

taken place till this year, when the Town Council carried into effect the restoration of the Aisle of St Andrew. They have also, in a most praiseworthy manner, opened up the tower to visitors, so that the bells may be seen with comparative comfort, and you can ascend to the roof and have a magnificent view of the whole country.

**CHRISTOPHER BELL, TEACHER AND
PRECENTOR:**

**ONE OF THE GUESTS AT THE FIRST BURNS
SUPPER IN STIRLING, 27TH AUGUST, 1787.**

The last Sunday and Monday of August, 1787, were two eventful and happy days in the existence—all too brief, alas!—of Robert Burns. On the Sunday morning the poet, in company with his friend and fellow-traveller, William Nicol, had visited the old churchyard of Falkirk, and there had knelt in patriotic devotion at the tomb of Sir John the Graham, the gallant friend of Sir William Wallace. Continuing his journey, Burns called at Auchenbowie House, where he dined with the laird, Mr Monro, and his daughter. Then he drove to the field of Bannockburn, and, as he wrote to his friend, Robert Muir, said a fervent prayer for Old Caledonia over the hole of a blue whin-stone where Robert de Bruce fixed his royal standard on the banks of Bannockburn. An hour later he was standing on the battlements of Stirling Castle viewing the glorious prospect of the windings of the Forth through the rich Carse of Stirling, in the purple light of the setting sun. For that night and the following one the poet and his friend had taken rooms at the newly-erected inn below the Mealmarket, and near the New Port, the inner defence of our ancient burgh. It may be noted that the fact that it was on Sunday evening that Burns visited the Castle disposes of the story told by Mr John Dick of Craigengelt to the effect that his uncle, Provost Dick, saw the poet in Broad Street as he came down from the Castle one day on which, for some reason or other, the schoolboys (of whom the Provost was one) had got a holiday, and the town bells were rung. If the incident occurred

on the occasion of Burns's first visit to Stirling, it must have been the church bells that young Dick heard ringing, but the mention of Ramsay of Ochtertyre in connection with the story points to the occasion being the Bard's second visit to the town in the October following. After a day so full of interest, it may be surmised that Burns did not sleep very soundly. His visit to the historic battlefield had fired his imagination. He fancied to himself, as he writes in his *Commonplace Book*, that he saw his gallant heroic countrymen coming over the hill and down upon the plunderers of their country, the murderers of their fathers, noble revenge and just hate glowing in every vein, striving more and more eagerly as they approached the oppressive, insulting, bloodthirsty foe. He saw them meet in glorious triumphant congratulation on the victorious field, exulting in their heroic royal leader, and rescued liberty and independence. In after years these glowing visions, which had never been forgotten, produced at the proper moment the stirring war ode, "*Scots Wha Hae*," the best, as Carlyle says, that was ever written by any pen. Alternating with these patriotic emotions, there surged in the poet's breast a feeling of intense indignation that Stirling Castle, for the possession of which Bruce had risked so much and fought so well, should be so shamefully neglected by Bruce's successors on the Scottish throne, and, no doubt, before tired nature's sweet restorer visited his pillow, he had composed the vehement lines which next morning, before his companion came downstairs to breakfast, he scratched with a diamond on a pane of glass in the window of the public room looking into the yard of the inn. In the political turmoil of the time, these lines were apt to tell against their author, and in a cooler moment Burns took an opportunity of destroying the tell-tale glass, but that he did not retract his opinions is proved by the fact that he wrote several copies of the verses and made no attempt to conceal their authorship. There can be little doubt, however, that they hindered his promotion in the Excise. Before his appointment as an exciseman, Burns tells us that he was questioned like a child about his personal matters, and blamed and schooled for his inscription on the Stirling window.

The Monday thus begun was spent by the poet with some Ayrshire friends who were living at Harviestoun. The clear winding Devon had many attractions for Burns, who seems also to have been fascinated by the charms of a lovely girl, to the influence of which he was always very susceptible. The day, he says, was one of the most pleasant he ever had in his life, and he returned to Stirling in the evening in high good humour. It may have been on that night he paid a brief visit to the local Lodge of Freemasons, Ancient 30, and signed the Attendance Register which is said to have disappeared, but not before the bold signature of our national Bard had been wantonly cut out. The crowded day finished fittingly with a symposium in Wingate's Inn, excelling, as one may easily suppose, in wit and wisdom, in poesy and song, any of the *Noctes Ambrosianæ* of which a later poet was the bright particular star. Henley, in his odious manner, would have us believe that this, the first Burns supper in Stirling, was not only as stupid as the average festive gatherings on the 25th January, but was simply a jollification or "drucken spree," and that it was this that inspired the "Lines on a Window in Stirling." But, as we have seen, the lines were composed before the supper, and that this meeting was no debauch is proved, not only by the company who were present, but by the fact that at an early hour on the following day, Burns wrote a beautiful letter in the inn to his friend, Gavin Hamilton, a letter which it is safe to say no person who had been guilty of excess the night before could have been in a condition to indite. Burns's own note of the occasion in his commonplace Book is very brief:—

"At Stirling—Supper—Messrs Doig, the schoolmaster; Bell, and Captain Forrester of the Castle. Doig, a queerish figure and something of a pedant; Bell, a joyous fellow who sings a good song; Forrester, a merry swearing kind of man, with a dash of the 'sodjer.'"

