Mauchline Memories of Robert Burns
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MAUCHLINE CASTLE AND THE BLEACHING GREEN
In 1858 the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald published a series of articles containing a description of Mauchline at the time of Burns, with recollections of the poet and some of his associates. These extracts the Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society has decided to reprint, to mark the anniversary of the first publication of Burns’s poems in 1786. Some years ago the Society similarly commemorated the bi-centenary of Robert Burns’s birth by publishing a volume on Ayrshire at the Time of Burns (now out of print) accompanied by a facsimile in six sheets of Armstrong’s Map of Ayrshire in 1775 (copies still available). The present publication, though more modest in character, will we are certain prove equally useful, making available as it does some long-forgotten details in these Mauchline Memories of Robert Burns.

We prefix this publication with a brief introduction which outlines Robert Burns’s circumstances at this critical period in his career, and indicates the relevance of the material here presented.

After the death of his father in February 1784, 25-year-old Robert Burns moved with the rest of the family from Lochlea in Tarbolton parish to Mossgiel in the neighbouring parish of Mauchline. This was his home for the next four years — the most creative period of his short life. Up till 1783 Burns had composed only about thirty pieces, few of any special merit. 1784 brought a dozen more. Then in 1785 came more than forty, most of them longer and more ambitious than anything he had previously attempted, and including nearly all his most famous poems. As Hans Hecht appropriately comments: "The floodtide of Burns’s genius burst its bounds and began to sweep irresistibly forward".

In 1785 he also became closely involved in Mauchline affairs, making new friends, and becoming romantically entangled with Mary Campbell and Jean Armour in what became the complex web of incidents of 1786: April, Burns repudiated by the Armours; May, farewell to Highland Mary before the proposed emigration to Jamaica; July, penitential appearance in church, then Burns in hiding; September, Jean Armour bears twins. Meanwhile the Kilmarnock edition of the Poems is published in July, and in November Burns sets off for Edinburgh to win fame as Caledonia’s Bard.

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The circumstances in which the poems were written and the incidents of Burns's life in Mauchline have naturally become a subject for close investigation. The first official biographer (James Currie, 1800) had little to say about these events. He transcribed Robert's autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore, which gives a brief and dramatised account, and there were some explanatory comments from Gilbert Burns. Later editors with access to an increased number of Burns's letters were able to provide a more detailed version of what happened. In particular, Dr Robert Chambers in preparing for publication his Life and Works of Robert Burns (four volumes, 1851-52) extended research to collect reminiscences from contemporaries of the poet, including persons who had known him in Mauchline. This was supplemented by other memoirs. In 1881 a Schools Inspector William Jolly usefully published the memories of William Patrick who had been herd-boy at Mossgiel. From 1892 the Burns Chronicle provided additional information in various articles and notes. Some other books supplied new material about Burns's local associates, as did the autobiography attached to the Poetical Works of A. B. Todd which appeared in 1906. Several short local histories preserved folk memories, as did Mauchline by Helen J. Steven, 1897; The Land of Burns: Mauchline by John Taylor Gibb, 1911; and An Octogenarian's Reminiscences by W. F. Blair, 1922.

Recently, while searching for something else, I found, in the files of the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald for 1858, a series of articles which forms an additional source of information about Burns in Mauchline. Some facts which are well-known are repeated; certain items noted by later writers are here confirmed; and these articles contain some novel details of information. The anonymous author was obviously a resident of Mauchline. His first three articles deal with the earlier history of the parish, contain nothing that is original or particularly interesting, and have not been reproduced. Then in "No. IV - Mauchline as it was in Burns's Time" (19 June 1858) he provides a detailed description of the town "from the recollection of several aged persons who were living at that time". The exact location of certain premises is clarified, particularly that of the Sun Inn, which may be only of local interest. More important is the identification of Ann Orr's tavern in the Cowgate as the place of meeting of the Mauchline Young Men's Society, that successor to the better-known Tarbolton Bachelors Club. This was noted by Currie: "After the family of our bard removed from Tarbolton to the
neighbourhood of Mauchline, he and his brother were requested to assist in forming a similar institution there. The regulations of the club at Mauchline were nearly the same as those of the club at Tarbolton; but one laudable alteration was made. The fines for non-attendance had at Tarbolton been spent in enlarging their scanty potations: at Mauchline it was fixed, that the money so arising, should be set apart for the purchase of books . . .” Currie later quoted Professor Dugald Stewart on Burns in Mauchline: “If I am not mistaken, he told me, that in that village, before going to Edinburgh, he had belonged to a small club of such of the inhabitants as had a taste for books, when they used to converse and debate on any interesting questions that occurred to them in the course of their reading”. This may now be identified as a quite separate local organisation from the Young Men’s Society, as is mentioned in the article on John Richmond: “Sometimes they paid a visit to the reading club, in John McLelland’s Inn, now the Loudoun Hotel.” Dr John Mackenzie was probably also a member, as is hinted at in the article on that other of his associates; very likely too the writer Gavin Hamilton; perhaps Andrew Noble, schoolmaster and session clerk; possibly even Rev. William Auld, minister of the parish.

