

**A WINTER WITH ROBERT BURNS, BEING  
ANNALS OF HIS PATRONS AND  
ASSOCIATES IN EDINBURGH  
DURING THE YEAR 1786-7, AND DETAILS  
OF HIS INAUGURATION AS POET-  
LAUREATE OF THE CAN: KIL:**

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A Winter with Robert Burns, Being Annals of His Patrons and Associates in Edinburgh During the Year 1786-7, and Details of His Inauguration as Poet-Laureate of the Can: Kil: by James Marshall

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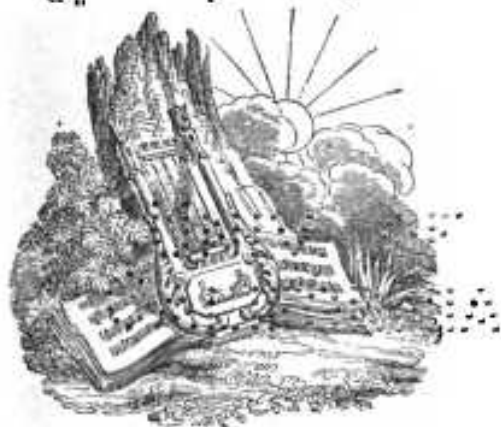


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*By Marshall, James*



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MDCCCLVI.

## ROBERT BURNS

## — CALIFORNIA

## I.—INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

Then farewell hopes o' laurel boughs,  
 To garland my poetic brows !  
 Henceforth I'll rove where busy ploughs  
     Are whistling thrang,  
 And teach the lanely hights and howes  
     My rustic sang.—*Burns*.

Yet read the names that know not death,  
 Few nobler ones than Burns are there ;  
 And few have worn a greener wreath  
     Than that which binds his hair.—*Halleck*.

It has been said by many that ROBERT BURNS was neglected by his country, and averred in reply that he was irreligious, revolutionary, and "terribly given to drink." All this nonsense is now dispelled ; and the only matter of surprise is that his assailants, and those who in his behalf assailed his countrymen, were not at once confuted by reference to his own glorious writings, or by the evidence borne by such of his contemporaries as Professor Dugald Stewart. That erudite, excellent, and discriminating man, speaking of the poet's sojourn in Edinburgh, and what should have been done for him, said, "I always wished that his pursuits and habits should continue the same as in the former part of his life, with the addition of what I con-

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sidered as then completely within his reach, a good farm, on reasonable terms, in a part of the country agreeable to his taste." This was the feeling repeatedly expressed by Burns himself. "I was bred to the plough," said he, "and am independent." Nevertheless, the auspicious visit to Edinburgh, which afforded an opportunity of testing the estimate in which his genius and merits were held by the elite of his fellow-countrymen, put several hundred pounds into his pocket,\* together with the offer of the lease of a farm of his own choice upon his own terms, (of which he afterwards availed himself,) and a commission, which he had coveted as a great boon. This last was not, to be sure, a cadetship in the army, nor a naval appointment, nor a post in the office of the commissary-clerk or sheriff-clerk, such as the classic, ill-fated Ferguson had obtained; nor was it a pension from William Pitt, who acknowledged that he could "think of no verse since Shakspeare's that has so much the appearance of coming directly from nature;" but it was an appointment which Burns was permitted to hold in reserve, and the duties of which would not diminish his opportunities of studying every variety of human character

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\* Mr Creech, the publisher, bought the copyright for L.100; but, before using it, it was then arranged that an edition should be published for the benefit of Burns. Creech stated that he paid in all L.1100 to Burns, from which fell to be deducted the expense of the subscription-edition. In Robert Heron's account of Burns, it is remarked on this, "that he realized a sum that, to a man who had hitherto been in his indigent circumstances, would be absolutely more than the vainly expected wealth of Sir Epicure Mammon." Heron was a contemporary of Burns, and author of several valuable works. His parents were in the humblest ranks, and his extravagance often reduced him to the hardest shifts, and finally to Newgate prison.

and incident, while they would afford peculiar facilities for his continued enjoyment of the "banks and braes and streams around" him. It was, moreover, an appointment presenting more certain and valuable promotion, had he lived, than any other could do. True, Burns received no *honorarium* from his countrymen for his immortal songs—and what of it? If a pecuniary mark of the value set upon them was requisite, where was the gold to express his nation's estimation of "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled?" As to his alleged *impiety*, they whom Dugald Stewart's distinct asseveration fails to convince that "Burns had a very strong sense of religion," have only to examine his writings in a fair and proper spirit to ensure conviction. The *last* charge, that of participation in the besetting sin of the age—the love of the bottle—is equally refuted by Stewart, in his declaration that, "notwithstanding various reports I heard during the preceding winter (1786-7) of Burns' predilection for convivial and not very select society, I should have concluded in favour of his habits of sobriety." Moreover, from inquiries made at the "howffs" mentioned in Burns' writings, and among the frequenters of them, his contemporaries, it has now been made manifest that it was not the *man*, but the *muse*, that became elevated. After settling in Dumfries, Burns, no doubt, was exposed to mixed and dissolute company. To a lady there, who remonstrated with him on the danger from drink, and the pursuits of some of his associates, he replied, "Madam, they would not thank me for my company if I did not drink with them; I must give them a slice of my constitution."



