughout
 his lifetime, and has been neither suffi-
 ciently wordly nor prudent to avoid the
 storms of life which now threaten to
 overcome him.

He is resigned to whatever fate has in
 store for him as his problems have driven
 him to the point of total despair.
 Everything in his life is bleak and there is
 little chance of salvation. Only ruination
 seems certain. *wants and woes* = poverty
 and grief; *striv'n* = struggled; *ev'ry stay but*
Heav'n = nothing left but death

Finally, he compares the fate of the daisy
 to what is in store for himself as he
 believes that his own death is imminent.
 He sees no escape from the harshness of
 his own life!

elate = proudly; *furrow's weight* = the earth
 turned over by the plough

Second Epistle to Davie

A BROTHER POET

Although Robert Burns was a prolific writer of letters, most of which were composed in the very formal manner so popular at the time, he delighted in corresponding with his fellow poets in rhyme as this one to David Sillar demonstrates.

Auld Neebor,
I'm three times doubly o'er your debtor,
For your auld-farrant, frien'ly letter;
Tho' I maun say 't, I doubt ye flatter;
Ye speak sae fair;
For my puir, silly, rhyming clatter
Some less maun sair.

Hale be your heart, hale be your fiddle!
Lang may your elbuck jink an' diddle,
To cheer you thro' the weary widdle
O' war'ly cares,
Till bairns' bairns kindly cuddle
Your auld, grey hairs!

But Davie, lad, I'm red ye're glaikit;
I'm tauld the Muse ye hae negleckit;
An' gif it's sae, ye sud be lickit
Until ye fyke;
Sic han's as you sud ne'er be faikit,
Be hain't wha like.

For me, I'm on Parnassus' brink,
Rivin the words to gar them clink;
Whyles dae'zt wi' love, whyles dae'zt wi' drink,
Wi' jads or Masons;
An' whyles, but ay owre late, I think;
Braw sober lessons.

He starts by thanking his friend for the flattering letter which he had received.

auld-farrant = old-fashioned; *puir* = poor;
clatter = chatter; *maun sair* = must serve

He hopes that Davie will remain fit and healthy and live to have grandchildren.

elbuck = elbow; *jink and diddle* = dance up and down; *widdle* = strife; *war'ly* = wordly;
bairns' bairns = grandchildren

He's dismayed to find that Davie is not composing rhymes at the moment, as a gift such as his should be used. In fact he should be whipped into action again.

red ye're glaikit = regret you're foolish; *gif* = if;
lickit = whipped; *fyke* = fidget; *sud* = should;
faikit = excused; *hain't* = except

Burns feel he is on the edge of a mountain trying to make his words rhyme, and he is distracted by girls or drinking with his Masonic friends.

rivin = tearing up; *gar them clink* = make them rhyme; *jads* = hussies

Of a' the thoughtless sons o' man,
 Commen' me to the Bardie clan;
 Except it be some idle plan
 O' rhyming clink,
 The devil-haet that I sud ban,
 They never think.

Nae thought, nae view, nae scheme o' livin',
 Nae care to gie us joy or grievin',
 But just the pouchie put the nieve in,
 An' while ought's there,
 Then, hiltie-skiltie, we gae scrievin',
 An' fash nae mair.

Leeze me on rhyme! it's ay a treasure,
 My chief, amaist my only pleasure;
 At hame, a-fiel', at wark or leisure,
 The Muse, poor hizzie!
 Tho' rough an' raploch be her measure,
 She's seldom lazy.

Haud to the Muse, my dainty Davie;
 The warl' may play you monie a shavie,
 But for the Muse, she'll never leave ye,
 Tho' e'er sae puir;
 Na, even tho' limpin wi the spavie
 Frae door to door.

He prefers his fellow poets to any other group of men. They have a casual attitude to life that he enjoys.

devil-haet = Heaven-forbid

They live for the moment with little concern for the future, and get by on very little.
pouchie = pocket; *nieve* = fist; *hiltie-skiltie* = helter- skelter; *scrievin* = careering; *fash* = worry

Bless his poetry. It's his greatest pleasure in life and he can enjoy it anywhere.
amaist = almost; *rough an' raploch* = rough and ready

Stick to your talent, Davie, and no matter what life has in store for you, you will always have that ability.
monie a shavie = many a trick; *spavie* = bone disease affecting the leg

Epistle to a Young Friend

Burns wrote the following words in 1786 to a young man named Andrew Hunter Aitken who was about to make his way in the world. The advice he offers is a pleasure to read as it shows the wonderful insight that he had into his fellow beings. However, it appears that the Bard was not always able to follow the guidelines which he gave so readily to young Andrew.