To this trio have to be added William Nicol, and Burns himself, so that the Army, education, and literature were well represented in the little company. Of Dr Doig it is unnecessary to speak. The learned Rector of the Grammar School of

Stirling, who had disputed, not unsuccessfully, with Lord Kames about the savage state of man, and was himself an aspirant to poetic fame, must have keenly enjoyed the full-blooded flow of Burns's conversation. As for Forrester, the fact that Burns notes that he was a swearing kind of man, is proof that the habit of profane swearing, common enough at the time, was not one of the poet's faults. But what of Bell, the joyous fellow who sang a good song? Mr W. Harvey, in his recently-published work entitled "Robert Burns in Stirlingshire," says, "Regarding 'Bell' of the company, there is some doubt. Beyond his name Burns gives no information, but it is likely that he was Christopher Bell, who was a schoolmaster in Stirling at the time." But there is really no doubt of the fact, and there never could be any in the mind of a person familiar with the Stirling of the period. Out of the four thousand six hundred souls or thereby who then composed the entire population of the burgh, there was only one Bell who could answer Burns's description. This description, and the company he was in, are two sure marks of identification, independently of Christopher Bell's friendship with Forrester. He was in company with Mr David 'Doig, schoolmaster, and he could sing a good song. Both as English teacher and as precentor, Bell was doubtless well known to Nicol, who was a teacher in the High School of Edinburgh, and who may be credited with suggesting the choice of guests for the evening. Like Burns himself, Mr Harvey gives no information about Bell beyond his name and designation, and while there was no call for Burns to do more than he did, or even so much, it was, in our opinion, clearly the duty of the author of a book on Burns in Stirlingshire to take a little trouble to try and find out something more about the guests at the famous Stirling supper. The following sketch of one of them is compiled from materials which have lain beside us for some years, and were derived from sources open to any inquirer.

Christopher Bell, before coming to Stirling, was schoolmaster at Campsie. We have satisfied ourselves that he did not belong to the Bells of Antermony, but we think it probable he was a son of the Rev. William Bell,

minister of the parish of Campsie from 1749 to 1783. Dr Scott, in his *Fasts*, states that Mr Bell was married, but does not mention any children of the marriage. Christopher's appointment in Stirling is dated 23rd February, 1771, when he succeeded the deceased Mr John M'Inlay. The educational arrangements in Stirling prior to Mr Bell's appointment seem to have been these: Mr David Doig conducted the Grammar School with the assistance of a doctor of Latin, and he had liberty to teach a class of such English scholars as were far advanced, if they intended to learn Latin and other languages; Mr Douglas was teacher of one of the English Schools, carried on in Cowane's Hospital; Mr M'Inlay, a former assistant of Mr Douglas's predecessor, Mr Burns, before the English School was divided into two in 1763, conducted the other school in the house in Baker Street now belonging to Mr William Boswell, bootmaker; and Mr Daniel Manson was writing master and teacher of arithmetic and book-keeping. Mr Manson was also precentor in the Parish Church and music master, receiving fees for his teaching of music in the English Schools, but being bound to attend the Grammar School and teach the scholars there gratis. The Rector and his Latin doctor were allowed to charge for teaching English as well as the dead languages, and in addition, Mr Doig had a salary of £40 per annum and a free house. Mr Burns had perhaps £20 after the division of the schools, and the fees; Mr M'Inlay, £15 and the fees; and Mr Manson, £200 Scots (£16 13s 4d) and the fees. When Christopher Bell succeeded Mr M'Inlay in 1771, he was also appointed to precent in the church for Mr Manson, and to act as music master, Mr Manson giving up all the emoluments arising from the teaching of vocal music in the burgh. About 1777, Mr Bell married one of the Littlejohn family, and was admitted a burghess *qua* guild brother in right of his wife.* In 1786, the school in Baxter's Wynd, with shop below, was ordered to be sold by public roup, new writing and English schools being erected in Cowane's Yard on part of the site now occupied

* We are indebted to Mr A. F. Hutchison, M.A., ex-Rector of the High School, for this information, and also for the identification of the English school in Baker Street.

by the High School. On the death of Mr Manson in 1791, Mr Thomas Smith, St Andrews, was appointed his successor, but he was not to teach music, Mr Bell being again appointed precentor and teacher of church music. The Council evidently thought this a good opportunity of reuniting the two English Schools, and they offered Mr Archibald Douglas, if he would resign, an annuity of £16, and £5 to carry him to the place in which he meant to reside, but if he stopped in Stirling his annuity was to stop also. The English School, it was arranged, was to be conducted under the joint care of Mr Bell and Mr M'Leran. These resolutions, however, did not please Mr Douglas, and he held on to his office for two years longer, when the Council allowed him on resignation his salary for life, and provided an assistant for Mr Bell, both the English Schools being thrown into one. This arrangement seems to have worked satisfactorily, as we find that both Mr Bell and his assistant, David Jameson, received an addition of £5 to their salary in 1797.

