

*George Scott Wilkie*

**Robert Burns**

**His Life In His Letters**

A Virtual Autobiography

## *A Chronology of Robert Burns*

- 1757 Marriage of William Burnes (1721 – 84) at Clochnahill Farm, Dunnottar, Kincardineshire) to Agnes Broun (1732 – 1820) at Craigenton, Kirkoswald) at Maybole, Ayrshire (15 December).
- 1759 Birth of Robert Burns at Alloway (25 January)
- 1760 Gilbert (brother) born.
- 1762 Agnes (sister) born. (1762 – 1834)
- 1764 Anabella (sister) born.(1764 – 1832)
- 1765 Robert and Gilbert are sent to John Murdoch's school at Alloway.
- 1766 William Burnes rents Mount Oliphant Farm, near Alloway and moves his family there (25 May).
- 1767 Birth of William Burns (brother) 1767 – 1790).
- 1768 John Murdoch closes the Alloway school, leaving the Burns brothers to be educated at home by their father.
- 1769 Birth of John Burns (brother). (1769 – 1785)
- 1770 Robert and Gilbert assist their father in labouring and farming duties.
- 1771 Birth of Isabella Burns (sister) (1771 – 1858).
- 1772 Robert and Gilbert attend Dalrymple Parish School during the summer, but having to go on alternate weeks as one is needed to assist on the farm.
- 1773 Robert studies grammar and French with John Murdoch for three weeks at Ayr
- 1774 Robert becomes the principal labourer on his father's farm and writes *Handsome Nell* in praise of Nellie Kilpatrick.
- 1777 He joins a dancing class, much to his father's horror. William Burnes moves the family from Mount Oliphant to Lochlea (25 May). Burns spends the summer on the smuggling coast of Kirkoswald and attends school there.

- 1780 With Gilbert and six other young men, Robert forms the Tarbolton Bachelor's Club. Its aims are 'relaxation from toil, the promotion of sociality and friendship and the improvement of the mind.'
- 1781 He meets and begins to court Alison Begbie, a domestic servant at Cessnock. Robert becomes an apprentice to a flax-dresser in Irvine during the summer. Is initiated as a Freemason at Tarbolton.
- 1782 The flax shop in Irvine is burned to the ground (1 January) and Burns returns to Lochlea, where his father is involved in a dispute with their landlord.
- 1783 Burns wins a £3.00 prize for linseed and begins writing his Commonplace Book. In view of their father's financial and legal difficulties, Robert and Gilbert secretly arrange to rent a farm at nearby Mossgiel (autumn).
- 1784 William Burnes wins his case against his landlord but is ruined financially (27 January) and he dies a few weeks later (13 February) of a 'phthisical consumption.' The family move to Mossgiel.
- 1785 Burns meets Jean Armour for the first time. Birth of Elizabeth, Robert's first child, to Elizabeth Paton (22 May). He writes *The Kirk's Alarm*, *The Ordination*, *The Holy Fair*, and his *Address to the Deil*. His *Epistles to J Lapraik*, *Halloween*, *Holy Willie's Prayer*, *The Jolly Beggars* and *The Cotter's Saturday Night*. In September he and Jean Armour attest their marriage. John Burns, Robert's brother dies and is buried at Mauchline (1 November). He writes *To a Mouse* (November).
- 1786 Jean Armour's father James faints when he hears she is pregnant and repudiates Burns as a son-in-law. Burns in turn repudiates Jean and her father banishes her to Paisley (March). Proposals for the Kilmarnock edition of his Poems are sent to press (3 April). Feeling deserted by Jean, Robert courts Mary Campbell, (b.1763) *Highland Mary*. (14 May). He goes into hiding from James Armour's writ (30 July) and publishes *The Kilmarnock Poems* (31 July). Jean Armour gives birth to twins, Robert and Jean (3 September). Mary Campbell dies in Greenock and Robert

abandons the plans he made with her to emigrate to the West Indies (October). Burns arrives in Edinburgh (29 November).

1787 The Grand Lodge of Scotland toasts Burns as 'Caledonia's Bard' (13 January); William Creech commissions the Alexander Naysmith portrait of Burns, from which an engraving is made to serve as the frontispiece to the *Edinburgh Poems* which he publishes (21 April); Burns sells his copyright to Creech for 100 guineas (23 April); Burns and Robert Ainslie tour the Borders (5 May to 1 June) (2 June) May Cameron's letter telling him of the birth of her child reaches Burns. He returns to Mauchline (8 June) as an acclaimed poet, the first volume of the *Scots Musical Museum* having been published at the start of the month; he continues his Scottish tours with a visit to the Highlands in June, returning with William Nicol two months later (25 August to 16 September) before touring Stirlingshire (4 to 20 October); Jean, his 1 year old daughter to Jean Armour dies the same month. Meets Mrs Agnes McLehose, whom he would call 'Clarinda' (4 December).

1788 Burns meets with Clarinda (4 January) and his letters to her increase through to February, when he leaves Edinburgh (18 February) for Mauchline to resume his relationship with Jean Armour. As a gesture of commitment he buys Jean a mahogany bed, moves in with her (23 February) Jean bears him twins again (3 March) who both die within two weeks of birth and he returns to Edinburgh for a few days (13 to 24 March) for the publication of volume 2 of *Scots Musical Museum* and to sign the lease of Ellisland farm, six miles north of Dumfries, where he moves his family (11 June); his marriage to Jean Armour is authenticated by the Mauchline Kirk Session (5 August) three months before Jenny Clow gives birth to his second son, Robert (November). Writes *Auld Lang Syne* (December).

1789 Burns settles his accounts with Creech in Edinburgh (16 February) and also settles Janet Clow's paternity suit (27 February). His third son, Francis Wallace Burns - his second to Jean Armour - is born (18 August).

1790 Third volume of *Scots Musical Museum* published (February); his brother

William dies in London (24 July); *Tam O' Shanter* sent to Francis Grose.  
(1 December)

1791 Anna Park bears Burns a daughter Elizabeth (31 March); Jean Armour accepts the baby into her family a few days before she gives birth to William Nicol Burns (9 April) Burns auctions the crops at Ellisland, (25 August) and renounces the lease of the farm (10 September) The family move to Dumfries, (11 November) Burns visits Edinburgh (29 November to 11 December) to end his relationship with Clarinda before she leaves for the West Indies.

1792 Burns is promoted to Dumfries Port Division (27 February) and is made an honorary member of the Royal Company of Archers (10 April). The fourth volume of *Scots Musical Museum* is published (August) Elizabeth Riddle Burns, Jean Armour's seventh child, Elizabeth Riddell Burns, is born (21 November)

1794 Maria Riddell breaks off her friendship with Burns. The second edition of the *Edinburgh Poems* is published (18 February); Burns tours Galloway with John Syme (30 July to 2 August) and sends *Scots Wha Hae* to George Thomson for inspection (30 August). Burns declines a post in London at the Morning Chronicle (1 May) and continues his research into Scots ballads with another tour of Galloway with John Syme (25 to 28 June); James Glencairn Burns born (12 August).

1795 Writes *For a' that an a' that* (January) and joins the Dumfries Volunteers (31 January); his friendship with Maria Riddell is reconciled (February); Alexander Reid paints his miniature of Burns (April); the three year old daughter of Jean and Robert, Elizabeth Riddell Burns, dies at Mossgiel (September).

1796 Burns begins the year ill with rheumatic fever and declines through the spring. His last letter precedes his death (21 July) by three days. His body lies in state at Dumfries Town Hall and is buried the next day (25 July). Jean Armour's ninth child - Robert's twelfth - Maxwell Burns is born the day his father is buried.

# Introduction

Burns' fame as a poet and song-writer is unquestioned, but hidden behind that fame lies another Robert Burns. Not only was he a great Bard, but he was also a man with a phenomenal ability to write letters, letters that reveal him to be a man of erudition, as well as of great compassion.

He loved the written word and wrote hundreds of letters to an assortment of people on a wide range of subjects. His introduction into Edinburgh's bourgeois society opened up opportunities for him to correspond with people of good education and allowed him to develop his writing technique as he wore out quill after quill in his unending desire to commit his thoughts to paper.

This collection of letters, arranged chronologically, offers an opportunity to discover the inner Burns in his own words as he describes the many twists and turns in his eventful, but tragically short life. They illustrate how his life arched upwards from his poverty-stricken childhood, rising to his fame and fortune before sliding downhill once again to poverty and ill-health. They also show clearly how his character altered from being a pupil hungry to learn, to that of a young man desperate to find true love, and of his many liaisons in the pursuit of such, becoming eventually that of a hard-working and conscientious husband and father, forced by circumstances to accept employment within the establishment that he had so often mocked and scorned in his poetic works.

Unfortunately the great majority of letters received by Burns have been lost to us forever owing to them having been stored in damp conditions. Only a few have survived. However, one or two of his early biographers have included some in their works, so we have access to a small number.

**Just how did a country lad from an extremely humble background become such a prolific figure in the world of literature? What drove Robert Burns to see far beyond the furrows of his plough and become one of the world's finest wordsmiths?**

**To try to find an answer to that question we will delve into the the early life of the Bard and we start by referring to a letter, written not by Robert, but by his brother Gilbert, sent to Dr James Currie after the death of the poet.**

When my father built his clay bigging, he put in two stone jambs, as they are called, and a lintel, carrying up a chimney in his clay gable. The consequence was, that as the gable subsided, the jambs remained firm, threw it off its centre; and one very stormy morning, when my brother was nine or ten days old, a little before daylight a part of the gable fell out, and the rest appeared so shattered, that my mother, with the young poet, had to be carried through the storm to a neighbours house, where they remained a week, till their own dwelling was adjusted.'

**This early episode in the life of the Bard was a forerunner of the many storms he would face in his turbulent life. Gilbert continued to supply Dr Currie with a biography of his brother's early life as he tells of the education given to Robert and himself by John Murdoch.**

' With him we learnt to read English tolerably well, and to write a little. He taught us, too, the English grammar. I was too young to profit much from his lessons in grammar, but Robert made some proficiency in it, a circumstance of considerable weight in the unfolding of his genius and character, as he soon became remarkable for the fluency and correctness of his expression, and read the few books that came his way with much pleasure and improvement; for even then he was a reader when he could get a book. Murdoch, whose library at that time had no great variety in it, lent him the *Life of Hannibal*, which was the first book he read (the school-books excepted), and almost the only one he had the opportunity of

reading while he was at school; for the *Life of Wallace*, which he classes with it in one of his letters, he did not see for some years afterwards when he borrowed it from the blacksmith who shod our horses.'

**Two years later, Murdoch left his school to take up work elsewhere. Gilbert recounts a visit to their house.**

'Murdoch came to spend the night with us, and to take his leave when he was about to go to Carrick. He brought us a present and memorial of him, a small compendium of English Grammar, and the tragedy of *Titus Andronicus*, and by the way of passing the evening, he began to read the play aloud. We were all attention for some time, till presently the whole party was dissolved in tears. A female in the play (I have but a confused recollection of it) had her hands chopt off, her tongue cut out, and then was insultingly desired to call for water to wash her hands. At this, in an agony of distress, we with one voice desired he would read no more. My father observed that if we would not hear it out, it would be needless to leave the play with us. Robert replied that if it was left he would burn it. My father was going to chide him for this ungrateful return to his tutor's kindness; but Murdoch interfered, declaring that he liked to see so much sensibility; and he left the *School for Love*, a comedy (translated, I think, from the French) in its place.

**With Murdoch now departed, William Burnes took over the task of educating his children himself. Gilbert continues.....**

'Nothing could be more retired than our general manner of living at Mount Oliphant; we rarely saw anybody but the members of our own family. There were no boys of our own age, or near it, in the neighbourhood. Indeed the greatest part of the land in the vicinity was at that time possessed by shopkeepers, and people of that stamp, who had retired from business, or who kept their farm in the country at the same time that they followed business in town. My father was for some time almost the only companion we had. He conversed familiarly on all subjects with us,

as if we had been men; and was at great pains, as we accompanied him in the labours of the farm, to lead the conversation to such subjects as might tend to increase our knowledge, or confirm our virtuous habits.

He borrowed Salmon's *Geographical Grammar* for us, and endeavoured to make us acquainted with the situation and history of the different countries in the world; while, from a book-society in Ayr, he procured for us Derham's *Physico and Astro-Theology*, and Ray's *Wisdom of God in the Creation*, to give us some idea of astronomy and natural history. Robert read all these books with an avidity and industry scarcely to be equalled. My father had been a subscriber to Stackhouse's *History of the Bible*, then lately published by James Meuros in Kilmarnock; from this Robert collected a competent knowledge of ancient history; for no book was so voluminous as to slacken his industry, or so antiquated as to damp his researches. A brother of my mother, who had lived with us some time, and had learnt some arithmetic by our winter evening's candle, went into a bookseller's shop in Ayr to purchase the *Ready Reckoner, or Tradesman's Sure Guide*, and a book to teach him write letters. Luckily, in place of the *Complete Letter Writer*, he got by mistake a small collection of letters by the most eminent writers, with a few sensible directions for attaining an easy epistolary style. This book was to Robert of the greatest consequence. It inspired him with a strong desire to excel in letter-writing, while it furnished him with models by some of the first writers in our language. My brother was about thirteen or fourteen, when my father, regretting that we wrote so ill, sent us, week about, during a summer quarter, to the parish school of Dalrymple, which, though between two and three miles distant, was the nearest to us, that we might have an opportunity of remedying this defect. About this time a bookish acquaintance of my father's procured for us a reading of two volumes of Richardson's *Pamela*, which was the first novel we read, and the only part of Richardson's works my brother was acquainted with, till towards the period of his commencing author. Till that time, too, he remained unacquainted with Fielding, with Smollet (two volumes of *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, and two volumes of *Peregrine Pickle*, excepted), with Hume and Robertson, and almost all our authors of eminence of the later times. I recollect, indeed, my father borrowed a volume of

English history from Mr Hamilton of Bourtree-hill's gardener. It treated of the reigns of James 1, and his unfortunate son Charles, but I do not know who was the author; all that I remember of it is something of Charles's conversation with his children. About this time, Murdoch, our former teacher, after having been in different places in the country, and having taught a school some time in Dumfries, came to be the established teacher of the English language in Ayr, a circumstance of considerable consequence to us. The remembrance of my father's former friendship, and his attachment to my brother, made him do everything in his power for our improvement. He sent us Pope's *Works*, and some other poetry, the first that we had the opportunity of reading, excepting what is contained in the *English Collection*, and in the volume of the *Edinburgh Magazine* for 1772; excepting also those *Excellent new songs* that are hawked about the country in baskets, or exposed in stalls in the streets.

The summer after we had been at Dalrymple School, my father sent Robert to Ayr, to revise his English grammar with his former teacher, He had only been there one week when he was obliged to return, to assist at the harvest. When the harvest was over, he went back to school, where he remained two weeks; and this completes the account of his school education, excepting one summer quarter, some time afterwards, that he attended the parish school of Kirkoswald (where he lived with a brother of my mother's) to learn surveying.

**The letter continues with a harrowing narrative of the hardship and poverty that surrounded the Buns family.**

Mount Oliphant, the farm my father possessed in the parish of Ayr, is almost the poorest soil I know of in a state of cultivation. A stronger proof of this I cannot give, than that, notwithstanding the extraordinary rise in the value of lands in Scotland, it was, after a considerable sum laid out in improving it by the proprietor, let a few years ago five pounds per annum lower than the rent paid for it thirty years ago. My father, in consequence of this, soon came into difficulties, which were increased by the loss of several of his cattle by accidents and disease. To use the

buffetings of misfortune we could only oppose hard labour, and the most rigid economy. We lived very sparingly. For several years butcher's meat was a stranger in the house, while all the members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength, and rather beyond it, in the labours of the farm. My brother, at the age of thirteen, assisted in thrashing the crop of corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm, for we had no hired servant, male or female. The anguish of mind we felt at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great. To think of our father growing old (for he was now above fifty), broken down with the long-continued fatigues of his life, with a wife and five other children, and in a declining state of circumstances; these reflections produced in my brother's mind and mine sensations of the deepest distress. I doubt not but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of his life was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits with which Robert was so often afflicted through his entire life afterwards. At this time he was almost constantly afflicted in the evening with a dull headache, which, at a future period of his life, was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart, and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night-time.'

**John Murdoch also communicated with Dr Currie regarding the early education of the Burns boys.**

'My pupil, Robert Burns, was then between six and seven years of age; his preceptor, about eighteen. Robert and his younger brother, Gilbert had been grounded a little in English before they were put under my care. They both made a rapid progress in reading, and a tolerable progress in writing. In reading, dividing words into syllables by rule, spelling without book, parsing sentences, &c., Robert and Gilbert were generally at the upper end of the class, even when ranged with boys far their seniors.'

**Murdoch continues his letter with a rather surprising statement.**

'Gilbert always appeared to me to possess a more lively imagination, and to be more of the wit, than Robert. I attempted to teach them a little church-music. Here they were left far behind all the rest of the school. Robert's ear, in particular, was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. It was long before I could get them to distinguish one tune from another. Robert's countenance was generally grave, and expressive of a serious and contemplative mind. Gilbert's face said, "Mirth, with thee I mean to live;" and certainly, if any person who knew the two boys had been asked which of them was the most likely to court the Muses, he would surely never have guessed that Robert had a propensity of that kind.'

**It was late in 1786 when Burns started to write letters on a regular basis and he continued to do so until his death ten years later. The earlier ones are slightly stiff and formal, then, as he gains recognition as a poet, they become flamboyant as he sends them out in great numbers. Eventually however, as he sinks into exhaustion through trying both to run a farm and ride some 200 miles per week on Excise duties, the letters become less numerous and lose their flamboyance. Those written in the period leading up to his death tell a tale of abject poverty and suffering, but continue to be written with dignity and style.**

**The most famous of the letters written by Robert Burns was undoubtedly the correspondence between him and Agnes McLehose, better known to the world as Clarinda. As Agnes was a married woman, although estranged from her husband, it would have been social suicide for each of them to have been discovered to be corresponding regularly, so in order to maintain their anonymity she became Clarinda and he Sylvander. Many of these letters have survived through the years, in spite of nearly being cast aside as worthless on her death. We are able to include some of the letters written by Clarinda, and can share her emotional turmoil in her struggle to maintain faith with her strict religious beliefs as she fought to keep their affair on a platonic level.**

In 1787 Burns wrote a very lengthy autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore that offers an insight into his early life, so in order to learn a little of the poet in his pre-fame days we will ignore its chronological position and place it at the beginning. Although many aspects of his early life have already been covered by Gilbert's letter, this is how Robert Burns recalled his childhood and youthful years The many letters that follow are the nearest thing to a complete autobiography of Robert Burns that we could ever hope for.

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## The Letters

Burns was 28 years old at the time of writing this early epistle and he describes his first feelings for a girl when he was a young farmhand, aged 15, and how he admits to being enchanted by the fairer sex. It also explains his fascination with the supernatural, used to such great effect in Tam o' Shanter, Halloween, Death and Doctor Hornbook, etc..

(125) Dr John Moore

Mauchline, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1787

Sir

For some months past I have been rambling over the country, partly on account of some little business I have to settle in various places; but of late I have been confined with some lingering complaints originating as I take it in the stomach. To divert my spirits a little from this miserable fog of Ennui, I have taken a whim to give you a history of MYSELF. My name has made a small noise in the country;

you have done me the honor to interest yourself very warmly in my behalf; and I think a faithful account of what character of man I am, and how I came by that character, may perhaps amuse you in an idle moment. I will give you an honest narrative, though I know it will be at the expense of frequently being laughed at; for I assure you, Sir, I have, like Solomon whose character, excepting the trifling affair of WISDOM, I sometimes think I resemble, I have, I say, like him “Turned my eyes to behold Madness and Folly;” and like him too, frequently shaken hands with their intoxicating friendship. In the very polite letter Miss Williams did me the honor to write to me, she tells me you have got a complaint in your eyes. I pray to God that it might be removed; for considering that lady and you are my common friends, you will probably employ her to read this letter; and then goodnight to that esteem with which she was pleased to honor the Scotch Bard. After you have perused these pages, should you think them trifling and impertinent, I only beg leave to tell you that the poor Author wrote them under some very twitching qualms of conscience, that perhaps he was doing what he ought not to do: a predicament he has more than once been in before.

I have not the most distant pretensions to what the pyecoated guardians of escutcheons call, A Gentleman. When at Edinburgh last winter, I got acquainted in the Herald’s Office, and looking through that granary of Honors I found almost every name in the kingdom; but for me,

“— My ancient but ignoble blood  
Has crept thro’ Scoundrels ever since the flood”

Gules, Purpure, Argent, &c. quite disowned me. My Fathers rented land of the noble Keiths of Marshal, and had the honor to share their fate. I do not use the word, Honor, with any reference to political principles; loyal and disloyal I take to be merely relative terms in that ancient and formidable court known in this Country by the name of CLUB-LAW. Those who do welcome Ruin and shake hands with Infamy for what they sincerely believe to be the cause of their God or their King—  
“Brutus and Cassius are honorable me.” I mention this circumstance because it

threw my father on the world at large; where after many years wandering and sojournings, he pickt up a pretty large quantity of Observation and Experience, to which I am indebted for most of my little pretensions to wisdom. I have met with few who understood “Men, their manners and their ways” equal to him; but stubborn, ungainly Integrity, and headlong, ungovernable Irrascibility are disqualifying circumstances: consequently I was born a very poor man’s son. For the first six or seven years of my life my father was gardiner to a worthy gentleman of small estate in the neighbourhood of Ayr. Had my father continued in this situation I must have marched off to be one of the underlings about a farm-house; but it was his dearest wish and prayer to have it in his power to keep his children under his own eye till they could discern between good and evil; so with the assistance of his generous Master my father ventured on a small farm in his estate. At these years I was by no means a favorite with anybody. I was a good deal note for a retentive memory, a stubborn, sturdy something in my disposition, and an enthusiastic, idiot – I say idiot piety, because I was then but a child. Though I cost the schoolmaster some thrashings, I made an excellent English scholar, and against the years of ten or eleven, I was absolutely a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles. In my infant and boyish days too, I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother’s, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition. She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery. This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors. The earliest thing of Composition that I recollect taking pleasure in was; The vision of Mirza and a hymn of Addison’s beginning —“How are Thy servants blest, O Lord!’ I particularly remember one half-stanza which was music to my boyish ear—

“For though in dreadful whirls we hung,  
High on the broken wave”—

I met with these pieces in Masson’s English Collection, one of my school-books. The first two books I ever read in private, and which gave more pleasure than any two books I ever read again, were, the life of Hannibal and the history of Sir William Wallace. Hannibal gave my rough ideas such a turn that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest. Polemical divinity about this time was putting the country half-mad; and I, ambitious in shining in conversation parties on Sundays between sermons, funerals, &c, used in a few years more to puzzle Calvinism with so much heat and indiscretion that I raised a hue and cry of heresy against me which has not ceased to this hour.

My vicinity to Ayr was of great advantage to me. My social disposition, when not checked by some modification of spited pride, like our catechism definition of Infinitude, was “without bounds or limits.” I formed many connections with other Youngers who possessed superior advantages; the youngling Actors who were busy with the rehearsal of PARTS in which they were shortly to appear on that STAGE where, Alas! I was destined to drudge behind the SCENES. It is not commonly at these green years that the young Noblesse and Gentry have a just sense of the immense distance between them and their ragged Playfellows. It takes a few dashes into the world to give the young Great man that proper, decent, unnoticing disregard for the poor, insignificant, stupid devils, the mechanics and peasantry around him; who were perhaps born in the same village. My young Superiours never insulted the clouterly appearance of my ploughboy carcass, the two extremes of which were often exposed to all the inclemencies of the seasons. They would give me stray volumes of books; among them, even then, I could pick up some observations; and ONE, whose heart I am sure not even the MUNNY BEGUM’S scenes have tainted, helped me to a little French. Parting with these,

my young friends and benefactors, as they dropped off for the east or west Indies, was often to me a sore affliction, but I was soon called to more serious evils. My father's generous Master died; the farm proved a ruinous bargain; and, to clench the curse, we fell into the hands of a Factor who sat for the picture I have drawn of one in Tale of two dogs. My father was advanced in life when he married; I was the eldest of seven children; and he, worn out by early hardship, was unfit for labor. My father's spirit was soon irritated, but not easily broken. There was a freedom in his lease in two years more, and to weather these two years we retrenched expenses. We lived very poorly; I was a dextrous Ploughman for my years; and the next eldest to me was a brother, who could drive the plough very well and help me to thrash. A Novel-Writer might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I; my indignation yet boils at the recollection of the scoundrel tyrant's insolent, threatening epistles, which used to set us all in tears.

This kind of life, the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing moil of a galley-slave, brought me to my sixteenth year, a little before which period I first committed the sin of RHYME. You know our country custom of coupling a man and a woman together as Partners in the labors of Harvest. In my fifteenth autumn, my partner was a bewitching creature who just counted an autumn less. My scarcity of English denies me the power of doing her justice in that language; but you know the Scotch idiom. She was a bonie, sweet, sonsie lass. In short, she altogether, unwittingly to herself, initiated me in a certain delicious Passion, which in spite of acid Disappointment, gin-horse Prudence and bookworm Philosophy, I hold to be the first of human joys, our dearest pleasure here below. How she caught the contagion I can't say; you medical people talk much of infection by breathing the same air, the touch &c, but I never expressly told her that I loved her. Indeed, I did not well know myself why I liked so much to loiter behind with her, when returning in the evening from our labors; why the tones of her voice made my heart-strings thrill like an Aeolian harp; and particularly why my pulse beat such a furious rantann, when I looked and fingered over her hand to pick out the nettle stings and thistles. Among her other love-inspiring qualifications, she sung sweetly; and 'twas

her favorite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme. I was not so presumptive as to imagine that I could make verses like printed ones, composed by men who had Greek and Latin; but my girl sung a song which was said to be composed by a small country laird's son, on one of his maids with whom he was in love; and I saw no reason why I might not rhyme as well as he, for excepting smearing sheep and casting peats, his father living in the moors, he had no more Scholarcraft than I had.

Thus with me began Love and Poesy; which at times have been my only, and till within this last twelvemonth have been my highest enjoyment. My father struggled on till he reached the freedom in his lease, when he entered a larger farm about ten mile further in the country. The nature of the bargain was such as to throw a little ready money in his hand at the commencement, otherwise the affair would have been impracticable. For four years we lived comfortably here; but a lawsuit between him and his Landlord commencing, after three years tossing and whirling in the vortex of Litigation, my father was just saved from absorption in a jail by phthisical consumption, which after two years promises, kindly stepped in and snatch'd him away —“To where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary be at rest.”

It is during this climackterick that my little story is most eventful. I was, at the beginning of this period, perhaps the most ungainly, aukward being in the parish.— No Solitaire was less acquainted with the ways of the world. My knowledge of ancient story was gathered from Salmon's and Guthrie's geographical grammars; my knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator. These, with Pope's works, some plays of Shakespear, Tull and Dickson on Agriculture, The Pantheon, Locke's Essay on the human understanding, Stackhouse's history of the bible, Justice's British Gardiner's directory, Boyle's lectures, Allan Ramsay's works, Taylor's scripture doctrine of original sin, a select Collection of English songs, and Hervey's meditations had been the extent of my reading.

The Collection of Songs was my vade mecum. I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is.

In my seventeenth year, to give my manners a brush, I went to a country dancing school. My father had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was, what to this hour I repent, in absolute defiance of his commands. My father, as I said before, was the sport of strong passions; from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe was one cause of that dissipation which marked my future years. I only say, Dissipation, comparative with the strictness and sobriety of Presbyterean country life; for through the will-o'-the-wisp meteors of thoughtless Whim were almost the sole light of my path, yet early ingrained Piety and Virtue never failed to point me out the line of Innocence. The great misfortune of my life was never to have AN AIM. I had felt early some stirrings of Ambition, but they were the blind gropings of Homer's Cyclops round the walls of his cave: I saw my father's situation entailed me on perpetual labor. The only two doors by which I could enter the fields of fortune were, the most niggardly economy, or the little chicaning art of bargain-making; the first is so contracted an aperture I could never squeeze myself into it; the last, I always hated the contamination of the threshold. Thus abandoned of aim or view in life; with a strong appetite for sociability, as well from native hilarity as from a pride of observation and remark; a constitutional hypochondriac taint which made me fly solitude; add to all these incentives to social life, my reputation for bookish knowledge, a certain wild logical talent, and a strength of thought something like the rudiments of good sense, made me generally a welcome guest; so 'tis no great wonder that always "where two or three were met together, there was I in the midst of them." But far beyond all the other impulses of my heart was un penchant a l'adorable moitiee du genre humain. My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other; and like every warfare in this world, I was sometimes crowned with success, and sometimes mortified with defeat.—At

the plough, scythe or reap-hook I feared no competitor, and set Want at defiance: and as I never cared farther for my labors than while I was in actual exercise, I spent the evening in the way after my own heart. A country lad rarely carries on an amour without an assisting confident. I possessed a curiosity, zeal and intrepid dexterity in these matters which recommended me a proper Second in duels of that kind; and I dare say, I felt as much pleasure at being in the secret of half the amours in the parish, as ever did Premier at knowing the intrigues of half the courts of Europe.

The very goosefeather in my hand seems instinctively to know the well-worn path of my imagination, the favorite theme of my song; and is with difficulty restrained from giving you a couple of paragraphs on the amours of my Compeers, the humble Inmates of the farm-house and cottages; but the grave sons of Science, Ambition or Avarice baptize these things by the name of Follies. To the sons and daughters of labor and poverty they are matters of the most serious nature; to them the ardent hope of the stolen interview, the tender farewell, are the greatest and most delicious part of their enjoyments.

Another circumstance in my life which made very considerable alterations in my mind and manners was, I spent my seventeenth summer on a smuggling coast a good distance from home at a noted school, to learn Mensuration, Surveying, Dialling, &c. in which I made a pretty good progress. But I made greater progress in the knowledge of mankind. The contraband trade at that time was very successful; scenes of swaggering riot and roaring dissipation were yet new to me; and I was no enemy to social life. Here, though I learned to look unconcernedly at a large tavern-bill, and mix without fear in a drunken squabble, yet I went on with a high hand in my Geometry; till the sun entered Virgo, a month which is always a carnival in my bosom, a charming Fillette who lived next door to the school upset my Trigonometry and set me off on a tangent from the sphere of my studies. I struggled on with my Sines and Co-sines for a few days more; but stepping out to the garden one charming noon, to take the sun's altitude, I met with my Angel.

“Like Prosperine gathering flowers,  
Herself a fairer flower”

It was vain to think of doing any more good at school. The remaining week I staid, I did nothing but craze the faculties of my soul about her, or steal out to meet with her; and the two last nights of my stay in the country, had sleep been a mortal, I was innocent.

I returned home very considerably improved. My reading was enlarged with the very important addition of Thomson’s and Shenstone’s works; I had seen mankind in a new phases; and I engaged several of my schoolfellows to keep up a literary correspondence with me. This last helped me much on in composition.— I had met with a collection of letters by the Wits of Queen Ann’s reign, and I pored over them most devoutly. I kept copies of any of my own letters that pleased me, and a comparison between them and the composition of most of my correspondence flattered my vanity. I carried this whim so far that though I had not three farthings worth of business in the world, yet every post brought me as many letters as if I had been a broad, plodding son of Day-book & Ledger.

My life flowed on much in the same tenor till my twenty third year. *Vive L’amour et vive la bagatelle* were my sole principles of action. The addition of two more Authors to my library gave me great pleasure; Stere and Mckenzie. Tristram Shandy and the Man of Feeling were my bosom favorites. Poesy was still a darling walk for my mind, but ’twas only the humour of the hour. I had usually half a dozen or more pieces on hand; I took up one or the other as it suited the momentary tone of this mind, and dismissed it as it bordered on fatigue. My Passions when once they were lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme; and then conning over my verses like a spell, soothed all into quiet. None of the rhymes of these days are in print, except, *Winter*, a dirge, the eldest of my printed pieces; *The death of Poor Mailie*, *John Barleycorn*, and songs first, second and

third: song second was that ebullition of that passion which ended the forementioned school-business.

My twenty-third year was to me an important era. Partly thro' whim, and partly that I wished to set about doing something in life, I joined with a flax-dresser in a neighbouring town, to learn his trade and carry on the business of manufacturing and retailing flax. This turned out a sadly unlucky affair. My Partner was a scoundrel of the first water who made money by the mystery of thieving; and to finish the whole, while we were given a welcoming carousal to the New Year, our shop, by the drunken carelessness of my Partner's wife, took fire and was burnt to ashes; and left me like a true poet, not worth sixpence. I was obliged to give up my business; the clouds of misfortune were gathering thick round my father's head, the darkest of all which was, he was visibly far gone in a consumption; and to crown all, a belle-fille whom I adored and who had pledged her soul to meet me in the field of matrimony, jilted me with peculiar circumstances of mortification. The finishing evil that brought up the rear of this infernal file was that my hypochondriac complaint being irritated to such a degree, that for three months I was in diseased state of body and mind, scarcely to be envied by the hopeless wretches who have just got their mittimus, "Depart from me, ye Cursed."

From this adventure I learned something of a town life. But the principal thing which gave my mind a turn was, I formed a bosom-friendship with a young fellow, the first created being I had ever seen, but a hapless son of misfortune. He was the son of a plain mechanic; but a great Man in the neighbourhood taking him under his patronage gave him a genteel education with a view to bettering his situation in life. The Patron dieing just as he was ready to launch forth into the world, the poor fellow in despair went to sea; where after a variety of good and bad fortune, a little before I was acquainted with him, he had been set ashore by an American Privateer on the wild coast of Connaught, stript of everything. I cannot quit this poor fellow's story without adding that he is at this moment Captain of a large westindian man belonging to the Thames.

This gentleman's mind was fraught with courage, independence, Magnanimity, and every noble, manly virtue. I loved him, I admired him, to a degree of enthusiasm; and I strove to imitate him. In some measure I succeeded: I had pride before, but he taught it to flow in proper channels. His knowledge of the world was vastly superiour to mine, and I was all attention to learn. He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool than myself when WOMAN was the presiding star; but he spoke of a certain fashionable failing with levity, which hitherto I had regarded with horror. Here his friendship did me a mischief; and the consequence was, that soon after I resumed the plough, I wrote the WELCOME inclosed. My reading was only increased by two stray volumes of Pamela, and one of Ferdinand Count Fathom, which gave me some idea of Novels. Rhyme, except some religious pieces which are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding rustic lyre with emulating vigour. When my father died, his all went among the rapacious hell-hounds that growl in the kennel of justice; but we made a shift to scrape a little money in the family amongst us, with which to keep us together, my brother and I took a neighbouring farm. My brother wanted my harebrained imagination as well as my social and amorous madness, but in good sense and every sober qualification he was far my superiour.

I entered on this farm with a full resolution, "Come, go to, I will be wise!" I read farming books, I calculated crops, I attended markets; and in short, in spite of "The devil, the world and the flesh," I believe I would have been a wise man; but the first year from unfortunately buying in bad seed, the second from a late harvest, we lost half of both our crops; this overset all of my wisdom, and I returned "Like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire."

I now began to be known in the neighbourhood a maker of rhymes. The first of my poetic offspring that saw the light was a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two reverend Calvinists, both of them dramatis personae in my Holy Fair. I had an idea myself that the piece had some merit; but to prevent the worst, I gave

a copy to a friend who was very fond of these things, and I told him I could not guess who was the Author of it, but that I thought it pretty clever. With a certain side of both clergy and laity it met with a roar of applause. Holy Willie's Prayer next made its appearance, and alarmed the Kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers. Unluckily for me, my idle wanderings led me, on another side, point blank within the reach of their heaviest metal. This is the unfortunate story alluded to in my printed poem, The Lament. 'Twas a shocking affair, which I cannot yet bear to recollect; and had very nearly given me one or two of the principal qualifications for the place among those who have lost the chart and mistake the reckoning of Rationality. I gave up my part of the farm to my brother, as in truth it was only nominally mine; and made what little preparation was in my power for Jamaica. Before leaving my native country for ever, I resolved to publish my Poems. I weighed my productions as impartially as in my power; I thought they had merit; and 'twas a delicious idea that I would be called a clever fellow, even though it might never reach my ears, a poor Negro-driver, or perhaps a victim to that inhospitable clime gone to the world of Spirits. I can truly say that pauvre Inconnu as I then was, I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and my works as I have at this moment. It is ever my opinion that the great, unhappy mistakes and blunders, both in a rational and religious point of view, of which we see thousands daily guilty, are owing to their ignorance, or mistaken notions of themselves. To know myself had been all along my constant study. I weighed myself alone; I balanced myself with others; I watched every means of information how much ground I occupied both as a Man and as a Poet; I studied assiduously Nature's DESIGN where she seem'd to have intended the various LIGHTS and SHADES in my character. I was pretty sure my poems would meet with some applause; but at the worst, the roar of the Atlantic would deafen the voice of censure, and the novelty of west-indian scenes make me forget neglect.

I threw off six-hundred copies, of which I had got subscriptions for about three hundred and fifty. My vanity was highly gratified by the reception I met with from the Publick; besides pocketing, all expenses deducted, near twenty pounds. This last came very seasonable, as I was about to indent myself for want of money to pay my freight. So soon I was master of nine guineas, the price of wafting me to the torrid zone, I bespoke a passage in the very first ship that was to sail, for

“Hungry ruin had me in the wind”—

I had for some time been skulking from covert to covert under all the terrors of a Jail; as some ill-advised, ungrateful people had uncoupled the merciless legal Pack at my heels. I had taken the last farewell of my few friends; my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed my last song I should ever measure in Caledonia,

“The gloomy night is gathering fast,” when a letter from Dr. Blacklock overthrew all my schemes by rousing my poetic ambitions. The Doctor belonged to a set of Critics for whose applause I had not even dared to hope. His idea that I would meet with every encouragement for a second edition fired me so much that I posted to Edinburgh without a single acquaintance in town, or a single letter of introduction in my pocket. The baneful Star that had so long shed its blasting influence in my Zenith, for once, made a revolution to the Nadir; and the providential care of a good God placed me under the patronage of one of his noblest creatures, the Earl of Glencairn: “Oublie moi, Grand Dieu, si jamais je l’oublie!”

I need relate no farther. At Edinburgh I was in a new world: I mingled among many classes of men, but all of them new to me; and I was all attention “to catch the manners living as they ride.”

You can now, Sir, form a pretty near guess what sort of Wight he is whom for some time you have honored with your correspondence. That Fancy & Whim, keen

sensibility and riotous Passions may still make him zig-zag in his future path of life, is far from being improbable; but come what will, I shall answer for him the most determinate integrity and honor; and though his evil star should again blaze in his meridian with tenfold more direful influence, he may reluctantly tax Friendship with Pity but no more.

My most respectful Compliments to Miss Williams. Her very elegant and friendly letter I cannot answer at present, as my presence is requisite in Edinburgh, and I set off tomorrow.

If you will oblige me so highly and do me so much honor as now and then to drop me a letter, Please direct to me at Mauchline, Ayrshire.

I have the honor to be, Sir  
Your ever grateful humble servant  
Robt Burns

**It was certainly a wonderful letter, but what is interesting about it is not so much what Burns tells Dr. Moore of his extraordinary life and his love of books, but what he omits to mention to the good doctor.**

**By the time of writing he had already fathered a daughter by Elizabeth Paton and twins by Jean Armour. Mary Campbell had died, although it remains uncertain if through premature child-birth or of typhus, and May Cameron had given birth to a child which she claimed was the responsibility of Burns, although this last claim was unsubstantiated in spite of Burns sending a small amount of money to Mary.**

**The following is the first recorded letter sent by Burns to a friend. It is more of an exercise in essay writing than a chatty letter.**

**( 1 ) William Niven**

Lochlea, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1786

I do not think I ever met with any letter that was more entertaining than the agreeable one you wrote on the 20<sup>th</sup>; the circumstances in it are very cleverly placed, and yet seem to rise naturally throughout it, and tho' keenly satirical have not a hint of the indelicate. I shall not at present attempt a definite criticism on it as I am determined to give you my observations on the subject at this very moment, but I must first premise these observations are intirely my own, and consequently may appear ill digested, nay perhaps to an unprejudiced critic some of them may appear absurd: but I am writing to a Friend.

There is some quality in the soul of man which instills important incentives in the human mind which are the principal ingredients in every thing that may be thought manly, &c., this I call Pride and regard it neither good nor bad in itself; but when joined with other manly dispositions it is part of the noblest virtues; or, when mixed with corrupted & disingenuous inclinations, it enters largely into the composition of many vices. I do not think I can convey my notion of it to you better, than by analising some of the virtues in which it is most conspicuous. I look upon patience to be the possessing one's mind calmly in ruffling circumstances of life and is either a natural born talent or, an acquired command of adulthood. If to this you add a large portion of Pride forementioned you have my idea of manliness. Then again, a generous, frank open mind promotes an enlarged understanding; this is, in my opinion, the genuine virtue of magnanimity or greatness of soul. Courage I hold to be nothing else than a large portion of audacity combined with a thoughtlessness of danger which is checked and counterbalanced with caution. When this quality in its highest perfection is manifest it is called rashness; there is also a kind of ferocity which is sometimes called courage but which is nothing akin to the former.— It is bred from fear. You see that according to my opinion it is

absurd to say such a one has courage. Each person must have it in some degree, but of all pretensions to human nature..... the ordinary acceptance of the .....the forementioned principle.....abilities such as render.....There are some characters that may be said to be without pride in a great measure: there is particularly one, may be said to be so which I have great esteem for. The principle feature in this character is indolence of temper: a man of this sort unless very much harassed is always easy and calm: he is not soon offended & tho' ruffled.....

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...and fortitude of these things are natural evils, but if they are injuries from their fellow creatures they are impatient of abuse: they are particularly constant & kind in their friendships tho' indeed seldom with persons of their own character but if with those of the first kind I mention I know no friendly cement so strong. I shall only add that if to these you join a delicate taste & an uncommonly clear penetration you have the character of a friend of mine who shall be nameless lest I should incur the imputation of being a flatterer which next to a backbiter is the most detestable character under the sun. I am my dear friend yours sincerely.

Robt Burns

As for my being in your country, I don't know when it will happen as I will have no business that I know of yet & such is our hurry that a pleasure jaunt is what I dare not ask. I have three acres of pretty good flax this season perhaps in the course of marketing it I may come your way.

RB

**(3) William Niven**

Lochlea, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1781

Dear Sir,

I shall not begin with considering whether you are to blame, or I am to blame, or who of us is most to blame for this long, long interval of our correspondence.

In my letter which I wrote you in February last, I touched a subject which I thought, would have produced an immediate answer; but it seems I have been mistaken, tho' I suspect not altogether neither. Had not the hurried season of seed-time come on so soon as it did, I would have wrote you farther on the subject; but so fatigued was my body & so hebetated my mind, that I could neither think, nor write any thing to purpose.

I know you will hardly believe when I tell you, that by a strange conjecture of circumstances, I am intirely got rid of all connections with the tender sex, I mean in the way of courtship; it is, however absolutely certain that I am so; though how long I shall continue so, Heaven only knows; but be that as it may, I shall never be involved as I was again.

Our communion was on Sunday e'en night. I mention this to tell you that I saw your cousin there, with some of Mr Hamilton's sons, You cannot imagine how pleased I was to steal a look at him, & trace the resemblance of my old friend – I was prepossessed in his favour on that account, but still more by that ingenuous modesty (a quality so rare among students, especially in the divinity way) which is so apparent in his air & manner. I could assure you my heart warmed to him; I was only sorry I could not tell him, how happy I would have been to have had it in my power to have obliged him. You know I am a Physiognomist, so will not be surprised at this. I shall expect to hear from you soon; & shall conclude with assuring you, that I am your sincere wellwisher & humble servant.

Robt Burns

**Alison Begbie, also known as Ellison, was a servant girl from nearby Loudon. She so entranced the Bard that he made a formal proposal of**

marriage to her that she rejected. Possibly the reputation of the young poet was beginning to work against him, so he bombarded Alison with letters in which he depicts himself as a serious and devout person, not the rake that he was considered to be

This was in 1781, and it was 22-year-old Rab's first really serious venture into a romance that he hoped would lead to marriage. Alison inspired him to write *The Lass o' Cessnock Bank*.

**(5) Alison Begbie**

Lochlea, 1781

What you may think of this letter when you see the name that subscribes it I cannot know; & perhaps I ought to make a long Preface of apologies for the freedom I am going to take, but as my heart means no offence but on the contrary is rather too interested in your favor, for that reason I hope you will forgive me when I tell you that I most sincerely and affectionately love you. I am a stranger in these matters Alison, as I assure that you are the first woman to whom I have ever made such a declaration so I declare I am at a loss how to proceed. I have more than once come into your company with a resolution to tell you what I have just now told you but my resolutions always fail'd me, & even now my heart trembles for the consequence of what I have said. I hope my Dearest you will not despise me because I am ignorant of the flattering arts of courtship; I hope my inexperience of the world will plead for me. I can only say I sincerely love you & there is nothing on earth I so ardently wish for, or could possibly give me so much happiness as one day to see you mine. I think you cannot doubt my sincerity as I am sure that whenever I see you my very looks betray me, and when once you have too much goodness & humanity to allow an honest man to languish in suspense only because he loves you too well, but I am certain that in such a state of anxiety as I myself at present feel, an absolute denial would be a preferable state.

**Unfortunately we only have the letters written by Burns and have little idea of the responses he received from Alison, but he certainly changes tack in his next one as he adopts the tone of a good-living young man whose thoughts are far removed from notions of romance.**

**(6) Alison Begbie**

Lochlea, 1781

I verily believe my dear E., that the pure genuine feelings of love, are as rare in the world as the pure genuine principles of virtue and piety. This I hope will account for the uncommon style of all my letters to you. By uncommon, I mean, their being written in such a serious manner, which to tell you the truth, has made me often afraid lest you should take me for some zealous bigot, who conversed with his mistress as he would converse with his minister. I don't know how it is, my dear; for though, except your company, there is nothing on earth gives me so much pleasure as writing to you, yet it never gives me those giddy raptures so much talked of among lovers. I have often thought that if a well-grounded affection be not really a part of virtue, 'tis something extremely akin to it. Whenever the thought of my E. warms my heart, every feeling of humanity, every principle of generosity, kindles in my breast. It extinguishes every dirty spark of malice and envy, which are but too apt to infest me. I grasp every creature in the arms of universal benevolence, and equally participate in the pleasures of the happy, and sympathise with the miseries of the unfortunate. I assure you my dear, I often look up to the divine disposer of events with an eye of gratitude for the blessing which I hope he intends to bestow upon me, in bestowing you. I sincerely wish that he may bless my endeavours to make your life as comfortable and happy as possible, both in sweetening the rougher parts of my natural temper, and bettering the unkindly circumstances of my fortune. This, my dear, is a passion worthy of a man, and I will add, worthy of a Christian. The sordid earth-worm may profess love to a woman's person, while in reality his affection is centered in her pocket; and the slavish drudge may go a wooing as he goes to the horse-market, to chuse one who is stout and firm, and as we may say of any old horse, one who will be a good

drudge and draw kindly. I disdain their dirty, puny ideas. I would be heartily out of humour with myself, if I thought I were capable of having so poor a notion of the sex, which were designed to crown the pleasures of society. Poor devils! I don't envy them their happiness who have such notions. For my part I propose quite other pleasures with my dear partner.

**Burns was only 22 years old when he wrote these words but comes across sounding like an old bachelor who has decided it was time to take a wife. It is difficult to envisage any young woman being swept off her feet by someone who admits to feeling no raptures towards her, and who professes to be looking for a companion rather than a lover.**

**(7) Alison Begbie**

Lochlea, 1781

My Dear E.

I do not remember in the course of your acquaintance and mine, ever to have heard your opinion on the ordinary way of falling in love, amongst people of our station in life: I do not mean the persons who proceed in the way of bargain, but those whose affection is placed on the person.

Though I be, as you know very well, but a very awkward lover myself, yet as I have some opportunities of observing the conduct of others who are much better skilled in the affair of courtship than I am. I often think it is owing to lucky chance more than to good management, that there are not more unhappy marriages than usually are.

It is natural for a young fellow to like the acquaintance of the females, and customary for him to keep them company when occasion serves; some one of them is more agreeable to him than the rest; there is something, he knows not what pleases him, he knows not how, in her company. This I take to be what is

called love with the greatest part of us, and I must own, my dear E. it is a hard game such a one as you has to play when you meet with such a lover. You cannot refuse but he is sincere, and yet though you use him ever so favourably, perhaps in a few months, or at farthest in a year or two, the same unaccountable fancy may make him as distractedly fond of another, whilst you are quite forgot. I am aware that perhaps the next time I have the pleasure of seeing you, you may bid me to take my lesson home, as tell me that the passion I have professed for you is perhaps one of these transient flashes I have been describing; but I hope, my dear E., you will do me the justice to believe me, when I assure you, that the love I have for you is founded on the sacred principles of virtue and honour, and by consequence so long as you continue possessed of these amiable qualities which first inspired my passion for you, so long must I continue to love you. Believe me my dear, it is love like this alone that can render the married state happy. People may talk of flames and raptures as long as they please; and a warm fancy with a flow of youthful spirits, may make them feel something like what they describe; but sure I am, the nobler faculties of the mind with kindred feelings of the heart, can only be the foundation of friendship, and it has always been my opinion, that married life was only friendship in a more exalted degree.

If you will be so good as grant my wishes, and it should please providence to spare us to the latest period, of life, I can look forward and see, that even then, though bent down with wrinkled age; even then, when all other wordly circumstances will be indifferent to me, I will regard my E. with the tenderest affection, and for this plain reason, because she is still possessed of these noble qualities, improved to a much higher degree, which first inspired my affectation for her.

“O happy state! When souls each other draw,  
When love is liberty, and nature law.”

I know, were I to speak in such a style of many a girl, who thinks herself possessed of no small share of sense, she would think it ridiculous – but the

language of the heart is, my dear E., the only courtship I shall ever use to you. When I look over what I have written, I am sensible it is vastly different from the ordinary style of courtship – but I shall make no apology – I know your good nature will excuse what your good sense may see amiss.

**What on earth would a young serving girl make of a letter like that? On one hand he is almost warning her that he might be tempted to stray, and on the other, he considers that friendship will be sufficient to hold them together through the years.**

**(8) Alison Begbie**

Lochlea, 1781

My dear E.

I have often thought it a peculiar unlucky circumstance in love, that though in every other situation in life, telling the truth is not only the safest, but actually by far the easiest way of proceeding. A lover is never under greater difficulty in acting, or more puzzled for expression, when his passion is sincere, and his intentions are honorable. I do not think that it is very difficult for a person of ordinary capacity to talk of love and fondness, which are not felt, and to make vows of constancy and fidelity, which are never intended to be performed, if he be villain enough to practise such detestable conduct: but to a man whose heart glows with the principles of integrity and truth; and who sincerely loves a woman of amiable person, uncommon refinement of sentiment, and purity of manners – to such a one, in such circumstances, I can assure you my dear, from my own feelings at this present moment, courtship is a task indeed. There is such a number of foreboding fears, and distrustful anxieties crowd into my mind when I am in your company, or when I sit down and write to you, that what to speak of or what to write I am altogether at a loss.

There is one rule which I have hitherto practiced, and which I shall invariably keep with you, and that is, honestly to tell you the plain truth. There is something so mean and unmanly about the arts of dissimulation and falsehood, that I am surprised they can be acted by anyone in so noble, so generous a passion as virtuous love. No, my dear E. I shall never endeavour to gain your favor by such detestable practices. If you will be so good and generous as to admit me for your partner, your companion, your bosom friend through life; there is nothing on this side of eternity shall give me greater transport; but I shall never think of purchasing your hand by arts unworthy of a man, and I will add, of a Christian. There is one thing, my dear, which I earnestly request of you, and it is this; that you would soon rather put an end to my hopes by a peremptory refusal, or cure me of my fears by generous consent.

It would oblige me much if you would send me a line or two when convenient. I shall only add further, that if a behaviour regulated (though perhaps but very imperfectly) by the rules of honor and virtue, if a heart devoted to love and esteem you, and an earnest endeavour to promote your happiness; if these are qualities you would wish in a friend, in a husband; I hope you shall ever find them in your real friend and sincere lover.

**The prospect of being the Bard's bosom friend was insufficient enticement to attract Alison to the altar for she rejected his proposal of marriage.**

**(9) Alison Begbie**

Lochlea, June 1781

I ought in good manners to have acknowledged the receipt of your letter before this time, but my heart was so shocked with the contents of it, that I can scarcely yet collect my thoughts so as to write to you on the subject. I will not attempt to describe what I felt on receiving your letter. I read it over and over, again and again, and though it was in the politest language of refusal, yet it was peremptory;

“you were sorry you could make me a return, but you wish me” what without you I never can obtain, “you wish me all kind of happiness,” it would be weak and unmanly to say that without you I can never be happy; but sure I am, that sharing a life with you, would have given it a relish, that, wanting you I can never taste.

Your, uncommon personal advantages, and your superior good sense, do not so much strike me; these possibly in a few instances may be met in others; but that amiable goodness, that tender feminine softness, that endearing sweetness of disposition, with all the charming offspring of a warm feeling heart – these I never again expect to meet with such a degree in this world. All these charming qualities, heightened by an education much beyond any thing I have ever met in any woman I ever dared to approach, have made an impression that I do not think the world can ever efface. My imagination had fondly flattered itself with a wish, I dare not say it ever reached a hope, that possibly I might one day call you mine. I had formed the most delightful images, and my fancy fondly brooded over them, but now I am wretched for the loss of what I really had no right to expect. I must now think no more of you as a mistress, still I presume to ask to be admitted as a friend. As such I wish to be allowed to wait on you, and as I expect to remove in a few days a little farther off, and you I suppose will perhaps soon leave this place, I wish to see you or hear from you soon; and if an expression should perhaps escape me rather too warm for friendship, I hope you will pardon it in, my dear Miss Begbie, (pardon me the dear expression for once).....

**Young Robert was obviously smarting when he wrote to William Niven. Unfortunately, we do not have the letter referred to in the following, but it is clear that he is still bitter about being rejected by Alison.**

**(3) William Niven**

Lochlee, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1781

Dear Sir,

I shall not begin with considering whether you are to blame, or I am to blame, or who of us is to blame for this long, long interval in our correspondence.

In my letter, which I wrote you in February last, I touched a subject which, I thought, would have produced an immediate answer; but it seems I have been mistaken, tho' I suspect not altogether neither. Had not the hurried season of seed-time come on so soon as it did. I would have wrote you farther on the subject; but so fatigued was my body & so hebetated my mind, that I could neither think, nor write any thing to purpose..

I know you will hardly believe me when I tell you, that by a strange conjecture of circumstances, I am intirely got rid of all connections with the tender sex. I mean in the way of courtship; it is, however absolutely certain that I am so; though how long I shall continue so, Heaven only knows; but be that as it may, I shall never be so involved as I was again.

Our communion was on Sunday se'en night. I mention this to tell you that I saw your cousin there, with some of Mr Hamilton's sons. You cannot imagine how pleased I was to steal a look at him, & trace the resemblance of my old friend. I was prepossessed in his favour on that account, but still more by that ingenuous modesty (a quality so rare among students, especially in the divinity way) which is so apparent in his air and manner. I assure you my heart warmed to him; I was only sorry I could not tell him, how happy I would have been to have had it in my power to have obliged him. You know I am a Physiognomist, so will not be surprised at this. I shall expect to hear from you soon; & shall conclude with assuring you that I am your sincere wellwisher and humble servant.

Robt Burns

**Following his rejection by Alison Begbie, young Robert decided to move to Irvine to learn the trade of flax-dressing, but his stay in Irvine was not a happy one. Although he appears to have enjoyed a fair amount of carousing in several of the town's taverns, his health deteriorated rapidly and his partner was a scoundrel. To cap his problems their premises burnt to the**

ground while they were celebrating the arrival of the New Year, apparently owing to the drunken behaviour of his partner's wife. But before this occurrence he had written to his father. The sadness and despair in that letter, written by a lad of 22 to his father, is incredible. William Burnes brought his son back from Irvine as soon as he received the letter, but it took several months of convalescence before Robert returned to anything like his former self.

**(4) William Burnes**

Irvine, December 27<sup>th</sup> 1781

Honored Sir,

I have purposely delayed writing in the hope that I would have the pleasure of seeing you on Newyearday but work comes so hard upon us that I do not chuse to come as well for that, as also for some other little reasons which I shall tell you at meeting. My health is much about what it was when you were here only my sleep is rather sounder and on the whole I am rather better than otherwise tho it is but by very slow degrees. The weakness of my nerves has so debilitated my mind that I dare not, either review past events, or look forward into futurity; for the least anxiety, or perturbation in my breast, produces most unhappy effects on my whole frame.

Sometimes, indeed, when for an hour or two, as is sometimes the case, my spirits are a little lightened, I glimmer a little into futurity; but my principal, and indeed my only pleasurable employment is looking backwards & forwards in a moral & religious way — I am quite transported at the thought that ere long, perhaps very soon, I shall bid an eternal adieu to all the pains and uneasiness & disquietudes of this weary life; for I assure you I am heartily tired of it, and If I do not deceive myself I could contentedly & gladly resign it.

The Soul uneasy & confin'd from home,

Rests & expatiates in a life to come.

Pope

It is for this reason I am more pleased with the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> verses of the 7<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Revelation than any ten times as many verses in the whole Bible, & would not exchange the noble enthusiasm with which they inspire me, for all that this world has to offer. As for this world I despair of ever making a figure in it. – I am not formed for the bustle of the busy nor the flutter of the Gay, I shall never again be capable of it, indeed, I am altogether unconcern'd at the thought of it. I foresee that very probably Poverty & Obscurity await me & I am, in some measure prepared & daily preparing to meet & welcome them. I have but just time & paper to return you my grateful thanks for the many Lessons of Virtue & Piety you have given me – Lessons which were but too much neglected when they were given but which I hope have been remembered ere it is yet too late. Present my dutiful respects to my Mother & my Compliments to Mr & Mrs Muir and with wishing you all a merry Newyearday.

I am, Honored Sir, your dutiful son

Robert Burns

.

**Another letter to an old friend written in the manner of an essay.**

**( 10 ) Thomas Orr**

Lochlea, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1782

Dear Sir,

I have been designed to write to you of a long time but was at a loss for a direction as I am ignorant what place in the country you are in. I have nothing to tell you of news; for myself I am going on in my old way – taking as light a burden as I can, of the cares of the world, studying men, their manners & their ways, as well as I can. Believe me Tom, it is the only study in the world will yield solid satisfaction. To be rich & to be great are the grand concerns of this world's men, & to be sure if moderately pursued it is laudable; but where is it moderately pursued? The greater part of men grasp at riches as eagerly as if Poverty were but another word for Damnation & misery, whereas I affirm that the man whose only wish is to become great & rich; whatever he may appear to be, or whatever he may pretend to be; at the bottom he is but a miserable wretch. Avoid this sordid turn of mind if you would be happy. Observe mankind around you; endeavour by studying the wisdom & Prudence of some & the folly & madness of others, to make yourself wiser & better. I hope you will write me soon & tell me what your mind is employed in, what your studies principally are; & believe me, that you may be wise & virtuous, generous & humane is the sincere wish of your friend.

Robt Burns

**Robert Burns was indeed fortunate that his father had been insistent on ensuring his children received the best education possible for him to obtain on their behalf. His father combined his resources with some of his Alloway neighbours and enlisted an 18 year-old youth, John Murdoch, as a teacher for their children. Murdoch's influence in the education of young Robert was of great importance and when he (Murdoch) left the area, he visited the Burns family to present them with a Shakespeare play, 'Titus Andronicus.' However young Robert considered this play much too violent for family reading and threatened to destroy it if it was left. Murdoch was not at all put out by this and stated how pleased he was that one so young could have such strong opinions.**

**(13) John Murdoch**

Lochlea, 15th January 1783

Dear Sir,

As I have an opportunity of sending you a letter without putting you to that experience which any production of mine would but ill repay; I embrace it with pleasure to tell you that I have not forgotten, nor ever will forget, the many obligations I lie under to your kindness and friendship. I do not doubt, Sir, but you will wish to know what has been the result of all the pains of an indulgent father and a masterly teacher; and I wish I could gratify your curiosity with such a recital you would be pleased with; but that is what I am afraid will not be the case. I have, indeed, kept pretty clear of vicious habits; & in this respect, I hope, my conduct will not disgrace the education I have gotten; but as a man of the world, I am most miserably deficient. One would have thought that, bred as I have been under a father who has figured pretty well as un homme des affaires, I might have been, what the world calls, a pulsing, active fellow; but to tell you truth, Sir, there is hardly any thing more the reverse. I seem to be one sent into the world, to see, and observe; and I very easily compound with the knave who tricks me of my money, if there be any thing original about him which shows me human nature in a different light from any thing I have seen before. In short, the joy of my heart is to "Study

men, their manners, & their ways;” and for this darling subject, I cheerfully sacrifice every other consideration; I am quite indolent about these other great concerns that set the bustling Sons of Care agog; and if I have to answer the present hour, I am very easy with regard to any thing further. Even the last, worst shift of the unfortunate and the wretched, does not terrify me; I know that even then, my talent for what country folks call “a sensible crack,” when once it is sanctified by a hoary head, could procure me so much esteem, that even then – I would learn to be happy. However, I am under no apprehensions about that, for though indolent, yet so far as an extremely delicate constitution permits, I am not lazy; and in many things, especially in tavern matters, I am a strict eo-conomist; not, indeed, for the sake of the money, but one of the principal parts in my composition is a kind of stomach; & I scorn to fear the face of any man living; above every thing, I abhor as hell, the idea of sneaking in a corner to avoid a dun – possibly some pitiful, sordid wretch, who in my heart I despise and detest. ’Tis this, and this alone, that endears eo-conomy to me. – In the matter of books, indeed, I am very profuse. My favorite authors are of the sentimental kind, such as Shenstone, particularly his Elegies, Thomson, Man of feeling, a book I prize next to the bible, Man of the World, Sterne, especially his Sentimental journey, McPherson’s Ossian, &c.. These are the glorious models after which I endeavour to form my conduct, and ’tis incongruous, ’tis absurd to suppose that the man whose mind glows with sentiments lighted up at their sacred flame – the man whose heart distends with benevolence to all the human race – he “who can soar above this little scene of things” -- can he descend to mind the paltry concerns about which the terrae-filial race fret, and fume, and vex themselves? O how the glorious Triumph swells my heart! I forget that I am a poor insignificant devil, unnoticed and unknown, stalking up and down fairs and markets when I happen to be in them, reading a page or two of mankind, and “catching the manners living as they rise” whilst the men of business jostle me on every side, as an idle encumbrance in their way. – But I dare say I have by this time tired your patience, so I shall conclude with begging you to give Mrs Murdoch – not my compliments – for that is mere common place story,

but my warmest, kindest wishes for her welfare; and accept of the same yourself from,

Dear Sir, your sincere friend, and obliged humble Servant  
Robt Burns

**William Burnes had originally lived in Aberdeenshire prior to moving south in search of work. This letter is to Robert's cousin who still lived their advising him of William's deteriorating health. Interesting to note how the name became shortened from Burness to Burnes and finally to Burns.**

**( 14 ) James Burness**

Lochlie, 21 June 1783

Dear Sir,

My father received your favour of the 10th current, and as he has been for some months very poorly in health, and is in his own opinion (and, indeed, in almost everybody else's) in a dying condition, he has only, with great difficulty, written a few farewell lines to each of his brothers-in-law. For this melancholy reason, I now hold the pen for him to thank you for your kind letter, and to assure you, sir, that it shall not be my fault if my father's correspondence in the North die with him. My brother writes to John Caird, and to him I must refer you for the news of our family. I shall only trouble you with a few particulars relative to the wretched state of this country. Our markets are exceedingly high; oatmeal 17d and 18d per peck, and not to be got even at that price. We have indeed been pretty well supplied with quantities of white peas from England and elsewhere, but that resource is likely to fail us, and what will become of us then, particularly the very poorest sort, Heaven only knows. This country, till of late, was flourishing incredibly in the manufacture of silk, lawn and carpet-weaving; and we are still carrying on a good deal in that way, but much reduced from what it was. We also had a fine trade in the shoe way, but now entirely ruined, and hundreds driven to a starving condition on account of it. Farming is also at a very low ebb with us. Our lands, generally speaking are mountainous and barren; and our land-holders, full of ideas of

farming gathered from the English and the Lothians, and other rich spoils in Scotland, make no allowance for the odds of the quality of land, and consequently stretch us much beyond what in the event we are able to pay [...] In short, my dear sir, since the unfortunate beginning of this American war, and its as unfortunate conclusion, this country has been, and still is, decaying very fast. Even in higher life, a couple of our Ayrshire noblemen, and the major part of our Knights and squires, are all insolvent. [...] There is a great trade of smuggling carried on along our coasts, which, however destructive to the interests of the kingdom at large, certainly enriches this corner of it, but too often indeed at the expense of our morals. However, it enables individuals to make, at least for a time, a splendid appearance; but fortune, as is usual with her when she is uncommonly lavish of her favours, is generally even with them at the last; and happy were it for numbers of them if she would leave them no worse than when she found them.

My mother sends you a small present of cheese; 'tis but a very small one, as our last year's stock is sold off; [...]

I shall conclude this long letter with assuring you that I shall be very happy to hear from you, or any of our friends in your country, when opportunity serves.

My father sends you, probably for the last time in this world, his warmest wishes for your welfare and happiness; and my mother and the rest of the family desire to enclose their kind compliments to you, along with those of, sir, your affectionate cousin.

**Gavin Hamilton was a lawyer in Mauchline who became one of Burns' most trusted friends. His attitude towards the church and the local ministry caused him to be in constant conflict with the Rev Daddy Auld, a situation that enamoured him towards Burns, a fellow critic of the ministry.**

**The following letter is from the start of the friendship when Burns and his brother Gilbert were struggling young farmers.**

**(15) Gavin Hamilton**

Mauchline, 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1783

Sir,

As you were pleased to give us the offer of a private bargain on the cows you intend for sale, my brother & I this day took a look at them and a friend with us on whose judgement we could something depend to enable us to form an estimate. If you are still intending to let us have them in that way, please appoint a day that we may wait on you and either agree amongst ourselves or else fix on men to whom we may refer it, tho' I hope we will not need any reference.

I am Sir your humble servant

Robert Burness

**Much has been made over the years of the Bard's relationship with his father, but the letters reveal clearly that Robert was deeply fond of his father and regarded him with reverence. Stories of family fall-outs over the young poet attending dancing classes against his father's wishes are no different to young men at odds with parental authority through the ages.**

**William Burnes died on the 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1784. At the time of his death he was involved in a distressing law-suit regarding the lease of his farm.**

**Dr Currie wrote of the Bard's father.**

**'The father of our poet is described by one who knew him towards the latter end of his life as above the common stature, thin and bent with labour. His countenance was serious and expressive, and the scanty locks on his head were grey. He was of a religious turn of mind, and, as is usual among the Scottish peasantry, a good deal conversant in speculative theology. There is in Gilbert's hands a little manual of religious belief, in the form of a dialogue between a father and his son, composed by him for the use of his children, in which the benevolence of his heart seems to have led him to soften the rigid**

**Calvinism of the Scottish Church into something approaching Arminianism. He was a devout man, and in the practice of calling his family together to join in prayer. It is known that the exquisite picture in the “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” represents William Burnes and his family at their evening devotions.’**

**(16) James Burness**

Lochlea, 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1784

Dear Cousin,

I would have returned to you my thanks for your kind favour of the 13<sup>th</sup> December sooner, had it not been that I waited to give you an account of that melancholy event which for some time past we have from day to day expected.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> current I lost the best of fathers. Though, to be sure, we have had a long warning of the impending stroke; still the feelings of nature claim their part, and I cannot recollect the tender endearments and parental lessons of the best of friends and the ablest of instructors, without feeling what, perhaps, the calmer dictates of reason would partly condemn.

I hope my father’s friends in your country will not let their connection with this place die with him. For my part I shall ever with pleasure – with pride, acknowledge my connection with those who were allied by the ties of blood and friendship to a man whose memory I shall ever honor and revere.

I expect therefore, my dear Sir, you will not neglect any opportunity of letting me hear from you, which will very much oblige,

My dear Cousin,  
Yours sincerely  
Robert Burness.

**The father’s body was carried between two ponies traveling in tandem from Lochlie to where he was buried in Alloway churchyard. Robert wrote the following epitaph which was engraved on his father’s headstone.**

O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains,  
Draw near with pious rev'rence, and attend!  
Here lie the loving husband's dear remains,  
The tender father, and the gen'rous friend;  
The pitying heart that felt for human woe,  
The dauntless heart that fear'd no human pride;  
The friend of man – to vice alone a foe;  
For 'ev'n his failings lean'd to virtue's side.'

**Burns was very anxious to maintain communication with his late father's relations in Stonehaven and continued for some time to sign himself in the original spelling of his family name. However, far from discussing family matters he elected to give his cousin details of a religious sect that had evidently been the cause of much discussion in his neighbourhood.**

**( 17 ) James Burness**

Mossgiel, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1784

My dear Sir,

I ought in gratitude to have acknowledged the receipt of your last kind letter before this time, but without troubling you with any apology I shall proceed to inform you that our family are all in health at present and we were very happy with the unexpected favor of John Caird's company for near two weeks; & I must say it of him he is one of the most agreeable, facetious, warm-hearted lads I was ever acquainted with.

We have been surprised with one of the most extraordinary Phenomena in the moral world, which, I dare say, has happened in the course of this last Century. We have had a party of the Presbytry Relief as they call themselves, for some Time in this country. A pretty thriving society of them has been in the Burgh of Irvine for some years past, till about two years ago, a Mrs Buchan from Glasgow

came among them, & in a very short time made many converts among them & among others their Preacher, one Mr Whyte, who upon that account has continued however to preach in private to this party, & was supported, both he, & their spiritual Mother as they affect to call old Buchan, by the contributions of the rest, several of whom were in good circumstances; till in spring last the Populace rose & mobbed the old leader Buchan, & put her out of the town; on which all her followers voluntarily quitted the place likewise, & with such precipitation, that many of them never shut their doors behind them; one left with a washing on the green, another a cow bellowing at the crib without meat or any body to mind her & after several stages they are fixed at present in the neighbourhood of Dumfries.

Their tenets are a strange jumble of enthusiastic jargon, among others, she pretends to give them the Holy Ghost by breathing on them, which she does with postures & practices that are scandalously indecent; they have likewise disposed of all their effects & hold a community of goods, & live nearly an idle life, carrying on a great farce of pretended devotion in barns, & woods, where they lodge & lye all together, & hold likewise a community of women, as it is another of their tenets that they can commit no moral sin. I am personally acquainted with most of them, & I can assure you the above mentioned are facts.

This My Dear Sir, is one of the many instances of the folly in leaving the guidance of sound reason, & common sense in matters of Religion. Whenever we neglect or despise these sacred Monitors, the whimsical notions of a disturbed brain are taken for the immediate influences of the Deity, & the wildest fanaticism, & the most inconsistent absurdities will meet with abettors & converts. Nay I have often thought, that the more out-of-the-way & ridiculous their fancies are, if once they are sacrificed under the sacred name of Religion, the unhappy mistaken votaries are the more firmly glued to them.

I expect to hear from you soon, & I beg you will remember me to all friends, & believe me to be,

My Dear Sir, your affectionate Cousin

Robert Burness

Direct to me at Mossgiel, Parish of Machline, near Kilmarnock.

**Jean and Anna Ronald were the daughters of a local farmer. Robert and his brother Gilbert were friendly with them and at one stage Gilbert was on the verge of a romantic affair with Jean, but the social divide between the poor Burns lads and the wealthy Ronald sisters was too great to be bridged. Robert Burns was very aware of the advantages in marrying a rich young lady and wrote the following letter to an old school friend, John Tennant, where he enlarged upon the subject. However, in a poem that he composed about the Ronalds he also emphasised that beauty is skin-deep and that a good intellect is preferable in a woman.**

**(18) John Tennant**

Mossgiel, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1784

My dear Sir,

My unlucky illness of Friday last did not do me a greater disservice than in disappointing me of the pleasure I had promised myself in spending an hour with you. I got so much better on Saturday as to be able to ride home, but I am still in a kind of slow fever, as I trouble you with the contents of this small letter rather to relieve a little the langor of my spirits than anything particular I have to tell you. I have been informed by Mr. Robert Paterson how affairs went among you on Friday night, tho' by the bye I am apt to suspect his information in some particulars. He tells me you used all your powers of eloquence, first on my friend Miss Ronald and next on Miss C----, to have the liberty of escorting them home, but all to no purpose; & I assure you Mr Paterson plumes himself not a little that he has been able to foil so formidable an antagonist. In short, as Mr Robert is very sanguine in all his projects, he seems fully assured of carrying his point; and I declare I never saw a man more intoxicated with success in my life. However, to do the gentleman

justice, his passion is but the raptures of a Lover in Romance, not the rant of a dramatic Hero. Her sweet, sonsy face, which I have so often admir'd, he knows no more about it but only as it helps him to distinguish her from another person; & tho' he talks of her being "a grand cracker" to speak in Mr Patersons own style, yet he seems to have little idea of her engaging frank, honest-hearted manner; and for good sense and education they are rather against him, as being so much superior to his own, they entangle him in a thousand difficulties; but, like a true Merchant he has stated it in the ledgers of his fancy thus:

Stock, Dr to cash, by Mrs Paterson's portion } 300 pounds –

We talk of air & manner, of beauty & wit, and lord knows what unmeaning nonsense; but – there – is solid charms for you. Who would not be in raptures with a woman that will make him 300 pounds richer? — & then to have a woman to lye with when one pleases without running any risk of the cursed expence of bastards and all the other concomitants of that species of Smuggling. These are solid views of matrimony.

But I forget that tho' I am cheating my languid moments with this nonsensical letter I am putting your patience to penance, so I conclude with wishing to see you, tho' when or where I know not.

I am, My Dear Sir, yours Sincerely,  
Robt Burns

**The next short note, again to Thomas Orr, relates to a young housekeeper known as 'Montgomerie's Peggy.' Burns had high hopes of building a relationship with Peggy but was dismayed to discover that she was already betrothed to someone else.**

**( 19 ) Thomas Orr**

Mossgiel 11<sup>th</sup> November 1784

Dear Thomas,

I am much obliged to you for your last letter tho' I assure you the contents of it gave me no manner of concern. I am at present so cursedly taken in with an affair of gallantry that I am very glad Peggy is off my hands as I am at present embarrassed enough without her. I don't chuse to enter into particulars in writing but never was a poor rakish rascal in a more pitiful taking. I should be glad to see you to tell you the affair, meanwhile

I am your friend

Robt Burness

**The next letter was sent to a young lady, Margaret Kennedy, with an enclosed poem titled 'Young Peggy.' There was no romantic link between Burns and Margaret, she was simply someone he had met at the home of his good friend Gavin Hamilton. In both the poem and the letter he wishes her well in her future life, but sadly, that was not to be.**

**Margaret was seduced by an army captain and bore him a daughter. The captain refused to acknowledge the child and the affair was taken to court where it was decided the child was indeed the issue of a legal marriage. Margaret was awarded a substantial sum of money from the court for the upbringing of the child, but died before the action was completed.**

**(20) Margaret Kennedy**

(early October 1785)

Madam,

Permit me to present you with the inclosed SONG, as a small, tho' grateful tribute for the honor of your acquaintance. I have, in these verses, attempted some fair sketches of your Portrait in the unembellished simple manner of descriptive Truth.

Flattery, I leave to your Lovers; whose exaggerating Fancies may make them imagine you still nearer, if possible, to Perfection than you really are.

Poets, Madam, of all Mankind, feel most forcibly the powers of Beauty; as if they are really Poets of Nature's making, their feelings must be finer, and their taste more delicate than most of the world. In the Chearful bloom of Spring, or the pensive mildness of Autumn; the Grandeur of Summer, or the hoary majesty of Winter; the Poet feels a charm unknown to the rest of his Species: even the sight of a fine flower, or the company of a fine Woman, (by far the finest part of God's works below) has sensations for the Poetic heart that the Herd of Man are strangers to. On this last account, Madam, I am as in many other things, indebted to Mr Hamilton's kindness in introducing me to you. Your Lovers may view you with a wish, I look on you with pleasure; their hearts, in your presence, may glow with desire, mine rises with Admiration.

That the Arrows of Misfortune, however they should, as incident to Humanity, glance a slight wound, may never reach your Heart — that the snare of Villainy may never beset you in the road of Life – that Innocence may hand you, by the path of Honor, to the dwelling of Peace, is the sincere wish of him who has the honor to be.

Madam,

Your most obedient and very humble servant

**By the time Burns wrote the next letter, he was locally famous as a poet. John Richmond was an old friend who had worked as a clerk for Gavin Hamilton, and when Burns made his first visit to Edinburgh he lodged in Richmond's room.**

**( 21 ) John Richmond**

Mossgiel, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1786

My Dear Sir,

I have not time at present to upbraid you for your silence and neglect. I shall only say I received yours with great pleasure. I have inclosed you a piece of rhyming ware for your perusal. I have been very busy with the muses since I saw you, and have composed, among several others, The Ordination, a poem on Mr McKinlay's being called to Kilmarnock, Scotch Drink a poem. The Cotter's Saturday Night, An Address to the Devil, &c.. I have likewise completed my poem on the dogs, but have not shown it to the world. My chief Patron now is Mr Aitken in Ayr who is pleased to express great approbation of my works. Be so good as send me Ferguson by Connel and I will remit you the money. I have no news to import you about Machlin, they are just going on in the old way. I have some very important news with respect to myself, not the most agreeable news that I am sure you cannot guess, but I shall give you the details some other time. I am extremely happy with Smith; he is all the friend I have now in Machlin. I can scarcely forgive your long neglect of me, & I beg you will let me hear from you regularly by Connel. If you would act your part as a FRIEND, I am sure neither GOOD nor BAD fortune should estrange or alter me. Excuse haste as I got yours but yesterday & am a little throng. If you write me duely I shall afterwards give you letters as long as my arm.