I lang hae thought, my youthfu' friend,
A something to have sent you,
Tho' it should serve nae ither end
Than just a kind memento;
But how the subject-scheme may gang,
Let time and chance determine;
Perhaps it may turn out a sang;
Perhaps, turn out a sermon.

Ye'll try the world soon, my lad;
And Andrew dear, believe me,
You'll find mankind an unco squad,
And muckle may they grieve ye:
For care and trouble set your thought,
Ev'n when your end's attained;
And a' your views may come to nought,
Where ev'ry nerve is strained.

I'll no say, men are villains a' :
The real, harden'd wicked,
Wha hae nae check but human law,
Are to a few restricted;
But, och! mankind are unco weak,
An' little to be trusted;
If *Self* the wavering balance shake,
It's rarely right adjusted!

Rab has been thinking of writing to Andrew for some time, but has no idea if his words will turn out to be a song or a sermon. Perhaps just something to keep as a reminder of their friendship.

lang hae = long have; *nae ither* = no other;
gang = go; *sang* = song

Andrew will discover that mankind is made up of people of varied assortment, many of whom will cause him grief. He should be prepared to face adversity at all times and accept that his plans may come to nothing.

unco = strange; *muckle* = much

Not all men are out and out villains, but few can be totally trusted, and should he cross the line between right and wrong, he will find it difficult to come back.

wha hae nae = who have nothing

Yet they wha fa' in Fortune's strife,
 Their fate we should na censure;
 For still, th' important end of life,
 They equally may answer:
 A man may hae an honest heart,
 Tho' poorith hourly stare him;
 A man may take a neebor's part,
 Yet hae nae cash to spare him.

Ay free, aff han', your story tll,
 When wi' a bosom cronie;
 But still, th' important end of life,
 Ye scarcely tell to onie:
 Conceal yourself as weel's ye can
 Frae critical dissection;
 But keek thro' ev'ry other man,
 Wi' sharpen'd, sly inspection.

The sacred lowe o' weel-plac'd love,
 Luxuriantly indulge it;
 But never tempt th' illicit rove,
 Tho' naething should divulge it:
 I waive the quantum o' th sin,
 The hazard of concealing;
 But, och! it hardens a' within,
 And petrifies the feeling!

To catch Dame Fortune's golden smile,
 Assiduous wait upon her;
 And gather gear by ev'ry wile
 That's justify'd by honour;
 Not for to hide it in a headge,
 Nor for a train attendant;
 But for a glorious priviledge
 Of being independent.

He must not criticise his fellow men as everyone will have to answer for their sins on the Day of Judgement, nor should he should judge anyone according to their wealth as the man facing poverty can still be kind and caring.

wha fa' = who fall; *poortith* = poverty; *neebor's* = neighbour's

Talk freely to your friends, but never reveal your innermost secrets. Always maintain your reserve to prevent criticism and keep a wary eye on others.

aff han' = off hand; *bosom cronie* = best friend; *keek* = glance

When you find true love, you have found real joy. Although others may tempt you and there is no danger of being caught out, you must resist, for it will remain on your conscience and be blight on your life. *lowe* = flame; *weel - plac'd* = well placed; *illicit rove* = infidelity; *wave the quantum* = reject the amount

You must pursue your fortune through hard work, and take pride in your belongings, safe in the knowledge that you have acquired them by honest endeavour. *gear* = wealth

The fear o' Hell's a hangman's whip
 To haud the wretch in order;
 But where ye feel your honour grip,
 Let that ay be your border:
 Its slightest touches, instant pause –
 Debar a' side-pretences;
 And resolutely keep its laws,
 Uncaring consequences.

The great creator to revere,
 Must sure become the creature;
 But still the peaching cant forbear,
 And ev'n the rigid feature;
 Yet ne'er with wits profane to range
 Be complaisance extended;
 An athiest's laugh's a poor exchange
 For Deity offended!

When ranting round in Pleasure's ring,
 Religion may be blinded;
 Or if she gie a random sting,
 It may be little minded;
 But when on Life we're tempest-driv'n,
 A conscience but a canker –
 A correspondence fix'd wi' Heaven,
 Is sure a noble anchor!

Adieu, dear, amiable youth!
 Your heart can ne'er be wanting!
 May prudence, fortitude and truth,
 Erect your brow undaunting.
 In ploughman phrase,
 'God send you speed,'
 Still daily to grow wiser;
 And may you better reckon the rede,
 Than ever did th' adviser!

Although the fear of Hell may keep others
 in check, all that is required of him is an
 honest mind and a strong conscience. With
 these, he can look forward to a blameless life.

haud = hold

He must always have faith in God and
 learn to tolerate the stony-faced preachers.
 Never blaspheme nor use profanity.