Articles V-IX on six of Burns’s Mauchline associates, followed by X-XII on the six Mauchline “belles” vividly personify these characters. “Holy Willie” clearly deserved to be satirised; but the beauty of the six girls immortalised in verse owed much to poetic licence. The various sketches afford interesting glimpses of aspects of social history, particularly the article on Helen Miller which tells of her brother’s return from the East with “a real, live, black boy from the Indies” and how he became an accepted member of the Mauchline parish community.

From the articles on the “Mauchline belles” and an obituary notice of Nellie Millar which we append, it is possible to construct a clearer history of Burns’s romantic attachments in Mauchline. There is mention of the Castle as “the scene of several of the poet’s amours”. Of the six “belles” there is “little information” about the “divine” Jane Markland. Jane Smith he was certainly acquainted with, if only as sister to his “bosom-friend” James Smith. Helen and Betty Miller he knew well enough to entertain at a party — a “rocking” — at Mossgiel; and in the summer of 1785 the latter was “Tenant of my heart for the time being”, as he revealed three years
later in a letter to Mrs Dunlop. Christina Morton, “the most attractive of the belles”, is said to have “entertained a secret passion for the poet” which may have been reciprocated for there were “so many clashes going on about Robert Burns and her, she wished to be out of the way”; she was “much affected when his preference for Miss Armour became evident”. It was perhaps with one of those, or another, that Burns attended the dance after the fair in April 1786, for though Jean Armour was there, they were “not as partners”. Not listed among the “belles” was Highland Mary, servant at the Castle, “where Burns was first introduced to Mary, before she went to Coilsfield”. Mary Campbell had not yet come to Mauchline in January 1785 (when Gavin Hamilton’s servants were all interviewed by the Kirk session) and by the autumn she and Nellie Millar had both left his service, so that her “half-a-year servant along with her in the Castle” may have been from the term-days of Candlemas (2 February) till Lammas (1 August).

In various of his social excursions Burns was accompanied by John Richmond and James Smith — in one way an odd trio since they were both just turned twenty and he was six years older. But they were kindred in their relations with the opposite sex. Richmond, who went off to Edinburgh later in the year to pursue his legal studies, had in January 1785 done public penance for his fornication with Janet Surgeoner. Smith had similarly appeared in church in 1783 with Christina Wilson (details of which affair are given in the article on Smith) and would be again be cited, in 1786, with Agnes Curry. Burns himself had to seek expiation in Tarbolton in May 1785 when Elizabeth Paton gave birth at Largieside to his first illegitimate child.

When Burns commenced his association with Jean Armour has long been argued. That it dated from 1784 is based on one isolated piece of dubious evidence. There is a reference to “my darling Jean” in the “Epistle to Davie”, which was commenced in that year and the “January” attached to it has been attributed to 1785. But of those who accept this, some have suggested that the reference is in fact to Jean Gardner of Irvine with whom it has been alleged Burns continued an association from 1781 till 1784. If Burns’s first encounter with Jean Armour was around the time of the Mauchline fair, in April 1784 he was hardly settled into Mossgiel, so a year later would seem more likely. The
incident at the fair dance and the subsequent exchange on
the bleaching green is recounted here as previously noted by
Chambers. A rather different version, with the dance
following the bleaching green meeting, as given by Jean
Armour in her widowhood, is quoted in Hately Waddell’s
edition of Burns’s Works, 1870. At any rate it is implicit that
there was no immediate attachment.

During the summer of 1785 may have continued “several of
the poet’s amours”. There was no apparent embarrassment at
the birth of Elizabeth Paton’s child in May and its adoption
into the Mossgiel household — if we can judge from the
pawky verses addressed to John Rankine of Adamhill and his
proud acknowledgment of paternity in “A Poet’s Welcome to
his Love-begotten Daughter”. There was a certain coolness
between Burns and Betty Miller in July, when her brother
William married the well-off Nansie Bell, but this Burns
later explained to Mrs Dunlop was because “the folks are
rather uppish” — “A sister of Miller’s who was then Tenant
of my heart for the time being, huffed my Bardship in the
pride of her new Connection; and I, in the heat of my
resentment resolved to burlesque the whole business.” But he
wisely “did not chuse to expose” his poem (“The Mauchline
Wedding”) and “Miss Bess and I were once more in Unison”.