I am My Dear Sir

Yours

Robert Burness

We move on to 1786. Burns must by now have felt that he was a cursed man, destined to spend a life in misery and penury. He had already fathered a daughter by Elizabeth Paton, the child having been accepted as one of the family by the Bard's mother. He had fallen in love with Jean Armour and had undergone a form of marriage, quite normal in these days, that consisted of little more than signing a piece of paper to attest they were indeed man and wife. However, Jean became pregnant and her furious parents forbade her to have anymore to do with Burns, mutilated the paper, and sent her packing to a distant relative. Burns regarded this as an act of treachery on the part of Jean and promptly set about having his marriage annulled while at the same time starting an affair with Mary Campbell, known to the world as Highland Mary. Mary's reputation was far from unblemished, but Burns was infatuated and could see no faults in his new love. It was the intention of Burns to leave Scotland forever at this point and take Mary to the West Indies where they would start a new life together far away from the problems that beset Burns. Sadly Mary died, possibly of typhus, but more likely from premature child-birth, so the outcome was that Burns decided to remain in Scotland and try to have his poems published. It was about this episode that he wrote the following letters to his friends.

(25) Gavin Hamilton

Mossgiel, Saturday morn. 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1786

My proposals came to hand last night, and I know you would wish to have it in your power to do me a service as *early* as anybody, so I inclose a sheet of them. I must consult you, first opportunity, on the propriety of sending my *quondam* friend, Mr Aiken, a copy. If he is now reconciled to my character as an honest man, I would do it with all my soul, but I would not be beholden to the noblest being ever God created, if he imagined me to be a rascal. Apropos, old Mr Armour prevailed with him to mutilate that unlucky paper yesterday. Would you believe it? Tho' I had not a hope, nor even a wish to make her mine after her conduct; yet when he told me the names were all cut out of the paper, my heart died within me, and he cut my

very veins with the news. Perdition seize her falsehood, and perjurious perfidy! But God bless her and forgive my poor, once-dear, misguided girl. She is ill-advised. Do not despise me, Sir, I am indeed a fool, but a *knave* is an infinitely worse character than any body, I hope, will dare to give.

The unfortunate Robt Burns

**John Arnot was another friend of the Bard and Burns wrote him this rather boastful letter, full of suggestive innuendoes in which he relates his problems regarding Jean Armour and her family.**

**( 29 ) John Arnott,**

April 1786

Sir,

I have long wished for some kind of claim to the honor of your acquaintance, & since it is out of my power to make that claim by the least service of mine to you, I shall do it by asking a friendly office of you to me. I should be much hurt, Sir, if anyone should view my poor Parnassian Pegasus in the light of a spur-galled hack, & think that I wish to make a shilling or two by him. I spurn the thought.

It may do, maun do, Sir, wi' them wha  
Maun please the great folk for a wame-fou;  
For me, sae laigh I need na bow,  
For, Lord be thankit, I can plough:  
And when I downa yoke a naig,  
Then, Lord be thankit! I can beg.

You will then, I hope Sir, forgive my troubling you with the inclosed, and spare a poor heart-crushed devil a word of apologies – a business he is very unfit for at any time, but at present, widowed as he is of every woman-giving comfort, he is

utterly incapable of. Sad and grievous of late, Sir, has been my tribulation, and many and piercing sorrows; and, had it not been for the loss the world would have sustained in losing so great a poet, I had ere now done as a much wiser man, the famous Achitophel of long-headed memory, did before me, when he 'went home and set his house in order'.

I have lost, Sir, that dearest earthly treasure, that greatest blessing here below, that last, best gift which completed Adam's happiness in the garden of bliss; I have lost – I have lost – my trembling hand refuses its office, the frightened ink recoils up the quill – I have lost a, a, A WIFE!

Fairest of God's creation, last and best,  
How art thou lost.

You have doubtless, sir, heard my story, heard it with all its exaggerations; but as my actions, and my motives for action are peculiarly like myself and that is peculiarly like nobody else, I shall just beg a leisure moment and a spare tear of you until I tell my own story my own way.

I have been all my life, Sir, one of the rueful-looking, long-visaged sons of Disappointment. A damned Star has always kept my zenith, and shed its hateful influence in the emphatic curse of the Prophet –“And behold whatsoever he doth, it shall not prosper!” I rarely hit where I aim, and if I want anything, I am almost sure never to find it where I seek it. For instance, if my penknife is needed, I pull out twenty things – a plough-wedge, a horse nail, an old letter, or a tattered rhyme, in short, everything but my penknife; and that, at last, after a painful, fruitless search, will be found in the unsuspected corner of an unsuspected pocket, as if on purpose thrust out of the way. Still, Sir, I long had a wishing eye to that inestimable blessing, a wife. My mouth watered deliciously, to see a young fellow, after a few idle commonplace stories from a gentleman in black, strip & go to bed with a young girl & no one durst say black was his eye; while I, for just doing the same thing, only wanting that ceremony, am made a Sunday's laughing-stock, and

abused like a pickpocket. I was well aware, though, that if my ill-starred fortune got the least hint of my connubial wish, my scheme would go to nothing. To prevent this, I determined to take my measures with such thought and fore-thought, such cautions and precautions, that all the malignant planets in the Hemisphere should be unable to blight my designs. Not content with, to sue the words of the celebrated Westminster Divines, "The outward & ordinary means," I left no stone unturned, sounded every unfathomed depth, stopped up every hole & bore of an objection: but how shall I tell it! Notwithstanding all this turning of stones, stopping of bores, &c. whilst I, with secret pleasure, marked my project swelling to the proper crisis, & was singing Te deum in my own fancy; or to change the metaphor, whilst I was vigorously pressing on the siege; had carried the counter-scarp, & made a practicable breach behind the curtain in the gorge of the very principal bastio; nay, having mastered the covered way, I had found means to slip a choice detachment into the very citadel; While I had nothing less in view than displaying my victorious banners on the top of the walls. Heaven and Earth! Must I remember? My damned star wheeled about to the zenith, by whose baleful rays Fortune took the alarm, & pouring in her forces on all quarters, front, flank & rear. I was utterly routed, my baggage lost, my military chest in the hands of the enemy; & your poor devil of a humble servant, commander in chief forsooth, was obliged to scamper away, without wither arms or honors of war, except his bare bayonet & cartridge pouch; nor in all probability had he escaped even with them, had he not made a shift to hide them under the lap of his military cloak.

In short, Pharaoh at the Red Sea, Darius at Arbela, Pompey at Pharsalia, Edward at Bannockburn, Charles at Pultoway, Burgoyne at Saratoga—no Prince, Potentate, or Commander of ancient or modern unfortunate memory ever got a more shameful or more total defeat.

"O horrible! O horrible. Most horrible!"

How I bore this can only be conceived. All powers of recital labor far, far behind. There is a pretty large portion of Bedlam in the composition of a poet at any time;

but on this occasion I was nine parts and nine tenths, out of ten, stark staring mad. At first I was fixed in stuporific insensibility, silent, sullen, staring like Lot's wife besaltified in the plains of Gomorrha. But my second paroxysm chiefly beggars description. The rifted northern ocean, when returning suns dissolve the chains of winter, and loosening precipices of long-accumulated ice tempest with hideous crash the foamy Deep, images like these may give some faint shadow of what was the situation of my bosom. My chained faculties broke loose; my maddening passions, roused to tenfold fury, bore over their banks with impetuous, resistless force, carrying every check and principle before them. Counsel was an unheeded call to the passing hurricane; Reason a screaming elk in the vortex of Moskoe strom; and Religion a feebly-struggling beaver down the roarings of Niagara. I reprobated the first moment of my existence; execrated Adam's folly-infatuated wish for that goodly-looking but poison-breathing gift which had ruined him and undone me; and called on the womb of uncreated night to close over me and all my sorrows.

A storm naturally overblows itself. My spent passions gradually sunk into a lurid calm; and by degrees I have subsided into the time-settled sorrow of the sable-widower, who, wiping away the decent tear, lifts up his grief-worn eye to look for another wife.

Such is the state of man; today he buds  
His tender leaves of hope; tomorrow blossoms  
And bears his blushing honors thick upon him;  
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,  
And nips his root, & then he falls as I do.

Such, Sir, has been the fatal era of my life. "And it came to pass that when I looked for sweet, behold bitter; and for light, behold darkness."

But this is not all: already the holy beagles, the houghmagandie pack, begin to snuff the scent, & I expect every moment to see them cast off, & hear them after me in full cry; but as I am an old fox, I shall give them dodging and doubling for it, & bye and bye I intend to earth among the mountains of Jamaica.

I am so struck, on a review, with the impertinent length of this letter, that I shall not increase it with one single word of apology, but abruptly conclude with assuring you that I am, Sir, yours and misery's most humble servant. :

Robt Burns

**Burns continues to relate the story of his affair with Jean as he writes to another friend. This time he is much more restrained, verging on self-pity as he confesses to Brice that he still loves Jean Armour.**

**(31) David Brice**

Mossgiel, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1786

Dear Brice,

I received your message by G. Paterson, & as I am not very throng at present, I just write to let you know that there is such a worthless, rhyming reprobate, as your humble servant still in the land of the living, tho' I can scarcely say in the place of hope. I have no news to tell you that will give me any pleasure to mention, or you, to hear. Poor, ill-advised, ungrateful Armour came home on Friday last. You have heard all the particulars of that affair, and a black affair it is. What she thinks of her conduct now, I don't know; one thing I know, she has made me completely miserable. Never man lov'd, or rather ador'd, a woman more than I did her and to confess a truth between you and me, I do still love her to distraction after all, tho' I won't tell her so, tho' I see her which I don't want to do. My poor dear, unfortunate Jean! How happy I have been in her arms! It is not the losing her that makes me so unhappy; but for *her* sake I feel most severely. I foresee she is on the road to, I am afraid, *eternal* ruin; and those who made so much noise, and showed so much

grief, at the thought of her being *my wife*, may some day see her connected in such a manner as may give them real cause of vexation. I am sure I do not wish it; may Almighty God forgive her ingratitude and perjury to me, as I from my very soul forgive her! And may His grace be with her, to bless her in all her future life! – I can have no nearer idea of the place of eternal punishment than what I have felt in my own breast on her account. I have tried often to forget her; I have run into all kinds of dissipation and riot, Mason-meetings, drinking matches, and other mischief, to drive her out of my head, but all in vain: & now for a grand cure, the Ship is on her way home that is to take me out to Jamaica, and then, farewell, dear old Scotland, and farewell dear, ungrateful Jean, for never, never will I see you more!

You will have heard that I am going to commence Poet in print; and tomorrow my works go to the press. I expect it will be a Volume about two-hundred pages. – It is just the last foolish action I intend to do; and then turn a wise man as fast as possible.

I shall expect a letter from you first leisure moment; and believe me to be,

Dear Brice, your friend and wellwisher

Robt Burns

**Still keen to see Jean, he is thwarted by her parents.**

**( 33 ) John Richmond**

Mosgiel, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1786

[...]I have waited on Armour since her return home; not from the least view of reconciliation but merely to ask for her health, and to you I will confess it, from a foolish hankering fondness, very ill-plac'd indeed. The mother forbade me from the house, nor did Jean show that penitence that might have been expected. However, the Priest, I am informed, will give me a certificate as a single man, if I comply with the rules of the church, which for that very reason I intend to do.

Sunday morn:] I am just going to put on Sackcloth and ashes this day. I am indulged so far as to appear in my own seat. Peccavi, pater, miserere mei. My book will be ready in a fortnight. If you have any subscribers return them to me by Connel.

The Lord stand wi' the Righteous

Amen amen

Robt Burns

**While Burns was penning these letters and expressing his heart-break and sorrow over Jean, he was already embroiled in a passionate affair with Mary Campbell, but omitted to mention that fact to his friends.**

**Burns was also being pursued through the courts by Jean's father, so before he was due to sail he set out the following document in July 1786 in which he transfers all his worldly goods to his brother Gilbert, who was also given responsibility for bringing up young Elizabeth, the illegitimate daughter.**

**(35)**

### **DEED OF ASSIGNMENT**

Know all these men by these presents that I Robert Burns in Mossgiel, whereas I intend to leave Scotland and go abroad, and having acknowledged myself the father of a child named Elizabeth, begot upon Elizabeth Paton in Largieside, and whereas Gilbert Burns in Mossgiel, my brother, has become bound, and hereby binds and obliges himself to alimnt clothe and educate my said natural child in a suitable manner as if she were his own, and in case her Mother chuse to part with her, and that until she arrive at the age of fifteen years. Therefore and to enable the said Gilbert Burns to make good his said engagement, Wit ye me to have assigned, disponed, conveyed and made over to, and in favors of the said Gilbert Burns his Heirs, Executors and Assignees, who are always to be bound in like manner with himself, all and Sundry Goods, Gear, Corns, Cattle, Horses, Nolt, Sheep, Household furniture, and all other moveable effects of

whatever kind that I shall leave behind me on my departure from the kingdom, after allowing for my part of the conjunct debts due the said Gilbert Burns and me as joint Tacksmen of the farm of Mossgiel. And particularly, without prejudice of the aforesaid generality, the profits that may arise from the Publication of my Poems presently in the Press. And also, I hereby dispone and convey to him in trust for behoof of my said natural daughter the Copyright of said Poems in so far as I can dispose of the same by law, after she arrives at the age of fifteen years complete – Surrogating and Substituting the said Gilbert Burns, my brother and his foresaids in my full right, title, room and place of the whole Premises, with power to him to intromit with, and dispose upon the same at pleasure, and in general, to do every other thing in the Premises that I could have done myself – before granting hereof, but always with and under the conditions before expressed. And I oblige myself to warrand this disposition and assignation from my own proper fact and deed allenary – Consenting to the Registration hereof in the Books of Council and Session, or any other Judges Books – competent, therein to remain for preservation and constitute... whereof I have Procurators &c. In witness whereof I have wrote and signed these presents, consisting of this and the preceding page, on stamped paper, with my own hand, at Mossgiel, the twenty second day of July, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-six years.

Robert Burns

**Burns obviously realized that Jean was at the mercy of her parents as he wrote to John Richmond, asking him to be tolerant towards Jean Armour. His detestation of Jean's mother comes through loud and clear.**

**(36 ) John Richmond.**

Mossgiel, 30th July, 1786.

My Dear Richmond,

My hour is now come - you and I will never meet in Britain more. I have orders, within three weeks at farthest, to repair aboard the 'Nancy ', Captain Smith, from Clyde to Jamaica, and to call at Antigua. This, except to our friend Smith, whom

God long preserve, is a secret about Mauchline. Would you believe it? Armour has got a warrant to throw me in jail till I find security for an enormous sum. This they keep an entire secret, but I got it by a channel they little dream of; and I am wandering from one friend's house to another, and, like a true son of the Gospel, "have nowhere to lay my head." I know you will pour an execration on her head, but spare the poor, ill-advised girl, for my sake; though may all the Furies that rend the injured, enraged Lover's bosom await the old Harridan, her Mother until her latest hour! May Hell string the arm of Death to throw the fatal dart, and all the winds of warring elements rouse the infernal flames to welcome her approach! For Heaven's sake burn this letter and never show it to a living creature. I write in a moment of rage, reflecting on my miserable situation—exil'd, abandon'd, forlorn. I can write no more - let me hear from you by the return of the coach. I will write you ere I go.

I am, Dear Sir, yours, here and hereafter,

Robt Burns

**James Smith was another of the Bard's most trusted friends, the brother of Jean Smith, one of the Mauchline Belles immortalized by Burns. He ranked on the same level as John Richmond in the eyes of Robert Burns. Indeed, the three had enjoyed many raucous times together in Mauchline as young men. Smith became a partner in a firm dealing in calico that eventually failed, causing him to take the familiar route of young Scots at that time to the West Indies. It is evident in this letter that Burns still has Jean Armour to the forefront of his mind.**

**(37) James Smith**

**1<sup>st</sup> August, 1786**

My friend, I need not tell you the receipt of yours gave me pleasure.

O Jeany, thou hast stolen away my soul!  
In vain I strive against the lov'd idea;  
Thy tender image sallies on my thoughts,

My firm resolves become an easy prey!

Against two things however, I am as fixed as Fate: staying at home, and owning her conjugally. The first, by Heaven I will not do! The last, by Hell I will never do!

The inclosed may divert you.

A good God bless you and make you happy up to the warmest, weeping wish of parting Friendship!

For me, I am witless wild and wicked; and have scarcely any vestige of the image of God left me, except a pretty large portion of of honour and an enthusiastic, incoherent Benevolence.

If you see Jean tell her, I will meet her. So help me Heaven in my hour of need!

Farewell till tomorrow morning!

Robt Burns

**John Kennedy was a cousin of Gavin Hamilton but was never one of the Bard's inner circle of friends**

**(38 ) John Kennedy**

Kilmarnock, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1786

My Dear Sir

Your truly facetious epistle of the 3rd instant gave me much entertainment. I was only sorry I had not the pleasure of seeing you as I passed your way; but we shall bring up all our lee way on Wednesday, the 16th Current, when I hope to have it in my power to call on you, and take a kind, very probably a last adieu, before I go for Jamaica; and I expect orders to repair to Greenock every day. I have at last made my public appearance, and am solemnly inaugurated into the numerous class of Authorship; but, now you have them, let them speak for themselves.

Farewell, dear friend! may guid luck hit you,

And 'mang her favourites admit you,  
If e'er Detraction shore to smit you,  
    May nane believe him,  
And ony Deil that thinks to get you,  
    Good Lord, deceive him,

Robt Burns

**John Logan was introduced to Burns by Gavin Hamilton and eventually distributed several copies of the Kilmarnock Edition on the Bard's behalf. The following letter gives some details of the transactions.**

**(39) John Logan**

Kilmarnock, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1786

I gratefully thank you for your kind offer in promoting my subscription, and still more for your very friendly letter. The first was doing me a Favour, but the last was doing me an Honour. I am in such a bustle at present, preparing for my West-India voyage, as I expect a letter every day from the Master of the vessel to repair directly to Greenock; that I am under a necessity to return you the subscription bills, and trouble you for the quantum of Copies till called for, or otherwise transmitted to the Gentlemen who have subscribed. Mr Bruce Campbell is already supplied with two copies, and I here send you 20 copies more. If any of the Gentlemen are supplied from any other quarter, 'tis no matter; the copies can be returned.

If orders from Greenock do not hinder, I intend doing myself the honor of waiting on you, Wednesday the 16<sup>th</sup> inst.

I am much hurt, Sir, that I must trouble you with the Copies; but circumstanced as I am, I know no other way your friends can be supplied.

I have the honour to be, SIR, your much indebted humble Servant

Robert Burns

(40) James Smith

Monday morn 14<sup>th</sup> August 1786

My Dear Sir,

I went to Dr Douglas yesterday fully resolved to take the opportunity of Captain Smith; but I found the Doctor with a Mr and Mrs White, both Jamaicans, and they have derang'd my plans altogether. They assure him that to send me from Savannah la Mar to Port Antonio will cost my Master, Charles Douglas, upwards of fifty pounds; besides running the risk of throwing myself into a pleuratic fever in consequences of hard travelling in the sun. On these accounts, he refuses sending me with Smith for pas; but a vessel sails from Greenock the first of Sept., right for the place of my destination; the Captain of her is an intimate of Mr Gavin Hamilton's, and as good a fellow as heart could wish: with him I am destined to go. Where I shall shelter, I know not, but I hope to weather the storm. Perish the drop of blood of mine that fears them! I know their worst and am prepared to meet it.

I'll laugh, an' sing, an' shake my leg,

As lang's I dow.

Thursday morning if you can muster as much self denial as be out of bed about seven o' clock, I shall see you as I ride through to Cumnock.

I could not write to Richard by Connel, but I will write by the Kimarnock Carrier.

After all, Heaven bless the Sex, I feel there is still happiness for me among them.

O woman, lovely woman sure Heaven design'd you,

To temper Man, we had been brutes without you.

Robert Burns

**Another letter to John Richmond, about his imminent departure to Jamaica, and once more no mention of Mary Campbell. It is worthy of note that Burns chooses to take the side of a girl who he considered had been poorly treated by his friend and admonishes Richmond for his behaviour towards the girl.**

**(43) John Richmond**

Mossgiel, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1786

My Dear Sir,

I am still here in *stu quo*, tho' I well expected to have been on my way over the Atlantic by this time. The Nancy, in which I was to have gone, did not give me warning enough. Two days notice was too little for me to wind up my affairs & go for Greenock. I am now to be a passenger aboard the Bell, Captain Cathcart, who sails at the end of this month. I am under little apprehension now about Armour. The warrant is still in existence, but some of the first Gentlemen in the county have offered to befriend me, & besides, Jean will not take any step against me, without letting me know, as nothing but the most violent menaces could have forced her to sign the Petition, I have called on her once & again of late; as she, at this moment is threatened with the pangs of approaching travail; and I assure you, my dear Friend, I cannot help being anxious, very anxious, for her situation. She would gladly now embrace that offer she once rejected, but it shall never more be in her power.

I saw Jenny Surgeoner of late, and she complains bitterly against you. You are acting very wrong. My friend; her happiness or misery is bound up in your affection or unkindness. Poor girl! She told me with tears in her eyes that she had been at great pains since she went to Paisley, learning to write better; just on purpose to be able to correspond with you; & had promised herself great pleasure in your letters. Richmond, I know you to be a man of honor, but this conduct of yours to a poor girl who distractedly loves you, and whom you have ruined, forgive me, my friend, when I say it is highly inconsistent with that manly INTEGRITY that I know

your bosom glows with.— Your little sweet Innocent too —but I beg your pardon; 'tis taking an improper liberty.—

“He would not have done such a thing, but once,  
“Tho’ hid from all the world and none had known it—  
He could not have forgiven to himself”—

Otway

I do not know if Smith wrote you along with my book; but I tell you now, I present you with that Copy, as a memento of an old friend, on these conditions, you must bind it in the neatest manner and never lend it, but keep it for my sake. I shall certainly expect to hear from you by the return of Connel & you will hear from me yet before I go.

I am, My Dear Sir, your ever faithful friend

Robt Burns

**Jean Armour gave birth to twins, named Robert and Jean on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1786. Burns wrote this rather callow note to Richmond informing him of the event.**

**(45) John Richmond**

Mossgiel, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1786

Wish me luck, dear Richmond! Armour has just now brought me a fine boy and girl at one throw. God bless them, poor little dears!

“Green grow the rashes, O,  
“Green grow the rashes, O,  
“A feather bed is no sae soft,  
“As the bosoms o’ the lasses, O”

R.B.

**Mrs Catherine Stewart was one of the Bard's early patrons and he wrote to her prior to his impending departure to Jamaica enclosing some of his works.**

**( 47 ) Mrs. Catherine Gordon Stewart of Stair**

Sept 1786

Madam,

The hurry of my preparations for going abroad has hindered me from performing my promise so soon as I intended. I have here sent you a parcel of songs, etc., which never made their appearance, except to a friend or two at most. Perhaps some of them may be no great entertainment to you, but of that I am far from being an adequate judge. The song to the tune of "Ettrick Banks" you will easily see the impropriety of exposing much even in manuscript. I think, myself, it has some merit, both as a tolerable description of one of nature's sweetest scenes, a July evening, and as one of the finest pieces of nature's workmanship, the finest indeed we know anything of, an amiable, beautiful young woman; but I have no common friend to procure me that permission, without which I would not dare to spread the copy.

I am quite aware, Madam, what task the world would assign me in this letter. The obscure Bard, when any of the Great condescend to take notice of him, should heap the altar with the incense of flattery. Their high Ancestry, their own great and godlike qualities and actions, should be recounted with the most exaggerated description. This, Madam, is a task for which I am altogether unfit. Besides a certain disqualifying pride of heart, I know nothing of your connections in life, and have no access to where your real character is to be found--the company of your compeers: and more, I am afraid that even the most refined adulation is by no means the road to your good opinion.

One feature of your character I shall ever with grateful pleasure remember, the reception I got when I had the honour of waiting on you at Stair. I am little acquainted with Politeness, but I know a good deal of benevolence of temper and goodness of heart. Surely did those in exalted stations know how happy they could make some classes of their Inferiors by condescension and affability, they would never stand so high, measuring out with every look the height of their elevation, but condescend as sweetly as did Mrs. Stewart of Stair.

R.B

**John Kennedy was known to Burns through his friendship with the Hamilton family. He does not appear to have been one of the Bard's intimates although he was the recipient of To a Mountain Daisy soon after its composition. He appears to have been instrumental in assisting the Bard with subscriptions for the Kilmarnock Edition.**

**(48) John Kennedy**  
September, 1786

Mossgiel, Tuesday noon, 26<sup>th</sup>

My Dear Sir,

I this moment receive yours – receive it with the honest hospitable warmth of a friend's welcome. Whatever comes from you always wakens up the better blood around my heart; which your kind, little recollections of my Parental FRIEND carries as far as it will go. 'Tis there Sir, Man is blest! 'Tis there, my Friend, man feels a consciousness of something within him, above the trodden clod! The grateful reverence to the hoary, earthly Authors of his being. The burning glow when he clasps the Woman of his Soul to his bosom. The tender yearnings of heart for little Angels to whom he has give existence. These, nature has pour'd in milky streams about the human heart; and the Man who never rouses them into action by the inspiring influences of their proper objects, lose by far the most pleasurable part of his existence.

My departure is uncertain, but I do not think it will be till after harvest. I will be on the very short allowance of time indeed, if I do not comply with your friendly invitation. When it will be I do not know; but if I can make my wish good, I will endeavour to drop you a line some time before.

My best Compliments to Mrs Kennedy. I should be equally mortified should I drop in when she is abroad, but of that I suppose there is little chance.

What I have wrote; Heaven knows; I have not time to review it; so accept of it in the beaten way of Friendship, with the ordinary phrase, perhaps, rather more than the ordinary sincerity of

I am My dear Sir, ever yours

Robt Burns

**In this next letter to John Richmond Burns gives a small hint that his voyage to the West Indies may not happen after all.**

**(49) John Richmond**

27<sup>th</sup> September 1786

I received yours of Connel's last return, and I have just a moment at present to tell you that I am in the land of the living, and in the place of hope. I am going perhaps to try a second edition of my book. If I do, it will delay me a little longer in the country; if not I shall be gone as soon as harvest is over.

Bettsey Miller awaits me.

God bless you

Robt Burns

**Robert Aitken was an Ayr lawyer and was among the first people to appreciate the enormity of Burns' talent. He was largely instrumental in ensuring the Bard's early works were sold.**

**( 53 ) Robert Aitken**

Mossgiel, 27<sup>th</sup> September 1786

Sir,

I was with Wilson, my printer, t'other day, and settled all our by-gone matters between us. After I had paid him all demands, I made him the offer of the second edition, on the hazard of being paid out of the first and readiest, which he declines. By his account, the paper of a thousand copies would cost about twenty-seven pounds, and the printing about fifteen or sixteen: he offers to agree to this for the printing, if I will advance for the paper, but this, you know, is out of my power; so farewell hopes of a second edition 'till I grow richer! An epocha which, I think, will arrive at the payment of the British national debt.

There is scarcely anything hurts me so much in being disappointed of my second edition, as not having it in my power to show my gratitude to Mr. Ballantine, by publishing my poem of "The Brigs of Ayr." I would detest myself as a wretch, if I thought I were capable in a very long life of forgetting the honest, warm, and tender delicacy with which he enters into my interests. I am sometimes pleased with myself in my grateful sensations; but I believe, on the whole, I have very little merit in it, as my gratitude is not a virtue, the consequence of reflection, but sheerly the instinctive emotion of my heart, too inattentive to allow worldly maxims and views to settle into selfish habits.

I have been feeling all the various rotations and movements within, respecting the Excise. There are many things plead strongly against it; the uncertainty of getting soon into business; the consequences of my follies, which may perhaps make it impracticable for me to stay at home; and, besides, I have for some time been pining under secret wretchedness, from causes which you pretty well know—the pang of disappointment, the sting of pride, with some wandering stabs of remorse, which never fail to settle on my vitals like vultures, when attention is not called away by the calls of society, or the vagaries of the muse. Even in the hour of social

mirth, my gaiety is the madness of an intoxicated criminal under the hands of the executioner. All these reasons urge me to go abroad, and to all these reasons I have only one answer—the feelings of a father. This, in the present mood I am in, overbalances everything that can be laid in the scale against it.

You may perhaps think it an extravagant fancy, but it is a sentiment which strikes home to my very soul: though sceptical in some points of our current belief, yet, I think, I have every evidence for the reality of a life beyond the stinted bourne of our present existence; if so, then, how should I, in the presence of that tremendous Being, the Author of existence, how should I meet the reproaches of those who stand to me in the dear relation of children, whom I deserted in the smiling innocency of helpless infancy? O, thou great unknown Power!—thou Almighty God! Who has lighted up reason in my breast, and blessed me with immortality!—I have frequently wandered from that order and regularity necessary for the perfection of Thy works, yet Thou hast never left me nor forsaken me!

Since I wrote the foregoing sheet, I have seen something of the storm of mischief thickening over my folly-devoted head. Should you, my friends, my benefactors, be successful in your applications for me, perhaps it may not be in my power, in that way, to reap the fruit of your friendly efforts. What I have written in the preceding pages, is the settled tenor of my present resolution; but should inimical circumstances forbid me closing with your kind offer, or enjoying it only threaten to entail farther misery---

To tell the truth, I have little reason for this last complaint; as the world, in general, has been kind to me, fully up to my deserts. I was, for some time past, fast getting into the pining, distrustful snarl of the misanthrope. I saw myself alone, unfit for the struggle of life, shrinking at every rising cloud in the chance-directed atmosphere of fortune, while, all defenceless, I looked about in vain for a cover. It never occurred to me, at least never with the force it deserved, that this world is a busy scene, and man, a creature destined for a progressive struggle; and that, however I might possess a warm heart and inoffensive manners (which last, by the by, was rather more than I could well boast) still, more than these passive qualities, there was something to be done. When all my school-fellows and youthful compeers

(those misguided few excepted who joined, to use a Gentoo phrase, the “hallachores” of the human race) were striking off with eager hope and earnest intent, in some one or other of the many paths of busy life, I was “standing idle in the market-place,” or only left the chase of the butterfly from flower to flower, to hunt fancy from whim to whim.

You see, Sir, that if to know one’s errors were a probability of mending them, I stand a fair chance: but, according to the reverend Westminster divines, though conviction must precede conversion, it is very far from always implying it.

**The next letter is the first of many between Burns and Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop. Mrs Dunlop was almost a mother figure to the Bard. She was the widow of an aristocrat who was a direct descendant of William Wallace, a fact that alone would have made her a heroine in the eyes of the Bard. She made herself known to Burns by requesting six copies of the Kilmarnock Edition after having read ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’. Burns was highly flattered by this and wrote to Mrs Dunlop accordingly. This was the start of a long friendship in which they corresponded on a regular basis. The letters that Burns wrote to Mrs Dunlop were generally very lengthy and included samples of his work sent for her approval. Mrs Dunlop became one of the major recipients of letters from Robert Burns over a period of ten years.**

**(55) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Mossgiel, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1786

Madam,

I am truly sorry I was not at home yesterday when I was so much honored with order for my Copies, & incomparably more so by the handsome compliments you are pleased to pay my poetic abilities. I am fully persuaded that there is not any class of Mankind so feelingly alive to the titillations of applause as the Sons of

Parnassus; nor is it easy to conceive how the heart of the poor Bard dances with rapture, when Judges honor him with their approbation.

Had you been thoroughly acquainted with me, Madam, you could not have touched my darling heart-chord more sweetly, than by noticing my attempts to celebrate your illustrious Ancestor, the SAVIOUR OF HIS COUNTRY.

“Great Patriot hero! Ill-required Chief!”

The first books I met with in my early years, which I perused with pleasure, were the lives of Hannibal, and Sir William Wallace. For several of my earlier years, I had few other Authors, & many a solitary hour have I stole out, after the laborious vocations of the day, to shed a tear over their glorious but unfortunate Story. In those boyish days, I remember in particular, being struck with that part of Wallace’s history where these lines occur.

“Syne to the Leglen wood when it was late  
“To make a silent and a safe retreat”

I chose a fine summer Sunday, the only day of the week in my power & walked half a dozen miles to pay my respects to the “Leglen wood,” & with as much devout enthusiasm as ever Pilgrim did to Lorretto; & as I explored every den & dell where I could suppose my heroic Countryman to have sheltered, I recollect (for even then I was a Rhymer) that my heart glowed with a wish to be able to make a Song on him equal to his merits.

I have only been able to send you five Copies; they are all I can command. I am thinking of going off to Edinburgh in a week or two at farthest, to throw off a second Impression of my book; but on my return, I shall certainly do myself to wait on you, & thank you in person for the oblidging notice you have been pleased to take of.

Madam,

your much indebted  
and very humble servant  
Robert Burns

**None of the hundreds of beautiful songs and poems written by the Bard can depict him as a hopeless romantic more so than the letter he wrote to Wilhelmina Alexander, a lady he had never met or spoken with. He saw Wilhelmina while walking in the woods one day and was so enchanted by her beauty that he composed the song, 'The Bonnie Lass o' Ballochmyle' and sent it to her with the accompanying letter.**

**(56) Wilhelmina Alexander**

Mossgiel, 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1786

Madam,

Poets are such outré Beings, so much the children of wayward Fancy and capricious Whim, that I believe the world generally allows them a larger latitude in the rules of Propriety, than the sober sons of Judgement and Prudence. – I mention this as an apology all at once for the liberties which a nameless Stranger has taken with you in the inclosed; and which he begs leave to present you with. Whether it has poetical merit in any way worthy of the THEME, I am not the proper judge, but it is the best my abilities can produce; & what to a good heart will always be a superiour grace, it is equally sincere. –

The scenery was nearly taken from real life; though I dare say, Madam, you don't recollect it: for I believe you scarcely noticed the poetic Reveur, as he wandered by you. – I had roved out as Chance directed on the favourite haunts of my Muse, the banks of Ayr; to view Nature in all the gayety of the vernal year. –

The sun was flaming o'er the distant, western hills; not a breath stirred the crimson opening blossom, or the verdant spreading leaf.

'Twas a golden moment for a poetic heart. – I listened the feathered Warblers, pouring their harmony on every hand, with a congenial, kindred regard; & frequently turned out of my path lest I should disturb their little songs, or frighten them to another station. –

“Surely.” said I to myself, “he must be a wretch indeed, who, regardless of your harmonious endeavours to please him, can eye your elusive flights, to discover your secret recesses, and rob you of all the property Nature gives you; your dearest comforts, your helpless, little Nestlings.”

Even the hoary Hawthorn twig that shot across the way, what heart, at such a time, but must have been interested in its welfare, & wished it to be preserved from the rudely browsing Cattle, or the withering eastern Blast?

Such was the scene, & such the hour, when in a corner of my prospect I spied one of the finest pieces of Nature's workmanship that ever crowned a poetic Landskip; those visionary Bards excepted who hold commerce with aerial Beings.

–

Had CALUMNY and VILLAINY taken my walk, they had, at that moment sworn eternal peace with such an Object. –

What an hour of inspiration for a Poet! It would have raised plain, dull, historic Prose to Metaphor and Measure!

The inclosed song was the work of my return home: and perhaps but poorly answers what might have been expected from such a scene. – I am going to print a second Edition of my Poems, but cannot insert these verses without your permission. –

I have the honor to be, Madam  
Your most obedient & very humble servant,  
Robert Burns

**Although she declined to respond to his letter she was greatly flattered by both it and the poem and still had them when she died, still unmarried. Years later Robert commented;**

Well, Mr. Burns, and did the lady give you the desired permission?

No; she was too fine a lady to notice so plain a compliment. As to her great brothers, whom I have since met in life on more equal terms of respectability - why should I quarrel with their want of attention to me? When fate swore that their purses should be full, nature was equally positive that their heads should be empty. Men of their fashion were surely incapable of being unpolite? Ye canna mak a silk-purse o' a sow's lug.

R. B., 1792.

**William Chalmers was an Ayr lawyer who had assisted Burns in the drawing up of his Deed of Assignment. He asked Burns to compose something that he could present to his sweetheart and Burns wrote this mock legal document to be given to the girl.**

Mauchline, 20<sup>th</sup> November, 1786

### **In the Name of the NINE. Amen**

We, ROBERT BURNS, by virtue of a Warrant from NATURE, bearing date the Twenty- fifth of January, Anno Domini and BARD IN CHIEF in and over the Districts and Countries of KYLE, CUNNINGHAM and CARRICK, of old extent, To our trusty and and well-beloved WILLIAM CHALMERS and JOHN M'ADAM, Students and Practitioners in the ancient and mysterious Science of CONFOUNDING RIGHT AND WRONG.

RIGHT TRUSTY,

Be it known unto you, That whereas in in the course of our care and watchings over the Order and Police of all and sundry the MANUFACTURERS, RETAINERS ,and VENDERS of POESY; bards, Poets, Poetasters, Rhymers, Songsters, Ballad-singers, &c, &c, &c, &c, &c, male and female. We have discovered a certain (bawdy), nefarious, abominable, and wicked SONG or BALLAD, a copy whereof

we have here inclosed. Our WILL THEREFORE IS, that YE pitch upon and appoint the most execrable Individual of that most execrable Species, known by the appellation, phrase and nickname of THE DEIL'S YELL NOWTE: and after having caused him to kindle a fire at the CROSS of AYR, ye shall, at noontide of the day, put into the said wretch's miserable hands the said copy of the said nefarious and wiccked Song, to be consumed by fire in the presence of all Beholders, in abhorrence of, an terrerom to, all such COMPOSITIONS and COMPOSERS. And this in no wise ye leave undone, but have it executed in every point as this OUR MANDATE bears, before the twenty-fourth current, when IN PERSON We hope to applaud your faithfulness and zeal.

Given at Mauchline, this twentieth day of November, Anno Domini one thousand seven hundred and eighty-six.

GOD SAVE THE BARD

**Burns was both pleased and flattered to discover that his poems were appreciated by a man of standing. Sir John Whitefoord had been master of the estate of Ballochmyle but financial constraints had forced him to sell and move to Edinburgh. Burns wrote this rather stilted letter to him from Edinburgh.**

**( 61 ) Sir John Whitefoord**

Edinburgh, 1<sup>st</sup> December, 1786

Sir,

Mr McKenzie' in Mauchline, my very warm and worthy friend, has informed me how much you are pleased to interest yourself in my fate as a man, and (what to me is incomparably dearer) my fame as a poet. I have, Sir, in one or two instances, been patronized by those of your character in life, when I was introduced to their notice by \*\*\*\*\* friends to them, and honoured acquaintances to me; but you are the first gentleman in the country whose benevolence and goodness of heart has interested him for me, unsolicited and unknown. I am not

master enough of the etiquette of these matters to know, nor did I say to inquire, whether formal duty bade, or cold propriety disallowed, in my thanking you in this manner, as I am convinced, from the light in which you kindly view me, that you will do me the justice to believe that his letter is not the manoeuvre of the needy, sharpening author, fastening on those in upper life who honour him with a little notice of him or his works. Indeed, the situation of poets is generally such, to a proverb, as may, in some measure, palliate that prostitution of heart and talents they have at times been guilty of. I do not think prodigality is, by any means, a necessary concomitant of a poetic turn; but I believe a careless, indolent attention to oeconomy. Is almost inseparable from it; then there must be, in the heart of every bard of Nature's making, a certain modest sensibility, mixed with a kind of pride that will keep him out of the way of those windfalls of fortune, which frequently light on hardy impudence and foot-licking servility. It is not easy to imagine a more helpless state than his, whose poetic fancy unfits him for the world, and whose character as a scholar gives him some pretensions to the *politesse* of life – yet is as poor as I am.

For my part, I thank Heaven, my star has been kinder; learning never elevated my ideas above the peasant's shed, and I have an independent fortune at the plough-tail.

I was surprised to hear that any one, who pretended in the least to the *manners of the gentleman*, should be so foolish, or worse, as to stoop to traduce the morals of such a one as I am, and so inhumanly cruel, too, as to meddle with that late most unfortunate, unhappy part of my story. With a tear of gratitude, I thank you, Sir, for the warmth with which you interposed in behalf of my conduct. I am, I acknowledge, too frequently the sport of whim, caprice, and passion – but reverence to God, and integrity to my fellow-creatures, I hope I shall ever preserve. I have no return, Sir, to make for your goodness, but one – a return which I am persuaded will not be unacceptable – the honest, warm wishes of a grateful heart for your happiness, and every one of that lovely flock who stand to you in a filial

relation. If ever calumny aim the poisoned shaft at *them*, may friendship be by to ward the blow!

**Gavin Hamilton was a Mauchline lawyer who was one of the Bard's early benefactors and friends. Sadly, the friendship evaporated over Robert's refusal to stand as guarantor for his brother Gilbert, an action that could have caused him severe financial hardship. However, this letter was written prior to the fall-out when Burns had begun to realise that his works were being taken seriously by some important people in the country. His jocular letter proved to be a true forecast of what was to lie ahead although Burns had long departed this earth before it came true.**

**( 62 ) Gavin Hamilton**

Edinburgh, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1786

Honored Sir,

I have paid every attention to your command, but can only say that, which perhaps you will have heard before this reach you, that Muirklands were bought by a John Gordon W.S. but for whom I know not; Mauchlands, Haugh Miln, &c. by a Frederick Fotheringham, supposed to be for Ballochmyle Laird; & Adamhill & Shawhood were bought for Oswald folks. This is so imperfect an account, and will be late ere it reach you, that were it not to discharge my Conscience I would not trouble you with this; but after all my diligence I could make it no sooner nor better.

For my own affairs, I am in a fair way of becoming as eminent as Thomas a Kempis or John Bunyan; and you may expect henceforth to see my birthday inserted among the wonderful events, in the Poor Robin's and Aberdeen Almanacks, along with the black Monday, & the battle of Bothwell bridge. My Lord Glencairn & the Dean of Faculty, Mr H. Erskine, have taken me under their wing; and by all probability I shall soon be the tenth Worthy, and the eighth Wise Man, of the world. Through my Lord's influence it is inserted in the records of the

Caledonian Hunt that they universally, one & all, subscribe for the 2<sup>d</sup> Edition. My subscription

Bills come out tomorrow, and you will get some of them next post. I have met in Mr Dalrymple of Orangefield what Solomon emphatically calls , “a Friend that sticketh closer than a brother.” The warmth with which he interests himself in my affairs is of the same enthusiastic kind which you, Mr Aiken, and the few Patrons that took notice of my earlier poetic days, showed for the poor, unlucky devil of a Poet.

I always remember Mrs Hamilton & Miss Kennedy in my poetic prayers, but both in prose & verse.

May Cauld ne'er catch you but a hap,  
Nor Hunger but in Plenty's lap!

Amen!

Robert Burns

**Burns and Robert Muir enjoyed a short but harmonious friendship. The pair did not meet until early in 1786 and Muir died two years later. However, the next letter shows clearly that they were kindred spirits. It would appear that although Burns was very pleased with himself by the calibre of his patrons, he was still uncertain as to whether or not his future lay as a poet.**

**(64) Robert Muir**

Edinburgh, 15<sup>th</sup> December 1786

My Dear Sir,

I delayed writing you till I was able to give you some rational account of myself and my affairs. I am got under the patronage of the Duchess of Gordon, Dowager of Glencairn, Sir John Whitefoord, the Dean of Faculty, Professors Blair, Stewart, Gregory and several others of the noblesse and literati. I believe I shall begin at Mr Creech's as publisher. I am still undetermined as to the future; and, as usual, never think of it. I have now neither house nor home that I can call my own, and

live on the world at large. I am just a poor wayfaring Pilgrim on the way to Parnassus, thoughtless wanderer and sojourner in a strange land. I received a very kind letter from Mr A. Dalziel, for which please return him my thanks; and tell him I will write him in day or two. Mr Parker, Charles, Dr Corsan, and honest John (Wilson?) quondam printer, I remember in my prayers when I pray in rhyme. To all of whom, till I have an opportunity.....**the rest is missing**

**Burns wrote the following to his friend and adviser, Robert Aitken telling him how impressed he was by William Creech, the Edinburgh publisher. But that was to change dramatically at a later point in their relationship when he found Creech to be less than honourable in his dealings. Creech's premises were in the Luckenbooth, the commercial centre of Edinburgh at that time, and was a favourite meeting place for Edinburgh's literati.**

**(65) Robert Aiken**

Edinburgh, 16<sup>th</sup> December, 1786

Dear Patron of my Virgin Muse,

I wrote Mr Ballantine at large all my operations and "eventful Story," since I came to town. I have found in Mr Creech, who is my agent forsooth, and Mr Smellie who is to be my printer, that honor and goodness of heart which I always expect in Aitken's friends. Mr Dalrymple of Orangefield I shall ever remember; my Lord Glencairn I shall ever pray for. The Maker of man has great honor in the workmanship of of his lordship's heart. May he find that patronage and protection in his guardian angel that I have found in him! His lordship has sent a parcel of subscription bills to the Marquiss of Graham, with downright orders to get them filled up with all the first Scottish names about Court. He has likewise wrote to the Duke of Montague & is about to write to the Duke of Portland for their Grace's interest in behalf of the Scotch Bard's Subscription.

You will probably think, my honored friend, that a hint about the mischievous nature of intoxicated vanity may not be unreasonable, but, alas! you are wide of the mark. Various concurring circumstances have raised my fame as a Poet to a height which I am absolutely certain I have no merits to support; and I look down on the future as I would into the bottomless pit.

You shall have one or two more bills when I have the opportunity of a Carrier.

I am ever with the sincerest gratitude honored Sir  
Your most devoted humble servant  
Robert Burns

**( 67 ) Robert Muir**

20<sup>th</sup> December 1786

My Dear Friend,

I have just time for the Carrier, to tell you that I received your letter; of which I shall say no more but of what a lass of my acquaintance said of her bastart wean; she said, she did na ken wha was the father exactly, but she suspected it was some o' that bony, blackguard Smugglers, for it WAS LIKE THEM – so I only say, you oblidging epistle WAS LIKE YOU. I inclose you a parcel of Subscription-bills. Your affair of Sixty Copies is also LIKE YOU; but it would not be LIKE ME to comply.

Your friend's notion of MY LIFE has put a crotchet in my head of sketching MY LIFE in some future epistle to you.

My compliments to Charles & Mrs Parker

I am ever, my Dear Sir, yours

Robt Burns

**Although his next epistle to William Chalmers is written in a light-hearted manner, it also demonstrates the Bard's deep knowledge of the Bible.**

**(68) William Chalmers**

Edinburgh, 27<sup>TH</sup> December, 1786

My dear Friend,

I confess I have sinned the sin for which there is hardly any forgiveness, ingratitude to Friendship, in not writing you sooner; but of all men living, I had intended to send you an entertaining letter, and by all the plodding, stupid Powers that in nodding, conceited majesty preside over the dull routine of Business – A heavily-solemn Oath this! I am, and have been ever since I came to Edinburgh, as unfit to write a letter of humour, as to write a commentary on, The Revelation of St John the Divine, who was banished to the Isle of Patmos, by he cruel and bloody Domitian, son to Vespasian and brother to Titus, both Emperors of Rome, and who was himself an Emperor, and raised the second or third Persecution, I forget which, against the Christians, and after throwing the said Apostle John, brother to the Apostle James commonly called James the greater to distinguish him from another James who was, on some account or other, known by the name of James the less, after throwing him into a caldron of boiling oil from he was miraculously preserved, he banished the poor son of Zebedee to a desert island in the Archipelago, where he was gifted with the Second Sight, and saw as many wild beasts as I have seen since I came to Edinburgh; which, a circumstance not very common in story-telling, brings me back to where I set out.

To make amends for what, against you reach this paragraph, you will have suffered; I inclose two Poems I have carded and spun since I passed Glenbuck. One blank in the Address to Edinburgh “Fair B---“ is the heavenly Miss Burnet, daughter to Lord Monbodo, at whose house I have had the honor to be more than once. There has not been anything like her, in all the combinations of Beauty,

Grace and Goodness the great Creator has formed, since Milton's Eve on the first day of her existence.

I have sent you a parcel of subscription-bills, while I have wrote to Mr Ballantine & MR Aiken to call on you for some of them if they want them.

My direction is, Care of Andrew Bruce, Merchant, Bridge Street.

Adieu! Dear Chalmers

Robt Burns

**This next letter, or rather a fragment of one, sent to Gavin Hamilton expresses the Poet's ongoing misery at the loss of one of his loves. But was it Jean Armour or Mary Campbell to whom he was referring? No matter, for he already had another young lass in mind.**

**(72) Gavin Hamilton**

Edinburgh, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1787

.....To tell the truth among friends, I feel a miserable blank in my heart, with want of her, and I don't think I shall ever meet with so delicious an armful again. She has her faults; and so have you and I; and so has everybody.

Their tricks and craft hae put me daft;  
They've ta'en me in and a' that;  
But clear your decks, and here's the Sex,  
I like the jads for a' that.  
For a' that and a' that,  
And twice as muckle's a' that.

I have met with a very pretty girl, a Lothian farmer's daughter, whom I have almost persuaded to accompany me to the west country, should I ever return to settle there. By the bye, a Lothian farmer is about an Ayrshire squire of the lower kind;

and I had a most delicious ride from Leith to her house yesternight in a hackney coach, with her brother and two sisters, and brother's wife. We had dined all together at a common friends house in Leith, and danced, drank, and sang till late enough. The night was dark, the claret had been good, and I was thirsty.

**As we move into 1787, a much more formal letter to John Mackenzie.**

**(73) Dr John Mackenzie**

Edinburgh, 11<sup>th</sup> January 1787

My Dear Sir,

You gave me something like the pleasure of an old friend's face, I saw *your* friend and *my* honored Patron, Sir John Whitefoord just after I received your letter, and gave him your respectful Compliments. He was pleased to say many handsome things of you which I heard with the more satisfaction as I knew them to be just.

His son John, who calls very frequently on me, is in a fuss today like a coronation. This is the great day – the Assembly & Ball of the Caledonian Hunt; and John has had the good luck to pre-engage the hand of the beauty-famed and wealth-celebrated Miss McAdam, our Country-woman. Between friends, John is desperately in for it there; and I am afraid will be desperate indeed.

I am sorry to send you the last Speech and dying words of The Lounger.

A Gentleman waited on me yesterday, and gave me, by Lord Eglintoun's order, ten guineas by way of subscription for a brace of Copies of my 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

I met with Lord Maitland & a brother of his today, at breakfast. They are exceedingly easy, accessible, agreeable fellows; and seemingly pretty clever.

I am ever, My Dear Sir, yours

Robt Burns

**Robert Burns owed a great deal to the aristocrats who offered him both friendship and patronage, and his letters to these people were always highly**

respectful, sometimes verging on being embarrassing, as shown by the following one to the Earl of Glencairn. However, Lord Glencairn was one of the Bard's foremost patrons and had a great influence on his introduction into the drawing rooms of Edinburgh's society, a factor that Burns fully appreciated.

**(75) James Cunningham, Earl of Glencairn**      Lawnmarket, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1787

My Lord,

I wanted to purchase a Profile of your Lordship which I was told was to be got in town; but I am truly sorry to see that the Painter has spoiled a "Human face divine." The inclosed Stanzas I had intended to have written below a Picture or Profile of your Lordship, could I have been so happy as to procure one with any thing of a likeness. As I will soon return to my shades, I wanted to have something like a material object for my gratitude: I wanted to have it in my power to say to a Friend, there is my noble Patron, my generous Benefactor.

Allow me, my Lord, to proffer my warm, my fond request, to be permitted to publish these verses. I conjure your Lordship by the honest throes of Gratitude, by the generous wish of Benevolence, by all the Powers and Feelings which compose the magnanimous mind, do not deny me this my darling Petition. I owe much, very much indeed, to your Lordship, and what has not in some other instances always been the case with me, the weight of the obligation is a pleasing load. I trust I have a heart as independent as your Lordship's, than which I can say nothing more; and I would not be beholden to favors that would crucify my feelings. Your dignified character in life, and manner of supporting that character, are flattering to my Scottish pride; and I would be jealous of the purity of my grateful attachment, where I was under the Patronage of one the much favored Sons of Fortune.

Almost every Poet has celebrated his Patrons, particularly when they were Names dear to Fame, and illustrious in their Country; Permit me then, my Lord, if you think the lines have intrinsic merit, to tell the World how much I have the honor to be Your Lordship's highly indebted and ever grateful, humble servant

Robert Burns

**Margaret Chalmers was a highly educated young woman of great beauty, a combination that was irresistible to young Rab. Her father had suffered financial hardship causing the family to move from their estate into a leased farm near Mauchline. She confided to a friend later in life that Burns had proposed to her and that she had rejected his offer of marriage. In spite of that, the pair remained good friends. Her cousin, Charlotte, did not like Burns and tried to come between them by burning his letters.**

**(76) Margaret Chalmers**

January 1787

My Dear Countrywoman,

I am so impatient to show you that I am once more a peace with you, that I send you the book I mentioned directly, rather than wait the uncertain time of my seeing you. I am afraid I have mislaid or lost Collin's Poems which I promised to Miss Irvin. If I can find them I will forward them by you; if not you must apologise for me.

I know that you will laugh at it, when I tell you that your Piano and you together have play'd the deuce somehow about my heart. I was once a zealous devotee to your Sex, but you know the black story at home. My breast has been widowed these many months, and I thought myself proof against the fascinating witchcraft; but I am afraid, because I am not sure what is the matter with me. I have one miserable bad sympton, when you whisper, or look kindly to another, it gives me a draught of damnation. I have a kind of wayward wish to be with you ten minutes by yourself; though what I would say, Heaven above knows, for I am sure I know not. I have no formed design in all this; but just in the nakedness of my heart write you down a mere matter-of-fact story. You may perhaps give yourself airs of distance

on this, and that will completely cure me; but I wish you would not; just let us meet if you please in the old, beaten way of friendship.

I will not subscribe myself, your humble servant, for that is a phrase I think at least fifty miles off the heart; but I will conclude with sincerely wishing that the Great Protector of Innocence may shield you from the barbed dart of Calumny, and hand you by the covert snare of Deceit.

**Burns' lodgings during that visit to the Capital were in a tall tenement building off the High Street, very close the castle. These tenements housed a vast and colourful array of the city's population. The only distinction in class being that the higher a property was from the road, the higher was the rent. This was because all the household rubbish was simply thrown out of a window and deposited on the street below with the accompanying shout, "Gardyloo," so the higher you went, the farther away from the stench you also went. The level directly above his lodgings was the home of a group of prostitutes whose activities scandalized his landlady, as he tells John Ballantyne in the next letter. Should you be of the impression that young Robert would have been pleased to have such neighbours, you would be wrong, for in his poem, "The Fornicator," he pours scorn on any man who has to resort to using the services of a prostitute.**

**(77) John Ballantyne**

Edinburgh, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1787

My honored Friend,

It gives me a secret comfort to observe in myself that I am not yet so far gone as Willie Gaw's Skate, "Past redemption;" for I still have this favorable symptom of grace, that when my Conscience, as is the case of this letter, tells me I am leaving something undone that I ought to do, it teases me eternally till I do it.

I am still "dark as was Chaos" in respect to Futurity. My generous friend, Mr Peter Miller, brother to the Justice Clerk, has been talking with me about a lease of some farm or other in an estate called Dalswinton which he has lately bought near Dumfries. Some life-rented, embittering, Recollections whisper me that I will be no happier any where than in my old neighbourhood, but Mr Miller is no Judge of land, and though I dare say he means to favor me, yet he may give me, in his opinion, an advantageous bargain that may ruin me. I am to take a tour by Dumfries as I return and have promised to meet Mr Miller on his lands some time in May.

I went to a Mason-lodge yesternight where the Most Worshipful Grand Master Charters and all the Grand lodge of Scotland visited. The meeting was most numerous and elegant; all the different lodges about town were present, in all their pomp. The Grand Master who presided with great solemnity, and honour to himself as a Gentleman and Mason, among other general toasts gave. "Caledonia, & Caledonia's Bard, brother B----." which rung through the whole Assembly with multiplied honors and repeated acclamations. As I had no idea such a thing would happen, I was downright thunderstruck, and trembling in every nerve made the best returns in my power. Just as I finished, some of the Grand Officers said so loud as I could hear, with a most comforting accent, "Very well indeed!" which set me something to rights again.

I have just now had a visit from my Landlady, who, is a staid, sober, piously-disposed, sculdudery-abhorring Widow, coming on her grand climacterick. She is at present in sore tribulation respecting some "Daughters of Belial" who are on the floor immediately above. My Landlady, who as I said is a flesh-disciplining, godly Matron, firmly believes her husband is in Heaven, and having been very happy with him on earth, she vigorously and perseveringly practices some of the most distinguishing Christian virtues, such as attending Church, railing against vice, &c. that she may be qualified to meet her dear quondam Bedfellow in that happy place where the Unclean & the ungodly shall never enter. This, no doubt, requires some strong exertions of Self-denial, in a hale, well-kept Widow of forty-five; and as our

floors are low and ill-plastered, we can easily distinguish our laughter-loving, night-rejoicing neighbours – when they are eating, when they are drinking, when they are singing, when they are &c., my worthy Landlady tosses sleepless & unquiet, “looking for rest but finding none,” the whole night. Just now she told me, though by the bye she is sometimes dubious that I am, in her own phrase, “but a rough an’ roun’ Christian,” that “We should not be uneasy and envious because the Wicked enjoy the good things of this life; for these base jades who in her own words, lie up gandygoing with their filthy fellows, drinking the best of wines, and singing abominable songs, they shall one day lie in hell, weeping and wailing and gnashing their teeth over a cup of God’s wrath!”

I have today corrected my 152d page.— My best good wishes to Mr Aitken.—

I am ever

Dear Sir,

Your much indebted humble servant

Robert Burns

**The following letter shows clearly that Burns remained far from being convinced that his future lay as a poet and that he was determined to keep his feet on the ground. He had been a visitor to Newmilns Manse, the home of the Lawrie family and it was there that he first heard a piano being played, an occasion that brought a new dimension to his thoughts on how his songs might be performed.**

**(80) Rev. George Lawrie**

Edinburgh, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1787

Reverend and Dear Sir,

When I look at the date of your kind letter my heart reproaches me severely with ingratitude in neglecting so long to answer it. I will not trouble you with any account, by way of apology,

Of my hurried life & distracted attention: do me the justice to believe that my delay by no means proceeded from want of respect. I feel, and ever shall feel for you the mingled sentiments of esteem for a friend & reverence for a father.

I thank you Sir, with all my soul for your friendly hints; though I do not need them as much as my friends are apt to imagine. You are dazzled with news-paper accounts & distant reports, but in reality I have no great temptation to be intoxicated with the cup of Prosperity. Novelty may attract the attention for a while; to it I owe my present éclat: but I see the time not distant far when the popular tide, which has borne me to a height of which I am perhaps unworthy, shall recede with silent celerity and leave me a barren waste of sand, to descend at my leisure to my former station. I do not say this in the affectation of modesty; I see the consequence is unavoidable and am prepared for it. I had been at a great of pains to form a just, impartial estimate of my intellectual Powers before I came here; I have not added, since I came to Edinburgh anything to the account; and I trust, I shall take every atom of it back to my shades, the coverts of my unnoticed early years.

In Dr. Blacklock, whom I see very often, I have found what I would have expected in our friend, a clear and excellent heart.

By far the most agreeable hours I spend in Edinburgh must be placed to the account of Miss Lowrie and her Piano forte. I cannot help repeating to you & Mrs Lowrie a compliment that Mr Mckenzie, the celebrated "Man of Feeling" paid to Miss Christie the other night at the Concert. I had come in at an interlude and sat down by him, till I saw Miss Lowrie in a seat not very far distant, and went up to pay her respects to her. On my return to Mr Mckenzie, he asked me who she was; I told him 'twas the daughter of a reverend friend of mine in the West Country. He returned there was something very striking to his idea in her appearance. On me desiring to know it was, he was pleased to say, "She has a great deal of the

elegance of a well-bred Lady about her, with all the sweet simplicity of a Country girl.”

My compliments to all the happy Inmates of Saint Margaret’s.

I am, Dear Sir, Yours most gratefully,

Robt Burns

**Robert Burns was a devotee of the poems of another Scottish poet, Robert Fergusson who had died in poverty in 1774 at the age of twenty-four, and whose work had inspired Burns to write Scottish verse. He was horrified to discover that Fergusson lay in an unmarked pauper’s grave and petitioned for him to be given a proper resting place with a headstone to mark his grave.**

### **(81) The Bailies of the Canongate**

*To the Honorable the BAILIES OF THE CANONGATE, Edinburgh*

Edinburgh, 6<sup>th</sup> February 1787

Gentlemen,

I am sorry to be told that the remains of Robert Ferguson the so justly celebrated Poet, a man whose talents for ages to come will do honor to our Caledonian name, lie in your church yard among the ignoble Dead unnoticed and unknown. Some memorial to direct the Lovers of Scottish Song, when they wish to shed a tear over the “Narrow house” of the Bard who is no more, is surely a tribute due to Ferguson’s memory, a tribute I wish to have the honor of paying. I petition you then, Gentlemen, for your permission to lay a simple stone over his revered ashes, to remain an unalienable property to his deathless fame.

I have the honor to be Gentlemen,  
Your very humble servant  
Robert Burns

**Burns was eventually successful in his wish to see Robert Fergusson reinterred in a prominent position in the Canongate churchyard with a suitable memorial over the grave where it continues to be visited by people from all over the world. The “Narrow house” is simply another means of describing the grave.**

**The Bard’s letters to his intellectual friends continue to be slightly stilted as shown in this one to Dr John Moore.**

**(85) Dr John Moore**

Edinburgh, 155<sup>th</sup> February 1787

Reverend Sir,

Pardon my seeming neglect in delaying so long to acknowledge the honor, the very great honor, you have done such a one as I, by your kind, your generous notice of me, Jan 23.

It is not ingratitude; believe me, Sir, it is not. A few months ago I knew no other employment than the Plough-tail, nor could boast anything higher than perhaps a distant acquaintance with a country Clergyman. Mere Greatness never much embarrasses me; I have nothing to ask from their County, and I do not fear their judgement; but Genius, polished by Learning, and at its proper elevation in the eye of the World, this of late I frequently meet with, and tremble at the approach. I scorn the affectation of seeming Modesty, to cover self-conceit. I have very attentively studied myself; where I stand, both as a Man and a Poet. That I have some merit, I do not deny, is my own opinion; but I see, with frequent wringings of heart, that the novelty of my character, and the honest, national prejudice of

Scotchmen (a prejudice which do Thou O God, ever kindle ardent in their breasts!) have borne me to a height altogether untenable to my abilities.

For the honor Miss Williams has done me, please, Sir, return her my most grateful thanks. I have more than once thought of paying her in kind, but have hitherto quit the idea in hopeless despondency. I had never before heard of her; but since I have got her Poems, which for several reasons, some belonging to the head, and others the offspring of the heart, give me a great deal of pleasure. I have little pretence to Critic Lore; I only know what pleases me, often without being able to tell why. There are, I think, two particular, and to me, favorite characteristic features in Miss William's Muse, the wild, unfetter'd flight of native Poesy, and the querulous, somber tenderness of "time-fettled Sorrow."

My address is, Care of Mr Creech, Bookseller, Edinburgh

I have the honor to be, my dearly much respected Countryman, your ever gratefully indebted humble servant

Robert Burns

**The following letter to Gavin Hamilton concerns a court-case in which one of the Bard's fellow Free Masons philandering had landed him in what could prove to be a very expensive law-suit.**

**(88) Gavin Hamilton**

Edinburgh, 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1787

Dear Sir,

Yours came safe, and I am as usual much indebted to your goodness. Poor Captain Montgomerie is cast. Yesterday it was tried whether the husband could proceed against the unfortunate Lover without first divorcing his wife, and their Gravities on the bench were unanimously of opinion that Maxwell may prosecute for damages directly, and need not divorce his wife at all if he pleases; and Maxwell is immediately before the Lord ordinary to prove, what I dare say will never be denied, the Crim-con then their Lordships will modify the damages, which

I suppose will be pretty heavy, as their Wisdoms have expressed great abhorrence of my gallant Right Worshipful Brother's conduct.

O all ye Powers of love unfortunate and friendless woe, pour the balm of sympathizing pity on the grief-torn, tender heart of the hapless Fair One! My two Songs on Miss W. Alexander\* and Miss P. Kennedy\* were likewise tried yesterday by a jury of Literati, and found defamatory libels against the fastidious Powers of Poesy and Taste; and the Author forbid to print them under pain of forfeiture of character. I cannot help almost shedding a tear to the memory of two Songs that cost me some pains, and that I valued a good deal, but I must submit. My most respectful compliments to Mrs Hamilton and Miss Kennedy. My poor unfortunate Songs come again across my memory. Damn the pedant, frigid soul of Criticism for ever and ever.

I am ever, Dear Sir, your obliged,  
Robt Burns

\*The Lass o' Ballochmyle and \*Young Peggy.

**Mrs Francis Anna Dunlop of Dunlop was to become the greatest recipient of letters from the Bard. She was a direct descendant of William Wallace, a fact alone that would have made her a hero figure in the eyes of Burns, and had been one of his earliest readers. The relationship between the pair was almost like aunt and favourite nephew and Burns relished the huge exchange of letters between them. In this epistle he declares to Mrs Dunlop that although he enjoys his fame as Scotch Bard, his future lies in the world of farming.**

**(90) Mrs Francis Anna Dunlop**

Edinburgh, 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 1787

Madam,

When I was honored with yours of the 26<sup>th</sup> February, I likewise received one from Dr. Moore, where he informed me that he had on his way to Scotland his medical

treatise, and his sketch of Society and manners; the first he desired me to transmit to you, the last he has done me the honor to present me with. I delayed writing to you till the books should arrive, which they did yesterday; and the first Carrier for your country-side I shall send yours.

I read your letter, Madam, with watery eyes. A little, very little while ago, I had scarce a friend but the stubborn pride of my own bosom; now I am distinguished, patronised, befriended by YOU. Your friendly advices, I will not give them the cold name of criticisms, I receive with reverence. I have made some small alterations in what I before had printed. I have the advice of some very judicious friends in the Literati here, but with them, I sometimes find it necessary to claim the privilege of thinking for myself. The noble Earl of Glencairn, to whom I owe more than to any man on earth, does me the honor of giving me his strictures; his hints, with respect to impropriety or indelicacy, I follow implicitly.

You kindly interest yourself, my honored Patroness, in my future views and prospects; then I can give you no light at all. It is all –

“Dark as was Chaos ere the infant sun  
Was roll’d together, or had tried his beams  
Athwart the gloom profound.”

The appellation of a Scotch Bard is by far my highest pride; to continue to deserve it is my most exalted ambition. Scottish scenes and Scottish story are the scenes I could wish my power, unplagu’d with the routine of business, for which Heaven knows I am unfit enough, to make leisurely pilgrimages through Caledonia; to sit on the fields of her battles; to wander on the romantic banks of her rivers; and to muse by the stately tower or venerable ruins, once the honor’d abodes of her heroes.

But these are all Utopian ideas; I have dallied long enough with life; ‘tis time to be in earnest. I have a fond, aged Mother to care for; and some other bosom-ties, perhaps equally tender. Where the individual only suffers by the consequences of his own thoughtlessness, indolence or folly, he may be excusable; nay shining

abilities, and some of the nobler virtues may half sanctify the character; but where God and Nature have entrusted the welfare of others to his care, those whose weal or woe must depend upon his, where the trust is sacred and the ties are dear, that man must be far gone in unfeeling selfishness, or strangely lost to reflection and thought, whom these connections will not rouse to active attention and serious resolve.

I guess that I shall clear between two and three hundred pounds by my Authorship; with that sum I intend, as far as I may be said to have any intention, to return to my old acquaintance, the plough, and if I can meet with a lease by which I can live, to commence Farmer. I do not intend to give up Poesy: being bred to labor gives me independence, and the Muses are my chief, sometimes have been my only enjoyment. If my practice second my resolution, I shall have principally at heart the serious business of life; but while following my plough or building up my shocks, I shall cast a leisure glance to that dear, that only feature of my character which gave me notice of Caledonia, and the patronage of a Wallace.

Thus, honored Madam, I have given you the Bard, his situation and his views, native as they are in his own bosom. An integritive character, honest pride, and my poetic fame, will, I hope, ever assure my welcome with those whose esteem I value: the trappings and luxuries of upper stations, I have seen a little of them in Edinburgh – I can live without them. I shall never blush for my poverty, not the poverty of my Country.

I am, with the sincerest throe of gratitude, Madam, your much indebted, humble servant

Robert Burns

P.S. I have today corrected the last proof sheet of my poems and have now only the glossary and my subscribers names to print. Printing this last is much against my will, but some of my friends whom I do not chuse to thwart will have it so. I have both a second and a third Edition going on as the second was begun with too few a number of copies. The whole I have printed is three thousand. Would the

profits of that afford it, with rapture I would take your hint of a military life, as the most congenial to my feelings and situation of any other, but, "What is wanting cannot be numbered."

R.B.

**A short note to Lady Henrietta Don, sister of Lord Glencairn, the Bard's patron. He sent her a parcel of his 'epistolary performances' that are now contained in the Edinburgh University Library.**

**(93) Lady Henrietta Don**

Edinburgh, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1787

Madam,

I have sent you a parcel of my epistolary performance; happy at having it, in the smallest degree, in my power to show that gratitude, which, "while life's warm spirit beats within my breast" shall ever glow to the family of Glencairn. I might have altered or omitted somethings in these letters; perhaps I ought to have done so; but I wished to show you the Bard and his style in their native colors.

I have the honor to be  
with the most heart-warm, grateful sincerity,  
Madam, your much indebted & very humble servant  
Robt Burns

**John Ballantyne was a prominent figure in Ayr where he became the Provost. He was one of several people who guided Burns through his early days as a poet and it was he who suggested that an Edinburgh publisher would be more suited to his needs than a local one in Ayrshire.**

**(95) John Ballantyne**

Edinburgh, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1787

Sir,

I have taken the liberty to send a hundred copies of my book to your care. I have no acquaintance with Forsyth; and besides, I believe Booksellers take no less than the unconscionable Jewish tax of 25 per cent by way of agency. I trouble you then, Sir, to find a proper person, of the mercantile folks I suppose will be best, that for a moderate consideration will retail the books to subscribers as they are called for. Several of the Subscription bills have been mislaid, so all who say they have subscribed must be served at subscription price; otherwise those who have not subscribed must pay six shillings. Should more copies be needed, an order by post will be immediately answered.

My respectful Compliments to Mr Aiken. I wrote him by David Shaw which I hope he received.

I have the honor to be, with the most grateful sincerity,

Sir, your obliged & very humble servant

Robert Burns

**Another from the Dunlop correspondence.**

**(98) Mrs Francis Anna Dunlop**

Edinburgh, 30<sup>th</sup> April 1787

Madam,

I would not be capable of such an insult to you as to have sent the volumes in question to to a woman who once bore the honored name of Lady Wallace. There is a lady that I met with in town who I am told has a legal title to that designation, but the lady discovered her and my mistake, and the other day returned the books, which you will receive by today's Carrier.

Your criticism, Madam I understand very well, and could have wished to have pleased you better. You are right in your guesses that I am not very amenable to counsel. Poets, much my superiors, have so flattered those who possessed the

adventitious qualities of wealth and power, that I am determined to flatter no created being, either in prose or verse, so help me God. I set as little by kings, lords, clergy, critics. &c. as all these respectable Gentry do by my Bardship. I know what I may expect from the world, by and by; illiberal abuse and perhaps contemptuous neglect; but I am resolved to study the sentiments of a very respectable Patronage, Milton's Satan – "Hail horrors! hail infernal world." I am happy, Madam, that some of my favorite pieces are distinguished by your particular approbation. For my DREAM which has unfortunately incurred your loyal displeasure, I hope in four weeks, or less, to have the honor of appearing, at Dunlop, in its defence in person.

I have the honor to be, Madam, your very highly indebted humble servant  
Robt Burns

**His stay in Edinburgh had seen Burns rubbing shoulders with the rich and famous, but much of this was due to the favourable write-up given to his Kilmarnock Edition by Henry Mackenzie, a highly-respected lawyer in the city. Mackenzie was also an author and playwright and included in his works was a novel, 'Man of the World.'**

**(101a) Henry Mackenzie**

Lawn Market Friday morn; (4<sup>th</sup> May 1787)

Revered Sir,

I leave Edinburgh tomorrow morning, and send you this to assure you that no little petulant self-conceit, no distance or absence shall ever make me forget how much I owe YOU.

Allow me, Sir, to thank you most sincerely on another account; whatever is good about my heart is much indebted to Mr Harley. It is said often that the world reads & is never mended; I shall tell you a real matter of fact which happened in my own

observation, and I tell it you because you are a little interested in it. A dear friend of mine, & the truly cleverest fellow I ever saw, was very fond of a girl in the neighbourhood who doated on him distractedly. He was bred to the sea, a lad of much better than ordinary education, & glowed with unbounded ambition; she too was very pretty, & knew a little more of the politesse of life than most of her compeers. He was going abroad not to return for some time, and stung with passion, knowing she had many admirers, he formed a common but very wicked resolution respecting her, & hinted to me his plan. I had just got then the Man of the World and lent it to him, not indeed with a moral design but as something that pleased me. This was two evenings before the fatal interview was to have happened, & calling on him, as usual, next evening to ask his opinion of the book, I shall never forget the horror with which he mentioned his tomorrow night's enterprise; & this moment she makes him one of the best of wives.

I give you this seemingly romantic but real story, because as an Author & as a Man it must highly gratify your feeling.

I have sent you by the bearer of this trifling but very sincere testimony of that gratitude with which I have the honor to be,

Sir, your much indebted humble servant  
Robt Burns

**The next short note is rather mysterious. Originally addressed to Mr Fyfe, Surgeon College, the gentleman has since been recorded with the title Doctor, although no trace of him can be found in official records. This note refers to the Bard's Border tour with Robert Ainslie, a journey that he was anticipating with relish.**

**(105) Dr, M. Fyfe**

Saturday morn: six o'clock, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1787

My dear Sir,

My loins are girded, my sandals on my feet, and my staff is in my hand; and in half an hour I shall set off from this venerable, respectable, hospitable, social, convivial, imperial Queen of cities, AULD REEKIE. My compliments to Mr McCartney, and I have sent that engraving. Farewell!

Now, God in heaven bless Reekie's town  
With plenty joy and peace!  
And may her wealth and fair renown  
To latest times times encrease!!! Amen

Robt Burns

**In the Spring of 1787 Burns left Edinburgh and set off on a tour of the Border counties with his friend Robert Ainslie before returning to his Ayrshire home. He was by now fairly pleased with himself as he had sold his copyright to William Creech for 100 guineas. He had gained fame and recognition beyond his wildest dreams, and life at long last, was looking good. He wrote this short note to Creech when he arrived at Selkirk enclosing with it a poem, 'Lament for the Absence of William Creech' in which he describes the gloom amongst the literati of Edinburgh when Creech left town for a visit to London.**

**(106) William Creech**

Selkirk 13<sup>th</sup> May 1787

My honored Friend,

The inclosed I have just wrote, nearly extempore, in a solitary Inn in Selkirk, after a miserable wet day's riding. I have been over most of East Lothian, Berwick, Roxburgh & Selkirk Shires; & next week I begin a tour through the north of England. Yesterday I dined with Lady Harriot, sister to my noble Patron, Quem

Deus conservit! I would write till I would tire you as much with dull Prose as I dare say by this time you are with wretched Verse, but I am jaded to death; so with a grateful farewell, I have the honor to be,

Good Sir, yours sincerely  
Robt Burns

**Continuing on his travels Burns stopped at the home of his companion, Robert Ainslie, where he was much taken by Ainslie's sister, Rachel. He accompanied the family to church and noticed that the rantings of the preacher obviously disturbed Rachel and sent her the following note.**

Fair maid, you need not take the hint,  
Nor idle tears pursue,  
'Twas guilty sinners that he meant,  
Not ANGELS such as you.

**He wrote to his bookbinder with the following instructions.**

**(109a) William Scott**

Dunse, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1787

Mr Scot,

As you have still some of the ordinary bound copies which I suppose are all ready, parcel up two of them each by itself, & seal them up. One of them direct to Miss Ainslie at Berrywell, near Dunse, & send it by Dunse carrier, if possible this week as the Dunse carrier does not leave Edinburgh till Saturday morning early. — the other direct to Mr Gilbert Ker Farmer in Stodrigg near Kelso & send it by the Kelso carrier. Paste the inclosed labels on the blank leaves or inside of the cover.

I am your friend  
Robt Burns

**Robert Ainslie was forced to return to Edinburgh to resume his duties so Burns continued on his travels in the company of two elderly farmers. He obviously missed the company of the younger man as he recounted to him how a visit to Dunbar had not been to his liking.**

**(110) Robert Ainslie**

Newcastle, 29<sup>th</sup> May 1787

Mon cher Compagnon de voyage,

Here am I, a woeful wight on the banks of Tyne. Old Mr Thomas Hood has been persuaded to join our Partie, and Mr Kerr & he do very well, but alas! I dare not talk nonsense less I lose all the little dignity I have among the sober sons of wisdom & discretion, & I have not had one hearty mouthful of laughter since that merry-melancholy moment we parted.

Mr Sherriff tired me to death; but as my good star directed, Sir James Hall detained him on some business as he is Sir James's tenant, till near eleven at night, which time I spent with Miss Sherriff till I was, in the language of the royal Vonuntary, Solomon, "Sick of Love."

