

ROBERT BURNS

And

HIS EAST LoTHIAN CONNECTIONS

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Robert Burns and his East Lothian Connections

Although there are many connections between Robert Burns and this county, the poet made only one recorded comment about it. When on a visit to East Lothian, he called it the finest corn country that he had ever seen. The links that exist between Scotland's bard and this county are most in evidence when the Burns family is taken as a whole. Robert's brother Gilbert was the factor of Lennoxlove Estate, Haddington, and with him, in his home on the estate near Haddington, resided his mother (Agnes Brown), his sister Annabella and his own children. Isobel (Mrs Begg) the youngest of the Burns family, with her children, lived for a time in nearby Ormiston.

While Robert Burns is often labelled "Caledonia's Bard" because of his fervour for the Scottish cause, it could be argued that this title has turned out to be too narrow. Certainly his words written over two hundred years ago are as meaningful today as ever they were and it might be claimed that 'Poet Universal' is now a more apt term. The term "Caledonia's Bard", however, has East Lothian connections because it was an East Lothian gentleman, Lord Charteris, who on the evening of 12th January, 1787, proclaimed Robert Burns as "Caledonia's Bard" in Lodge St Andrew No.47. Edinburgh, when as Grand Master Mason of Scotland, he proposed the toast "Caledonia and Caledonia's Bard", to which Burns replied with "every nerve tingling".

Your author's home area, the Parish of Gladsmuir, has three links with Robert Burns.

1. The one-time Principal of Edinburgh University, William Robertson, who resided in Gladsmuir from 1744 to 1758, met the poet during Burns' Edinburgh period.
2. When on his northern tour with Willie Nicol, Burns had his Jacobite feeling roused by the ruinous state of the Old Parliament Hall at Stirling Castle and was angry enough to scratch some lines on the window of an inn called the Golden Lion where he slept. The lines began,

"Here Stewarts once in glory reigned,
And laws for Scotland's well ordained;
But now unroofed their palace stands,
Their sceptre's swayed by other hands,"

And finished with a slashing attack on the Stewarts' successors.

The Rev. George Hamilton, minister of Gladsmuir from 1790 to 1832, saw the verses shortly afterwards and composed in verse a stinging reply, most notable for the unfulfilled prophecy with which it closes,

"These few rash lines will dash thy name,
And blast thy hopes of future fame".

Robert Burns in the Glenriddel manuscripts, under the title of “A Poet’s reply to the threat of a censorious critic”, comments, “My imprudent lines were answered very petulantly by someone I believe to be a Rev. Mr. Hamilton”. The Rev. George Hamilton was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1805. (As an aside here it is a point of interest to know that George Hamilton who gave his name to Hamilton, Ontario, was a nephew of this Gladsmuir minister).

3. James Mylne who farmed Lochhill, near Longniddry, which is still within the Parish of Gladsmuir, wrote a volume of poems and in one of the poems, a very long one, invited Burns to Lochhill. Probably the length of the poem removed any inclination on Burns’ part to visit Lochhill, but here are a few lines of this poem:

“I hope ye thinkna’ I bespatter thee,
Like monie mair wi’ fulsome flattery.
Far less tae rouse your anger’s battery, was my intent,
But let ye ken I’d like to chatter wi’ ye, was my intent.”
After the invitation to meet and talk, came the directions,

“But if it chance to please and ye think it worthwhile,
Eastward frae Edinburgh by the sea, but fourteen mile
Ride thro’ the toon o’ Prestonpans.
Three miles ayont then leave the sands,
Then ither twa through guid rich land ye’ll reach Lochhill
An’ ready there at you command, yer frien’, James Mylne

James Mylne lies buried in Aberlady Churchyard where his gravestone may be seen.

Robert Burns did accept one particular invitation to visit East Lothian and that was offered by Lord Dalrymple of North Berwick, to attend a function in the Dalrymple home. Either by accident, or design, Burns found himself dining in the servants’ quarters to be called in due course to the banqueting hall to entertain the guests. When Burns was ushered into the grandly-decorated hall with all the gentry and their ladies present, the spirit of Burns was afire. When invited to perform, he spoke out, not in anger, but in concern that any invited guest should be treated as he had been:

“My Lord I would not fill thy chair,
Tho’ ye be the noblest earl’s heir,
I came this night to the feast,
An equal to the best at least.
‘Tis true that cash with me is scant,
An’ whiles there’s trifles that I want.
The King has never made me kneel,
To plant my manhood with his seal
But what of that? Did the Lord on high
Take less pains with you than I?”

(“Address to the Lords”)

One East Lothian man’s work appealed to Burns. He was a Haddingtonian, John Brown, whose house in Haddington is marked by a plaque and stands in a cul-de-sac

on the north side of Market Street. John Brown was a very religious man, consumed by a fervour, which made it seem that when he preached, “Christ stood at his elbow”. In these lines from a “Letter to James Tennant of Glenconnor”, Brown is mentioned.