It's very easy to forget religion when enjoying
 oneself, but even when temptation is at its
 greatest and his conscience is being strained
 to its utmost, then the strenght of his beliefs
 will carry him through.

ranting = frolicking; *canker* = corruption

Now, self-deprecation on the part of
 Burns as he finishes the epistle by hoping
 that Andrew will take more heed of his
 advice than he did himself.

reck the rede = heed the advice

Lines Written on a Bank Note

The following lines were actually written upon a one-guinea note in 1786. At the time, Burns was giving a good deal of thought to the idea of emigrating to Jamaica believing that this might be a means of escaping from his ever present problems.

Few of us will have difficulty relating to the heart-felt words of this poem.

Wae worth thy pow'r, thou cursed leaf!	<i>wae worth</i> = woe befall
Fell source of all my woe and grief,	<i>fell source</i> = cause
For lack o' thee I've lost my lass,	
For lack o' thee I scrimp my glass!	<i>scrimp my glass</i> = limit my drinking
I see the children of affliction	
Unaided, thro' thy curs'd restriction.	
I've seen the oppressor's cruel smile	
Amid his hapless victim's spoil;	
And for thy potence vainly wish'd	<i>potence</i> = power
To crush the villain in the dust.	
For lack o' thee, I leave this much-lov'd shore,	
Never, perhaps, to greet old Scotland more!	

R.B.

The Farewell

Robert Burns was in no doubt that his future lay in the West Indies. His many skirmishes with the Kirk and the problems which he was having to face because of his relationship with his wife's family were taking their toll. He wrote several pieces dwelling on this, and expressing his sorrow at being forced to leave his beloved Scotland. This is a fairly sentimental poem, written in the summer of 1786, in which he tells of his sorrow at his impending separation from his wife, his family and friends.

*The valiant, in himself, what can he suffer?
Or what does he regard his single woes?
But when, alas! he multiplies himself,
To dearer selves, to the lov'd tender fair
To those whose bliss, whose beings hang upon him,
To helpless children – then, Oh then he feels
The point of misery, festering in his heart,
And weakly weeps his fortunes like a coward:*

Such, such am I!— undone! – THOMSON'S Edward and Eleanor

Farewell, old Scotia's bleak domains,
Far dearer than the torrid plains,
Where rich ananas blow!
Farewell, a mother's blessing dear!
A brother's sigh, a sister's tear!
My Jean's heart-rending throe!
Farewell, my Bess! tho' thou'rt bereft
Of my paternal care,
A faithful brother I have left,
My part in him thou'lt share!
Adieu too, to you too,
My Smith, my bosom frien';
When kindly you mind me,
O, then befriend my Jean!

Ananas = pineapples

Bess = his illegitimate daughter, Elizabeth

faithful brother = Gilbert Burns

My Smith = James Smith

What bursting anguish tears my heart;
From thee, my Jeany, must I part!
Thou, weeping, answ'rest – 'No!
Alas! misfortune stares my face,
And points to ruin and disgrace,
I for thy sake must go!
Thee, Hamilton, and Aiken dear,
A grateful, warm adieu:
I with much-indebted tear
Shall still remember you!
All-hail then, the gale then
Wafts me from thee, dear shore!
It rustles, and whistles
I'll never see thee more!

Gavin Hamilton. Robert Aiken

Reply to a Trimming Epistle Received from a Tailor

Robert Burns was not a man to take insults lying down. A tailor by the name of Thomas Walker had sent Burns twenty-six dreary stanzas in the hope that Burns would reply to him in verse. Burns ignored them completely, but when the Kilmarnock Edition was published, Walker wrote complaining of the poet's morals, prompting Burns to respond with this jocular and deeply sarcastic poem.

What ails ye now, ye lousy bitch
To thrash my back at such a pitch?
Losh, man, hae mercy wi' your natch,
Your bodkin's bauld.
I didna suffer half as much
Frae Daddie Auld.

What tho' at times when I grew crouse,
I gie their wames a random pouce,
Is that enough for you to souse
Your servant sae?
Gae mind your seam, ye prick-the-louse,
And jag-the-flea!

King David o' poetic brief
Wrocht 'mang the lasses sic mischief
As filled his after-life wi' grief,
An' bluidy rants;
An' yet he's rank'd amang the chief
O' lang-syne saunts.

And maybe Tam, for a' my cants,
My wicked rhymes, an' drucken rants,
I'll gie auld Clove Cloutie's haunts
An unco slip yet,
An' snugly sit amang the saunts,
At Davie's hip yet!