Next morning, Sir James who had been informed by the Sherriffs of my Bardship's arrival, came to breakfast with us and carried me with him, and his charming Lady & me the honor to accompany me on the whole forenoon through the glorious, romantic Deane of Dunglass. I would not stay dinner; and when I returned to my horse, I found Miss Sherriff ready eqipp'd to escort me to Dunbar with the view of making a parade of me as a Sweetheart among her relations by the way & at

Dunbar. She was “bien poudre, bien fries” in her fine cream-coloured riding clothes, mounted on an old dun carthorse that had once been fat; a broken old side saddle, without crupper, stirrup or girth; a bridle that in former times had had buckles, & a crooked meandering hazle stick which might have borne a place with credit in a scrubbed besom. In the words of the Highlandman when he saw the Deil on Shanter-hill in the shape of five swine My hair stood and my p--- stood, & I swat & trembled.” Nothing could prevail with her, no distant insinuation, no broad hint would make her give over her purpose; at last vexed, disgusted, enraged to a high degree, I pretended a fire-haste & rode so hard that she was almost shaken to pieces on old Jolly, and to my great joy found it convenient to stop at an uncle’s house by the way; I refused to call with her, & so we quarreled and parted.

You shall hear from me at Dumfries. Farewell!

Robt Burns

**William Nicol was a school-master at Edinburgh’s Royal High School and had become a good friend of the Bard’s, so much so that when Burns set off for the Highland part of his tour of Caledonia, Nicol was his travelling companion. This partnership was not wholly successful as Nicol was a man of short temper and caused Burns embarrassment on several occasions. This letter is written in jocular manner in very broad Scots dialect.**

**(112) William Nicol** Carlisle 1<sup>st</sup> June 1787 – or I believe the 39<sup>th</sup> o’ May rather

Kind, honest-hearted Willie,

I’m sitten down here, after seven and forty miles ridin, e’en as forjesket and forniaw’d as a forfoughten cock, to gie you some notion o’ my lanlower-like stravaguin sin the sorrwfu’ hour that I sheuk hands and parted wi’ Auld Reekie. My auld, ga’d Gleyd o’ a mere has huchyall’d up hill & down brae, in Scotland and

England, as teugh and birnie as a vera devil wi' me. It's true she's as poor as a Sang-maker and as hard's a kirk, & tipper-taipers when she taks the gate first like a Lady's gentlewoman in a minuet or a hen on a het girdle, but she's a yauld, poutherie Girran for a' that; & has a stomach like Willie Stalker's mere that wad hae digested tumbler-wheels, for she'll whip me aff five stimparts o' the best aits at a down-sittin & ne'er fash her thumb. When ance her ring-banes and spavies, her crucks & cramps, are fairly soupl'd, she beets to, beets to, & ay the hindmost hour the tightest. I could wager her price to a thretty pennies that, for twa or three wooks ridin at fifty miles a day, the deil-sticker a five gallopers acqueesh Clyde and Whithorn could cast saut in her tail.

I hae daunder'd owre the kintra frae Dunbar to Selcraig, & hae forgather'd wi' monie a guid fallow and monie a weel-far'd hizzie. I met wi' twa dink quines in particular, ane o' them a sonsie, fine, fodge lass, baith braw and bonie; the weel-fard's winch, as blythe's a lintwhite on a flowerie thorn, & as sweet and modest's a new blawn plumrose in a hazle shaw. They were baith bred to mainers by the beuk, & onie ane o' them has a muckle smeddum & rumble-gumtion as the half o' some Presbyteries that you and I baith ken. They play'd such a devil o' a shavie that I daur say if my harigals were turn'd out, ye wad see twa nicks i' the heart o' me like the mark o' a kailwhittle in a castock.

I was gaun to write you a lang pystle, but, Gude forgie me, I gat myself sae notoriously bitchify'd the day after kail-time that I can hardy stoiter but and ben. My best respects to the guid-wife & a' our common friends, especiall Mr & Mrs Cruikshank & the honest Guidman o' Jock's Lodge.

I'll be in Dumfries the morn gif the beast be to the fore & the branks bide hale.

Gude be wi' you, Willie! Amen.

Robt Burns

**James Smith was another of the Bard's close friends in Mauchline. He had been brought up in a very restricted manner and gladly kicked over the traces on the death of his step-father. He eventually left Scotland, and in common with many young Scots of his generation, set out for the West Indies and settled in the beautiful island of St Lucia. At the time of writing the first letter, Burns had returned to Mauchline, both famous and reasonably wealthy, and had been greeted with open arms by Jean Armour's parents, an action that filled Burns with disgust. However, that did not prevent him from taking up with Jean once again, leaving her pregnant for the second time.**

**(113) James Smith**

Mauchline, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1787

My ever dear Sir,

I date this from Mauchline, where I arrived on Friday even last. I slept at John Dow's, and called for my daughter; Mr Hamilton and family; your mother, sister and brother; my quondam Eliza, &c. all, all well. If anything had been wanting to disgust me compleately at Armour's family, their mean servile compliance would have done it.

Give me a spirit like my favourite hero, Milton's Satan,

"Hail horrors hail,  
Infernal world! and thou profoundest Hell,  
Receive thy new possessor! one who brings  
A mind not to be chang'd by *place or time!*"

I cannot settle to my mind. Farming is the only thing of which I know any thing, & Heaven above knows, but what little I do understand even of that, I cannot, dare not risk on farms as they are. If I do not fix, I will go for Jamaica. Should I stay, in an unsettled state, at home, I will only dissipate my little fortune, & ruin what I

intend shall compensate my little ones, for the stigma I have brought upon their names.

I shall write you more at large soon, as this letter costs you no postage, if it be worth reading you cannot complain of your penny worth.

I am ever, my dear Sir, yours

Robert Burns

**Robert Burns may have been enjoying his current life style, but he was unable to convince himself that his good fortune would continue for much longer. He writes to his friend, William Nicol, stating as much and in the letter tells of his amazement at the change of attitude towards him by people who had previously regarded him with disdain. It was during this return to Mauchline that Jean Armour's parents tried to make him welcome him into their family, and he detested them for their hypocrisy.**

**(114) William Nicol**

Mauchline, 18<sup>th</sup> June, 1`787

My dear friend,

I am now arrived safely in my native country after a very agreeable jaunt; and have the pleasure to find all my friends well. I breakfasted with your gray-headed, reverend friend Mr Smith; and was highly pleased with the cordial welcome he gave me, and his most respectable appearance and sterling good sense.

I have been with Mr Miller at Dalswinton, and am to meet him again in August.

From my view of the lands and his acceptance of my Bardship, my hopes in that business are rather mended; but still they are slender.

I am quite charmed with Dumfries folks, Mr Burnside the Clergyman, in particular, is a man I whom I shall always gratefully remember; and his wife, Gude forgie me, I had almost broken the tenth commandment on her account. Simplicity, elegance,

good sense, sweetness of disposition, good humor, kind hospitality, are the constituents of her manner and heart; in short – but if I say one word more about her, I shall be directly in love with her.

I never, my friend, thought mankind capable of anything generous; but the stateliness of the Patricians in Edinburgh; and the damn'd servility of my plebeian brethren, who perhaps formerly eyed me askance, since I returned home have nearly put me out of conceit altogether with my species. I have bought a pocket Milton which I carry perpetually with me, in order to study the sentiments – the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid, unyielding independence; the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great Personage, Satan. 'Tis true I have just now a little cash; but I am afraid the damn'd star that hitherto has shed its malignant, purpose blasting rays full in my zenith; that noxious Planet so baneful in its influences to the rhyming tribe, I much dread it is not yet beneath my horizon. Misfortune dodges the path of human life; the poetic mind finds itself hopelessly deranged in, and unfit for the walks of business; add to all that, thoughtless follies and hare-brained whims, like so many Ignus fatui, eternally diverging from the right line of sober discretion, sparkle with step-bewitching blaze in the idly gazing eyes of the poor heedless Bard, till pop, "he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again." God grant that this may be an unreal picture with respect to me! but should it not, I have very little dependance on mankind. I will close this letter with this tribute my heart bids me pay you – the many ties of acquaintance & friendship which I have, or think I have in life. I have felt all along the lines and damn them! they are almost all of them of such frail contexture, that I am sure they would not stand the breath of the least adverse breeze of Fortune; but from you, My ever dear Sir, I look with confidence for the Apostolic love that shall wait on me "Through good report & bad report." The love which Solomon emphatically says "Is strong as death." My compliments to Mrs Nicol, & all the circle of our common friends.

Robt

Burns

P.S. I shall be in Edinburgh about the latter end of July.

**This short note to Robert Ainslie could be confusing as it refers to him as brother Arch. The reason is that while on their travels in the South of the country the pair had been made Royal Arch Masons by Eyemouth Lodge. The Masons of Eyemouth were so pleased to receive a visit from the Bard that they kept the cutlery he used as a memento of his visit and it can still be found there to this day. Burns was now touring the Western Highlands.**

**(116) Robert Ainslie**

Arrochar, near Crocharibas, by Loch Loang

June 25<sup>th</sup> 1787

My dear Friend & brother Arch,

I write you this on tour through a country where savage streams tumble over savage mountains, thinly overspread with savage flocks, which starvingly support as savage inhabitants. My last stage was Inverary – tomorrow night's stage, Dumbarton. I ought sooner to have answered your kind letter, but you know I am a man of many sins.

**A large part of this letter is missing but the remaining few lines are intriguing.**

..... the Devil's Day-book only April 14 or fifteen so cannot yet have increased her growth much. I begin, from that, and some other circumstances to suspect foul play; and to tell the truth I w.....

**It appears that he could be referring to a girl who should be showing signs of pregnancy, but that can only be a guess.**

**Again to James Smith, he describes a convivial evening spent in a country house by the banks of Loch Lomond, (now the famed Cameron House Hotel).**

**(117) James Smith**

30<sup>th</sup> June 1787

On our return, at a Highland gentleman's hospitable mansion, we fell in with a merry party, & danced 'till the ladies left us, at three in the morning. Our dancing was none of the French or English insipid formal movements; the ladies sung Scotch songs like angels, at intervals; then we flew at *Bab at the Bowster*, *Tulllochgorum*, *Loch Erroch side*, &c. like midgies sporting in the mottie sun, or craws prognosticating a storm in a hairst day. When the dear lassies left us, we ranged the bowl till the good-fellow hour of six; except a few minutes that we went out to pay our devotions to the glorious lamp of day peering over the towering top of Benlomond. We all kneeled; our worthy landlord's son held the bowl; each man a full glass in his hand; & I, as priest, repeated some rhyming nonsense, like Thomas a Rhymer's prophecies I suppose. After a small refreshment of the gifts of Somnus, we proceeded to spend the day on Lochlomond, and reached Dumbarton in the evening. We dined at another good fellow's house, and consequently push'd the bottle; when we went out to mount our horses, we found ourselves "No vera fou but gaylie yet." My two friends & I rode soberly down the Loch side, till by came a Highlander at the gallop, on a tolerably good horse, but which had never known the ornaments of iron or leather. We scorned to be out-galoped by a Highlandman, so off we started, whip & spur. My companions, though seemingly gaily mounted, fell sadly astern; but my old mare, Jenny Geddes, one of the Rosinante family, she strained past the Highlander in spite of all his efforts, with the hair-halter; Just as I was passing him, Donald wheeled his horse, as if to cross before me to mar my progress, when down came his horse, & threw his rider's breekless arse into a clipt hedge; & down came Jenny Geddes over all, & my hardship between her & the Highlandman's horse. Jenny Geddes trode over me

with such cautious reverence, that matters were not as bad as might well have been expected; so I came off with a few cuts and bruises, & a thorough resolution to be a pattern of sobriety for the future.

I have yet fixed on nothing with respect to the serious business of life. I am just as usual, a rhyiming, mason-making, raking, aimless, idle fellow. However, I shall somewhere have a farm soon. I was going to say, a wife too; but that must never be my blessed lot. –I am but a younger son of the house of Parnassus, & like other younger sons of great families, I may intrigue, if I choose to run all risks, but must not marry.

I am afraid I have almost ruined one source, the principal one indeed, of my former happiness; that eternal propensity I always had to fall in love. My heart no more glows with feverish rapture. – I have no paradisaical evening interviews stolen from the restless cares & prying inhabitants of this weary world. I have only \*\*\*\*. –This last is one of your distant acquaintances, has a fine figure, and elegant manners, & in the train of some great folks whom you know, has seen the politest quarters in Europe. I do like her a good deal; but what piques me is her conduct at the commencement of our acquaintance. I frequently visited her when I was in -----, & after passing regularly the intermediate degrees between the distant formal bow & the familiar grasp around the waist, I ventured in my careless way to talk of friendship in rather ambiguous terms; & after her return to -----, I wrote to her in the same style. Miss, construing my words farther than even I intended, flew off in a tangent of female dignity & reserve, like a mounting lark in an April morning, and wrote me an answer which measured me very compleately what an immense way I had to travel before I could reach the climate of her favour. But I am an old hawk at the sport; & wrote her such a cool, deliberate, prudent reply as brought my bird from her aerial towerings, pop, down at my foot like corporal Trim's hat.

As for the rest of my acts, and my wars, and all my wise sayings, and why my mare was called Jenny Geddes, they shall be recorded in a few weeks hence at Linlithgow, in the chronicles of your memory, by

Robert Burns

**John Richmond was one of the Bard's early friends and had been responsible for the pregnancy of one of the local girls. He outlived Burns by some fifty years but in later life was reluctant to discuss his youthful misdemeanours.**

**(119) John Richmond**

Mossgiel, 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1787

My dear Richmond,

I am all impatience to hear your fate since the old confounder of right & wrong has turned you out of the place, by his journey to answer his indictment at the Bar of the other world. He will find the Practice of that court so different from the Practice in which he has for so many years been thoroughly hackneyed. That his friends, if he had any connection truly of that kind, which I rather doubt, may well tremble for his sake.

His Chicane, his Left-handed Wisdom, which stood so firmly by him, to such good purpose, *here*, like other accomplices in robbery and plunder, will, now the piratical business is blown, in all probability turn King's evidence, and then the Devil's bagpiper will touch him off, "Bundle and go."

If he has left you any legacy, I beg your pardon for all this; if not, I know you will swear to every word I have said about him.

I have lately been rambling over by Dumbarton and Inverary, and running a drunken race on the side of Loch Lomond with a wild Highlandman, his horse, which had never known the ornaments of iron or leather, zigzagged across before my old spavin'd hunter, whose name is Jenny Geddes, and down came the Highwayman, horse and all, and down came Jenny and my Bardship; so I have got

such a skinful of bruises and wounds, that I shall be four weeks before I dare venture on my journey to Edinburgh.

Not one new thing under the sun has happened in Mauchline since you left it. I hope this will find you as comfortably situated as formerly, or, if Heaven please, more so; but at all events, I trust you will let me know by Connel how matters stand with you, well or ill. 'Tis but poor consolation to tell the world when things go wrong; but, you know very well your connection & mine stands on a very different footing.

I am ever, my dear friend, yours

Robt Burns

**Burns met Robert Ainslie while in Edinburgh and the enjoyed many raucous evenings together. Ainslie accompanied Burns on part of his Border tour and was, according to Burns, the only person he could talk nonsense to without losing his dignity.**

**(122) Robert Ainslie**

Mauchline, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1787

My dear Ainslie,

There is one thing for which I set great store by you as a friend, and it is this, that I have not got a friend upon earth, besides yourself, to whom I can talk nonsense without forfeiting some degree of his esteem. Now, to one like me, who never cares for speaking anything else but nonsense, such a friend as you is an invaluable treasure: I was never a rogue, but have been a fool all of my life; and in spite of all my endeavours, I see now plainly that I shall never be wise. Now it rejoices my heart to have met with such a fellow as you, who, though you are not such a hopeless fool as I, yet I trust you will never listen so much to the temptations of the devil as to grow so very wise that you will in the least disrespect an ahonest fellow because he is a fool. In short, I have set you down as the staff of

my old age, when the whole list of my friends, will, after a decent share of pity, have forgot me.

“Though in the morn comes sturt and strife,  
Yet may joy come at noon;  
And I hope to live a merry, merry life  
When a’ thir days are gone.”

Write me soon, were it but a few lines to tell me how that good, sagacious man, your father is, that kind, dainty body, your mother, that strapping chield, your brother Douglas – and my friend Rachel, who is as far before Rachel of old, as she was before her blear-eyed sister Leah.

R.B.

**Burns was by now communicating with Mrs Dunlop on a regular basis and was happy to send her a copy of the autobiographical letter sent to Dr Moore.**

**(124) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Stewarton, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1787

I am sure, Madam, you have most effectually surprised me this morning. – Send your servant twenty miles to enquire for me!!! By all the towering flights of Pride, ’twas doing me an honor so far beyond my wildest expectation that for half a second the shadow of a Doubt eclipsed my belief, whether you might perhaps mean to burlesque me. I have indeed been ailing, but your verses have given me a fillip for one day. Without any Poetic licence, I assure you upon the honor of a plain, unfettered, truth-delivering Prose, they are excellent. I have a long letter to Dr Moore just ready to put into the Post Office, it is on a subject you have done me the honor to interest yourself in, so if you dare face twenty pages of an epistle, a reading of it is at your service. I don’t doubt but you will laugh at me; I know you

will; and I will insist on taking that amusement at my expense, solely by yourself. – I am not bound to contribute at so dear a rate to the diversion of the rest of the family. I have no copy of Dr Moore's letter, I mean the one I send him, so this you read must go to post. If you can contrive a better way, I shall call for it myself tomorrow as I am going for Edinburgh by way of Paisley & Glasgow, tomorrow morning.

My most respectful Compliments to Lady Wallace, Miss Logan, who I heard at Ayr 'tother day is at Dunlop. The Major & all your good family.

I have the honor to be, with the highest respect and most sincere gratitude,

Madam, your much obliged very humble servant

Robt Burns

**Back in Edinburgh once more, Burns resumes his correspondence with the Rev Lawrie. This rambling letter suggests that perhaps Burns had been imbibing on the port he writes about.**

**(127) The Rev Archibald Lawrie**

Edinburgh, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1787

My dear Sir,

Here am I – that is all I can tell you of that unaccountable BEING – Myself. What I am doing, no mortal can tell; what I am thinking, I myself cannot tell; what I am usually saying is not worth telling. The clock is just striking, one, two, three, four, --, --, --, --, --, --, twelve, forenoon, and here I sit, in the Attic story, alias, the garret, with a friend on the right hand of my Standish – a friend whose kindness I shall largely experience at the close of this line – there – thank you – a Friend, my dear Mr Lowrie, whose kindness often makes me blush; a Friend who has more of the milk of human kindness than the all the human race put together, and what is highly to his honor, peculiarly a friend to the friendless as often as they come his

way, in short, Sir, he is without the least alloy, a universal Philanthropist' and his much beloved name is A BOTTLE OF GOOD OLD PORT! In a week, if whim and weather serve, I shall set out for the North, a tour to the Highlands.

I ate some Newhaven broth, in other words, boiled mussels with Mr Farquhar's family t'other day. Now I see you prick up your ears. They are all well and Mademoiselle is particularly well. She begs her respects to you all, along with which, please present those of your humble servant.

I can no more. I have so high a veneration, or rather, idolitization for the cleric character, that even a little futurum esse vel fuisse Priestling in his Penna, pennae, pennae, &c. throws an awe over my mind in his presence, and shortens my sentences into single ideas,

Farewell, and believe me to ever, my dear Sir, yours

Robt Burns

**Robert Burns had been involved in the Masonic movement from the age of 22 and at the time of writing the following letter, was Depute Master of Tarbolton Lodge. Interesting to note that he is sympathetic to those members who may not be able to pay their dues to the Lodge.**

**(129) Lodge St James Kilwinning No. 135 Tarbolton** Edinburgh, 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 1787

Men & Brethren,

I am truly sorry it is not in my power to be at your quarterly meeting. If I must be absent in body, believe me I shall be present in spirit. I suppose those who owe us monies by bill or otherwise will appear; I mean those we summoned. If you please, I wish you delay prosecuting defaulters till I come home. The Court is up, and I will be home before it sits down. In the meantime, to take a note of who appear and who do not of our faulty debtors will be right in my humble opinion; and those who confess debt and crave days, I think we should spare them. Farewell.

Within your dear Mansion may wayward Contention  
Or wither'd Envy never enter!  
May Secrecy round be the mystical bound,  
And brotherly love be the Center!!!

Robt Burns

**Robert Burns, accompanied by Willie Nicol, had by now set out on his Highland Tour. He was determined to see the parts of Scotland that had only been available to him from the pages of books, and now with some money in his pocket he was able to fulfill his ambition.**

**(132) Gavin Hamilton**

Stirling, 28<sup>th</sup> August 1787

My dear Sir,

Here am I on my way to Inverness. I have rambled over the rich, fertile corses of Falkirk and Stirling, and am delighted with their appearance, richly waving crops of wheat, barley, &c. but no harvest at all yet, except in one or two places an old wife's ridge. Yesterday morning I rode from this town up the meandering Devan's banks to pay my last respects to some Ayrshire folks at Harvieston. After breakfast, we made a party to go and see the famous Cauldron-linn, a remarkable cascade in the Devan about five miles above Harvieston; and after spending one of the most pleasant days I ever had in my life, I returned to Stirling in the evening. They are a family, Sir, though I had not had any prior tie, though they had been the brothers & sisters of a certain generous friend of mine, I would never forget them. I am told you have not seen them in these several years, so you can have very little idea of what such young folks as they are now. Your brother is as tall as you are, but slender rather than otherwise; and I have the satisfaction to inform you that he is getting the better of these consumptive symptoms which I suppose you knew were threatening him. His make & particularly his manner resemble you, but he

will still have a finer face. (I put in the word, still, to please Mrs Hamilton). Good-sense, modesty and at the same time a just idea of that respect that man owes to man and has a right in turn to exact, are striking features in his character; and what with me is the Alpha & the Omega, he has a heart might adorn the breast of a Poet. Grace has a good figure and the look of health and cheerfulness, but nothing else remarkable in her person. I scarcely ever saw so striking a likeness between her & your little Beennie; the mouth and chin particularly. She is reserved at first, but as we grew better acquainted; I was delighted with the native frankness of her manner, and the sterling sense of her observation. Of Charlotte I cannot speak in common terms of admiration; she is not only beautiful, but lovely. Her form is elegant; her features not regular but they have the smile of Sweetness and the settled complacency of good nature in the highest degree; and her complexion, now that she has happily recovered her wonted health, is equal to Miss Burnet's. After the exercise of our ride to the falls, Charlotte was exactly Dr Donne's Mistress.

“Her pure and eloquent blood  
Flowed in her cheeks and so distinctly wrought,  
That on would almost say her body thought”

Her eyes are fascinating; at once expressive of good-sense, tenderness, and a noble mind.

I do not give you all this account, my good Sir, to flatter you; I mean it to reproach you. Such relations, the first Peer in the realm might own with pride; then why but you keep up more correspondence with these so amiable young folks? I had a thousand questions to answer about you all; I had to describe the little ones with the minuteness of the Anatomy. They were highly delighted when I told them that John was so good a boy and so fine a scholar, and that Willie was going on still very pretty; but I have it in commission to tell her from them that beauty is a poor silly bauble without she be good, -- Miss Chalmers I had left in Edinburgh but I had

the pleasure of meeting with Mrs Chalmers, only Lady Mckenzie being rather alarmingly ill of a sore throat somewhat marr'd our enjoyment.

I shall not be in Ayrshire for four weeks. My most respectful Compliments to Mrs Hamilton, Miss Kennedy and Doctor Mckenzie. I shall probably write to him from some stage or other.

I am ever, Sir, yours most gratefully  
Robt Burns

**The connection between Robert Burns and people such as Josiah Walker is remarkable for their respective life styles were light years apart. Walker was the son of a clergyman and had graduated from Edinburgh University before becoming private tutor to the son of the Duke of Atholl. He accompanied the boy to Eton and it was while there that he was told of Scotland's new literary sensation. Having been familiar with the poetry and songs of rustic origins and been totally unimpressed by them, he was astonished to find that, in his estimation, every page of the works of Burns was the work of a genius. The pair eventually met during Burns' Highland tour when the Bard was invited to Blair Castle as the guest of the Duke and Duchess. However, Burns was not impressed by some criticism of his works offered by Walker and made his feelings clear on he subject. Burns was accompanied on the Highland tour by his friend, William Nicol, the Edinburgh school teacher.**

**(135) Josiah Walker**

Inverness, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1787

Enclosing *The humble petition of Bruar Water*

My dear Sir,

I have just time to write the foregoing, and to tell you that it was, at least most part of it, the effusion of the half hour that I spent at Bruar. I don't mean it was

extempore, for I have endeavoured to brush it up as well as Mr Nicol's chat and the jogging of the chaise would allow. It eases my heart a good deal, as Rhyme is the coin with which a Poet pays his debts of honor or gratitude; what I owe to the noble Family of Athole of the first kind, I shall ever proudly boast; what I owe of the last, so help me God in my hour of need! I shall never forget!

The little angel band, I declare I prayed for them very sincerely today at the falls of Fyars; you know from experience the bedlam warmth of a Poet's heart. I Shall never forget the fine family piece I saw at Blair; the amiable, the truly noble Duchess with her smiling little seraph in her lap, at the head of her table; the lovely "olive plants," as the Hebrew Bard finely says, round the happy mother: the beautiful Mrs Graham: the lovely, sweet Miss Cathcart, &c. I wish I had the powers of Guido to do them justice! My lord Duke's kind hospitality, markedly kind indeed; Mr Graham of Fintrie's charms of conversation; Sir William Murray's friendship; in short, the recollection of all that polite, agreeable company raises an honest glow in my bosom.

If you write to me, to be left at the post office, Dundee, any time before the 12<sup>th</sup> inst I will find it, as by my calculation I shall pass that night in Dundee.

Farewell!

Robt Burns.

**The Bard had returned to Edinburgh from his Highland tour the previous day as he sat down to relate some of his experiences to his brother, Gilbert. Even in writing to his own brother, the strict formality of address was adhered to.**

**(137) Gilbert Burns**

Edinburgh, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1787

My dear Sir,

I arrived here safe yesterday evening after a tour of 22 days, and travelling near 600 miles, windings included. My farthest stretch was, about 10 miles beyond

Inverness. I went through the heart of the Highlands by Crieff, Taymouth the famous seat of Lord Breadalbane, down the Tay, among cascades and Druidical circles of stones, to Dunkeld, the seat of the Duke of Athole, thence cross Tay and up one his tributary streams to Blair of Athole, another of the Duke's seats, where I had the honor of spending nearly two days with his Grace and Family, thence many miles through a wild country among cliffs grey with eternal snows and gloomy savage glens till I crossed Spey and went down the stream through Strathspey so famous in Scottish music, Badenoch &c, till I reached Grant Castle, where I spent half a day with Sir James Grant and Family, then cross the country for Fort George – call by the way at Cawdor the ancient seat of Mcbeth you know in Shakespeare, there I saw the identical bed in which Tradition says king Duncan was murdered, lastly from Fort George to Inverness.

I returned by the coast; Nairn, Forres, and so on to Aberdeen, thence to Stonhive where James Burness from Montrose met me by appointment. I spent two days among our relations, and found our aunts, Jean and Isbal still alive and hale old women, John Caird, though born the same year with our father, walks as vigorously as I can; they have had several letters from his son in New York. William Brand is likewise a stout old fellow; but further particulars I delay till I see you, which will be in two or three weeks. The rest of my stages are not worth rehearsing – warm as I was from Ossian's country where I had seen his very grave, what cared I for fisher-towns and fertile Carse? I slept at the famous Brodie of Brodie's one night and dined at Gordon castle next day with the Duke, Duchess and family. I am thinking of causing my old mare to meet me by means of John Ronald at Glasgow, but you shall hear further from me before I leave Edinburgh. My duty and many Compliments from the North to my Mother; and my brotherly Compliments to the rest. I have been trying for a berth for William, but am not likely to be successful. Farewel !

Robt Burns

**Josiah Walker obviously replied to the letter from Burns and offered some form of criticism, rejected by the Bard. However, it is patently obvious that Burns was still slightly overwhelmed by the warmth of the reception he had received at Blair Castle and brushed the criticism aside.**

**(140) Josiah Walker**

Edinburgh, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1787

My dear friend & Countryman,

Why I have not answered your most welcome letter sooner is partly owing to yourself. I was conscious I was deeply in your debt, and was resolved to pay you *in kind* by writing you a most devilish good letter; but among a Poet's Creditors usually, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak;" so I send you this in the interim merely "ti=0 brunt side o' my shin," at the idea of my Petition for the poor naked Falls of Bruar being so well received at Blair. I wrote it with all the pith and marrow of Gratitude. I was so flattered by the cordial welcome I got from the truly noble Family, and so delighted with the little Seraphs, the future hope of Caledonia, that I swore in my own mind by the Great Fountain of Generosity and Hospitality, if my Muse did not, within twenty four hours from the date of my leaving Blair, pay her illustrious friends at Athole some poetic compliment, the very best the time and circumstances could produce – I would, with unrelenting vengeance, throw her into the House of Correction and finally banish her to Botany Bay.

Your Criticism I do not just approve of: To say that a thing is "Worth gaun a mile to see," is indefinitely saying worth going a great way to see, which, in my opinion, is better than marking any particular length of way. Pardonnez Moi; you may be perhaps be right for all that. I would not like it to be published in any other newspaper than a magazine, not there, but as if by chance, and "said" to be done by such a Man; but it is to me a matter totally indifferent; you are at perfect liberty to do as you please.

I should go on to tell you the particulars of my pilgrimage after you saw me: what pleasure I had in your account of the adventure at Bruar, and the story of Miss Cathcart, by the way, I am convinced fully now, that those who tell me I have no

second-sighted skill in human nature are mistaken; I had not been fifteen minutes in Miss Cathcart's company till I set her down in the dearest records of my observation as one of those "Ministring Spirits" who delight in doing kind offices to "The Heirs of Salvation." I was going to say that if, on consulting your feelings you can promise that a letter from Poet Burns, in whatever mood, tense, time, number or case his Bardship may be, and whether it be the consequence of unforeseen misfortune or thoughtless folly; shall be welcome: if you can do this with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and say YEA, and AMEN – then, Sir, so aid me, My Muse, in my hour of Song, as I now speak the truth and nothing but the truth! I ever shall be happy to send you the cogitations of my mind; the occurrences of my life, or the productions of my Muse; on condition that you just pay me, as I said before, *in kind*. I have no idea of corresponding as a clock strikes; I only write as the spirit moves me. Direct to me at Mauchline, as it is now a post-town. On Thursday I shall be at Auchtertyre, where I shall remain for five or six days, and then a day or two at Edinburgh sends me for the West Country.

Adieu!

Robt Burns

**Patrick Miller was the owner of the Dalswinton estate and Burns was contemplating leasing a farm upon his land.**

**(144 ) Patrick Miller**

Edinburgh, 20th Oct, 1787.

Sir,

I was spending a few days at Sir William Murray's, Ochtertyre, and did not get your obliging letter till to-day I came to town. I was still more unlucky in catching a miserable cold, for which the medical gentlemen have ordered me into close confinement, "under pain of death" - the severest of penalties.

In two or three days, if I get better, and if I hear at your lodgings that you are still at Dalswinton, I will take a ride to Dumfries directly. From something in your last, I would wish to explain my idea of being your tenant.

I want to be a farmer in a small farm, about a plough-gang, in a pleasant country, under the auspices of a good landlord. I have no foolish notion of being a tenant on easier terms than another. To find a farm where one can live at all is not easy -- I only mean living soberly, like an old-style farmer, and joining personal industry. The banks of the Nith are as sweet poetic ground as any I ever saw; and besides, Sir, 'tis but justice to the feelings of my own heart and the opinion of my best friends, to say that I would wish to call you landlord sooner than any landed gentleman I know. These are my views and wishes; and in whatever way you think best to lay out your farms I shall be happy to rent one of them. I shall certainly be able to ride to Dalswinton about the middle of next week, if I hear that you are not gone.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your obliged humble servant,  
Robt Burns

**During his Highland tour Burns had been invited for dinner at Castle Gordon, but his companion William Nicol was livid with indignation to discover he was not included on the invitation. When the Duke of Gordon became aware of this omission he immediately requested that Burns should go and fetch his travelling companion. However, Nicol had worked himself into such a fury over the situation that he refused to accompany Burns and insisted they carry on with their journey forthwith. Burns had little alternative but to comply otherwise he may have been stranded in the Highlands with no transport, so to his great embarrassment he left without being able to make his apologies to the Duke and Duchess. We can only imagine the strained relationship for the next part of the journey. The following letter is to the**

**Duke's companion, James Hoy, relating the Bard's thoughts toward Nicol over the episode.**

**(145) James Hoy**

Edinburgh, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1787

Sir,

I will defend my conduct, in giving you this trouble, on the best of Christian principles –“Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” I shall certainly, among my legacies, leave my latest curse to that unlucky predicament which hurried me, tore me away from Castle Gordon. May that obstinate Son of Latin Prose be curst to Scotch-mile periods, and damn'd to seven-league paragraphs; while Declension and Conjugation, Gender, Number and Time, under the ragged banners of Dissonance and Disarrangement eternally rank against him in hostile array!!!!!!

Allow me Sir, to strengthen the small claim I have to your acquaintance by the following request. An Engraver, James Johnson, in Edinburgh has, not from mercenary views but from an honest Scotch enthusiasm, set about collecting all our native Songs and setting them to music; particularly those that have never been set before. Clarke, the well known Musician presides over the musical arrangement; and Drs Beattie and Blacklock, Mr Tytler, Woodhouselee, and your humble servant to the utmost of his small power, assist in collecting the old poetry, or sometimes for a fine air to make a stanza, when it has no words. The inclosed is one which, like some other misbegotten brats, “too tedious to mention,” claims a parental pang From my Bardship. I suppose it will appear in Johnson's second Number; the first was published before my acquaintance with him. My request is; “Cauld kail in Aberdeen” is one intended for this number; and I beg a copy of his Grace of Gordon's words to it, which you were so kind to repeat to me. You may be sure we wont prefix the Author's name, except you like; tho' I look on it as no small merit to this work that the names of many of the Authors of our old Scotch Songs, names almost forgotten, will be inserted. I do not well know where to write to you, I rather write at you; but if you will so obliging immediately on receipt of this,

as to write me a few lines; I shall perhaps pay you in kind, tho' not in quality. Johnson's terms are; each Number, a handsome pocket volume, to consist at least of a hundred Scotch Songs, with bases for the Harpsichord, &c.; the price to subscribers, 5, to non sub; 6sh. He will have three Numbers I conjecture. My direction for two or three weeks will be, at Mr William Cruikshank's, St Jame's Square, Newton, Edinburgh.  
I am, Sir, yours to command

Robt Burns

**( 145A ) Margaret Chalmers**

Oct. 26, 1787.

I send Charlotte the first number of the songs; I would not wait for the second number; I hate delays in little marks of friendship, as I hate dissimulation in the language of the heart. I am determined to pay Charlotte a poetic compliment, if I could hit on some glorious old Scotch air, in number second. You will see a small attempt on a shred of paper in the book; but though Dr. Blacklock commended it very highly, I am not just satisfied with it myself. I intend to make it a description of some kind: the whining cant of love, except in real passion, and by a masterly hand, is to me as insufferable as the preaching cant of old Father Smeaton, whig-minister at Kilmaurs. Darts, flames, cupids, loves, graces, and all that farrago, are just a Mauchline sacrament, a senseless rabble.

I got an excellent poetic epistle yesternight from the old, venerable author of "Tullochgorum," "John of Badenyon," etc. I suppose you know he is a clergyman. It is by far the finest poetic compliment I ever got. I will send you a copy of it.

I go on Thursday or Friday to Dumfries, to wait on Mr. Miller about his farms. Do tell that to Lady Mackenzie, that she may give me credit for a little wisdom. "I, Wisdom, dwell with Prudence." What a blessed fireside! How happy should I be to pass a winter evening under their venerable roof! and smoke a pipe of tobacco, or drink water-gruel with them! What solemn, lengthened, laughter-quashing gravity of phiz! What sage remarks on the good-for-nothing sons and daughters of

indiscretion and folly! And what frugal lessons, as we straitened the fireside circle, on the uses of the poker and tongs!

Miss N. is very well, and begs to be remembered in the old way to you. I used all my eloquence, all the persuasive flourishes of the hand, and heart-melting modulation of periods in my power, to urge her out to Hervieston, but all in vain. My rhetoric seems quite to have lost its effect on the lovely half of mankind. I have seen the day--but this is "a tale of other years." In my conscience I believe that my heart has been so oft on fire that it is absolutely vitrified. I look on the sex with something like the admiration with which I regard the starry sky in a frosty December night. I admire the beauty of the Creator's workmanship; I am charmed with the wild but graceful eccentricity of their motions, and--wish them good-night. I mean this with respect to a certain passion dont j'at eu l'honneur d'etre un miserable esclave.

As for friendship, you and Charlotte have given me pleasure, permanent pleasure, "which the world cannot give, nor take away,"

I hope, and which will outlast the heavens and the earth.

R. B.

**Like Burns, the Rev. John Skinner was a collector of Scots songs and corresponded with Burns on the subject. Skinner's church in Aberdeen had been wrecked by Cumberland's men in the aftermath of the '45 rebellion, and he had been imprisoned for six months for having preached to a congregation of more than four people.**

**( 147 ) The Rev John Skinner**

Edinburgh, October 25th, 1787.

Reverend and Venerable Sir,

Accept, in plain, dull prose, my most sincere thanks for the best poetical compliment I ever received.

I assure you, Sir, as a poet, you have conjured up an airy demon of vanity in my fancy, which the best abilities in your other capacity would be ill able to lay. I regret, and while I live I shall regret, that when I was in the north I had not the pleasure of paying a younger brother's dutiful respect to the author of the best Scotch song ever Scotland saw--"Tullochgorum's my delight!" The world may think slightly of the craft of song-making if they please; but, as Job says, "O! that mine adversary had written a book!" let them try.

There is a certain something in the old Scotch songs, a wild happiness of thought and expression, which peculiarly marks them, not only from English songs, but also from the modern efforts of song-wrights, in our native manner and language. The only remains of this enchantment, these spells of the imagination, rest with you. Our true brother, Ross of Lochlee, was likewise "owre cannie"--a "wild warlock" -- but now he sings among the "sons of the morning."

I have often wished, and will certainly endeavour, to form a kind of common acquaintance among all the genuine sons of Caledonian song. The world, busy in low prosaic pursuits, may overlook most of us; but "reverence thyself." The world is not our 'peers' so we challenge the jury. We can lash that world, and find ourselves a very great source of amusement and happiness independent of that world.

There is a work going on in Edinburgh, just now, which claims your best assistance. An Engraver in this town has set about collecting and publishing all the Scotch songs, with the music, that can be found. Songs in the English language, if by Scotchmen, are admitted, but the music must all be Scotch. Drs. Beattie and Blacklock are lending a hand, and the first musician in town presides over that department. I have been absolutely crazed about it, collecting old stanzas, and every information remaining respecting their origin, authors, etc., etc. This last is but a very fragment business; but at the end of his second number -- the first is

already published -- a small account will be given of the authors, particularly to preserve those of latter times.

Your three songs, "Tullochgorum," "John of Badenyon," and "Ewie wi' the crookit Horn," go in this second number. I was determined, before I got your letter, to write you, begging that you would let me know where the editions of these pieces may be found as you would wish them to continue in future times: and if you would be so kind to this undertaking as send any songs, of your own or others, that you would think proper to publish, your name will be inserted among the other authors. "Nill ye, will ye," one-half of Scotland already give your songs to other authors.

Paper is done. I beg to hear from you; the sooner the better, as I leave Edinburgh in a fortnight or three weeks.

I am, with the warmest sincerity, Sir, your obliged humble Servant,

Robert Burns

**John Murdoch had moved to London and was agreeably surprised to discover that the Bard of Scotland was his former pupil.**

**Letter from John Murdoch**

London, 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1787

My Dear Sir,

As my friend, Mr Brown, is going from this place to your neighbourhood, I embrace the opportunity of telling you that I am yet alive, tolerably well, and always in expectation of being better. By the much-valued letters before me, I see that it was my duty to have given you this intelligence about three years and nine months ago; and have nothing to allege as an excuse, but that we poor, busy, bustling bodies in London are so much taken up with the various pursuits in which we are engaged, that we seldom think of any person, creature, place, or thing, that is absent. But this is not altogether the case with me; for I often think of you, and *Hornie*, and *Russel*, and an *unfathomed depth*, and *lowan brunstane*, all in the same minute,

although you and they are (as I suppose) at a considerable distance. I flatter myself, however, with the pleasing thought that you and I shall meet some time or other, either in Scotland or England. If you ever come hither, you will have the satisfaction of seeing your poems relished by the Caledonians in London full as much as they can be by those in Edinburgh. We frequently repeat some of your verse in our Caledonian Society; and you may believe that I am not a little vain that I have had some share in cultivating such a genius. I was not absolutely certain that you were the author till a few days ago, when I made a visit to Mrs Hill, Dr McComb's eldest daughter, who lives in town, and who told me that she was informed of it by a letter from her sister in Edinburgh, with whom you had been in company in that capital.

Pray let me know if you have any intention of visiting this huge, over-grown metropolis. It would afford matter for a large poem. Here you would have an opportunity of indulging your vein in the study of mankind, perhaps to a greater degree than in any city on the face of the globe; for the inhabitants of London, as you know, are a collection of all nations, kindreds, and tongues, who make it, as it were, the centre of their commerce.

Present my respectful compliments to Mrs Burns, to my dear friend Gilbert, and all the rest of her amiable children. May the Father of the Universe bless you with all those principles and dispositions that the best of parents took such uncommon pains to instill into your minds from your earliest infancy. May you live as he did: if you do, you can never be unhappy. I feel myself grown serious all at once, and affected in a manner I cannot describe. I shall only add, that it is one of the greatest pleasures I promise myself before I die, that of seeing the family of a man whose memory I revere more than that of any person that ever I was acquainted with.

I am, my dear Friend, Yours sincerely,

John Murdoch

**Again to Margaret Chalmers, chiding her for her timidity.**

**(150) Margaret Chalmers**

Edinburgh, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1787

My dear Madam,

I have just read yours. The poetic compliments I pay cannot be misunderstood. – They are neither of them so particular as to point you out to the world at large; and your circle of acquaintances will allow all I have said. Besides, I have complimented you chiefly, almost solely, on your mental charms. Shall I be plain with you? I will; so look to it. Personal attractions, madam, you have much above par; wit, understanding & worth, you possess in the first class. This is a cursed flat way of telling you these truths, but let me hear no more of your sheepish timidity. – I know the world a little, I know what they will say of my poems; by second sight I suppose; for I am seldom out in my conjectures; & you may believe, my dear madam, I would not run any risk of hurting you by an ill-judged compliment. – I wish to show to the world the odds between a poet's friends & those of simple prosement. More for your information, *both* the pieces go in. One of them "Where braving all the winter's harms," is already set – the tune is Neil Gow's lamentation for Abercairny; The other is set to an old Highland air in Daniel Dow's "collection of ancient Scots music;" the name is *Ha a chaillich air mo Dheith*. My treacherous memory has forgot every circumstance about *Les Incas*, only I think you mentioned them as being in Creech's possession. I shall ask him about it. I am afraid the song of "Somebody" will come too late – as I shall, for certain, leave town in a week for Ayr-shire, & from that to Dumfries, but there my hopes are slender. I leave my direction in town, so any thing, wherever I am, will reach me. I saw yours to -----, it is not too severe, nor did he take it amiss. On the contrary, like a whipt spaniel, he talks of being with you on the Christmas days. Mr ----- has given him the invitation, & he is determined to accept of it. O selfishness! He owns in his sober moments, that from his own volatility of inclination, the circumstances in which he is situated & his knowledge of his father's disposition, -- the whole affair is chimerical – yet he *will* grant an idle *penchant* at the enormous, cruel

expense of perhaps ruining the peace of the very woman for whom he professes the generous passion of love! He is a gentleman in his mind & manners. *I pis!* – He is a volatile school-boy. The heir to a man's fortune who well knows the value of two times two!

Perdition seize them & their fortunes before they should make the amiable, the lovely ----- the derided object of their purse-proud contempt.

I am doubly happy to hear of Mrs -----'s recovery, because I really thought all was over with her. There are days of pleasure yet awaiting her. –

“As I cam by in Glenap  
I met with an aged woman;  
She bade me chear up my heart,  
For the best o' my day was comin.”

This day will decide my affairs with Creech. Things are, like myself, not what they ought to be; yet better than what they appear to be.

‘Heaven's sovereign saves all beings but himself  
That hideous sight – a naked human heart.’

Farewell! Remember me to Charlotte.

R.B.

**( 152 ) Margaret Chalmers**

Nov 21, 1787.

I have one vexatious fault to the kindly, welcome, well-filled sheet which I owe to your and Charlotte's goodness – it contains too much sense, sentiment, and good spelling. It is impossible that even you two, whom, I declare to my God, I will give credit for any degree of excellence the sex are capable of attaining – it is impossible you can go on to correspond at that rate; so, like those who, Shenstone

says, retire because they have made a good speech, I shall, after a few letters, hear no more of you. I insist that you shall write whatever comes first – what you see, what you read, what you hear, what you admire, what you dislike, trifles, bagatelles, nonsense; or, to fill up a corner, e'en put down a laugh at full length.

Now, none of your polite hints about flattery; I leave that to your lovers, if you have or shall have any; though, thank heaven, I have found at last two girls who can be luxuriantly happy in their own minds and with one another, without that commonly necessary appendage to female bliss – A LOVER.

Charlotte and you are just two favourite resting-places for my soul in her wanderings through the weary, thorny wilderness of this world. God knows, I am ill-fitted for the struggle: I glory in being a poet, and I want to be thought a wise man – I would fondly be generous, and I wish to be rich. After all, I am afraid I am a lost subject. "Some folk hae a hantle o' faults, and I'm but a ne'er-do-weel".

Afternoon. To close the melancholy reflections at the end of last sheet, I shall just add a piece of devotion, commonly known in Carrick by the title of the "Wabster's grace":

Some say we're thieves, and e'en sae are we,  
Some say we lie, and e'en sae do we!  
Gude forgie us, and I hope sae will he!  
Up and to your looms, lads.

R. B.

**Another rambling epistle to Mrs Dunlop in which he attacks religious bigotry.**

**(152A) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Edinburgh, 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1787

Madam,

I will bear the reproaches of my conscience respecting this letter no longer. I was indebted to you some time ago for a kind, long letter; (your letters, the longer the better) and again the other day I heard from you, enclosing a very friendly letter

from Dr Moore. I thought with myself in the height of my gratitude and pride of my remark that I would sit down some hour of inspiration, and write you a letter, at least worth twa groats; consequently you would have been a gainer, as you are so benevolent as to bestow your epistolary correspondence on me, I am sure without the least idea of being paid *in kind*.

When you talk of correspondence and friendship to me, Madam, you do me too much honor; but, as I shall soon be at my wonted leisure and rural occupation, if my remark on what I have read or seen, or any new rhyme I may twist, that is worth while, if such a letter, Madam, can give a person of your rank, information and abilities any entertainment, you shall have it with all my heart and soul.

It requires no common exertion of good sense and Philosophy in persons of elevated rank, to keep a friendship properly alive with one much their inferior.

Externals, things totally extraneous of the man, steal upon the heart and judgements of almost, if not altogether, all mankind; nor do I know any more than one instance of a Man who fully and truly regards "all the world as a stage, and all the men and women merely Players," and who, the dancing-school bow excepted, only values these Players, the Dramatis Personae, who build Cities, or rear hedges; or govern provinces, or superintend flocks, merely as they *act their parts*. For the honor of Ayrshire, this Man is Professor Dugald Stewart of Catrine. To him I might perhaps add another instance, a Popish Bishop; but I have already outraged that gloomy Fury, Presbytereanism, enough already, though I don't spit in her lugubrious face by telling her that the first Cleric character I ever saw was a Roman Catholick.

I ever could ill endure those surly cubs of "Chaos and old Night;" these ghostly beasts of prey, who foul the hallow'd ground of Religion with their nocturnal prowlings; but if the prosecution which I hear the Erebean Fanatics are projecting against my learned and truly worthy friend, Dr McGill, goes on, I shall keep no measure with the savages, but fly at them with the falcons of Ridicule, or run them down with bloodhounds or Satire, as lawful game, wherever I start them. I expect to leave Edinburgh in eight or ten days, and shall certainly do myself the honor of calling at Dunlop house as I return to Ayrshire.

I have the honor to be, Madam, your obliged humble servant,

Robt Burns

**The Bard now writes to Gavin Hamilton commiserating with him in a light-hearted and irreverent manner over his problems with the Rev Daddy Auld.**

**(157) Gavin Hamilton**

Edinburgh, December 1787

My dear Sir,

It is indeed with the highest of pleasure that I congratulate you on the return of "Days of ease and nights of pleasure," after the horrid hours of misery in which I saw you suffering existence when I was last in Ayr-shire, I seldom pray for any body – "I'm baith dead sweer an' wretched ill o't," but most fervently do I beseech the Holy Trinity, or the holy Somebody that directs this world, that you may live long and be happy, but live no longer than you are happy. It is needless for me to advise to have a reverend care of your health. I know you will make it a point never at one time to drink more than a pint of wine (I mean an English pint) and that you will never be witness to more than one bowl of punch at a time; and that cold drams you will never more taste; and above all things, and above all things, I am convinced that after drinking perhaps boiling punch, you will never mount your horse and gallop home in a chill, late hour, Above all things, as I understand you are now in habits of intimacy with that Boanerge of gospel powers, Father Auld, be earnest with him that he will wrestle in prayer for you, that you may see the vanity of vanities in rusting to, or even practicing the carnal moral works of Charity, Humanity, Generosity & Forgiveness; things which you practiced so flagrantly it was evident you delighted in them; neglecting, or perhaps profanely despising the wholesome doctrine of "Faith without Works, the only anchor of salvation." A hymn of thanksgiving would, in my opinion, be highly becoming from you at present; and in my zeal for your well-being, I earnestly press it on you to be diligent in chanting

over the two inclosed pieces of sacred poesy. My best Compliments to Mrs Hamilton and Miss Kennedy.

Yours in the Lord

R.B.

**December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1797, was a fateful day in the life of Robert Burns, for that was the day he first met Agnes McLehose, known to her friends as Nancy, but better known to us as Clarinda.**

**As a girl of sixteen Nancy was pursued by a Glasgow lawyer, James McLehose. Discovering that young Nancy was to take the stage from Glasgow to Edinburgh, James booked all the other seats on the coach to ensure that he would be alone with Nancy for the several hours of the journey. His ploy obviously paid off, for Nancy agreed to marry him and they were wed the following year. However, the romantic lawyer turned out to be a bully and wife-beater and four years and four children later, Nancy left James McLehose and returned to her father's house. James McLehose left Scotland for Jamaica, but Nancy became homeless when her father died two years after the marriage break-up. She decided that life would be preferable in Edinburgh where she would be able to receive financial assistance from a wealthy cousin, and as she was both attractive and literate, became a regular visitor to the drawing rooms of Edinburgh. Nancy was keen to meet the young poet who was the talk of the city and succeeded in obtaining an invitation to a house where Burns was to be the guest of honour, and when the two eventually met, Burns found himself immediately smitten by the buxom, well-educated young lady. They began to correspond almost immediately, each writing poetry to be sent to the other, until Nancy, realising that she was still a married woman, decided it would be prudent if they stopped using their proper names and used nom de plumes instead, so she would become Clarinda and he Sylvander. And so began the exchange**

of letters that was to last for several years, not just the occasional note, but at one stage writing to each other at the rate of four letters per day.

Fortunately, we are able to include several of the letters sent by Clarinda, and they are wonderful to read.

We start at the very first letter written two days after the initial meeting, before they adopted their nom de plumes.

(158) Agnes McLehose

Thursday even; 6<sup>th</sup> December 1787

Madam.

I had set no small store by my tea-drinking tonight, and have not often been so disappointed..Saturday evening I shall embrace the opportunity with the greatest pleasure. I leave this town this day se'ennight, and probably for a couple of twelvemonth but must ever regret that I so lately got an acquaintance I shall ever highly esteem, and in whose welfare I shall ever be warmly interested.

Our worthy common friend, (Miss Nimmo), in her usual pleasant way, rallied me a good deal on my new acquaintance, and in the humour of her ideas I wrote some lines which I inclose you, as I think they have a good deal of poetic merit; and Miss Nimmo tells me, you are not only a Critic but a Poetess. Fiction, you know, is the native region of Poetry; and I hope you will pardon my vanity in sending you the bagatelle as a tolerable off-hand jeux d'esprit. I have several poetic trifles which I shall gladly leave with Miss Nimmo or you, if they were worth houseroom; as there are scarcely two people on earth by whom it would mortify me more to be forgotten, tho' at the distance of nine-score miles.

I am Madam, with the highest respect,

Your very humble servant

Robt Burns

**Unfortunately for the Bard, he suffered a nasty fall from a coach that he blamed on a drunken coachman, and was forced to forego a meeting arranged with Nancy.**

**(159) Agnes McLehose**

Saturday even;

St James Square No 2 (8<sup>th</sup> December 1787)

I can say with truth, Madam, that I never met with a person in my life whom I more anxiously wished to meet again than yourself. Tonight I was to have had that very great pleasure—I was so intoxicated with the idea – but an unlucky fall from a coach has so bruised one of my knees that I can't stir my leg off the cushion. – So if I don't see you again, I shall not rest in my grave for chagrin. I was vexed to the soul that I had not seen you sooner; I determined to cultivate your friendship with the enthusiasm of Religion, but thus has Fortune ever served me. I cannot bear the idea of leaving Edinburgh without seeing you – I know not how to account for it – I am strangely taken with some people; nor am I often mistaken. You are a stranger to me; but I am an odd being some yet unnamed feelings; things not principles, but better than whims, carry me farther than boasted reason ever did a Philosopher.

Farewel! Every happiness be yours!

Robt Burns

**Nancy McLehose wasted no time in responding to this letter and replied immediately.**

TO MR ROBERT BURNS, MR CRUIKSHANK'S, JAMES' SQUARE

Saturday evening, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1787

Enured as I have been to disappointments, I never felt more, nay, nor half so severely, for one of the same nature! The cruel cause, too, augments my

uneasiness. I trust you'll soon recover it; meantime, if my sympathy, my friendship, can alleviate your pain, be assured you possess them. I am much flattered at being a favourite of yours. Miss Nimmo can tell you how earnestly I had long pressed her to make us acquainted. I had a presentiment that we should derive pleasure from the society of each other. To-night I had thought of fifty things to say to you; how unfortunate this prevention! Do not accuse Fortune; had I not known she was *blind* before, her ill-usage of *you* had marked it sufficiently. However, she is a fickle, old, envious beldame, and I'd much rather be indebted to *Nature*. You shall *not* leave town without seeing me. If I should come along with good Miss Nimmo and call for you. I am determined to see you; and am ready to exclaim with Yorick, "Tut! Are we not all relations?" We are indeed *strangers* in one sense; but of near kin in many respects: these 'nameless feelings' I perfectly comprehend, tho' the pen of a Locke could not define them. Perhaps *instinct* comes nearer their description than either 'Principles or Whims.' Think ye have they any connection with that 'heavenly light which leads astray?' One thing I know, that they have a powerful effect upon me; and are delightful when under the check of *reason* and *religion*.

Miss Nimmo was a favourite of mine from the first hour I met her. There is a softness, a nameless something about her that, was I a man, old as she is, I should have chosen her before most women that I know. I fear, however, this liking is not *mutual*. I'll tell you why I think so at meeting. She was in mere jest when she told you I was a *Poetess*. I have often composed rhyme, (if not *reason*), but never one line of *poetry*. The distinction is obvious to everyone of the least discernment. Your lines are truly poetical; give me all you can spare. Not one living has a higher relish for poetry than I have; and my reading everything of the kind makes me a tolerable judge. Ten years ago, such lines from such a hand would have half-turned my head. Perhaps you thought it might have done so even *yet*, and wisely premised that '*Fiction* was the native region of poetry.' Read the enclosed, which I scrawled just after reading yours. Be sincere, and own that, whatever merit it has, it has not a line resembling poetry. Pardon any little freedoms I take with you; if they entertain a heavy hour, they have all the merit I intended. Will you let me

know, now and then, how your leg is? If I was your *sister*, I would call and see you; but 'tis a censorious world this; and (in this sense) 'you and I are not of this world.' Adieu. Keep up your heart, you will soon get well, and we shall *meet*.

Farewell, God bless you

A.M.

**Burns may have commenced his correspondence with Nancy McLehose, but that didn't mean that all the other women in his life were to be forgotten and ignored, as is shown by these letters to Margaret Chalmers.**

**(160) Margaret Chalmers**

Edinburgh 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1787

I am here under the care of a surgeon, with a bruised limb extended on a cushion; and the tints of my mind vying with the livid horror preceding a midnight thunder-storm. A drunken coachman was the cause of the first, and incomparably, the lightest evil; misfortune, bodily constitution, hell and myself, have formed a "Quadruple Alliance" to guarantee the other. I got my fall on Saturday, and am getting slowly better.

I have taken tooth and nail to the bible, and am got through the first five books of Moses, and half-way in Joshua. It is really a glorious book. I sent for my book-binder today, and ordered him to get me an octavo bible in sheets, the best paper and print in town; and bind it with all the elegance of his craft.

I would give my best song to my worst enemy, I mean the merit of making it, to have you and Charlotte by me. You are angelic creatures, and would pour oil and wine into my wounded spirit.

I inclose you a proof copy of the "Banks of Devon," which present with my best wishes to Charlotte. The "Ochel-hills," you shall probably have next week for yourself. None of your fine speeches!

**The correspondence between the two continues.**

**(161) Agnes McLehose**

12<sup>th</sup> December 1787

I stretch a point indeed my dearest Madam, when I answer your card on the rack of my present agony. Your friendship, Madam! by Heavens, I was never proud before. Your lines, I maintain it, are Poetry; and good Poetry; mine were indeed partly fiction, and partly a friendship which had I been so blest to have met with you *in time*, might have led me – God of love only knows where. Time is too short for ceremonies – I swear solemnly (in all the tenor of my former oath) to remember you in the pride and warmth of friendship until – I cease to be!

Tomorrow, and every day till I see you, you shall hear from me.

Farewell! May you enjoy a better night's repose than I am likely to have.

Robt Burns

**Agnes McLehose was more than pleased to find herself in correspondence with Edinburgh's favourite poet. She was no slouch at the art of letter writing, but at this early stage in their relationship was keen to remind Burns that she a married woman and must be treated accordingly.**

**From Agnes McLehose to Robert Burns**      Sunday, Noon, December 16<sup>th</sup> 1787

Miss Nimmo and I had a long conversation last night. Little did I suspect that she was of the party. Gentle, sweet soul! She was accusing herself as the cause of your misfortune. I was in vain I rallied her upon such an excess of sensibility, (as I termed it.) She is literally descended from "My Uncle Toby;" has hopes of the Devil, and would not hurt a fly. How could you tell me you were in "agony"? I hope you would swallow some laudanum and procure some ease from sleep. I am glad to hear Mr Wood attends you. He is a good soul, and a safe surgeon. I know him a little. Do as he bids, and I trust your leg will soon be quite well. When I meet you, I must chide you for writing in your romantic style. O you remember that she whom

you address is a married woman? or Jacob-like, would you wait seven years, and even then, perhaps be disappointed, as he was. No, I know you better: you have too much of that impetuosity which generally accompanies noble minds. To be serious, some people would think, by your style, that you were writing to some vain, silly woman to make a fool of her – or worse. I have too much vanity to ascribe to the former motive, and too much charity to harbour an idea of the latter; and viewing it as the effusion of a benevolent heart upon meeting one somewhat similar to itself, I have promised you my friendship: it will your own fault if I ever withdraw it. Would to God I had it in my power to give you some solid proofs of it! Were I the Duchess of Gordon, you should be possessed of that independence which every generous mind pants after; but I fear she is “no Duchess at the heart.” Obscure as I am (comparatively), I enjoy all the necessaries of life as fully as I desire, and wish for wealth only to procure the “luxury of doing good.” My chief design in writing to today was to beg you would not write me often, lest the exertion should hurt you. Meantime, if my scrawls can amuse you in your confinement, you shall have them occasionally. I shall hear of you every day from my beloved Miss Nimmo. Do you know, the very first time I was in her house, most of our conversation was about a certain (lame) poet? I read her soul in her expressive countenance, and have been attached to her ever since. Adieu! Be patient. Take care of yourself. My best wishes attend you.

A.M.

**( 162 ) Margaret Chalmers**

Edinburgh, Dec 19. 1787.

I begin this letter in answer to yours of the 17th current, which is not yet cold since I read it.

The atmosphere of my soul is vastly clearer than when I wrote you last. For the first time, yesterday I crossed the room on crutches. It would do your heart good to see my hardship, not on my poetic, but on my oaken stilts; throwing my best leg with an air! and with as much hilarity in my gait and countenance, as a May frog

leaping across the newly-harrowed ridge, enjoying the fragrance of the refreshed earth, after the long-expected shower!

I can't say I am altogether at my ease when I see anywhere in my path that meagre, squalid, famine-faced spectre, poverty; attended as he always is, by iron-fisted oppression, and leering contempt; but I have sturdily withstood his buffetings many a hard-laboured day already, and still my motto is -- I DARE! My worst enemy is 'moi même'.

I lie so miserably open to the inroads and incursions of a mischievous, light-armed, well-mounted banditti, under the banners of imagination, whim, caprice, and passion; and the heavy-armed veteran regulars of wisdom, prudence, and forethought move so very, very slow, that I am almost in a state of perpetual warfare, and, alas! frequent defeat. There are just two creatures I would envy, a horse in his wild state traversing the forests of Asia, or an oyster on some of the desert shores of Europe. The one has not a wish without enjoyment, the other has neither wish nor fear.

R. B.

**The final letter written to Nancy McLehose before the start of the Clarinda correspondence.**

**(163) Agnes McLehose**

20<sup>th</sup> December, 1787

Your last, my dear Madam, had the effect on me that Job's situation had on his friends, when "they sat down for seven days and seven nights astonished, and spake not a word." "Pay my addresses to a married woman!" I started, as if I had seen the ghost of him I had injur'd. I recollected my expressions; some of them indeed were, in the law phrase, "habit and repute," which is being half guilty. I cannot positively say, Madam, whether my heart might not have gone astray a little; but I can declare upon the honor of a Poet that the vagrant has wandered unknown to

me, -- I have a pretty handsome troop of Follies of my own; and like some people's retinue, they are but undisciplined blackguards; but the luckless rascals have something of honor in them; they would not do a dishonest thing.

To meet with an unfortunate woman, amiable and young, deserted and widowed by those who were bound by every tie of Duty, Nature and Gratitude, to protect, comfort and cherish her; add to all, when she is perhaps one of the first of Lovely Forms and Noble Minds, the Mind too that hits ones taste as the joys of Heaven do a Saint – should a vague infant-idea, the natural child of Imagination, thoughtlessly peep over the fence – were you, My Friend, to sit in judgement, and the poor, airy Straggler brought before you, trembling self-condemned; with artless eyes, brimful of contrition, looking wistfully on its Judge – you could not. My dear Madam, condemn the hapless wretch to “death without benefit of Clergy?”

I won't tell you what reply my heart made to your raillery of “Seven Years;” but I will tell you what a brother of my trade says on the same allusion.

The Patriach to gain a wife  
Chaste, beautiful and young,  
Serv'd fourteen years a painful life  
And never thought it long;  
O were you to reward such cares,  
And life so long would stay,  
Not fourteen but four hundred years  
Would seem but as one day!

I have written you this scrawl because I have nothing else to do, and you may sit down and find fault with it if you have no better way of consuming your time; but finding faults with the vaguings of a Poet's fancy is much such other business as Xerxes chastising the waves of Hellespont.

My limb now allows me to sit in some peace; to walk I have yet no prospect of, as I can't mark it to the ground.

I have just looked over what I have written, and it is such a chaos of nonsense that I daresay you will throw it into the fire, and call me an idle, stupid fellow; but whatever you think of my brains, believe me to be, with the most sacred respect, and heart-felt esteem,

My Dear Madam, your humble servant  
Robt Burns

**We now find Burns writing as Sylvander to Clarinda and this gives him freedom to express his feelings in a much less restrained manner than when he was addressing them to Nancy.**

**(166) Clarinda**

Friday eve, 28<sup>th</sup> December 1787

I beg your pardon, my dear "Clarinda," for the fragment scrawl I sent you yesterday. I really don't know what I wrote. A gentleman for whose character, abilities and critical knowledge I have the highest veneration, called in just as I had begun the second sentence, and I would not make the Porter wait. I read to my much-respected friends several of my own bagatelles and among others your lines which I had copied out. He began some criticisms on them as on the other pieces, when I informed him they were the work of a young lady in this town; which I assure you made him stare. My learned friend seriously protested that he did not believe any young woman in Edinburgh was capable of such lines; and if you know anything of Professor Gregory you will neither doubt of his abilities nor his sincerity. I do love you if possible still better for having so fine a taste and turn for Poesy. I have again gone wrong in my usual unguarded way, but you may erase the word and put esteem, respect, or any other tame Dutch expression you please

in its place. I believe there is no holding converse or carrying on correspondence, with an amiable woman, much less a *gloriously amiable, fine woman*, without some mixture of that delicious Passion, whose most devoted Slave I have more than once had the honor of being; but why be hurt or offended on that account? Can no honest man have a prepossession for a fine woman, but he must run his head against an intrigue? Take a little of the tender witchcraft of Love, and add it to the generous, the honorable sentiments of manly Friendship; and I know but *one* more delightful morsel, which few, few in any rank ever taste. Such a composition is like adding cream to strawberries – it not only gives the fruit a more elegant richness, but has a peculiar deliciousness of its own.

I inclose you a few lines I composed on a late melancholy occasion. I will not give above five or six copies of it at all, and I would be hurt if any friend should give any copies without my consent.

You cannot imagine, Clarinda, (I like the idea of Arcadian names in a commerce of this kind) how much store I have set by the hopes of your future friendship. I don't know if you have a just idea of my character, but I wish you to see me *as I am*.— I am, as most people of my trade are, a strange will o' wisp being; the victim too frequently of much imprudence and many follies. My great constituent elements are Pride and Passion; the first I have endeavoured to humanize into integrity and honour; the last makes me a Devotee to the warmest degree of enthusiasm, in Love Religion, or Friendship; either of them or all of them together as I happen to be inspired. 'Tis true, I never saw you but once; but how much acquaintance did I form with you in that once! Don't think I flatter you, or have a design upon you, Clarinda; I have too much pride for the one, and too little cold contrivance for the other; but of all God's creatures I ever could approach in the beaten way of acquaintance, you struck me with the deepest, the strongest, the most permanent impression. I say the most permanent, because I know myself well, and how far I can promise either on my prepossessions or powers. Why are you unhappy? and why are so many of our fellow creatures, unworthy to belong to the same species

with you, blest with all they can wish? You have a hand all benevolent to give, why were you denied the pleasure? You have a heart form'd, gloriously form'd, for all the most refined luxuries of love; why was that heart ever wrung? O Clarinda! shall we not meet in a state, some yet unknown state of Being, where the lavish hand of Plenty shall minister to the highest wish of Benevolence; and where the chill north-wind of Prudence shall never blow over the flowery fields of Enjoyment? if we do not, man was made in vain! I deserv'd most of the unhappy hours that have linger'd over my head; they were the wages of my labour; but what unprovoked Demon, malignant as Hell, stole upon the confidence of unmistrusting busy Fate, and dash'd your cup of life with undeserv'd sorrow?

Let me know how long your stay will be out of town; I shall count the hours till you inform me of your return. Cursed etiquette forbids your seeing me just now; and so soon as I can walk, I must bid Edinburgh adieu. Lord, why was I born to see misery which I cannot relieve, and to meet with friends whom I can't enjoy! I look back with the pang of unavailing avarice on my loss in not knowing you sooner; all last winter; these three months past; what luxury of intercourse have I not lost! Perhaps tho' 'twas better for my peace. You see I am either above, or incapable of Dissimulation. I believe it is want of that particular genius. I despise Design because I want either coolness or wisdom to be capable of it. I may take a fort by storm, but never by Siege.—

I am interrupted – Adieu! My dear Clarinda!

Sylvander

**Although now responding by the name Clarinda, Nancy is nevertheless concerned that her true identity may be revealed as is shown by the postscript on her letter.**

**Clarinda to Sylvander**

Friday evening, December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1787

I go to the country early tomorrow morning, but will be home by Tuesday – sooner than I expected. I have not time to answer yours as it deserves; nor, had I the age of Methusalem, could I answer it in kind. I shall grow *vain*. Your praises were enough – but those of a Dr Gregory superadded! Take care; many a glorious woman has been undone by having her head turned. ‘Know you!’ I know you far better than you do me. Like yourself, I am a bit of an enthusiast. In religion and friendship quite a bigot – perhaps I could be so in love too; but everything dear to me in heaven and earth forbids! This is my fixed principle; and the person who would dare to endeavour to remove it I would hold as my chief enemy. Like you, I am capable of dissimulation; nor am I, as you suppose, unhappy. I have been unfortunate, but guilt alone could make me unhappy. Possessed of fine children, -- competence, -- fame, -- friends, kind and attentive, -- what a monster of ingratitude should I be in the eye of Heaven were I to style myself unhappy! True, I have met with scenes horrible to recollection – even at six years distance; but adversity, my friend, is allowed to be the school of virtue. It oft confers that chastened softness which is unknown among the favourites of Fortune! Even a mind possessed of natural sensibility, without this, never feels that exquisite pleasure which nature has annexed to our sympathetic sorrows. Religion, the only refuge of the unfortunate, has been my balm in every woe. O! could I make her appear to you as she has done to me! Instead of ridiculing her tenets, you would fall down and worship her very semblance wherever you found it!

I will write you again at more leisure, and notice other parts of yours. I send you a simile upon a character I don’t know if you are acquainted with. I am confounded at your admiring my lines. I shall begin to question your taste, -- but Dr G! When I am low-spirited (which I am at times) I shall think of this as a *restorative*.

Now for the simile: --

The morning sun shines glorious and bright,  
And fills the heart with wonders and delight!  
He dazzles in meridian splendour seen,  
Without a blackening cloud to intervene.

So, at a distance viewed, your genius bright,  
Your wit, your flowing numbers give delight.  
But, ah! when errors dark'ning clouds arise,  
When passion's thunder, folly's lightning flies,  
More safe we gaze, but admiration dies.  
And as the tempting brightness nears the moth,  
Sure ruin marks too near approach to both.

Good night; for Clarinda's 'heavenly eyes' need the earthly aid of sleep. Adieu

Clarinda

P.s. I entreat you not to mention our corresponding to one on earth. Though I've  
conscious innocence, my situation is a delicate one.

**Richrd Brown was the sea-farer friend from Burns' stay in Irvine. Burns  
declared that Brown was " the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool  
than myself when Woman was the presiding star."**

**( 168 ) Richard Brown**

Edinburgh, 30th Dec. 1787.

My Dear Sir,

I have met with few things in my life which has given me more pleasure than  
Fortune's kindness to you, since these days in which we met in the vale of misery,  
as I can honestly say that I never met with a man who more truly deserved it, or to  
whom my heart more truly wish'd it. I have been much indebted since that time, to  
your story and sentiments, for steeling my mind against evils of which I have had a  
pretty decent share. My will o' wisp fate, you know: do you recollect a Sunday we  
spent together in Eglinton woods? You told me, on my repeating some verses to  
you, that you wondered I could resist the temptation of sending verses of such  
merit to a magazine. It was from this remark I derived that idea of my own pieces,

which encouraged me to endeavour at the character of a poet. I am happy to hear that you will be two or three months at home: as soon as a bruised limb will permit me, I shall return to Ayrshire – and we *shall* meet!

:And faith, I hope we'll no sit dumb,  
Nor yet cast out!"

I have much to tell you of "Men, their manners, and their ways," perhaps a little of t'other sex. Apropos, I beg to be remembered to Mrs. Brown. There, I doubt not, my dear friend, but you have found substantial happiness. I expect to find you something of an altered but not a different man; the wild, bold, generous young fellow composed into the steady affectionate husband, and the fond careful Parent.

For me, I am just the same will-o'-wisp being I used to be. About the first and fourth quarters of the moon, I generally set in for the trade wind of wisdom; but about the full and change, I am the luckless victim of mad tornadoes, which blow me into chaos. Almighty love still reigns and revels in my bosom; and I am at this moment ready to hang myself for a young Edinburgh widow, who has wit and wisdom more murderously fatal than the assassinating stiletto of the Sicilian bandit, or the poisoned arrow of the savage African. My Highland durk, that used to hang beside my crutches, I have gravely removed into a neighbouring closet, the key of which I cannot command, in case of spring-tide paroxysms. You may guess of wit by the following verses which she sent me the other day.

"Talk not of Love, it gives me pain,  
For Love has been my foe;  
He bound me with an iron chain,  
And plunged me deep in woe!

But Friendship's pure and lasting joys  
My heart was formed to prove;

Their welcome win and wear the prize,  
But never talk of Love.

Your Friendship much can make me blest,  
O, why that bliss destroy!  
Why urge the odious, one request  
You know I must deny!"

My best compliments to our friend Allan. Adieu!

Robt Burns

**As we move into 1788 the tone of the correspondence has changed as Nancy McLehose finds herself becoming more and more enchanted by Burns. However, she is keen to impress upon him that she is a devout woman who has no intention of sacrificing her life in the hereafter for an affair with the Bard.**

**Clarinda to Sylvander**

1<sup>st</sup> January, 1788

Many happy returns of this day to you, my dear, pleasant friend! May each revolving year find you *wiser and happier!* I embrace the first spare hour to fulfil my promise; and begin with thanking you for the enclosed lines – they are very pretty. I like the idea of the vices rising in the absence of *Justice*. It is a constant source of refined pleasure, giving to “airy nothings a note of habitation and a name, ”which people of a luxuriant only can enjoy. Yet to a mind of a benevolent turn, it is delightful to observe how equal the distribution of happiness is among all ranks! If stupid people are rendered incapable of tasting the refined pleasures of the intelligent and feeling mind, they are likewise exempted from the thousand distractions and disquietitudes peculiar to sensibility.

I have been staying with a female friend who has long been an admirer of yours, and was once on the brink of meeting with you in the house of a Mrs Bruce. She

would have been a much better *Clarinda*. She is comely without being beautiful, and has a large share of sense, taste, and sensibility; added to all, a violent penchant for poetry. If I ever have the opportunity, I shall make you and her acquainted. No wonder Dr Gregory criticised my lines. I saw several defects in them myself; but had neither time nor patience (nor ability perhaps), to correct them. The last three verses were longer than the former; and in the conclusion, I saw a vile tautology which I could not get rid of. But you will not wonder when I tell you, that I am not only ignorant of every language except my own, but never so much as knew a syllable of the English grammar. If I ever write grammatically, 'tis through mere habit. I rejoice to hear of Dr Gregory being your particular friend. Though unacquainted, I am no stranger to his character: where worth unites with abilities, it commands our love as well as our admiration. Alas! they are too seldom found in one character! Those possessed of great talents would do well to remember, that all depends of the use made of them. Shining abilities improperly applied, only serve to accelerate our destruction in both worlds. I loved you, for your fine taste in poetry, long before I saw you; so shall not trouble myself erasing the same word applied in the same way to me. "You say, there is no corresponding with an agreeable woman without a mixture of tender passion." I believe there is no friendship between people of sentiment and different sexes, without a *little* softness; but when kept within proper bounds, it only serves to give a higher relish to such intercourse. Love and Friendship are names in everyone's mouth; but few, extremely few, understand their meaning. Love (or affection) cannot be genuine if hesitate a moment to sacrifice every selfish gratification to the happiness of its object. On the contrary, if it would cancel that at the expense of this, it deserves to be styled, not love, but a name too gross to mention. Therefore, I contend that an honest man *may* have a friendly prepossession for a woman whose soul would abhor the idea of an intrigue with her. These are my sentiments on this subject: I hope they correspond with yours. 'Tis honest in you to wish me to see you "just as you are." I believe I have a tolerably just idea of your character. No wonder; for had I been a man, I should have been you. I am not vain enough to think myself equal in abilities; but I am formed with a liveliness of fancy, and a strength of passion

little inferior. Situation and circumstances have, however, have had the effects upon each of us which might be expected. Misfortune has wonderfully contributed to subdue the keenness of my passions, while success and adulation have served to nourish and inflame yours. Both of us are incapable of deceit, because we want coolness and command of our feelings. Art is what I would never attain to, even in situations where a little would have been prudent. Now and then, I am favoured with a salutary blast of “the north wind of Prudence,” the southern zephyrs of Kindness, too often send up their sultry fogs, and cloud the atmosphere of my understanding. I have thought that Nature threw me off in the same mould, just after you. We were born, I believe, in one year. Madam Nature has some merit for her work that year. Don’t you think so? I suppose the carline has been a flying visit of Venus and the Graces; and Minerva has been jealous of her attention, and sent Apollo with his harp to charm them away.