In the autumn he wrote to Margaret Kennedy of Daljarrock,
sending her “Young Peggy blooms, our bonniest lass” — his
only song composed during this period — describing it as “a
small tho’ grateful tribute for the honour of your acquaintance
... I am, as in many other things, indebted to Mr
Hamilton’s kindness in introducing me to you’. This reads
like a tentative attempt at formal courtship, which came to
nothing. Also on the approach of autumn he made his first
advances to Jean Armour. Then Christina Morton “much
affected when his preference for Miss Armour became
evident... left Mauchline and engaged with a farmer in New
Cumnock to assist in harvest operations”.

The article on Jean Armour reveals how the affair began.
After a “rocking” at Mossgiel, Burns arranged with John
Blane for a “first interview” the next evening with “this Jean
Armour” who was praised for her singing. “Burns went into a
public-house under the singing-school of which Blane and
Miss Armour were both pupils, and waited there till the class
was dismissed ... When she expressed a feeling of delicacy
about going without a female companion, Miss Morton

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volunteered to accompany her." Soon afterwards there was 
another foursome — Jean and Robert with Nellie Millar and 
William Burns, meeting in Nanse Tinnock’s ale-house (with 
Burns reciting his recently-composed “The Holy Fair”). This 
two-and-two relationship was, and remains, an intermediate 
stage in the local pattern of courtship, as reported for the 
neighbouring parish of Tarbolton in the Third Statistical 
Account of Ayrshire, published in 1951: “The natural 
history of the sex relations begins with the meeting of groups 
of boys with groups of girls, goes on to a two-and-two 
relation, and finally reaches the one young man and the one 
young woman. In a great many cases the marriage is 
precipitated by the pregnancy of the woman”.

Before the end of 1785 Burns was making solitary assign-
nations with Jean Armour. Assistance was rendered by 
Catherine Govan who "acted occasionally as 'black-fit' or 
go-between of the lovers" on winter evenings with her 
"sitting sewing at a table at which a lighted candle was 
placed." In darkness too would occur the alleged 
"clandestine entrance into Jeannie’s room" through a little 
garret-window opposite the rear of the Whitefoord Arms. 
Early in 1786 signs that Jean was pregnant became obvious. 
The well-known facts of the rejection of Burns by the 
Armour family are repeated in these articles, with some 
minor details added to the story of subsequent events.

Nothing is said about the renewed association with Mary 
Campbell in 1786, the publication of the Poems in July 
of that year is noted only in passing, and sadly but not 
unexpectedly here is no information about the composition 
of any of these poems. Here we see the poet as a young man 
sharing in the life of a small but lively community, delineated 
in these Mauchline Memories of Robert Burns.

JOHN STRAWHORN Mauchline, 1985

Acknowledgement is made to the Ardrossan 
and Saltcoats Herald and the Cunninghame 
District Library, Ardrossan, for their assis-
tance in making available copies of these 
articles which we now reprint...
MAUCHLINE AS IT WAS IN BURNS'S TIME
(from **Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 19 June 1858**)

The following account of the appearance of Mauchline, in the time of Burns, is taken down from the recollection of several aged persons who were living at that time, and who still remain the sole survivors of that generation among whom the poet walked as an equal and a fellow. We have nearly a dozen such worthies in our good town—a fact which argues strongly for the healthy situation of the place. Nearly all of them retain a vivid recollection of the personal appearance of Burns—describing him as a little, dark-complexioned man, with black eyes and long dark hair, not very good-looking at first sight, but of such remarkable social powers, that, when kindled up in conversation, his countenance assumed a very pleasing aspect, and his manner was altogether irresistible. Though to be understood we must be particular, and to be particular we must, in some degree, be dry, we are content to be so if we can succeed in our present object—to show Mauchline as it was in 1784.