A just appreciation of Robert Burns can scarcely be attained without deliberate perusal of his *entire* prose and poetical works, together with all explanatory notes and testimony furnished by his contemporaries and best commentators. To have all these collected in one volume, was long an important desideratum. The indefatigable and enterprising Messrs Chambers have supplied this by their *People's Edition* of Burns' Life and Works. To the perusal of it, however, may most advantageously be added that of Professor Wilson's splendid Essay "On the Genius and Character of Burns." A more delightful treat than this Essay affords can scarcely be conceived. "Burns (says this eloquent and highly distinguished poet and critic) is by far the greatest poet that ever sprung from the bosom of the people, and lived and died in a humble condition. Indeed no country in the world but Scotland could have produced such a man; and he will be for ever regarded as the glorious representative of the genius of his country. He was born a poet, if ever man was, and to his native genius alone is owing the perpetuity of his fame. \* \* \* When inspired to compose poetry, poetry came gushing up from the well of his human affections, and he had nothing more to do than to pour it like streams irrigating a meadow, in many a cheerful tide, over the drooping flowers and fading verdure of life. \* \* There is no delusion no affectation, no exaggeration, no falsehood, in the spirit of Burns' poetry. He rejoices like an untamed enthusiast and weeps like a prostrate penitent. In joy and in grief the whole man appears. Whatever be the faults or defects of the poetry of Burns—and, no doubt, it has many—it has, beyon

all that ever was written, this greatest of all merits, intense, life-pervading, and life-breathing truth."

The father of Robert Burns was the son of a farmer in Kincardineshire. He became a gardener, and in that capacity, at an early age, he went into the service of a gentleman, from whom he afterwards rented a small farm, and built a cottage on it, near Alloway Kirk, two miles from Ayr. In 1757 he married Agnes Brown, who there, on 25th January 1759, gave birth to their eldest child, the poet. He received the ordinary parish school education, and was well trained by his exemplary father, whom he soon had to serve; and up to 1781, Burns, at the yearly wages of seven pounds, stood manfully by his plough, sickle, and, flail. He then left his father's farm of Lochlea to become a flax-dresser at Irvine; but there he had forebodings that poverty and obscurity awaited him. His shop took fire, and was burnt to ashes, which, as he says, left him, "like a true poet—not worth a sixpence." His father was soon bowed to the grave; and Burns gathered the little that was spared, and, with the aid of his younger brother, Gilbert, took charge of Mossgiel farm, of which his mother and sisters divided the domestic labours. During their third season, indifferent seed and a bad harvest robbed them of half their crop. Yet, the while, the muse was strong within him; for, in spite of declining markets, showery harvests, and the clamour for rents and accounts, he persevered in song, and sought solace in verse. Finally, he was driven to the determination of proceeding to Jamaica, there perchance to quell his patriotic fire in the flood of tropic sweats, and exchange the lash of good-humoured satire for the brutalizing

thong of the merciless slave-driver; for Jean Armour's austere and relentless parents compelled her to destroy her "marriage lines," though Burns loved her to distraction, and had offered to become a day-labourer at home, or toil for a time abroad, for their mutual support. They had stern and peculiar prejudices, and nothing would satisfy her father but the removal of Burns from the country. "Poor foolish Armour"\* wanted boldness to say with Desdemona—

I am hitherto your daughter, but here's my husband.

Still Burns had to raise the expense of his passage; and it is to these various conjoined circumstances we owe the first publication, at Kilmarnock, of the poems he had up to that period penned. "I was pretty confident" (says he) "my poems would meet with some applause, and, at the worst, the roar of the Atlantic would deafen the voice of censure, and the novelty of the West Indian scenes make me forget neglect." After the publication, he still lingered in the country, and on the 23d October 1786, in the house of Professor Dugald Stewart, at Catrine, in Ayrshire, first "dinner'd wi' a Lord." A letter was about this time written about Burns by Dr Laurie, an Ayrshire clergyman, to the amiable and accomplished divine, Dr Blacklock of

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\* Some early Biographers of Burns, from delicacy, owing to inadequate information as to the marriage affair, put the public astray. In Burns' letter, for instance, of 17th July 1786, which the writer of these pages has put into the hands of James Shaw Bookseller, Queen Street, Glasgow, Burns writes—"Poor foolish Armour is come back to Mauchline." Hitherto the word "foolish" has been omitted in printing the letter, from the obvious desire to avoid offence, although it is clear that the expression means no more than is explained by the quotation from Shakspeare here used.