But why do you accuse Fate for my misfortunes? There is a noble independence of mind which I do admire; but, when not checked by religion, is apt to degenerate into a criminal arraignment of Providence. No “malignant demon,” as you suppose, was permitted to dash my cup of life with sorrow: it was the kindness of a wise and tender Father, who foresaw that I needed chastisement ore I could be brought to myself. Ah, my friend, Religion converts our heaviest misfortunes into blessings! I feel it to be so, These passions, naturally too violent for my peace, have been broken and moderated by adversity, and if even that has been unable to conquer my vivacity, what lengths might I not have gone, had I been permitted to glide along in the sunshine of my prosperity? I should have forgot my future destination and fixed my happiness on the fleeting shadows below! My hand was denied of the bliss of giving, but Heaven accepts of the wish. My heart was formed for love, and I intend to give it to Him who is the source of love! Yes: we shall surely meet in an “unknown state of being,” where there will be full scope for every kind, heartfelt affection – love without alloy, and without end. Your paragraph upon this made the tears flow down my face! I will not tell you the reflections which it raised in my mind; but I wished that a heart susceptible of such a sentiment took more pains about its accomplishment. I fancy you will not wish me to write again; you’ll think

me too serious and grave. I know not how I have been led to be so; but I make no excuse, because I must be allowed to write to you as I feel, or not at all. You say you have humanized pride into “honour and integrity.” ‘Tis a good endeavour; and could you command your too impetuous passions, it would be a more glorious achievement than his who conquered the world, and wept because he had no more worlds to subdue. Forgive my freedom with you: I never trouble myself with the faults of those I don’t esteem, and only notice those of friends to themselves. I am pleased with friends when they tell me mine, and look upon it as a test of real friendship.

I have your poems in loan just now. I’ve read them many times, and with new pleasure. Sometime I shall give you my opinion upon them severally. Let me have a sight of your “Bagatelles,” as you style them. If ever I write any more, you shall have them; and I’ll thank you to correct their errors. I wrote lines on Bishop G., by way of blank verse; but they were what Pope describes – “Ten low words to creep in one dull line.” I believe you (being a genius) have inspired me; for I never wrote so well before. Pray, is Dr Gregory pious? I have heard so, I wish I knew him. Adieu! You have quantity enough! whatever be the quality. Good night. Believe me your sincere friend.

Clarinda

**CLARINDA TO SYLVANDER**

Thursday, Jan 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1788

I got your lines: they are ‘in *kind!*’ I can’t but laugh at my presumption in pretending to send my poor ones to *you!* but it was to amuse myself. At this season, when others are joyous, I am the reverse. I have no *near* relations; and while others are with theirs, I sit alone, musing upon several of mine with whom I used to be – now gone to the land of forgetfulness.

You have put me in a rhyming humour. The moment I read yours, I wrote the following lines –

Talk not of Love! it gives me pain –  
For Love has been my foe:  
He bound me in an iron chain!  
And plunged me deep in woe!

But Friendship's pure and lasting joys  
My heart was form'd to prove –  
The worthy object be of those,  
But never talk of Love.

The 'Hand of Friendship' I accept –  
May Honour be our guard!  
*Virtue* our intercourse direct,  
Her smiles our dear reward!

But I wish to know (in sober prose) how your leg is? I would have inquired sooner had I known it would have been acceptable. Miss N. informs me now and then; but I have not seen her dear face for some time. Do you think you could venture this length in a coach without hurting yourself? I go out of town the beginning of next week for a few days. I wish you could come tomorrow or Saturday. I long for a conversation with you, and lameness of body won't hinder that. 'Tis really curious – so much *fun* passing between two people who saw one another only *once!* Say if you think you dare venture; only let the coachman be 'adorned with sobriety.' Adieu! Believe me, (on my simple word), Your real friend and well-wisher.

A.M.

**Burns was delighted with that letter and answered immediately**

**(169) Clarinda**

3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1788

My Dear Clarinda,

Your last verses have so delighted me, that I have copied them in among some of my own valued pieces, which I keep sacred for my own use. Do let me have a few now and then.

Did you, Madam, know what I feel when you talk of your sorrows!

Good God! that one who has so much worth in the sight of heaven, and is so amiable to her fellow-creatures, should be so unhappy! I can't venture out for cold. My limb is vastly better; but I have not any use of it without my crutches. Monday, for the first time, I dine in a neighbour's next door. As soon as I can go far, *even in a coach*, my first visit shall be to you. Write me when you leave town, and immediately when you return; and I earnestly pray your stay may be short. You can't imagine how miserable you made me when you hinted to me not to write. Farewell.

Sylvander

**As we enter 1788 Burns continued to bombard Nancy with lengthy epistles, and she replied in similar manner. It was if the pair were in competition to see who could produce the lengthiest letter, and show off their literary skills.**

**(170) Clarinda**

4<sup>th</sup> January 1788

You are right, my dear Clarinda; a friendly correspondence goes for nothing, except one write their undisguised sentiments. Yours please me for their intrinsic merit, as well as because they are *yours*; sentiments, Madam, I revere. If you have, on some suspicious evidence, from some lying oracle, learnt that I despise or ridicule so sacredly important a matter as real Religion, you have, my Clarinda, much misconstrued your friend. "I am not mad, most noble Festus!" Have you ever met a perfect character? Do we not sometimes exchange faults rather than get rid

of them? For instance; I am perhaps tired with and shocked at a life, too much the prey of giddy inconsistencies and thoughtless follies; by degrees I grow sober, prudent, and stately pious – I say stately, because the most unaffected devotion is not at all inconsistent with my first character – I join the world in congratulating myself on the happy change. But let me pry more narrowly into this affair; have I, at bottom, anything of a secret pride in these endowments and emendations? Have I nothing of a Presbyterian sourness, a hypercritical severity when I survey my less regular neighbours? In a word, have I miss'd all these nameless and numberless modifications of indistinct selfishness, which are so near our own eyes we can scarcely bring them within our own sphere of vision, and which the known spotless cambric of our character hides from the ordinary Observer?

My definition of Worth is short; Truth and Humanity respecting our fellow-creatures; Reverence and Humility in the presence of that Being, my Creator and Preserver, and who, I have every reason to believe, will one day be my Judge. The first part of my definition is the creature of unbiased Instinct; the last is the child of after Reflection. Where I find these two essentials; I would gently note, and slightly mention. Any attendant flaws – flaws, the marks, the consequences of Human nature.

I can easily enter into the sublime pleasures that your strong imagination and keen sensibility must derive from Religion, particularly if a little in the shade of misfortune, but I own I cannot without a marked grudge, see Heaven totally engross so amiable so charming a woman as my friend Clarinda; and should be very well pleased at a *circumstance* that would put it in the power of Somebody, happy Somebody! to divide her attention, with all the delicacy and tenderness of an earthly attachment.

You will not easily persuade me that you have not gotten a grammatical knowledge of the English language. So far from being inaccurate, you are elegant beyond any woman of my acquaintance, except one whom I wish I knew.

Your last verses have so delighted me that I have got an excellent old Scots air that suits the measure, and you shall see them in print in the "Scots Musical Museum," a work publishing by a friend of mine in this town. I want four stanzas; you gave me but three, and one of them alluded to an expression in my former letter; so I have taken your two first verses with a slight alteration in the second, and have added a third, but you must help me to a fourth. Here they are; the latter half of the first stanza would have been worthy of Sappho; I am in raptures with it.

Talk not of Love, it gives me pain,  
For Love has been my foe;  
He bound me with an iron chain,  
And sunk me deep in woe.—

But Friendship's pure and lasting joys  
My heart was form'd to prove;  
There, welcome win and wear the prize,  
But never talk of Love! —

Your Friendship much can make me blest,  
O, why that bliss destroy!  
only  
Why urge the odious one request  
will  
You know I must deny!

The alteration in the second stanza is no improvement, but there was a slight inaccuracy in your rhyme. The third, I only offer to your choice, and have left two words for your determination. The air is "The Banks of Spey," and is most beautiful.

Tomorrow evening, I intend taking a chair and paying a visit at Park-place to a much valued old friend. If I could be sure of finding you at home, and I will send one of the chairmen to call, I would spend from five to six o' clock with you, as I go past. I cannot do more at this time, as I have something on my hand that hurries me much. I propose giving you the first call, my old friend the second, and Miss Nimmo as I return home. Do not break any engagements for me, as I will spend another evening with you at any rate before I leave town.

Do not tell me that you are pleased when your friends inform you of your faults. I am ignorant what they are; but I am sure they must be such evanescent trifles, compared with your personal and mental accomplishments, that I would despise the ungenerous, narrow soul who would notice any shadow of imperfections you may seem to have, any other way than in the most delicate, agreeable rally.

Coarse minds are not aware how much they injure the keenly feeling tie of bosom-friendship, when in their foolish officiousness they mention what nobody cares for recollecting. People of nice sensibility and generous minds have a certain intrinsic dignity, that fires at being trifled with, or towered, or even too nearly approached.

You need make no apology for long letters; I am even with you. Many happy New-years to you, charming Clarinda! I can't dissemble were it to shun perdition. – He who sees you as I have done and does not love you, deserves to be damn'd for his stupidity! He who loves you and would injure you, deserves to be doubly damn'd for his villainy! Adieu!

Sylvander

**CLARINDA TO SYLVANDER**

Monday night, 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1788

I cannot delay thanking you for the packet of Saturday; twice have I read it with close attention. Some parts of it did beguile me of my tears. With Desdemona, I felt – 'twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.' When I reached the paragraph where Lord

Glencairn is mentioned, I burst out into tears. 'Twas that delightful swell of the heart which arises from a combination of the most pleasurable feelings. Nothing is so binding to a generous mind as placing confidence in it. I have ever felt it so. You seem to have known this feature in my character intuitively; and therefore trusted me with all your faults and follies. The description of your first love-scene delighted me. It recalled the idea of some tender circumstances which happened to myself, at the same period of life – only mine did not go so far. Perhaps, in return, I'll tell you the particulars when we meet. Ah, my friend! Our early love emotions are surely the most exquisite. In riper years we acquire more knowledge, sentiment, &c; but none of these can yield such raptures as the dear delusions of heart-throbbing youth! Like yours, mine was a rural scene, too, which adds more to the tender meeting. But no more of these recollections.

One thing alone hurt me, though I regretted many – your avowal to being an enemy to Calvinism. I guessed it was so by some of your pieces; but the confirmation of it gave me a shock I could only have felt for one I was interested in. You will not wonder at this when I tell you that I am a strict Calvinist, *one or two* dark tenets excepted, which I never meddle with. Like many others, you are so, either from never having examined it with candour and impartiality, or from having unfortunately met with weak professors, who did not understand it; and hypocritical ones, who make it a cloak for their knavery. Both of these, I am aware, abound in country life; nor am I surprised at their having had this effect upon your more enlightened understanding' I fear your friend, the captain of the ship, was of no advantage to you in this, and many other respects.

My dear Sylvander, I flatter myself you have some opinion of Clarinda's understanding. Her belief in Calvinism is not (as you will be apt to suppose) the prejudice of education. I was bred by my father in the Arminian principles. My mother, who was an angel, died when I was in my tenth year. She was a Calvinist, -- was adored in life, -- and died triumphing in the prospect of immortality. I was too young at that time to know the difference; but her pious precepts and example often recurred to my mind amidst the giddiness and adulation of Miss in her teens. 'Twas since I came to this town five years ago, that I imbibed my present

principles. They were those of a dear, valued friend, in whose judgement and integrity I had utter confidence. I listened often to him, with delight, upon the subject. My mind was docile and open to conviction. I resolved to investigate with deep attention, that scheme of doctrine which had such happy effects upon him. Conviction of understanding, and peace of mind, were the happy consequences. Thus I have given you a true account of my faith. I trust my practice will ever correspond. Were I to narrate my past life as honestly as you have done, you would soon be convinced that neither of us could hope to be justified by our good works.

If you have time and inclination, I should wish to hear your chief objections to Calvinism. They have often been confuted by men of great minds and exemplary lives, but perhaps you never inquired into these. Ah, Sylvander! Heaven has not endowed you with such uncommon powers of mind to employ them in the manner you have done. This long, serious subject will, I know, have one of *three* effects; either to make you laugh in derision – yawn in supine indifference – or set about examining the hitherto-despised subject. Judge of the interest Clarinda takes in you when she affirms that there are but few events could take place that would afford her the heartfelt pleasure of the latter.

Read this letter attentively, and answer me at leisure. Do not be frightened at its gravity – believe me, I can be as lively as you please. Though I wish Madam Minerva for my guide, I shall not be hindered from rambling sometimes in the fields of Fancy. I must tell you that I admire your narrative in point of composition, beyond all other productions. One thing I am afraid of; there is not a trace of a friendship towards a female; now, in the case of Clarinda, this is the only ‘consummation devoutly to be wished.’

You told me you had never met a woman who could love as ardently as yourself. I believe it; and would advise you never to tie yourself, till you meet with such a one. Alas! you’ll find many who *canna*, and some who *manna*; but to be joined to one of the former description would make you miserable. I think you had almost best resolve against wedlock; for unless a woman were qualified for the companion, the friend, and the mistress, she would not do for you. The last may gain Sylvander,

but the others alone can keep him. Sleep, and want of room, prevent my explaining myself upon 'infidelity in a husband,' which made you stare at me. This, and other things, shall be a matter for another letter, if you are not wishing this to be the last. If agreeable to you, I 'll keep the narrative till we meet. Adieu! 'Charming Clainda' must e'en resign herself to the arms of Morpheus. Your true friend, Clarinda.

PS. Don't detain the porter. Write when convenient.

I am probably to be in your Square this afternoon, near two o'clock. If your room be to the street, I shall have the pleasure of giving you a nod. I have paid the porter, and you may do so when you write. I'm sure they sometimes have made us pay double. Adieu!

**The Bard is keen to impress on his new love that he too is a devout and religious person. Indeed, Burns was a true believer but disagreed violently with the manner in which religion was presented at that time.**

**(174) Clarinda**

Tuesday night, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1788

I am delighted, charming Clarinda, with your honest enthusiasm for Religion. Those of either sex, but particularly the female, who are lukewarm in that most important of all things, "O my soul, come not thou into their secrets!" I feel myself deeply interested in your good opinion, and will lay before you the outlines of my belief. He, who is our Author and Preserver, and will one day be our Judge, must be, (not for his sake in the way of duty, but from the native impulse of our hearts,) the object of our reverential awe and grateful adoration: He is almighty and all-bounteous, we are weak and dependent; hence prayer and every other sort of devotion. "He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to everlasting life;" consequently, it must be in every one's power to embrace His offer of "everlasting life;" otherwise He could not, in justice, condemn those who did not. A mind pervaded, actuated and governed by purity, truth and charity,

though it does not *merit* heaven, yet it is an absolutely necessary pre-requisite, without which heave can neither be obtained nor enjoyed; and by Divine promise, such a mind shall never fail of attaining “everlasting life:” Hence the impure, the deceiving, and the uncharitable, extrude themselves from eternal bliss, by their unfitness for enjoying it. The Supreme Being has put the immediate administration for all this, for wise and good ends known to himself, into the hands of Jesus Christ, a great Personage, whose relation to Him we cannot comprehend, but whose relation to us is a Guide and Saviour; and who, except for our own obstinacy and misconduct, will bring us all, through various ways and by various means, to bliss at last.

These are my tenets, my lovely friend, and which, I think, cannot be well disputed. My creed is pretty nearly expressed in the last clause of Jamie Dean’s grace, an honest weaver in Ayrshire; “Lord grant that we may live a gude life! for a gude life maks a gude end, at least it helps weel!”

I am flattered by the entertainment you tell me you have found in my packet. You see me aas I have been, you know me as I am, and may guess at what I am likely to be. I too may say, “Talk not of love, &c.” for indeed he has” plung’d me deep in woe!” Not that I ever saw a woman who pleased unexceptionally, as my Clarinda elegantly says, “In the companion, the friend, and the mistress.” *One* indeed I could except – *One* before passion threw its mists over my discernment I knew it, *the* first of women! Her name is indelibly written in my heart’s core – but I dare not look on it – a degree of agony would be the consequence. Oh, thou perfidious , cruel, mischief-making demon, who’s president o’er that frantic passion – thou mayst, thou dost poison my peace, but shall not taint my honour – I would not for a single moment give an asylum to the most distant imagination, that would shadow the faintest outline of a selfish gratification, at the expense of *her* whose happiness is twisted with the threads of my existence – may she be happy as she deserves! And if my tenderest, faithfulest friendship can add to her bliss – I shall at least have one solid mine of enjoyment in my bosom! *Don’t guess at these ravings!*

I watched at our front window today, but was disappointed. I t haas been a daay of disappointments. I am just risen from a two-hour bout after supper, with silly or

sordid souls, who could relish nothing in common with me – but the Port. “One” – ‘tis now “witching time of night ;” and whatever is out of joint in the foregoing scrawl, impute it to enchantment and spells; for I can’t look over it, but will seal it up directly, as I don’t care for tomorrow’s criticisms on it.

You are by this time fast asleep, Clarinda; may good angels attend and guard you as constantly and faithfully as my good wishes do!

“Beauty, which whether waking or asleep,  
Shot forth peculiar graces.”

John Milton, I wish thy soul better rest than I expect on my pillow tonight! O for a little of the cart-horse part of human nature! Good night my dearest Clarinda!

Sylvander

**CLARINDA TO SYLVANDER**

Wednesday, 10pm. January 9<sup>th</sup> 1788

This moment your letter was delivered to me. My boys are asleep. The youngest has been for some time in a crazy state of health, but has been worse these two days past. Partly this and the badness of the day prevented my exchanging a heartfelt How d’ye, yesterday. Friday, if nothing prevents, I shall have that pleasure, about two o’clock, or a little before it.

I wonder how you could write so distinctly after two or three hours over a bottle; but they were not congenial whom you sat with, and therefore your spirits remained unexhausted; and when quit of them, you fled to a friend who can relish most things in common with you (except Port). ‘Tis dreadful what a variety of these ‘silly, sordid’ souls one meets in life; but in scenes of mere sociability these pass. In reading the account you give for of your inveterate turn for social pleasure, I smiled at its resemblance to my own. It is so great, that I often think I had been a man, but for some mistake of Nature. If you saw me in a merry party, you would suppose me only an enthusiast in *fun*; but I now avoid such parties. My spirits are sunk for

days after; and what is worse, there are sometimes dull or malicious souls who censure me loudly for what their sluggish natures cannot comprehend. Were I possessed of an independent fortune, I would scorn their pitiful remarks; but everything in my situation renders prudence necessary.

I have slept little these two nights. My child was uneasy, and that kept me awake watching him! Sylvander, if I have merit in anything, 'tis an unremitting attention to my two children; but it cannot be dominated merit, since 'tis as much inclination as duty. A prudent woman (as the world goes) told me she was surprised I loved them, 'considering what a father they had.' I replied with acrimony, I could not but love my children in any case but my having given them the misfortune of such a father, endears them doubly to my heart; they are innocent – they depend upon me – and I feel this the most tender of all claims. While I live, my fondest attention shall be theirs!

All my life I loved the unfortunate, and ever will. Did you ever read Fielding's *Amelia*? If you have not, I beg you would. There are scenes in it, tender, domestic scenes, which I have read over and over, with feelings too delightful to describe! I meant a 'Booth,' as such a one infinitely to be preferred to a brutal, though perhaps constant, husband. I can conceive a man fond of his wife, yet, (Sylvander-like), hurried into a momentary deviation, while his heart remained faithful. If he concealed it, it could not hurt me; but if, unable to bear the anguish of self-reproach, he unbosomed it to me, I would not only forgive him, but comfort and speak kindly, and in secret only weep. Reconciliation, in such a case, would be exquisite beyond almost anything I can conceive! Do you understand me on this subject? I was uneasy till it was explained; for all I have said, I know not if I had been an 'Amelia,' even with a 'Booth.' My resentments are keen, like all my other feelings; I am exquisitely alive to kindness and unkindness. The first binds me forever! But I have none of the spaniel in my nature. The last would soon cure me, though I loved to distraction. But all this is not, perhaps, interesting to Sylvander. I have seen nobody today; and like a true egotist, talk away to please myself. I am not in a humour to answer your creed to-night.

I have been puzzling my brain about the fair one you bid me 'not guess at.' I first thought it your Jean; but I don't know if she now possesses your 'tenderest, faithfulest friendship.' I can't understand that bony lassie; her refusal, after such proofs of love, proves her to be either an angel or a dolt. I beg pardon; I know not all the circumstances, and am no judge therefore. I love you for your continued fondness, even after enjoyment; few of your sex have souls in such cases. But I take this to be the test of true love – mere desire is all the bulk of people are susceptible of; and that is soon satiated. 'Your good wishes.' You had mine, Sylvander, before I saw you. You will have them while I live. With you, I wish a had a little of the cart-horse in me. You and I have some horse properties; but more of the eagle, and too much of the turtle dove! Good night! Your friend,

Clarinda

Thursday morning

This day is so good that I'll make my call to your Square. I am laughing to myself for announcing this for the third time. Were she who 'poisons your peace' to intend you a Pisgah view, she could do no more than I have done on this trivial occasion. Keep a good heart, Sylvander; the eternity of your love-sufferings will be ended before six weeks. Such perjuries the 'Laughing gods allow.' But remember, there is no such toleration in friendship, and – I am yours,

Clarinda

**Robert Burns continued the endless flow of letters to Nancy McLehose. His frustration at not having seen her from his window as she passed by his lodgings is evident.**

**(175) Clarinda**

Thursday noon, 10<sup>th</sup> January 1788

I am certain I saw you, Clarinda; but you don't look to the proper storey for a Poet's lodgings.

"Where speculation roosted near the sky"

I could almost have thrown myself over, for very vexation. Why didn't you look higher? It has spoilt my peace for this day. To be so near my charming Clarinda; to miss her look when it was searching for me – I am sure the soul is capable of disease, for mine has convulsed itself into an inflammatory fever.

I am sorry for your little boy; do let me know tomorrow how he is. You have converted me, Clarinda. (I shall love that name while I live; there is heavenly music in it.--) Booth and Amelia I know well. Your sentiments on that subject, as they are on every subject, are just and noble. "To be feeling alive to kindness – and to unkindness," is a charming female character.

What I said in my last letter, the Powers of fuddling sociality only know for me. By yours, I understand my good Star has been partly in my horizon, when I got wild in my reveries. Had that evil Planet which has almost all my life shed its baleful rays on my devoted head, been, as usual, in my zenith, I had certainly blab'd something that would have pointed out to you the dear Object of my tenderest friendship, and in spite of me – something more. Had that fatal information escaped me, and it was merely chance or kind stars that it did not, I had been undone! you would never have wrote me, except perhaps *once*, more! O, I could curse circumstances! and the coarse tie of human laws which keep fast what Common Sense would loose; and which bars that happiness itself cannot give – Happiness which otherwise Love and Honor would warrant! But hold – I shall make no more "hairbreadth escapes."

My friendship, Clarinda, is a life-rent business. My likings are both strong and eternal. I told you I had but one male friend; I have but two female. I should have a

third, but she is surrounded by the blandishments of Flattery and Courtship. Her I register in my heart's core – by Peggy Chalmers. Miss Nimmo can tell you how divine she is. She is worthy of a place in the same bosom with my Clarinda. That is the highest compliment I can pay her.

Farewel, Clarinda! Remember

Sylvander!

**CLARINDA TO SYLVANDER**

Thursday eve, January 10<sup>th</sup>,

I could not see you, Sylvander, though I had twice traversed the Square. I'm persuaded you saw not me either. I met the young lady I meant to call for first; and returned to seek another acquaintance, but found her moved. All the time, my eye soared to poetic heights, *alias* garrets, but not a glimpse of you could I obtain! You surely was within the glass, at least. I returned, finding my intrinsic dignity a good deal hurt, as I missed my friend. Perhaps I shall see you again next week; say how high you are. Thanks for your inquiry about my child; his complaints are of a tedious kind, and require patience and resignation. Religion has taught me both. By nature I inherit as little of them as a certain harum-scarum friend of mine. In what respects has Clarinda 'converted you?' Tell me. It were an arduous task indeed!

Your 'ravings' last night, and your ambiguous remarks upon them, I cannot, perhaps ought not, to comprehend. I am your friend, Sylvander; take care lest virtue demands even friendship as a sacrifice. You need not curse the tie of human laws; since what is the happiness Clarinda would derive from being loosed? At present she enjoys the hope of having her children provided for. In the other case, she is left, indeed, at liberty, but half dependant on the bounty of a friend, -- kind in substantial, but having no feelings of romance; and who are the generous, the disinterested, who would risk the world's 'dread laugh' to protect her and her little ones? Perhaps a Sylvander-like son of 'whim and fancy' might, in a sudden fit of romance; but would not ruin be the consequence? Perhaps one of the former.....

yet if he was not dearer to her than all the world—such are still her romantic ideas – she could not be his.

You see, Sylvander, you have no cause to regret my bondage. The above is a true picture. Have I not reason to rejoice that I have it not in my power to dispose of myself? 'I commit myself into thy hands, thou Supreme Disposer of all events! Do with me as seemeth good'. Who is this one male friend? I know your third female. Ah, Sylvander! Many 'that are first shall be last,' and *vice versa!* I am proud of being compared with Miss Chalmers; I have heard how amiable she is. She cannot be more so than Miss Nimmo; why do ye not register her also? She is warmly your friend; -- surely you are incapable of ingratitude. She has almost wept to me at mentioning your intimacy with a certain famous, or infamous man in town. Do you think Clarinda could anger you just now? I composed lines addressed to you, some time ago, containing a hint upon the occasion. I had not courage to send them then; if you say you'll not be angry, I will yet.

I know not how 'tis, but I felt an irresistible impulse to write you the moment I read yours. I have a design in it. Part of your interest in me is owing to mere novelty. You'll be tired of my correspondence ere you leave town, and will never fash to write me from the country. I forgive you in a 'state of celibacy.' Sylvander, I wish I saw you happily married; you are so formed, you cannot be happy without a tender attachment. Heaven direct you!

When you see Bishop Geddes, ask him if he remembers a lady at Mrs Kemp's on a Sunday night, who listened to every word he uttered with the gaze of attention. I saw he observed me, and returned that glance of cordial warmth which assured me he was pleased with my delicate flattery. I wished that night he had been my father, that I might shelter me in his bosom.

You shall have this, as you desired, by tomorrow; and if possible, none for four or five days. I say if possible; for I really can't but write, as if I had nothing else to do. I admire your Epitaph; but while I read it, my heart swells at the sad idea of its realization. Did you ever read Sancho's letters? They would hit your taste. My next will be on my favourite theme – religion.

Farewell, Sylvander! Be wise, be prudent, and be happy.

Clarinda

(177) Clarinda

12<sup>th</sup> January 1788

You talk of weeping, Clarinda; some involuntary drops wet your lines as I read them. Offend me, my dearest Angel! You cannot offend me; you have never offended me! If you had ever given me the least shadow of offence; so pardon me, my God, as I forgive Clarinda. I have read yours again; it has blotted my paper. – Tho' I find your letter has agitated me into a violent headache, I shall take a chair and be with you about eight. A friend is to be with us at tea on my account, which hinders me from coming sooner. Forgive, my dearest Clarinda, my unguarded expressions. For Heaven's sake forgive me, or I shall never be able to bear my own mind!

Your unhappy  
Sylvander

**Burns and Nancy had met the previous evening at her house, an occasion that although had been pleasing to Nancy, also filled her with misgivings. She sought only friendship but Burns was hoping for a more physical relationship with her. The only way she could think of to calm the Bard's passion would be for him to become as devout as herself.**

CLARINDA TO SYLVANDER

Sunday evening, January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1788

I will not deny it, Sylvander, last night was one of the most exquisite I ever experienced. Few such fall to the lot of mortals! Few, extremely few, are formed to relish such refined enjoyment. That it should be so, vindicates the wisdom of Heaven. But, though our enjoyment did not lead beyond the limits of virtue, yet today's reflections have not been altogether unmixed with regret. The idea of the pain it would have given, were it known to a friend to whom I am bound by the

sacred ties of gratitude, (no more,) the opinion Sylvander may have formed from my unreservedness; and, above all, some secret misgivings that Heaven may not approve, situated as I am – these procured me a sleepless night; and though at church, I am not at all well.

Sylvander, you saw Clarinda last night, behind the scenes! Now you'll be convinced she has faults. If she knows herself, her intention is always good; but she is too often the victim of sensibility, and hence, is seldom pleased with herself. A rencontre today I will relate to you, because it will show you I have some share of pride. I met with a sister of Lord Napier, at the house of a friend with whom I sat between sermons: I knew who she was, but paid her no other mark of respect that I do to any gentlewoman. She eyed me with minute, supercilious attention, never looking at me, when I spoke, but even half interrupted me, before I had done addressing the lady of the house. I felt my face glow with resentment, and consoled myself with the idea of being her superior in every respect but the accidental, trifling one of birth! I was disgusted at the fawning deference the lady showed her; and when she told me at the door it was my Lord Napier's sister, I replied, 'Is it, indeed? By her ill-breeding I should have taken her for the daughter of some upstart tradesman!'

Sylvander, my sentiments as to birth and fortune are truly unfashionable, despise the persons who pique themselves on either, -- the former especially.

Something may be allowed to bright talents, or even external beauty – these belong to us essentially; but birth in no respect can confer merit, because it is not our own. A person of a vulgar, uncultivated mind I would not take to my bosom, in any station; but one possessed of natural genius, improved by education and diligence, such a one I'd take for my friend, be her extraction ever so mean. These, alone, constitute any real distinction between man and man. Are we not all the offspring of Adam? Have we not one God? one Saviour? one Immortality? I have found but one among all my acquaintance who agreed with me – My Mary, whom I mentioned to you. I am to spend tomorrow with her, if I am better. I like her the more that she likes me.

I intended to resume a little upon your favourite topic, the 'Religion of the Bosom.' Did you ever imagine I meant any other? Poor were that religion and unprofitable whose seat was merely in the brain. In most points we seem to agree; only I found all my hopes of pardon and acceptance with Heaven upon the merits of Christ's atonement, whereas you do upon a good life. You think 'it helps weel at least.' If anything we could do had been able to atone for the violation of God's Law, where was the need (I speak it with reverence) of such an astonishing Sacrifice? Job was an 'upright man.' In the dark season of adversity, when other sins were brought to his remembrance, he boasted of his integrity; but no sooner did God reveal Himself to him, than he exclaims; 'Behold, I am vile and abhor myself in dust and ashes.' Ah, my friend, 'tis pride that hinders us from embracing Jesus! We would be our own Saviour, and scorn to be indebted even to the 'Son of the Most High.' But this is the only sure foundation of our hopes. It is said by God Himself, 'tis to some a stumbling block, to others foolishness;' but they who believe, feel it to be the 'Wisdom of God, and the Power of God.'

If my head did not ache, I would continue the subject. I, too, hate controversial religion; but this is the 'Religion of the Bosom.' My God! Sylvander, why am I so anxious to make you embrace the Gospel? I dare not probe too deep for an answer – let your heart answer; in a word – Benevolence. When I return, I'll finish this. Meantime, adieu! Sylvander, I intended doing you good; if it proves the reverse, I 'll never forgive myself. Good night.

Tuesday, noon.

Just returned from the Dean, where I wined and supped with fourteen of both sexes; all stupid. My Mary and I alone understood each other. However, we were joyous, and I sang in spite of my cold; but no wit. 'Twould have been pearls before swine literalised. I recollect promising to write to you. Sylvander, you'll never find me worse than my word. If you have written me, (which I hope), send it to me when convenient, either at nine in the morning or evening. I fear your limb may be worse from staying so late. I have other fears too; guess them! Oh! my friend, I wish ardently to maintain your esteem; rather than forfeit an iota of it, I 'd be content never to be wiser than now, Our last interview has raised you very high in

mine. I have met with few indeed of your sex who understood delicacy in such circumstances; yet 'tis that only which gives relish to such delightful intercourse. Do you wish to preserve my esteem, Sylvander? Do not be proud to Clarinda! She deserves it not. I subscribe to Lord B's sentiment to Swift; yet some faults I shall still sigh over, though you style it reproach even to hint them. Adieu! You have it much in your power to add to the happiness or unhappiness of Clarinda.

**The barrage of letters to Clarinda continues, although the following one displays a morsel of conceit on the part of the Bard.**

**(178) Clarinda**

Monday even, 11 o'clock, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1788

Why have I not heard from you, Clarinda! Today I well expected it; and before supper, when a letter to me was announced, my heart danced with rapture; but behold, 'twas some fool who had taken it into his head to turn Poet, and made me an offering of the first fruits of his nonsense. "It is not poetry, but prose run mad." Did I ever repeat to you an epigram I made on a Mr Elphinstone, who has given a translation of Martial, a famous Latin poet? The poetry of Elphinstone can only equal his prose-notes. I was sitting in a merchant's shop of an acquaintance, waiting somebody; he put Elphinstone into my hand, and asked my opinion of it; I begged leave to write it on a blank leaf, which I did –

To Mr Elphinstone, &c..

O thou whom Poesy abhors!  
Whom Prose has turned out of doors!  
Heardst thou yon groan? proceed no further!  
'Twas laurel'd Martial calling murder!

I am determined to see you, if at all possible, on Saturday evening. Next week I must sing –

The night is my departing night,  
The morn's the day I maun awa;  
There's neither friend nor foe o' mine  
But wishes that I were awa'!

What I hae done for lack o' wit,  
I never, never can reca';  
I hope ye're a' my friends as yet –  
Gude night, and joy be wi' you a'!

If I could see you sooner, I would be so much the happier; but I would not purchase the *dearest gratification* on earth, if it must be at your expense in worldly censure; far less inward peace!

I shall certainly be ashamed of scrawling large sheets of incoherence. The only *unity*, (a sad word with Poets and Critics!) in my ideas, is Clarinda. There my heart “reigns and revels.”

“What art thou Love! whence are those charms,  
That thus thou bear'st an universal rule!  
For thee the soldier quits his arms,  
The king turns slave, the wise man fool.

In vain we chase thee from the field,  
And with cool thoughts resist thy yoke:  
Next tide of blood, Alas! we yield;  
And all those high resolves are broke!”

I like to have quotations ready for every occasion. They give one's ideas so pat, and save one the trouble of finding expressions adequate to one's feelings. I think it is one of the greatest pleasures attending a Poetic genius, that we can give our

woes, cares, joys, loves, &c. an embodied form in verse, which to me, is ever immediate ease. Goldsmith says finely of his Muse –

“Thou source of all my bliss and woe,  
Who found’st me poor at first, and kept me so”

My limb has been so well today that I have gone up and down stairs often without my staff. Tomorrow I hope to walk on my own legs to dinner. It is only next street. Adieu!

Sylvander

**In spite of her protestations that she is a devout, married woman, Burns now turns on his charms to convince Clarinda that he is in love with her.**

**(179) Clarinda**

Tuesday evening, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1788

That you have faults, my Clarinda, I never doubted; but I knew not where they existed, and Saturday night made me more in the dark than ever. O, Clarinda, why will you wound my soul by hinting that last night, must have lessened my opinion of you! True, I was “behind the scenes with you” but what did I see? A bosom glowing with honor and benevolence; a mind ennobled by genius, informed and refined by education and reflection, and exalted by native religion, genuine as in the climes of heaven; a heart formed for all the glorious meltings of friendship, love and pity. These I saw. I saw the noblest immortal soul, creation ever shewed me.

I looked long, my dear Clarinda, for your letter; and am vexed that you are complaining. I have not caught you so far wrong as in your idea, that the commerce you have had with *one* friend hurts you, if you cannot tell every tittle of it to *another*. Why have so injurious a suspicion of a good God, Clarinda, as to think that Friendship and Love, on the sacred, inviolate principles of Truth, Honor and Religion, can be any thing else than an object of His divine approbation?

I have mentioned, in some of my former scrawls, Saturday evening next. Do, allow me to wait on you that evening. Oh, my angel! how soon must we part! and when can we meet again? I look forward on the horrid interval with tearful eyes! What have I lost by not knowing you sooner. I fear, I fear my acquaintance with you is too short, to make that *lasting* impression on your heart I could wish.

Sylvander

**His words are now beginning to break down Clarinda's resolve as she suggests he times his visit to an hour when they are less likely to be disturbed.**

**Clarinda to Sylvander**

Wednesday morning, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1788

Your mother's wish was fully realized. I slept sounder last night than for weeks past – and I had a "blithe awakening"; for your letter was the first object my eyes opened on. Sylvander, I fancy you and Vulcan are intimates: he has lent you a key which opens Clarinda's heart at pleasure, shows you what is there and enables you to adapt yourself to its every feeling! I believe I shall give over writing you. Your letters are too much! My way is, alas, "hedged in"; but had I, like Sylvander, "the world before me," I should bid him, if he had a friend that loved me, tell him to write as he does, and "that would woo me." Seriously, you are the first letter writer I ever knew. I only wonder how you can be fashed with my scrawls. I impute it to partialities. Either tomorrow or Friday I shall be happy to see you. On Saturday, I am not sure of being alone, or at home. Say which you'll come? Come to tea if you please, but eight will be an hour less liable to intrusions. I hope you'll *come afoot*, even though you take a chair home. A chair is so uncommon a thing in our neighbourhood, it is apt to raise speculation – but they're all asleep by ten. I am happy to hear of your being able to walk -- even to the next street. You are a consummate flatterer; really my cheeks glow when I read you flights of Fancy. I

fancy you like it when you peep into the Repository. I know none insensible to that “delightful essence.” If I grow affected or conceited, you are alone to blame. Ah, my friend, these are disgusting qualities, but I am not afraid. I know any merit I have perfectly – but I know many sad counterbalances.

Your lines on Elphinstone were clever, beyond anything I ever saw of the kind; I know the character – the figure is enough to make one cry, Murder! He is a complete pedant in language; but are you and I pedants in something else? Yes, but in far superior things; Love, Friendship, Poesy, Religion! Ah, Sylvander! you have murdered Humility, and I can say thou didst it. You carry your warmth too far as to Miss Napier, (not Nairn;) yet I am pleased at it. She is sensible, lively, and well-liked they say. She was not to know Clarinda was “divine,” and therefore kept her distance. She is comely, but a thick bad figure, waddles in her pace, and has rosy cheeks.

I hate myself for being satirical – hate me for it too. I’ll certainly go to Miers to please you, either with Mary or Miss Nimmo. Sylvander, some most interesting parts of yours I cannot enter on at present. I dare not think about our parting – upon the interval; but I am sure both are wisely ordered for our good. A line in return to tell me which night you’ll be with me. “Lasting impression!” Your key might have shown me better. Say, my lover, poet, and my friend, what day next month time Eternity will end? When you use your key, don’t rummage too much, lest you find I am half as great a fool in the *tender* as yourself. Farewell! Sylvander. I may sign, for I am already sealed your friend.

Clarinda

**Sylvander’s reply was immediate.**

**(180) Clarinda**

Weden noon, 16<sup>th</sup> January 1788

Clarinda,

Your letter found me writing to you. I read yours two or three times by way of welcome; by and by, I shall do it more justice. Friday evening, about eight o’ clock,

expect me. If I can't walk all the way, I'll take a chair to Nicolson's square, or so; and walk the rest. You talk of vanity; in mercy remember me, when you praise my letter writing talents so extravagantly.

Inured to flattery as I have been for some time past, I am not proof against the applauses of one whom I love dearer, and whose judgement I esteem more, than I do the world beside. I forget the chairman waits – God bless you!

Remember Sylvander

**The eagerly awaited meeting has by now taken place and Burns is totally besotted by Nancy McLehose.**

**(181) Clarinda**

Saturday morning, 19<sup>th</sup> January 1788

There is no time, my Clarinda, when the conscious thrilling chords of Love and Friendship give such delight as in the pensive hours of what our favourite, Thomson, calls "Philosophic Melancholy." The sportive insects who bask in the sunshine of Prosperity, or the worms that luxuriant crawl amid their ample wealth of earth, they need no Clarinda, they would despise Sylvander – if they durst. The family of Misfortune, a numerous group of brothers and sisters! they need a resting place to their souls: unnoticed, often condemned by the world; in some degree perhaps condemned by themselves, they feel the full enjoyment of ardent love, delicate tender endearments, mutual esteem and mutual reliance.

In this light I have often admired Religion, In proportion we are wrung with grief, or distracted with anxiety, the ideas of a compassionate Deity, an Almighty Protector, are doubly dear.

"'Tis this, my friend, that streaks the morning bright;

'Tis this that gilds the horrors of our night"—

I have been this morning taking a peep thro', as Young finely says, "The dark posterns of time long elaps'd," and you will easily guess, it was a rueful prospect. What a tissue of thoughtlessness, weakness and folly! My life reminded me of a

ruin'd temple; what strength, what proportions in some parts! what unsightly gaps, what prostrate ruins in others! I kneeled down before the Father of mercies and said, "Father, I have sinned against Heaven and in Thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son!" I rose, eased and strengthened – I despise the superstition of a Fanatic, but I love the Religion of a Man. "The future," said I to myself, "is still before me; there let me –

On reason build Resolve.

"That column of true majesty in Man!"

"I have difficulties many to encounter," said I; "but they are not absolutely insuperable, and where is firmness of mind shewn, but in exertion? mere declamation is bombast rant. Besides, wherever I am, or in whatever situation I may be –

"Tis nought to me;

Since God is ever present, ever felt,

In the void waste as in the city full;

And where He vital breathes, there must be joy!"

What luxury of bliss I was enjoying this time yesternight! My ever-dearest Clarinda, you have stolen away my soul, but you have refined, you have exalted it; you have given it a stronger sense of Virtue, and a stronger relish for Piety. Clarinda, first of your Sex. If ever I am the veriest wretch on earth to forget you; if ever your lovely image is effaced from my soul.

"May I be lost, no eye to weep my end;

And find no earth that's base enough to bury me!"

What trifling silliness is the childish fondness of the every day children of the world! 'tis the unmeaning toying of the younglings of the fields and forests; but where Sentiment and Fancy unite their sweets; where Taste and Delicacy refine; where Wit adds the flavour, and Good-sense gives strength and spirit to all, what a

delicious draught is the hour of tender endearment! Beauty and Grace in the arms of Truth and Honor, in all the luxury of mutual love!

Clarinda, have you ever seen the picture realised? not in all its very richest colouring: but

“Hope thou Nurse of young Desire;  
Fair promiser of joy”

Last night, Clarinda, but for one slight shade, was the picture –

Innocence

Look'd, gayly smiling on; while rosy Pleasure  
Hid young Desire amid her flowery wreath,  
And pour'd her cup luxuriant; mantling high,  
The sparkling heavenly vintage, Love and Bliss!

Clarinda, when a Poet and Poetess of Nature's making, two of Nature's noblest productions! When they drink together of the same “cup of Love and Bliss” – attempt not, ye coarser stuff of Human-nature, profanely to measure enjoyment ye can never know!

Goodnight, my dear Clarinda!

Sylvander

**Robert Burns must have felt that his wildest dreams were coming true. Having had relationships with country girls of limited education, here he was, now writing in an unrestrained manner to a well educated, sophisticated and attractive young woman, and she was actually replying in similar vein. Unusual for a man, Burns had realised at an early age that beauty is skin-deep and that a good intellect is far more important in a woman. In one of his early works, ‘The Ronalds of the Bennals,’ he wrote the following verse.**

*The charms o' the min', the langer they shine*

*The mair admiration they draw, man;  
While peaches and cherries, and roses and lilies,  
They fade and they wither awa', man.*

**Robert Burns had never been blessed with good health. Poor diet as a youngster coupled with hard, manual labour at an age long before his body had developed had left him prone to any ailment that happened by. He is suffering from one his many bouts of fever as he attempts to write to Clarinda.**

**(182) Clarinda**

Sunday night, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1788

The impertinence of fools has joined with a return of an old disposition, to make me good for nothing today. The paper has lain before me all this evening, to write to my dear Clarinda, but –

“Fools rush’d on fools, as waves succeed to waves”

I cursed them in my soul: they sacreligiously disturbed my meditations on her who holds my heart. What a creature is man! A little alarm last night and today that I am mortal, has made such a revolution on my spirits! There is no Philosophy, no Divinity, comes half so home to the mind. I have no idea of courage that braves Heaven. ‘Tis the wild rantings of an imaginary hero in Bedlam.

I can no more, Clarinda; I can scarce hold up my head; but I am happy you do not know it, you would be so uneasy.

Sylvander

Monday morning

I am, my lovely friend, much better this morning, on the whole, but I have a horrid languor on my spirits.

“Sick of the world, and all its joy,

My soul in pining sadness mourns:  
Dark scenes of woe my mind employ,  
The past and present in their turns.”

Have you ever met with a saying of the Great and likewise Good Mr Locke, Author of the famous essay on the human understanding. He wrote a letter to a friend, directing it “not to be delivered till after my decease;” it ended thus – “I know you loved me when living, and will preserve my memory now I am dead. All the use to “be made of it is; that this life affords no solid satisfaction, but in the consciousness of having done well, and the hopes of another life. Adieu! I leave my best wishes with you. J. Locke”

Clarinda, may I reckon on your friendship for life? I think I may. Thou Almighty Preserver of Men! Thy friendship, which hitherto I have too much neglected, to secure it shall, all the future days and nights of my life, be my steady care! The idea of my Clarinda follows –

“Hide it my heart, within that close disguise,  
Where mixed with God’s her lov’d idea lies”

But I fear that inconstancy, the consequent imperfection of human weakness. Shall I meet with a friendship that defies years of Absence and the chances and changes of Fortune? Perhaps “such things are”; *One* honest man I have great hopes from, that way; but who, except a Romance-writer, would think on a *love* that could promise for life, in spite of distance, absence, chance and change; and say that too, with slender hopes of Fruition? For my own part, I can say to myself in both requisitions, “Thou art the man!” I dare, in cool resolve I dare, declare myself that Friend, and that Lover. If Womankind is capable of such things, Clarinda, I trust that she is, and feel I shall be miserable, if she is not. There is not one Virtue which gives worth, or one Sentiment which does honor to the Sex, that she does not possess superiour to any woman I ever saw; her exalted mind, aided

a little perhaps by her situation, is, I think, capable of that nobly-romantic Love-enthusiasm.

May I see you on Wednesday evening, my dear Angel? The next Wednesday again will, I conjecture, be a hated day to us both. I tremble for censorious remark, for your sake; but in extraordinary cases, may not usual and useful Precaution be a little dispensed with? Three evenings, three swift-winged evenings, with pinions of down, are all the past. I dare not calculate the future. I shall call at Miss Nimmo's tomorrow-evening; 'twill be a farewell call.

I have written out my last sheet of paper, so I am reduc'd to my last half-sheet.

What a strange, mysterious faculty is that thing called Imagination? We have no ideas almost at all of another world; but I have often amused myself with visionary schemes of what happiness might be enjoyed by small alterations, alterations that we can fully enter to, in this present state of our existence. For instance; suppose you and I just as we are at present; the same reasoning Powers, Sentiments, and even Desires; the same fond curiosity for knowledge and remarking observation in our minds; and imagine our bodies free from pain and the necessary supplies for the wants of nature, at all times and easily within our reach; imagine farther that we were set free from the laws of gravitation which binds us to this globe. And could at pleasure, fly without inconvenience, through all the yet unconjectur'd bounds of Creation – what a life of bliss would we lead, in our mutual pursuit of virtue and knowledge, and our mutual enjoyment of friendship and love!

I see you laughing at my fairy fancies, and calling me a voluptuous Mahometan; but I am certain I would be happy creature, beyond anything we call bliss here below; nay, it would be a paradise congenial to you too. Don't you see us hand in hand, or rather my arm about your lovely waist, making our remarks on Sirius, the nearest of our fixed stars; or surveying a Comet flaming innoxious by us, as we just now would mark the passing pomp of a traveling Monarch; or, in the shady bower of Mercury or Venus, dedicating the hour to love; in mutual converse, relying honor and revelling endearment – while the most exalted strains of Poesy and Harmony would be the ready, spontaneous language of our souls! Devotion is the favorite employment of your heart; so it is of mine; what incentives then to, and powers for,

Reverence, Gratitude, Faith and Hope in all the fervours of Adoration and Praise to that Being whose unsearchable Wisdom, Power and Goodness so pervaded, so inspired every Sense and Feeling! By this time, I dare say you will be blessing the neglect of the maid that leaves me destitute of paper.

Sylvander

**Burns wrote few letters to others during his period of confinement with his injured leg. Clarinda appears to have taken over his life. However, he managed to drop a short note to Mrs Dunlop to keep her updated on his condition. This letter implies that he has been too ill to even contemplate writing and that he is dying of boredom. Mrs Dunlop would have been scandalised had she known he was pouring his heart out every day to a married woman, so Burns prudently omitted any mention of Clarinda.**

**(184) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Edinburgh, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1788

After six weeks confinement, I am beginning to walk across the room. They have been six horrible weeks, anguish and low spirits made me unfit to read, write, or think.

I have a hundred times wished that one could resign life as an officer resigns a commission; for I would not take in any poor, ignorant wretch by *selling out*. Lately I was a sixpenny private; and God knows, a miserable soldier enough; now I march to the campaign, a starving cadet; a little more conspicuously wretched.

I am ashamed of all this; for though I do want bravery for the warfare of life, I could wish, like some other soldiers, to have as much fortitude or cunning as to dissemble or conceal my cowardice.

As soon as I can bear the journey, which will be, I suppose about the middle of the next week, I leave Edinburgh, and soon after I shall pay my grateful duty at Dunlop house.

**Although Burns had been impressed by William Creech on their first meeting, his patience with the publisher was wearing thin due to Creech's lack of willingness to part with money.**

**Creech obviously failed to placate the Bard as we learn from part of a letter sent to Margaret Chalmers a few days later.**

**(185) Margaret Chalmers**

22nd January 1788

Now for that wayward, unfortunate thing, myself. I have broke measures with Creech and last week I wrote him a frosty, keen letter. He replied in terms of chastisement, and promised me upon his honor that I should have the account on Monday; but this is Tuesday, and yet I have not heard a word from him. God have mercy on me! a poor damned, incautious, duped, unfortunate fool! The sport, the miserable victim of rebellious pride; hypochondriac imagination, agonising sensibility, and bedlam passions

"I wish that I were dead, but I'm no like to die!" I had lately "a hairbreadth 'scape in th' imminent deadly breach" of love too. Thank my lucky stars I got off heart-whole, "waur fley'd than hurt."

*Interruption*

**Burns had by now discovered that his dealings with William Creech were not quite as honourable as he had believed after their initial meeting. In fact, one old anecdote tells of Burns striding up Leith Walk clutching a young sapling**

**he had torn from the ground with the intention of using it as a weapon to injure Creech.**

**(185A) William Creech**

24<sup>th</sup> January 1788

Sir,

When a business which at any time could be done in a few hours, has kept me for four months without even a shadow of anything else to do but wait on it, 'tis no very favourable symptom that it will soon be done, when I am a hundred miles absent. At any rate I have no mind to make the experiment, but am determined to have it done before I leave Edinburgh. But why should I go into the country? till I clear with you, I don't know what to do, or what I have in my power to do. You have declared yourself to the Publick at large, my friend, my Patron; at all times I gratefully own it; I beg you will continue to be so; and rather make a little exertion amid your hurried time, than trifle with a poor man in his very existence; I shall expect to hear from you tomorrow, or the next day; and have the honor to be,

Sir

Your very humble servant

**Robert Burns had by now cast his spell over Nancy McLehose as can be clearly seen in this beautiful letter written by her. She was totally confused in her thinking towards him and was concerned that she might be persuaded to surrender to him as their meeting of the previous evening had been too passionate for her comfort. It must be remembered that the pair were young people, still in their twenties, with all the natural impulses of people of that age, but Nancy believed she would be a much happier person if the relationship remained purely platonic.**

**Clarinda to Sylvander**

Thursday Forenoon, 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1788

Sylvander, the moment I waked this morning, I received a summons from Conscience to appear at the Bar of Reason. While I trembled before this sacred throne, I beheld a succession of figures pass before me in awful brightness! Religion, clad in a robe of light, stalked majestically along, her hair disheveled, and in her hand the Scriptures of Truth held open at these words – ‘If you love me, keep my commandments.’ Reputation followed; her eyes darted indignation, while she waved a beautiful wreath of laurel, intermixed with flowers, gathered by Modesty in the Bower of Peace. Consideration held her bright mirror close to my eyes, and made me start at my own image! Love alone appeared as counsel in my behalf. She was adorned with a veil, borrowed from Friendship, which hid her defects, and set off her beauties to advantage. She had no plea to offer but that of being the sister of Friendship and the offspring of Charity. But Reason refused to listen to her defence, because she brought no certificate from the Temple of Hymen! While I trembled before her, Reason addressed me in the following manner; --‘Return to my paths, which alone are peace; shut your heart against this fascinating intrusion of the passions; take Consideration for your guide, and you will soon arrive at the Temple of Tranquillity.’

Sylvander, to drop my metaphor, I am neither well nor happy today; my heart reproaches me for last night. If you wish Clarinda to regain her peace, determine against everything but what the strictest delicacy warrants.

I do not blame you, but myself. I must not see you on Saturday, unless I find I can depend on myself acting otherwise. Delicacy, you know, it was which won me to you at once; take care you do not loosen the dearest, most sacred tie that unites us? Remember Clarinda’s present and eternal happiness depends upon her adherence to Virtue. Happy Sylvander! That can be attached to Heaven and Clarinda together. Alas! I feel I cannot serve two masters. God pity me!!

Thursday night.

Why have I not heard from you, Sylvander? Everything in nature seems tinged with gloom today. Ah! Sylvander –

The heart's ay the part ay  
That makes us right or wrang!

How forcibly have these lines recurred to my thoughts! Did I not tell you what a wretch love rendered me? Affection to the strongest height, I am capable of, to a man of my Sylvander's merit – if he did not lead me into weaknesses and follies my heart utterly condemns. I am convinced, without the approbation of Heaven and my own mind, existence would be to me a heavy curse. Sylvander, why do not your Clarinda's repeated levities cure the too passionate fondness you express for her? Perhaps it a little removed esteem. But I dare not touch this string – it would fill up the cup of my present misery. Oh, Sylvander, may the friendship of that God you and I have too much neglected to secure, be henceforth our chief study and delight. I cannot live deprived of the consciousness of His favour, I feel something of this awful state all this day. Nay, while I approached God with my lips, my heart was not fully there.

Mr Locke's posthumous letter ought to be written in letters of gold. What heartfelt joy does the consciousness of having done well in any one instance confer; and what agony the reverse! Do not be displeased when I tell you I wish our parting was over. At a distance we shall retain the same heartfelt affection and interestedness in each other's concerns; -- but absence will mellow and restrain these violent heart-agitations which, if continued much longer, would unhinge my very soul, and render me unfit for the duties of life. You and I are capable of that ardency of love, for which the wide creation can afford an adequate object. Let us seek to repose it in the bosom of our God. Let us next give a place to those dearest on earth – the tender charities of parent, sister, child! I bid you goodnight with this short prayer of Thomson's: --

Father of Light and Life, thou good Supreme!

Oh teach us what is good – teach us Thyself!  
Save us from Folly, Vanity, and Vice, &c.

Your letter – I should have liked had it contained a little of the last one's seriousness. Bless me! You must not flatter so; but it's in a 'merry mood,' and I must make allowances. Part of some your encomiums I know I deserve, but you are far out when you enumerate 'strength of mind' among them. I have not even an ordinary share of it – every passion does what it will with me; and all my life, I have been guided by the impulses of the moment – unsteady and weak! I thank you for the letter, though it sticketh my prayer. Why did you tell me you drank away Reason, 'that Heaven-lighted lamp in man?' When Sylvander utters a calm, sober sentiment, he is never half so charming. I have read several of these in your last letter with vast pleasure. Good night!

Friday morning

My servant (who is a good soul) will deliver you this. She is going down to Leith, and will return about two or three o'clock. I have ordered her to call then, in case you have ought to say to Clarinda today. I am better of that sickness of my heart I had yesterday; but there's a sting remains which will not be removed till I am at peace with Heaven and myself. Another interview, spent as we ought, will help me procure this. A day when the sun shines gloriously always makes me devout! I hope 'tis an earnest (today) of being soon restored to the 'light of His countenance' who is the source of love and standard of perfection. Adieu!

Clarinda

**Burns obviously realised that he had gone too far in his amorous pursuit of Nancy McLehose and grovels furiously in this next letter as he tries to reassure her that he will behave himself in future.**

(187) Clarinda

25<sup>th</sup> January 1788

Clarinda, my life, you have wounded my soul. Can I think of your being unhappy, even tho' it be not described in your pathetic elegance of language, without being miserable? Clarinda, can I bear to be told from you that "you will not see me tomorrow night – that you wish the hour of parting were come"! Do not let us impose on ourselves by sounds; if in the moment of fond endearment and tender dalliance, I perhaps trespassed against the *letter* of Decorum's law; I appeal, even to you, whether I ever sinned in the very least degree against the *spirit* of her strictest statute. But why, my Love, talk to me in such strong terms, every word of which cuts me to the very soul? You know, a hint, the slightest signification of your wish, is to me a sacred command. Be reconciled, my Angel, to your God, yourself and me; and I pledge you *Sylvander's honor*, an oath I dare say you will trust without reserve, that you shall never more have reason to complain of his conduct. Now my Love, do not wound up our next meeting with any averted looks or restrained caresses: I have marked the line of conduct, a line I know exactly to your taste, and which I will inviolably keep; but do not *you* show the least inclination to make boundaries: seeming distrust, where you know you may confide, is a cruel sin against Sensibility. Delicacy, you know it, was which won me to you at once – "*take care* you do not loosen the dearest most sacred tie which unites us." Clarinda, I would not have stung *your* soul, I would not have bruised your spirit, as that harsh crucifying "Take care," did *mine*; no, not to have gained heaven! Let me again appeal to your dear Self. If Sylvander, even when he seemingly half-transgressed the laws of Decorum, if he did not shew more chastised, trembling, faltering delicacy, than the MANY of the world do in keeping these laws.

O Love and Sensibility, ye have conspired against my Peace! I love to madness and I feel to torture! Clarinda, how can I ever forgive myself that I have ever touched a single cord in your bosom with pain! would I do it willingly? Would any consideration, any gratification make me do so? O, did you love like me, you would not, you could not deny or put off a meeting with the Man who adores you; who

would die a thousand deaths before he would injure you; and who must bid you a long farewell!!

I had proposed bringing my bosom friend, Mr Ainslie, tomorrow evening, at his strong request to see you; as he only has time to stay with us about ten minutes, for an engagement; but – I shall hear from you; this afternoon, for mercy's sake! for till I hear from you I am wretched. O Clarinda, the tie that binds me to thee, is entwisted, incorporated with my dearest threads of life!

Sylvander

**By now, Burns was professing his love for Nancy openly in his letters, and was keen to introduce her to his friend, Robert Ainslie.**

**(188) Clarinda**

26<sup>th</sup> January 1788

I was on the way, *my Love*, to meet you (I never do things by halves) when I got your card. Mr Ainslie goes out of town tomorrow morning to see a brother of his who is newly arrived from France. I am determined that he and I shall call on you together; so look you, lest I should never see tomorrow, we will call on you. – Tonight. – Mary and you may put off tea till about seven; at which time, in the Galloway phrase, “an’ the beast be to the fore, and the branks bide hale,” expect the humblest of your humble servants, and his dearest friend. – We only propose staying half an hour, --“for aught ye ken.” I could suffer the lash of Misery eleven months in the year, were the twelfth to be composed of hours like yesternight. – You are the soul of my enjoyment; all else is of the stuff of stocks & stones.

Sylvander

**Written after the visit by Burns and Ainslie, Clarinda put pen to another lengthy epistle again describing her concern about her feelings for the Bard. She nevertheless managed some pointed humour at the expense of Burns.**

**CLARINDA TO SYLVANDER**

Sunday evening, 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1788

Sylvander, when I think of you as my *dearest* and most attached *friend*, I am highly pleased; but when you come across my mind as my *lover*, something within gives me a *sting* resembling that of guilt! Tell me why is this? It must be from the idea that I am another's. What! Another's wife! O cruel Fate! I am indeed bound in an 'iron chain!' Forgive me if this should give you pain. You know I must (I told you I *must*) tell you my genuine feelings or be silent. Last night we were happy! Beyond what the bulk of mankind can conceive! Perhaps the 'line' you had mark'd was a *little* infringed – it was really; but tho' I *disapprove*, I have not been *unhappy* about it. I am convinced no less of your *discernment* than of your *wish* to make Clarinda happy. I know you are *sincere* when you profess horrors at what would render her miserable forever. But we must *guard* against going to the *verge* of danger. Ah! my friend, much need had we to 'watch and pray!' May these benevolent spirits whose office it is to 'save the fall of Virtue struggling on the brink of vice' be ever present to protect and guide us in right paths!

I had an hour's conversation today with my worthy friend, Mr Kemp. You'll attribute to *this*, the above sentiments. 'Tis true, there's not one on earth has so much influence on me, except Sylvander; *partly* it has forced me 'to feel along the mental intelligence.' However, I've broken the ice. I confessed I had conceived a tender impression of late – that it was mutual, and that I had wish'd to unbosom myself to him (as I did), particularly to ask if he thought I should, or not, mention it to my *friend*? I saw he felt for me (for I was in tears); but he bewail'd that I had given my *heart* while in my present state of bondage – wish'd I had made it friendship *only* – in short, talked to me in the style of a tender Parent, *anxious* for my happiness. He disapproves altogether of my saying a syllable of the matter to my friend; says it could only make him uneasy; and that I'm in no way bound to do it by any one tie.

This has eased me of a *load* which has laid upon my mind ever since our intimacy. Sylvander, I wish you and Mr Kemp were acquainted – such worth and sensibility! If you had his piety and sobriety of manners, united to the shining abilities you possess! You'd be “a faultless monster which the world never saw.” He too has great talents. His imagination is rich, his feelings delicate, his discernment acute; yet there are *shades* in his, as in all characters: but these it would ill become Clarinda to point out. Alas! I know too many blots in my own. Sylvander, I believe nothing were a more impracticable task than to make you feel a little of genuine Gospel *humility*! Believe me, I wish not to see you deprived of that noble fire of an exalted mind which you eminently possess. Yet a sense of your faults – a *feeling* sense of them! – were devoutly to be wish'd. Tell me, did you ever, or how oft, have you smote on your breast, and cried “God be merciful to me a sinner?” I fancy once or twice when suffering from the effects of your errors. Pardon me if I be hurting your ‘intrinsic dignity;’ it need not – even ‘divine Clarinda’ has been in this mortal predicament.

Pray, what does Mr Ainslie think of her? Was he not astonished to find her merely human? Three weeks ago I suppose you would have walked into her presence *unshod*; but one must *bury* even divinities when they discover symptoms of mortality! (Let *these* be interred on Sylvander's bosom!)

My dearest friend, there are two wishes uppermost in my heart; to see you think alike Clarinda on religion; and to see you settled in some creditable line of business. The warm interest I take in both these is perhaps the best proof of the sincerity of my friendship, as well as the earnest of its duration. As to the first, I devolve it over into the hands of the Omniscient! May He raise up friends who will effectuate the other! While I breathe these fervent wishes, think not that anything but pure *disinterested* regard prompts them. They're fond, but chimerical ideas. They are never indulged but in the hour of tender endearment, when

-----Innocence

Looks gaily smiling on; while rosy Pleasure  
Hides young Desire amid her flowery wreath,

And pours her cup luxuriant, mantling high  
The sparkling heavenly vintage – Love and Bliss

'Tis past ten; and I please myself with thinking Sylvander will be about to retire, and write to Clarinda. I fancy you'll find this *stupid* enough; but I can't be always bright; the *sun* will be *sometimes* under a cloud. Sylvander, I wish our kind feelings were more moderate; why set one's heart upon *impossibilities*? Try me merely as your friend (alas! all I ought to be); believe me, you'll find me more rational. If you'd caress the 'mental intelligence' as you do the corporeal frame, indeed Sylvander, you'd make me a philosopher. I see you fidgetting at this *violently* blasting rationality. I have a headache which brings home those things to the mind. Tomorrow I'll hear from you, I hope! This is Sunday, and not a word on our favourite subject. O fy! 'divine Clarinda.' I intend giving you *my* idea of Heaven in opposition to your heathenish description (which, by the way, was elegantly drawn). Mine shall be founded on Reason, and supported by Scripture; but it's too late, my head aches, but my heart is affectionately yours.

Monday morning

I am not sorry almost at the Excise affair misgiving. You will be better off out of Edin.; it is full of temptation to one of your social turn. Providence (if you be wise in future) will order something better for you. I'm half-glad you were school'd about the Inscription; 'twill be a lesson, I hope, in future. Clarinda would have lectured you on it before, 'if she durst.' Miss Nimmo is a woman after my own heart. You are reconciled to the world by her 'friendly prattle!' How can you talk so diminutively of the conversation of a woman with solid sense? What will you say of Clarinda's chit-chat? I suppose you will give it a still more insignificant term, If you durst; but it is mixed with *something* that makes it more bearable, were it even weaker than it is. Miss Nimmo is right in both her conjectures. Ah, Sylvander! My peace *must* suffer; yours cannot. *You* think, in loving Clarinda, you are doing right; all Sylvander's eloquence cannot convince me that it is so! If I were but at liberty –

O how I would indulge in in all the luxury of *innocent* love! It is, I fear, I fear, too late to talk in this strain after indulging you and myself so much; but would Sylvander shelter his Love in Friendship's *allowed* garb, Clarinda would be much happier!

'Tomorrow,' did'st thou say? The time is short *now*; is it not *too* frequent? Do not sweetest dainties cloy soonest? Take your chance – come half-past eight. If anything particular occur to render it improper *tomorrow*, I'll send you word, and name another evening. Mr Kemp is to call tonight, I believe. *He*, too, trembles for my peace. Two such worthies to be interested about my foolish ladyship! The Apostle Paul, with all his rhetoric, could not reconcile me to the *great* (little souls) when I think of them and Sylvander together; but I *pity* them.

If e'er ambition did my fancy cheat,  
With any wish, so mean, as to be great,  
Continue, Heav'n, far from me to remove  
The humble blessings of that life I'd love.

Till we meet, my dear Sylvander, adieu!

Clarinda

**This was the time that Burns was contemplating a career as an Exciseman and had been sounding out some of his well-connected acquaintances about such a possibility, with varying responses.**

**(189) Clarinda**

Sunday noon, 27<sup>th</sup> January 1788

I have almost given up the excise idea. I have been just now to wait on a great person, Miss Nimmo's friend, Mrs Stewart. Why will Great People not only deafen us with the din of their equipage and dazzle us with their fastidious pomp, but they must also be so very dictatorially wise? I have been question'd like a child about

my matters, and blamed and schooled for my Inscription on Stirling window. –  
Come, Clarinda – “Come, curse me Jacob; come, defy me Israel!”

### Sunday Night

I have been with Miss Nimmo. She is indeed “a good soul,” as my Clarinda finely says. She has reconciled me, in a good measure, to the world, with her friendly prattle.

Schetki has sent me the song set to a fine air of his composing. I have called the song, ‘Clarinda’; I have carried it about in my pocket, and thumbed it over all day.

I trust you have spent a pleasant day; and that no idea or recollection gives you pain.

### Monday morning

If my prayers have any weight in Heaven, this morning looks in on you and finds you in the arms of peace; except where it is charmingly interrupted by the ardours of Devotion.

I find so much serenity of mind, so much positive pleasure, so much fearless daring towards the world, when I warm up in devotion, or feel the glorious sensation, a consciousness of Almighty Friendship, that I am sure I shall soon be an honest Enthusiast.

“How are the servants blest, O Lord,  
How sure is their defence!  
Eternal wisdom is their guide,  
Their help Omnipotence!”

I am, my dear Madam, yours  
Sylvander

**(190) Clarinda**

Tuesday morn, 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1788

I cannot go out today, my dearest *Love*, without sending you half a line by way of a sin offering; but believe me, 'twas the sin of ignorance. Could you think I *intended* to hurt you by anything I said yesternight? Nature has been too kind to you for your happiness. Your Delicacy, your Sensibility – O why should such glorious qualifications be the fruitful source of woe! You have “murd’red sleep” to me last night. I went to bed with an idea that you were unhappy; and every start I closed my eyes, busy Fancy painted you in such scenes of romantic misery that I would almost be persuaded that you are not well this morning.

!f I unweeting have offended,  
Impute it not  
But while we live,  
But one short hour perhaps, between us two  
Let there be peace”.

If Mary is not gone by this reaches you, give her my best Compliments. She is a charming girl, and highly worthy of the noblest love.

I send you a poem to read, till I call on you this night, which will be about nine. I wish I could procure some potent spell, some fairy charm, that would protect from injury, or restore to rest, that bosom-chord, “trembling alive all o’er,” on which hangs your peace of mind. I tought, vainly, I fear, thought, that the devotion of Love, Love strong as even you can feel; Love guarded, by all the puriy of Virtue, and all the pride of Honor; I thought such a love might make you happy – will I be mistaken? I can no more for hurry.

Thine  
Sylvander

**A short note to John Richmond in which he refers to Jean Armour.**

**(196) John Richmond**

Edinburgh, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1788

Dear Richmond,

As I hope to see you soon, I shall not trouble you with a long letter of Edinburgh news. Indeed there is nothing worth mentioning to you; every thing going on as usual – houses building, bucks strutting, ladies flaring, blackguards skulking, whores leering, &c. in the old way. I have not got, nor will not for some time, get the better of my bruised knee; but I have laid aside my crutches. A lame Poet is unlucky, lame verses is an every day circumstance. I saw Smith lately; hale and hearty as formerly. I have heard melancholy enough accounts of Jean; 'tis an unlucky affair.

I am ever, My dear Sir, yours

Robt Burns

**The relationship between Burns and Nancy was no longer the secret they wished and Nancy was troubled by a letter she had received concerning it. She sent it to Burns for his perusal and he did not take it lightly.**

**(199) Clarinda**

13<sup>th</sup> February, 1788

*My ever dearest Clarinda,*

I make a numerous dinner party wait me while I read yours and write this. Do not require that I should cease to love you, to adore you in my soul – 'tis to me impossible – your peace and happiness are to me dearer than my soul – name the terms on which you wish to see me, to correspond with me, and you have them – I

must love, pine, mourn and adore in secret – this you *must* not deny me – you will ever be to me –

“Dear as the light that visits these sad eyes,  
Dear as the ruddy drops that warm my heart.”

I have not patience to read the puritanic scrawl. Vile sophistry! Ye heavens! thou God of nature! thou Redeemer of mankind! ye look down with approving eyes on a passion inspired by the purest flame, and guarded by truth, delicacy and honour; but the half-inch soul of an unfeeling, cold-blooded, pitiful presbyterian bigot, cannot forgive any thing above his dungeon bosom and foggy head.

Farewell! I'll be with you tomorrow evening – and be at rest in your mind -- I will be yours in the way you think most to your happiness! I dare not proceed – I love, and will with joyous confidence approach the throne of the Almighty Judge of men, with your dear idea, and will despise the scum of sentiment and the mist of sophistry.

Sylvander

**This episode must have caused Burns a great deal of distress for he returned from his dinner party and wrote another letter to Nancy expounding on his thoughts about the affair.**

**(200) Clarinda**

Weden: -- midnight – 13<sup>th</sup> February 1788

Madam

After a wretched day, I am preparing for a sleepless night. I am going to address myself to the Almighty Witness of my actions—some time, perhaps *very* soon, my Almighty Judge. I am not going to be the advocate of Passion – be Thou my Inspirer and testimony, O God, as I plead the cause of truth!

I have read over your friend's haughty, dictatorial letter; you are only answerable to your God in such a manner. Who gave any fellow-creature of yours (a fellow-creature incapable of being your judge because not your Peer) a right to catechise, scold undervalue, abuse and insult, wantonly and inhumanly to insult you thus? I don't wish, not even *wish* to deceive you, Madam. The Searcher of hearts is my witness how dear you are to me; but tho' it were possible you could still be dearer to me – I would not even kiss your hand at the expence of your conscience. Away with declamation! let us appeal to the bar of Common Sense. It is not mouthing every thing sacred; it not vague, ranting assertions; it is not assuming haughtily and insultingly assuming, the dictatorial language of a Roman Pontiff, that must dissolve a union like ours. Tell me, Madam, are you under the least shadow of an obligation to bestow your love, tenderness, caresses, affections, heart and soul, on Mr Mcilhose – the man who has repeatedly, habitually and barbarously broke thro' every tie of Duty, Nature, or Gratitude to you? The laws of your Country indeed, for the most useful reasons of Policy and sound government, have made your person inviolate; but are your heart and affections bound to one who gives not the least return of either to you? You cannot do it; the common feelings of humanity forbid it. Have you then a heart and affections which are no man's right? You have; it would be highly ridiculously absurd to suppose the contrary. Tell me then in the name of Common Sense can it be wrong, is such a supposition compatible with the plainest ideas of Right and Wrong, that it is improper to bestow that heart and those affections to another; while that bestowing is not in the smallest degree hurtful to your duty to God, to your children or to Society at large?

This is the great test; the consequences; let us see them. In a widowed, forlorn, lonely situation, with a bosom glowing with love and tenderness, yet so delicately situated that you cannot indulge these noble feelings except you meet with a man who has a soul capable.

**Nancy was now finding that her friendship with Burns was one that met with no approval from her other acquaintances.**

**Clarinda to Sylvander** Edinburgh, Tuesday evening, nine o'clock, 10th Feb., 1788

Mr--- has just left me, after half an hour's most pathetic conversation. I told him, of the usage I had met with on Sunday night, which he condemned much, as unmanly and ungenerous. I expressed my thanks for his call; but he told me it 'was merely to hide the change in his friendship from the world.' Think how I was mortified: I was indeed; and affected so, as hardly to restrain tears. He did not name you; but spoke in terms that showed plainly he knew. Would to God he knew my Sylvander as I do! Then might I hope to retain his friendship still; but I have made my choice, and you alone can ever make me repent it.

Yet, while I live, I must regret the loss of such a man's friendship. My dear, generous friend of my soul does so too. I love him for it! Yesterday I thought of you, and went over to Miss Nimmo, to have the luxury of talking of you. She was most kind; and praised you more than ever, as a man of worth, honour, genius. Oh, how I could have listened to her forever! She says she is afraid our attachment will be lasting. I stayed tea, was asked kindly, and did not choose to refuse, as I stayed last time when you were of the party. I wish you were here tonight to comfort me. I feel hurt and depressed; but tomorrow I hope for a cordial from your dear hand! I must bid you good night. Remember your Clarinda. Every blessing be yours!

Your letter this moment. Why did you write before today? Thank you for it. I figure your heartfelt enjoyment last night. Oh, to have been of the party! Where was it? I'd like to know the very spot. My head aches so I can't write more: but I have kissed your dear lines over and over. Adieu! I'll finish this tomorrow.

Your Clarinda

Wednesday morning.

Mary was at my bedside by eight this morning. We had much chat about you. She is an affectionate, faithful soul. She tells me her defence of you was so warm, in a large company where you were blamed for some trivial affair, that she left them impressed with the idea of her being in love. She laughs and says 'tis pity to have the skaith and nothing for the pains.'

My spirits are greatly better today. I am a little anxious about Willie; his leg is to be lanced this day, and I shall be fluttered till the operation is fairly over. Mr Wood thinks he will soon get well when the matter lodged in it is discussed. God grant it! Oh, how can I ever be ungrateful to that good Providence who has blessed me with so many undeserved mercies, and saved me from the ruin I courted! The heart that feels its continual dependence on the Almighty is bound to keep His laws by a tie stronger and tenderer than any human obligation. The feeling of honour is a noble and powerful one; but can we be honourable to a fellow-creature, and basely unmindful of our Bountiful Benefactor, to whom we are indebted for life and all its blessings; and even for those very distinguishing qualities, Honour, Genius, and Benevolence?

I am sure you enter into these ideas; did you think with me on all points I should be too happy; but I'll be silent. I may wish and pray, but you shall never again accuse me of presumption. My dear, I write tis to Mauchline, to be waiting you. I hope, nay I am sure, 'twill be welcome.

You are an extravagant prodigal in more essential things than affection. Today's post would have brought me yours and saved you sixpence. However, it pleased me to know that, though absent in body, 'you were present with me in spirit.'

Do you know a Miss Nellie Hamilton in Ayr, daughter to a Captain John H. of the Excise cutter? I staid with her at Kailzie and love her. She is a dear amiable, romantic girl. I wish much to write to her, and will enclose it for you to deliver, personally, if agreeable. She raved about your poems in summer, and wished to be acquainted' Let me know if you have any objections. She is an intimate of Miss Nimmo too. I think the streets look deserted-like since Monday; and there's a certain insipidity in good kind of folks I once enjoyed not a little. You, who are a casuist, explain these deep enigmas. Miss Wardrobe supped here on Monday.

She once named you, which kept me from falling asleep. I drank your health in a glass of ale – as the lasses do at Halloween, -- ‘in to mysel.’

Happy Sylvander! To meet with the dear charities of brother, sister, parent! Whilst I have none of these, and belong to nobody. Yes, I have my children, and my heart’s friend, Sylvander – the only one I have ever found capable of that nameless, delicate attachment, which none but noble, romantic minds can comprehend, I envy you the Captain’s society. Don’t tell him of the ‘Iron Chain,’ lest he call us both fools. I saw the happy trio in my mind’s eye. So absence increases your fondness; ‘tis ever so in great souls. Let the poor wordlings enjoy (possess, I mean, for they can’t enjoy) their golden dish; we have each of us an estate, derived from the Father of the Universe, into whose hands I trust we’ll return it, cultivated, so as to prove an inexhaustible treasure through the endless ages of eternity!

Afternoon

Mr Wood has not come, so the affair is not over. I hesitate about sending this till I hear further; but I think you said you’d be at Mauchline on Thursday; at any rate, you’ll get this on your arrival. Farewell! May you ever abide under the shadow of the Almighty,

Yours,

Clarinda

**(202) Clarinda**

2.o’clock 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1788

I have just now received your first letter of yesterday, by the careless negligence of the Penny post. Clarinda, matters are grown very serious with us; then seriously hear me, and hear me Heaven. I met you, my dear Clarinda, by far the first of womankind, at least to me; I esteemed, I lov’d you at first sight, both of which attachments you have done me the honor to return; the longer I am acquainted with you, the more innate amiableness and worth I discover in you. You have suffered a loss I confess for my sake; but if the firmest, steadiest, warmest Friendship; if every endeavour to be worthy of your friendship; if a love strong as

the ties of Nature; and holy as the duties of Religion -- if all these can make any thing like a compensation for th evil I have occasioned you, if they be worth your acceptance, or can in the least add to your enjoyments. So help Sylvander, ye Powers above, in his hour of need, as he freely gives all to Clarinda!