The principal alteration which has been made in the village since that period is the opening up of the New Road and Earl Grey Street. The public road between Glasgow and Dumfries, which now goes through the town by that route, passed in former times down the Netherplace avenue, and went along the Back Causeway, at that time the Main Street of Mauchline, till it reached the Cross, when it made a turn downwards to the church, and left the town by the Cowgate. Another road branched off from the Netherplace walk, and joined the Ayr road at Loudoun Street Toll-bar. As this was the quietest approach to the town from Mossgie, it was the one generally taken by Burns; and one of our old worthies, Helen Miller, tells us that she has often met the poet on this road, and every time with a book in his hand. The Ayr and Edinburgh road always pursued the same route through the town as it does at present. The houses, too, which formed the Main Street in Burns's time have been nearly all of them taken down; but, with these exceptions, the general appearance of the town has not been greatly altered since 1784. The first object likely to attract the attention of a stranger in taking a survey of Mauchline at the period referred to, would be the Old Church. It stood in the centre of the village, on the very spot where the present Parish Church now stands. It is described as a large, plain, sombre-looking structure, built
in that primitive style of architecture so often to be met with in the old ruined churches of antiquated parishes, with the invariable appendages of belfry and burying-ground, the latter thickly strewn with flat and upright tombstones. Mauchline Church was built by the monks of Melrose in the 12th or 13th century, and served as a place of worship for 600 years. It obtained its notoriety chiefly from its being the scene of the "Holy Fair". Behind the church stood, and still stands, Gavin Hamilton's house, reckoned a very handsome one in these days, and fertile in associations regarding Burns. Close adjoining are the remains of the ancient priory, a high embattlemented building, dignified with the appellation of Mauchline Castle, and the scene of several of the poet's amours. Opposite the principal entrance to the church stood the Whiteford Arms Inn, kept by John Dove, or Dow — a favourite resort of the bard's. Farther down the street, in the house now occupied by Mr Bull (for we must be minute), was Gavin Hamilton's office, in which were to be found two wild young clerks, great cronies of Burns, and one of them the celebrated John Richmond. The Cowgate, which runs up past John Dow's, is a compact little street, and was, in Burns's time, well stocked with alehouses. Separated from the Whiteford Arms only by an intervening lane, in the house now occupied by Mr Green, gunsmith, lived James Armour, with his smart young daughter Jean — a more favourite resort of the poet's we may well suppose, than any other house in Mauchline. The little garret-window is still to be seen, by which Burns used to make a clandestine entrance into Jeanie's room, by the help of the fair one herself. On the other side of the street stood John Thomson's tavern, in after times connected with a dark tragedy: it was long known in Mauchline as the house where Mungo Miller was murdered. Farther up the street, in the house of Mr Gibson, quarryman, another tavern was kept by a female of the name of Ann Orr. This house possesses some interest as being the place where the Mauchline Young Men's Society, of which both Robert and Gilbert Burns were members, held its meetings.