Burns hurls abuse at the tailor and points out that the local minister was not as harsh on him as Walker.

thresh = thrash; *Losh* = Lord; *natch* = notching-blade; *bodkin* = large needle

If I get in the mood for making love to the girls, what's it to do with you? Mind your own business.

crouse = bold; *wames* = bellies; *pouce* = thrust; *souse* = hit; *prick-the-louse* = nit-picker; *jag-the-flea* = flea

King David was one for the girls, but he still became one of the leading saints.

wrocht = wrought; *rants* = rows; *lang-syne* = long ago; *saunts* = saints

Burns feels that he might yet escape the Devil and take his place among the saints.

cants = songs. *Cloven Cloutie* = the Devil

But, fegs, the Session says I maun
 Gae fa' upo' anither plan
 Than garrin lasses coup the cran,
 Clean heels owre body,
 An' sairly thole their mother's ban
 Afore the howdy.

This leads me on to tell for sport
 How I did with the Session sort:
 Auld Clinkum at the inner port
 Cried three times 'Robin!
 Come hither lad, and answer for't,
 Ye're blamed for jobbin'!

Wi' pinch I put a Sunday face on,
 An' snoov'd awa before the Session
 I made an open, fair confession —
 I scorned to lie —
 An' syne Mess John, beyond expression,
 Fell foul o' me.

A fornicater-loun he call'd me,
 An' said my faut frae bliss expell'd me.
 I own'd the tale was true he tell'd me,
 But what the matter?
 (Quo' I) 'I fear unless ye geld me,
 I'll ne'er be better!

'Geld you!' (quo he) 'an' what for no?
 If that your right hand, leg or toe
 Should ever prove your sp'ritual foe,
 You should remember
 To cut it aff — an' what for no
 Your dearest member!

But before that, the Session want him to
 appear once more to answer for his
 misdeeds with the girls.

fegs = faith; *maun* = must; *garrin'* =
 making; *coup the cran* = upset the cart

He goes on to relate his experience with
 the Session when the bell-ringer
 summoned him.

Clinkum = bell-ringer; *jobbin'* =
 fornication

Putting on a pious expression, he admitted
 to the Session that they were correct.
 Their leader fell upon him in rage.

snoov'd = walked purposefully; *Mess* =
 master

He told Burns that his sins would bar him
 from Heaven. Rab replied that the only
 way to stop him chasing the girls was for
 him to be gelded.

loun = rogue; *gelded* = castrated

Rab was a bit taken aback when the leader
 agreed with him. After all, if one's arm or
 leg was causing problems, then cut it off,
 so why not Rab's offending parts?

'Na, na, (quo I) 'I'm no for that,
 Gelding's nae better than 'tis ca't;
 I'd rather suffer for my my faut,
 A hearty flewit,
 As sair owre hips as ye can draw't,
 Tho' I should rue it.

'Or gin ye like to end the bother,
 To please us a' – I've just ae ither;
 When next wi' yon lass I forgather,
 Whate'er betide it,
 I'll frankly gie her 't a' thegither,
 An' let her guide it.'

But, Sir, this pleas'd them warst of a',
 An' therefore, Tam, when that I saw,
 I said 'Guid night' an' came awa,
 An' left the Session:
 I saw they were resolv'd a'
 On my oppression.

Rab thought this was was not a good idea
 and suggested that a flogging might be
 more in order.

flewit = flogging

He wondered if it might be an idea to let
 the next girl who he seduces to do the
 flogging.

This did not go down too well and as he
 set off homeward he could see that they
 were bent on his downfall.

My Highland Lassie O

Burns turned to Mary Campbell shortly after his affair with Jean Armour was brought to an end by Jean's father. Burns' opinion of Mary Campbell is at odds with those of others in his family who considered her to be no more than a slut, and it certainly appears that Campbell was no upholder of morals. However, Rab must have been stricken as he had decided that the two of them would travel to the West Indies to start a new life together.

This plan was not to be fulfilled as Mary died shortly before they were due to depart, and it remains unclear to this day whether she died from fever or childbirth.

CHORUS

*Within the glen sae bushy, O,
Aboon the plain sae rashy, O,
I set me down wi right guid will,
To sing my Highland lassie, O!*

Nae gentle dames, tho' ne'er sae fair,
Shall ever by my Muse's care:
Their titles a' are empty show;
Gie me my Highland lassie, O!

O, were yon hills and vallies mine,
Yon palace and yon gardens fine,
The world then the love should know
I bear my Highland lassie, O!

But fickle fortune frowns on me,
And I maun cross the raging sea;
But while my crimson currents flow,
I'll love my Highland lassie, O!

Although thro' foreign climes I range,
I know her heart will never change;
For her bosom burns with honour's glow,
My faithful Highland lassie, O!

For her I'll dare the billows roar,
For her I'll trace a distant shore,
That Indian wealth may lustre throw
Around my Highland lassie, O!