I esteem you, I love you, as a friend, I admire you, I love you aas a Woman, beyond anyone in all the circle of Creation: I know I shall continue to esteem you, to love you, to pray for you – nay to pray for myself for your sake.

(One line missing)

Expect me at eight – and believe me to be ever, My dearest Madam, yours most entirely.

Sylvander

**Burns is becoming flustered as his time in Edinburgh draws to an end. Too much to do and too little time to do it.**

**(205) Capt Richard Brown**

Edinburgh, 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1788

My Dear Sir,

I received yours with the greatest pleasure. I shall arrive at Glasgow on Monday evening, and beg, if possible, you will meet me on Tuesday; I shall wait you Tuesday all day. I shall be found at Durie's, Blackbull Inn. I am hurried as if hunted by fifty devils, else I would come to Greenock; but if you cannot possibly come, write me, if possible, to Glaasgow on Monday; or direct to me at Mossgiel, by Mauchline, and name a day and place in Ayrshire, & return to Edinburgh.

I am ever, My dearest friend, yours

Robt Burns

**(208) Clarinda**

Glasgow, Monday even., 9 o'clock

The attraction of love I find is in inverse proportion to the attraction of the Newtonian Philosophy; in the system of Sir Isaac, the nearer objects were to one another, the stronger was the attractive force; in my system every milestone that marked my progress from Clarinda, awakened a keener pang of attachment to her. How do you feel my Love? Is your heart ill at ease? I fear it. God forbid that these Persecutors should harass that Peace which is more precious to me than my own. Be assured that I shall ever think on you, muse on you, and in my moments of devotion, pray for you. The hour that you are not in my thoughts, "be that hour darkness! Let the shadows of Death cover it! Let it not be numbered in the hours of the day!"

When I forget the darling theme  
Be my tongue mute, my fancy paint no more!  
And dead to joy, forget my heart to beat.

I have just met with my old friend, the ship Captain; guess my pleasure; to meet you could alone have given me more. My brother William too, the young Saddler has come to Glasgow to meet me; and here are we three spending the evening. I arrived here too late to write by post, but I'll wrap half a dozen sheets of blank paper together, and send it by the Fly under the name of a parcel. You shall hear from me next post town. I would write you a longer letter but for the present circumstances of my friend. Adieu, my dear Clarinda! I am just going to propose your health by way of a grace-drink.

Sylvander

**Robert Burns had returned to his native Ayrshire. It difficult to understand just what was in the mind of the Bard at this time.**

**He had met the heavily pregnant Jean Armour and set up house with her and their son Bobbie, the other twin having died in infancy. He boasted to his friends that he has bought her a mahogany bed, and he professed to Clarinda that he despised Jean. But Nancy had expressed a wish in one of**

her letters that she would be pleased to see him happily married, so why be so insulting about Jean? It is doubtful if Burns had ever truly got over Jean and was pleased to resume their relationship, for if his romance with Clarinda was truly platonic, then Burns would be only too happy to resume a physical relationship with Jean Armour. It could also be the case that he was under pressure to sort out his affairs if he wished to become an Exciseman. The following letter may have been penned to soften the blow to Clarinda, but it does Burns no credit as he heaps insults upon the head of Jean Armour.

(210) Clarinda

Mossgiel, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1788

I have just now, my ever dearest Madam, delivered your kind present to my sweet, little Bobbie; who I find a very fine fellow. – Your letter was waiting me. Your interview with Mr. K----- opens a wound, ill-closed, in my breast; not that I think his friendship of so much consequence to you, but because you set such a value on it. Now for a little news that will please you. I, this morning as I came home, called for a certain woman. I am disgusted with her; I cannot endure her! I, while my heart smote me for the prophanity, tried to compare her with my Clarinda; 'twas setting the expiring glimmer of a farthing taper beside the cloudless glory of the meridian sun. Here was tasteless insipidity, vulgar of soul, and mercenary fawning; there; polished good sense, heaven-born genius, & the most generous, the most delicate, the most tender Passion. I have done with her, and she with me. *(One line missing from MS, cut away here)* I set off tomorrow for Dumfriesshire. – 'Tis merely out of Compliments to Mr Miller, for I know the Excise must be my lot. I will write you from Dumfries, if these horrid postages don't frighten me.

“Whatever place, whatever land I see,  
My heart, untravell'd, fondly turns to thee;  
Still to “Clarinda” turns with ceaseless pain;  
And drags at each remove, a lengthen'd chain!”

I just stay to write you a few lines before I go to call on my friend, Mr Gavin Hamilton. I hate myself as an unworthy sinner, because these interviews of old, dear friends make me for half a moment almost forget Clarinda.

Remember tomorrow evening at eight o' clock; I shall be with the Father of mercies, at that hour, on your account. Farewell! If the post goes not tonight, I'll finish the other page tomorrow morning.

Sylvander

**(211) Capt. Richard Brown,**

Mossgiel, 24th February, 1788.

My Dear Friend,

I cannot get the properest direction for my friend in Jamaica, but the following will do. To mr John Hutchison, at John Brownrigs Esqr... Care of Mr Benjamin Henriques, Merchant, Orange Street, Kingston.

I arrived here, at my brother's, only yesterday, after fighting my way thro' Paisley and Kilmarnock, against those old powerful foes of mine, the Devil, the World, and the Flesh - so terrible in the fields of Dissipation.

I have met with few incidents in my life which gave me so much pleasure as meeting you in Glasgow. There is a time of life beyond which, we cannot form a tie worth the name of Friendship.

"O youth! enchanting stage, profusely blest."

Life is a fairy scene: almost all that deserves the name of enjoyment or pleasure is only a charming delusion; and in comes ripening Age, in all the gravity of hoary wisdom, and wickedly chases away the dear, bewitching Phantoms.

When I think of life, I resolve to keep a strict look-out in the course of Economy, for the sake of worldly convenience and independance of mind; to cultivate intimacy with a few of the companions of youth, that they may be the friends of Age; never to refuse my liquorish humour a handful of the Sweetmeats of life, when they come not too dear; and, for Futurity,

“The present moment is our ain,  
The neist we never saw!”

How do you like my philosophy? Give my best compliments to Mrs. Brown, and believe me to be ever,  
My dear Sir, yours most truly,

Robt Burns

**Although Burns is busy attempting to establish himself as a farmer in the West, he nevertheless continues to write lengthy missives to Clarinda.**

**(213) Clarinda**

Cumnock, 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 1788

I hope and am certain that my generous Clarinda will not think my silence, for now a long week, has been in any degree owing to my forgetfulness. I have been tosst about through the Country ever since I wrote you; and am here, returning from Dumfries-shire, at an Inn, the Post-Office of the place, with just so long time as my horse eats his corn to write to you. I have been hurried with business and dissipation almost equal to the insidious degree of the Persian Monarch's mandate; when he forbade asking petition of god or man for forty days: had the venerable P-rophet been as throng as I, he had not broke the decree; at least, not thrice a day.

I am thinking my farming scheme will yet hold. A worthy, intelligent farmer, my father's friend, and my own, has been with me on the spot; he thinks the bargain practicable. I am myself, on a more serious review of the lands, much better

pleased wiith them. I won't mention this in writing to any body but you and Mr Ainslie. Don't accuse me of being fickle; I have the two plans of life before me, and I wish to procure the one most likely to procure me independence. I shall be in Edinburgh next week. I long to see you; your image is omnipresent to me: nay, I am convinced I would soon idolatrize it most seriously; so much do absence and memory improve the medium thro' which one sees the much loved Object. Tonight, at the sacred hour of eight, I expect to meet you – at the Throne of Grace. I hope as I go home tonight, to find a letter from you at the Post-Office in Mauchline. I have just once seen that dear hand since I left Edinburgh; a letter indeed which much affected me.

Tell me, first of womankind, will my warmest attachment, my sincerest friendship, my correspondence, will they be any compensation for the sacrifices you make for my sake? If they will, they are yours. I f I settle on the farm I propose, I am just a day and a half's ride from Edinburgh – we will meet – don't you say, “perhaps too often!”

Fair wel, my air, my charming Poetess! May all good things ever attend you.

I am ever, My dearest Madam, yours

Sylvander

**William Cruikshank was classics master at Edinburgh High School and a colleague of William Nicol. Burns lodged with the Cruikshank family in St James Square and wrote “A Rosebud by my Early Walk” in tribute to the twelve-year-old daughter of the family.**

**( 214 ) William Cruikshank**

Mauchline, March 3rd, 1788.

My dear Sir,

Apologies for not writing are frequently like apologies for not singing - the apology better than the song.

I have fought my way severely through the savage hospitality of this country, the object of all hosts being to send every guest drunk to bed if they can.

I executed your commission in Glasgow, and I hope the Cocoa came safe. 'Twas the same price and the very same kind as your former parcel; for the gentleman recollected your buying there before perfectly well.

I Should return my thanks for your            hospitality (I leave a blank for the epithet, as I know none can do it justice) to a poor, wayfaring Bard, who was spent and almost overpowered fighting with Prosaic wickedness in high places; but I am afraid lest you should burn the letter whenever you come to the passage, so I pass over it in silence.

I am just returned from visiting Mr. Miller's farm. The friend whom I told you I would take with me was highly pleased with the farm; and as he is, without exception, the most intelligent farmer in the Country, he has staggered me a good deal. I have the two plans of life before me; I shall balance them to the best of my judgment; and fix on the most eligible. I have written Mr. Miller, and shall wait on him when I come to town, which shall be the beginning or middle of next week: I would be in sooner, but my unlucky knee is rather worse, and I fear for some time will scarcely stand the fatigue of my Excise instructions. I only mention these ideas to you, and, indeed, except Mr. Ainslie, whom I intend writing to tomorrow, I will not write at all to Edinburgh till I return to it. I would send my compliments to Mr. Nicol, but he would be hurt if he knew I wrote to anybody and not to him; so I shall only beg my best, kindest, kindest compliments to my worthy Hostess, and the sweet little Rose-bud.

So soon as I am settled in the routine of life, either as an Excise-officer, or as a farmer, I propose myself great pleasure from a regular correspondence with the only Man almost I ever saw, who joined the most attentive prudence with the warmest generosity.

I am much interested for that best of men, Mr. Wood; I hope he is in better health and spirits than when I saw him last.

I am ever, my dearest friend, your obliged, humble servant,

Robt Burns

**We now arrive at the most shocking letter written by Robert Burns. It was only a week since he returned to Ayrshire and met with Jean, who was in the full term of her pregnancy. On the day that Burns was engaged in writing this dreadful, boastful letter, Jean was giving birth to another set of twins, both of whom died within three weeks of their birth.**

**(215) Robert Ainslie**

Mauchline, 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 1788

My dear Friend,

I am just returned from Mr Miller's farm. My old friend whom I took with me was highly pleased with the bargain, & advised me to accept it. He is the most intelligent sensible farmer in the county, & his advice has staggered me a great deal. I have the two plans before me; I shall endeavour to balance them to the best of my judgement, and fix on the most eligible. On the whole, if I find Mr Miller in the same favourable disposition as when I saw him last, I shall in all probability turn farmer.

I have been through sore tribulation and under much buffeting of the Wicked One since I came to this country. Jean I found banished like a martyr – forlorn, destitute & friendless; all for the good old cause. I have reconciled her to her fate, & I have reconciled her to her mother. I have taken her a room; I have taken her to my arms, I have given her a mahogany bed. I have given her a guinea, & I have f—d her till she rejoiced with joy unspeakable and full of glory. But, as I always am on every occasion, I have been prudent and cautious to an astonishing degree. I swore her privately and solemnly never to attempt any claim on me as a husband, even though anyone should persuade her she had such a claim (which she did

not), neither during my life or after my death. She did all this like a good girl, & I took the opportunity of some dry horse-litter, & gave her such a thundering scalade that electrified the very marrow of her bones. Oh, what a peace-maker is a guid weel-willy pintle! It is the mediator, the guarantee, the umpire, the bond of union, the solemn league and covenant, the plenipotentiary, the Aaron's rod, the Jacob's staff, the prophet Elisha's pot of oil, the Ahasuerus Sceptre, the sword of mercy, the philosopher's stone, the Horn of Plenty, and Tree of Life between Man and Woman.

I shall be in Edinburgh the middle of next week. My farming ideas I shall keep private till I see. I got a letter from Clarinda yesterday and she tells me she has got no letter of mine but one. Tell her that I have written to her from Glasgow, from Kilmarnock, from Mauchline and yesterday from Cumnock, as I returned from Dumfries. Indeed she is the only person in Edinburgh I have written to till this day today. How are your soul and body putting up? A little like man and wife I suppose.

Your faithful friend

R.B.

**Clarinda must have been a bit concerned at the happenings in Ayrshire as she sent a letter of reproach to Burns. Unfortunately, she had a habit of scoring through or cutting out sections of the letters she received and several pieces are missing from the following one. Burns carefully omitted any further mention of Jean in his reply.**

**(217) Clarinda**

6<sup>th</sup> March 1788

I own myself guilty, Clarinda; I should have wrote you last week; but when you recollect, my dearest Madam, that yours of this night's Post is only the third I have got from you, and that this is the fifth or sixth I have sent to you, you will not

reproach me with a good grace for unkindness. I have always some kind of idea, not to sit down and write a letter except I have time & possession of my faculties so as to do some justice to my letter; which at present is rarely my situation. For instance, yesterday I dined at a friend's at some distance; the savage hospitality of this Country spent me the most part of the night in the nauseous position in the bowl this day – sick – headache – low spirits – miserable – fasting, except for a draught of water or a small-beer now eight o' clock at night – only able to crawl ten minutes into Mauchline, to wait the Post in the pleasurable of hearing from the Mistress of my soul.

But truce with all this! When I sit down to write to you all is harmony and peace. – A hundred times a day do I figure you, before your taper, your book or work laid aside as I get within the room. How happy have I been! & how little of that scantling portion of time, called the life of man, is sacred to happiness; much less transport!

I could moralise tonight, like a Death's head.

“O what is life, that thoughtless wish of all!  
A drop of honey in a draught of gall”

Nothing astonishes me more, when a little sickness clogs the wheels of life, than the thoughtless career we run, in the hour of health. “None saith, where is God, my Maker, that giveth songs in the night; who teacheth us more knowledge than the beasts of the field, and more understanding than the fowls of the air.” –

Give me, my Maker to remember Thee! Give me to act up the dignity of my nature! Give me to feel “another's woe”; and continue with me that dear-lov'd Friend that feels with mine!

The dignified consciousness of an honest man, and the well-grounded trust in approving Heaven are two most substantial foundations for happiness.—

**Several lines are illegible, but the letter finishes**

I have just had Bobbie inoculated in the small-pox, as they are in the neighborhood; he is yet, doing very well.

I could not have written a page to any mortal, except yourself. – I'll write you by Sunday's post.

Adieu! Good-night!

Sylvander

**We can only guess at the contents of the letter referred to by Burns in this next letter to Mrs Dunlop, but it was probably a barbed comment about his preoccupation with other matters causing her to feel neglected.**

**(219) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Mossgiel, 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1788

Madam,

The last paragraph of yours of the 30<sup>th</sup> February affected me most, so I shall begin my answer where you ended your letter. That I am often a sinner with any little wit I have, I do confess; but I have taxed my recollection to no purpose to find out when it was employed against you. I hate an ungenerous sarcasm, a great deal worse than I do the devil; at least, as Milton describes him; and though I may be rascally enough to be guilty of it myself, I cannot endure it in others. You, my honoured friend, who cannot appear in any light but that you are sure of being respectable – you can afford to pass by an occasion to display your wit, because you may depend for fame on your sense; or, if you choose to be silent, you know you can rely on the gratitude of many and the esteem of all: but God help us who are wits or witlings by profession, if we stand not for fame there, we sink unsupported!

I am highly flattered by the news you tell me of Coila. I may say to the faaair painter who does me so much honour, as Dr. Beattie says to Ross the poet, of his muse Scota, from which, by the way, I took the idea of Coila: ('Tis a poem of Beattie's in the Scottish dialect, which perhaps you have never seen.)

“Ye shake your head, but o’ my fegs,  
Ye’ve set auld Scota on her legs:  
Lang had she lien wi’ buffe (*for* beffs) and flegs,  
Bombaz’d and dizzie,  
Heer fiddle wanted strings and pegs,  
Waes me, poor hizzie!”

**The next letter to Captain Richard Brown is written in a light-hearted, nautical style, but Burns expresses his doubt that he will be a successful farmer**

**(220) Captain Richard Brown**

Mauchline, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1788

I have been out the country, my dear friend, and have not had an opportunity of writing till now, when I am afraid you will be gone out of the country too. I have been looking at farms; and after all perhaps I may settle in that character. I have got such a vicious bent to idleness, and have ever so little been a man of business, that it will take no ordinary effort to bring my mind properly in to the routine of business; but you will say – “A great effort is worthy you;” I say so to myself, and butter up my vanity with all the stimulating compliments I can think of. Men of grave, geometrical minds, the sons of “Which was to be demonstrated,” may cry up reason as much as they please; but I have always found an honest passion, or native instinct, the trustiest auxiliary in the warfare of this world. Reason almost always comes to me, like an unlucky wife to a poor devil of a husband – just in time enough to add her reproaches to his other grievances.

I found Jean – with her cargo well laid in; but unfortunately moor'd, almost at the mercy of wind and tide; I have towed her into convenient harbour where she may lie snug till she unload; and have taken the command myself – not ostensibly, but for a time, in secret. I am gratified by your kind enquiries after her; as after all, I may say with Othello —

“Excellent wretch!  
Perdition catch my soul but I do love thee!”

I go for Edinburgh on Monday, but will return in a week. I 'll send you the Directory on Weden; next, which I suppose you will find time enough. I got a letter from my Edinburgh correspondent, who tells me that he has not sent it you; I am very angry with him.

Prosperity and safe return attend you!

I am ever, my dear Sir, yours most sincerely,  
Robt Burns

**Although not one of the Bard's older friends, Robert Muir's friendship had become meaningful to Burns, and he was devastated when Muir died in 1788, aged 30.**

**( 221 ) Robert Muir**

Mossgiel, 7th March 1788.

Dear Sir,

I have partly changed my ideas, my dear friend, since I saw you.

I took old Glenconner with me to Mr. Miller's farm, and he was so pleased with it, that I have wrote an offer to Mr. Miller, which, if he accepts, I shall sit down a plain farmer, the happiest of lives when a Man can live by it.

In this case I shall not stay in Edinburgh above a week. I set out on Monday, and would have come by Kilmarnock; but there are several small sums owing me for my first edition about Galston and Newmilns, and I shall set off so early as to despatch my business and reach Glasgow by night. When I return, I shall devote a forenoon or two to make some kind of acknowledgment for all the kindness I owe your friendship. Now that I hope to settle with some credit and comfort at home, there was not any friendship or friendly correspondence that promised me more pleasure than yours; I hope I will not be disappointed.

I trust the spring will renew your shattered frame, and make your friends happy. You and I have often agreed that life is no great blessing on the whole. The close of life, indeed, to a reasoning age, is

Dark as was chaos, ere the infant sun  
Was roll'd together, or had tried his beams  
Athwart the gloom profound.

But an honest man has nothing to fear. If we lie down in the grave, the whole man a piece of broken machinery, to moulder with the clods of the valley, be it so; at least there is an end of pain, care, woes, and wants. If that part of us called mind does survive the apparent destruction of the man -- away with old-wife prejudices and tales. Every age and every nation has had a different set of stories; and as the many are always weak, of consequence they have often, perhaps always, been deceived. A man conscious of having acted an honest part among his fellow-creatures - even granting that he may have been the sport at times of passions and instincts - he goes to a great unknown Being, who could have no other end in giving him existence but to make him happy, who gave him those passions and instincts, and well knows their force.

These, my worthy friend, are my ideas; and I know they are not far different from yours. It becomes a man of sense to think for himself, particularly in a case where all men are equally interested, and where, indeed, all men are equally in the dark.

Adieu, my dear Sir; God send us a cheerful meeting!

R. B.

**Gavin Hamilton made a substantial offer of financial assistance to the Burns family, but Robert was afraid to take his offer.**

**(222) Gavin Hamilton**

Mossgiel, Friday Morn; 7<sup>th</sup> March 1788

Sir,

The language of refusal is to me the most difficult on earth, and you are the man of the world, excepting One of Right Honorable designation, to whom it gives me the greatest pain to hold such language. My brother has already got money, and shall want with nothing in my power to enable him to fulfil his engagement with you; but to be security on so large a scale even for a brother, is what I dare not do, except that I were in such circumstances of life as that the worst might happen could not greatly injure me. I never wrote a letter which gave me so much pain in my life, as I know the unhappy consequences; I shall incur the displeasure of a Gentleman for whom I have the highest respect, and to whom I am deeply obliged.

I am ever, Sir.

Your obliged and very humble servant,

Robt. Burns

**Burns had now returned to Edinburgh and was furious with William Creech.**

**(222b) Clarinda**

Wednesday Morning, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1788

Clarinda, will that envious night-cap hinder you from appearing at the window as I pass? “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning; fair as the sun, clear as the moon, terrible as an army with banners?”

Do not accuse me of fond folly for this line; you know I am a cool lover. I mean by these presents greeting, to let you to wit, that arch-rascal, Creech, has not done my business yesternight, which has put off my leaving town till Monday morning. Tomorrow at eleven, I meet with him for the last time; just the hour I should have met far more agreeable company.

You will tell me this evening, whether you cannot make our hour of meeting tomorrow one o’ clock. I have just now written Creech such a letter, that the very goose-feather in my hand shrunk back from the line, and seemed to say, “I exceedingly fear and quake!” I am forming ideal schemes of vengeance. O for a little of my will on him! I just wished he loved as I do – as glorious an object as Clarinda – & that he were doomed. Adieu, & think on.

Sylvander

**( 223 ) Margaret Chalmers.**

Edinburgh, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1788.

I know, my ever dear friend, that you will be pleased with the news when I tell you I have at last taken a lease of a farm.

Yesternight I completed a bargain with Mr. Miller, of Dalswinton, for the farm of Ellisland, on the banks of the Nith, between five and six miles above Dumfries. I begin at Whit-Sunday to build a house, drive lime, &c., and Heaven be my help! for it will take a strong effort to bring my mind into the routine of business.

I have discharged all the army of my former pursuits, fancies, and pleasures; a motley host! and have literally and strictly retained only the ideas of a few friends, which I have incorporated into a life-guard. I trust in Dr. Johnson's observation, "Where much is attempted, something is done." Firmness, both in sufferance and exertion, is a character I would wish to be thought to possess: and have always despised the whining yelp of complaint, and the cowardly, feeble resolve.

Poor Miss Kennedy is ailing a good deal this winter, and begged me to remember her to you the first time I wrote to you. Surely woman, amiable woman, is often made in vain. Too delicately formed for the rougher pursuits of ambition; too noble for the dirt of avarice, and even too gentle for the rage of pleasure; formed, indeed, for, and highly susceptible of enjoyment and rapture; but that enjoyment, alas! almost wholly at the mercy of the caprice, malevolence, stupidity, or wickedness of an animal at all times comparatively unfeeling, and often brutal.

R.B.

**(224) Clarinda**

Friday, Nine o' clock Night, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1788

I am just come in and have read your letter. The first thing I did, was to thank the Divine Disposer of events, that he has had such happiness in store for me as the connexion I have with you. Life, my dear Clarinda, is a weary, barren path; and woe be to him or her that ventures on it alone! For me, I have my dearest partner of my soul; Clarinda and I will out our pilgrimage together. Wherever I am, I shall constantly let her know how I go on, what I observe in the world around me, and what adventures I meet with. Will it please you, my love, to get, every week, or at least, every fortnight, a packet, two or three sheets, full of remarks, nonsense, news, rhymes, and old songs?

Will you open, with satisfaction and delight, a letter from a man who loves you, who has loved you, and who will love you till death, and forever? Oh Clarinda! what do I owe to Heaven for blessing me with such a piece of exalted excellence as you! I call over your idea, as a miser counts over his treasure! Tell me, were you studious to please me last night? I am sure you did it to transport. How rich am I to have such a treasure as you! You know me; you know how to make me happy, and you do it most effectually. God bless you with

“Long life, long youth, long pleasure, and a friend!”

Tomorrow night, according to your own direction, I shall watch the window; 'tis the star that guides me to paradise. The great relish to all is, that Honour, that Innocence, that Religion, are the witnesses and guarantees of our happiness. “The Lord God knoweth, ” & perhaps, “Israel he shall know,” my love and your merit. Adieu, Clarinda! I am going to remember you in my prayers.

Sylvander

**Again to Capt Richard Brown explaining to him how he was furious with frustration at his meeting with Creech**

**(228) Capt. Richard Brown**

Glasgow, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1788

I am monstrously to blame, my dear Sir, in not writing ou, and sending you the Directory. I have been getting my tack extended as I have taken a farm and have been racking shop accounts with Mr Creech; which, both together, with watching, fatigue, and a load of Care almost too heavy for my shoulders, have in some degree actually fever'd me. I really forgot the directory yesterday, which vexes me, but I was convul'd with rage a good part of the day.

I am to thank you very much for the ingenious friendly, indeed elegant epistle from your friend Mr Crawford. I will certainly write him, but not now: this is only a card to

you, as I am posting to my farm in Dumfries-shire, where many perplexing arrangements await me.

I am vexed about the Directory; but my dear Sir, forgive me; these eight days I have been positively crazed.

My compliments to Mrs Brown. I'll write you to Grenada.

I am ever, my dearest Friend, yours

Robt Burns

**The Bard now writes directly to Creech to try to arrange payment.**

**(231) William Creech**

Mauchline, 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1788

Sir,

As I am seriously set for my farming operations, I shall need that sum your kindness procured for me for my Copyright. I have sent the line to Mr John Sommerville, a particular friend of mine, who will call on you; but as I do not need the sum, at least I can make a shift without it till then, any time between now and the first of May, as it may suit your convenience to pay it, will do for me.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your obliged, humble servant

Robt Burns

**William Dunbar was one of the Bard's Edinburgh friends. Involved in Lodge Kilwinning as well as the Crochallan Fencibles, the two must have spent many convivial hours together. Burns is now reconciling himself to life as a farmer, but with little apparent enthusiasm.**

**( 236 ) William Dunbar**

Mauchline, 7th April 1788.

I have not delayed so long to write to you, my much respected Friend, because I thought no farther of my promise. I have long since given up that kind of formal correspondence, where one sits down irksomely to write a letter, because we think we are duty bound so to do.

I have been roving over the Country, as the farm I have taken is forty miles from this place, hiring servants and preparing matters; but most of all, I am earnestly busy to bring about a revolution in my own mind.

As, till within these eighteen months, I never was the wealthy master of ten guineas, my knowledge of business is to learn. Add to this, my late scenes of idleness and dissipation have enervated my mind to an alarming degree. Skill in the sober Science of Life is my most serious, and hourly study. I have dropt all conversation and all reading (prose reading) but what tends in some way or other to my serious aim.

Except one worthy young fellow I have not a single Correspondent in Edinburgh. You have indeed kindly made me an offer of that kind which gives me the highest pleasure. The world of Wits, and Gens comme-il-faut, which I lately left, and in which I never again will intimately mix, from that Port, Sir, I expect your gazette, what the beaux Esprits are saying, what they are doing, and what they are singing. Any sober intelligence from my sequestered life; any droll Original; any passing remark, important forsooth because it is mine; any little Poetic effort, however embryotic; these my dear Sir, are all you have to expect from me. When I talk of Poetic efforts, I must have it always understood that I appeal from your wit and taste to your friendship and good nature. The first would be my favourite tribunal where I defied Censure; but the last, where I declined Justice.

I have scarcely made a single Distic since I saw you. When I meet with an old Scots air that has any facetious idea in its Name, I have a peculiar pleasure in following out that idea for a verse or two.

I trust this will find you in better health than I did the last time I called for you. A few lines from you, directed to me, at Mauchline, were it but to let me know how you are, will settle my mind a good deal. Now, never shun the idea of writing me

because, perhaps, you may be out of humour or spirits. I could give you a hundred good consequences attending a dull letter; one, for example, and the remaining ninety-nine some other time -- it will always serve to keep in countenance, my much

respected Sir, your obliged friend and humble servant

Robt Burns

**Burns is quite tickled by Jean's propensity to bear twins and tells Smith how he is looking forward to fathering twelve pairs.**

**( 237 ) James Smith**

Mauchline, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1788.

Beware of your Strasburg, my good Sir! Look on this as the opening of a correspondence, like the opening of a twenty-four gun battery!

There is no understanding a man properly, without knowing something of his previous ideas; that is to say, if the Man has any ideas; for I know many who, in the Animal-muster, pass for Men, that are the scanty masters of only one idea on any given subject, and by far the greatest part of your acquaintances and mine can barely boast of Ideas, 1.25, 1.5, 1.75, or some such fractional matter, so to let you a little into the secrets of my Pericranium, there is, you must know, a certain clean-limbed, handsome, bewitching young hussy of your acquaintance, to whom I have lately and privately given a matrimonial title to my Corpus.

Bode a robe and wear it,

Bode a pock and bear it,

says the wise old Scots Adage! I hate to presage ill-luck; and as my girl in some late random trials has been *doubly* kinder to me than even the best of women usually are to their Partners of our Sex, in similar circumstances, I reckon on twelve times a brace of children against I celebrate my twelfth wedding-day: these

twenty-four will give me twenty-four Gossipings, twenty-four christenings (I mean one equal to two), and I hope, by the blessing of the God of my fathers, to make them twenty-four dutiful children to their Parents, twenty-four useful members of society, and twenty-four approved servants of their God; not to mention twenty four times a hundred and eighty two Mason-meetings on the business that I hope to have with their Mother into the bargain.

"Light's heartsome," quo' the wife when she was stealing sheep. You see what a lamp I have hung up to lighten your paths, when you are idle enough to explore the combinations and relations of my ideas. 'Tis now as plain as a pike-staff, why a twenty-four gun battery was a Metaphor I could readily employ.

Now for business. I intend to present Mrs. Burns with a printed shawl, an article of which I dare say you have variety: 'tis my first present to her since I have *irrevocably* called her mine, and I have a kind of whimsical wish to get her the first said present from an old and much-valued friend of hers and mine, a trusty Trojan, on whose friendship I count myself possessed of as a life-rent lease. Connel goes to Edinburgh next week, it will oblige me unspeakably if you will transmit by him the shawl, or you may send it by [*some words missing*] in Ronald's quarters which I believe will be the best. The quality, let it be the best; the Pattern I leave to your taste. The money I'll pay to your sister, or transmit to any Correspondent of yours in Edinburgh or Glasgow.

Look on this letter as a "beginning of sorrows;" I will write you till your eyes ache with reading nonsense.

Mrs. Burns ('tis only her private designation) begs her best Compliments to you.

I am, my dear Sir, ever most truly yours

Robt Burns

**Although famed throughout the country as a poet, Robert Burns remained unconvinced that his current good fortune would last.**

**( 238 ) Frances Anna Dunlop**

Mauchline, 28th April 1788.

Madam,

Your powers of reprehension must be great indeed, as I assure you they make my heart ache with penitential pangs, even though I was really not guilty. As I commence Farmer at Whitsunday, you will easily guess I must be pretty throng; but that is not all. As I got the offer of the Excise business without solicitation, and as it costs me only six weeks attendance for instructions, to entitle me to a commission - which commission lies by me, and at any future period, on my simple petition, can be resumed -- I thought five-and-thirty pounds a-year was no bad dernier ressort for a poor poet, if Fortune in her jade tricks should kick him down from the little eminence to which she has lately helped him up.

For this reason, I am at present attending these instructions, to have them completed before Whitsunday. Still, Madam, I prepared with the sincerest pleasure to meet you at the Mount, and came to my brother's on Saturday night, to set out on Sunday; but for some nights preceding I had slept in an apartment, where the force of the winds and rains was only mitigated by being sifted through numberless apertures in the windows, walls, etc. In consequence I was on Sunday, Monday, and part of Tuesday, unable to stir out of bed, with all the miserable effects of a violent cold.

You see, Madam, the truth of the French maxim, 'le vrai n'est pas toujours le vraisemblable'. Your last was so full of expostulation, and was something so like the language of an offended friend, that I began to tremble for a Correspondence, which I had with grateful pleasure set down as one of the greatest enjoyments of my future life. You see the consequence of all this. I like to sit down when I write to a *Friend indeed*, and give way to the unpremeditated miscellaneous effusions of my heart; instead of which, my unlucky Cold has forced me on a drawling epistle of dull apologies that can serve no positive good end, but negatively I trust, will

prevent that excommunication from the much esteemed privileges of your friendship, which, in appearance I so justly deserved; & which I dread infinitely more than all the Anathemas of the Vatican, or the equally infallible General Assembly.

As I hold this no letter, but what the Quarrel-Brokers, alias the Lawyers, call A Reply, I shall trouble you with a letter by our Edinburgh Carrier, who I believe sets out next week.

I shall be going & coming frequently to Ayrshire thro' the Summer; and if I am not so happy as meet you at Dunlop, I shall be in Edinburgh some time before Midsummer, when if the irresistible hand of Predestination do not interpose, I shall see you at Haddington. Your books have delighted me; Virgil, Dryden, and Tasso were all equally strangers to me; but of this more at large in my next.

I have the honor to be, Madam  
your much indebted humble servant  
Robt Burns

**Samuel Brown was the rascally brother of the Bard's mother. Like Burns, he had suffered the indignity of being made to sit before the pulpit to be chastised publicly for his sexual misconduct. The reference by Burns to smuggling is another way of describing his own illicit affair with Jean Armour that he is now contemplating legalizing through marriage.**

**( 240 ) Samuel Brown.**

Mossgiel, 4th May 1788.

Dear Uncle,

This, I hope, will find you and your conjugal yoke-fellow in your good old way. I am impatient to know if the Ailsa fowling be commenced for this season yet, as I want three or four stones of feathers, and I hope you will bespeak them for me.

It would be a vain attempt for me to enumerate the various transactions I have been engaged in since I saw you last; but this know - I engaged in a smuggling trade, and God knows if ever any poor man ever experienced better returns, two for one: but as freight and delivery have turned out so D--md dear, I am thinking of taking out a License and beginning in a Fair trade.

I have taken a farm, on the borders of the Nith, and in imitation of the old Patriarchs get Men servants and Maid servants – Flocks and herds and beget sons and daughters.

Your Obedient Nephew

Robert Burns

**James Johnson was responsible for the publication of the *Scots Musical Museum*, a collection of old Scots songs gathered over the years. Burns was very enthusiastic about this project and gave Johnson some assistance in its preparation as well as contributing many pieces of his own work. They became very good friends and Burns corresponded with Johnson for many years. Johnson was one of the last people to receive a letter from the Bard before his death in 1796.**

**(242) James Johnson**

Mauchline, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1788

My dear Sir,

I am really uneasy about that money which Mr Creech owes me per the Note in your hand, and I want it much at present as I am engaging in business pretty deeply for both myself & my brother. A hundred guineas can be but a trifling affair to him, and 'tis a matter of serious importance to me. Tomorrow I begin my operations as a farmer, and God speed the Plough!

I am so enamoured with a certain girl's prolific twin-bearing merit, that I have given her a *legal* title to the best blood in my body; and so farewell Rakery! To be serious, my worthy friend; I found I had a long and much lov'd fellow-creatures happiness or misery among my hands' and tho' Pride & seeming Justice were murderous King's Advocates on the one side, yet Humanity, Generosity & forgiveness were such powerful such irresistible Counsel on the other side, that a Jury of old Endearments & new attachments brought in a unanimous verdict – *NOT GUILTY!* And the Panel. be it known unto all whom it concerns, is installed & instated into all the Rights, Priviledges, Immunities, Franchises, Service & paraphernalia that is present do, or in any time coming may belong to the Name, title & Designation (*Four or five words missing*) Present my best Compliments (*three or four words missing*) and please let me hear from you by return of Carrier.  
–

I am, my dear sir, yours sincerely  
Robt Burns

**Not only is Burns happy to tell his friends about Jean, but he now declares that she has brought stability into his life.**

**(243) Robert Ainslie**

Mauchline, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1788

My dear Friend,

I am two letters in your debt, but I have been from home & horridly busy, laying and preparing for that farming business; over & above the plague of my Excise Instructions which this week will finish.

As I flatter my wishes that I foresee many future years' Correspondence between us, 'tis foolish to talk of excusing dull epistles; a dull letter may be a very kind one.

I have the pleasure to tell you that I have been extremely fortunate in all my buyings and bargainings hitherto; Mrs Burns not excepted, which title I now avow to the World. I am truly pleased with this last affair; it has indeed added to my anxieties for Futurity but it has given a stability to my mind & resolutions, unknown before; & the poor girl has the most sacred enthusiasm of attachment to me, & has not a wish but to gratify my every idea of her deportment.

I am interrupted.

Farewel my dear Sir!

Robt Burns

**During the period when Burns was considering emigrating to Jamaica with Mary Campbell, and also when he was being pursued by the Armour family with regard to their daughter's pregnancy, he still found time to get another girl, May Cameron, pregnant. This sounds fairly dreadful, but such situations were common-place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Bard had paid his dues in respect of his baby. The truth of the situation was that he may not have been the father but he paid up anyway. Unfortunately for Burns, this was not the end of the episode, for May Cameron became destitute, and found herself 'in trouble' again. Although this time no fault of the Bard, she wrote him a begging letter pleading for some cash to help her out. Burns wrote to his friend, Robert Ainslie, asking him to give her a small donation but also asking him to ensure he retrieved a letter Burns had written to May.**

**(246) Robert Ainslie**

Dumfries, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1788

My Dear Friend,

My first welcome to this place was the inclosed letter. I am very sorry for it, but what is done is done. I pay you no compliment when I say that except my old friend Smith there is not any person in the world I would trust so far. Please call at the James Hog mentioned, and send for the wench and give her ten or twelve shillings, but don't for Heaven's sake meddle with her as a *Piece*. I insist on this, on your honor; and advise out to some country friends. You may perhaps not like the business, but I just tax your friendship thus far. Call for God's sake, lest the poor soul be starving. Ask her for a letter I wrote her just now, by way of token – it is unsigned. Write me after the meeting.

Robt Burns

**Although extremely busy in the preparation of his his new home at Ellisland, Burns found time to write a stream of letters, this one to Mrs Dunlop.**

**(247) Frances Anna Dunlop**

Ellisland, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1788

“Where'er I roam, whatever realms I see,  
“My heart, untravell'd, fondly turns to thee;  
“Still to my Friend it turns with ceaseless pain,  
“And drags at each remove a lenghten'd chain.”

This is the second day, my honored Friend, that I have been on my farm. A solitary inmate of an old, smoky 'SPENCE'; far from every object I love or by whom I am belov'd, nor any acquaintance older than yesterday except Jenny Geddes, the old mare I ride on; while uncouth Cares and novel Plans hourly insult my aukward Ignorance & bashful Inexperience. There is a foggy Atmosphere native to my soul in the hour of care, consequently the dreary Objects seem larger than the life. Extreme Sensibility, irritated and prejudiced on the gloomy side by a series of Misfortunes & Disappointments at that period of my existencewhen the soul is

laying in her cargoe of ideas for the voyage of Life, is, I believe the principal cause of this unhappy frame of mind.

“The valiant, in himself, what can he suffer?  
“Or what need he regards his *single* woes?  
“But when, alas, he multiplies himself  
“To dearer Selves, to the lov’d, tender Fair,  
“To those whose bliss, whose being hangs upon him,  
“To helpless children! Then, O then he feels  
“The point of misery festering in his heart,  
“And weakly weeps his fortune like a coward!”

To excuse my long quotation, I must inform you, Madam, that your surname is just; I am indeed A HUSBAND. This information I from my inmost soul wished to give you but till you yourself should mention it, I did not know how to do it I found a once much-loved and still much-loved Female, literally & truly cast out to the mercy of the naked elements, but as I enabled her to *purchase* a shelter; and there is no sporting with creature’s happiness or misery. The most placid good-nature & sweetness of disposition; a warm heart, gratefully devoted with its powers to love one; vigorous health & sprightly cheerfulness, set off to the best advantage by a more than common handsome figure; these, I think, in a woman, may make a tolerable good wife, though she would never have read a page but the Scriptures of the Old & New Testament, nor have “danced in a brighter Assembly than a Penny-pay Wedding.

I have lately been at Dunlop, where, among other good company I met my old Acquaintance, Coila. I am highly pleased with her. The expression in the face; the adjustment of her head, particularly her own holly wreath; the tout ensemble of her attitude & air, especially her holding the wreath she is about to bestow are in my opinion admirably executed. Some of your family deserve to be lampoon’d for their prejudices against her. A few things I ventur’d to hint at as rather imperfect, all which I saw, in a second call I made at Dunlop on Tuesday last, are on a fair way

to emulating the best finished parts of the work. On the whole, it is such a high gratification to my vanity as none but an Author can have any idea of. Please keep my old Direction at Mauchline, as I will be there pretty often.

I have the honor to be, Madam, your ever grateful humble servant,  
Robt Burns

( 249 ) Robert Ainslie

Ellisland, June 1788

I have lately been much mortified with contemplating an unlucky imperfection in the very framing and construction of my soul; namely, a blundering inaccuracy of her olfactory organs in hitting the scent of craft or design in my fellow-creatures. I do not mean any compliment to my ingenuousness, or to hint that the defect is in consequence of the unsuspecting simplicity of conscious truth and honour: I take it to be, in some way or other, an imperfection in the mental sight; or, metaphor apart, some modification of dullness. In two or three instances lately, I have been most shamefully out.

I have all along, hitherto, in the warfare of life, been bred to arms among the light horse, the piquet-guards of fancy; a kind of hussars and Highlanders of the *Brain*; but I am firmly resolved to sell out of these giddy battalions, who have no ideas of a battle but fighting the foe, or of a siege but storming the town. Cost what it will, I am determined to buy in among the grave squadrons of heavy-armed thought, or the artillery corps of plodding contrivance.

You will make a noble fellow if once you were married. I make no reservation of your being *well-married*; you have so much sense, and knowledge of human nature, that though you may not realise perhaps the ideas of romance, yet you will never be *ill-married*.

Were it not for the terrors of my ticklish situation respecting provision for a family of children, I am decidedly of opinion that the step I have taken is vastly for my happiness. As it is, I look to the Excise scheme as a certainty of maintenance; a maintenance! - luxury to what neither Mrs. Burns or I were born to.

Adieu.

**Nancy McLehose passed on some tittle-tattle about Willie Nicol to Burns that he mentioned in conversation to a third party. This gossip got to the ears of Dr Adams, the Rector of Edinburgh High School where Nicol taught and Burns was pressed into revealing his source of information.**

**(252) Robert Ainslie**

Ellisland, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1788

I received your last, my dear friend, but I write you just now on a very vexatious business.

I don't know if ever I told you some very bad reports that Mrs McLehose once told me of Mr Nicol. I had mentioned the affair to Mr Cruikshank, in the course of conversation about our common friend, that a lady had said so & so, which I suspected had originated from some malevolence of Dr Adams. He had mentioned this story to Mr Nicol cursorily, & there it rested, till now, a prosecution has commenced between Dr A-- & Mr N--, & Mr N— has press'd me over & over to give up the lady's name. I have refused this; & last post Mr N— acquaints me, but in very good natured terms, that if I persist in my refusal, I am to served with a summons to compear & declare the fact.

Heaven knows how I should proceed! I have this moment wrote Mrs Mc---se telling her that I have informed you of the affair; & I shall write Mr Nicol by Tuesday's post that I will not give up my female friend till farther consideration; but that I have acquainted you with the business & the name; & that I have desired you to wait on

him, which I intreat, my dear Sir, you will do; & give up the name or not, as Your and Mrs Mc---se's prudence shall suggest.

I am vexed to the very heart that Mr Ainslie has disappointed my brother; I grasp at your kind offer, & wish to enquire for a place among the Saddler's shops. If I can get him into a first rate shop, I will bind him for a year or two, I almost do not care on what terms. He is about eighteen; really very clever; & in what work he has seen, not a despicable tradesman, but I will have him a first rate hand if possible.

Why trouble yourself about Hamilton? Let me pay the expence, for I don't know where he is to be found. Dr Blacklock where he lodged, which caused me to meet with him; & Signor Dasti, Junr, one of his greatest cronies, are the only intelligencers to whom I can refer you.

Adieu! I am ever most cordially yours

Robt Burns

**Burns now writes to Mrs Dunlop telling her of his marriage to Jean and relates to her the whole sad episode regarding his relationship with Jean's parents. It is interesting to note that he might fancy another wife but accepts that Jean is as good as he is going to get.**

**(254) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Mauchline, 17<sup>th</sup> July, 1788

My much honored Friend,

Yours of the 24<sup>th</sup> June is before me. I found it, as well as another valued friend – MY WIFE – waiting to welcome me to Ayr-shire; I met both with sincerest pleasure.

When I write you, Madam, I do not sit down to answer every paragraph of yours, by echoing every sentiment – like, the faithful Commons of Great Britain in parliament assembled answering a speech from the best of Kings! I just write in the fullness of heart, & may perhaps be guilty of neglecting some of your kind enquiries – but not from your very odd reason that I do not read your letters. All your epistles, for several months, have cost me nothing – except a deep-felt sentiment of respectful veneration, or a swelling throb of native Gratitude.

Mrs Burns, Madam, is the identical woman who was the mother of twice twins to me in seventeen months. When she first found herself – “As women wish to be who love their lords,” as I lov’d her near to distraction, I took some previous steps to a private marriage. Her Parents got the hint; & in detestation of my guilt of being a poor devil, not only forbade me her company & their house, but on my rumored West Indian voyage, got a warrant to incarcerate me in jail till I should find security in my about-to-be Paternal relation. You know my lucky reverse of fortune. On my eclatant return to Mauchline, I was made very welcome to visit my girl. The usual consequences began to betray her; & I was at time laid up a cripple in Edinburgh, she was turned, literally turned out of doors, & I wrote to a friend to shelter her, till my return. I was not under the least verbal obligation to her, but her happiness or misery, were in my hands, and who could trifle with such a deposit? To the least temptation to Jealousy or Infidelity, I am an equal stranger. My preservative from the first, is the most thorough consciousness of her sentiments of honor, and her attachment to me; my antidote against the last, is my long & deep-rooted affection for her. – In housewife matters, in aptness to learn & activity to execute she is eminently mistress; & during my absence to Nithsdale, she is regularly & constantly apprentice to my Mother & Sisters in their dairy & other rural business. – In short, I can easily *fancy* a more agreeable companion for my journey of Life, but, upon my honor, I have never *seen* the individual Instance! You are right that a bachelor state would have ensured me more friends; but from a cause you will easily guess, conscious Peace in the enjoyment of my own mind, & unmistrusting Confidence in approaching my God, would seldom have been of the number. The

Muses must not be offended when I tell them, the concerns of my wife & my family will, in my mind, always take the Pas; but I assure them, their Ladyships shall ever come next in place. Should my farm, which it possibly may, turn out a ruinous bargain, I have a certainty of employment, poor as it may *comparatively* be, whose emoluments are luxury to anything my first twenty-five years of Life could promise. I don't know if ever I mentioned to you my most favorite Quotation –

“On Reason build Resolve  
That column of true majesty in Man!”

Circumstanced as I am, I could never have got a female partner for life who could have entered into my favorite studies, relished my favorite Authors, &c. without entailing on me at the same time, expensive living, fantastic caprice, apish affection, with the other blessed, Boarding-school acquirements which (*pardonnez moi, Madame!*) are some times to be found among females of the upper ranks, but almost universally pervade the Misses of the Would-be-gentry. – In this kind of literary, sentimental correspondence, FRIENDSHIP must be my social channel; at the same time I declare to God, You are almost the (only) friend of this Kind I have. So far from tiring of your correspondence, Madam, it would be one of the greatest misfortunes that could befall me, were I to lose it. I really tremble at the idea that days & years are making you older, and that the all-conquering hand of Time may deprive me of a FRIEND whose WORTH I shall ever gratefully revere, & whose loss (should I be so unfortunate) I shall ever inconsolably deplore.

I like your way in your Church-yard lucubrations. Thoughts that are the spontaneous result of accidental situations, either respecting health, place, or company, have often a strength, & always an Originality, that would be in vain to look for in faded circumstances and studied paragraphs. For me, I have often thought of keeping a letter, *in progression*, by me, to send you when the sheet was wrote out. Now I talk of sheets, I must tell you, my reason for writing to you on paper of this kind is my pruriency of writing to you at LARGE. A page of Post is on

such a dissocial narrow-minded scale, that I cannot abide it; & double letters, at least in my miscellaneous, reverie manner, are a monstrous tax, in a close Correspondence.

I have the honor to be, Madam,  
Your obliged & most obedient humble servant,  
Robt Burns

**Burns met Peter Hill when Hill was employed by William Creech. Hill left Creech's employment a short time after that and Burns used his services to add to his collection of books.**

**(255) Peter Hill**

Mauchline, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1788

You injured me, my dear Sir, in your construction of the cause of my Silence. From Ellisland in Nithsdale to Mauchline in Kyle, is forty & five miles there. A house a building & farm inclosures & improvements to tend; here, a new – not so much indeed a *new* as a *young* wife. Good God, Sir, could my dearest BROTHER expect a regular correspondence from me! I who am busied with the sacred Pen of Nature, in the mystic Volume of Creation, can I dishonor my hand with a dirty goose feather, on a parcel of mash'd old rags? I who am "Called as was Aaron" to offer in the Sanctum Sanctorium, not indeed the the mysterious bloody types of future Murder, but the thrice hallowed Quintessences of future Existence; can I -- but I have apologized enough; I am certain that You, my liberal-minded & much-respected Friend, would have acquitted me, tho' I had obeyed to the very letter that famous Statute among the irrevocable Decrees of the Medes and Persians for forty days, of either god or man, sae *THEE, O Queen, only* –

I am highly obliged to you, my dearest Sir, for your kind, your elegant compliments on my becoming one of that most respectable, that truly venerable Corps; they who are, without a metaphor, the Fathers of Posterity, the Benefactors of all coming Generations, the Editors of Spiritual Nature, & the Authors of Immortal Being. Now that I am "one of you," I shall humbly but fervently endeavour be a conspicuous Member. Now it is "called Today." With my powers & me; but the time fast approacheth when beholding the debilitated victim of all-subduing Time, they shall exclaim, "How are the Might fallen, & the weapons of war perished!"

Your book came safe, & I am going to trouble you with future Commissions. I call it troubling you, because I want only, Books; the cheapest way, the best; so you may have to hunt for them in the evening Auctions. I want Smollet's works, for the sake of his incomparable humor. I have already Roderick Random & Humphrey Clinker. Peregrine Pickle, Lancelot Greaves & Ferdinand Count Fathom, I still want; but as I said, the veriest ordinary copies will serve me. I am nice only in the appearance of my Poets. I forget the price of Cowper's Poems, but I believe I must have them. I saw the other day, proposals for a Publication entitled "Banke's new & complete Christian's family bible," Printed for C. Cooke, Paternoster row, London. He promises to at least give in the Work, I think it three hundred & odd Engravings, to which he has put the Names of the first Artists in London. You will know the character of the Performance, as some Numbers of it are published; & if it is really what it pretends to be, set me down as a Subscriber, & send me the Published Numbers.

Let me hear from you, your first leisure minute, & trust me, you shall, in future, have no reason to complain of my Silence. The dazzling perplexity of Novelty will dissipate, & leave me to pursue my course in the quiet Path of methodical Routine.

I might go on to fill up the Page, but I dare say you are already sufficiently tired of,

My dear Sir, yours sincerely,

Robt Burns

**Little is known of the next recipient other than he appears to have been a Merchant who lived in Glasgow. Although he was obviously no great friend, Burns took time in the midst of one of the most turbulent years of his life to write to him.**

**(256) George Lockhart**

Mauchline, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1788

My Dear Sir,

I am just going for Nithsdale, else I would certainly have transcribed some of my rhyming things for you. The Miss Baillies I have seen in Edinburgh. "Fair & lovely are Thy Works, Lord God Almighty! Who would not praise Thee for these Thy Gifts in Thy goodness to the sons of men!" It needed not your fine taste to admire them. I declare, one day I had the honor of dining at Mr Baillie's, I was almost in the predicament of the Children of Israel, when they could not look on Mose's face for the glory that shone in it when he descended from mount Horeb.

I did once write a Poetic address from the falls of Bruar to his Grace of Athole, when I was in the Highlands. When you return to Scotland let me know, & I will send you such of my pieces as please myself best.

I return to Mauchline in about ten days.

My Compliments to Mr Purden.—  
I am in truth, but at present in haste  
Yours sincerely  
Robt Burns

**No matter how hard Burns toiled on his farm, he still found time to compose poems and songs. He now writes to James Johnson enclosing another batch of his compositions.**

**(258) James Johnson**

Ellisland, 28<sup>th</sup> July 1788

My dear Sir,

I send you here another cargo of Songs. I long to know whether you are begun yet, & how you come on. Pray, did that cheese I sent to Mr Clarke & by your care, come to hand?

I still have a good number of Dr Blacklock's Songs among my hands, but they take sad hacking and hewing, I sent you some weeks ago another parcel of Songs, but I have not heard if you have received them. I am in hopes that I shall pick up some fine tunes from among the Collection of Highland airs which I got from you at Edinburgh. I have had an able Fiddler two days already on it, & I expect him every day for another review of it. I have got one most beautiful air out of it, that sings to the measure of Lochaber. I shall try to give it my very best words.

How does your Father do; and my worthy brother Bard, Mr Barclay? Give them my very best Compliments.

I have troubled you with some letters which you will please put into the Penny-post Office.

Have you never a fair Goddess that leads you a wild-goose chase of amorous devotion? Let me know a few of her qualities, such as whether she be rather, black, or fair; plump, or thin; short, or tall; &c, chuse your air, and I shall task my Muse to celebrate her.

Adieu!

Robt Burns

**This importance of this letter is that it was written on the day that Mauchline Kirk Session officially recognised that Robert Burns and Jean Armour were**

**indeed man and wife. Robert McIndoe was a silk merchant with premises in Glasgow and Burns wanted Jean to have new clothes.**

**(262) Robert McIndoe**

Mauchline, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1788

My Dear Sir,

I am vexed for nothing more that I have not been at Glasgow, than not meeting with you. I have seldom found my Friend Andrew McCulloch wrong in his ideas of Mankind; but respecting your Worship, he was true as Holy Writ. This is the night of our Fair, & I, as you will see, cannot keep well *in a line*; but if you will send me by the bearer, John Ronald Carrier, between Glasgow and Mauchline, fifteen yards of black silk, the same kind of which I bought a gown & petticoat from you formerly, Lutestring I think its name, I shall send you the money & a more coherent letter, when he goes again to your good town. To be brief, send me fifteen yards black lutestring silk, such as they use to make gowns & petticoats of, & I shall chuse some sober morning before breakfast, & write you a sober answer, with the sober sum which will then be due you from,

Dear Sir, fu' or fasting, yours sincerely

Robt Burns

**Burns had by now realized that the farm alone would not satisfy his financial requirements and writes to Robert Graham to explain his predicament. Writing this letter was not a happy task for Burns as his circumstances forced him to grovel to Graham.**

**(269) Robert Graham of Fintry**

Ellisland near Dumfries September 10<sup>th</sup> 1788

Sir,

The scrapes and premunires into which our indiscretions and follies, in the ordinary constitution of things, often bring us, are bad enough; but it is peculiarly hard that a man's virtues should involve him in disquiet, and the very goodness of his heart cause the persecution of his peace. You, Sir, have patronized and befriended me, not by barren compliments which merely feed my vaaniity, or little marks of notice which perhaps only encumbered me more in the awkwardness of my native rusticity, but by being my persevering Friend in real life; and now, as if your continued Benevolence had given me a prescriptive right, I am going again to trouble you with my importunities.

Your Honorable Board, sometime ago, gave me my Excise Commission; which I regard as my sheet anchor in life. My farm, now that I have tried it a little, tho' I think it will in time be a saving bargain, yet does by no means promise to be such a Pennyworth as I was taught to expect. It is in the last stage of worn out poverty, and will take some time before it pay the rent. I might have had Cash to supply the deficiencies of these hungry years, but I have a younger brother who is supporting my aged mother, another still much younger brother, and three sisters, on a farm in Ayr-shire; and it took all my surplus over what I thought necessary for my farming capital, to save, not only the very existence of that fireside, family-circle from impending destruction. This was done before I took the farm; and rather than abstract money from my brother, a circumstance which would ruin him, I will esign he farm and enter immediately into the service of your HONOURS. But I am embarked now on the farm; I have commenced married man; and I am determined to stand by my Lease, till resistless Necessity compel me to quit my ground.

There is one way by which I might be enabled to extricate myself fom this embarrassment, a scheme which I am sure is in your power to effectuate. I live here, Sir, in the very centre of a country Excise Division; the present Officer lately lived on a farm which he rented in my nearest neighbourhood; and as the gentleman, owing to some legacies, is really quite opulent, a removal could do him no harm of injury; and on a month's warning, to give me a little time to lok over my own Instructions, I would not be afraid to enter on business. I do not know the name of his Division, as I have not yet got acquainted with any of Dumfries Excise

People; but his own name is Leonard Smith. It would suit me to enter on it, beginning of next Summer; but I shall be in Edinburgh to wait upon you about the affair, sometime in the ensuing winter.

When I think how and on what I have written to you, Sir, I shudder at my own Hardiesse. Forgive me ,Sir! I have told you my situation. If anything less could possibly have done, I would not have asked so much.

If I were in the Service, it would likewise favour my Poetical schemes. I am thinking of something, in the rural way of the Drama-kind. Originality of character is, I think, the most striking beauty in that Species of Composition, and my wanderings in the way of my business would be vastly favourable to my picking up original traits of Human nature.

I again, Sir, earnestly beg your forgiveness for this letter. I have done violence to my own feelings in writing it.

“If I in aught have gone amiss,  
Impute it not”!

My thoughts on this business, as usual with me when my mind is burdened, vented themselves, in the inclosed verses, which I have taken the liberty to inscribe to you.

You, Sir, have the power to bless; but the only claim I have to your friendly Offices, is my having already been the object of your goodness, which indeed looks like producing my debt instead of my discharge.

I am sure I go on to Scripture-grounds in this affair; for, I “ask in faith, nothing doubting; and for the true Scripture-reason too. Because I have the fullest conviction that, “my Benefactor is good.”

I have the honor to be Sir, your deeply indebted humble servant

Robt Burns

**Burns wrote few letters to his wife, which is hardly surprising as he had every opportunity to communicate with her on a daily basis. This was written when he was busy setting up their new home at Ellisland while Jean remained in Mauchline.**

**(270) Jean Armour Burns**

Ellisland, Friday 12<sup>th</sup> September 1788

My dear Love,

I received your kind letter with a pleasure which no letter but one from you could have given me. I dreamed of you the whole night last, but alas! I fear it will be three weeks yet, ere I can hope for the happiness of seeing you. My harvest is going on. I have some to cut down still, but I put in two stacks today, so I am as tired as a dog

You might get one of Gilbert's sweet milk cheeses, & send it to (*MS torn*)

On second thoughts, I believe you had best get the half of Gilbert's web of Table-linen, and make it up; tho' I think it damnable dear, but it is no out-laid money to us you know. I have just now consulted my old Landlady about table-linen, & she thinks I may have the best for two shillings per yard; so after all, let it alone until I return; and some day soon I will be in Dumfries, & will ask the prices there. I expect your new gowns will be very forward, or ready to make, against I be home to get the Baiveridge. I have written my long-thought-on letter to Mr Graham, the Commissioner of Excise; & have sent him a sheetful of Poetry besides. Now I talk of Poetry. I had a fine Strathspey among my hands to make verses to for Mr Johnson's Collection which I .... (*remainder of MS missing*)

**He continues to correspond with his old flame.**

**(272) Margaret Chalmers**

Ellisland, near Dumfries, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1788

Where are you? & how are you? & is Lady McKenzie recovering her health? for I have had but one solitary letter from you. I will not think you have forgot me, Madam; & for my part –

“When thee Jerusalem I forgot  
Skill part from my right hand!”

“My heart is not of that rock, nor my soul careless at that sea.” I do not make my progress among mankind as a bowl does among its fellows – rolling through the crowd without bearing away any mark or impression, except where they hit in hostile collision.

I am here, driven in with my harvest-folks by bad weather; and as you and your sister once did me the honor of interesting yourselves much *a l’egard de moi*, I sit down to beg the continuation of your goodness. I can truly say that, all the exterior of life apart, I never saw two, whose esteem flattered the noble feelings of my soul – I will not say, more, but, so much as Lady McKenzie and Miss Chalmers. When I think of you – hearts the best, minds the noblest, of human kind – unfortunately, even in the shades of life – when I think I have met with you, and have lived more a real life with you in eight days, than I can do with almost any body I met in eight years – when I think on the improbability of meeting you in this world again – I could sit down & cry like a child. If ever you honored me with a place in your esteem, I trust I can now plead more desert. I am secure against that crushing grip of iron poverty, which, alas! is less or more fatal to the native worth and purity of, I fear, the noblest souls; & a late important step in my life has kindly taken me out of the way of these ungrateful iniquities, which, however overlooked in fashionable license, or varnished in fashionable phrase, are indeed but lighter and deeper shades of VILLAINY.

Shortly after my last return to Ayr-shire, I married "my Jean." This was not in consequence of the attachment of romance perhaps, but I had a long and much-loved fellow creature's happiness or misery in my determination, and I durst not trifle with so important a deposit. Nor have I any cause to repent it. If I have not got polite tattle, modish manners, & fashionable dress. I am not sickened with the multiform curse of boarding-school affectation; & I have got the handsomest figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the country. Mrs Burns believes, as firmly as her creed, that I am *le plus bel esprit, et le plus bonnette homme* in the universe; although she scarcely ever in her life, except the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, and the Psalms of David in metre, spent five minutes together on either prose or verse. I must except also from this last, a certain late publication of Scots poems, which she has perused very devoutly; & all the ballads in the country, as she has (Oh the partial lover! you will cry) the finest "wood note wild" I ever heard. I am the more particular in this lady's character, as I know she will henceforth have the honor of a share in your best wishes. She is still at Mauchline, as I am building my house; for this hovel that I shelter in while occasionally here, is pervious to every blast that blows, and every shower that falls; & I am only preserved from being chilled to death, by being suffocated with smoke. I do not find my farm that pennyworth I was taught to expect, but I believe in time, it may be a saving bargain, You will be pleased to hear that I have laid aside idle *éclat*, and bind every day after my reapers.

To save me from that horrid situation of at any time going down, in a losing bargain of a farm, to misery, I have taken my Excise instructions, and have my commission in my pocket for any emergency of fortune. If I could set *all* before your view, whatever disrespect you in common with the world, have for this business, I know you would approve of my idea.

I will make no apology, dear Madam. For this egotistic detail; I know you and your sister will be interested in every circumstance of it. What signify the silly, idle

gewgaws of wealth, or the ideal trumpery of greatness! When fellow partakers of the same nature fear the same God, have the same benevolence of heart, the same nobleness of soul, the same detestation at every thing dishonest, and the same scorn at everything unworthy – if they are not in the dependance of absolute beggary, in the name of common sense are they not EQUALS? And if the bias, the instinctive bias of their souls run the same way, why may they not be FRIENDS?

When I have the opportunity of sending you this, Heaven only knows. Shenstone says, “When one is confined idle within doors by bad weather, the best antidote to *ennui* is, to read the letters of, or write to one’s friends,” in that case then, if the weather continues thus, I may scrawl you half a quire.

I very lately, to wit, since harvest began, wrote a poem, not in imitation, but in the manner of Pope’s Moral Epistles. It is only a short essay, just to try the strength of my Muse’s pinion in that way. I will send you a copy of it, when once I have heard from you. I have like wise been laying the foundation of some pretty large works; how the superstructure will come on I leave to that great maker and marrer of projects – TIME. – Johnson’s collection of Scots songs is going on in the third volume; and of consequence finds me a consumpt for a great deal of idle metre. One of the most tolerable things I have done in that way, is, two stanzas that I made to an air, a musical gentleman of my acquaintance composed for the anniversary of his wedding-day, which happens on the seventh of November. Take it as follows;

The day returns – my bosom burns,

I shall give over this letter for shame. If I should be seized with a scribbling fit, before this goes away, I shall make it another letter; and then you may allow your patience a week’s respite between the two. I have no room for more than the old, kind, hearty, FAREWEL!

To make some amends, *mes cheres Madames*, for dragging you on to this second sheet; and to relive a little of the tiresomeness of my unstudied and incorrectible prose, I shall transcribe you some of my later poetic bagatelles; though I have, these eight or ten months, done very little in that way. One day, in a Hermitage on the Banks of Nith, belonging to a gentleman in my neighbourhood, who is so good as to give me a key at pleasure, I wrote as follows, supposing myself the sequestered, venerable inhabitant of the lonely mansion.

*Lines written in Friar's Carse Hermitage*

**The letter to Graham of Fintry obviously had a rapid and positive response.**

**(273) Robert Graham of Fintry**

Ellisland, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1788

Sir,

Though I am scarce able to hold up my head with this fashionable Influenza, which is just now the rage hereabouts, yet, with half a spark of Life I would try to thank you for your most generous favour of the 14<sup>th</sup>; which, owing to my infrequent calls at the Post-Office in the hurry of harvest,, came only to hand yesternight. I assure you, my ever-honored Sir, I read it with my eyes brimful of other drops than those of anguish. Oh,, what means of happiness the Author of Goodness has put in their hands to whom he has given the power to bless; & what real happiness has he given to those on whom he has likewise bestowed, kind, generous, benevolent Dispositions! Did you know, Sir,from how many fears & forebodings the friendly assurances of your patronage & protection has freed me, it would be some reward for your goodness.

I am curst with a melancholy Prescience, which makes me the veriest coward, in Life. There is not any exertion which I would not attempt rather than be in that horrid situation – to be ready to call on the mountains to fall on me, & the hills to cover me from the presence of a haughty Landlord, or his still more haughty Underling, to whom I owed – what I could not pay. My Muse, too, the circumstance

that after my Domestic Comfort is by far the dearest to my soul, to have it in my power to cultivate her acquaintance to advantage – in short, Sir, you have like the GREAT BEING whose image you so richly bear, made a Creature happy who had no other claim to your goodness than his necessity, & who can make you no other return than his grateful Acknowledgement.

My farm I think I am certain will, in the long run, be an Object for me; & as I rent it in the first three years something under, I will be able to weather by a twelvemonth or perhaps more; tho' it would make me set Fortune more at defiance, if it can be in your power to grant my request as I mentioned, in the beginning of next Summer. I was thinking that as I am only a little more than five miles from Dumfries, I might perhaps officiate there, if any of these Officers could be removed with more propriety than Mr Smith; but besides the monstrous inconvenience of it to me, I could not bear to injure a poor fellow by outing him to make way for myself; to a wealthy Son of good fortune like Smith, the injury is imaginary, where the propriety of your rules admit.

Had I been well, I intended to have troubled you farther with a description of my Soil, & Plan of farming; but business will call me to town about February next, I hope then to have the honor of assuring you in propria persona how much & how truly I am, Sir, your deeply indebted & ever gratefull humble servant.

Robt Burns

**The following letter to Mrs Dunlop reveals the dreadful workload that Burns was enduring as he tells her how he was inspired to write at 3.am enroute to his farm**

**( 275 ) Frances Anna Dunlop**

Mauchline, 27th Sept. 1788.

I have received twins, Dear Madam, more than once; but scarcely ever with more pleasure than when I received yours of the 12th instant. To make myself understood; I had wrote to Mr. Graham, enclosing my Poem addressed to him, and the same post which favoured me with yours brought me an answer from him. It

was dated the very day he had received mine; & I am quite at a loss to say whether it was most polite or kind.

Your Criticisms, my honoured benefactress, are truly the work of a Friend. They are not the blasting depredations of a canker-toothed, caterpillar critic; nor are they the fair statement of cold impartiality, balancing with unfeeling exactitude the pros and cons of an Author's merits; they are the judicious observations of animated friendship, selecting the beauties of the piece.

I am just arrived from Nithsdale, and will be here a fortnight. I was on horseback this morning by three o'clock; for between my Wife and my farm is just 46 miles. As I jogged on in the dark, I was taken with a Poetic fit, as follows: "Mrs. Ferguson of Craigdarroch's lamentation for the death of her son; an uncommonly promising youth of eighteen or nineteen years of age:--

Fate gave the word--the arrow sped,  
And pierced my darling's heart,"(\_etc\_.)

You will not send me your Poetic rambles, but, you see, I am no niggard of mine. I am sure your Impromptus give me double pleasure; what falls from your pen can neither be unentertaining in itself, nor indifferent to me.

The *one* fault you found is just: but I cannot please myself in an emendation. What a life of solicitude is the life of a Parent! You interested me much in your young Couple. I suppose it is not any of the ladies I have seen.

I would not take my folio for this epistle, & now I repent it. I am so jaded with my dirty long journey, that I was afraid to drawl into the essence of dulness with anything larger than a quarto, & so I must leave out another rhyme of this morning's manufacture.

I will pay the sapientipotent George most chearfully, to hear from you ere I leave Ayrshire.

I have the honor to be, Madam, your much obliged, and most respectful humble servant,

Robert Burns

**Burns is by now missing the company of Jean Armour and is anxious that she moves to Dumfries as soon as possible**

**(278) Jean Armour Burns**

Ellisland, Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> October 1788

My dearest Love,

You need not come on Sunday to meet me on the road, for I am engaged that day to dine with Mr Logan at Laycht, so it will be the evening before I arrive at Mauchline.

You must get ready for Nithsdale as fast as possible, for I have an offer of a house in the very neighbourhood with some furniture in it, all of which I shall have the use of for nothing till my own house be got ready; & I am determined to remove you from Ayr-shire immediately, as I am a sufferer by not being on the farm myself. We will want a Maid servant, of consequence; if you hear of any to hire, ask after them. The apples are all sold & gone. I am extremely happy at the idea of your coming to Nithsdale, as it save us from these cruel separations. The house is one in which a Mr Newal lived during the summer, who is gone to Dumfries in Winter. It is a large house, but we will only occupy a room or two of it.

I am ever, my dearest Madam,  
Your faithful husband & humble servant  
Robt Burns

**Robert Burns was never a man to suppress his opinions if he disagreed with what was being said. Although he was a staunch Presbyterean, he was also sympathetic to the Jacobite cause, and was horrified by the mass slaughter of Highlanders by the Duke of Cumberland after Culloden. The “Glorious Revolution” referred to in his following letter to a newspaper was the flight of the Catholic James V11 of Scotland to be replaced by the House of Orange. The opening paragraph of the letter displays sentiments he wrote in his “Address to the Unco’ Guid.” Burns was no admirer of the ‘fire and brimstone’ preachers of the kirk and made many enemies of the clergy during his lifetime. It is therefore surprising to find him commemorated by a huge stained glass window in St Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh. It is also interesting to note his prediction that the 4<sup>th</sup> of July would become a day of celebration throughout the United States of America.**

**(283) Letter to the Edinburgh Evening Courant**

8<sup>th</sup> November 1788

Sir,

Notwithstanding the opprobrious epithets with which some sour philosophers and gloomy sectaries have branded our nature – the principle of universal selfishness, or the proneness to all evil, which they have given us – still the detestation in which inhumanity to the distressed, or insolence to the fallen, are held by all mankind, shews that they are not natives of the human heart. Even by those unhappy partners of our kind that are undone, the bitter consequences of their follies or their crimes – who but sympathizes with the miseries of a ruined profligate brother? – We forget the injuries & feel for the man.

I went last Wednesday to my parish church, most cordially to join in grateful acknowledgements to the Author of all Good, for the consequent blessings of the Glorious Revolution. To that auspicious event we owe no less than our liberties

religious and civil – to it we are likewise indebted for the present Royal Family, the ruling features of whose administration have ever been, mildness to the subject, & tenderness of his rights. Bred & educated in revolution principles, the principles of reason and common sense, it could not be any silly political prejudice that made my heart revolt at the harsh abusive manner in which the Reverend Gentleman mentioned the House of Stuart, and which, I am afraid, was too much the language of that day. We may rejoice sufficiently in our deliverance from past evils, without cruelly raking up the ashes of those whose misfortune it was, perhaps, as much as their crimes, to be the authors of those evils; & may bless God for all his goodness to us as a nation, without, at the same time, cursing a few ruined powerless exiles, who only harboured ideas, & made attempts, that most of us would have done, had we been in their situation.

“The bloody and tyrannical house of Stuart” may be said with propriety and justice, when compared with the present Royal Family, & the liberal sentiments of our days, but is there no allowance to be made for the manners of the times? Were the royal contemporaries of the Stuarts more mildly attentive to the rights of man? – Might not the epithets of “bloody and tyrannical” be with at least equal justice applied to the house of Tudor, of York, or any other of their predecessors?

The simple state of the case, Mr Printer, seems to be this. At that period, the science of government – the true relation between King and subject, like other sciences, was but just in its infancy, emerging from the dark ages of ignorance and barbarism. The Stuarts only contended for prerogatives which they knew their predecessors enjoyed, and which they saw their contemporaries enjoying; but these prerogatives were inimical to the happiness of a nation and the rights of subjects. In this contest between Prince and People, the consequence of that light of science which had lately dawned over Europe, the Monarch of France, for example, was victorious over the struggling liberties of the subject: With us, luckily, the Monarch failed, and his unwarrantable pretensions fell a sacrifice to our rights and happiness. Whether it was owing to the wisdom of leading individuals, or to

the jostlings of party, I cannot pretend to determine; but, likewise happily for us, the kingly power was shifted into another branch of the family, who, as they owed the throne solely to the call of a free people, could claim nothing inconsistent with the covenanted terms which placed them there.

The Stuarts have been condemned and laughed at for the folly and impracticability of their attempts, in 1715 and 1745. That they failed, I bless my God most fervently; but cannot join in the ridicule against them. Who does not know that the abilities or defects of leaders and commanders are often hidden until put to the touchstone of exigence; and that there is a caprice of fortune, an omnipotence in particular accidents, and conjunctures of circumstances, which exalt us as heroes, or brand us as madmen, just as they are for or against us?

Man, Mr Printer, is a strange, weak, inconsistent being. Who would believe, Sir, that in this our Augustan age of liberality & refinement, while we seem so justly sensible & jealous of our rights and liberties, & animated with such indignation against the very memory of those who would have subverted them, who would suppose that a certain people under our national protection, should complain, not against a Monarch & a few favourite advisers, but against our whole legislative body, of the very same imposition and oppression, the Romish religion not excepted, and almost in the very same terms as our forefathers did against the family of Stuart! I will not, I cannot, enter into the merits of the cause; but I dare say the American Congress, in 1776, will be allowed to have been as able and as enlightened, and a whole empire will say, as honest, as the English Convention in 1688; & that the fourth of July will be as sacred to their posterity as the fifth of November is to us.

To conclude, Sir, let every man, who has a tear for the many miseries incident to humanity, feel for a family, illustrious as any in Europe, & unfortunate beyond historic precedent; and let every Briton, & particularly every Scotsman, who ever

looked with reverential pity on the dotage of a parent, cast a veil over the fatal mistakes of the Kings of his forefathers.

A Briton

**When Burns sent off a copy of 'Auld Lang Syne' to Mrs Dunlop he had no idea that this song would eventually become an International Anthem, sung by nations around the world to celebrate the arrival of a New Year.**

**(290 ) Frances Anna Dunlop.**

Ellisland, 7th December 1788.

My dear honored friend,

Yours, dated Edinburgh, which I have just read, makes me very unhappy. "Almost blind and wholly deaf" are melancholy news of Human-nature; but when told of a much loved and honored friend, they carry misery in the sound. Goodness on your part, and gratitude on mine, began a tie which has gradually & strongly entwisted itself among the dearest chords of my bosom; and I tremble at the omens of your late and present ailing habit, and shattered health. You miscalculate matters widely, when you forbid my waiting on you lest it should hurt my worldly concerns. My small scale of farming is exceedingly more simple and easy than what you have lately seen at Moreham Mains. But, be that as it may, the heart of the man and the fancy of the poet are the two grand considerations for which I live: if miry ridges and dirty dunghills are to engross the best part of the functions of my soul immortal, I had better been a rook or a magpie at once, and then I should not have been plagued with any ideas superior to breaking of clods and picking up grubs; not to mention Barn-door Cocks or Mallards, creatures with which I could almost exchange lives at any time. If you continue so deaf, I am afraid a visit will be no great pleasure to either of us, but if I hear you are got so well as to relish conversation, look you to it, Madam, for I will make my threatenings good. I am to be at the Newyearday fair of Ayr, by all that is Sacred in the world, Friend! I will

come and see you! As for G.R. whom you commiserate so much in your Moreham mains epistle (you see I have read both sheets, notwithstanding your wicked surmise) I am not sure whether he is not a gainer, by how much a Madman is a more respectable character than a Fool.

If you have an opportunity of seeing the Edinburgh evening Courant of Saturday the 22<sup>nd</sup> November, you will see a piece of my Politics, signed by A Briton. Heaven forgive me for dissimulation in that Paragraph! I too, Madam, am just now Revolution-mad, but it is not the tarantula frenzy of insulting Whiggism, like an ass's colt capering over the generous hound breathing his last; mine is the madness of an enraged Scorpion shut up in a thumb-phial; the indignant groans and bloodshot glances of ruined Right, gagged on the pillory of Derision to gratify the idiot insolence of Usurpation.

To show you that all your things don't lie by me unread, I have perused your inclosed verses more than half a dozen times, & as I am I believe the sole Depository of them, as well as several other of your Parnassian flights, I treasure them carefully with a felonious intention some day or other to give them here & there in my future Pieces as my own. I tell you this in confidence, Madam, and I trust you will not betray me.