At the foot of the Cowgate, on the other side from John Dow's, stood the house of the far-famed Poosie Nancy. This woman, along with her daughter, Racer Jess, kept a lodging house for vagrants, and it was here that Burns one night accompanied by Smith and Richmond, witnessed that rousing scene, which he has transcribed into such animated verse in the "Jolly Beggars". At the head of the street in which this worthy dame resided, and facing the Cross, stood
the Sun Inn, kept by John Millier, father of two of the village "belles". This house, which was the most respectable inns in the town, stood right across the end of Earl Grey Street, occupying part of the side of the present Stamp Office. It was afterwards occupied by Mr Lindsay, now of the Black Bull, whose gardens extended to the Ballochmyle Bridge Tavern, the barn and outhouses standing beside the celebrated "palm tree", the great frequent afterwards of would be politicians. Let us now have a look at the Cross itself. Surrounded on every side by houses, in the centre of the square stood a flight of steps led up to a curious pillar-shaped erection, which served, it seems, both as a gas-lamp and a pump. Supplying light above and water below, it would certainly have a somewhat odd appearance; but our worthy old friends who have had the advantage of personal experience on the subject, maintain that it was a great ornament to the Cross, and that, moreover, Mauchline was a much superior place to what it is now. On one side of the Cross square at least, so much might be said. The large building on the east side of the Cross, with its capacious court and extensive garden gate behind, bears evident marks of having been once in a much more flourishing condition than it is at present. The house was built in 1756 by Mr Gibb, a gentleman of rather superior taste. It is said that, shortly after it was built, the Earl of Eglinton, who was then residing at Coilsfield, on passing through the village, found the building so massive, and the garden so well laid off, with the walls and summer house all erected in so elegant and tasteful a style, that he declared it was as fine a residence as his own Castle of Montgomery. It must, at any rate, have been a very superior building in its day. Now, however, it is in such a state of dilapidation and disrepair, that instead of being an ornament it is a disgrace to the town. Between this house and the Cross stood in former times a wooden erection of triangular form, from which were suspended a pair of scales, and in these all the butter, wool, and other commodities sold at the market were weighed, and a duty laid on them accordingly. To give an idea of the customs levied at that time on such articles, it may be stated, that for every piece of cloth or spynndle of yarn 4d, was charged, for every sack of meal or salt 8d, for every sack of cheese or butter 8d, for every load of kail 8d, and for every pack of wool 6d, 8d — all Scots money of course. On the opposite side, the house now occupied by Mr James Lambie, was the shop of Burns's friend, John Mackenzie, "Doctor and Midwife", as his sign somewhat strangely informed the passers by. The adjoining
shop was a grocer’s, and kept by Mr Markland, father of one of the “belles”. This brings us to Main Street, the first house of which is a famous one, Nanse Tinnocks, which, possessing a back entrance into the church-yard, was a favourite resort of “yill-caup commentators”, during intervals of sermon. On the opposite side, at the turning of Main Street, an apartment now occupied by Mrs Isabella Paterson, a good wife who herself remembers the poet well, was the one in which Burns and his wife first “took up house”. It was here the young couple lived, while the new house at Ellisland was being prepared for them. Stretching across the new road and facing the Sun Inn, was a draper’s shop, kept by Burns’s favourite friend, James Smith. In the street leading from the Cross to the Market-place, the second house on the left hand was occupied in one end by another of Burns’s friends, to whom we have already referred more than once, John Richmond, and in the other by Mr Waddell, saddler, with whom the poet’s young brother was for some time apprenticed. Separated from this house only by an intervening lane stood an inn, kept in the time of Burns by a person of the name of Findlay, whose daughters were rather famous for their beauty. A curious tradition is related concerning this house. This is said to have been the inn where General Drummond “put up”, and held the mock trial of the five Covenanters who suffered martyrdom at the town-head. He was unable to procure ropes for the execution of his victims, and the townspeople refused to render him the slightest assistance in the matter. In the extremity he applied to his host, a man of the name of Fisher, and, strange to say, an ancestor of William Fisher, the notorious Burns figure. True to the hereditary character of his family, the old wretch replied that he would “mak a shift” to provide him ropes, and actually managed to furnish Drummond with materials for the execution. The stigma, however, stuck to old Fisher all his days, and the by-name of “Mak a shift” continued in the family down to Holy Willie’s time.

(continued in Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 26 June 1858)

Our teetotal friends consider Mauchline rather a black spot on the temperance map, and point somewhat despondingly to the fact that there are 11 places for the sale of spirits, to a population of no more than 1500. If they can derive any consolation from the reflection, that there was a time when matters was still worse, they are quite entitled to that consolation in the present case. In the time of Burns, when
Mauchline could not have more than 1000 inhabitants there were no less than 13 places licensed for the sale of drink. In other words, while we have now only one public house for every 137 of the population, there were, 70 years ago, 1 for every 77. At that time, therefore, there were twice as many places for selling drink as there are now, in proportion to the number of inhabitants. But even these figures come short of the real state of matters. The ale house was then a much more frequented place than it is at present. When the Communion Sabbath was such a scene of drink and debauchery as to entitle it to the name of “Holy Fair”, what would the ordinary fairs be like? When such men as Holy Willie, who pretended to more than ordinary sanctity, did not scruple to come home every night in a state of glorification, can we suppose that those would be much better who had no restraint on their conduct? It must also be taken into account that it was the most common thing in the world for the good folks, in those times, to make their own ale. All the publicans did so, and honest Alex. Brown, of the Main Street, brewed a boll of malt every week. Numbers too who were not publicans took it upon themselves not only to brew, but also to sell a little in a private way. On the fairs especially, which, though not so numerous, were more numerously attended than they are at present, it was the old “use and wont” of the good wives at the Loan to sell their home-brewed ale to the country-folks who assembléd at the market. On such occasions it mattered not into what house you might drop, you were sure to find plenty of the balmy liquid ready to be disposed off for your money. Good and cheap it was too. You could get two chapins of strong ale, such as, to use an old wife’s phrase, “would gar your lips stick together”, for 3½d. The fairs in olden times were busy, important days in Mauchline. The day preceding each fair was called the “wee fair”, and on it the women came with their home spun cloth to the market, and disposed of it to the best advantage. One good wife, of the name of Janet Smith, was particularly famed for her abilities, both as a spinner and saleswoman. One of the wiles she practised on the “puir farmer bodies”, when anxious to dispose of her cloth, was to declare to them solemnly that “this piece was just made for oor Rab”, (by whom she meant her husband Robert Marr,) and thus make them believe that it was only as a special favour offered to them. But as somehow most of the good dame’s cloth seemed to have been made for “oor Rab”, people came to suspect the truth of her story. At that time nearly all the men were weavers, and all the women spinners.
The birr of the spinning wheel was to be heard in every house; but the introduction of machinery has now done away with home-manufactured cloth.