She has my heart, she has my hand,
By secret troth and honor's band!
Till the mortal stroke shall lay me low,
I'm thine, my Highland lassie, O!

Farewell the glen sae bushy, O!
Farewell the plain sae rashy, O!
To other land I now must go
To sing my Highland lassie, O!

Epigram on Rough Roads

Burns was so disgusted with the condition of the roads on one of his journeys that he wrote the following lines about them. Another poem which is as meaningful today as when he wrote it.

I'm now arrived – thanks to the gods!
Thro' pathways rough and muddy,
A certain sign that makin' roads
Is no' this people's study:

Altho' I'm not wi' Scriptur cram'd,
I'm sure the Bible says,
That heedless sinners shall be damn'd,
Unless they mend their *ways*.

To an Old Sweetheart

Burns wrote these lines to Miss Peggy Thomson of Kirkoswald, a one time sweetheart, but since married. This is one of several poems written during the time that he was seriously contemplating a new life in the West Indies, so this short poem is a note of goodbye.

Once fondly lov'd, and still remember'd dear,
Sweet early object of my youthful vows,
Accept this mark of friendship, warm, sincere,
(Friendship! 'tis all cold duty now allows.)

And while you read the simple, artless rhymes,
One friendly sigh for him – he asks no more,
Who, distant, burns in flamin' torrid climes,
Or haply lies beneath th' Atlantic roar.

The Gloomy Night is Gath'ring Fast

The following lines were composed as Burns walked home from a visit to his friend Dr. Lawrie. Again, it was during the time that he considered emigration to the West Indies was inevitable, and the prospect of such a move filled him with a sense of foreboding.

The gloomy night is gath'ring fast,
Loud roars the wild, inconstant blast;
Yon murky cloud is filled with rain,
I see it driving o'er the plain;
The hunter now has left the moor,
The scatt'ered coveys meet secure;
While I here wander, prest with care,
Along the lonely banks of Ayr.

The Autumn mourns her rip'ning corn
By early Winter's ravage torn;
Across her placid, azure sky,
She sees the scowling tempest fly;
Chill runs my blood to hear it rave;
I think upon the stormy wave,
Where many a danger I must dare,
Far from the bonie banks of Ayr.

'Tis not the surging billows roar,
'Tis not that fatal, deadly shore;
Tho' death in ev'ry shape appear,
The wretched have no more to fear:
But round my heart the ties are bound;
The heart transpierc'd with many a wound;
These bleed afresh, those ties I tear,
To leave the bonie banks of Ayr.

Farewell, old Coila's hills and dales,
Her heathy moors and winding vales;
The scenes where wretched Fancy roves;
Pursuing past unhappy loves!
Farewell my friends! farewell my foes!
My peace with these, my love with those-
The bursting tears my heart declare,
Farewell, my bonie banks of Ayr!

On Meeting with Lord Daer

Lord Daer was the first aristocrat Burns was to encounter socially and he was obviously very excited at the prospect. They met at the home of an Ayrshire professor who was entertaining the peer at his country house. Lord Daer was at that time a student at Edinburgh University, and must have been considered a radical by his fellow peers as he was in favour of both parliamentary reform and the French revolution. He died in France at an early age and thus never inherited the title of the Earl of Selkirk.

This wot ye all whom it concerns;

I, Rhymer Rab, alias Burns

October twenty-third,

A ne'er-to-be-forgotten day,

Sae far I sprachl'd up the brae,

I dinner'd wi' a Lord.

I've been at drucken Writers' feasts,

Nay, been bitch-fou 'mang Godly Priests;

(Wi' rev'rence be it spoken!)

I've even join'd the honor'd jorum,

When mighty Squireships o' the Quorum

Their hydra drouth did sloken.

But wi' a Lord – stand out my shin!

A Lord, a Peer, an Earl's son!—

Up higher yet, my bonnet!

An sic a Lord! — lang Scotch ell twa,

Our Peerage he looks o'er them a',

As I look o'er my sonnet.

But O, for Hogarth's magic pow'r,

To shew Sir Bardie's willyart glow'r,

An' how he star'd an' stammer'd!

When goavin's he'd been led wi' branks,

An' stumpin' on his ploughman shanks,

He in the parlour hammer'd.

Burns wants the world to know that he has dined with a Lord.

wot = know; *sprachl'd up the brae* = clambered up the hill

He recalls many occasions when he has dined with lawyers and priests, frequently inebriated.

drucken Writers = drunken lawyers; *bitch-fou* = completely drunk; *orum* = drinking vessel; *hydra drouth did sloken* = many people drank

But he has never dined with nobility, and this particular nobleman is over six feet tall, quite a height at that time in history.

shin = climb; *lang Scotch ell twa* = over six feet

He wished that William Hogarth, the painter, had been on hand to record his expression as he was led into the parlour to meet the Lord.