My song, Clarinda, was a real affair. It was un petit egaremen de Coeur during my last stay in Edinburgh, but circumstances are too romantic to be credited almost from the mouth of Truth\* herself; I beg Truth's pardon if I have mistaken the Gender in the Pronoun foregoing marked with an Asterisk,

Your meeting, which you so well describe, with your old schoolfellow and friend, was truly interesting. Out upon the ways of the world! They spoil these "social offsprings of the heart." Two veterans of the "men of the world" would have met with little more heart-workings than two old hacks worn out on the road. Apropos, is not the Scotch phrase, "Auld lang syne," exceedingly expressive? There is an old song and tune which has often thrilled through my soul. You know I am an enthusiast in old Scotch song. I shall give you the verses on the other sheet, as I suppose Mr. Ker will save you the postage.[...]

## Auld Lang Syne

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And never thought upon?  
Let's hae a waught o' Malaga,  
For auld lang syne.

### Chorus

For auld lang syne, my jo,  
For auld lang syne;  
Let's hae a waught o' Malaga,  
For auld lang syne.

And surely ye'll be you pint-stoup!  
And surely I'll be mine!  
And we'll take a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld &c.

We twa hae run about the braes,  
And pou't the gowans fine;  
But we've wander'd mony a weary foot  
Sin auld lang syne.  
For auld lang &c.

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

And there's a han', my trusty fiere,  
And gie's a han' o' thine!  
And we'll tak a right guidwilly waught,  
For auld lang syne!

Light be the turf on the breast of the Heaven-inspired poet who composed this glorious fragment! There is more of the fire of native genius in it than in half a dozen of modern English Bacchanalians! [...]

R. B.

**John Tennant was a distiller and it is interesting to note that whisky was considered to be a drink suitable only only for the rougher elements of society.**

**( 291 ) John Tennant**

Ellisland, 22 nd December 1788.

I yesterday tried my cask of whisky for the first time, and I assure you it does you great credit. It will bear five waters, strong: or six ordinary toddy. The whisky of this country is a most rascally liquor; and, by consequence, only drunk by the most rascally part of the inhabitants. I am persuaded, if you once got a footing here, you might do a great deal of business; both in the way of consumpt, and should you commence Distiller again, this is the native barley-country.

I am ignorant if, in your present way of dealing, you would think it worth while to extend your business so far as this country-side. I write you this on the account of an accident which I must take the merit of having partly designed too. A neighbour of mine, a John Currie, miller, in Carse Mill - a man who is, in a word, a very good man, even for a £500 bargain, he and his wife were in the country Publick-house and sell a great deal of foreign spirits, but all along thought that Whisky would have

degraded their house. They were perfectly astonished at my whisky, both for its taste and strength; and, by their desire, I write you to know if you could supply them with liquor of an equal quality, and what price.

Please write me by first post, and direct to me at Ellisland, near Dumfries. If you could take a jaunt this way yourself, I have a spare spoon, knife, and fork, very much at your service. My compliments to Mrs. Tennant, and all the good folks in Glenconnel and Barguharrie.

I am truly, My dear Sir, yours

Robt Burns

**( 294 ) Dr John Moore**

Ellisland, 4th Jan. 1789.

Sir,

As often as I think of writing to you, which has been three or four times every week these six months, it gives me something so like the idea of an ordinary sized Statue offering a conversation with the Rhodian Colossus that my mind misgives me; and the affair always miscarries somewhere between Purpose and Resolve. I have at lost got some business with you, and business-letters are written by the Style-book. I say my business is with you, Sir; for you never had any with me, except the business that Benevolence has in the mansion pf Poverty.

The character and employment of a Poet were formerly my pleasure, but are now my pride. I know that a very great deal of my late éclat was owing to the singularity of my situation, and the honest prejudice of Scotsmen; but still, as I said in the preface to my first Edition, I do look upon myself as having some pretensions from Nature to the Poetic Character. I have not a doubt but the knack, the aptitude, to learn the Muses' trade, is a gift bestowed by Him "who forms the secret bias of the soul;" but I as firmly believe that excellence in the profession is the fruit of industry, labour, attention, and pains.

At least I am resolved to try my doctrine by the test of experience. Another appearance from the press I put off to a very distant day, a day that may never arrive--but poesy I am determined to prosecute with all my vigour. Nature has given very few, if any, of the Profession, the talents of shining in every species of Composition. I shall try, for until trial it is impossible to know whether she has qualified me to shine in any one. The worst of it is, by the time one has finished a Piece, it has been so often viewed and reviewed before the mental eye, that one loses in a good measure the powers of critical discrimination. Here the best criterion I know is a friend--not only of abilities to judge, but with good-nature enough, like a prudent teacher with a young learner, to praise perhaps a little more than is exactly just, lest the thin-skinned animal fall into that most deplorable of all poetic diseases--heart-breaking despondency of himself.

Dare I, Sir, already immensely indebted to your goodness, ask the additional obligation of your being that Friend to me? I inclose you an essay of mine in a walk of Poesy to me entirely new; I mean the epistle addressed to R. G., Esq., or Robert Graham, of Fintry, Esq., a gentleman of uncommon worth, to whom I lie under very great obligations. The story of the poem, like most of my poems, is connected with my own story, and to give you the one, I must give you something of the other. I cannot boast of Mr. Creech's ingenuous fair dealing to me. He kept me hanging about Edinburgh from the 7th August 1787 until the 13th April 1788 before he would condescend to give a statement of affairs; nor had I got it even then, but for an angry letter I wrote him, which irritated his pride. "I could" not a "tale," but a detail "unfold"; but what am I that should speak against the Lord's anointed Bailie of Edinburgh?

I believe I shall, in whole, £100 Copyright included, clear about £400, some little odds; and even part of this depends upon what the gentleman has yet to settle with me. I give you this information, because you did me the honor to interest yourself much in my welfare. I give you this information, but I give it to yourself only, for the world would accuse me of ingratitude, and I am still much in the gentleman's mercy. Perhaps I injure the man in the idea I am sometimes tempted

to have of him--God forbid I should. A little time will try, for in a month I shall go to town to wind up the business, if possible.

To give the rest of my story in brief, I have married "My Jean," and taken a farm; with the first step I have every day more and more reason to be satisfied; with the last, it is rather the reverse. I have a younger brother, who supports my aged mother, another still younger brother, and three sisters, in a farm. On my last return from Edinburgh it cost me about £180 to save them from ruin.

Not that I have lost so much--I only interposed between my brother and his impending fate by the loan of so much. I give myself no airs on this, for it was mere selfishness on my part; I was conscious that the wrong scale of the balance was pretty heavily charged, and I thought that throwing a little filial piety and fraternal affection into the scale in my favour, might help to smooth matters at the Grand Reckoning. There is still one thing would make my circumstances quite Easy. I have an Excise-Officer's Commission, and I live in the midst of a country Division. My request to Mr. Graham, who is one of the Commissioners of Excise, was, if in his power, to procure me that Division. If I were very sanguine, I might hope that some of my great patrons might procure me a Treasury warrant for Supervisor, Surveyor-general, &c, but thank Heaven I am in a good degree independant. If farming will not do, a simple petition will get me into employ in the Excise somewhere; & poor as the salary comparatively is, it is luxury to what either my wife or I were in early life taught to expect.

Thus, secure of a livelihood, "to thee, sweet Poetry, delightful maid," I consecrate my future days.

With the highest esteem & warmest gratitude

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your most humble servant

Robt Burns.

**Whilst enjoying a platonic relationship with Clarinda in Edinburgh, Burns had managed to get another girl pregnant. Jenny Clow bore him a son in November, 1788, and had issued a writ against him for maintenance of the child.**

**(295) Robert Ainslie**

Ellisland, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1789

Many happy returns of the season to you, my dear Sir! May you be comparatively happy up to your comparative Worth, among the sons of men; which would, I am sure, make you one of the most blest of the Human-race.

I do not know if passing "a Writer to the Signet" be a trial of scientific merit, or a mere business of friends & interest. However it be, let me quote you my two favorite passages, which, tho' I have repeated them ten thousand times, still they rouse my manhood & steel my resolutions like Inspiration.

On Reason build Resolve,  
That column of true majesty in man!

Young.

Hear, Alfred, hero of the State,  
Thy Genius Heaven's high will declare,  
The triumph of the truly great  
Is never, never to despair!  
Is never to despair!

Masque of Alfred.

I grant you enter the lists of life, to struggle for bread, business, notice and distinction in common with hundreds. But who are they? Men, like yourself; and of that aggregate body, your compeers, seven tenths of them come short of your advantages, natural & accidental; while two of these that remain either neglect

their parts, as flowers blooming in a desert or mispend their strength, like a bull goring a bramble-bush.

But to change the theme, I am still catering for Johnson's publication; and among others, I have brushed up the following old favorite Song a little, with a view to your worship. I have only altered a word here & there, but if you like the humour of it, we shall think of a Stanza or two to add to it.

O Robin sure in hairst,

I shall be in town in about four or five weeks, & I must again trouble you find & secure for me a direction where to find Jenny Clow, for a main part of my business in Edinburgh is to settle that matter with her, & free her hand of the process.

I shall not be above two or three nights in town; but one of them I shall certainly devote to witness with how much esteem & affection I am,

My dear Friend, yours –

Robt Burns

**Robert Burns appears to have enjoyed his relationship with some members of the aristocracy. Writing to them allowed him to show off his ability to compose epistles of length and style. Lady Elizabeth Cunningham was the daughter of the Earl of Glencairn and her brother was the Bard's patron, so it not surprising that he wanted to impress her through his letters.**

**(298) Lady Elizabeth Cunningham** Ellisland near Dumfries, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1789

My Lady

As the officious gratitude of a poor creature, however it may be a little troublesome, can never be disagreeable to a good heart, I have ventured to send your Ladyship this packet. That from a dabble in rhymes I am become a professed Poet, that my attachment to the Muses is heated into enthusiasm; that my squalid Poverty is changed for comfortable Independance, is the work of your Ladyship's noble Family. Whether I may ever make my footing good, on any considerable height of Parnassus, is what I do not know; but I am determined to strain every nerve in the trial. Though the rough material of fine writing is undoubtedly the gift of Genius, the workmanship is certainly the united effort of labor, attention and pains. Nature has qualified few, if any, to shine in every walk of the Muses; I shall put it to the test of repeated trial, whether she has formed me capable of distinguishing myself in any one.

In the first great concern of life, the means of supporting that life, I think myself tolerably secure. If my farm should not turn out well, which after all it may not, I have my Excise Commission in reserve. This last is comparatively a poor resource, but it is luxury to any thing the first five & twenty years of my life taught me to expect; & I would despise myself if I thought I were not capable of sacrificing any one little liquorish gratification on the altar of Independance. A little spice of indolence excepted. I thank Heaven there is not a species of dissipation that I cannot set at defiance. The indolent reveries of a bemused mind, are indeed the sins that easily beset me; but, like the noxious vapours that annoy Miners, I am afraid they are evils that necessarily rise from my very Profession.

The inclosed Poems are the favors of the Nithsdale muses. The piece inscribed to R—G — Esq. Is a copy of verses which I sent to Mr Graham of Fintry, with a request for his assistance to procure me me an Excise Division in the middle of which I live. On my return from Edinburgh last, I found my aged mother, my brothers & sisters on the brink of ruin with their farm; and as I am certain the remainder of their lease will be worth holding, I advanced them nearly one half of

my capital to keep their little Commonwealth together, and place them in comfort. My own farm here, I am pretty sure in time will do well; but for several years it will require assistance more than my pocket can afford. The Excise-salary would pay half my rent, and I could manage the whole business of the Division without five guineas of additional expence.

I shall be in Edinburgh in about a month when I shall do myself the honor to inform your Ladyship farther of these to me important matters, as I know your Goodness will be interested in them.

In all my other domestic concerns, I find myself extremely comfortable. I muse & rhyme, morning, noon & night; & have a hundred different Poetic plans, pastoral, georgic, dramatic, &c. floating in the regions of fancy, somewhere between Purpose and resolve. To secure myself from ever descending to anything unworthy of the independant spirit of Man, or the honest pride of Genius, I have adopted Lord Glencairn as my titular Protector, what your scholars call by the Heathen name of Dii penates, I think it is. I have a large shade of him, with the verses I intended for his picture, wrote out by Butterworth, pasted on the back; and a small shade of him both by Miers, set in a gold breast-pin, with the words, "Mon Dieu et toi," engraved on the shell. The first I have hung over my Parlour chimney-piece, the last I keep for gala-days. I have often, during this hard winter, wished myself a Great-man, that I might, with propriety in the etiquette of the world, have enquired after Lady Glencairn's health. One of the sons of little men as I am, I can only wish fervently for her welfare; or in my devouter moods, pray for her, in the charming language of Mckenzie, that "the Great Spirit may bear up the weight of her grey hairs and blunt the arrow that brings them to rest."

I shall not add to this unconscionable letter by a tedious apology, or anything more than assuring your Ladyship, that with the warmest sincerity of heart-felt, though powerless gratitude,

I have the honor to be, My Lady,  
Your Ladyship's deeply indebted  
And ever grateful humble servant  
Robt Burns

**Burns wrote to his cabinet-maker asking him to get a move on with the furniture being made for his house.**

**(300) Peter Morison**

Isle 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1789

My dear Sir,

Necessity obliges me to go into my new house, even before it be plaistered. I will inhabit the one end until the other is finished. About three weeks more, I think, will at farthest be my time beyond which I cannot stay in this present house. If ever you wished to deserve the blessing of him that was ready to perish; if ever you were in a situation that a little kindness would have rescued you from many evils; if ever you hope to find rest in in future states of untried being; get these matters of mind ready. My servant will be out in the beginning of next week for the Clock. My compliments to Mrs Morison. –

I am, after all my tribulation, Dear Sir, yours  
Robt Burns

**Alexander Cunningham was one of the Bard's good friends in Edinburgh. Cunningham had been jilted by his fiancée and Burns wrote a rather deep letter to him on the meaning of love**

**(307) Alexander Cunningham**

Ellisland, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1789

My dear Cunningham,

When I saw in my last Newspaper that a Surgeon in Edinburgh was married to a certain amiable & accomplished young lady whose name begins with Ann; a lady with whom I have the honor to be a little acquainted, I sincerely felt for a worthy much-esteemed friend of mine. As you are the single only instance that ever came within the sphere of my observation of her human nature, of a young fellow, dissipated but not debauched, a circumstance that has ever given me the highest idea of the native qualities of your heart, I am certain that a disappointment in the tender passion must to you, be a very serious matter. To the hopeful youth, keen on the badger-foot of Mammon, or listed under the gaudy banners of Ambition, a love-disappointment, as such, is an easy business; nay, perhaps he hugs himself on his escape; but to your scanty tribe of mankind, whose souls bear, on the richest materials, the most elegant impress of the Great Creator, Love enters deeply into their existence, it is entwisted with their very thread of life. I myself can affirm, both from bachelor and wedlock experience, that Love is the Alpha and the Omega of human enjoyment. All the pleasures, all the happiness of my humble Compeers, flow immediately and directly from this delicious source. It is that spark of celestial fire which lights up the wintry hut of Poverty, and makes the cheerless mansion, warm, comfortable and gay. It is the emanation of Divinity that preserves the Sons and Daughters of rustic labour from degenerating into the brutes with which they daily hold converse. Without it, life to the poor inmates of the Cottage would be a damning gift.

I intended to go with some kind of consolatory epistle, when unawares I flew off in this rhapsodical tangent. Instead of attempting to resume a subject for which I am so ill qualified, I shall ask your opinion of some verses I have lately begun, on a theme of which you are the best judge I ever saw. It is Love too; tho' not just

warranted by the law of nations. A married lady of my acquaintance, whose crim. con. amour with a certain Captain, has made some noise in the world writes to him now in the West Indies as follows.

By all I lov'd neglected and forgot,  
Now raving wild, I curse that fatal night.

I intend being in Edinburgh about the end of February –

Adieu!

Robt Burns

**Burns met The Right Rev John Geddes, Bishop of Dunkeld at the home of Lord Monboddo and was extremely impressed by him. Bishop Geddes was instrumental in having several Catholic seminaries subscribe to the Edinburgh Edition of 1787. He obtained a copy for himself that he had rebound. This copy eventually found its way to America where it was reprinted in 1908 and is known as *The Geddes Burns*.**

**( 308 ) Rt. Rev. Bishop Geddes**

Ellisland, 3rd Feb. 1789.

Venerable Father,

As I am conscious that wherever I am, you do me the honour to interest yourself in my welfare, it gives me pleasure to inform you, that I am here at last, stationary in the serious business of life, and have now not only the retired leisure, but the hearty inclination, to attend to those great and important questions, what I am? where I am? and for what I am destined.

In that first concern, the conduct of the Man, there was ever but one side on which I was habitually blameable, and there I have secured myself in the way pointed out by Nature and Nature's God. I was sensible that, to so helpless a creature as a

poor poet, a wife and family were incumbrances, which a species of prudence would bid him shun; but when the alternative was, being at eternal warfare with myself, on account of habitual follies, to give them no worse name, which no general example, no licentious wit, no sophisticated infidelity, would, to me, ever justify, I must have been a fool to have hesitated, and a madman to have made another choice. Besides, I had in "my Jean" a long and much-loved fellow-creature's happiness or misery among my hands, and who could trifle with such a deposit?

In the affair of a livelihood, I think myself tolerably secure: I have good hopes of my farm, but should they fail, I have an excise commission, which, on my simple petition, will, at any time, procure me bread. There is a certain stigma affixed to the character of an Excise-Officer, but I do not pretend to borrow honour from my profession; and though the salary be comparatively small, it is luxury to anything that the first twenty-five years of my life taught me to expect.

Thus, with a rational aim and method in life, you may easily guess, my Reverend and much-honoured Friend, that my characteristical trade is not forgotten. I am, if possible, more than ever an enthusiast to the Muses. I am determined to study man and nature, and in that view incessantly; and to try if the ripening and corrections of years can enable me to produce something worth preserving.

You will see in your book, which I beg your pardon for detaining so long, that I have been tuning my lyre on the banks of Nith. Some large Poetic plans that are floating in my imagination, or partly put in execution, I shall impart to you when I have the pleasure of meeting with you; which, if you are then in Edinburgh, I shall have about the beginning of March.

That acquaintance, worthy Sir, with which you were pleased to honour me, you must still allow me to challenge; for, with whatever unconcern I give up my

transient connection with the merely great, I cannot lose the patronising notice of the Learned and Good without the bitterest regret.

I have the honor to be, Venerable Sir, your most respectful and very humble servant.

Robert Burns

**It is always interesting when reading the letters and poems of the Bard to discover just how little in life actually changes. This short note to Thomas Boyd, his builder, expresses Burns' anger and irritation at the delays in completing the work on his house.**

**(313) Thomas Boyd**

Isle, Sunday morn; 8<sup>th</sup> February 1789

I see at last, dear Sir, some signs of your executing my house within the current year. I am obliged to set out for Edinburgh se'enight, so I beg you will set as many hands to work as possible during this week. I am distressed with the want of my house in a most provoking manner. It loses me two hours work of my servants every day, besides other inconveniences. For God's sake let me but within the shell of it!

I am, Dear Sir, yours

Robt Burns

**This letter tells us that Robert Burns was indeed a man of compassion as he explains to his cousin that he has taken in young relatives who had been left fatherless.**

**( 314 ) James Burness**

Ellisland, 9th Feb. 1789.

My Dear Sir,

Why I did not write you long ago is what, even on the rack I could not answer. If you can in your mind form an idea of indolence, dissipation, hurry, cares, changes of country, entering on untried scenes of life – all combined; you will save me the trouble of a blushing apology. It could not be want of regard for a man for whom I had a high esteem before I knew him – an esteem which has much increased since I did know him; and the caveat entered, I shall plead guilty to any other indictment with which you shall please to charge me.

After I parted from you, for many months my life was one continued scene of dissipation. Here at last I am become stationary, and have taken a farm and -- a wife. The farm lies beautifully situated on the Nith, a large river that runs by Dumfries, and falls into the Solway frith. I have gotten a lease of my farm as long as I please; but how it may turn out is just a guess, and it is yet to improve and inclose, etc.; however, I have good hopes of my bargain on the whole.

My Wife is my Jean, with whose story you are partly acquainted. I found I had a much-loved fellow-creature's happiness or misery among my hands, and I durst not trifle with so sacred a deposit. Indeed, I have not any reason to repent the step I have taken, as I have attached myself to a very good wife, and have shaken myself loose of a very bad failing.

I have found my book a very profitable business, and with the profits of it I have begun life pretty decently. Should Fortune not favour me in farming, as I have no great faith in her fickle Ladyship, I have provided myself in another resource, which, however some folks may affect to despise it, is still a comfortable shift in the day of misfortune. In the hey-day of my fame, a gentleman, whose name at least I daresay you know, as his estate lies somewhere near Dundee, Mr. Graham, of Fintry, one of the Commissioners of Excise, offered me the commission of an Excise-Officer. I thought it prudent to accept the offer; and accordingly, I took my

instructions, and have my Commission by me. Whether I may ever do duty, or be a penny the better for it, is what I do not know; but I have the comfortable assurance that, come whatever ill fate will, I can, on my simple petition to the Excise Board, get into employ.

We have lost poor uncle Robert this winter. He has long been very weak, and with very little alteration on him; he expired 3rd January. His son William has been with me this winter, and goes in May to be an apprentice to a mason with my fatherinlaw who is a pretty considerable architect in Ayrshire. His other son, the eldest, John, comes to me I expect in summer. They are both remarkable stout young fellows, and promise to do well. His only daughter, Fanny, has been with me ever since her father's death, and I purpose keeping her in my family till she is woman grown, and fit for better service. She is one of the cleverest girls, and has one of the most amiable dispositions I have ever seen.

All friends in this country and Ayrshire are well. Remember me to all friends in the North. My wife joins me in compliments to your bedfellow & family. I would write your brother-in-law, but have lost his address. For goodness sake, don't take example from me, but write me soon..

I am ever, my dear cousin, yours sincerely,

Robt Burns

**Back once again in Edinburgh, Burns sent a short note to his wife.**

**(315) Jean Armour Burns**

Edinburgh Friday morning, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1789

I cannot precisely say when I will leave this town, my dearest friend, but at farthest I think I will be with you on Sunday come eight days, perhaps sooner. I had a horrid journey.....*some lines of MS missing.*

I have settled matters greatly to my satisfaction with Mr Creech. He is certainly not what he should be, nor has he given me what I should have, but I am better than expected. Farewell! I long much to see you – God bless you!

Yours most sincerely  
Robt Burns

**Back home and still having major problems with his builders.**

**(317) Thomas Boyd**

Isle Sunday morn, 1<sup>st</sup> March 1789

I arrived from Edinburgh yesternight and was a good deal surprised at finding my house still lying like Babylon in the prophecies of Isiah. I beg, dear Sir, for humanity's sake, that you will send me out your hands tomorrow, and oblige.

Dear Sir, yours sincerely  
Robt Burns

**One or two letters from Robert's young brother, William, have come to light. This is the first of them in which young William seeks advice from his elder brother.**

**Letter from William Burns**

Longtown, February 15<sup>th</sup> , 1789

Dear Sir,

As I am now in a manner only entering the world, I begin this our correspondence with a view to being a gainer by your advice, more than ever you can be by any

thing I write you of what I see, or what I hear in the course of my wanderings. I know not how it happened, but you were more shy of your counsel than I could have wished, the time I staid with you; whether it was because you thought it might disgust me to have my faults freely told me while I was dependent on you, or whether it was because you saw that, by my indolent disposition, your instructions would have no effect, I cannot determine; but if it proceeded from any of the above causes, the reason of withholding your admonition is now done away with, for I now stand on my own bottom, and that indolence, which I am very conscious of, is something rubbed off by having to act in life, whether I will or not; and my inexperience, which I daily feel, makes me wish for that advice which you are so able to give and which I can only expect from you or Gilbert, since the loss of the kindest and ablest of fathers.

The morning after I went from the Isle, I left Dumfries about five o'clock and came to Annan to breakfast, and staid about an hour; and I reached this place about two o'clock. I have got work here and I intend to stay about a month or six weeks, and then go forward, as I wish to be at York about the latter end of summer, where I propose to spend next winter, and go to London in the spring.

I have the promise of seven shillings a week from Mr Proctor while I stay here, and sixpence more if he succeeds himself, for he has only new begun trade here. I am to pay four shillings per week of board wages, so that my net income here will be much the same as in Dumfries.

The enclosed you will send to Gilbert with the first opportunity.

Please send me, the first Wednesday after you receive this, by the Carlisle wagon, two of my coarse shirts, one of my best linen ones, my velveteen vest and a neck-cloth; write to me along with them, and direct to me, Saddler, in Longtown, and they will not miscarry, for I am boarded in the waggoner's house. You may either let them be given into the waggon, or send them to Coultart and Gellebourn's shop and they will forward them. Please write me often while I stay here. I wish you would send me a letter, though never so small, every week, for they will be no expense to me and but little trouble to you. Please to give my best wishes to my sister-in-law, and believe me to you affectionate and obliged Brother.

William Burns

P.S. The great coat you gave me at parting did me singular service the day I came here, and merits my hearty thanks. From what has been said, the conclusion is this; that my hearty thanks and my best wishes that you and my sister must expect from W.B.

**Robert Burns' younger brother, William, had succeeded in obtaining an apprenticeship as a saddler and here his elder brother writes in response to the letter from William.**

**(318) William Burns**

Isle , 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1789

My dear William,

I arrived from Edinburgh only the night before last, so could not answer your epistle sooner. I congratulate you on the prospect of employ, & I am indebted to you for one of the best letters that been written by any Mechanic-lad in Nithsdale or Annandale or any other Dale on either side of the border this twelvemonth. Not that I would have you always affecting the stately stilts of studied composition, but surely writing a handsome letter is an accomplishment worth courting; & with attention & practice, I can promise you that it will soon be an accomplishment of yours.

If my advice can serve you, that is to say, if you can resolve yourself, not only in reviewing your own deportment, manners, &c. but also in carrying your consequent resolutions of amending the faulty parts into practice, my small knowledge & experience of the world is heartily at your service.

I intended to give you a sheetful of counsels, but some business has prevented me. In a word, Learn Taciturnity; let that be your motto. Though you had the

wisdom of Newton, or the wit of Swift, garrulouness would lower you in the eyes of your fellow-creatures.

You will receive by the carrier 2 coarse & one fine shirt, a neckcloth & your velvet waistcoat. I'll probably write you next week.

I am  
Your brother  
Robt Burns

**A whole year has passed since the last recorded letter of Burns writing to Clarinda. This gap does not seem natural but we have no idea of her attitude to his having set up home with Jean Armour. Perhaps there were letters that she may have destroyed in petulance, we'll never know. He is writing here in answer to a letter he has received from Clarinda that certainly appears to have been written in a hostile manner, but by now the tenderness shown in previous correspondence has evaporated as he responds in his own defence.**

**(320) Clarinda**

9<sup>th</sup> March 1789

Madam

The letter you wrote me to Heron's carried its own answer in its bosom; you forbade me to write you, unless I was willing to plead Guilty, to a certain Indictment that you were pleased to bring against me. As I am convinced of my own innocence, and though conscious of high imprudence & egregious folly, I can lay my hand on my breast & attest the rectitude of my heart; you will pardon me, Madam, if I do not carry my complaisance so far, as humbly to acquiesce in the

name of, Villain, merely out of compliment even to YOUR opinion; much as I esteem your judgement, and warmly as I regard your worth. I have already told you, & I again aver it, that at the Period of time alluded to, I was not under the smallest moral tie to Mrs B---; nor did I, nor could I then know, all the powerful circumstances that omnipotent Necessity was busy laying in wait for me. When you call over the scenes that have passed between us, you will survey the conduct of an honest man, struggling successfully with temptations the most powerful that ever beset humanity, and preserving untainted honor in situations where the austerest Virtue would have forgiven a fall. Situations that I dare to say, not a single individual of all his kind, even with half his sensibility and passion, could have encountered without ruin; and I leave you to guess, Madam, how such a man is likely to digest an accusation of perfidious treachery!

Was I to blame, Madam, in being the distracted victim of Charms which, I affirm it, no man ever approached with impunity? Had I seen the least glimmering of hope that these Charms could ever have been mine – or even had not iron Necessity — but these are unavailing words.

I would have called on you when I was in town, indeed I could not have resisted it, but that Mr Ainslie told me that you were determined to avoid your windows while I was in town, lest even a glance of me should occur in the Street.

When I have regained your good opinion, perhaps I may venture to solicit your friendship; but be that as it may, the first of her Sex I ever knew, shall always be the object of my warmest wishes.

**Robert Burns was a man who did not enjoy being pushed aside, and in this letter to Dr John Moore, he describes the situation which led to his writing a**

rather venomous poem, “Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs Oswald of Auchencruive.”

(322) Dr John Moore

Ellisland, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1789

Sir

The gentleman who will deliver this, is a Mr Nielson, a worthy clergyman in my neighbourhood, & a very particular acquaintance of mine. As I have troubled him with this packet, I must turn him o'er to your goodness to recompense him for it in a way in which he much needs your assistance, & where you can effectually serve him. Mr Nielson is on his way for France to wait on his Grace of Queensbury on some little business of a good deal of importance to my friend, and he wishes for your instructions respecting the most eligible mode of traveling, &c., for him when he has crossed the channel. I would not have dared to take this liberty with you, but that I am told by those who have the honor of your personal acquaintance, that to be a poor honest Scotsman is such a letter of recommendation to you, & to have it in your power to serve such a character gives you so much pleasure, that I am persuaded in soliciting your goodness in the business I am gratifying your feelings with a degree of enjoyment.

The inclosed Ode is a compliment to the late Mrs Oswald of Auchencruive. You probably knew her personally, an honor of which I can not boast; but I spent my early years in her neighbourhood, and among her servants and tenants I know she was detested with the most heart-felt cordiality. However, in the particular part of her conduct which roused my Poetic wrath, she was much less blameable. In January last, on my road to Ayrshire, I had put up at Bailie Whigham's in Sanquhar, the only tolerable inn in the place. The frost was keen, & the grim evening & howling wind were ushering in a night of snow and drift. My horse & I were both much fatigued by the labors of the day, & just as my friend the Bailie & I, were bidding defiance to the storm over a smoking bowl, in wheels the funeral

pageantry of the late great Mrs Oswald, & poor I, are forced to brave all the horrors of the tempestuous night, & jade my horse, my young favourite horse whom I had just christened Pegasus, twelve miles farther on, through the wildest moors & hills of Ayrshire, to New Cumnock, the next Inn. The powers of Poesy & Prose sink under me, when I would describe what I felt. Suffice it to say, that when a good fire at New Cumnock had so far recovered my frozen sinews, I sat down and wrote the inclosed Ode.

I was at Edinburgh lately, and settled with Mr Creech; and I must retract some ill natured surmises in my last letter, and own that at last, he has been amicable and fair with me.

I have the honor to be, with the sincerest gratitude,  
Sir, your deeply indebted humble servant  
Robt Burns

**( 323 ) William Burns**

Isle, March 25th 1789.

I have stolen from my corn-sowing this minute to write a line to accompany your shirt and hat, for I can no more. Your sister Nannie arrived yesternight, and begs to be remembered to you. Write me every opportunity - never mind postage. My head, too, is as addle as an egg this morning, with dining abroad yesterday. I received yours by the mason. Forgive me this foolish looking scrap of an epistle.

I am ever, my dear William, yours,

Robt Burns.

P.S. If you are not then gone from Longtown, I'll write you a long letter by this day se'ennight. If you should not succeed in your tramps, don't be dejected, or take any rash step. Return to us in that case, and we will court Fortune's better humour.

Remember this, I charge you.

R. B.

**Robert Burns was deeply loyal to his patrons, and when some lines appeared in a newspaper attributed to him, he was quick to respond.**

**(327) The London Gazetteer and new Daily Advertiser**

Ellisland near Dumfries 10<sup>th</sup> April 1789

Sir,

By accident I met with your Paper of March the 28<sup>th</sup>, in which there are four disrespectful lines on the Duchess of Gordon, that you tell us the composition of "Mr Burns, the ploughing poet;" who, as you at the same time remind the world, "owes much of his good fortune to her Grace's patronage." I am that Mr Burns, Sir, & I affirm that the wretched Stanza in question is not mine, nor do I know anything of the Author. It is indeed true that I have the honor to be deeply indebted to the Duchess of Gordon's goodness, & for that reason I now write to you; had you only forged dullness on me, I should not have thought it worthwhile to reply; but to add ingratitude too, is what I cannot in silence bear. In justice to the private character of a man, which must suffer must by your injurious imputation, allow me, Sir, to insist on your retracting your assertion of my being the Author of those verses.

I am, Sir, Your injured humble servant,  
Robert Burns

**As a lover of nature, Burns was saddened on one occasion when he saw a badly wounded hare limp passed him while working in the fields. This inspired him to write the beautiful “Ode to a Wounded Hare,” in which he condemns people who shoot for sport.**

**(336) Alexander Cunningham**

Ellisland, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1789

My dear Sir,

Your *duty-free* Favor of the 26<sup>th</sup> April I received two days ago. I will not say I received it with pleasure; that is the cold compliment of ceremony; I perused it, Sir, with delicious satisfaction. In short, it is such a letter that not you, nor your friend, but the Legislature, by express Proviso in their Postage laws should frank. A letter informed with all the glowing soul of friendship is such an honor to Human nature that they should order it, free ingress & egress to & from their bags & mails, as an encouragement and mark of distinction to supereminent Virtue.

I have just put the last hand to a little Poem, which I think will be something in your taste. One morning lately as I was out pretty early in the fields sowing some grass-seeds, I heard the burst of a shot from a neighbouring Plantation, & presently a poor little wounded hare came crippling by me. You will guess my indignation at the inhuman fellow, who could shoot a hare at this season when they all have young ones; & it gave me no little gloomy satisfaction to see the poor injured creature escape him. Indeed there is something in all that multiform business of destroying for our sport individuals in the animal creation that do not injure us materially, that I could never reconcile to my ideas of native Virtue & eternal Right. —

On Seeing a Fellow Wound a Hare with a Shot—

April – 1789

Inhuman man! Curse on thy barb'rous art,

Thank you my dearest Sir, for your concern for me in my contest with the London News-men. Depend on it that I will never deign to reply to *their* petulance. The Publisher of the Star has been polite. – He may find his account in it; though I would scorn to put my name to a Newspaper Poem. One instance, indeed, excepted; I mean your two Stanzas. Had the Lady kept her character, she would have kept my verses but as she prostituted the one, I no longer made any thing of the other; so sent them to Stuart as a bribe in my earnestness to be cleared from the foul aspersions respecting the Duchess of Gordon.

Let me know how you like my Poem. I am doubtful whether it would not be an improvement to keep out the last Stanza but one, altogether.

Cleghorn is a glorious production of the Author of Man. You, He, & the noble Colonel of the Crochallan Fencibles are to me

Dear as the ruddy drops that warm my heart.—

I have a good mind to make verses on you all, to the tune of, Three guid fellows ayont yon glen. By the way, do look in on poor Johnson, how he comes on. I sent him a list of what *I would chuse* for his third Volume. –

Adieu! God bless you!

Robt Burns

**Peter Stuart was one of three brothers who had built careers in journalism. He was the founder of the Star and Advertiser, the very first London paper to be printed on a regular basis. He had offered Burns some financial incentive**

**if he were to supply the paper with a regular supply of original poetry. Burns declined the invitation but sent the odd piece to Stuart for publication.**

**(343) Peter Stuart**

Ellisland, near Dumfries 18<sup>th</sup> May 1789

Mr Printer,

If the productions of a simple ploughman can merit a place in the same paper with Sylvester Otway, and the other favorites of the Muses who illuminate *The Star* with the luster of genius, your insertion of the inclosed trifle will be succeeded by future communications from

Yours, &c.,  
R. Burns

**( 347 ) Robert Ainslie**

Ellisland, 8th June 1789.

My dear Friend,

I am perfectly ashamed of myself when I look at the date of your last. It is not that I forget the friend of my heart and the companion of my peregrinations; but I have been condemned to drudgery beyond sufferance, though not, thank God, beyond redemption. I have had a collection of poems by a lady put into my hands to prepare them for the press; which horrid task, with sowing my corn with my own hand, a parcel of masons, wrights, plaisterers, &c. to attend to, roaming on business through Ayrshire, all this was against me, and the very first dreadful article was of itself too much for me.

13<sup>th</sup>. I have not had a moment to spare from incessant toil since the 8<sup>th</sup>. Life, my dear Sir, is a serious matter. You know by experience that a man's individual self is a good deal, but believe me, a wife and family of children, whenever you have the honour to be a husband and a father, will show you that your present and most

anxious hours of solitude are spent on trifles. The welfare of those who are very dear to us, whose only support, hope, and stay we are - this, to a generous mind, is another sort of more important object of care than any concerns whatever which centre merely in the individual.

On the other hand, let no young, rakehelly dog among you, make a song of his pretended liberty and freedom from care. If the relations we stand in to king, country, kindred, and friends, be anything but the visionary fancies of dreaming metaphysicians; if religion, virtue, magnanimity, generosity, humanity and justice, be aught but empty sounds; then the man who may be said to live only for others, for the beloved, honourable female, whose tender faithful embrace endears life, and for the helpless little innocents who are to be the men and women, the worshippers of his God, the subjects of his king, and the support, nay the very vital existence of his COUNTRY, in the ensuing age; - compare such a man with any fellow whatever, who, whether he bustle and push in business among labourers, clerks, statesmen; or whether he roar and rant, and drink and sing in taverns - a fellow over whose grave no one will breathe a single heigh-ho, except from the cobweb-tie of what is called good fellowship - who has no view nor aim but what terminates in himself - if there be any grovelling earth-born wretch of our species, a renegade to common sense, who would fain believe that the noble creature, man, is no better than a sort of fungus, generated out of nothing, nobody knows how, and soon dissipating in nothing, nobody knows where; such a stupid beast, such a crawling reptile, might balance the foregoing unexaggerated comparison, but no one else would have the patience.

Forgive me, my dear Sir, for this long silence. To make you amends, I shall send you soon, and more encouraging still, without any postage, one or two rhymes of my later manufacture

**The Bard appears to have the problems of the world on his shoulders as he pens this lengthy epistle to Mrs Dunlop.**

**(350) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Ellisland, 21<sup>st</sup> June 1789

Dear Madam,

Will you take the effusions, the miserable effusion, of low spirits, just as they flow from their bitter spring? I know not of any particular cause for this worst of all my foes besetting me; but for some time my soul has been beclouded with a thickening atmosphere of evil imaginations and gloomy presages.

Monday evening 22<sup>nd</sup> June

I have just heard the Rev Joseph Kirkpatrick give a sermon. He is a man famous for his benevolence, and I revere him; but from such ideas of my Creator, good Lord deliver me! Religion, my honoured friend, is surely a simple business, as it equally concerns the ignorant and the learned, the poor and the rich. That there is an incomprehensibly Great Being, to whom I owe my existence, & that he must be intimately acquainted with the operations & progress of the internal machinery, & consequent outward deportment of this creature which he has made; these are, I think, self-evident propositions. That there is a real and eternal distinction between virtue and vice, and consequently that I am an accountable creature; that far from the seeming nature of the human mind, as well as from the evident imperfection, nay, positive injustice, in the administration of affairs, both in the natural & moral worlds, there must be a retributive scene of existence beyond the grave – must, I think, be allowed by every one who will give himself a moment's reflection, I will go farther, and affirm, that from the sublimity, excellence, and purity of his doctrine & precepts un-paralleled by all the aggravated wisdom and learning of many preceding ages, though *to appearance*, he himself was the obscurest & most illiterate of our species; therefore Jesus Christ was from God.

Whatever mitigates the woes, or increases the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness; & whatever injures society at large, or an individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.

What think you, Madam, of my creed? I trust that I have said nothing that will lessen me in the eye of one whose good opinion I value almost next to the approbation of my own mind.

Your little *dear* namesake has not yet made his appearance, but he is every day expected. I promise myself great assistance in training up his young mind to dignity & sentiment and greatness of soul, from the honored name by which he is called. I know many would despise, & more would laugh at, such a way of thinking; but with all reverence to the cold theorem of Reason, a few honest Prejudices & benevolent Prepossessions, are of the utmost consequence, and give the finishing polish to illustrious characters of Patriot, Benefactor, Father & Friend; & all the tender relations included in the endearing word. What a poor, blighted, rickety breed are the Virtues & charities when they take their birth from geometrical hypothesis & mathematical demonstration? & what a vigorous Offspring they are when they owe their origin to, and are nursed with the vital blood of a heart glowing with the noble enthusiasm of Generosity, Benevolence, and Greatness of Soul? The first may do very well for those philosophers who look on the world of man as one vast ocean, and each individual as a little vortex in it whose sole business and merit is to absorb as much as it can in its own centre; but the last is absolutely & essentially necessary when you would make a Leonidas, a Hannibal, an Alfred, or a WALLACE.

Whether this long letter may contribute to your entertainment is what I cannot tell; but one thing I know, my own spirits are a good the lighter for this opportunity of assuring you how much I have the honor to be, Madam,

Your obliged friend & humble servant

Robt Burns

**Burns arrives at a major crossroads in his life as he contemplates giving up farming.**

**( 353 ) Robert Graham of Fintry**

Ellisland, 31st July 1789.

Sir,

The language of Gratitude has been so prostituted by servile adulation and designing flattery, that I know not how to express myself when I would acknowledge the receipt of your last letter. I beg and hope, ever-honored

“Friend of my life! True patron of my rhymes”

that you will always give me credit for the sincerest, chastest gratitude.

The callous Hypocrite may be louder than I, in his grateful professions, professions which he never felt, or the selfish heart of the Covetous may pocket the bounties of Beneficence with more rejoicing exultation; but for the brimful eye, springing from the ardent throbbings of an honest bosom, at the goodness of a kindly active Benefactor and politely generous Friend, I dare call the SEARCHER OF HEARTS & AUTHOR OF ALL GOODNESS to witness how truly these are mine to you.

Mr. Mitchell did not wait my calling on him, but sent me a kind letter, giving me a hint of the business; and yesterday he entered with the most friendly ardour into my views and interests. He seems to think, and from my private knowledge I am certain he is right, that removing the Officer who now does, and for these many years has done, duty in the Division in the middle of which I live, will be productive of at least no disadvantage to the Revenue, and may likewise be done without any detriment to him. Should the Honourable Board think so, and should they deem it

eligible to appoint me to officiate in his present place, I am then at the top of my wishes. The emoluments of my Office will enable me to carry on, and enjoy those improvements in my farm, which but for this additional assistance, I must in a year or two have abandoned. Should it be judged improper to place me in this Division, I am deliberating whether I had not better give up my farming altogether, and go into the Excise whenever I can find employment. Now that the salary is £50 per annum, the Excise is surely a much superior object to a farm, which, without some foreign assistance, must for half a lease be a losing bargain. The worst of it is - I know there are some respectable Characters who do me the honour to interest themselves in my welfare and behaviour, and, as leaving the farm so soon may have an unsteady, giddy-headed appearance, I had better perhaps lose a little money than hazard such people's esteem.

You see, Sir, with what freedom I lay before you all my little matters - little indeed to the World, but of the most important magnitude to me. You are so good, that I trust I am not troublesome. I have heard and read a good deal of Philanthropy, Generosity and Greatness of soul, and when rounded with the flourish of declamatory periods, or poured in the mellifluousness of Parnassian measure, they have a tolerable effect on a musical ear; but when these high sounding professions are compared with the very act and deed as they are usually performed, I do not think there is any thing in or belonging to Human Nature, so baldly disproportionate. In fact, were it not for a very few of our Kind, among whom an honored Friend of mine, that to you Sir I will not name, is a distinguished individual, the very existence of Magnanimity, Generosity, and all their kindred Virtues, would be as much a question with Metaphysicians as the existence of Witchcraft. Perhaps the nature of man is not so much to blame for this, as the situation in which by some miscarriage or other he is placed in this world. The poor, naked, helpless wretch, with such voracious appetites and such a famine of provision for them, is under a kind of cursed necessity of turning selfish in his own defence. Except here and there a Scelerate who seems to be a Scoundrel from the womb by Original Sin, thorough-paced Selfishness is always a work of time. Indeed, in a

little time, we generally grow so attentive to ourselves and so regardless of others that I have often in Poetic frenzy looked on this world as one vast ocean, occupied and commoved by innumerable vortices, each whirling round its centre, which vortices are the children of men; and that the great design and, if I may say so, merit of every particular vortex consists in how wide it can extend the influence of its circle, and how much floating trash it can suck in and absorb.

I know not why I have got into this preaching vein, except it be to show you that it is not my ignorance but my knowledge of mankind which makes me so much admire your goodness to me.

I hope this will find my amiable young acquaintance, John, recovered from his indisposition, and all the members of your charming fire-side circle well and happy. I am sure I am anxiously interested in all their welfares; I wish it with all my soul; nay, I believe I sometimes catch myself praying for it. I am not impatient of my own impotence under that immense debt which I owe to your goodness, but I wish and beseech that Being who has all good things in his hands to bless and reward you with all those comforts and pleasures which HE knows I would bestow on you were they mine to give.

I shall return your books very soon; I only wish to give Dr Smith one other perusal, which I will do in two or three days. I do not think that I must trouble you for another cargo, at least for some time, as I am going to apply to Leadbetter & Syme on Gaging, and to study my Sliding rule, Branan's rule, &c. with all the possible attention.

An apology for the impertinent length of this epistle would only add to the evil.

I have the honor to be, Sir,  
Your deeply indebted humble servant  
Robt Burns

**Previous letters written by the Bard leave us in no doubt that he was a devout man, but although a true believer, he had little time for those preachers who ranted at their congregations promising little but hell and damnation for them beyond the grave. “The Kirk’s Alarm” is a lengthy poem in which he lampoons several of the old guard of preachers and he sent a copy of it along with this letter to a friend, John Logan.**

**(356) John Logan**

Ellisland near Dumfries, 7th August 1789

Dear Sir,

I intended to have written you long ere now, and as I told you, I had gotten three stanzas and a half on my way in a poetic epistle to you; but that old enemy of all *good works*, the Devil, threw me into a Prosaic mire, & for the soul of me, I cannot get myself out of it. I dare not write you a long letter, as I am going to intrude on your time with a long Ballad. –I have, as you will shortly see, finished, “THE KIRK’S ALARM,” but now that it is done, & that I have laughed once or twice at the conceits in some of the Stanzas, I am determined not to let it get into the Publick; so I send you this copy; the first I have sent to Ayr-shire except some few of the Stanzas which I wrote off in embryo for Gavin Hamilton, under the express provision & request – that you will only read it to a few of us, and do not on any account, give, or permit to be taken, any copy of the Ballad. If I could be of any service to Dr McGill, I would do it though it would be at a much greater expence than irritating a few bigotted Priests; but as I am afraid, serving him in his present embarrass is a task too hard for me, I have enemies enow, God knows tho’ I do not wantonly add to the number. Still, as I think there is some merit in two or three of the thoughts, I send it you as a small but sincere testimony how much and with what respectful esteem.

I am, Dear Sir, your obliged humble servant

Robt Burns

**Burns is embarrassed to tell his old friend that he has crossed the line and joined the establishment.**

**( 367 ) Robert Ainslie**

Ellisland, 1st Nov. 1789.

My Dear Friend,

I had not written you long ere now, could I have guessed where to find you; for I am sure you have more good sense than to waste your precious days of vacation time in the dirt of Business & Edinburgh. Wherever you are, God bless you, & lead you not into temptation but deliver you from evil!

I do not know if I have informed you that I am now appointed to an Excise division, in the middle of which my house and farm lie. In this I was extremely lucky. Without ever having been an Expectant, as they call their Journeymen Excisemen, I was directly planted down to all intents and purposes an officer of Excise; there to flourish and bring forth fruits - worthy of repentance. I know how the word, Exciseman, or still more opprobrious, Gauger, will sound in your ears. I too have seen the day when my auditory nerves would have felt very delicately on this subject, but a wife and children are things which have a wonderful power in blunting those kind of sensations. Fifty pounds a year for life, & provision for widows & orphans, is no bad settlement for a Poet. For the ignominy of the Profession, I have the encouragement which I once heard a recruiting Sergeant give to a numerous if not respectable audience in the streets of Kilmarnock – “Gentlemen, for your farther and better encouragement, I can assure you that our regiment is the most blackguard corps under the crown, and consequently, with us an honest fellow has the surest chance for preferment.”

You need not doubt that I find several very unpleasant and disagreeable circumstances in my business; but I am tired with and disgusted at the language of complaint against the evils of life. Human existence in the most favourable

situations does not abound with pleasures, and has its inconveniences and ills: capricious foolish Man mistakes these inconveniences and ills as if they were the peculiar property of his particular situation; and hence that eternal fickleness, that love of change, which has ruined, and daily does ruin many a fine fellow, as well as many a Blockhead, and is almost, without exception, a constant source of disappointment and misery.

So far as being with my present lot, I earnestly pray the Great Disposer of Events that it may never be worse, & I think I can lay my hand on my heart and say, "I shall be content."

I long to hear from you how you go on, not so much in business as in life. Are you pretty well satisfied with your own exertions, and tolerably at ease in your internal reflections? 'Tis much to be a great character as a lawyer, but beyond comparison more to be a great character as a man. That you may be both the one and the other is the earnest wish, and that you will be both is the firm persuasion of,

My dear Sir, &c.  
Robt Burns

**By the time Burns wrote this next letter to his brother, he was riding over 200 miles on his Excise duties as well as trying to run his farm.**

**(372) William Burns**

Ellisland 10<sup>th</sup> November 1789

Dear William

I would have written you sooner but I am so hurried and fatigued with my Excise-business that I can scarcely pluck up resolution to go through the effort of a letter to any body. Indeed you hardly deserve a letter from me, considering that you

have spare hours in which you have nothing to do at all, & yet it was near three months between your last two letters.

I know not if you have heard lately from Gilbert. I expect him here with me on the latter end of this week. They are all well, as I heard very lately. My Mother is returned, now that she has seen my little boy. Francis, fairly set to the world. – I suppose Gilbert has informed you that you have gotten a new Nephew. He is a fine thriving fellow, & promises to do honor to the name he bears. I have named him Francis Wallace, after my worthy friend Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop.

The only Ayr-shire news that I remember, in which I think you will be interested, is that Mr Ronald is bankrupt. You will easily guess that from his insolent vanity in his sunshine of life, he will now feel a little retaliation from those who thought themselves eclipsed by him, for, poor fellow, I do not think he ever intentionally injured any one. I might indeed perhaps except his wife, whom he certainly has used very ill; but she is still fond of him to distraction, and bears up wonderfully, much superiour to him, under this most severe shock of Fortune. Women have a kind of sturdy sufferance which qualifies them to endure beyond, much beyond the common run of Men; but perhaps part of that fortitude is owing to their short-sightedness, as they are by no means famous for seeing remote consequences in all their real importance.

I am very glad at your resolution of living within your income be that what it will. Had poor Ronald done so, he had not this day been a prey to the dreadful miseries of Insolvency. You are at the time of life when these habitudes are begun which are to mark the character of the future Man. Go on, and persevere, & depend on less or more success.

All the family have their Compliments to you

I am, dear William, your brother

**We now come to one of the most remarkable letters written by Burns. It is both sad and deep as he calls to mind Mary Campbell, and questions whether there really will be life after death in which he will meet again with his parents, friends and Mary. He is both mentally and physically exhausted and would almost welcome death as an escape from his hardships.**

**(374) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Ellisland, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1789

Many thanks, dear Madam, for your sheet-full of Rhymes. Tho' at present I am below the veriest Prose, yet from you everything pleases. I am groaning under the miseries of a diseased nervous System; a system of all the most essential to our happiness – our Misery. For now near three weeks I have been so ill with a nervous head-ach, that I have been obliged to give up for a time my Excise-books, being scarce able to lift my head, much less to ride once a week over ten muir Parishes. Lord, what is Man! Today, in the luxuriance of health, exulting in the enjoyment of existence; In a few days, perhaps in a few hours, loaded with conscious painful repercussions of anguish, & refusing or denied a Comforter. Day follows night, and night comes after day, only to curse him with life which gives him no pleasure; & yet the awful, dark termination of that life, is a something – perhaps a Nothing – at which he recoils with still more horror.

“Tell us, ye Dead; will none of you in pity  
Disclose the Secret –  
*What 'tis you are, and we must shortly be!*  
'tis no matter;  
A little time will make us learn'd as you are”

Can it be possible that when I resign this frail, feverish being, I shall still find myself in conscious existence! When the last gasp of agony has announced that I am no more to those that knew me & the few who loved me; when the cold, stiffened, unconscious ghastly corpse is resigned into the earth, to be the prey of unsightly reptiles, & to become in time a trodden clod, shall I yet be warm in life, seeing and seen, enjoying & enjoyed? Ye venerable Sages & holy Flamens, is there any probability in your many conjectures, any truth in your many stories, of another world beyond death; or are they all alike, baseless visions & fabricated fables? If there is another life, it must be only for the just, the benevolent, the amiable & the humane; what a flattering idea, then is a World to come! Would to God I as firmly believed it as I ardently wish it! There I should meet an aged Parent, now at rest from the many buffetings of an evil world against which he so long and bravely struggled. There should I meet the friend, the disinterested friend of my early life; the man who rejoiced to see me, because he loved me & could serve me – Muir, thy weaknesses were the aberrations of Human-nature, but thy heart glowed with every thing generous, manly & noble; and if ever emanation from the All-Good Being animated a human form, it was thine! There should I, with speechless agony of rapture, again recognise my lost, my ever dear MARY, whose bosom was fraught with Truth, Honor, Constancy & Love.

My Mary dear, departed Shade!  
Where is thy place of heavenly rest?  
Seest thou thy Lover lowly laid?  
Hear'st thou the groans that rend his breast!

Jesus Christ, thou amiablest of characters, I trust thou art no Imposter, & that thy revelation of blissful scenes of existence beyond death and the grave, is not one of the many impositions which time after time have been palmed on credulous mankind. I trust that in Thee “shall all the Families of the earth be blessed” by being yet connected together in a better world, where every tie that bound heart to

heart in this state of existence shall be, far beyond our present conceptions, more endearing.

I am a good deal inclined to think with those who maintain that what are called nervous affectations are in fact diseases of the mind.

I cannot reason, I cannot think; & but to You, I would not venture to write any thing above an order to a Cobler. You have felt too much of the ills of life not to sympathise with a diseased wretch who is impaired more than half of any faculties he possesses. Your goodness will excuse this distracted scrawl which the Writer dare scarcely read, & which he would throw into the fire if he were able to write any thing better, or indeed any thing at all.

I am glad you have put me on transcribing my departed Friend's epitaph. —  
Transcribing saves me a great deal of thinking.

Epitaph on R. Muir —

What Man could esteem, or what Woman could love,  
Was he who lies under this sod;  
If Such Thou refusest admittance above,  
Then whom wilt thou favor, Good God!

Rumour told me something of a son of yours who was returned from the East or West Indies. If you have gotten news of James or Anthony, it was cruel of you not to let me know; as I promise you on the sincerity of a man who is weary of one world & anxious about another, that scarce any thing could give so much pleasure as to hear of any good thing befalling my honored Friend.

If you have a minute's leisure, take up your pen in pity to le pauvre Miserable—

Robt Burns

**Written on the same day as the previous letter, but on an entirely different subject.**

**(375) William Nicol**

Ellisland, Sunday morning, 13<sup>th</sup> December, 1789

I have been so ill, my ever dear Friend, that I have not been able to go over the threshold of my door since I saw you. As I could not see & inspect Laggan farm personally, I have sent for two friends of mine that know it well, and on whose judgement of land I could depend very far, & from what they inform me, I think you have every reason to proceed with your purchase. One of my friends says it will without a doubt bring Seventy guineas of rent; & as he is a plain intelligent country farmer, I like *his* decision on the business. The other says if it bought under seventeen hundred pounds it is by no means dear.

Now for your unfortunate old mare. I have tried many dealers for her, & I am ashamed to say that the highest offer I have got for her, is fifty shillings. – However, I tried her yesterday in the Plough, & I find the poor creature is extremely willing to do what she can, so I hope to make her worth meat to me, until I can try her, at some fair.

I can no more. – I hope you will find your remaining family in better spirits than,

My dear Sir,  
Your miserable humble obliged friend  
Robt Burns

My warmest most respectful Compliments to Mrs Nicol.

**( 381 ) Gilbert Burns**

Ellisland, 11th January 1790.

Dear Brother,

I mean to take advantage of the Frank, though I have not in my present frame of mind much appetite for exertion in writing. My nerves are in a damnable state. I feel that horrid hypochondria pervading every atom of both body and Soul. This farm has undone my enjoyment of myself. It is a ruinous affair on all hands. But let it go to hell! I'll fight it out and be off with it.

We have gotten a set of very decent Players here just now. I have seen them an evening or two. David Campbell, in Ayr, wrote to me by the manager of the company, a Mr. Sutherland, who is indeed a man of genius and apparent worth. On New-year-day evening I gave him the following Prologue, which he spouted to his audience with applause:--

No Song nor dance I bring from yon great City, etc.

I can no more. If once I was clear of this accursed farm, I shall respire more at ease.

I am yours

Robt Burns

**Burns explains to his friend that the responsibility of parenthood has forced him to rethink his life.**

**( 382 ) William Dunbar**

Ellisland, 14th Jan. 1790.

Since we are here creatures of a day, since "a few summer days, a few winter nights, and the life of man is at an end," why, my dear much esteemed Sir, should You and I let negligent indolence, for I know it is nothing worse, step in between us and bar the enjoyment of a mutual correspondence? We are not shapen out of the

common, heavy, methodical clod, the elemental stuff of the plodding selfish race, the sons of Arithmetick and Prudence; our feelings and hearts are not benumbed and poisoned by the cursed influence of riches, which, whatever blessing they may be in other respects, are no friends to the nobler qualities of the heart; in the name of random Sensibility, then, let never the moon change on our silence any more.

I have had a tract of bad health the most part of this winter, else you had heard from me long ere now. Thank Heaven, I am now got so much better as to be able to partake a little in the enjoyments of life.

Our friend, Cunningham, will perhaps have told you of my going into the Excise. The truth is, I found it a very convenient business to have £50 per annum, nor have I yet felt any of these mortifying circumstances in it that I was led to fear.

Feb. 2nd.

I have not for sheer hurry of business been able to spare five minutes to finish my letter. Besides my farm business, I ride on my Excise matters at least two hundred miles every week. I have not by any means given up the Muses. You will see in the third volume of Johnson's Scots songs that I have contributed my mite there.

But, my dear Sir, little ones that look up to you for paternal protection are an important charge. I have already two fine healthy stout little fellows, and I wish to throw some light upon them. I have a thousand reveries and schemes about them, and their future destiny. Not that I am an Utopian projector in these things. I am resolved never to breed up a son of mine to any of the learned professions. I know the value of independance; and since I cannot give my sons an independant fortune, I shall give them an independant line of life. What a chaos of hurry, chance, and change is this world, when one sits soberly down to reflect on it! To a Father, who himself knows the world, the thought that he shall have Sons to usher into it, must fill him with dread; but if he have Daughters, the prospect in a thoughtful moment is apt to shock him.

I hope Mrs Fordyce & the two young ladies are well. Do, let me forget that they are nieces of yours, & let me say that I never saw a more interesting, sweeter pair of Sisters in my life. I am the fool of my feelings and attachments. I often take up a volume of my Spenser to realise you to my imagination, and think over the social scenes we have had together. God grant that there may be another world more congenial to honest fellows beyond this; a world where these rubs and plagues of absence, distance, misfortunes, ill-health, &c., shall no more damp hilarity and divide friendship.

This I know is your throng season, but half a page will much oblige,

my dear Sir, yours sincerely,

Robt Burns

**The Bard may have been willing to have a moan to his friends about his ill-health, but chose to keep quiet when corresponding with his doctor. Perhaps he had an antipathy towards doctors as illustrated in “Death and Dr Hornbook.”**

**(383) Dr. James Mundell**

January 1790

Dear Doctor,

The bearer, Janet Nievison, is a neighbour, & occasionally a laborer of mine. She has got some complaint in her shoulder, & wants me to find her out a Doctor that will cure her, so I have sent her to you. You will remember that she is just in the jaws of MATRIMONY, so for heaven's sake, get her hale & sound" as soon as possible. We are all pretty well, only the little boy's sore mouth has inflamed Mrs B—'s Nipples.

I am yours

**During Burns' time in Edinburgh, a case involving a prostitute by the name of Margaret Burns (no relation) had received some publicity. She had so offended the city fathers by running a brothel in Edinburgh's Rose Street that they had her banished from the town and she was forced to live out the rest of her life in the countryside. Robert Burns regarded this as unwarranted persecution and evidently felt very strongly about the matter.**

**(387) Peter Hill**

Ellisland 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1790

No! I will not say one word about apologies or excuses for not writing to you. I am a poor, damn'd, rascally Gauger, condemned to gallop at least 200 miles every week to inspect dirty Ponds & yeasty barrels, & where can I find time to write to, or importance to interest any body? The upbraidings of my conscience, nay, the upbraidings of my Wife, have persecuted me on your account these two or three months past. I wish to God that I was a Great Man that my correspondence might throw light upon you, to let the world see what you really are; & then I would make your fortune, without putting my hand in my pocket for you, which, like all other Great Men, I suppose I would avoid as much as possible. What are you doing, & how are you doing? – Have you lately seen any of my few friends? – What is become of the Borough Reform, or how is the fate of my poor Namesake, Mademoiselle Burns decided? Which of their grave Lordships can lay his hand on his heart & say that he has not taken advantage of such frailty; nay, if we may judge by near six thousand years experience, can the World do without such frailty? O Man! but for thee & thy selfish appetites & dishonest artifices, that beauteous form & that once innocent & still ingenuous mind might have shone conspicuous & lovely in the faithful wife & the affectionate mother; & shall thy unfortunate sacrifice to thy pleasures have no claim on thy humanity? As for those

flinty bosomed Prosecutors of Female Frailty & Persecutors of Female Charms – I am quite sober – I am dispassionate – to shew you that I am so I will mend my Pen ere I proceed.

It is written, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain," so I shall neither say, G — curse them! nor G — blast them! nor G — damn them! but may Woman curse them! May Woman blast them! May Woman damn them! May her lovely hands inexorably shut the Portal of Rapture to their most earnest Prayers & fondest essays for entrance! & when many years, & much port and great business have delivered them over to Vulture Gouts & Aspen Palsies, *then* may the dear, bewitching Charmer in derision throw open the blissful Gate to tantalise their impotent desires which like ghosts haunt their bosoms when all their powers to give or receive enjoyment, are forever asleep in the sepulcher of their fathers!!!

Now for business. Our book Society owes you one pound four shillings. A friend of mine will I suppose have given you some money for me. – It is about three-pounds ten shillings or so, from which pay yourself the Monkland Friendly Society's account, & likewise Mr Nielson's account, and send me a copy of it. The gentleman that will have given you the money will be Mr Allan Masterton, Writing Master in Carruber's Close. I saw lately in a review, some extracts from a new Poem called, "The Village Curate," I think; send it me. I want likewise a cheap Copy of The World. Mr Armstrong, the young Poet who does me the honor to mention me so kindly in his Works, please give him my best thanks for the copy of his book. I shall write him my first leisure hour. I like his Poetry much, but I think his style in Prose quite astonishing. What is becoming of that old Veteran in Genius, Wit and B—dry, Smellie, & his book? – Give him my compliments. Does Mr Graham of Gartmore ever enter your Shop now? He is the noblest instance of great talents; great fortune & great Worth that ever I saw in conjunction.

Remember me to Mrs Hill, & believe me to be

My dear Sir, ever Yours  
Robt Burns

**The letters to Nancy McLehose, or Clarinda, had slowed down dramatically. However, she was apparently still very annoyed at him and the next two, written within a short period, were attempts to defend himself from her accusations. The long distances that he was forced to ride in the execution of his Excise duties obviously concerned him, for he refers to them once again. Neither of these letters is complete.**

**(388) Clarinda**

February 1790

I have indeed been ill, Madam, this whole winter. An incessant headache, depression of spirits, & all the truly miserable consequences of a deranged nervous system, have made dreadful havoc of my health and peace. Add to all this, a line of life into which I have lately entered, obliges me to ride, upon an average, at least 200 miles every week. However, thank heaven I am now greatly better in my health.... I cannot, will not, enter into extenuatory circumstances; else I could show you how my precipitate, headlong, unthinking conduct leagued, with a conjuncture of unlucky events, to thrust me out of a possibility of keeping the path of rectitude; to curse me, by an irreconcilable war between my duty & my nearest wishes, & to damn me with a choice only of different species of error and misconduct.

I dare not trust myself further with this subject. – The following song is one of my latest productions; & I send it to you as I would do any thing else, because it pleases myself.

Thine am I, my faithful fair,  
Thine, my lovely Nancy;  
Ev'ry pulse along my veins,  
Ev'ry roving fancy.

**(389) Clarinda**

February 1790

.....in health. I do not rate the fatigue a farthing. This laborious life secures me independence, a blessing which you know few people prize higher than I .

I could not answer your last letter but one when you in so many words tell a man that “you look upon his letters with a smile of contempt,” in what language, Madam, can he answer you? Though I were conscious that I had acted wrong – & I am conscious that I have acted wrong – yet I would not be bullied into repentance, but your last letter quite disarmed me. Determined as you.....

**Another epistle to Nicol with news of the mare, but also of a theatre to be built in Dumfries.**

**(390) William Nicol**

Ellisland, 9<sup>th</sup> February 1790

My dear Sir,

That damn'd mare of yours is dead. I would freely have given her price to have saved her; she has vexed me beyond description. Indebted as I was to your goodness beyond what I can ever repay, I eagerly grasped at your offer to have the mare with me. That I might at least shew my readiness in wishing to be grateful, I took every care of her in my power. She was never crossed for riding above half a score of times by me or in my keeping. I drew her in the plough, one of three, for one poor week. I refused fifty-five shillings for her, which was the best bode I could squeeze for her. I had her up and in fine order for Dumfries fair; when for or five days before the fair, she was seized with an unaccountable disorder in the sinews, or somewhere in the bones of her neck; with a weakness or total loss

of power in her fillets, & in short the whole vertebrae of her spine seemed to be diseased & unhinged, & in eight to forty hours, in spite of the two best farriers in the country, she died & be d-mnd to her! The farriers said she had been quite strained in the fillets beyond cure before you had bought her, & that the poor devil, though she might keep a little flesh, had been jaded and quite worn out with fatigue and oppression. While she was with me, she was under my own eye, and I assure you, my much valued friend, every thing was done for her that could be done; & the accident has vexed me to the heart. In fact I could not pluck up spirits to write you, on account of the unfortunate business.

There is little new in this country. Our theatrical company, of which you must have heard, leave us in a week. Their merit & character are indeed both very great, both on the stage and in private life; not a worthless creature among them; & their encouragement has been accordingly. Their usual run is from eighteen to twenty-five pounds a night; seldom less than the one, & the house will hold no more than the other. There have been repeated instances of sending away, six, and eight, and ten pounds in a night for want of room. A new theatre is to be built by subscription; the first stone is to be laid on Friday first to come. Three hundred guineas have been raised by thirty subscribers, & thirty more might have got if wanted. The manager, Mr Sutherland, was introduced to me by a friend from Ayr; & a worthier or cleverer fellow I have rarely met with. Some of our clergy have slipt in by stealth now and then; but they have got up a farce of their own. – You must have heard how the Rev. Mr Lawson of Kirkmahoe, seconded by the Rev. Mr Kirkpatrick of Dunscore, & the rest of that faction, have accused in formal process, the unfortunate and Rev. Mr Heron of Kirkgunzeon, that in ordaining Mr Nelson to cure the souls in Kirkbean, he, the said Heron, feloniously and treasonably bound the said Nelson to the confession of faith, *so far as it was agreeable to reason and the word of God!*

Mrs B. begs to be remembered most gratefully to you. Little Bobby and Frank are charmingly well and healthy. I am jaded to death with fatigue. For these two or

three months, on an average, I have not ridden less than two hundred miles per week. I have done little in the poetic way. I have given Mrs Sutherland two Prologues; one of which was delivered last week. I have likewise strung out four or five barbarous stanzas to the tune of Chevy Chase, by way of an Elegy on your poor unfortunate mare, beginning the name she got here was Peg Nicholson.

Peg Nicholson was a good bay mare,  
As ever trod on airn;  
But now she's floating down the Nith,  
And past the Mouth o' Cairn.

My best compliments to Mrs Nicol, & little Neddy, and all the family. I hope Ned is a good scholar, & will come out to gather nuts and apples in the next harvest.

I am ever, my dearest Friend, yours,  
Robt Burns

**Young William Burns continues to write to his brother seeking advice.**

**Letter from William Burns**

Newcastle, 24th January, 1790

Dear Brother,

I wrote you about six weeks ago, and I have expected to hear from you every post since, but I suppose your excise business, which you hinted at in your last, has prevented you from writing. By the bye, when and how have you got into the excise; and what division have you got about Dumfries? Those questions please answer in your next, if more important matters do not occur. But in the mean time let me have the letter from John Murdoch which Gilbert wrote me you meant to send; inclose it in yours to me, and let me have them as soon as possible, for I intend to sail for London in a fortnight or three weeks at farthest.

You promised me, when I was intending to go to Edinburgh, to write to me some instructions about behaviour in companies rather above my station, to which I might be eventually introduced. As I may be introduced into such companies at Murdoch's, or in his account, when I go to London, I wish you would write some such instructions now: I never had more need of them, for having spent little of my time in company of any sort since I came to Newcastle, I have almost forgot the common civilities of life. To these instructions pray add some of a moral kind, for though (either through the strength of early impressions or the frigidity of my constitution) I have hitherto withstood the temptations to these vices to which young fellows of my station and time of life are so much addicted, yet I do not know if my virtue will be able to withstand the more powerful temptations of the metropolis; yet, through God's assistance and your instructions, I hope to weather the storm.

Give the compliments of the season and my love to my sisters and all the rest of the family. Tell Gilbert, the first time you write him, that I am well and that I will write him either when I sail or when I arrive at London.

I am &c.,  
W.B.

**Robert Burns may have been fond of the lassies, and he was certainly vociferous in his defence of Margaret Burns, the prostitute, but he never used the services of such ladies and advises his young brother likewise as he responds to William's plea for advice.**

**(391) William Burns**

Ellisland, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1790

My dear William

I would have written to you sooner but I have mislaid Mr Murdoch's letter, and cannot for the life of me lay my hands on it, so I cannot write him for want of a Direction.

If I find it afterwards, I will write him & inclose it to you in London. Now that you are setting out for that place, put on manly resolve, & determine to persevere; & in that case you will be less or more sure of success. One or two things allow me to particularise to you. London swarms with worthless wretches who prey on their fellow-creatures' thoughtlessness or inexperience. Be cautious with forming connections with comrades and companions. You can be pretty good company to yourself & you cannot be too shy of letting any body know you further than to know you as a Sadler. Another caution; I give you great credit for your sobriety with respect to that universal vice, Bad Women. It is an impulse, the hardest to be restrained, but if once a man accustoms himself to gratifications of that impulse, it is then nearly or altogether impossible to restrain it. Whoring is a most ruinous expensive species of dissipation; is spending a poor fellow's money with which he ought clothe and support himself nothing? Whoring has ninety-nine chances in a hundred to bring on a man the most nauseous & excruciating diseases to which Human nature is liable; are disease & impaired constitution trifling considerations? All this is independant of the criminality of it. —

I have gotten the Excise Division in the middle of which I live. Poor little Frank is this morning at the height of the Small-pox. I got him inoculated & hope he is in a good way.

Write me before you leave Newcastle, & as soon as you reach London. In a word, if ever you be, as perhaps you may be, in a strait for a little ready cash, you know my direction. I shall not see you beat, while you fight like a Man.

Farewell ! God bless you!

Robt Burns

**David Staig was Provost of Dumfries and was a man for whom Burns had the utmost respect. Burns wrote to him enclosing a prologue he had sent to Mr Sutherland to be read at his wife's Benefit Night asking Staig to ensure it was politically correct.**

**(394) David Staig**

Ellisland. Monday morn; 1<sup>st</sup> March 1790

Sir,

My friend and fellow-laborer in scaling the barren heights of Parnassus, Mr Sutherland, having asked me for a Prologue, or something like it, for Mrs Sutherland's benefit-night, I have composed a Prologue "or something like it," for him, as you see by the inclosed. It is not for its *merit* that I trouble you with a copy of it; if it escape damnation, it will be "of *Grace*, not of *Works*," but there is a dark stroke of politics in the belly of the Piece, and like a faithful loyal Subject, I lay it down before You, as the Chief Magistrate of the Country, at least the only Magistrate whom I have met with in the Country who had the honor to be very conspicuous as a Gentleman; that if the said Poem be found to contain any Treason, or words of treasonable construction, or any Fama clamosa or Scandalum magnatum against our Sovereign lord the King, or any of his liege Subjects, the said Prologue may not see the light. Mr Sutherland may possibly mention the circumstances for your strictures, or I may possibly meet with you on wednesday in your market-day perambulations.

To tell you the truth, the whole truth, (in the language of that elegant Science, the Law,) the real reason why I trouble you with this, is, that I had a woman's longing for an opportunity of this kind to assure You, how gratefully & truly,

I have the honor to be Sir,  
Your oblidged & obedient humble servant

Robt Burns

**William Burns had by arrived in London, but it would appear that he did not share his older brother's appetite for the good-life.**

**Letter from William Burns**

London, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1790

Dear Brother,

I have been here three weeks come Tuesday, and would have written you sooner, but was not settled in a place of work. We were ten days on our passage from Shields; the weather being calm. I was not sick, except one day when it blew pretty hard. I got into work the Friday after I came to town; I wrought there only eight days, their job being done. I got work again in a shop in the Strand, the next day after I left my former master. It is only a temporary place, but I expect to be settled soon in a shop to my mind, although it will be a harder task than I first imagined, for there are such swarms of fresh hands just come from the country that the town is quite overstocked, and except one is a particularly good workman (which you know I am not, nor, I am afraid, ever will be) it is hard to get a place: However I don't yet despair to bring up my lee-way, and shall endeavour if possible to sail within three or four points of the wind. The encouragement here is not what I expected, wages being very low in proportion to the expense of living, but yet, if I can only lay by the money that is spent by others in my situation in dissipation and riot, I expect soon to return to you the money I borrowed of you and live comfortably besides.

In the mean time, I wish you would send all my best linen shirts to London, which you may easily do by sending them to some of your Edinburgh friends, to be shipped from Leith. Some of them are too little; don't send any but what are good, and I wish one of my sisters could find as much time to trim my shirts at the breast, for there is no such thing to be seen here as a plain shirt, even for wearing, which

is what I want these for. I mean to get one or two new shirts here for Sundays, but I assure you that linen here is a very expensive article. I am going to write to Gilbert to send me an Ayrshire cheese; if he can spare it he will send it to you, and you may send it with the shirts, but I expect to hear from you before that time. The cheese I could get here; but I will have a pride in eating Ayrshire cheese in London, and the expense of sending it will be little, as you are sending the shirts any how,

I write this by J. Stevens in his lodgings, while he is writing to Gilbert. He is well and hearty, which is a blessing to me as well as to him. We were at Covent Garden chapel this forenoon to hear the *Calf* preach; (Rev. James Steven) he is grown very fat and is as boisterous as ever. There is a whole colony of Kilmarnock people here, so we don't want for acquaintance.

Remember me to my sisters and all the family. I shall give you all the observations I have made on London in my next, when I shall have seen more of it.

I am, dear Brother, yours &c.,

W.B.

**Burns met Francis Grose through mutual friends and immediately took a liking to the man. Grose was a writer specialising in Scottish antiquities and told Burns that he would include Alloway Kirk in his next volume provided that Burns would furnish him with a poem to accompany the illustration. This turned out to be the inspiration for what Burns considered to be his finest work, "Tam o' Shanter."**

**(401) Captain Francis Grose**

June 1790

Among the many Witch Stories I have heard relating to Alloway Kirk, I distinctly remember only two or three.

Upon a stormy night, amid whirling squalls of wind & bitter blasts of hail, in short, on such a night as the devil would chuse to take the air in, a farmer, or the farmer's servant was plodding & plashing homewards with his plough irons on his shoulder, having been getting some repairs on them at a neighbouring smithy. His way lay by the Kirk of Alloway, & being rather on the anxious look-out in approaching a place so well known to be a favourite haunt of the devil & the devil's friends & emissaries, he was struck aghast by discovering through the horrors of the storm and stormy night, a light, which on his nearer approach, plainly shewed itself to proceed from the haunted edifice. Whether he had been fortified from above on his devout supplication, as is customary with people when they suspect the immediate presence of Satan; or whether, according to another custom, he had got courageously drunk at the smithy, I will not pretend to determine; but so it was that he ventured to go up to, nay into the very kirk. As good luck would have it, his temerity came off unpunished. The members of the infernal junto were all on some midnight business or other, & he saw nothing but a kind of kettle or caldron, depending from the roof, over the fire, simmering some heads of unchristened children, limbs of executed malefactors, &c. for the business of the night. It was in for a penny, in for a pound, with the honest ploughman; so without ceremony he unhooked the caldron from off the fire, & pouring out the damnable ingredients, inverted it on his head, & carried it fairly home, where it remained long in the family, a living evidence of the truth of the story.