We have thus seen Mauchline as it was in the time of Burns. Let us now have a look at some of its “Characters”, who have obtained a certain degree of celebrity from their connections with the poet.

GAVIN HAMILTON
(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 26 June 1858)

As Burns’s earliest patron, his prudent adviser in times of trouble and perplexity, his constant associate in brighter and happier hours, and especially as the sagacious friend who first urged on the poet to the publication of his works, Gavin Hamilton occupies a prominent part in the brilliant but painful history of our Scottish bard. He was, when Burns first became acquainted with him, a writer, or legal practitioner, in very respectable circumstances in Mauchline. The origin of their acquaintance is well known. Shortly before their father’s death, Robert and Gilbert Burns applied in person to Mr Hamilton regarding the farm of Mossgiel, which they intended as a retreat for the family, should the Lochlea landlord proceed to extremities with them. Gavin had but a lease of the farm himself from the Earl of Loudoun, and had built the steading as a sort of summer residence for his family. There is an old person, named George Patrick, at present living, at the advanced age of 86, in Mauchline, who remembers very distinctly this first visit of the two brothers to their future place of abode. He was then a ploughboy on the farm of Mossgiel, and was in the act of driving the plough when he observed Robert and Gilbert walking about the farm and examining it. The poet, he says, wore on that occasion, drab-coloured clothes, and had his long black hair tied, according to the fashion at that time, in a knot behind. After expressing themselves satisfied with the appearance of the farm, they called in at Mr Hamilton’s office, and a bargain was struck. Gavin did not lose sight of his tenants, and it was not long till he discovered the superior genius of the latent poet.

Captivated by his powers of conversation, all times a welcome guest to him, between landlord and tenant was lived together on the most intimate footing. Gavin, though a man of the quiet and upright character, was unfortunately involved in the persecutions which the kirk sessions, by which we mean the members of the ministry of Mauchline. The consequent restrictions, which the kirk sessions were actuated also by the fact that Hamilton—thought proper to institute an investigation.

(The details of the dispute need not be here related. Suffice it to say that the subsequent issue of the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, July 1858, note is made that Hamilton, at the time, the publication of the country paper, which seems never to have crossed his mind as a likely means of profit, continued association.)

... Gavin Hamilton lived respectable and happy life in Mauchline, and died regretted. His descendants still reside in the village. His widow of the late Rev. J. Todd, who died a few weeks ago, at the great age of 90 years of age when Burns frequented the place.

JAMES SMITH
(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 26 June 1858)

Among the Mauchline “Characters” of the time, James Smith deserves a prominent place. Of all the Mauchline friends, perhaps, the closest intimacy with him was that with bosom friend. His father, Robert Smith, was a boy, by a fall from his horse on his journey to Ayr. His mother, left by the landlord, finding her inclinations turning a different way, matrimony, bestowed her hand on the name of Lambie, who, to his other name of Smith, of being occupant and owner of the farm of Mossgiel, and became a sort of second owner of the farm.}

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Captivated by his powers of conversation, he admitted him at all times a welcome guest to his table. The distinction between landlord and tenant was mutually forgot, and they lived together on the most intimate and familiar terms. Mr Hamilton, though a man of the most generous disposition and upright character, was unfortunate enough not to make his conduct square with the notions of Mr Auld, then minister of Mauchline. The consequence was a series of petty persecutions which the kirk session — some of whose members were actuated also by personal pique towards Hamilton — thought proper to instigate against him....

(The details of the dispute need not be repeated here. In the subsequent issue of the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 3 July 1858, note is made that Hamilton “earnestly urged on him, at the time, the publication of his poems — a thing which seems never to have crossed the mind of the poet himself as a likely means of profit”. Remark is made of their continued association.)

... Gavin Hamilton lived respected for many years after in Mauchline, and died regretted. Several of his immediate descendants still reside in the village. His daughter, Williamina, widow of the late Rev. J. Todd, was removed from us only a few weeks ago, at the great age of 79. She would be seven years of age when Burns frequented the house.