Sir Bardie's willyart glow'r = Burns' timid look; *goavin's* = dazed; *branks* = bridles; *stumpin'* = walking stiffly; *shanks* = legs

To meet good Stewart little pain is,
 Or Scotia's sacred Demosthenes;
 Thinks I: 'They are but men!'
 But 'Burns'! - 'My Lord' - Good God! I
 doited!

My knees on ane anither knoited,
 As faltering I gaed ben.

I sidling shelter'd in a neuk,
 An' at his Lordship staw a leuk,
 Like some portentous omen;
 Except good sense and social glee,
 An' (what surpris'd me) modesty,
 I marked naught uncommon.

I watch'd the symptoms o' the Great,
 The gentle pride, the lordly state,
 The arrogant assuming;
 The fient a pride, nae pride had he,
 Nor sauce, nor state, that I could see,
 Mair than an honest ploughman!

Then from his Lordship I shall learn,
 Henceforth to meet with unconcern
 One rank as weel's another;
 Nae honest, worthy man need care,
 To meet wi' noble, youthfu' Daer,
 For he but meets a Brother.

Mere mortals are one thing, but meeting a
 Lord made him nervous and tongue-tied.
doited = blundered; *knoited* = knotted; *gaed
 ben* = went through

Still overcome by the occasion, Burns
 stood in a corner stealing glances at the
 Lord, and was surprised at how modest
 and normal the young man was.
sidling shelter'd in a neuk = edged into a
 corner; *staw a leuk* = stole a glance

Burns had witnessed the arrogance of
 aristocrats before, but Lord Daer
 displayed none of their traits. In fact he
 felt that the young Lord's attitude to life
 was little different to his own.
fient = friend; *mair* = more

This meeting has shown the poet that all
 men are equal, irrespective of rank or title,
 and that an honest man can hold his head
 high in any company.

Address to Edinburgh

Burns wrote this tribute to the city shortly after his arrival in Edinburgh. Its style is a bit stiff, slightly pompous, and almost Anglicised – rather how the citizens of Edinburgh are perceived by their counterparts in the west.

Edina! Scotia's darling seat!
All hail thy palaces and tow'rs,
Where once, beneath a Monarch's feet
Sat Legislation's sov'reign pow'rs!
From marking wildly-scatt'ed flow'rs,
As on the banks of Ayr I stray'd,
And singing, lone, the ling'ring hours,
I shelter in thy honor'd shade.

Here Wealth still swells the golden tide,
As busy trade his labours plies;
There Architecture's noble pride
Bids elegance and splendour rise:
Here Justice, from her native skies,
High wields her balance and her rod;
There Learning, with his eagle eyes,
Seeks Science in her coy abode.

Thy sons, Edina, social, kind,
With open arms the stranger hail;
Their views enlarg'd, their lib'ral mind,
Above the narrow, rural vale;
Attentive still to Sorrow's wail,
Or modest Merit's silent claim:
And never may their sources fail!
And never envy blot their name!

Thy daughters bright thy walks adorn,
 Gay as the gilded summer sky,
 Sweet as the dewy, milk-white thorn,
 Dear as the raptur'd thrill of joy!
 Fair Burnett strikes th' adoring eye,
 Heav'ns beauties on my fancy shine:
 I see the Sire of Love on high,
 And own his work indeed divine!

Eliza Burnett

There, watching high the least alarms,
 Thy rough, rude fortress gleams afar;
 Like some bold vet'ran, grey in arms,
 And marked with many a seamy scar:
 The pond'rous wall and massy bar,
 Grim-rising o'er the rugged rock,
 Have oft withstood assailing war,
 And oft repell'd th' invader's shock.

With awe-struck thought and pitying tears,
 I view that noble, stately dome,
 Where Scotia's kings of other years,
 Fam'd heroes! had their royal home:
 Alas, how chang'd the times to come!
 Their royal name low in the dust!
 Their hapless race wild-wand'ring roam!
 Tho' rigid Law cries out ' 'Twas just!

Wild beats my heart to trace your steps,
 Whose ancestors, in days of yore,
 Thro' hostile ranks and ruin'd gaps
 Old Scotia's bloody lion bore;
 Ev'n I, who sing in rustic lore,
 Haply my sires have left their shed,
 And fac'd grim Danger's loudest roar,
 Bold-following where your fathers led!