Another story which I can prove to be equally authentic was as follows. –

On a market day in the town of Ayr, a farmer from Carrick, and consequently whose way lay by the very gate of Alloway kirk-yard, in order to cross the river Doon at the old bridge, which is about two or three hundred yards further on than the said gate, had been detained by his business, 'till by the time he reached Alloway, it was the wizard hour between night and morning. Though he was terrified with a blaze streaming from the kirk, yet as it a well-known fact that to turn

back on these occasions is running by far the greatest risk of mischief, he prudently advanced on his road. When he had reached the gate of the kirk-yard, he was surprised & entertained, through the ribs and arches of an old gothic window which still faces the highway, to see a dance of witches merrily footing round their old sooty black-guard master, who was keeping them alive with the power of his bag-pipe. The farmer, stopping his horse to observe them a little, could plainly descry the faces of many old women of his acquaintance and neighbourhood. How the gentleman was dressed, tradition does not say; but the ladies were all in their smocks; & one of them happening unluckily to have a smock which was considerably too short to answer all the purpose of that piece of dress, our farmer was so tickled that he involuntarily burst out, with a loud laugh, "Well luppen Maggy wi' the short sark!" & recollecting himself, instantly spurred his horse to the top of his speed. I need not mention the universally known fact that no diabolical power can pursue you beyond the middle of a running stream. Lucky it was for the poor farmer that the river Doon was so near, for notwithstanding the speed of his horse, which was a good one, against he reached the middle arch of the bridge, and consequently the middle of the stream, the pursuing, vengeful, hags were so close at his heels, that one of them actually sprung to seize him; but it was too late, nothing was on her side of the stream but the horse's tail, which immediately gave way to her infernal grip, as if blasted by a stroke of lightning; but the farmer was beyond her reach. However, the unsightly, tailless condition of the vigorous steed was to the last hour of the noble creature's life, an awful warning to the Carrick farmers, not to stay too late in Ayr markets.

The last relation I shall give, though equally true, is not so well identified as the two former, with regard to the scene; but as the best authorities give it Alloway, I shall relate it.

On a summer's evening, about the time that Nature puts on her sables to mourn the expiry of the cheerful day, a shepherd boy belonging to a farmer in the immediate neighbourhood of Alloway Kirk, had just folded his charge, and was

returning home. As he passed the kirk, in the adjoining field, he fell in with a crew of men and women who were busy pulling stems of the plant ragwort, he or she got astride of it & called out, "Up Horsie!" on which the ragwort flew off, like Pegasus, through the air with its rider. The foolish boy likewise pulled his ragwort, & cried with the rest "Up Horsie!" and strange to tell, he flew away with the company. The first stage at which the cavalcade stopt, was a merchant's wine cellar in Bordeaux, where without saying by your leave, they quaffed away at the best the cellar could afford, until the morning, foe to the imps and works of darkness, threatened to throw light on the matter, & frightened them from their carousals.

The poor shepherd lad, being equally a stranger to the scene and the liquor, heedlessly got himself drunk, & when the rest took horse he fell asleep, and was found so next day by some of the people belonging to the merchant. Somebody that understood Scotch, asking him what he was, he said he was such-a-one's herd in Aloway; and by some means or other getting home again, he lived to tell the world the wondrous tale.

I am, &c. &c.

Rob Burns

**Robert Burns' life was seldom a happy one. He had just completed an Elegy on his good friend, Captain Matthew Henderson, when word came from London informing him of the death of his young brother, William.**

**(411) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Ellisland, 30th July 1790

Ten minutes ago, I had no idea, my dear honored Friend, that your distresses could be of comfort to me, which, odd as it may sound, they have just now been. I

had transcribed off for you the inclosed Elegy on a much-valued acquaintance of mine, which I thought might perhaps amuse you a little; and was just set down to write you by this conveyance which is my wife & your little God-son going to Ayrshire to see their friends, when a servant of mine brought me from town, your letter, & one from London acquainting me with the death of a brother of mine who was there a journeyman Saddler. He was just twenty-three, a fine, worthy, young fellow; & while my bosom labored with the anguish consequent on the distressing intelligence – Poor Mrs Henri! – said I to myself; & lifted up my heart in gratitude that I was not called to bear such a load of woe as hers.

I am not collected to write to you a letter. I am happy however that Miss Dunlop is getting better, & particularly that YOU are not likely to suffer so much as I dreaded in precious health. – That was a shocking alarm respecting the Major. It would indeed, Madam, have been a load of sorrows more than you could have borne.

I have just finished the Stanzas I mentioned in my last. Allow me, my dear Friend, to dedicate them to you, as a Relique at the shrine of friendship – a friendship that makes so large a share of the enjoyment of my existence. If ever I print it, permit me to prefix your name; & if the period of publication should be at some (I hope very) distant time, when you & I may be in worlds as different as Heaven & Earth, & should I be the survivor, I shall certainly mention it.

Sacred to the Memory of a much-valued & dearly respected Friend

Do let me hear from you! – You cannot imagine what pleasure it will give me!

Adieu!

Robt Burns

**Next we have an official letter from Burns to his Superior Officer in the Excise explaining in detail why he had taken a particular course of action.**

**(418) John Mitchell**

September 1790

*Answers to the Petition of Thomas Johnston*

1mo. Whether the Petitioner has been in use formerly to malt all his grain at one operation is foreign to the purpose; this last season he certainly malted his crop at four or five operations; but be that as it may, Mr Johnston ought to have known, that by express Act of Parliament, no Malt, however small the quantity can be legally manufactured *until* previous Entry be made, in writing, of all the ponds, barns, floors, &c so to be used before the grain be put to steep. In the Excise Entry books for the Division, there is not a syllable of Thomas Johnston's name for a number of years bygone.

2d. True it is, that Mr Burns on his first ride, in answer to Mr Johnston's question anent the conveyancing of the Notices, among other ways, pointed out the sending it by post as the most eligible method; but at the same time added this express Clause, & to which Mr Burns is willing to make faith. "At the same time, remember, Mr Johnston, that the Notice is at your risk, until it reach me!"

Farther, when Mr Burns came to the Petitioner's kiln, there was a servant belonging to Mr Johnston ploughing at a very considerable distance from the kiln, who left his plough & three horses without a driver, & came into the kiln, which Mr B— thought was a rather suspicious circumstance; as there was nothing extraordinary in an Excise Officer going into a legal Maltfloor, so as to leave three horses yoked to a plough in the distant middle of a moor.

The Servant on being repeatedly questioned by Mr Burns could not tell when the malt was put to steep, when it was taken out; in short was determined to be entirely ignorant in the affair. Bye & bye, Mr Johnston's Son came in, & on being

questioned as to the steeping, taking out the grain, &c. Mr Johnston Junior referred me to this said servant, this ploughman, who, he said must remember it best as having been the principal actor in the business. The lad, *then*, having gotten his cue, circumstantially recollected all about it.

All this time though I was telling the Son & Servant the nature of the premunire they had incurred, though they pleaded for mercy keenly, the affair of the Notice having been sent never once occurred to them, not even the son, who is said to have been the Bearer. This was a stroke reserved for & worthy of the gentleman himself. As to Mrs Kellock's oath, it proves nothing. She did indeed depone to a line being left for me at her house, which said line miscarried. It was a sealed letter; she could not tell whether it was a Malt Notice or not. She could not even condescend on the Month, nor so much as the season of the year. The truth is, Thomas Johnston & his family being Seeders, & consequently coming every Sunday to Thornhill Meeting-house, they were a good conveyance for the several Malters & Traders in their neighborhood to transmit to Post their Notices, Permits, &..

But why all this tergiversation? It was put to the Petitioner in open Court, after a full investigation of the Cause, "Was he willing to swear that he meant no fraud in this matter?" And the Justices told him that if he swore to that, he would be assoilzied, otherwise he would be fined; still the Petitioner, after ten minutes consideration, found his conscience unequal to the task & declined the Oath.

Now indeed he says he is willing to swear; he has been exercising his Conscience in private & will perhaps stretch a point. But the fact to which he is to swear was equally & in all its parts known to him on that day when he refused to swear, as today; nothing can give him further light as to the intention of his mind, respecting his meaning or not meaning a fraud in the affair. No time can cast light farther on the present resolves of the mind; but Time will reconcile, & has reconciled many a Man to that Iniquity which at first he abhorred.

**Burns now attempts to improve his lot within the Excise through the influence of friends in high places**

**(419) Robert Graham of Fintry**

Dumfries, Globe Inn, 4<sup>th</sup> September 1790

Sir,

The very kind letter you did me the honor to write to me, reached me just as I was setting in to the Whirlpool of an Excise-fraud-Court, from the vortex of which I am just emerged – Heaven knows, in a very unfit situation to do justice to the workings of my bosom when I sit down and write to the

“Friend of my life – true Patron of my rhymes!”

As my Division consists of ten large parishes, & I am sorry to say, hitherto very carelessly surveyed, I had a good deal of business for the Justices; & I believe my Decreet will amount to between fifty & sixty pounds. I took, I fancy, rather a new way with my Frauds. – I recorded every Defaulter; but at the Court, I myself begged off every poor body that was unable to pay, which seeming candour gave me so much implicit credit with the Hon. Bench that with high Compliments they gave me such ample vengeance on the rest, that my Decreet is double the amount of any Division in the District.

I am going to give up, or subset my farm directly. I have not liberty to subset, but if my Master will grant me, I propose giving it just as I have it to myself, to an industrious fellow of a near relation of mine. Farming this place in which I live, would just be a livelihood to a man who would be the greatest drudge in his own

family, so is no object; & living here hinders me from that knowledge of in the business of Excise which is absolutely necessary for me to attain.

I did not like to be an incessant beggar from you. A Port Division I wish if possible to get; my kind funny friend Captain Grose, offered to interest Mr Brown, & perhaps Mr Wharton for me, a very handsome opportunity of getting Mr Corbet superior general, to pledge every service in his power; then I was just going to acquaint you with what I had done, or rather what was done for me, that as every body have their particular friends to serve, you might find the less obstacle in what, I assure you Sir, I constantly count on – your wishes & endeavours to be of service to me.

As I had an eye to getting on the Examiners list, if attainable by me, I was going to ask you if it would be of any service to try the interest of some Great, & some *very* Great folks to whom I have the honor to be known; I mean in the way of a Treasury Warrant. But much as early impressions have given me the horror of Spectres, &c. still, I would face the Arch-fiend in Miltonic pomp, at the head of all his legions; and hear that infernal shout which blind John says, “Tore hell’s concave :” rather than crawl in, a dust-licking Petitioner, before the presence of Mighty Man, & bear amid all the mortifying pangs of Self-annihilation, the swelling consequence of his damn’d State, & the cold monosyllables of his hollow heart!

It was in the view of trying for a Port, that I asked Collector Mitchel to get me appointed, which he has done, to a vacant foot-walk in Dumfries. If ever I am so fortunate as to be called out to do business as a Supervisor, I would chuse the North of Scotland, but until that Utopian period, I own I have some wayward feelings at appearing as a simple Gauger in a Country where I am only known by fame. Portglasgow, Greenock or Dumfries, Ports, would be in the mean time my ultimatum.

I inclose you a tribute I have just been paying to the memory of my friend, Matthew Henderson, whom I dare say you must have known. I had acknowledged your goodness sooner, but for want of time to transcribe the Poem. Poor Matthew! I can forgive Poverty for hiding Virtue & Piety. They are not only plants that flourish best in the shade, but they also produce their sacred fruits for another world. But, when the haggard Beldam throws her invidious veil over Wit, Spirit, &c. but I trust another world will cast light on the subject.

I have the honor to be, Sir  
Your deeply obliged and very humble servant  
Robt Burns

**Robert Burns had by now completed “Tam o’ Shanter,” said to have been written in a single day as he walked up and down the riverside path at Ellisland, and sent it to Francis Grose as per his request.**

**(427A) Captain Francis Grose**

Ellisland 1<sup>st</sup> December 1790

Sir,

The Post is just going, but 'tis no matter I am not, God knows, vain of my Composition, & you like intellectual food more substantial, than the whipt syllabub of epistolary Compliment.

Inclosed is one of the Aloway-kirk Stories, done in Scots verse. Should you think it worthy a place in your Scots Antiquities, it will lengthen not a little, the altitude of my Muse's pride. If you do me the honor to print it, I am afraid it will be impossible to transmit me the Proof-Sheets, otherwise I would like to see them. After all, Sir, do by me as I would do by you, or any body; print my piece or not as you think

proper. Authors have too often very little to say in the disposal of this world's affairs, but it would be very hard if they were not absolute in their own Works.

Your draught of Kilwinning is finished, but not come to hand. I shall send it you the minute it reaches me. I hope it will answer your wishes, but at all events it has one merit, it will cost you nothing but the Postage. I wish I could give you a more substantial proof, with how much respectful regard & sincere esteem, I have the honor to be,

Sir,  
Your obliged humble servant  
Robt Burns

**The period of financial security that Burns enjoyed was short indeed. Here he is complaining bitterly about poverty and the huge difference in attitudes towards the rich and the poor.**

**(430) Peter Hill**

Ellisland, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1791

Take these three guineas & place them overgainst that damned account of yours, which has gagged my mouth these five or six months! I can as little write Good Things as write Apologies to the man I owe money to. O the supreme curse of making three guineas do the business of five! Not all the twelve labors of Hercules, not all the Hebrews' three centuries of Egyptian bondage, were such an insuperable business, such an infernal task.

Poverty! Thou half-sister of Death, thou cousin-german of Hell, where shall I find force of execration equal to thy demerits! By thee, the venerable Ancient, though in thy invidious obscurity, grown hoary in the practice of every virtue under Heaven, now laden with years & wretchedness, implores from a stony-hearted son of

Mammon whose sun of prosperity never knew a cloud, a little, little aid to support his very existence, and is by him denied & insulted. By thee, the Man of Sentiment whose heart glows with independance & melts with sensibility, inly pines under the neglect or writhes in bitterness of soul under the contumely, of arrogant, unfeeling Wealth. By thee the Man of Genius whose ill-starred ambition plants him at the table of the Fashionable & Polite, must see in suffering silence his remark neglected & his person despised, while shallow Greatness in his idiot attempts at wit shall meet with countenance & applause.

Nor is it only the family of Worth that have reason to complain of thee; the children of Folly & Vice, tho' in common with thee the offspring of Evil, smart equally under thy rod. Owing to thee, the Man of unfortunate dispositions & neglected education, is condemned as a fool for his dissipation; despised & shunned as a needy wretch, When his follies as usual have brought him to want; & is abhorred as a miscreant, & perishes by the justice of his country. But far otherwise is the lot of Man of Family & Fortune. His early extravagance & folly are fire & spirit; his consequent wants are the embarrassments of an Honest Fellow; & when, to remedy the matter, he sets out with a legal commission to plunder distant provinces & massacre peaceful nations, he returns laden with the spoils of rapine & murder., lives wicked & respected, & dies a villain & a Lord. Nay, worst of all – Alas for hapless Woman! The needy creature who was shivering at the corner of the street, waiting to earn the wages of casual prostitution, is ridden down by the chariot wheels of the CORONETED Rep, hurrying on to the adulterous assignation, she, who without the same necessities to plead, riots nightly in the same guilty trade!!!

Well, Divines may say what they please, but I maintain that a hearty blast of execration is to the mind, what breathing vein is to the body; the overloaded sluices of both are wonderfully relieved by their respective evacuations. I feel myself vastly easier than when I began my letter, & can now go on to business. – You will be so good then as send by the first Dumfries Carrier, all, or as many as you have by you, of the following books.

The Adventurer – Joseph Andrews – Don Quixote --The Idler – Arabian nights entertainment – Dr Price’s dissertations on Providence, prayer, Death & Miracles – Roderick Random -- & -- the 5<sup>th</sup> Volume of the Observer – for these books take your fair price, as our Society are no judges on the matter, & will insist on having the following damned trash, which you must also send us, as cheaply as possible – Scots Worthies – Boston’s 4 fold State – Marrow of Modern Divinity – Cole on God’s Sovereignty – Newton’s letters – Doddridge’s thoughts – Gib’s Act & Testimony – Confession of faith -- & Captain Robert Boyle. – I forgot to mention among the valuable books, Blair’s Sermons & the latest edition of Guthrie’s Geographical grammar, which two books be sure to send us.

**(435) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Ellisland, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1791

When I tell you, Madam, that by a fall, not from my horse but with my horse, I have been a cripple for some time, & that this is the first day my arm & hand have been able to serve me in writing, you will allow that it is too good an apology for my seemingly ungrateful silence. I am now getting better & am able to rhyme a little, which implies some tolerable ease; as I cannot think that the most poetic genius is able to compose on the rack.

I do not remember if I ever mentioned to you my having an idea of composing an Elegy on the late Miss Burnet of Monbodo. I had the honor of being pretty well acquainted with her, & have seldom felt so much at the loss of an acquaintance as when I heard that so amiable & accomplished a piece of God’s works was no more. I have as yet gone no farther than the following fragment, of which please let have your opinion. You know that Elegy is so exhausted a subject that any new idea on the business is not to be expected; ’tis well if we can place an old idea in a

new light. How far I have succeeded as to this last, you will judge from what follows.

Elegy on the late Miss Burnet of Monbodo –

Life ne'er exulted in so rich a prize,

I have proceeded no farther.

Your kind letter, with your kind remembrance of your Godson came safe. To this last, Madam, it is scarcely what my pride can bear. As to the little fellow, he is, partiality apart, the finest boy I have of a long time seen. He is now seventeen months old, has the small-pox & measles over, has cut several teeth, & yet never had a grain of Doctor's drugs in his bowels.

I am truly happy to hear that the "little Floweret: is blooming so fresh & fair, & that the Mother-Plant is rather recovering her drooping head. Soon & well may her "cruel wounds" be healed! I have written thus far with a good deal of difficulty. When I get a little abler you shall hear farther from,

Madam, your obliged & most devoted servant  
Robt Burns

**Robert Burns now explains to Alexander Cunningham that he can only write meaningfully from the heart and is unable to turn out verses to order. He also tells how he had felt slighted when an elegy that he had been asked to compose was totally ignored.**

**(441) Alexander Cunningham**

Ellisland, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1791

My dear Cunningham

I received your first letter two days ago; the last came to hand this moment. I was highly delighted with the well-carried on Allegory in your friend's letter. I read it to two or three acquaintances who had souls to enjoy a good thing, & we had a very hearty laugh at it. I have felt all along the line of my Muse's inclination, & I fear your Archery subject would be uphill work with her. I have two or three times in my life composed from the wish, rather than from the impulse, but I never succeeded to any purpose. One of these times I shall remember with gnashing of teeth. 'Twas on the death of the late Lord President Dundas. My very worthy & most respected Friend, Mr Alexander Wood, Surgeon, urged me to pay a compliment in the way of my trade to his Lordship's memory. Well, to work I went, & produced a copy of Elegiac verses, some of them I own rather common place, & others rather hide-bound, but on they whole though they were far from being in my best manner, they were tolerable; & had they been the production of a Lord or a Baronet, they would have been thought very clever. I wrote a letter, which however was in my very best manner, & inclosing my Poem, Mr Wood carried along to Mr Solicitor Dundas that then was, & not finding him at home, left the parcel for him. His Solicitorship never took the smallest notice of the Letter, the Poem, or the Poet. From that time, highly as I respect the talents of their Family, I never see the name Dundas, in the column of a newspaper, but my heart seems straitened for room in my bosom; & if I feel obliged to read aloud a paragraph relating to one of them, I feel my forehead flush, & my nether lip quivers. Had I been an obscure Scribbler, as I was then in the heyday of my fame; or had I been a dependant Hangeron for favor or pay; or had the bearer of the letter been any other than a gentleman who does honor to the city in which he lives, to the Country that produced him, & to the God that created him, Mr Solicitor might have had some apology.

But enough of this ungracious subject. – A friend of mine who transcribed the last parcel, is to be with me in a day or two, & I shall get him to copy out the two poems you mention. I have this evening sketched out a Song, which I have a good mind to send you, though I foresee it will cost you another groat of postage. By the way, you once mentioned to me a method of franking letters to you, but I have forgotten the direction. My song is intended to sing to a Strathspey reel of which I am very fond, called in Cummin's Collection of Strathspeys, "Ballendalloch's reel;" & in other Collections that I have met with, it is known by the name of "Candelmore." It takes three Stanzas of four lines each, to go through the whole tune. I shall give the song to Johnson for the fourth vol. of his Publication of Scots Songs, which he has just now in hand.

### Song –

Sweet are the banks, the banks o' Doon,

If the foregoing Piece be worth your strictures, let me have them. For my own part, a thing I have just composed always appears through a double portion of that partial medium in which an Author will view his own works. I believe in general, Novelty has something in it that inebriates the fancy; & not unfrequently dissipates & fumes like any other intoxication, and leaves the poor Patient as usual with an aching heart. A striking instance of this might be adduced in the revolution of many Hymeneal honeymoon. But lest I sink into stupid Prose, so sacriliciously intrude on the office of my Parish-priest, who is in himself one vast constellation of dullness, & from his weekly zenith rays out his contradictory stupidity to the no small edification & enlightening of the heavy & opaque pericraniums of his gaping Admirers; I shall fill up the page in my own way, & give you another Song of my late composition, which will appear perhaps in Johnson's work as well as the former. You must know a beautiful Jacobite Air, "There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame." When Political combustion ceases to be object of Princes & Patriots, it then, you know, becomes the lawful prey of Historians & Poets.

Song –

By yon castle wa', at he close of the day,

If you like the air, & the stanzas hit your fancy, you cannot imagine, my dear Friend, how much you would oblige me if by the charms of your delightful voice you would give my honest effusion to “The memory of joys that are past,” to the few friends you indulge in that pleasure. But I have scribbled on till I hear the clock has intimated the near approach of –

“That Hour, o' night's black arch the key stane” so Goodnight to you! – and sound be your sleep, & delectable your dreams! Apropos, how do you like this thought in a ballad I have just now on the tapis?

I look to the west, when I gae to rest  
That happy my dreams & my slumbers may be;  
For far in in the west lives he I lo'e best  
The man that is dear to my babie & me!

Goodnight, once more; & God bless you!

Robt Burns

**Another letter to Mrs Dunlop informing her of the birth of another son, William Nicol Burns. However, he omits mentioning to her that he was also the father of a daughter born just over a week before his son. This was the result of an affair with Anna Park, barmaid at the Globe Inn. Jean Armour accepted this daughter as her own with the comment that “ Rab should hae twa wives.”**

**(443) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Ellisland, 11<sup>th</sup> April 1791

I am once more able, my honored friend, to return you with my own hand, thanks for the many instances of your friendship & particularly for your kind anxiety in this last disaster that my evil genius had in store for me. However, life is chequered, joy & sorrow, for on Saturday morning last Mrs Burns made me a present of a fine boy, rather stouter but not so handsome as your God-son at his time of life was. – Indeed I look upon your little Namesake to be my chef d'oeuvre in that species of manufacture, as I look on “Tam o’ Shanter” to be my standard performance in the Poetical line. ’Tis true, both one & the other discover a spice of roguish waggery that might perhaps be as well spared; but then they also shew in my opinion a force of genius & finishing polish that I despair of ever excelling. Mrs Burns is getting stout again, & laid as lustily about her today at breakfast as a Reaper from the cornridge. That is the peculiar privilege & blessing of our hale, sprightly damsels, that are bred among the hay & heather. We cannot hope for that highly polished mind, that charming delicacy of soul, which is found among the Female world in the more elevated stations of life, which is certainly by far the most bewitching charm in that famous cestus of Venus. It is indeed such an inestimable treasure, that where it can be had in its native heavenly purity, unstained by some or other of the many shades of affectation, & unallayed by some or other of the many species of caprice, I declare to Heaven I would think it cheaply purchased at the expence of every other earthly good! But as this angelic creature is extremely rare in any station & rank of life, & totally denied to such a humble one as mine; we meaner mortals must put up with the next rank of female excellence – as fine a figure & face we can produce as any rank of life whatever; rustic, native grace, unaffected modesty, & unsullied purity; Nature’s mother-wit, & the rudiments of Taste; a simplicity of soul, unsuspecting of, because acquainted with the crooked ways of a selfish, interested disingenuous world; & the dearest charm of all the rest, an unyielding sweetness of disposition & a generous warmth of heart, grateful for love on our part, & ardently glowing with a more than equal return; these, with a

healthy frame, a sound, vigorous constitution, which your higher ranks can scarcely ever hope to enjoy, are the charms of lovely woman in my humble walk of life.

This is the greatest effort my broken arm has yet made. Do, let me hear by first post, how cher petit Monsieur, comes on with his pustules. – May Almighty Goodness preserve & restore him!!!

I have the honr to be, Madam  
Your oblidge friend  
Robt Burns

In a letter I had lately from Dr Moore he bids me to remember him to you, & beg of you not to think that his friendship flags when his pen lies still. He says except on business, he now seldom lifts a pen at all. But, this is from myself, the devil take such apathy of Friendship!!!

R.B.

**As we read with monotonous regularity in the press of teachers being accused by their pupils of a range of offences, it is interesting to discover this is by no means a recent phenomenon.**

**(456) Alexander Cunningham**

11<sup>th</sup> June 1791

Let me interest you, my dear Cunningham, in behalf of the gentleman who gives you this. He is Mr Clarke of Moffat, principal schoolmaster there, & is at present suffering severely under the persecution of one or two malicious but powerful individuals of his employers. He is accused of harshness to some perverse dunces that were placed under his care. God help the Teacher, a man of genius &

sensibility, for such is my friend Clarke, when the blockheaded Father presents him with his booby son, & insists on having the rays of science lighted up in a fellow's head whose skull is impervious & inaccessible by any other way than with a positive fracture with a cudgel. A fellow, whom in fact it savours of Impiety to attempt making a scholar of, as he has already been marked, "A Blockhead," in the book of fate at the Almighty fiat of his Creator.

The Patrons of Moffat-school are, the ministers, Magistrates & Town Council of Edinburgh, & as the business now comes before them, let me beg my dearest Friend to do every thing in his power to serve the interests of a man of genius, a man of worth, & a man whom I particularly respect & esteem. You know some good fellows among the Magistrates & Council, though, God knows, 'tis generally a very unfit soil for good fellows to flourish in, but particularly you have much to say with a Reverend Gentleman to whom you have the honor of being very nearly related, & whom this Country & Age have had the honor to produce – I need not name the Historian of Charles the fifth. I tell him through the medium of his nephew's influence that Mr Clarke is a gentleman who will not disgrace even his Patronisation.

I know the merits of the cause thoroughly; & I say, that my friend is falling a sacrifice to prejudiced Ignorance & envious, *causeless* Malice. God help the children of Dependance! Hated & persecuted by their enemies, & too often, -- Alas, almost unexceptionably, *always* received by their friends with insulting disrespect, & heart-stinging reproach, under the thin disguises of cold civility, & humiliating advice. O, to be a sturdy Savage, stalking in the pride of his independance amidst the solitary wilds of his desarts! Rather than in civilized life helplessly to tremble for a subsistence, precarious as the caprice of his fellow-creature! Every man has his virtues, & no man is without his failings; & curse on that priviledged plaindealing of friendship, which in the hour of my calamity, cannot reach forth the helping hand, without at the same time pointing out those failings, & assigning their share in my present distress. My friends, for such the world calls you, & such ye think

yourselves to be, pass by my Virtues if you please; but do, also, spare my follies; the first will witness in my breast for themselves, & the last will give pain enough in the ingenuous mind without you. And, since deviating, more, or less, from the paths of Propriety & Rectitude must be incident to Human-nature, do thou, Fortune, put it in my power, always from my own pocket to pay the penalties of these errors. I do not want to be independant that I may sin; but I want to be independant in my sinning.

**Alexander Findlater was the Bard's Superior Officer in the Dumfries Excise Division, and although the pair were very friendly, friendship never stood in the way of discipline in Findlater's eyes.**

**(460) Alexander Findlater**

Sunday even; June 1791

Dear Sir,

I am both surprised & vexed at the accident of Lorimer's Stock. The last survey I made prior to Mr Lorimer's going to Edinburgh I was very particular in my inspection & the quantity was certainly in his possession as I stated it. The surveys I have made during his absence might as well have been marked "*key absent*" as I never found any body but the lady, who is not mistress of keys, &c. to know anything of it, and one of the times it would have rejoiced all Hell to see her so drunk. I have not surveyed there since his return. I know the gentleman's ways are, like the grace of God, past all comprehension; but I shall give the house a severe scrutiny tomorrow morning & send you in the naked facts. I know, Sir, & regret deeply, that this business glances with a malign aspect on my character as an Officer, but I am really innocent in the affair, & the gentleman is known to be an illicit Dealer, & particularly as this is the *single* instant of the least shadow of carelessness or impropriety in my conduct as an Officer, I shall be peculiarly

unfortunate if my character shall fall a sacrifice to the dark manoeuvres of a Smuggler.

I am, Sir, your obliged & obedient humble servant

Robt Burns

I send you some rhymes I have just finished which tickle my fancy a little.

**Burns was now on the receiving end of some very unromantic letters from his old love, Nancy McLehose. It is unclear if this particular letter was addressed to her as Clarinda for we do not have the end of the letter to see how it was signed. The few remaining letters sent to her are signed either Robert Burns or simply R.B., so we will presume that the Clarinda correspondence is now finished.**

**(462) Agnes McLehose**

Ellisland, July 1791

I have received both your last letters, Madam, & would have answered the first long ago. But on what subject shall I write you? How can you expect a correspondent should write you, when you declare that you mean to preserve his letters with a view, sooner or later, to expose them on the pillory of derision & the rack of criticism? This is gagging me completely as to speaking the sentiments of my bosom; else, Madam, I could perhaps too truly

“Join grief with grief & echo sighs to thine!”

I have perused your most beautiful but most pathetic Poem – do not ask me how often, or with what emotions.

You know that, "I dare to *sin*, but not to *lie*." Your Verses wring the confessions from my inmost soul that – I will say it – expose it if you please – that – I have more than once on my life been the victim of a damning conjecture of circumstances; & that to me you must be ever

"Dear as the light that visits these sad eyes"

\*            \*

Sweet Sensibility how charming,

I have just, *since I had yours*, composed the inclosed Stanzas. Let me know your opinion of them. I have one other Piece in your taste, but I have a snatch of time.

**Deborah Duff Davies was a young lady who Burns met through mutual friends. She was the inspiration for several songs, the most famous of which is "Bonie Wee Thing." Burns returned to his old flamboyant self when writing to Deborah.**

**(472A) Deborah Duff Davies**

October 1791

Madam,

I understand that my very neighbour, Mr Riddell, has informed you that I have made you the subject of some verses. There is something in the idea of being the burden of a ballad, that I do not think Job or Moses, though such patterns of patience & meekness, could have resisted the curiosity to know what that ballad was; so my worthy friend, what I dare say he never intended, has done me a mischief; & reduced me to the unfortunate alternative of leaving your curiosity ungratified, or else disgusting you with foolish verses, the unfinished production of a random moment, & never meant to have met your ear. I have heard or read

somewhere, of a gentleman, who had some genius, much eccentricity, & very considerable dexterity with his pencil. – In the accidental groups of social life into which one is thrown, whenever this gentleman met with a character in a more than ordinary degree congenial to his soul, he used to steal a sketch of the face, merely, he said, as a nota bene to point out the agreeable recollection to his memory. What this gentleman's pencil was to him, is my Muse to me: & the inclosed verses I do myself the honor to send you, are a memento exactly of the same kind. It may be more owing to the fastidiousness of my caprice than the delicacy of my taste, but I am so often, tired, disgusted & hurt with the insipidity; affectation & pride of mankind, that when I meet with a person "after my own heart." I positively feel what an orthodox Protestant would call a species of idolatry, & which acts on my mind like inspiration, & I can no more resist rhyming on the impulse, than an Eolian harp can refuse its tones to the streaming air. A distich or two would be the consequence, though the object of my fancy were grey-bearded, wrinkled age; but where my theme is Youth & Beauty, a young Lady whose personal charms, wit & sentiment are equally striking & unaffected – by Heavens! Though I had lived three-score years a married man, & three-score years before I was a married man, my imagination would hallow the very idea; & I am truly sorry that the inclosed Stanzas have done such poor justice to such a Subject.

I have the honor &c.--

**The early doubts of Robert Burns as to whether or not he could ever be a successful farmer have by now proved to be correct**

**(481) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Dumfries, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1791

Forgive me, Madam, for not writing you sooner. I have been measuring my land that I had sold the crop of; taking a house here in town, & furnishing it; preparing

my horses, cows, farming things, &c. for sale next week; & in short, have not had a moment's rest to do anything with a pen.

I highly approve of Mrs Henri's idea. The lines she has written are at once, simple & energetic. *As they are*; none of the amendments above the lines is in my judgement of the matter.

Cursed business just now interferes. I can do nothing but seal this, & inclose some verses I mentioned to you. –

I am ever, dear Madam your obliged humble servant  
R.B.

**( 482 ) Robert Ainslie**

Dumfries, November 1791.

My Dear Ainslie,

Can you minister to a mind diseased? can you, amid the horrors of penitence, regret, remorse, head-ache, nausea, and all the rest of the damn'd hounds of hell that beset a poor wretch who has been guilty of the sin of drunkenness - can you speak peace to a troubled soul?

'Miserable perdu' that I am, I have tried every thing that used to amuse me, but in vain; here must I sit, a monument of the vengeance laid up in store for the wicked, slowly counting every click of the clock as it slowly, slowly numbers over these lazy scoundrels of hours, who, damn them, are ranked up before me, every one at his neighbour's backside, and every one with a burden of anguish on his back, to pour on my devoted head--and there is none to pity me.

My wife scolds me, my business torments me, and my sins come staring me in the face, every one telling a more bitter tale than his fellow. When I tell you even \*\*\*\*\*

has lost its power to please, you will guess something of my hell within, and all around me.

I began 'Elibanks and Elibraes', but the stanzas fell unenjoyed and unfinished from my listless tongue: at last I luckily thought of reading over an old letter of yours, that lay by me in my bookcase, and I felt something for the first time since I opened my eyes, of pleasurable existence.

Well, I begin to breathe a little since I began to write to you. How are you, and what are you doing? How goes Law? Apropos, for connexion's sake do not address to me supervisor, for that is an honour I cannot pretend to--I am on the list, as we call it, for a supervisor, and will be called out by-and-by to act as one; but at present I am a simple gauger, tho' t'other day I got an appointment to an excise division of £25 per annum, better than the rest. My present income, down money, is £70 per annum.

I have one or two good fellows here whom you would be glad to know.

**It is almost possible to feel the searing resentment contained in this letter from this letter from Nancy McLehose.**

**Agnes McLehose to Robert Burns**

**November, 1791**

Sir,

I take the liberty of addressing a few lines in behalf of your old acquaintance, Jenny Clow, who, to all appearances, is at this moment dying. Obligated, from all the symptoms of a rapid decay, to quit her service, she is gone to a room almost without common necessaries, untended and unmourned. In circumstances so distressing, to whom can she so naturally look for aid as to the father of her child, the man for whose sake she suffered many a sad and anxious night, shut from the

world, with no other companions than guilt and solitude? You have now an opportunity to evince you indeed possess these fine feelings you have delineated, so as to claim the just admiration of your country. I am convinced I need add nothing further to persuade you to act as every consideration of humanity, as well as gratitude, must dictate.

I am, Sir, your sincere well-wisher,

A.M.

**The long and romantic platonic affair between Robert Burns and Agnes McLehose was by now grinding to a standstill. She was preparing to sail to Jamaica in an attempt to rekindle her marriage, and the flurry of short notes sent to her by Burns at this stage are far removed from the lengthy epistles promising undying love that he had earlier promised. The first appears to show more concern for the welfare of Jenny Clow and her baby than Nancy, and it is interesting to hear him say that he would have taken the baby into his family but that Jenny would not part with it.**

**(483) Agnes McLehose**

Dumfries, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1791

It is extremely difficult, my dear Madam. For me to deny a lady anything; but to a lady whom I regard with all the endearing epithets of respectful esteem and old friendship, how shall I find the language of refusal? I have indeed, a shade of the lady, which I keep, and shall ever keep in the *sanctum sanctorum* of my most anxious care. That lady, though an unfortunate, and irresistible conjuncture of circumstances has lost me her esteem, yet she shall be ever, to me

“Dear as the ruddy drops that warm my heart.”

I am rather anxious for her sake, as to her voyage. I pray God my fears may be groundless. By the way, I have this moment a letter from her with a paragraph or two conceived in so stately a style, that I would not pardon it in any created being except herself; but, as the subject interests me much, I shall answer it to you, as I do not know her present address. I am sure she must have told you of a girl, a Jenny Clow, who had the misfortune to make me a father, with contrition I own it, contrary to the laws of our most excellent constitution, in our holy Presbyterian hierarchy. –

Mrs M--- tells me a tale of the poor girl's distress that makes my very heart weep blood. I will trust that your goodness will apologise to your delicacy for me, when I beg of you, for Heaven's sake, to send a porter to the poor woman – Mrs M., it seems, knows where she is to be found – with five shillings in my name; & as I shall be in Edinburgh on Tuesday first, for certain, make the poor wench leave a line for me, before Tuesday, at Mr McKay's, White Hart Inn, Grassmarket, where I shall put up; & before I am two hours in town, I shall see the poor girl, and what is to be done for her relief. I would have taken the boy from her long ago, but she would never consent.

I shall do myself the great pleasure to call for you when I come to town, & repay you the sum your goodness shall have advanced.

And most obedient,  
Robert Burns

**Burns did indeed visit Agnes McLehose as promised. Their last meeting took place on the 6<sup>th</sup> December, 1791.**

**(484) Agnes McLehose**

Leadhills, Thursday noon, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1791

*(Enclosing the Lament of Mary Queen of Scots)*

Such, My dearest Nancy, were the words of the amiable but unfortunate Mary. Misfortune seems to take a peculiar pleasure in darting her arrows against "Honest men & bonie lassies." Of this, you are too, too just a proof; but may your future fate be a bright exception to the remark. In the words of Hamlet –

"Adieu, adieu, adieu! Remember me!"

Robt Burns

**(485) Agnes McLehose**

Dumfries, 15<sup>th</sup> December 1791

I have some merit, my ever dearest of women, in attracting the heart of Clarinda. In her I met with the most accomplished of women-kind, the first of all God's works, & yet I, even I, had the good fortune to appear amiable in her sight.

By the bye, this is the sixth letter that I have written you, since I left you; & if you were an ordinary being; as you are a creature very extraordinary, an instance of what God Almighty in the plentitude of his power & the fullness of his goodness, can make!! I would never forgive you for not answering my letters.

I have sent your hair, a part of the parcel you gave me, with a measure, to Mr Bruce the Jeweller in Prince's Street, to get a ring done for me. I have likewise sent in the verses on Sensibility altered to

Sensibility how charming  
Dearest, Nancy, thou canst tell -- &c,

in to the editor of the Scots Songs, of which you have three volumes, to set to a most beautiful air; out of compliment to the first of women, my ever beloved, my ever sacred Clarinda.

I shall probably write you tomorrow!. In the meantime, from a man who is literally drunk, accept & forgive!!

R.B.

**As Nancy McLehose made her final preparation for her voyage to Jamaica, her platonic lover sent her three songs, one of which was to become one of his most famous works ---- “Ae Fond Kiss,” surely one of the most beautiful love songs ever written.**

**(486) Agnes McLehose**

Dumfries, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1791

I have yours, my ever dearest Nancy, this moment. I have just ten minutes before the Post goes & these I shall employ in sending you some Songs I have just been composing to different tunes for the Collection of Songs, of which you have three volumes -- & of which you *shall* have the fourth.

Song – Tune, Rory Dall’s port –  
Ae fond kiss & then we sever;

Song – To an old Scots tune –  
Behold the hour, the boat arrive!

Song – to a charming plaintive Scots air –  
Ance mair I hail thee, thou gloomy December!

The rest of this song is on wheels.

Adieu! Adieu!!

**(491) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Dumfries, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1792

You will scarce think it credible when I tell you, dear Madam, that ever since I wrote you last, I have actually not had time to write you again. Leaving my former habitation, settling here and getting engaged in a line of our business to which I was an entire Stranger; not to mention the hunting of Smugglers once or twice every week, & a ten days jaunt into Edinburgh; these have so entirely engrossed my time & attention, that except letters of indispensable business, I have not put pen to paper on any given subject since you heard from me. Now, that hurry is nearly over. I have got into the routine of my occupation, & have far less occupation than in my former place; & upon the whole, I have every reason to believe that I shall be much more comfortable for my change. Indeed, CHANGE, was, to me, become a matter of necessity. Ruin awaited me as a Farmer; though by that peculiar Good Luck that for some years past, has attended all my motions, I have got rid of my farm with little, if any loss.

Thus have I dedicated one page with my own concerns; & now I begin another with wishing, most sincerely wishing you the Compliments of the season. Whatever number of years the Great Disposer of Events may have allotted you, may the JOYS of these years very far overbalance the SORROWS! .. Notwithstanding your many tender Relatives & near Connections. I do not think there is an individual in the world who shall desire or enjoy the prolongation of your existence than I; yet there is a period beyond which life is too heavy to be borne, & it must be a very ungenerous, selfish attachment that would wish to have a friend present with us at the expence of making that friend miserable. As to your predictions of sixty-three, I laugh at it. You have a hale, antedeluvian constitution; & if you have any enemies in the world, wretches who are wicked enough to wish

your departure from this state of Being, I have no doubt but that you will hold out tough & hard to live -- & live --& live, till all these atrocious Scelerats gnash their teeth in the agonies of despair.

I most cordially congratulate you on your good news from Anthony. Pray, have you heard nothing lately of Mrs Henri & her dear Babe? Her Worth & her misfortunes would interest the most hardened Bandit in her fate. Oh, how often has my heart ached to agony, for the power, "To wipe away all tears from all eyes."

I am glad to hear so good an account of Jenny Little's affairs. I have done next to nothing for her as yet, but I shall now set about & soon fill up my Subscription-bill.

I feel much for your loss in the late excellent Lady Wallace. Losing a Friend is a loss one can ill afford at any time, but taking an everlasting farewell of the Friend of many years, is truly distressing. That it may long ere any of your friends have occasion to feel for You, what you now feel for her, is the ardent wish & prayer of,

Dear Madam, your obliged & obedient humble servant  
Robt Burns

**William Smellie was the printer who printed Burns' books in Edinburgh, and was also the first editor of Encyclopaedia Britannica, contributing much of the content himself. When Burns met him in Edinburgh, Smellie was the founder of a drinking club called the Crochallan Fencibles whose sole purpose was to enjoy bawdy evenings, exactly the type of entertainment Burns revelled in. Burns wrote this letter to him to introduce Maria Riddell who had written a book and was hoping to find a publisher.**

I sit down, my dear Sir, to introduce a young lady to you, & a lady in the first ranks of fashion too. What a task! You, who care no more for the herd of animals called "Young Ladies," than for the herd of animals called "Young Gentlemen;" You, who despise & detest the groupings of Fashion – an idiot Painter! who seems industrious to place staring Fools, & unprincipled Knaves in the foreground of his Picture, while Men of Sense & Honesty are too often thrown into the dimmest shades. Mrs Riddell who takes this letter to town with her, is a Character that even in your own way as a Naturist & a Philosopher, would be an acquisition to your acquaintance. The lady too, is a votary of the Muses; & as I think I am somewhat of a judge in my own trade, I assure you that her verses, always correct, & often elegant, are very much beyond the common run of the Lady Poetesses of the day. She is a great admirer of your Book; & hearing me say that I was acquainted with you, she begged to be known to you, as she is just going to pay her first visit to our Caledonian Capital. I told her that her best way was, to desire your intimate friend & her near relation, Craigdarroch, to have you at his house while she was there; & lest you should think of a lively West-Indian girl of eighteen, as girls of eighteen too often deserve to be thought of, I should take care to remove that prejudice. To be impartial, however, the Lady has one unlucky failing; & a failing which you will easily discover, as she seems rather pleased with indulging it; & a failing which you will as easily pardon, as it is a sin that very much besets yourself; -- where she dislikes or despises, she is apt to make no more of a secret of it – than where she esteems & probably respects.

I will not send you the unmeaning "Compliments of the season," but I will send you my warmest wishes & most ardent prayers, that Fortune may never throw your subsistence to the mercy of a Knave, nor set your character on the judgement of a Fool! But that, upright & erect, you may walk to an honest grave, where men of letters shall say, here lies a man who did honor to Science, & men of worth shall say, here lies a man who did honor to Human Nature. I am ever with the most grateful sincerity,

My dear Sir, yours,  
Robt Burns

**From Agnes McLehose to Robert Burns**

25<sup>th</sup> January, 1792

Agitated, hurried to death, I sit down to write a few lines to you, my ever-dear friend, dear friend! We are ordered abroad on Saturday, -- to sail on Sunday. And now, my dearest Sir, I have a few things to say to you, as the last advice of her who could have lived or died with you! I am happy to know of your applying so steadily to the business you have engaged in; but, oh remember, this life is a short, passing scene! Seek God's favour, -- keep His commandments, -- be solicitous to prepare for a happy eternity! There, I trust we will meet, in perfect and never-ending bliss. Read my former letter attentively: let the religious tenets there expressed sink deep into your mind; meditate on them with candour; and your accurate judgement must be convinced that they accord with the words of Eternal Truth! Laugh no more at holy things or holy men; remember 'without holiness, no man shall see God.' Another thing and I have done: as you value my peace, do not write me to Jamaica, until I know you may with safety. Write Mary often. She feels for you! and judges of your present feelings by her own. I am sure you will be happy to hear of my happiness; and I trust you will -- soon. If there is time, you may drop me a line ere I go, to inform me if you got this and another letter I wrote you dated the 21<sup>st</sup>, which I am afraid of having neglected to be put into the office. So it was the Roselle you were to have gone in! I read your letter today and reflected deeply on the ways of Heaven! To us they oft appear dark and doubtful; but let us do our duty faithfully, and sooner or later we will have our reward, because 'the Lord God Omnipotent reigns;' every upright mind here has cause to rejoice. And now, adieu. May Almighty God bless you and yours! Take you into His blessed favour here; and afterwards receive you into His glory! Farewell. I will ever remain, Your *real* friend,

A.M.

**Burns now decides that it is time to pay the stone-mason who erected the stone over Ferguson's grave in the Canongate Churchyard in Edinburgh.**

**(495) Peter Hill**

Dumfries, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1792

My dear Friend,

I send you by the bearer, Mr Clarke, a particular friend of mine, six pounds & a shilling, which you will dispose of as follows. Five pounds ten shillings per account I owe to Mr Robt Burn, Architect, for erecting the stone over poor Ferguson. He was two years in erecting it, after I commissioned him for it; & I have been two years paying him, after he sent me his account; so he & I are quits. He had the hardiesse to ask me interest on the sum; but considering that the money was due from one Poet, for putting a tomb-stone over another, he may, with grateful surprise, thank Heaven that he ever saw a farthing of it.

With the remainder of the money, pay yourself the "Office of a Messenger" that I bought of you, & send me by Mr Clarke a note of its price. Send me likewise the fifth volume of the Observer by Mr Clarke; & if any money remain, let it stand to account.

My best Compliments to Mrs Hill. I sent you a Maukin by last week's Fly, which I hope you received. –

Yours most sincerely  
Robt Burns

**In spite of the heavy load of his own domestic issues, Burns continued in his quest to find a satisfactory outcome for his teacher friend, James Clarke.**

**(499) James Clarke**

Dumfries, 17<sup>th</sup> February 1792

My dear Sir,

If this finds you at Moffat, or so soon as it finds you at Moffat, you must without delay wait on Mr Riddell, as he has been very kindly thinking of you in an affair that has happened in a Clerk's place in Manchester, which, if your hopes are desperate in your present business, he proposes procuring it for you. I know your gratitude for past, as well as hopes of future favors, will induce you to pay every attention to Glenriddell's wishes; as he is almost the only, & undoubtedly the *best* friend that your unlucky fate has left you.

Apropos, I just now hear that you have beat your foes, *every tail hollow*. Huzza! Io! Triomphe! Mr Riddell, who is at my elbow, says that if it is so, he begs that you will wait on him directly -- & I know you are too good a man not to pay your respects to your Saviour.

Yours  
Robt Burns  
turn over

Mr Riddell will be in Dumfries until Sunday midday, so you will find him here, -- If you don't come & wait on him directly -- you will never be forgiven.

**Robert Burns failed totally to appreciate the value of his extraordinary genius and was much too casual when it came to ensuring that he received his just reward for his poetic efforts.**

**(502) William Creech**

Dumfries, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1792

Sir,

I this moment have yours, & were it not that habit, as usual, has deafened conscience, my criminal indolence should lead me an uneasy life of Reproach. I ought long ago to have written you on this very business. –

Now, to try a language of which I am not half-master, I shall assume as well as I can, the man of business. I suppose, at a gross guess, that I could add of new materials to your two volumes, about fifty pages. I would also correct & retrench a good deal. These said fifty pages you know are as much mine as the thumb-stall I have just now drawn on my finger which I unfortunately gashed in mending my pen. A few Books which I very much want, are all the recompence I crave, together with as many copies of this new edition of my own works as Friendship or Gratitude shall prompt me to *present*. There are three Men whom you know, & whose friendly Patronage I think I can trouble so far, Messrs McKenzie, D. Stuart, & F. Tytler; to any of these I shall submit my M.S.S. for their strictures, & also let them say on my informing them, I mean any of them, what Authors I want, to what value of them I am entitled. If he adjudges me only a Tom-thumb, I am content. – The Man of Feeling & Professor Stuart, are, I hear, busy with works of their own, for which reason I shall prefer Mr Tytler. So as soon as I hear from you, I shall write Mr Tytler; & in a fortnight more I shall put my M.S.S. in his hands.

If the thing were possible that I could receive the Proof-Sheets by our Dumfries Fly, which runs three times a week, I would earnestly wish to correct them myself.

I have the honor to be, Sir

Your very humble servant

**Now that the hardships created by attempting to run a farm as well as being an Excise Officer are behind him, the Bard returns to his letter writing with uplifted spirits.**

**(505) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

Annan Waterfoot, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1792

Do not blame me for it, Madam. My own conscience, hacknied & weather-beaten as it is, in watching & reprovng my vagaries, follies, Indolence, &c. has contrived to blame & punish me sufficiently. These two or three months, besides my own business, I have been writing out for, & correcting the Press-work of two Publications. One was for a friend; the other is my own Poems, a new edition of which, in two volumes, will appear in a few weeks. All this, you must allow, was enough & more than enough for such an idle, unthinking, musing rhyming, lazy wight as your humble servant. Do you think it possible, my dear & honored friend, that I could be lost to gratitude for many favours, to esteem for much worth & to the honest, kind, pleasurable tie of, *now* old acquaintance & I hope & I am sure, of progressive, increasing friendship – as, for a single day, not to think of you – to ask the Fates what they are doing & about to do with my much-loved Friend & her many & wide-scattered connections -- & to beg of them to be as kind to you & yours as they possibly can?

Apropos (tho how it is apropos I have not leisure to explain) do you know that I am almost in love with an acquaintance of yours. “Almost!” said I – I am in love, souse! over head & ears, deep as the most unfathomable abyss of the boundless ocean; but the word “Love,” owing to the intermingledoms of the good & the bad, the pure & the impure, in this world, being rather an equivocal term for expressing one’s sentiments & sensations, I must do justice to the sacred purity of my attachment.

Know then, that the heart-struck awe, the distant humble approach; the delight we should have in listening to a Messenger of Heaven, appearing in the unsported purity of his Celestial Home, among the coarse, polluted, far inferior sons of men, to deliver them tidings that made their hearts swim in joy & their imagination soar in transport. Such, so delighting, & so pure, were the emotions of my soul on meeting the other day with Miss Lesley Bailie, your neighbour at Mayfield. Mr Bailie, with his two daughters, accompanied by a Mr Hamilton of Grange, passing through Dumfries a few days ago, on their way to England, did me the honor of calling on me, on which I took my horse (tho' God knows I could ill spare the time) & convoyed them fourteen or fifteen miles & dined & spent the day with them. 'Twas about nine, I think, when I left them; & riding home I composed the following ballad, on which you will probably think you have a dear bargain, as it will cost you another groat of postage. You must know there is an old ballad beginning with

My bonie Lizie Bailie  
I'll row thee in my plaidie &c –

I parodied it as follows, which is literally the first copy, “unannointed, unannealed,” as Hamlet says

The bonie Lesley Bailie,  
To see her is to love her,

So much for ballads. I regret you are gone to the East Country, as I am going to be in Ayr-shire in about a fortnight. This world of ours notwithstanding, it has many good things in it yet has ever had this curse, that two or three people who would be the happier, the oftener they met together are, almost without exception, always to be placed as never to meet but once or twice a year, which considering the few years of a man's life, is a very great “evil under the sun,” & which I do not recollect that Solomon has mentioned in his catalogue of the miseries of man. I hope & believe, that there is a state of existence beyond the grave where the worthy of this life will renew their former intimacies, with this endearing addition, that “we meet to

part no more.” Still the damned dogmas of reasoning Philosophy throw in their doubts; but upon the whole, I believe, or rather I have a kind of conviction, though not absolute certainty of the world beyond the grave.

“Tell us ye Dead,  
Will none of you, in pity, disclose the secret  
What 'tis you are & we must shortly be!”

A thousand times I have made this apostrophe to the departed sons of men, but not one of them has ever thought fit to answer the question. “O that some courteous ghost would blab it out!” – but it cannot be; you & I, my Friend, must make the experiment by ourselves. However I am so convinced that an unshaken faith in the doctrines of Christianity is not only necessary by making us better men, but also making us happier men, that I shall take every care that your little godson, & every little creature that shall call me Father, shall be firmly persuaded that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses.”

So ends this heterogeneous letter, written at this wild place of the world, in the intervals of my labor in discharging a vessel of rum from Antigua.

Le bon Dieu vous benit! Amen!

Robt Burns

**The next is a long, peculiar, rambling letter sent to Alexander Cunningham. Burns had recently been made an honoray member of the Royal Company of Archers, a great compliment to his poetic skills. However, that did not prevent him from having a dig at the Aristocracy.**

No! I will not attempt an apology. Amid all my hurry of business, grinding the faces of the Publican & the Sinner on the merciless wheels of the Excise; making ballads, & then drinking, & singing them; & over & above all, the correcting the Presswork of two different Publications; still, still I might have have stolen five minutes to dedicate to one of the first of my Friends & Fellow-creatures. I might have done, as I do at present, snatched an hour near "witching time of night" & scrawled a page or two. I might have thanked the Caledonian Archers for the honor they have done me; (tho to do myself justice, I intended to have done both in RHYME, else I had done both long ere now.) Well then, here is to your good health! for you must know I have set a nipperkin of TODDY by me, just by way of Spell to keep away the meikle horned Deil, or any of his subaltern Imps who might be on their nightly rounds.

But what shall I write to you? The Voice said Cry! and I said, What shall I cry? O, thou Spirit! whatever thou art, or wherever thou makest thyself visible! Be thou a Bogle by the eerie side of an old thorn in the dreary glen through which the herd-callan maun bicker in his gloomin route frae the fauld! Be thou a BROWNIE, set, at dead of night, to thy task by the blazing ingle, or in the solitary barn where the repercussions of thy iron flail half affright thyself, as thou performest the work of twenty of the sons of men, ere the cock-crowing summon thee to thy ample cog of substantial BROSE! Be thou a KELPIE, haunting the ford, or ferry, in the starless night, mixing thy laughing yell with the howling of the storm & the roaring of the flood, as thou viewest the perils & miseries of Man on the floundering horse, or in the tumbling boat! Or lastly, be thou a GHOST, paying thy nocturnal visits to the hoary ruins of decayed Grandeur, or performing thy mystic rites in the shadow of the time-worn Church while the Moon looks, without a cloud, on the silent, ghastly dwellings of the dead around thee; or taking thy stand by the bedside of the Villain, or the Murderer, pourtraying on his dreaming fancy, pictures, dreadful as the horrors of unveiled Hell, & terrible as the wrath of incensed Deity!! Come, thou

Spirit, but not in these horrid forms; come with the milder, gentle, easy inspirations which thou breathest round the wig of a prating ADVOCATE, or the tete of a tea-bibbing Gossip, while their tongues run at the light-horse gallop of clishmaclavier for ever & ever – come & assist a poor devil who is quite jaded in his attempt to share half an idea among half a hundred words; to fill up four quarto pages, while he has not got one sentence of recollection, information, or remark, worth putting pen to paper for!

I feel, I feel the presence of Supernatural assistance! Circled in the embrace of my elbow-chair, my breast labors, like the bloated Sybil on her three-footed stool, & like her too, labors with Nonsense, auspicious name! Tutor, Friend & finger-post in the mystic mazes of Law, the cadaverous paths of Physic; & particularly in the sightless soarings of SCHOOL DIVINITY, who, leaving Common Sense confounded at his strength of pinion, Reason delirious with eyeing his giddy flight, & Truth creeping back into the bottom of her well, cursing the hour that ever she offered her scorned alliance to the wizard Power of Theologic Vision – raves abroad on all the winds, “On Earth Discord! A gloomy Heaven above opening her jealous gates to the nineteen thousandth part of “the tithe of mankind!” And below, an inescapable & inexorable “Hell, expanding its leviathan jaws for the vast residue of Mortals!!” O, doctrine! comfortable & healing to the weary, wounded soul of man! Ye sons & daughters of affliction, ye pauvres Miserables, to whom day brings no pleasure, & night yields no rest, be comforted! “ ’Tis but *one* “nineteen hundred thousand, that “ your situation will mend in this world,” so, alas, the experience of the Poor & Needy too truly affirms: & ’tis nineteen hundred thousand to *one*, by the dogmas of Theology, that you will be damned eternally in the World to come!

But of all Nonsense, Religious Nonsense is the most nonsense; so enough, & more than enough of it. Only by the bye, will you, or can you tell me, my dear Cunningham, why a religioso turn of mind has always a tendency to narrow & illiberalize the heart? They are orderly, they may be just, I have known them merciful; but still your children of Sanctity move among their fellow-creatures with a

nostril snuffing putrescence, & a foot spurning filth, in short with that conceited dignity which your titled Douglasses, Hamiltons, Gordons, or any other of your Scots Lordlings of seven centuries standing, display when they accidentally mix among the many-aproned Sons of Mechanical life. I remember in my Plough-boy days, I could not conceive it possible that a noble Lord could be a Fool, or that a godly Man could be a knave. – How ignorant are Plough-boys! Nay, I have since discovered that a *godly woman* may be a ----! – But hold – Here's t'ye again – This Rum is damn'd generous Antigua, so a very unfit menstruum for scandal.

Apropos, how do you like, I mean *really* like the Married Life? Ah, my Friend! Matrimony is quite a different thing from what your love-sick youths & sighing girls take it to be! But Marriage, we are told, is appointed by God & I shall never quarrel with any of HIS Institutions. I am a Husband of older standing than you, & I shall give you *my* ideas of the Conjugal State. (En passant, you know I am no Latin, is not "Conjugal" derived from "Jugum," a yoke?) Well then, the scale of Good-wife ship I divide into ten parts. Good Nature, four, Good-Sense, two, Wit, one, Personal Charms, viz. a sweet face, eloquent eyes, fine limbs, graceful carriage, (I would add a fine waist too, but that is too often spoilt you know,) all these, one; as for the other qualities belonging to, or attending on, a Wife, such as, fortune, connections, education, (I mean education extraordinary) family-blood, &c. divide the two remaining degrees among them as you please; only, remember that all these minor properties must be expressed by *fractions*; for there is not one of them, in the aforesaid scale, entitled to the dignity of an *integer*.

As for the rest of my fancies & reveries. How I have met lately with Miss Lesley Bailie, the most beautiful, elegant woman in the world. How I accompanied her & her Father's Family fifteen miles on their journey, out of pure devotion to admire the loveliness of the works of God in such an unequalled display of them. How, in galloping home at night, I made a ballad of her of which these two Stanzas make a part.

Thou, bonie Lesley, art a queen,  
Thy subjects we before thee;  
Thou, bonie Lesley art divine,  
The hearts of men adore thee.

The very Deil, he could na scathe  
Whatever wad belang thee!  
He'd look into thy bonie face,  
And say, "I canna wrang thee"

Behold all these things are written in the Chronicles of my imaginations, & shall be read by thee, my dear Friend, & by thy beloved Spouse, my dear other Friend, at a more convenient season.

Now, to thee, & to thy before-designed *bosom*-companion, be given the precious things brought forth by the Sun, & the precious things brought forth by the Moon, & the benignt influences of the Stars, & the living streams which flow from the fountains of Life & by the tree of Life, for ever & ever! Amen!!!

Robt Burns

**George Thomson was destined to play a major role in the life of Robert Burns. He was anxious to put together a collection of Scottish songs, but being a perfectionist, was equally anxious that the melodies and lyrics should be of the highest quality.**

**George Thomson to Robert Burns**

Edinburgh, September, 1792

Sir,

For some years past, I have with a friend or two, employed many leisure hours in collating and collecting the most favourite of our national melodies for publication. We have engaged Pleyel, the most agreeable composer living, to put accompaniments to these, and also to compose an instrumental prelude and conclusion to each air, the better to them for concerts, both public and private. To render this work perfect, we are desirous to have the poetry improved wherever it seems unworthy of the music; and that it is so, in many instances, is allowed by every one conversant with our musical collections. The editors of these seem in general to have depended on the music proving an excuse for the verses; and hence some charming melodies are united to mere nonsense and doggerel, while others are accommodated with rhymes so loose and indelicate as cannot be sung in decent company. To remove this reproach would be an easy task for the author of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night;' and for the honour of Caledonia, I would fain hope he may be induced to take up the pen; If so, we shall be able to present the public with a collection infinitely more interesting than any that has yet appeared and acceptable to all persons of taste, whether they wish for correct melodies, delicate accompaniments or characteristic verses.

We shall esteem your poetical assistance a particular favour, besides paying any reasonable price you shall please to demand for it. Profit is quite a secondary consideration with us; and we are resolved to spare neither pains nor expense on the publication. Tell me frankly, then, whether you will devote your leisure to writing twenty or twenty-five songs, suitable to the particular melodies which I am prepared to send you. A few Songs exceptionable only in some of their verses, I will likewise submit to your consideration; leaving it to you, either to mend these or make new Songs in their stead. It is superfluous to assure you that I have no intention to displace any of the sterling old Songs; those only will be removed which appear quite silly or absolutely indecent. Even these shall all be examined by Mr Burns, and if *he* is of the opinion that any of them are deserving of the music, in such cases no divorce shall take place.

Relying on the letter accompanying this, to be forgiven for the liberty I have taken in addressing you, I am, with great esteem, Sir, your most obedient humble servant,

G. Thomson.

**Robert Burns was very pleased to receive this proposal and responded immediately. This was the first of many, many letters that were to pass between Burns and Thomson over the next four years. This letter again shows how naïve Burns was when it came to ensuring suitable remuneration for his work.**

**(507) George Thomson**

Dumfries, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1792

Sir,

I have just this moment got your letter. As the request you make will positively add to my enjoyment in complying with it, I shall enter into the undertaking with all the small portion of abilities I have, strained to their utmost exertion by the impulse of enthusiasm. Only, don't hurry me: 'Deil tak the hindmost' is by means the *Crie de guerre* of my muse. Will you, as I am inferior to none of you in enthusiastic attachment to the poetry and music of old Caledonia and, since you request it, have cheerfully promised you my mite of assistance – will you let me have a list of your airs, with the first line of the verses you intend for them, that I may have an opportunity of suggesting any alteration that may occur to me – you know 'tis in the way of my trade – still leaving you, Gentlemen, the undoubted right of publishers to approve or reject, at you pleasure, in your own publication. I say the *first line* of the verses, because if they are verses that have appeared in any of our collection of songs, I know them and can have recourse to them. Apropos, if you are for English verse, there is on my part an end to the matter. Whether in the simplicity of the Ballad or the pathos of the Song, I can only hope to please myself in being allowed

at least a sprinkling of our native tongue. English verses, particularly the woks of Scotsmen, that have merit, are certainly very eligible. "Tweedside,' 'Ah! the poor Shepherd's mournful fate!' 'Ah, Chloris, could I sit,' &c., except (excuse my vanity) you should, to 'Gilderoy,' prefer my own song, 'From thee, Eliza, I must go,' – all these you cannot mend; but such insipid stuff as "To Fanny fair could I impart,' &c., usually set to 'The Mill, Mill O,' 'tis a disgrace to the collections in which it has already appeared and would doubly disgrace a collection that will have the very superior merit of yours. But more of this in the further prosecution of the business, if I'm to be called on for my strictures and amendments – I say, amendments; for I will not *alter* except where I myself at least think that I *amend*.

As to remuneration, you may think my songs either *above* or *below* price; for they shall absolutely be the one or the other. In the honest enthusiasm with which I embark in your undertaking, to talk of money, wages, fee, hire, &c., would be downright sodomy of soul! A proof of each of the songs that I compose or amend, I shall receive as a favor. In the rustic phrase of the season, 'God speed the wark!' I am, Sir, you very humble servant,

Robert Burns

P.S. – I have some particular reasons for wishing my interference to be known as little as possible.

R.B.

**Maria Riddell was the daughter of a Governor of the Leeward Islands and met her husband, Walter Riddell, brother of Burns' friend Glenriddell, in the West Indies, where they were married. They returned to England a short while afterwards but eventually moved to an estate near Dumfries and became acquaintances of the Bard.**

**(509) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Early Autumn 1792

Fate seems determined, Madam, to set you & I at cross-purposes. On Sunday I am engaged to go to Drumlanrig with my friend Clarke, the Organist from Edinburgh, who goes to give the young ladies the instruction of his profession. I was the Agent between Mr McMurdo & him, & by express appointment I must go to Drumlanrig on that day. However, it is not likely that I shall see Glenriddell at that time, but if I should, I shall say nothing at all, & listen to nothing at all, in which you are mediately, or immediately concerned. So, Vive l'amour, & cive la bagatelle! For I dare say that one, or both of these mighty Deities are at the bottom of this most extraordinary, inexpressible, & inexplicable mystery.

Robt B----

**(510 ) Frances Anna Dunlop**

Dumfries, 24th September 1792.

[...] I wish the farmer great joy of his new acquisition to his family.... I cannot say that I give Him joy of his life as a farmer. 'Tis, as a farmer paying a dear, unconscionable rent, a cursed life! As to a laird farming his own property; sowing his own corn in hope; and reaping it, in spite of brittle weather, in gladness; knowing that none can say unto him, "What dost thou?"--fattening his herds; shearing his flocks; rejoicing at Christmas; and begetting sons and daughters, until he be the venerated, grey-haired leader of a little tribe--'tis a heavenly life! but devil take the life of reaping the fruits that another must eat!

Well, your kind wishes will be gratified, as to seeing me when I make my Ayrshire visit. I cannot leave Mrs. Burns until her nine months' race is run, which may perhaps be in three or four weeks. She, too, seems determined to make me the patriarchal leader of a band. However, if Heaven will be so obliging as to let me have them in the proportion of three boys to one girl, I shall be so much the more

pleased. I hope, if I am spared with them, to show a set of boys that will do honour to my cares and name; but I am not equal to the task of rearing girls. Besides, I am too poor; a girl should always have a fortune.

Apropos, your little godson is thriving charmingly, but is a very deil. He, though two years younger, has completely mastered his brother. Robert is indeed the mildest, gentlest creature I ever saw. He has a most surprising memory, and is quite the pride of his schoolmaster.

You know how readily we get into prattle upon a subject dear to our heart: you can excuse it. God bless you and yours!

R.B.

**This letter to Thomson is typical of many that would be written in similar vein.**

**(511) George Thomson**

Friday night, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1792

My dear Sir,

Let me tell you, that you are too fastidious in your ideas of Song's & ballads. I own that your criticisms are just – the Songs that you specify in your list have, *all but one*, the faults you remark in them – but who shall mend the matter? Who shall rise up & say, “ Go to it, I will make a better!” For instance; on reading over The lea-rig, I immediately set about trying my hand on it; & after all, I could make nothing more of it than the following, which Heaven knows is poor enough.

When o'er the hill the Eastern star,

Your observation as to the aptitude of Dr Percy's ballad to the air, Nanie O, is just. It is, besides, perhaps, the most beautiful Ballad in the English language. But let

me remark to you, in the sentiment & style of our Scots airs, there is a pastoral simplicity, a something that one may call the Doric Style & dialect of vocal music, to which a dash of our native tongue & manners is particularly, nay peculiarly apposite. For this reason, & upon my honor, for this reason alone, I am of opinion, (but, as I told you before, my opinion is yours, freely yours, to approve, or reject as you please) that my ballad of Nanie O might perhaps do for one set of verses to the tune. Now, don't let it enter your head that you are under any necessity of taking my verses. I have long ago made up my mind as to my own reputation in the business of Authorship; & have nothing to be pleased, or offended at, in your adoption or rejection of my verses. Tho you should reject one half of what I give you, I shall be pleased with your adopting t'other half; & shall continue to serve you with the same assiduity.

In the printed copy of my, Nanie O, the name of the river is horridly prosaic – I will alter it,

{ Girvan

Beyond yon hills where

{ Lugar flows—

“ Girvan, “ is the river that suits the idea of the stanza best, but “Lugar” is the most agree modulation of syllables.

I intended to have given you, & will soon give you, a great many more remarks on this business; but I have just now an opportunity of conveying to you this scrawl, postage-free, an expence that it is ill able to pay; so with my best Compliments to honest Allan, God b'w'ye. To you!

R.B.

Remember me to the first & dearest of my friends, Alexander Cunningham, who, I understand, is a coadjutor with you in this business.

R.B.

Saturday morning

I find I still have an hour to spare this morning before my conveyance goes away. –  
I shall give you Nanie O at length.

Your remarks on, Ewebughts Marion, are just; still it has obtained a place among our more classical Scots songs; & what with many beauties in its composition, & more prejudice in its favor, you will not find it easy to supplant it. In my very early years, when I was thinking of going to the West Indies, I took the following farewell of a dear girl. It is quite trifling, & has nothing of the merit of “Ewebughts;” but it will fill up this page. You must know, that all my earlier love-songs were the breathings of ardent Passion; & tho’ it might have been easier in aftertimes to have given them a polish, yet that polish, to me, whose they were, & who perhaps alone cared for them, would have defaced the legend of my heart, which was so faithfully inscribed on them. Their uncouth simplicity was, as they say of wines, their RACE.

Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary?

Galla water & auld Rab Morris, I think will most probably be the next subjects of my musings. However, even on *my verses*, speak out your criticisms with equal frankness. My wish is, not to stand aloof, the uncomplying bigot of opiniatrete; but cordially to join issue with you in the furtherance of the work.

GUDE SPEED THE WARK! AMEN!!!

R.B.

**Louisa Fontenelle was a London actress whose performances on stage with Sutherland’s Company delighted Burns. He wrote the *Rights of Woman* as an address for her to use on her Benefit Night, which he enclosed with the following letter that also included a flattering, short poem on the lady herself:**

**(519) Louisa Fontenelle**

22<sup>nd</sup> November 1792

Madam,

In such a bad world as ours, those who add to the scanty sum of our pleasures, are positively our Benefactors. To you, Madam, on our humble Dumfries boards, I have been more indebted for entertainment, than ever I was in prouder Theatres. Your charms as a woman would insure applause to the most indifferent Actress, & your theatrical talents would secure admiration to the plainest figure. This Madam, is not the unmeaning, or insidious compliment of the Frivolous or Interested. I pay it from the same honest impulse that the Sublime of Nature excites my admiration, or her beauties give me delight.

Will the foregoing words be of any service to you on your approaching benefit night? If they will, I shall be prouder of my Muse than ever. They are nearly extempore; I know they have no great merit; but though they shall add but little to entertainment of the evening, they give me the happiness of an opportunity to declare how much I have the honor to be.

Madam, your very humble servant.

### On Seeing Miss Fontenelle In A Favourite Character

Sweet naivete of feature,  
Simple, wild, enchanting elf,  
Not to thee, but thanks to nature,  
Thou art acting but thyself.

Wert thou awkward, stiff, affected,  
Spurning nature, torturing art;  
Loves and graces all rejected,  
Then indeed thou'd act a part.

**It must be said that Robert Burns was not loved and adored by everyone who met and knew him. He had wielded his pen like a sword on many occasions, and his position in the Excise had been regarded by many with some envy. His support in verse for such causes as the Jacobite Rebellion and the French Revolution, not to mention Rights for Women and his anti-slavery stance had raised hackles in some quarters, so when an opportunity arose to point the finger of treason at Burns, his enemies grasped it, forcing Burns to defend himself to his greatest patron, Graham of Fintry.**

**( 528 ) Robert Graham of Fintry**

Dumfries, December 1792.

I have been surprised, confounded & distracted by Mr Mitchel, the Collector, telling me just now, that he he has received an order from your Honorable Board to enquire into my political conduct, & blaming me as a person disaffected to Government.

Sir, you are a husband and a father. You know what you would feel, to see the much-loved wife of your bosom, and your helpless, prattling little ones, turned adrift into the world, degraded and disgraced from a situation in which they had been respectable and respected, and left almost without the necessary support of a miserable existence.

Alas, Sir! must I think that such, soon, will be my lot! and from the damn'd, dark insinuations of hellish, groundless Envy too!

I believe, Sir, I may aver it, and in the sight of Omnipotence, that I would not tell a deliberate falsehood, no, not though even worse horrors, if worse can be, than those I have mentioned, hung over my head; and I say, that the allegation, whatever villain has made it, is a LIE! To the British Constitution, on Revolution principles, next after my God, I am most devoutly attached.

You, Sir, have been much and generously my Friend. Heaven knows how warmly I have felt the obligation, and how gratefully I have thanked you. Fortune, Sir, has

made you powerful, and me impotent; has given you patronage, and me dependence. I would not for my single self call on your Humanity; were such my insular, unconnected situation, I would despise the tear that now swells in my eye-- I could brave Misfortune, I could face Ruin; for at the worst, "Death's thousand doors stand open;" but, good God! the tender concerns that I have mentioned, the claims and ties that I see at this moment, and feel around me, how they unnerve Courage, and wither Resolution! To your patronage, as a man of some genius, you have allowed me a claim; and your esteem, as an honest Man, I know is my due: to these, Sir, permit me to appeal; by these may I adjure you to save me from that misery which threatens to overwhelm me, and which, with my latest breath I will say it, I have not deserved.

Pardon this confused scrawl. I know not well what I have written.

I have the honor to be, Sir, your deeply indebted & ever grateful humble servant

Robt Burns

**( 529 ) Frances Anna Dunlop**

31st December 1792.

Dear Madam,

A hurry of business, thrown in heaps by my absence, has until now prevented my returning my grateful acknowledgments to the good family of Dunlop, and you in particular, for that hospitable kindness which rendered the four days I spent under that genial roof, four of the pleasantest I ever enjoyed. Alas, my dearest friend! how few and fleeting are those things we call pleasures! on my road to Ayrshire I spent a night with a friend whom I much valued; a man whose days promised to be many; and on Saturday last we laid him in the dust!

Jan. 2nd, 1793.

I have just received yours of the 30th, and feel much for your situation. However, I heartily rejoice in your prospect of recovery from that vile jaundice. As to myself, I

am better, though not quite free of my complaint. You must not think, as you seem to insinuate, that in my way of life I want exercise. Of that I have enough; but occasional hard drinking is the devil to me. Against this I have again and again bent my resolution, and have greatly succeeded. Taverns I have totally abandoned: it is the private parties in the family way, among the hard-drinking gentlemen of this country, that do me the mischief--but even this I have more than half given over.

Mr. Corbet can be of little service to me at present; at least I should be shy of applying. I cannot possibly be settled as a supervisor for several years. I must wait the rotation of the list, and there are twenty names before mine. --I might indeed get a job of officiating, where a settled supervisor was ill, or aged; but that hauls me from my family, as I could not remove them on such an uncertainty. Besides, some envious, malicious devil has raised a little demur on my political principles, and I wish to let that matter settle before I offer myself too much in the eye of my supervisors. I have set, henceforth, a seal on my lips, as to these unlucky politics; but to you I must breathe my sentiments. In this, as in everything else, I shall show the undisguised emotions of my soul. War I deprecate: misery and ruin to thousands are in the blast that announces the destructive demon.

But....**Remainder cut away**

**(530) Robert Graham of Fintry**

Dumfries, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1793

Sir,

I am this moment honored with your letter; with what feelings I received this other instance of your goodness, I shall not pretend to describe.

Now to the charges which Malice & Misrepresentation have brought against me.

It has been said, it seems, that I not only belong to, but head a disaffected party in this place. I know of no party in this place, either Republican or Reform, except an old party of Borough-Reform, with which I never had any thing to do. Individuals, both Republican & Reform, we have, though not many of either; but if they have associated, it is more than I have the least knowledge of; & if there exists such an association, it must consist of such obscure nameless beings, as precludes any possibility of my being known to them, or they to me.

I was in the playhouse one night, when Ca ira was called for. I was in the middle of the pit, & from the Pit the clamour arose. One or two individuals with whom I occasionally associate were of the party, but I neither knew of the Plot, nor joined in the Plot; nor ever opened my lips to hiss, or huzza, that, or any other Political tune whatever. I looked on myself as far too obscure a man to have any weight in quelling a Riot; at the same time, as a character of higher respectability, than to yell in the howlings of a rabble. This was the conduct of all the first Characters in this place, & these Characters know, & will avow that such was my conduct.

I never uttered any invectives against the king. His private worth, it is altogether impossible that such a man as I, can appreciate; and in his Public capacity, I always revered, & ever will, with the soundest loyalty, revere, the Monarch of Great-Britain, as, to speak in Masonic, the sacred KEYSTONE OF OUR ROYAL ARCH CONSTITUTION.

As to REFORM PRINCIPLES, I look upon the British Constitution, as settled at the Revolution, to be the most glorious Constitution on earth, or that perhaps the wit of man can frame; at the same time, I think, & you know what High & distinguished Characters have for some time thought, that we have a good deal deviated from the original principles of that Constitution; particularly that an alarming System of Corruption has pervaded the connection between the Executive Power & the House of Commons. This is the Truth, the Whole truth of my Reform opinions;

opinions which, before I was aware of the complection of these innovating times, I too unguardedly (now I see it) sported with; but henceforth I seal up my lips. However, I never dictated to, corresponded with, or had the least connection with, any political association except, that when the Magistrates & principal inhabitants of this town, met to declare their attachment to the Constitution, & their abhorrence of Riot, which declaration you would see in the Papers, I as I thought my duty as a Subject at large, & a Citizen in particular, called upon me, subscribed the same declatory Creed.