One year prior to this event, Robert Burns's earthly career had closed in gloom and disappointment, and we may feel sure that not the least sincere mourner was Christopher Bell, whose fine voice must have found a new and delightful exercise in the singing of "Scots Wha Hae" and other masterpieces of his departed friend. In some versions of Burns's entry in his *Commonplace Book of the Stirling Supper*, the word "vacant" is introduced after "joyous," and Bell is described as a "joyous, vacant fellow." This expression is not in the edition of Burns's works from which we extracted the entry some twenty years ago, and we do not know the authority for it. But we submit that if the word is genuine, it does not mean unintelligent, much less idiotic. No such person could sing a song in a way to call forth the poet's praise, and the word "vacant," if used at all, could only have been meant as inexpressive in contrast to Dr Doig's keen intellectual features.*

* Mr Hutchison informs us that he had the good fortune to find in Stirling a very fine wax medallion of Christopher Bell, which shows a face of broad and rather heavy features, with small eyes, which, however, are anything but unintelligent; in fact, they give one the idea of twinkling with humour. In repose, nevertheless, the countenance may have appeared dull.

Bell's position as English teacher is also against the presumption that he was vacant or empty-headed. That he was really acute and a good man of business, is proved by the fact that he was afterwards appointed Session Clerk, keeper of the registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials, and one of the auditors of the Kirk Session's accounts. It may also be remarked here that his being an elder of the Church is another circumstance disproving the supposition that the Stirling Supper was allowed to degenerate into a debauch.

We now come to an incident in Mr Bell's career which is most honourable to his memory. There is nothing to show that he ever sympathised with Burns's revolutionary sentiments — sentiments which Burns himself renounced, as his Address to the Dumfries Volunteers clearly shows, and in the year 1800, when Napoleon threatened to invade Great Britain, and the country armed to resist him, Christopher Bell was patriotic enough to enrol himself in the corps of Loyal Stirling Volunteers, although he must then have been considerably over fifty years of age. He retired, however, the following year, and did not rejoin in 1803, when a new embodiment of the corps took place. Unfortunately, he did not live to see the defeat of Napoleon in 1815. Mr Bell continued to fill the office of senior English master till failing health compelled him to resign. A minute of the Town Council, dated 9th October, 1813, records his resignation, and proceeds to state that the Council, in respect of his long and faithful service for above 43 years, allow him to retire on his salary of £50 sterling during his life. It was not, however, till February of the following year that Mr John Weir was appointed his successor. The Kirk Session minute of 16th August, 1813, is the last of the regular series written by Mr Bell from his appointment as Clerk on 3rd November, 1800, but there is one more minute in his handwriting, very shaky in comparison with the others, and kept straight by pencilled lines across the page. It is dated 17th November, 1813, and, no doubt, marks his return to duty after a serious illness. He died in October of the following year, having probably reached the threescore and ten. Stirling has had many worthy teachers, but none more worthy than Christopher Bell, the joyous fellow who sang

a good song, and who, patiently and faithfully labouring in his vocation, rejoiced alike in the psalms of David and the songs of Burns.

25th January, 1900.

Ed.

FAC-SIMILE OF CHRISTOPHER BELL'S
SIGNATURE.



LEGENDS OF DUNBLANE.

(Continued from Vol. II.)

DUNBLANE CATHEDRAL.

O, had thy stony lips the power
In living accents to unfold
Thy history since art was young,
And first thy pillar'd arches sprung.

—*Gamma.*

The restoration of this venerable building has attracted considerable attention, and it is in every way worthy of national respect. Its picturesque situation and architectural beauty, its historical associations and the remembrance that within the weather-beaten walls successive generations of Scotsmen have worshipped for nearly eight centuries, all cannot fail to impress the visitor when viewing the pillared aisles and time-worn memorials of past ages.

The early history of the cathedral is necessarily more or less of a speculative character. That the Culdees first occupied the site there can be no reasonable doubt. St. Blane, the patron-saint of Dunblane, lived in the latter half of the sixth century, and he founded the fraternity of Culdees at Dunblane, and it is believed that he died and was buried there. During the six centuries following the death of St. Blane, history throws but a feeble light on the vicissitudes of the place, but