Edina, Scotia's darling seat!
All hail thy palaces and tow'rs;
Where once beneath a Monarch's feet,
Sat Legislation's sov'reign pow'rs!
From marking wildly cat'red flow'rs,
As on the banks of Ayr I stray'd,
And singing, lone, the ling'ring hours,
I shelter in thy honor'd shade.

Address to a Haggis

No Burns Supper could ever take place without the wonderful ritual of the Address to the Haggis. This recital is usually performed in a very theatrical and flamboyant manner and can be totally incomprehensible to the non-Scot (and truth be told, even to some Scots). It is a truly wonderful poem, full of humour, although some find the language daunting.

There is one school of thought that thinks Burns wrote 'To a Haggis' as a piece of fun and never intended it to be taken seriously. Others believe it to be a tribute to the strength of the working-classes. No matter! It has become part of the Scottish tradition and will never, ever be forgotten.

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin'-race!
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,
Painch, tripe or thairm;
Weel are ye wordy o' a grace
As lang's my arm.

The groaning trencher there ye fill,
Your hurdies like a distant hill,
Your pin wad help to mend a mill,
In time o' need,
While thro' your pores the dews distil,
Like amber bead.

His knife see rustic labour dight,
An' cut you up wi' ready slight,
Trenching your gushing entrails bright,
Like onie ditch;
And then, O what a glorious sight,
Warm-reekin, rich!

This begins with a simple statement. The haggis is the greatest of all puddings, greater than stomach, tripe or guts, and well worth this long grace.

sonsie = jolly; *puddin-race* = meat puddings or sausages; *aboon* = above; *painch, tripe or thairm* = animal entrails; *weel* = well; *wordy* = worthy; *lang* = long; *airm* = arm

It fills the platter and its buttocks look like a distant hill. Its skewer is large enough to repair a mill, and the moisture oozing from it is as beautiful as amber beads. *groaning trencher* = laden platter; *hurdies* = hips or buttocks; *pin* = skewer; *wad* = would

With a skilled hand, the server cuts through the skin which flows open like a ditch as the insides gush forth. But what a glorious sight with its warm, steaming richness.

dight = to clean; *trenching* = cutting open; *ony* = any; *warm-reekin* = warm smelling

Then, horn for horn, they stretch an' strive,
 Deil tak the hindmost, on they drive,
 Till a' their weel-swallow'd kytes belyve
 Are bent like drums;
 Then auld Guidman, maist like to rive,
 'Bethankit' hums

Is there that owre his French ragout,
 Or olio that wad staw a sow,
 Or fricassee wad make her spew
 Wi' perfect sconner,
 Looks down wi' sneerin, scornfu' view
 On sic a dinner?

Poor devil! see him owre his trash,
 As feckless as a wither'd rash,
 His spindle shank a guid whiplash,
 His nieve a nit;
 Thro' bluidy flood or field to dash,
 O how unfit!

But mark the Rustic, haggis-fed,
 The trembling earth resounds his tread,
 Clap in his walie nieve a blade,
 He'll mak it whissle.
 An' legs, an' arms, an' heads will sned,
 Like taps o' thrissle.

Spoonful by spoonful, everyone digs in
 and the devil take the slowest eater until
 all are replete. Then the bulging elder of
 the family leans back and gives his thanks.
horn = a spoon; *weel-swallow'd kytes* = full
 bellies; *bent like drums* = tight as drums;
auld = old; *maist* = most; *rive* = burst;
bethankit = God be thanked

Can anyone who has eaten that fancy
 French rubbish, so disgusting as to make a
 pig throw up, dare to look down his nose
 and sneer at such a dinner.
owre = over; *ragout/olio* = savoury dishes of
 meat and vegetables; *staw a sow* = stop a pig;
fricassee = dish of fowl or rabbit; *spew* =
 vomit; *sconner* = disgust; *sic* = such

Look at that poor devil bent over the
 rubbish he is eating. He's as weak as a
 withered rush. His legs are skinny and his
 fist is no bigger than a nut. No venturing
 into the battle-field for him, he's too unfit.
feckless = helpless; *spindle-shank* = thin leg;
guid = good; *nieve* = fist; *nit* = nut

But see that labourer fed on haggis. The
 earth trembles under his feet and in his great
 fist a sword would whistle through the air,
 lopping off legs, arms and heads as though
 they were no more than the tops of thistles.
walie nieve = large fist; *blade* = sword; *whissle*
 = whistle; *sned* = lop off; *taps o' thrissle* = tops
 of thistle

Ye Pow'rs, wha mak mankind your care,
And dish them out their bill o' fare,
Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware
That jaups in luggies;
But, if ye wish her gratefu' prayer
Gie her a Haggis!