“For now I’ve grown sae cursed douce,
I pray and ponder, but the house* (the kitchen)
My shins, my lane*, I sit there roasting, (by myself)
Perusing Bunyan, Brown and Boston”

Although Burns never visited East Linton, Charles Martin Harvey, who was born and educated in the village, creates the link with the poet, as he painted two large oil scenes involving Burns:

the meeting of Robert Burns and the young Walter Scott;
Burns reading his poems to the literati of Edinburgh.

The figure of Burns in Harvey’s painting was used as a model for a statue of the poet which stands in Adelaide, New South Wales.

Another Burnsian link with East Linton is that one time farmer at Kirklandhill, nearby, Mr. R. Stobie, possessed the original manuscript of the Roslin anecdote. The story goes that Burns, when in Edinburgh, used to walk often with Professor Dugald Stewart of the University. On one occasion they called into an inn in Roslin and Burns wrote these lines:

“My blessings on you sonsie wife’
I ne’er was here before,
You’ve gi’en me walth for horn and knife,
Nae heart could wish for more.
Heaven keep you free frae care and strife,
Till far ayont fourscore,
And, while I toddle on through life
I’ll ne’er gang by your door.

Dunbar was also visited by the poet on 22nd May, 1787. ‘His Journal of a Journey’ records a journey made of the Borders in the company of Robert Ainslee, of Berrywell, Duns. It is in the ‘Journal of a Journey’ that his visit to Dunbar is noted and it was while on this visit to East Lothian that Burns commented on the rich fertility of the area. Dunbar impressed him as a neat little town. He dined with Provost Fall, described as a prominent merchant and most respectable character, and it is suggested that he slept at the Provost’s stately mansion house, now Lauderdale House, the home of the Earl of Lauderdale. The following day Burns spent at Skateraw.

Dunglass, an estate on the eastern boundary of the county, was found by Burns to be “the most romantic sweet place I ever saw”. Ainslee and Burns on their tour visited Sir James Hall and his wife at their Dunglass home and he describes his hosts in warm terms of respect.

When Ainslee and Burns arrived in Duns, Berwickshire, they met William Dudgeon, poet and songwriter, who was a cousin of Bob Ainslee. Dudgeon lies buried in Prestonkirk, near East Linton, linking Burns to East Lothian again. Also in Duns at a dinner of the Duns Farmer's Club, Burns met Mr. Andrew Meikle of Houston Mill, Prestonkirk. Mr Meikle was a celebrated mechanic and inventor of the threshing mill.

Henry Grey Graham, who lived at North Berwick and became a minister in 1865, links us also with Burns. He was a descendant of the Rev. George Lawrie of Loudoun. The Rev. George Lawrie took a keen interest in Burns and sometimes received him in his manse, which was beautifully situated on the Irvine. It was to Lawrie that the blind poet Dr. Thomas Blacklock of Edinburgh wrote and spoke in his letter dated 4th September, 1786, of the deep impression made upon him by the works in the Kilmarnock Edition. Since he (Blacklock) had heard that the first edition was exhausted, he thought it would be to the young poet's advantage to have a second edition printed at once. Through Gavin Hamilton this letter was forwarded to Burns after several weeks' delay. Burns was encouraged by the letter to try his luck in Edinburgh, because, as Burns records, "the doctor belonged to a set of critics for whose applause I had not dared hope".

While the appeal of Burns is universal, one of the greatest collectors of Burnsiana, and renowned for his collection in America, was an East Lothian man, W. R. Smith, a native of Athelstaneford. He established a collection of Burns' works which was reputed to be the most complete in the United States. Smith was a botanist of great ability, and during the second half of the 19th century, was Superintendent of the Botanic Gardens in Washington, which attracted visitors from all over the world, because of the perfection which Smith imparted to them.

Of the many monuments to Burns throughout the world, one of the best known is the mausoleum to the poet in Mauchline, Ayr. On the left of the doorway, there is a red chalk drawing partly executed from Naysmith's portrait of Burns, - the work of an East Lothian man, Archibald Skirving (1749-1819) born at East Garleton, near Haddington.

Lastly mention should be made perhaps of the famous "Swinton Portrait". Peter Burn Swinton became factor of the Yester estate in 1856, a position he held for over 50 years. In 1873, at a farm sale, Swinton bought a portrait of Burns, now called the Swinton Portrait. At one time this portrait belonged to Mrs. Burns (Agnes Brown) but the artist is unknown. It is said that Mrs Burns regarded this portrait as being the one which carried the best likeness of her son. Mrs Burns presented this portrait to William Bogue, who farmed Kirklands near Under Bolton. After Swinton bought the portrait nothing more was heard of it for some long time and its whereabouts was unknown. However, quite recently, in the 1960s, the portrait did come to light again, when a Miss Philip of Kilspindie House, Aberlady, died. It was found to be one of her possessions, bequeathed in her will to Edinburgh University. The portrait is on a panel of dark mahogany and differs from Naysmith's in as much as it depicts a more rustic and virile type of nature. It hangs now, and can be seen in Edinburgh University.

Peter Dobson (1974)