Of Johnston, the publisher of the Edinburgh Gazetteer, I know nothing. One evening in company with four or five friends, we met with his prospectus which we thought manly & independant; & I wrote to him, ordering his paper for us. If you think that I acted improperly in allowing his Paper to come addressed to me, I shall immediately countermand it. I never, so judge me, God! wrote a line of prose for the Gazetteer in my life. An occasional address, spoken by Miss Fontenelle on her benefit night here, which I called the Rights of Woman; I sent to the Gazetteer; as also, some extempore stanzas on the Commemoration of Thomson; both these I will subjoin for your perusal. You will see that they have nothing whatsoever to do with Politics. At the time when I sent Johnston one of these poems, but which one I do not remember, I inclosed at the request of my warm & worthy friend, Robert Riddell Esq. of Glenriddell, a prose Essay, signed Cato, written by him, & addressed to the delegates for the County Reform, of which he was one of the County. With the merits, or demerits of that Essay I have nothing to do, farther than transmitting it in the same Frank, which Frank he had procured me.

As to France, I was her enthusiastic votary in the beginning of the business. When she came to shew her old avidity for conquest, in annexing Savoy, &c. to her dominions, & invading the rights of Holland, I altered my sentiments. A tippling Ballad which I made on the Prince of Brunswick's breaking up his camp & sung one convivial evening, I shall likewise send you, sealed up, as it is not every body's reading. This last is not worth your perusal; but lest MRS FAME should, as she

has already done, use, & even abuse, her old privilege of lying, you shall be in the market of everything, le pour et le contre, of my political writings & conduct.

This, my honored Patron, is all. To this statement I challenge disquisition. Mistaken Prejudice, or unguarded Passion, may mislead, & often have misled me; but when called on to answer for my mistakes, though I will say it, no man can feel keener compunction for his errors, yet. I trust, no man can be more superiour to evasion or disguise.

I shall do myself the honor to thank Mrs Graham for her goodness, in a separate letter.

If, Sir, I have been so fortunate as to do away the misapprehensions of my conduct & character, I shall with the confidence which you were wont to allow me, apply to your goodness on every opening in the way of business, where I think, I, with propriety, may offer myself. An instance that occurs just now; Mr Mcfarlane, Supervisor of the Galloway District, is & has been for some time, very ill. I spoke to Mr Mitchell as to his wishes to forward my application for the job, but though he expressed & ever does express every kindness for me, he hesitates, in hopes that the disease may be of short continuance. However, as it seems to be a paralytic affliction, I fear that it may be some time before he can take charge of so extended a District. There is a great deal of fatigue, & very little business in the District; two things suitable enough to my hardy constitution, & inexperience in that line of life.

I have the honor to be, Sir, your ever grateful & highly obliged humble servant

Robt Burns

**When Robert Burns made his first visit to Dumfries six years prior, he was made an Honorary Burgess of the town. Now, in 1793, although a resident, he discovered that schooling in the town would be expensive and submitted**

**a request through the Lord Provost to be allowed to have his children educated at a lower rate than he would normally have to pay as one not born in the town. His letter was sufficiently persuasive to win the argument. The Bard's income as an Exciseman had been severely reduced by a ban on French goods and he was beginning to feel the pinch.**

**(534) David Staig**

March 1793

My Lord & Gentlemen,

The literary taste & liberal spirit of your good town has so ably filled the various departments of your schools, as to make it a very great object for a Parent to have his children educated in them. Still, to me, a Stranger, with my very large family & very stinted income, to give my young ones that education I wish, at the high School-fees which a Stranger pays, will bear hard upon me.

Some years ago your good town did me the honor of making me an Honorary Burgess. Will your Honors allow me to request that this mark of distinction may extend so far, as to put me on the footing of a real Freeman of the Town in the Schools?

That I may not appear altogether unworthy of this favor, allow me to state some little favors I have lately done a branch of your Revenue; the two pennies exigible on foreign Ale vended within your limits. In this rather neglected article of your income, I am ready to shew that within these few weeks, my exertions have secured for you of these duties nearly the sum of ten pounds; & in this too, I was the only one of the gentlemen of the Excise (except Mr Mitchell, whom *you pay* for his trouble,) who took the least concern in this business.

If you are so very kind as to grant my request, it will certainly be constant incentive to me to strain every nerve, where in that, or any other way, I can officially serve

you, & will, if possible, increase that grateful respect with which I have the honor to be,

My Lord & Gentlemen,  
Your devoted humble servant

**( 536 ) Alexander Cunningham,**

Dumfries, 20th Feb. 1793.

What are you doing? What hurry have you got on your head, my dear Cunningham, that I have not heard from you? Are you deeply engaged in the mazes of Law, the mysteries of Love, or the profound wisdom of politics? Curse on the word which ended the period!

Q. What is Politics?

A. It is a science wherewith, by means of nefarious cunning and hypocritical pretence, we govern civil Polities for the emolument of ourselves and our adherents.

Q. What is a Minister?

A. A Minister is an unprincipled fellow who, by the influence of hereditary or acquired wealth, by superiour abilities; or by a lucky conjuncture of circumstances, obtains a principal place in the administration of the affairs of government.

Q. What is a patriot?

A. An individual exactly of the same description as a minister, only out of place.

I have been interrupted in my Catechism, and am returned at a late hour just to subscribe my name, and to put you in mind of the forgotten friend of that name who is still in the land of the living, though I can hardly say in the place of hope.

Adieu

Robt Burns

**Burns had persuaded his friend Stephen Clarke to give music lessons to the McMurdo children at Drumlanrig. The Bard went along on these occasions and enjoyed the hospitality of the McMurdo household a little too enthusiastically on one occasion.**

**(542A) John McMurdo**

March 1793

Sir,

I believe last night that my old enemy, the Devil, taking the advantage of my being in drink (he well knows he has little chance with me in sober hours) tempted me to be a little turbulent. You have too much humanity to heed the maniac ravings of a poor wretch whom the powers of Hell, & the potency of Port, beset at the same time.

In the meantime, allow me to present you with the following Song which I have hammered out this morning. –

I am ever, Your poetical humble servant,

R.B.

Song

Lang here awa, there awa wandering Willie,

**Nancy McLehose had returned to Scotland. Her attempt at reconciliation with her husband had failed miserably as he had already set up home with a Jamaican lady. Burns was indignant that she had not bothered to contact him on her return. However, he is only willing to resume their correspondence if Nancy returns to being a friend and stops lecturing him.**

**(544) Agnes McLehose**

March 1793

I suppose, my dear Madam, that by your neglecting to inform me of your arrival in Europe, a circumstance that would not be indifferent to me, as indeed no occurrence relating to you can – you meant to leave me to guess & gather that a correspondence I once had the honor & *felicity* to enjoy, is to be no more. Alas, what heavy laden sounds are these – “no more!” The wretch who has never tasted pleasure, has never known woe; but what drives the soul to madness, is the recollection of joys that are “no more!” But come, ye children of Feeling & Sentiment; ye whose trembling bosom cords ache, to unutterable anguish, as recollection gushed on the heart! Ye who are capable of an attachment, keen as the arrow of Death, & strong as the vigour of Immortal Being. Come! & your ears shall drink a tale – but hush! – I must not, can not tell it! Agony is in the recollection, & frenzy is in the recital! –

But to leave these paths that lead to madness, I congratulate your friends, Madam, on your return; & I hope that the precious health which Miss Peacock tells me is so much injured, is restored, or restoring. There is a fatality attends Miss Peacock’s correspondence & mine. Two of my letters it seems she never received; & her last, which came when I was in Ayrshire, was unfortunately mislaid, & only found about ten days ago, on removing a desk of drawers.

I present you a book; may I hope you will accept of it. I dare say you have brought your books with you. The fourth volume of Scots Songs is published; I will send it to you.

Shall I hear from you? But first, hear me! No cold language – no prudential documents – I despise Advice, & scorn Controul. If you are not to write such language, such sentiments, as you know I shall wish, shall delight to receive; I conjure you, By wounded Pride! By ruined Peace! By frantic disappointed Passion! By all the many ills that constitute that sum of human woes – A BROKEN HEART! To me be silent forever! If you insult me with the unfeeling apothegms of cold-blooded Caution, may all the – but hold – a Fiend could not breathe a malevolent wish on the head of *MY* Angel!

Mind my request! If you send me a page baptised in the font of sanctimonious Prudence – by Heaven, Earth & Hell, I will tear into atoms! –

Adieu! May all good things attend you!

R.B.

**Burns' friendship with Maria Riddell was blossoming as he writes to her in jocular style.**

**(554A) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Friday noon, April 1793

I remember, Madam, to have heard you inveigh against this unfortunate Country, that it was so barren of comforts, the very necessaries of life were not to be found in it. In particular, you told me, you could not *exist* without FRENCH GLOVES. Had Fate put it in my power any way to have added one comfort to your existence, it

could not perhaps have done any thing which would have gratified me more; yet, poor as I am in everything, except Inclination, I have been fortunate enough to obviate the business of FRENCH GLOVES. In order that you may have the higher idea of my merits in this MOMENTOUS affair, I must tell you, that all the Haberdashers here are on the alarm, as to the necessary article of FRENCH GLOVES. You must know that FRENCH GLOVES are contraband goods, & expressly prohibited by the laws of this wise-governed Realm of ours. A Satirist would say, that this is one reason why all the ladies are so fond of them; but I, who have not one grain of GALL in my composition, shall alledge, that it is the PATRIOTISM of the dear Goddesses of man's idolatry that makes them so fond of dress from the LAND OF LIBERTY & EQUALITY.

There was a search very lately through this town, for the express purpose of discovering French Gloves, at which search I assisted in the very respectable character of a Revenue Officer; & three of our principal Merchants are at this moment, subpona'd before the Court of Exchequer (a crabbed law expression for being ruined in a revenue court) for that day's work. Still, I have discovered one Haberdasher, who, at my particular request, will clothe your fair hands as they ought to be, to keep them from being profaned by the rude gaze of the gloating eye, or – Horrid! – from perhaps a RAPE by the unhallowed lips of the Satyr Man. You will remember though, that you are to tell no body, but the ladies of your acquaintance, & that only on the same condition so that the secret may be sure to be kept, & the poor Haberdasher not ruined by his kindness,

I had a long letter the other day from Mr Thomson, the gentleman who presides over the Publication of Scots Music to which Mr R---- is a subscriber; & he tells me we may expect twenty five of the Songs by the end of next month. There are several airs that have verses far unworthy of their merit, to which Mr T. wishes me to give him new ones. – Would you honor the publication with a Song from you? For instance, the fine pathetic air, "My lodging on the cold ground;" – The present song is an improper measure; the Stanza ought to run as thus —

“O’er moorlands & mountains, rough, barren & bare,  
Bewilder’d & wearied I roam”

I have just sent a new song to “the last time I came o’er the moor;” but I do not know if I have succeeded. I inclose it for your strictures. Mary was the name I intended my Heroine to bear, but I altered it into your Ladyship’s, as being infinitely more musical. I am afraid that my song will turn out a very cold performance, as I never can do any good with a love theme, except when I am really & devoutly in love.

I have the honor to be Madam,  
The most devoted & humblest of your devoted & humble servants  
The Bard

“The last time I came o’er the moor.  
And left Maria’s dwelling.”

On reading over this song, I see it is but a cold, inanimate composition. It will be absolutely necessary for me to get in love, else I shall never be able to make a line worth reading on the subject.

**Jessie Staig was the daughter of David Staig. She died at the age of twenty-six and lies buried a few short steps away from Burns’ Mausoleum in Dumfries. Burns had composed a song “Young Jessie,” which he enclosed with this short letter.**

**(554B) Jessie Staig**

Spring 1793

Mr Burns presents his most respectful compliments to Miss Staig, & has sent her the Song. Mr Burns begs to be forgiven his delaying so long to send it; & allows

Miss Staig to impute the neglect to any cause under Heaven, except want of respect for her commands. Mr Burns would just give the hint to Miss Staig, that should the respectful timidity of any of her lovers deny him the power of speech, that she will then teach him Mr Burns' song; so that the poor fellow may not lie under the double imputation of being neither able TO SING NOR SAY. -- Monday even;

**The Bard was very apologetic to Deborah Duff Davies when he sent her the following letter in which he enclosed "Bonie Wee Thing," a beautiful song that was destined to live through the centuries.**

**(556A) Deborah Duff Davies**

6<sup>th</sup> April; 1793

It is impossible, Madam, that the generous warmth & angelic purity of your youthful mind can have any idea of the moral disease under which I, unhappily, must rank as the chief of sinners; I mean a torpitude of the Moral Powers that may be called, a Lethargy of Conscience. In vain the the provoked Fury rears her horrent crest, & rouses all her snakes; beneath the deadly-fixed eye & leaden hand of INDOLENCE, their wildest ire is charmed into the torpor of the bat, slumbering out the rigours of winter in a chink of a ruined wall. Nothing less, Madam, than this vile depravity of soul could have made me so long neglect your obliging commands. Indeed I had one apology; the bagatelle was not worth presenting. Besides, so strongly as I am interested in MISS DAVIES'S fate & welfare, in the serious business of life, amid its chances & changes; that to make her the subject of a silly BALLAD is downright mockery of these ardent feelings. 'Tis like an impertinent jest to a dying friend.

Good God, why this disparity between our wishes & our powers? Why is the most generous wish to make others blest, impotent & ineffectual as the idle breeze that crosses the pathless desert! In my walks of life, I have met with a few people to

whom how gladly I would have said – “Go, be happy! I know that your hearts have been wounded by the scorn of the Proud whom accident has placed above you, or worse still, in whose hands, perhaps, are placed many of the comforts of your life; but there! ascend that rock of Independance, & look, justly, down on their littleness of soul. Make the Worthless tremble under your indignation, & the Foolish sink before your contempt; & largely impart that happiness to others which I am certain will give yourselves so much pleasure to bestow.

Why, dear Madam, must I awake from this delightful reverie, & find it all a dream? Why, amid my generous enthusiasm, must I find myself a poor, powerless devil, incapable of wiping one tear from the eye of Misery, or of adding one comfort to the Friend I love! Out upon the world! say I; that its affairs are administered so ill! – They talk of REFORM – My God! what a reform would I make among the Sons, & even the Daughters of men!

Down immediately should go FOOLS from the high places where misbegotten CHANCE has perked them up, & through life should they sculk, ever haunted by their native insignificance, as the body marches accompanied by its shadow. As for a much more formidable class, the knaves, I am at a loss to know what to do with them. Had I a world, there should not be a knave in it; & on the other hand, Hell as our Theologians paint it, particularly an eternal Hell, is a deeper damnation than I could bear to see the veriest scoundrel in earth plunged into. But the hand that could give, I would liberally fill; & I would pour delight on the heart that could kindly forgive, & generously love.

Still, the inequalities of life are, among MEN, comparatively tolerable, but there is a DELICACY, a TENDERNESS, accompanying every view in which one can place lovely WOMAN, that are grated & shocked at the rude, capricious distinctions of Fortune. Woman is the BLOOD-ROYAL of life; let there be slight degrees of precedency among them, but let them all be sacred.

Whether this last sentiment be right or wrong, I am not accountable; it is an original, component feature of my mind. I remember, & 'tis almost the earliest thing I do remember, when I was quite a boy, one day at church, being enraged at seeing a young creature, one of the maids of his house, rise from the mouth of the pew to give way to a bloated son of Wealth & Dullness, who waddled surlily past her. Indeed the girl was very pretty; & he was an ugly, stupid, purse-proud, money-loving, old monster, as you can imagine.

I will make no apology for this rhapsodical sheet. If you are provoked to take your revenge in kind, it will highly honor & oblige,

Madam, Your most obedient humble servant  
Robt Burns

**John Erskine was the 27<sup>th</sup> Earl of Mar, and although he had never met Burns he was alarmed to hear rumours of his dismissal from the Excise and offered to head a subscription on the Bard's behalf. Burns was pleased to write in his own defence to an influential nobleman.**

**(558 ) John Erskine**

Dumfries, 13th April 1793.

Sir,

[...] You have been misinformed as to my final dismissal from the Excise; I am still in the service. Indeed, but for the exertions of a gentleman who must be known to you, Mr. Graham of Fintry, a gentleman who has ever been my warm and generous friend, I had, without so much as a hearing, or the slightest previous intimation, been turned adrift, with my helpless family, to all the horrors of want. Had I had any other resource, probably I might have saved them the trouble of a dismissal; but the little money I gained by my publication is almost every guinea

embarked to save from ruin an only brother, who, though one of the worthiest, is by no means one of the most fortunate of men.

In my defence to their accusations, I said, that whatever might be my sentiments of Republics, ancient or modern, as to Britain, I abjured the idea: That a Constitution, which, in its original principles, experience had proved to be every way fitted for our happiness in society, it would be insanity to sacrifice to an untried visionary theory: That, in consideration of my being situated in a department, however humble, immediately in the hands of people in power, I had forborne taking any active part, either personally, or as an author, in the present business of Reform: but that, where I must declare my sentiments, I would say there existed a system of corruption between the Executive Power and the Representative part of the Legislature, which boded no good to our glorious Constitution, and which every patriotic Briton must wish to see amended. Some such sentiments as these I stated in a letter to my generous Patron, Mr. Graham, which he laid before the Board at large; where, it seems, my last remark gave great offence: and one of our supervisors-general, a Mr. Corbet, was instructed to inquire on the spot, and to document me - "that my business was to act, not to think; and that whatever might be men or measures, it was for me to be silent and obedient." Mr. Corbet was likewise my steady friend; so between Mr. Graham and him I have been partly forgiven; only I understand that all hopes of my getting officially forward are blasted.

Now, Sir, to the business in which I would more immediately interest you. The partiality of my Countrymen has brought me forward as a man of genius, and has given me a Character to support. In the Poet I have avowed manly and independant sentiments, which I trust will be found in the Man. Reasons of no less weight than the support of a wife and family, have pointed out as the eligible, and indeed, the only eligible line of life for me, my present occupation. Still my honest fame is my dearest concern; and a thousand times have I trembled at the idea of those degrading epithets that Malice or Misrepresentation may affix to my name. I

have often, in blasting anticipation, listened to some future hackney Magazine scribbler, with the heavy malice of savage stupidity, exulting in his hireling paragraphs that--"Burns, notwithstanding the fanfaronade of independence to be found in his works, and after having been held forth to public view and to public estimation as a man of some genius, yet, quite destitute of resources within himself to support his borrowed dignity, he dwindled into a paltry Exciseman, and slunk out the rest of his insignificant existence in the meanest of pursuits, and among the vilest of mankind."

In your illustrious hands, Sir, permit me to lodge my strong disavowal and defiance of these slanderous falsehoods. BURNS was a poor man from birth, & an Exciseman by necessity; but--I will say it! The sterling of his honest worth no poverty could debase, and his independent British mind, oppression might bend, but could not subdue! Have not I, to me a more precious stake in my Country's welfare, than the richest dukedom in it? -- I have a large family of children, and the prospect of more. I have three sons, who, I see already, have brought into the world souls ill qualified to inhabit the bodies of Slaves. Can I look tamely on, and see any machinations to wrest from them the birthright of my boys, -- the little independent Britons, in whose veins runs my own blood? -- No! I will not! should my heart's blood stream around my attempt to defend it!

Does any man tell me that my full efforts can be of no service; and that it does not belong to my humble station to meddle with the concerns of a People? I tell him that it is on such individuals as I that a nation has to rest, both for the hand of support and the eye of intelligence. The uninformed mob may swell a nation's bulk; and the titled, tinsel, courtly throng may be its feathered ornament; but the number of those who are elevated enough in life to reason and to reflect, yet low enough to keep clear of the venal contagion of a court! -- these are a Nation's strength.

One small request more; when you have honoured this letter with a perusal, please to commit it to the flames. Burns, in whose behalf you have so generously

interested yourself, I have here, in his native colours, drawn as he is; but should any of the people in whose hands is the very bread he eats, get the least knowledge of the picture, it would ruin the poor Bard for ever!

My Poems having just come out in another edition, I beg leave to present you with a copy as a small mark of that high esteem and ardent gratitude with which I have the honor to be,

Sir, your deeply indebted, and ever devoted, humble servant,

Robt Burns

**This is the last letter that we have on record that Burns wrote to his good friend, Robert Ainslie. It is a rather odd piece of writing in that it imparts absolutely no news or information of any nature to Ainslie, but is simply the Bard allowing his imagination to run riot.**

**(561) Robert Ainslie**

26<sup>th</sup> April 1793

I am damnably out of humour, my dear Ainslie, & that is the reason why I take up my pen to *you*; 'tis the nearest way, (probatum est) to recover my spirits again.

I received your last, & was much entertained with it; but I will not at this time, nor at any other time, answer it. Answer a letter? I never could answer a letter in my life! I have written many a letter in return for letters I have received; but then – they were original matter – spurt – away! zig here; zag there, as if the Devil that, my grannie (an old woman indeed!) often told me, rode on Will-o'- wisp, or in more classic phrase, SPUNKIE, were looking over my elbow. A happy thought that idea has ingendered in my head! SPUNKIE – thou shalt henceforth be my Symbol, Signature, & Tutelary Genius!

Like thee, hap-step-&-lowp, here-awa-there-awa, up-tails-a'-by-the-light-o'-the-moon, has been, is, & shall be, my progress through the mosses & moors of this vile, bleak, barren wilderness of a life of ours.

Come then, my guardian Spirit! like thee may I skip away, amusing myself by & at my own light; & if any opaque-souled lubber of mankind complain that my elfine, lambent, glimmerous wanderings have misled his stupid steps over precipices, or into bogs; let the thick-headed blunderbuss recollect, that he is not a SPUNKIE – that

“SPUNKIE’S wanderings could not copied be;  
Amid these perils none durst walk but he “

I feel myself vastly better. I give you friendly joy of Robie Water’s brother. ’Twas a happy thought, his begetting him against a *Book press*. No doubt, as you with equal sagacity & science remark, it will have an astonishing effect of the young BOOK-WORM’S head-piece. I have no doubt but your Scholarcraft may be caught, as a Scotsman catches the itch, by friction. How else can you account for it, that born blockheads, by mere dint of *handling* books, grow so wise that even they themselves are equally convinced of, & surprised at their own parts? I once carried this Philosophy to that degree that in a knot of Country folks who had a library amongst them, and who, to the honor of their good sense, made me Factotum in the business. One of our members, a little wise-looking, squat, upright, jabbering body of a Tailor, I advised him, instead of turning over the leaves, *to bind the book on his back*. Johnnie took the hint; & as our meetings were every fourth Saturday, & Prick-louse having a good Scots mile to walk in coming, & of course, another in returning, BODKIN was sure to lay his hand on some heavy Quarto, or ponderous Folio, with & under which, wrapt up in his grey plaid, he grew wise as he grew weary all the way home. He carried this so far, that an old, musty Hebrew Concordance, which we had as a present from a neighbouring Priest, by mere dint of applying it as doctors do a blistering plaister, between his shoulders, STITCH, in

a dozen pilgrimages, acquires as much *rational* Theology as said Priest had done by forty years perusal of the pages.

Tell me, & tell me truly what you think of this theory.

Yours  
SPUNKIE

**Burns now writes to Lesley Baillie, the young lady he had written so enthusiastically about to Mrs Dunlop. He enclosed the song, “Blythe hae I been on yon Hill, ‘ with the letter and offers similar advice to that he had given Jessie Staig.**

**(562) Lesley Baillie**

Dumfries, May 1793

Madam, I have just put the last hand to the inclosed song; & I think that I may say of it, as Nature can of you “There is a work of mine, finished in my very finest style!”

Among your sighing swains, if there should be one whose ardent sentiment & ingenuous modesty fetter his power of speech in your presence; with that look & attitude so native to your manner, & of all others the most bewitching – Beauty listening to Compassion --- put my Ballad in the poor fellow’s hand, just to give a little breathing to the fervour of his soul!

I have some pretence, Madam, to make you the theme of my song, as you & I are two downright singularities in human nature. You will probably start at this assertion; but I believe it will be allowed that a woman, exquisitely charming,

without the least seeming conscious of it; & a Poet who never paid a compliment but where it was justly due, are two of the greatest rarities on earth.

I have the honor to be --- & c. —

**Robert Burns' self-esteem was riding high when he wrote this next letter to John McMurdo, asking permission to present a song to one of the McMurdo girls.**

**(571) John McMurdo**

July 1793

Sir,

There is a beautiful, simple little Scots air which Mr Clarke tells me has the good fortune to meet your approbation, & which he says he has taught your young ladies, together with the rudiments of a Song which I intended to suit the tune. That Ballad I inclose, finished, & in my own opinion, in my best style; & I now beg leave to present to Miss McMurdo the Composition when I think I have made it worthy in some degree of the Subject. She, from the beginning, meant for the Heroine of it.

Sincere respect, Sir, even from those who can bestow nothing else, or who themselves are no consequence as folks of the world, still that tribute of the heart is an offering grateful to every worthy mind. You know, that is a tribute I never pay, but in the willing ardour of my soul. Kings give Coronets; Alas, I can only bestow a Ballad. Still however, I proudly claim one superiority, even over Monarchs. My presents, so far as I am a Poet, are the presents of Genius; & as the gifts of R. BURNS, they are the gifts of respectful gratitude to the WORTHY. I assure you, I am not a little flattered with the idea, when I anticipate children pointing out in

future Publications the tribute of respect I have bestowed upon their Mothers. The merit of the Scots airs, to which many of my Songs are, & more will be set, give me this pleasing hope.

You, I believe, are a Subscriber to that Splendid Edition of Scots Music in which Pleyel presides over the musical department. In a future Number of that Work, the first Number is already published, this Ballad will probably appear.

I have the honor to be, Sir,  
Your obliged humble servant  
Robt Burns

**Jean McMurdo, the daughter of John McMurdo of Drumlanrig, was the girl referred to in the previous letter. Burns enclosed a song for her, "There was a lass, & she was fair, " on her sixteenth birthday, but it is the accompanying letter that is amazing. It illustrates the Bard's concerns for the youth of the day, and implores Jean to concentrate on her studies and not become embroiled with other youngsters who are only interested in having a good time. Once again the Bard demonstrates that little in life really changes as he expresses his concerns as a father.**

**(572) Jean McMurdo**

Dumfries, July 1793

Madam,

Amid the profusion of complimentary address which your age, sex, & accomplishments will now bring you, permit me to approach you with my devoirs, which, however deficient may be their consequence in other respects, have the double novelty & merit, in these frivolous, hollow times of being poetic & sincere. In

the inclosed ballad I have, I think, hit off a few outlines of your portrait. The personal charms, the purity of mind, the ingenuous naivete of heart & manners, in my heroine, are, I flatter myself, a pretty just likeness of Miss McMurdo in a Cottager.

Every composition of this kind must have a series of dramatic incident in it; so I have had recourse to my invention to finish the rest of the ballad.

So much for the Poet: now let me add a few wishes which every man who has the honor of himself being a father, must breathe, when he sees female Youth, Beauty & Innocence about to enter into this much chequered world & very precarious world. May you, my young Madam, escape that FRIVOLITY which threatens universally to pervade the minds & manners of Fashionable life.

To pass by the rougher, & still more degenerate Sex; the mob of Fashionable Female Youth, what are they? Are they any thing? They prattle, laugh, sing, dance, finger a lesson, or perhaps turn over the leaves of a fashionable Novel, but are their minds stored with any information, worthy of the noble powers of reason & judgement; or do their hearts glow with Sentiment, ardent, generous & humane? Were I to poetise on the subject, I would call them the butterflies of the human kind, remarkable only for & distinguished only by, the idle variety of their gaudy glare, silly straying from one blossoming weed to another, without a meaning & without an aim; the idiot prey of every pirate of the skies, who thinks them worth his while as he wings his way by them; & speedily, by wintry Time, swept to that oblivion whence they might as well never have appeared.

Amid this crowd of Nothing, may you, Madam, be Something! May you be a Character, dignified as Rational & Immortal being.

A still more formidable plague in life, unfeeling interested Selfishness; is a contagion too impure to touch you. The selfish drift to bless yourself alone; to build

your fame on another's ruin; to look on the child of Misfortune without commiseration, or even the victim of Folly without pity – these, & every other feature of a heart rotten at the core, are what you are totally incapable of.

These wishes, Madam, are of no consequence to you, but to me they are of the utmost; as they give me an opportunity of declaring with what respect I have the honor to be.

&c.

**The large majority of letters sent by Burns to George Thomson contained screeds of amendments or suggestion for songs. However, this one concentrates on one song that had the Bard in a state of excitement. His jubilation was fully justified, for the song was to become one of his most treasured masterpieces, “Scots Wha Hae.”**

**(582) George Thomson**

30<sup>th</sup> August 1793

My dear Sir,

You know that my pretensions to musical taste, are merely a few of Nature's instincts, untaught & untutored by Art. For this reason, many musical compositions, particularly where much of the merit lies in Counterpoint, however they may transport & ravish the ears of you, Connoisseurs, affect my simple lug no otherwise than merely as melodious Din. On the other hand, by way of amends, I am delighted with many little melodies, which the learned Musician despises as silly & insipid. I do not know whether the old Air, “Hey tutti taitie,” may rank among this number; but I well know that, with Fraser's Hautboy, it has often filled my eyes with tears. There is a tradition, which I have met in many places in Scotland, that it was Robert Bruce's March at the battle of Bannockburn. This thought, in my yesternight's evening walk, warmed me to a pitch of enthusiasm on the theme of

Liberty & Independence, which I threw into a kind of Scots Ode, fitted to the Air, that one might suppose to be the gallant ROYAL SCOT'S address to his heroic followers on that eventful morning.

Robert Bruce's march to BANNOCKBURN –

To its ain tune –

SCOTS, wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,  
SCOTS, wham BRUCE has aften led,  
Welcome to your gory bed,  
Or to Victory.

Now's the day, & now's the hour;  
See the front o' battle lower,  
See approach proud EDWARD'S power,  
Chains & Slaverie.

Wha will be a traitor-knave?  
Wha can fill a coward's grave?  
Wha sae base as be as a slave  
Let him turn & flee.

Wha for SCOTLAND'S king & law,  
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
FREE-MAN stand, or FREE-MAN fa',  
Let him follow me.

By Oppression's woes & pains!  
By your Sons in servile chains!  
We will drain our dearest veins,

But they shall be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!

Tyrants fall in every foe!

LIBERTY'S in every blow!

Let US DO – or DIE!!!

So may God ever defend the cause of TRUTH & LIBERTY, as He did that day!

Amen!

R.B.

P.S. I shewd the air to Urbani, who was highly pleased with it, & begged me to make soft verses for it; but I had no idea of giving myself trouble on the Subject, till the accidental recollection of that glorious struggle for Freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of some other struggles of the same nature, *not quite so ancient*, roused my rhyming Mania. Clarke's set of the tune, with his bass, you will find in the Museum; though I am afraid that the air is not what will entitle it to a place in your elegant selection. However, I am so pleased with my verses, or more properly, the Subject of my verses, that although Johnson has already given the tune a place, yet it shall appear again, set to this Song, in his next & last Volume.

R.B.

**Yet another letter to a young woman enclosing a song in her honour. The recipient of this one was the daughter of his landlord, Patrick Miller of Dalswinton**

**(585) Miss Janet Miller**

Dumfries, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1793

Madam, I have taken the liberty to make you a Heroine of the Song on the foregoing page. Being little in the secret of young ladie's loves & lovers – how

should I, you know? I have formed in my fancy a little love-story for you; & a lamentable ditty I have put in your Lover's mouth. The air, you know, is excellent; & the verses, I hope, & think, are in my best manner. It goes into Pleyel's songs; & allow me to tell you a truth (what your Sex, Youth & Charms, from *my* Sex, may not often hear) I am – Sincerely happy to have an opportunity of shewing, with what respect, I have the honor to be, Madam,

Your very humble servant  
Robt Burms

**The Bard's adulation of Bruce and his army did not extend to the officers of the army of his time. He had no liking for the young officers, resplendent in their uniforms of bright red and was not afraid to let anyone know his dislike of them.**

**(594) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

November 1793

Dear Madam,

I meant to have called on you yesternight, but as I edged up to your Box-door, the first object which greeted my view was one of these lobster-coated PUPPIES, sitting like another dragon, guarding the Hesperian fruit. On Sunday I shall have the pleasure & honor of assuring you, in propria persona, how sincerely

I am yours  
R.B.

As we know, Maria Riddell was a member of a wealthy family with whom Burns enjoyed an excellent relationship. The Bard's friendship with Maria came to a sudden and dramatic end, however, when he was attending a party at Friar's Carse, the home of her sister-in-law, Elizabeth Riddell in December, 1793. Many versions of what occurred on that fateful evening have been ventured, so it is difficult to know the precise facts. Apparently, some of the men in attendance decided it would be fun to re-enact 'The Rape of the Sabine Women,' and Burns is reputed to have overacted his part with the hostess, Elizabeth Riddell, resulting in him being ordered to leave the house in disgrace.

Another theory is that Burns may have been set up by some of the young army officers in attendance, in revenge for him describing them as '*lobster-coated puppies*,' but we'll never know. Burns was deeply ashamed by this turn of events and wrote this wonderful letter of apology to Elizabeth, to express his remorse.

(608) Mrs Elizabeth Riddell

January 1794

Madam,

I dare say this is the first epistle you ever received from the nether world. I write you from the regions of Hell, amid the horrors of the damned. The time & manner of my leaving your earth I do not exactly know, as I took my departure in the heat of a fever of intoxication, contracted at your too hospitable mansion: but on my arrival here, I was fairly tried & sentenced to endure the purgatorial tortures of this infernal confine for the space of ninety-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days, & all on account of the impropriety of my conduct yesternight under your roof. Here am I laid on a bed of pitiless furze, with my aching head laid on a pillow of everpiercing thorn, while an infernal tormentor, wrinkled & old, and cruel, his name, I think is *Recollection*, with whip of scorpions, forbids peace or rest to approach me, and keeps anguish eternally awake. Still, Madam, if I could in any

measure be reinstated in the fair circle whom my conduct last night so much injured, I think it would be an alleviation to my torments. For this reason I trouble you with this letter. To the men of the company I will make no apology. Your husband, who insisted on my drinking more than I chose, has no right to blame me, & the other gentlemen were partakers of my guilt. But to you, Madam, I have much to apologise. Your good opinion I valued as one of the greatest acquisitions I had made on earth, & I was truly a beast to forfeit it. There was a Miss I-----, too, a woman of fine sense, gentle & unassuming manners – do make, on my part, a miserable damned wretch’s best apology to her. A Mrs G-----, a charming woman, did me the honor to be prejudiced in my favour; this makes me hope that I have not outraged her beyond all forgiveness. To all the other ladies, please present my humblest contrition for my conduct, & my petition for their gracious pardon. O, all ye powers of decency & decorum! whisper to them that my errors, though great, were involuntary – that an intoxicated man is the vilest of beasts – that it was not in my nature to be brutal to any one – that to be rude to a woman, when in my senses, was impossible to with me – but –

\* \* \* \* \*

Regret! Remorse! Shame! ye three hell-hounds that ever dog my steps & bay at my heels, spare me, spare me!!

Forgive the offences, & pity the perdition of, Madam,

Your humble slave

**Elizabeth Riddell refused to forgive Burns, therefore Maria, her sister-in-law, had no alternative but to toe the line and also exclude him from her circle of friends. This was a huge blow to the Bard for he was genuinely fond of Maria and regarded her friendship as a great honour.**

**(611) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Dumfries, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1794

Madam,

I return your Common Place Book. I have perused it with much pleasure, & would have continued my criticisms; but as it seems the Critic has forfeited your esteem, his strictures must lose their value.

If it is true, that “Offences only come from the heart;” – before you, I am guiltless. To admire, esteem, prize & adore you, as the most accomplished of Woman & the first of Friends – if these are crimes, I am the most offending thing alive.

In a face where I used to meet the kind complacency of friendly confidence, *now* to find cold neglect & contemptuous scorn – is a wrench that my heart can ill bear. – It is however, some kind of miserable good luck; that while De-haut-en-bas rigour may depress an unoffending wretch to the ground, it has a tendency to raise a stubborn something in his bosom, which, though it cannot heal the wounds of his soul, is at least an opiate to blunt their poignancy.

With the profoundest respect for your exalted abilities; the most sincere esteem & ardent regard, & for your gentle heart & amiable manners; & the most fervent wish & prayer for your welfare, peace & bliss.

I have the honor to be, MADAM,  
Your most devoted humble servant  
Robt Burns

**The first few weeks of 1794 were not the happiest in the life of Burns.**

**(616) James Johnson**

Dumfries, February 1794

My dear Sir,

I send by my friend, Mr Wallace, forty-one songs for your fifth volume. Mr Clarke has also a good many, if he have not, with his usual indolence, *cast them at the cocks*. I have still, a good parcel among my hands, in scraps & fragments; so that I hope we will make a shift for our last volume.

You should have heard from me long ago; but, over & above some vexacious share in the pecuniary losses of these accursed times, I have, all this winter, been plagued with low spirits & blue devils, so that I have almost hung my harp on the willow-trees.

I have got an old Highland durk, for which I have a great veneration; as it was once the durk of Lord Balmerino. It fell into bad hands who stripped it of the silver mounting, as well as the knife & fork. I have some thoughts of sending it to your care, to get it mounted anew. Our friend, Mr Clarke, owes me an account somewhere about one pound, which would go a good way to paying the expence. I remember you once settled an account in this way before; & as you will still have money matters to settle with him, you might accommodate us both.

I do not, my dear Sir, wish to do this; & I beg you will not hint it to Mr Clarke. If we do it all, I will break it to him myself.

My best Compliments to your worthy old Father, & your better-half.

Yours  
Robt Burns

**We come to another milestone in the life of the Bard as we reach the final letter on record written to Nancy McLehose, a correspondence that bridged seven years. Sadly, although the greatest part of the letter is here, the final few lines are missing, so we will never know how he ended it.**

**(629) Agnes McLehose**

Castle Douglas, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1794

Before you ask me why I have not written you; first let me ask of you, *how* I shall write to you? "In Friendship," you say; & I have many a time taken up my pen to try an epistle of "Friendship" to you; but it will not do; 'tis like Jove grasping a pop-gun, after having wielded his thunder. When I take up the pen, what a host of Memory's tenderest offspring crowd on my fancy at that sound! But I must not indulge that subject; -- you have forbid it.

I am extremely happy to learn that your precious health is re-established, & that you are once more fit to enjoy that satisfaction in existence, which health alone give us. My old Friend, Ainslie, has indeed been kind to you. Tell him that I envy him the power of serving you. I had a letter from him a while ago, but it was so dry & distant, so like a card to one of his Clients, that I could scarce bear to read it, & have not answered it. He is a good, honest fellow, & *can* write a friendly letter, which would do equal honor to his head & his heart, as a whole sheaf of his letters I have by me will witness; & though Fame does not blow her trumpet at my approach *now*, as she did *then*, when he first honored me with his friendship, yet I am as proud as ever; & when I am laid in my grave, I wish to be stretched at my full length, that I may occupy every inch of ground I have the right to.

You would laugh, were you to see me where I am just now; -- would to Heaven you were here to laugh with me, though I am afraid that crying would be our first employment. Here am I set, a solitary hermit, in the solitary room, of a solitary inn, with a solitary bottle of wine by me – as grave & as stupid as an owl – but like that owl, still faithful to my own song; in confirmation of which, my dear Mrs Mack, here is your good health! May the hand-wal'd benisons o' Heaven bless your bonie face; & the wretch who skellies at your welfare, may the auld tinkler-deil get him to clout his rotten heart! Amen!

You must know, my dearest Madam, that these now many years, wherever I am, in whatever company, when a married lady is called as a toast, I constantly give you; but as your name never passed my lips, even to my most intimate friend, I give you by the name of Mrs Mack. This is so well known among my acquaintances, that when my married lady is called for, the toast-master will say "O, we need not ask him who it is – here's to Mrs Mack!" I have also among my convivial friends, set on foot a round of toasts, which I call around of Arcadian Shepherdesses; that is, a round of favourite Ladies, under female names celebrated in ancient song; & then, you are my Clarinda; -- so my lovely Clarinda, I devote this glass of wine to a most ardent wish for your happiness!

In vain would Prudence, with decorous sneer,  
Point out a cens'ring world, & bid me fear;  
Above that world on wings of love I rise,  
I know its worst -- & can that worst despise. –

"Wronged, injured, shunned, unpitied, unredrest;  
The mocked quotation of the scorner's jest" –  
Let Prudence direct bodements on me fall,  
Clarinda, rich reward! O'erpays them all!

I have been rhyming a little of late, but I do not know if they are worth the Postage. Tell me what you think of the following –

How cold is that bosom which folly once fired,

The subject of the foregoing is a woman of fashion in this country, with whom, at one period, I was well acquainted. By some scandalous conduct to me, & two or three other gentlemen here as well as me, she steered so far to the north of my good opinions, that I have made her the theme of several things. The following epigram struck me the other day as I passed her carriage.

I f you rattle along like your Mistresses tongue,  
Your speed will outrival the dart;  
But a fly for your load, you'll break down on the road,  
If your stuff be as rotten's her heart.

**Burns' income as an Excise officer had dwindled to almost nothing. The French war had virtually wiped him out as his finances depended largely on commission from the duties which he collected, and nothing was being imported from France. The following letter must have been one of the most difficult ever written by him. Captain John Hamilton was the landlord of his house in Mill Street (now Burns Street) and Burns was struggling to pay the rent.**

**(633) Captain John Hamilton**

July 1794

Sir,

It is even so. You are the only person in Dumfries or in the world, to whom I have *run in debt*; & I took the freedom with you, because I believed, & do still believe that I may do it with more impunity as to my feelings than any other person almost, that I ever met with. I will settle with you soon, & I assure you, Sir, it is with infinite pain that I have transgressed on your goodness. The unlucky fact for me is, that about the beginning of these disastrous times, in a moment of imprudence, I lent my name to a friend who has since been unfortunate, & of course, I had a sum to pay which my very limited income & large family could ill afford. God forbid, Sir, that anything should ever distress you as much as writing this card has done me.

With the sincerest gratitude & most respectful esteem. –

I have the honor to be, Sir,  
Your very humble servant  
Robt Burns

**In this letter to Mrs Dunlop he complains again of poverty and illness. His money had disappeared into a bottomless pit as he endeavoured to keep brother Gilbert's farm from ruination, and now he had yet another mouth to feed.**

**(638) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

September 1794

Dear Madam,

I am so poorly today as to be scarce able to hold my pen, and so deplorably stupid as to be unable to hold it to any purpose; but as my good friend, The Member franks it for me, it will only cost you the penance of reading. I know you are pretty deep read in Medical matters, but I fear you have nothing in the *Materia Medica* which can heal a diseased SPIRIT. I think that the Poet's old companion, Poverty, is to be my attendant to my grave. You know that my brother, poor fellow, was on the brink of ruin, when my good fortune threw a little money among my hands which saved him for a while. Still his ruinous farm threatens to beggar him, & though a bad debt of ten pounds excepted, he has every shilling I am worth in the world among his hands, I am nearly certain that I am done with it forever. This loss, as to my individual self, I could hold it very light; but my little flock would have been the better for a couple of hundred pounds; for *their* sakes, it wrings my heart!

Apropos, the other day, Mrs Burns presented me with my fourth son, whom I have christened James Glencairn; in grateful memory of my lamented Patron. I shall

make all my children's names altars of gratitude. Poor dear little souls, they are all the finest creatures in the world. I gratefully thank my God for his goodness in that respect. A fine constitution, & amiable dispositions, are of immense consequence to the happiness of the individual.

When did you hear from the East? Believe me, I am most anxiously interested in every thing dear to you. Have you any correspondence with little Wallace; & does he promise well? I know that he used to occupy a great deal of your thoughts. – Ah, my dear Madam, the feelings of a Parent are not to be described! I sympathised much, the other day, with a father, a man whom I respect highly. He is a Mr Staig, the leading man in our Borough. A girl of his, a lovely creature of sixteen, was given over by the Physician who openly said that she had but few hours to live. A gentleman who also lives in town, & who has studied medicine in the first schools – the Dr Maxwell whom Burke mentioned in the House of Commons about the affair of the daggers – he was at last called in, -- & his prescriptions in a few hours altered her situation, & have now cured her. Maxwell is my most intimate friend, & one of the first characters I ever met with, but on account of his Politics is rather shunned by some Aristocrates, though his Family & Fortune entitle him to the first circles. I addressed the following Epigram to him on that occasion

Maxwell, if merit here you crave,

Here follows an Epigram of a different cast.—

On Walter Riddell Esq;

So vile was poor Wat, such a miscreant slave,

I shall write you some ballads in a day or two, the playthings of my fancy of late.

Farewell!

Robt Burns

**The Bard wrote this next letter to Mrs Dunlop over a period of three weeks, but is only the section written on the 12 th January 1795 that is of interest. His comments about the King and Queen of France offended Mrs Dunlop so deeply that she brought their incredible eight-year correspondence to an abrupt end**

**(649) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

12<sup>th</sup> January 1795

You will have seen our worthy & ingenious friend, the Doctor, long ere this. I hope he is well, & beg to be remembered to him. I have just been reading over again, I dare say for the hundred & fiftieth time, his “Views of Society & Manners;” & still read it with unsated delight. His humour is perfectly original. It is neither the humour of Addison, nor Swift, nor Sterne, nor any body, but Dr Moore; & is positively as rich a vein as any of them could boast. By the bye, you have deprived me of a Zeluco; remember *that*, when you are disposed to rake up the sins of my neglect from among the ashes of my laziness.

He has paid me a pretty compliment, by quoting me in his last Publication, though I must beg leave to say, that he has not written this last work in his usual happy manner. Entre nous, you know my Politics; & I cannot approve of the honest Doctor’s whining over the deserved fate of a certain pair of Personages. What is there in delivering over a perjured Blockhead & an unprincipled Prostitute into the hands of the hangman, that it should arrest for a moment, attention, in an eventful hour, when, as my friend Roscoe in Liverpool gloriously expresses it—

“When the welfare of Millions is hung in the scale  
And the balance yet trembles with fate!”

But our friend is already indebted to People in power, & still looks forward for his Family, so I can apologise to him; for at bottom, I am sure he is a close friend to

liberty. Thank God these London trials have given us a bit more breath, & I imagine that the time is not far distant when a man may freely blame Billy Pitt, without being called an enemy to his Country.

Adieu!  
Robt Burns

**At last one of the black clouds which had hung over the head of the Bard for so long was to lift. Maria Riddell wrote to him and re-established their friendship. Her brother-in-law Robert Riddell had died and his wife Elizabeth had sold Friar's Carse and moved from the area. This move was instrumental in freeing young Maria from the family shackles that had prevented contact with Burns. Maria sent him a book and he wasted no time in writing a letter of thanks.**

**(650) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Friday eve, January 1795

Mr Burns's Compliments to Mrs Riddell – is much obliged to her for her polite attention in sending him the book. Owing to Mr B----s's being at present acting as Supervisor of Excise, a department that occupies his every hour of the day, he has not that time to spare which is necessary for any Belle Lettre pursuit; but, as he will, in a week or two, again return to his wonted leisure, he will then pay that attention to Mrs R-----'s beautiful Song "To thee, loved Nith," which it so well deserves.

When 'Anacharsis Travels' come to hand, which Mrs Riddell mentioned as her gift to the Public Library, Mr B----- will thank her for a reading of it, previous to her sending it to the Library, as it a book Mr B---- has never seen, & wishes to have a longer perusal of than the regulations of the Library allow.

P.S. Mr Burns will be much obliged to Mrs Riddell if she will favor him with a perusal of any of her poetical pieces which he may not have seen.

**William Stewart was an old friend of the Bard, immortalised by a song inscribed on a glass tumbler that eventually found its way to Abbotsford as part of Sir Walter Scott's collection where it remains to this day. Burns was by now in such a state of penury that he was forced to write to his old friend begging for a loan.**

**(652) William Stewart**

Dumfries, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1795

This is a painful, disagreeable letter & the first of the kind I ever wrote. I am truly in serious distress for three or four guineas; can you, my dear Sir, accomodate me? It will truly oblige me. These cursed times, by stopping up Importation, have for this year at least lopt off a full third of my income; & with my large Family, this is to me a distressing matter.

Farewell! & God bless you !

R Burns

**Burns wrote the next letter on behalf of a neighbour, so although the content is interesting, it has nothing to do with the problems surrounding him at that time.**

**(654) The Editors of the Morning Chronicle**

January 1795

Gentlemen,

You will see by your subscriber's list, that I have now been about nine months one of that number. I am sorry to inform you, that in that time, seven or eight of your Papers either have never been sent me, or else they have never reached me. To be deprived of any one Number of the first Newspaper in Britain, for information, ability & independance, is is what I can ill brook & bear; but to be deprived of that most admirable Oration of the Marquis of Lansdowne, when he made the great, though ineffectual attempt, (in the language of the Poet, I fear too true,) "to save a Rotten State" – this was a loss which I neither can, nor will forgive you. That Paper, Gentlemen, never reached me; but I demand it of you. I am a Briton; & must be interested in the cause of Liberty; I am a man; & the rights of Human Nature can not be indifferent to me. However, do not let me mislead you; I am not a man in that situation of life, which, as your Subscriber, can be of any consequence to you, in the eyes of those, to whom *Situation of Life alone* is the criterion of Man. I am but a plain Tradesman in this distant, obscure country town; but that humble domicile in which I shelter my wife & children, is the Castellum of a Briton; & that scanty, hard-earned Income which supports them, is as truly my Property, as the most magnificent fortune, of the most puissant member of your House of Nobles.

These, Gentlemen, are my sentiments; & to them I subscribe my Name; & were I a man of ability & consequence enough to address the Public, with that Name should they appear.

I am &c.—

**The Bard was obviously highly delighted that he was oce again able to communicate with Maria Riddell and did so with enthusiasm.**

**(658) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Dumfries, March 1795

I cannot express my gratitude to you for allowing me a longer perusal of Anacharsis. In fact, I have never met with a book that bewitched me so much; & I as a member of the Library, must warmly feel the obligation you have laid us under. Indeed to me, the obligation is stronger than to any other individual of our Society; as Anacharsis is an indispensable desideratum to a Son of the Muses.

Pleyel is still in statu quo. In a little time, however, we will have all the work. He is still in Strasbourg; but the Messrs Coutts, the London bankers, have been so obliging as to allow my friend Thomson, the Editor, the channel of their correspondence in Switzerland, through which medium the business is going forward. Thomson has enlarged his plan. The hundred pathetic airs are to be as proposed, only he means to have four plates, instead of two. He likewise has increased his number of facetious songs & lively airs, & proposes adorning them here or there with vignettes. Among others in the lively way, he has taken one or two Irish tunes; chiefly, I believe, from the partiality which his friendship to me makes him feel for the verses I have written for them. The following I wrote the other day for an Irish air which I highly admire; & for the sake of my verses he has obligingly adopted the air into his Selection.

Song

Their groves o' sweet myrtle

Song

My Chloris, mark how green the groves

Song

Long, long the night

I cannot help laughing at your friend's conceit of my picture; & I suspect you are playing off on me some of that fashionable wit, called HUMBUG. Apropos to pictures, I am just sitting to Reid in this town for a miniature; & I think he has hit by

far the best likeness of me ever was taken. When you are at any time so idle, in town, as to call at Reid's painting-room, & mention to him that I spoke of such a thing to you, he will shew it you; else, he will not; for both the Miniature's existence & its destiny are an inviolable secret, & therefore very properly trusted in part to you.

Song

Canst thou leave me thus, my Katie

I am sure you are now most heartily inclined to drowsy rest, so Bon repos.

R.B.

**This letter was sent along with a large quantity of songs and epigrams to his friend Peter Hill.**

**(671) Peter Hill**

Dumfries, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1795

Sir,

I had intended to trouble you with a long letter; but at present the delightful sensations of an omnipotent TOOTHACH so engross all my inner man, as to put it out of my power even to write Nonsense. However, as in duty bound, I approach my BOOKSELLER with an offering in my hand – a few poetic Clinches & a song; to expect any other kind of offering from the Rhyming Tribe, would be to know them much less than you do. I do not pretend that there is much merit in the Morceaux, but I have two reasons for sending them; primo, they are mostly ill-natured, so are in unison with my present feelings while fifty troops of infernal Spirits are riding post from ear to ear along my jaw-bones; & secondly, they are so short that you cannot leave off in the middle, & so hurt my pride in the idea that you thought any Work of mine too heavy to get through.

I have a request to beg of you, & I not only beg of you, but conjure you. By all your Wishes & by all your Hopes, that the Muse will spare the Satyric wink, in the moment of your foibles; that she will warble the song of rapture round your Hymeneal couch; & that she will shed on your turf the honest tear of Elegiac gratitude! Grant my request as speedily as possible. Send me, by the very first Fly or Coach for this Place, three copies of the last edition of my Poems; which place to my account.

Now, may the good things of Prose, & the good things of Verse, come among thy hands, until they be filled with the good things of Life! prayeth.

R. Burns

**Maria Riddell was interested in helping someone procure a position in the Excise and was seeking the Bard's assistance in the matter.**

**(673A) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Summer 1795

I think there is little doubt but that your interest, if judiciously directed, may procure a Tide-water's place for your protégé, Shaw; but, alas, that is doing little for him! – Fifteen pounds per ann. is the Salary; & the perquisites in some lucky stations, such as Leith, Glasgow, Greenock, may be ten more; but in such a place as this, for instance, they will hardly amount to five. The appointment is not in the EXCISE, but in the CUSTOMS. The way of getting appointed, is just the application of GREAT FOLKS to the Commissioners of the CUSTOMS; the Almanack will give you their names. The EXCISE is a superiour object, as the salary is fifty per annum. You mention that he has a family; if he has more than three children, he

cannot be admitted as an Excise Officer. To apply there, is the same business as the Customs. Garthland, if you can commit his sincere zeal in the cause, is, I think able to do either the one or the other. Find out among your acquaintances who are the private friends of the Commissioners of the particular Board at which you wish to apply, & interest them – the more the better. The Commissioners of both Boards are people quite in the fashionable circle, & must be known to many of your friends. I was going to mention some of your Female acquaintances who might give you a lift, but on recollection, your interest with the WOMEN is, I believe, but a sorry business, -- so much the better! 'tis God's judgement upon you for making such a despotic use of your sway over the MEN. *You* a Republican! You have an Empire over us; & you know it too; but the Lord's holy name be praised, you have something of the same propensity to get giddy – (intoxicated is not a lady's word) with power & devilish deal of aptitude to the same blind, undistinguishing FAVORITISM which makes other despots less dangerous to the welfare & repose of mankind than they otherwise might be.

So much for scolding you .

I have perused your M.S.S. with a great deal of pleasure. I have taken the liberty to make a few marks with my pencil which I trust you will pardon.

Farewell

R.Burns

**Burns writes once again to Maria Riddell, but on this occasion his mood is one of despondency. His young daughter, Elizabeth Riddell Burns, had died before she reached her third birthday.**

**(685) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Dumfries, October 1795

A severe domestic misfortune has put all literary business out of my head for some time past. Now I begin to resume my wonted studies. I am much in correspondence in your debt; I shall pay it soon. Clarke's sonatas are of no use to me, & I beg you will keep them.

That you, my friend, may never experience such a loss as mine, sincerely prays

R.B.

**As we enter 1796, the Bard's health is deteriorating rapidly. He is obviously very forlorn and missing the comfort of the correspondence enjoyed for so long between Mrs Dunlop and himself. Still unaware that he has offended her sensibilities in his earlier letter he tries once more to rekindle their friendship. A failed harvest has made the procurement of food very difficult in Dumfries, a situation that eventually led to rioting in the streets of the town.**

**(688) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

31<sup>st</sup> January 1796

These many months you have been two packets in my debt. What sin of ignorance I have committed against so highly a valued friend I am utterly at a loss to guess. Your son, John, whom I had the pleasure of seeing here, told me you had gotten a nasty accident of a fall, but told me also the comfortable news that you were gotten pretty well again. Will you be so obliging, dear Madam, as to condescend on that my offence which you seem determined to punish with a deprivation of that friendship which was once the source of my highest enjoyments? Alas, Madam, ill can I afford at this time, to be deprived of any of the small remnant of my pleasures. I have lately drank deep of the cup of affliction. The Autumn robbed me of my only daughter & darling child, & that at a distance too, & so rapidly as to put it out of my power to pay the last duties to her. I had scarcely began to recover from that shock, when I became myself the victim of a

most severe Rheumatic-fever, & long the die spun doubtful; until after many weeks of a sick-bed, it seems to have turned up life, & I am beginning to crawl across my room, & once indeed have been before my own door in the street.

When Pleasure fascinates the mental sight,  
Affliction purifies the visual ray;  
Religion hails the drear, the untried night,  
That shuts, for ever shuts! Life's doubtful day.

As to other matters of my concern, my family, views, &c., they are all as successful as I could well wish.

I know not how you are in Ayr-shire, but here we have actual famine, & that too in the midst of plenty. Many days my family & hundreds of other families are absolutely without one grain of meal; as money cannot purchase it. How long the *Swiss Multitude* will be quiet, I cannot tell; they threaten daily.

Farewel! May all good things attend you

R.Burns

**Burns had now arrived at the stage where he realised that his life had only a short while to run.**

**(693) George Thomson**

April 1796

Alas, my dear Thomson, I fear it will be sometime ere I tune my lyre again! "By Babel streams" &c. Almost ever since I wrote you last, I have only known Existence by the pressure of the heavy hand of Sickness; & have counted Time by the repurcussions of Pain! Rheumatism, Cold & Fever, have formed, to me, a

terrible Trinity in Unity, which makes me close my eyes in misery, & open them without hope. I look on the vernal day, & say with poor Ferguson —

“Say wherefore has an all indulgent Heaven  
Light to the comfortless & wretched given?”

This will be delivered to you by a Mrs Hyslop, Landlady of the Globe Tavern here, which for these many years has been my HOWFF, & where our friend Clarke & I have had many a merry squeeze. I mention this, because she will be a very proper hand to bring that Seal you talk of.

I am highly delighted with Mr Allan’s etchings. “Woo’d & married & a” is admirable! The *grouping* is beyond all praise. The *expression* of the figures, conformable to the story in the ballad, is absolutely faultless perfection. I next admire ‘Turnimspyke.’ What I like least is “Jenny said to Jocky.” Besides the female being in her appearance *quite a virago*, if you take her stooping into account, she is at least two inches taller than her lover.

I will thank you much for a number or two of that magazine you mention. Poor Cleghorn! I sincerely sympathise with him! Happy am I to think that yet he has a wellgrounded hope of health & enjoyment in this world.

As for me – but that is a *damning* subject!

FAREWEL !!!

R.B.

**(696) James Johnson**

1<sup>st</sup> June 1796

How are you, my dear Friend? & how comes on your fifth volume? You may probably think that for some time past I have neglected you & your work; but Alas the hand of pain, & sorrow, & care has these many months lain heavy on me! Personal & domestic affliction have almost banished that alacrity of life with which I

used to woo the rural Muse of Scotia. In the mean time, let us finish what we have so well begun. The gentleman Mr Lewars, a particular friend of mine, will bring out any proofs (if they are ready) or any message you may have.

Farewell!

R. Burns

turn over

You should have had this when Mr Lewars called on you, but his saddle-bags miscarried. I am extremely anxious for your work, as indeed I am for anything concerning you & your welfare. You are a good, worthy, honest fellow, & have a good right to live in this world – because you deserve it. Many a merry meeting this Publication has given us, & possibly it may give us more, though, alas, I fear it. This protracting, slow, consuming illness which hangs over me, will, I doubt much, my ever dear friend, arrest my sun before he has well reached his middle career, & will turn over the Poet to far other & more important concerns than studying the brilliancy of Wit or the pathos of Sentiment. However, Hope is the cordial of the human heart, & I endeavour to cherish it as well as I can. Let me hear from you as soon as convenient. Your Work is a great one; & though now that it is near finished, I see if we were to begin again, two or three things that might be mended, yet I will venture to prophesy, that to future ages your Publication will be the text book & standard of Scottish Song & Music.

I am ashamed to ask another favor of you because you have been so good already, but my wife has a very particular friend of hers, a young lady who sings well, to whom she wishes to present the Scots Musical Museum. If you have a spare copy, will you be obliging to send by the very first Fly, as I am anxious to have it soon.

Yours ever

R. Burns

**In this, his final recorded letter to Maria Riddell, Robert Burns showed admirable fortitude in the last weeks of his life. His body may well have been racked with pain but his mind remained lucid as he continued to compose letters in his inimitable style.**

**(697) Maria Banks Woodley Riddell**

Dumfries, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1796

I am in such miserable health as to be utterly incapable of shewing my loyalty in any way. Racked as I am with Rheumatisms, I meet every face with a greeting like that of Balak to Balaam. "Come curse me Jacob; & come, defy me Israel." So say I, Come, curse me that East-wind; & come, defy me the North!!! Would you have me in such circumstances copy you out a Love-song? No! if I must write, let it be Seditious, or Blasphemous, or something else that begins with a B. so that I may grin with the grin of iniquity, & rejoice with the rejoicing of an apostate Angel.

"All good to me is lost,  
Evil, be thou my good!"

I may perhaps see you on Saturday, but I will not be at the Ball. Why should I? "Man delights not me, nor woman either"! Can you supply me with the Song, "Let's all be unhappy together."

Do, if you can, & oblige

Le pauvre miserable

R.B.

**Although by then barely able to hold his quill, Robert Burns continued to write to his friends to inform them of his illness.**

**(698) James Clarke**

Dumfries, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1796

My dear Clarke,

Still, still the victim of affliction. Were you to see the emaciated figure who now holds the pen to you, you would not know your old friend. Whether I shall ever get about again, is only known to HIM, the Great Unknown, whose creature I am. Alas, Clarke, I begin to fear the worst! As to my individual Self, I am tranquil. I would despise myself if I were not; but Burn's poor widow & half a dozen of his dear little ones, helpless orphans, there I am weak as a woman's tear. Enough of this! 'tis half my disease!

I duly received your last, inclosing the note. It came extremely in time, & I was much obliged to you for your punctuality. Again I must request you to do me the same kindness. Be so very good as *by return of post* to inclose me another note. I trust you can do it without much inconvenience, & it will seriously oblige me. If I must go, I leave a few friends behind me, whom I shall regret while consciousness remains. I know I shall live in their remembrance.

Adieu dear Clarke! That I shall ever see you again is, I am afraid, highly improbable.

R. Burns

**The Bard's good friend, Dr Maxwell, had considered that the only course of action left for Burns was to bathe chest high in the freezing waters of the Solway Firth and to go riding, both actions which we now know were**

**guaranteed to shorten the life of the poet. But Burns had faith in Maxwell and followed his instructions by going to Brow for bathing.**

**(700) Alexander Cunningham**

Brow-Sea-bathing quarters, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1796

My dear Cunningham,

I received yours this moment & am indeed highly flattered with the approbation of the literary circle you mention; a literary circle inferiour to none in the two kingdoms. Alas! my friend, I fear the voice of the Bard will soon be heard among you no more! For these eight or ten months I have been ailing, sometimes bedfast & sometimes not; but these last three months I have been tortured with an excruciating rheumatism, which has reduced me nearly to this last stage. You actually would not know me if you saw me. Pale, emaciated, & so feeble as to occasionally need help from my chair – my spirits fled! fled! – but I can no more on the subject – only the Medical people tell me that last & only chance is bathing & country-quarters & riding. The deuce of the matter is this; when an Excise-man is off duty, his salary is reduced to thirty-five pounds instead of fifty pounds. What way, in the name of thrift, shall I maintain myself & keep a horse in Country-quarters – with a wife & five children at home, on thirty-five pounds? I mention this, because I had intended to beg your utmost interest & all friends you can muster to move our Commissioners of Excise to grant me the full salary. I dare say you know them all personally. If they do not grant it me, I must lay my account with an exit truly en poete, if I die not of disease, I must perish with hunger!

I have sent you one of the songs; the other, my memory does not serve me with; & I have no copy here; but I shall be at home soon, when I will send it you. Apropos to being at home, Mrs Burns threatens in a week or two, to add one more to my Paternal charge, which, if of the right gender, I intend shall be introduced to the world by the respectable designation of Alexander Cunningham Burns. My last was James Glencairn, so you can have no objection to the company of Nobility.

Farewell!

R.B.

**The ailing Bard was still at Brow when he sent off this letter to his father-in-law, a man with whom he had had little contact since marrying Jean Armour. However, in spite of the animosity he felt towards the Armours, he still signed the letter with great formality.**

**(701) James Armour**

10<sup>th</sup> July 1796

For Heaven's sake & as you value the welfare of your daughter, & my wife, do, my dearest Sir, write to Fife to Mrs Armour to come if possible. My wife thinks she can yet reckon upon a fortnight. The Medical people order me, *as I value my existence*, to fly to sea-bathing & country-quarters, so it is ten thousand chances to one that I shall not be within a dozen miles of her when her hour comes. What a situation for her, poor girl, without a single friend by her on such a serious moment.

I have now been a week at salt water, & although I think I have got some good by it, yet I have some secret fears that this business will be dangerous, if not fatal.

Your most affectionate son

R Burns

**Here we have a final note to Mrs Dunlop, to which she replied just before his death. He had treasured his friendship and correspondence with Mrs Dunlop and wished her to know that before he died. Her note in return is believed to**

have been one of the very last letters read by the Bard before his eyes closed forever.

**(702) Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop**

10<sup>th</sup> July 1796

Madam,

I have written you so often without receiving any answer, that I would not trouble you again but for the circumstances in which I am. An illness which has long hung about me in all probability will speedily send me beyond that bourne whence no traveller returns. Your friendship with which for many years you honored me was a friendship dearest to my soul. Your conversation & especially your correspondence were at once highly entertaining & instructive. With what pleasure did I use to break up the seal! The remembrance yet adds one pulse more to my poor palpitating heart!

Farewell!!!!

Robert Burns

**(703) Gilbert Burns**

10<sup>th</sup> July 1796

It will be no very pleasing news to you to be told that I am dangerously ill, & not likely to get better. An inveterate rheumatism has reduced me to such a state of debility, & my appetite is gone, so that I can scarce stand on my legs. I have been a week at sea-bathing, & I will continue there in a friend's house all the summer. God help my wife & children, if I am taken from their head! They will be poor indeed. I have contracted one or two serious debts, partly from my illness these many months, & partly to thoughtlessness as to expense when I came to town that will cut in too much on the little I leave them in your hands. Remember me to my Mother

Yours  
Robt Burns

**The vultures were now surrounding Burns as he lay ill, and incapable of supporting himself.**

**( 705 ) James Burness,**

Dumfries, 12th July 1796

My Dear Cousin,

When you offered me money assistance, little did I think I should want it so soon. A rascal of a Haberdasher, to whom I owe a considerable bill, taking it into his head that I am dying, has commenced a process against me, & will infallibly put my emaciated body into jail. Will you be so good as to accommodate me, and that by return of post, with ten pounds?

O James, did you know the pride of my heart, you would feel doubly for me! Alas! I am not used to beg! The worst of it is, my health was coming about finely; you know & my Physician assures me that melancholy and low spirits are half my disease. If I had it settled, I would be, I think, quite well in a manner. How shall I use the language to you, O do not disappoint me! But strong necessity's curst demand.

I have been thinking over & over my brother's affairs & I fear I must cut him up; but on this I will correspond at another time, particularly as I shall want your advice. Forgive me for once more mentioning by return of Post. Save me the horrors of jail!

My compliments to my friend James, & to all the rest. I do not know what I have written, the subject is so horrible, I dare not look it over again.

Farewel

R. B.

**His desperation is revealed in this final letter to George Thomson, but in spite of everything he still continued to attempt to edit songs.**

**(706) George Thomson**

12<sup>th</sup> July 1796

After all my boasted independence, curst necessity compels me to implore you for five pounds. A cruel scoundrel of a Haberdasher to whom I owe an account, taking it into his head that I am dying, has commenced a process & will infallibly put me into jail. Do, for God's sake, send me that sum, & that by return of post. Forgive me this earnestness, but the horrors of a jail have made me half distracted. I do not ask all this gratuitously, for upon returning to health, I hereby promise & engage to furnish you with five pounds worth of the neatest songs you have seen.

I tried my hand on Rothiemuchie this morning. The measure is so difficult that it is impossible to infuse much genius into the lines – they are on the other side.

Forgive, forgive me!

Yours  
R Burns  
Turn

Song, tune Rothiemurchie

Chorus

Fairest maid on Devon banks,

**In this short note to his wife, Burns fails to mention that he is sure he is dying.**

**(708) Jean Armour Burns**

Brow, Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> July 1796

My dearest Love,

I delayed writing until I could tell you what effect sea-bathing was likely to produce. It would be injustice to deny that it has eased my pains, & I think, has strengthened me, but my appetite is still extremely bad. No flesh nor fish can I swallow; porridge & milk are the only things I can taste. I am very happy to hear by Miss Jess Lewars, that you are all well. My very best & kindest compliments to her, & to all the children. I will see you on Sunday. –

Your affectionate husband  
R.B.

**Burns was by now desperate to return to Dumfries. He was only too aware of the predicament that would befall his wife unless she had someone on hand when she gave birth. In desperation he writes to a friend to try and obtain the use of a covered Gig to get him back to Dumfries.**

**(709) John Clark**

Saturday noon, Brow 16<sup>th</sup> July 1796

My dear Sir,

My hours of bathing have interfered so unluckily as to have put it out of my power to wait on you. In the mean time, as the tides are over I anxiously wish to return to town, as I have not heard any news of Mrs Burns these two days. Dare I be so bold as to borrow your Gig? I have a horse at command, but it threatens to rain, & getting wet is perdition. Any time about three in the afternoon, will suit me exactly.

Yours most gratefully & sincerely  
R. Burns

**Sadly, we arrive at the final letter written by Robert Burns, and it is not a happy one. Jean's mother had failed to arrive at Dumfries and Burns was frantic with worry about the situation.**

**(710) James Armour**

Dumfries, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1796

My dear Sir

Do, for heaven's sake, send Mrs Armour here immediately. My wife is hourly expecting to be put to bed. Good God! what a situation for her to be in, poor girl, without a friend! I returned from sea-bathing quarters today, & my medical friends would almost persuade me that I am better, but I think & feel that my strength is so gone that the disorder will prove fatal to me.

Your son-in-law

R.B.

## *Epilogue*

*The Bard's awareness of his impending death was more accurate than that of his doctors and he died three days later.*

*Jean went into labour on the day of his funeral and as he was buried delivered her ninth child, Maxwell Burns, ironically named after the man who had hastened the decline of her husband. The funeral was a massive event as thousands of mourners poured into Dumfries to pay their last respects to*

*the Bard while the Dumfries Volunteers paid tribute by firing shots over his grave.*

*Scotland eventually realised the greatness of her departed Bard and his body was taken from his grave and reinterred in the magnificent white marble mausoleum where he lies along with Jean and several other members of his family.*

*Whether Burns would have wanted this is open to question, for he had written the following lines on the death of his good friend, Captain Matthew Henderson,*

*“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.*

*The fact that Robert Burns died at the age of 37 has been the subject of much analysis throughout the years. Rheumatic Fever has long been top of the list, but some have suggested that Burns may have been laid low by a sexually transmitted disease.*

*However, a much more enlightened prognosis has come from Canada where a doctor has come up with the well-founded theory that the death of Robert Burns was probably the result of Brucellosis, and certainly, if we read the short definition of Brucellosis, it certainly appears that the good doctor is entirely correct in his theory.*

***Brucellosis. A rare bacterial infection caused by various strains of Brucella which may be transmitted to humans from affected cattle, goats and pigs. It may also be transmitted in unpasteurised dairy products. Initially it causes a bout of high fever, backache, poor appetite, weakness and depression. Untreated severe cases may lead to pneumonia or meningitis. In long term Brucellosis, bouts of the illness recur over months or years and depression can be severe.***

*The Burns family cottage in Alloway was designed to accommodate the family’s live stock in an area adjacent to the living quarters, so it is a fact that young Robert came into close contact with farm animals from birth.*

*The very restricted diet that the cash-strapped family were forced to exist on contained milk straight from the cow and cheese made by the poet’s mother, and*

*in the words of Gilbert Burns, “for several years butcher meat was a stranger in the house”.*

*We know that Burns was both undernourished and overworked as a youngster, and that school days were often truncated by the need for the lad to assist in farm work, and we know that by the age of fifteen, Robert was the main source of labour on the farm.*

*We know that by the age of 22 Burns was already suffering from ill health, and the letter, written to his father from Irvin on the 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1781, illustrates clearly that Burns was already on the downward slope, and that the symptoms that he describes in the letter are indeed exactly those of Brucellosis.*

*What a sad letter, full of despondency and so in line with the symptoms of severe depression outlined in the description of that terrible disease. Not at all what one would expect from a young man with his life before him. Many of his poems, songs and letters are darkened with lines of despair. The final verse of what must be one of his best known poems, ‘To a Mouse’, tells us of a young man in deep depression. In fact, the entire poem could well have been a description of what was his own life at that time.....uncertainty and doubt.*

*“Still, thou art blest compar’d wi’ me.  
The present only toucheth thee;  
But Och! I backward cast my e’e  
On prospects drear!  
An’ forward, tho’ I canna see,  
I guess and fear.*

*Another of his works, ‘Man Was Made to Mourn’, finishes with a verse that tells us that Burns may well have welcomed death as a relief from the pressures of his early life.*

*O Death! The poor man’s dearest friend,  
The kindest and the best!  
Welcome the hour my aged limbs  
Are laid with thee at rest!  
The great, the wealthy fear thy blow,  
From pomp and pleasure torn;  
But Oh! a blest relief to those  
That weary-laden mourn.*

*Maria Riddell proved herself to be a tower of strength in aiding Jean through*

*the period following his death in spite of being beset with problems of her own. Jean outlived Robert by 38 years and was a source of information to the many visitors who found their way to her door.*

*Agnes MacLehose spent the rest of her life in Edinburgh and guarded her past carefully as interest in Burns grew. 'The day I cannot forget' she wrote in her diary for December 6th 1831, 'Parted with Burns in 1791, never more to meet in this world. May we meet in Heaven.' She died ten years later at the age of 83 and her memorial stone, showing her likeness in silhouette, can be seen in Canongate churchyard in sight of Edinburgh's Burns Monument. Her collection of letters from Burns was found in a wooden box and was considered to have no value. Only the box was sold.*

*Agnes Broun, Robert's mother, outlived her son by more than twenty years, and continued to live with Gilbert and his family in East Lothian on a pension arranged by Robert before he died. Gilbert remained a farmer and latterly a factor in East Lothian, where he died in 1827 aged 67. His youngest sister, Isabella was the sole survivor of the family, living into the height of Victorian curiosity about Robert. She died in Alloway in 1858 near her nephews and nieces.*

*Robert's first child, Elizabeth Paton Burns, lived with the family at Mossgiel and then at Ellisland until Robert died when she was 11. She went back to her mother, with whom she lived until she married. She had 7 children and died in 1817 at the age of 31.*

*Robert Burns jnr attended both Glasgow and Edinburgh universities before moving to London. He was given a position in the Stamp Office, courtesy of the Prime Minister, and on retirement received a pension, granted because of 'the great literary talents' of his father.*

*William Nicol Burns enjoyed a successful career in the East India Company where he attained the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, and on his return to Britain was made a full Colonel.*

*James Glencairn Burns travelled to India as a cadet with the East India Company where he achieved the rank of Major. He went on to become*

*Judge and Collector at Cahar and finished his career with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.*

*Although Elizabeth Park Burns had been raised by Jean Armour, after her death she felt shunned by the surviving children of the family and moved to Glasgow.*

*There are more statues and monuments throughout the world in honour of Robert Burns than of any other writer, but the greatest of his memorials are his words.*

*They will never die.*

### **List of addressees from A TO Z**

Aiken, Robert

Ainslie, Robert

Alexander, Wilhelmina

Armour, James

Arnott, John

Baillie, Lesley

Ballantyne, John

Begbie, Alison

Boyd, Thomas

Brice, David

Brown, Captain Richard

Brown, Samuel

Burnes, William

Burness, James

Burns, Jean Armour

Burns, Gilbert

Burns, William

Chalmers, Margaret

Clark, John  
Clarke, James  
Creech, William  
Cruikshank, William  
Cunningham, Alexander  
Cunningham, Lady Elizabeth  
Davies, Deborah Duff  
Deed of Assignment  
Don, Lady Henrietta  
Dunbar, William  
Dunlop, Mrs Frances Anna  
Erskine, John  
Findlater, Alexander  
Fontenelle, Louisa  
Geddes, Bishop  
Graham, Robert  
Grose, Captain Francis  
Hamilton, Captain John  
Hmilton, Gavin  
Hill, Peter  
Johnson, James  
Kennedy, John  
Kennedy, Margaret  
Letter to the Edinburgh Evening Courant  
Lockhart, George  
Logan, John  
Mackenzie, Henry  
McIndoe, Robert  
McLehose, Agnes, (Clarinda)  
McMurdo, Jean  
McMurdo, John

Miller, Mrs Janet  
Miller, Patrick  
Mitchell, James  
Moore, Dr. John  
Morison, Peter  
Muir, Robert  
Mundell, Dr. James  
Murdoch, John  
Nicol, William  
Niven, William  
Richmond, John  
Riddell, Elizabeth  
Riddell, Maria Banks Woodley  
Scott, William  
Skinner, Rev. John  
Smellie, William  
Smith, James  
Staig, David  
Staig, Jessie  
Stewart, William  
Stuart, Peter  
Tennant, John  
The Bailies of the Canongate  
The London Gazetteer  
The Editors of the Morning Chronicle  
Thomson, George