You Powers who look after mankind and provide us with our food. Scotland does not want watery rubbish splashing about in dishes. If you want her grateful thanks, give her a haggis.

bill-o'-fare = menu; *skinking ware* = watery rubbish; *jaups* = splashes; *luggie* = wooden dish with handles; *gie* = give

Elegy on the Death of Robert Ruisseux

Robert Burns appears to have had no fear of death. In fact on reading some of his work, it would seem that there were times in his life when he might have regarded it as a welcome relief from the tribulations which he suffered. This is a mock elegy written about himself, the name Ruisseux being French for stream, or burn.

Now Robin lies in his last lair,
He'll gabble rhyme, nor sing nae mair;
Cauld poverty, wi' hungry stare,
Nae mair shall fear him;
Nor anxious fear, nor cankert care,
E'er mair come near him.

To tell the truth, they seldom fash'd him,
Except the moment that they crush'd him;
For sune as chance or fate had hush'd, 'em
Tho' e'er sae short,
Then wi' a rhyme or sang he lash'd 'em,
And thought it sport.

Tho' he was bred to kintra-wark,
And counted was baith wight and stark,
Yet that was never Robin's mark
To mak a man;
But tell him he was learn'd and clark,
Ye roos'd him then!

He is now in his grave and secure from the tribulations that have dogged him during his lifetime.

cankert = crabbed

His enemies seldom succeeded in suppressing him for he was usually able to extract revenge by lampooning them in verse.

fash'd = worried; *sune* = soon

Although born into the life of a farm worker, he never judged a man by his physical strength, only by his knowledge, and was always pleased to be recognised as an educated man.

kintra-wark = country work; *baith wight and stark* = both stout and strong; *clark* = scholarly; *roos'd* = flattered

The Guidwife of Wauchope House, to Robert Burns, the Airshire Bard

Feb 1787

This is a wonderful, witty poem, not written by Burns, but sent to him by Mrs Elizabeth Scott, a very talented lady who lived in Wauchope House, close to Jedburgh. She had read the Kilmarnock Edition and was obviously very impressed by it. Mrs Scott tells the Bard that she doubts he really is a ploughman as she knows of no ploughman who could quote from the Greek Classics, or who would be able to make jokes about the country's political leaders. In fact, she feels that such knowledge could only be gleaned by close association with such people. She would much prefer to spend an evening listening to the Bard than entertaining dull aristocrats.

My canty, witty, rhyming ploughman,	<i>canty</i> = lively
I hafflins doubt, it is na' true, man,	<i>hafflins</i> = partly
That ye between the stilts was bred,	
Wi' ploughman schoold, wi' ploughman fed.	
I doubt it sair, ye've drawn your knowledge	<i>doubt it sair</i> = really doubt it
Either frae grammar school, or colledge.	
Guid troth, your saul and body baith	<i>saul</i> = soul; <i>baith</i> = both
War' better fed, I'd gie my aith,	<i>war</i> = were; <i>aith</i> = oath
Than theirs, who sup sour milk and parritch,	<i>sup</i> = drink
An' bummil thro' the single caritch.	<i>bummil</i> = mumble; <i>caritch</i> = catechism
Whaever heard the ploughman speak,	
Could tell if Homer was a Greek?	
Hed flee as soon upon a cudgel,	
As get a single line of Virgil.	
An' then sae slee ye crack your jokes	<i>slee</i> = sly
O' Willie Pitt and Charlie Fox.	
Our great men a' sae weel describe,	<i>describe</i> = describe
An' how to gar the nation thrive,	<i>gar</i> = make
Ane maist wad swear ye dwelt amang them,	
An' as ye saw them, sae ye sung them.	
But be ye ploughman, be ye peer,	
Ye are a funny blade, I swear.	
An' tho' the cauld I ill can bide,	

Yet twenty miles, an' mair, I'd ride,	
O'er moss an' muir , an' never grumble,	<i>muir</i> = moor
If my auld yad shou'd gae a stumble,	<i>yad</i> = mare
To crack a winter-night wi' thee,	
An' hear thy sangs, an' sonnets slee.	
A guid saut herring, an' a cake	<i>saut</i> = salt
Wi' sic a chiel a feast wad make.	
I'd rather scour your rumming yill,	<i>rumming yill</i> – beer glass
Or eat o' cheese and bread my fill,	
Than wi' dull lairds on turtle dine,	
An' ferlie at their wit and wine.	<i>ferlie</i> = marvel
O, gif I kend but whare ye baide,	
I'd send to you a marled plaid;	
'Twad haud your shoulders warm and braw,	
An' douse at kirk, or market shaw.	
Far south, as weel as north, my lad,	
A' honest Scotsmen lo'e the maud.	
Right wae that we're sae far frae ither;	
Yet proud I am to ca' ye brither.	

Your most obed. E.S.