JAMES SMITH

(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 3 July 1858)

Among the Mauchline “Characters” the name of James Smith deserves a prominent place. Of all Burns’s friends he had, perhaps, the closest intimacy with the poet, and was, more than any other, entitled to the honour of being called his bosom friend. His father, Robert Smith — a worthy merchant in very comfortable circumstances — was killed when his son was a boy, by a fall from his horse, on returning from a journey to Ayr. His mother, left by this means proprietress of the house where James afterwards opened his shop, and finding her inclinations turning a second time to the joys of matrimony, bestowed her hand on a worthy gentleman of the name of Lamble, who, to his other qualifications, added that of being occupant and owner of the house adjoining. James
Smith was thus early consigned to the care of a step-father; and the jealousies and strife usual in such circumstances did not fail to make their appearance in the present case. Mr Lambie was a strict, God-fearing, elder of the Kirk, and his stepson, a wild young rake of a fellow; who was never out of mischief. Kind and good-natured the young lad certainly was; but then he was so perversely fond of fun and frolic, that the good old man declared there was no living with him. The irregular hours he kept too, were particularly opposed to Mr Lambie's sense of propriety. Helen Miller, who was for some time in Mr Lambie's service, tells us that often, of a morning, after some of young Smith's rambles, if the old man saw her engaged in cleaning James's shoes from the effects of last night's excursion, he would tear them from her hands, and fling them from him with the greatest fury, bid her go and tell the young vagabond to clean them himself. Young Smith would not thus, however, be broken in, and he stood up for his rights like a man. At last his mother got a female servant of the name of Christina Wilson, to whom she gave strict injunctions to look after her son and try to reclaim him, in some degree, from his irregularities. How she succeeded in her task may be conceived from the fact that it was not long till Christina, to Mrs Lambie's inconceivable horror, presented that worthy lady with a little grandson, and, though she was old enough to be James's mother, no one had the slightest hesitation in pronouncing him the father of Christina's child. Smith, however, always maintained that he was quite innocent of any concern in the matter. After the birth of her child, Christina Wilson went to reside at Bridgend, and she used often to relate an incident which occurred during her stay there. Burns and Smith had been on a visit to Sorn, and called in at an alehouse in Bridgend, on their way home. It was proposed to send for Christina and her son, and immediately a message to that effect was sent across the street. The good lady instantly obeyed the summons, and her little boy was soon ensconced familiarly on his reputed father's knee. Burns, after bantering Smith about the connection, made a jocose appeal to the child, then little more than two years of age, saying inquiringly to him, "That's not your father, sir?" The little fellow, acute enough to see the drift of the question, stared for some time up in Smith's face, and, as if reassured by the scrutiny, answered in a decided tone, "But ye er my faether, ye er my faether". The amusement with which the natural sally was received, settling, as it did for the time, the disputed point, may be easily imagined. James Smith's son (if he be
really his son, a thing that few have any doubt about) still lives; but his recollection of this adventure are not very distinct. All he remembers of Burns is that he was a little, dark man. He is still able to exercise the function of letter-carrier to his native village; but he seems to heir nothing from his father but a respectable character and the name of Smith. James Smith, however, got over his youthful follies and resolving to commence business in earnest, opened a draper’s shop in his father’s old house, and for a while drove a respectable trade. His is described by those who remember him as a little, dark complexioned man, of lively manners, unfailing good humour, and great spirit and address. It may well be imagined that the Mossgiel poet would not long remain unacquainted with such a man. Congenial tastes and dispositions early drew them together, and a lasting friendship was soon formed of the most intimate nature. Together they caroused over Nanse Tinnock’s home-brewed ale, together made love with the Mauchline lasses, and together laughed at the canting hypocrisies of the “Unco guid”. We cannot get a better notion of Smith’s character than from the “Epistle” which Burns addressed to him . . .

Not prospering so well in his business in Mauchline as he desired, he removed to Avon, near Linlithgow, where he commenced a calico-printing establishment. Here, too, however, his speculations were unsuccessful, and he bade a final adieu to his native country, and found an early grave in a foreign land. It was Smith’s fate to end his life where Burns at one time intended to end his – in the West Indies. His only sister, Jane, figures as one of the “Mauchline belles”, and is the mother of the celebrated Dr. Candlish.

JOHN RICHMOND

(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 10 July 1858)

The name of James Smith is naturally succeeded by that of John Richmond – Burns’ friend and bed-fellow. We can say nothing of Richmond’s early days, except that he was, when but a boy, sent to the care of some friends in Newmilns, where it appears, he received the best part of his education. Some time after his return to Mauchline he was bound as a clerk to Gavin Hamilton for a number of years, and it was while in this situation that he formed his intimacy with the Mossgiel poet. Young Richmond was just of such a jovial, sociable disposition, as suited Burns’ taste, and they were
MAUCHLINE AT THE TIME OF BURNS

Thoroughfares:
A Kilmaurs road, also past Mossiel for Tarbolton and Irvine.
B Sorn road leading to Edinburgh, constructed after 1766 Turnpike Act.
C Old Sorn road, by Welton and Montgarsewood.
D Cumnock road for Dumfries, leading also to Ballochmyle and Catrine.
E Barskimming road.
F Ayr road, passing through Failford.
G Knowe.
H Back Causeway or Main Street, now Castle Street.

Places associated with Robert Burns:
1 The Bleaching Green where he encountered Jean Armour, 1785.
2 Mauchline Castle, "scene of several of the poet's amours''.
3 Gavin Hamilton's house.
4 Mauchline Parish Church, rebuilt 1829.
5 Kirkyard, scene of the Holy Fair.
6 Ronald's ball-room.
7 Hugh Morton's Black Horse inn, home of Christina Morton.
8 House where Robert and Jean lived, 1788, now Burns House Museum.
9 Adjoining house purchased by Dr John Mackenzie in 1788.
10 Nanse Tinnock's ale house.
11 Markland's shop, home of the "divine" Jean Markland.
12 Dr Mackenzie's first surgery, later Lambie's shop.
13 Home of James Lambie.
14 Home and shop of James Smith.
15 Home of John Richmond.
16 John Miller's Sun Inn, home of two of the "belles".
17 Poosie Nancie's lodging house, built 1700.
18 John Dow's Whitefoord Arms, Burns's favourite howff.
19 Home of Jean Armour.
20 Ann Orr's ale house, where the Young Men's Society met.
21 Gavin Hamilton's office about here.
22 McLelland's inn, where the Reading Society met, now Loudoun Arms.

Other Places:
23 Netherplace; 24 St Michael's well; 25 Elbow Inn; 26 Back Holm;
27 Clinkum's Square; 28 Brownlea House; 29 Old tolbooth and jail;
30 Finlay's inn; 31 Mauchline Place, built 1756; 32 Loan Green;
33 The Loan; 34 Market Inn; 35 Townhead; 36 Black Bull Inn, built 1776; 37 Manse, where lived Rev. William Auld; 38 Minister's Glebe;
39 Tweedly's Square; 40 John Thomson's tavern; 41 Toll house;
42 Mauchline burn, known also as River Chalk.
soon on the most intimate terms. Smith, Richmond, and Burns were three inseparable companions during the poet’s residence in Mossgiel. Often of a night, when Richmond was released from the office, and Smith from his shop, Burns would drop into town, and the three friends would meet in some quiet corner to pass the hours in social enjoyment. Sometimes they paid a visit to the reading club, in John McLelland’s Inn, now the Loudoun Hotel; sometimes to the debating society; oftener to John Dow’s, to discuss the politics or gossip of the day over a glass of ale. Burns seemed to place some reliance on Richmond’s judgement, for he was in the habit of sending him, every now and again, some of his poetical effusions for his perusal and criticism. The time came, however, that Richmond must leave Mauchline for upwards of a year and a half. But it was not to end here. Mr Richmond had not been settled above a year in Edinburgh when, by an unexpected turn of circumstances, Burns was also led to seek a residence in the metropolis. With the exception, perhaps, of Dugald Stewart, whom Burns had visited at Catrine, Richmond was his only acquaintance in the city. To him, therefore, he first betook himself. The young writer was at that time lodging in Baxter’s Close, Lawnmarket, in the house of a Mrs Carfrae, who rented him an apartment for the sum of three shillings a week. Burns was so knocked up by his journey from Mauchline that he remained in Richmond’s lodgings for two days without being able to leave his bed; and when he was able to leave it, on Richmond expressing his willingness to share his apartment with him, Burns closed at once with his offer, and was duly installed as John’s companion and bed-fellow. Mr Richmond endeavoured to make himself as useful to his friend as possible, in assisting him to transcribe his poems for the press. It was his practice, too, when Burns came in, jaded and worn out, from the levees of the great, to read to the poet till he fell asleep. Richmond has borne witness to the fact that Burns preserved habits of strict sobriety during his residence along with him in Edinburgh, which was about a year altogether. At length, in August, 1787, Burns was absent on a visit to the south, and, on returning to the capital, he found that Richmond had taken in a stranger in his place. There was no other course left for the poet but to seek lodgings elsewhere. This, however, did not terminate their friendship. Even when he was in Dumfries Burns continued to send an occasional letter or song to his old acquaintance.
Some of the originals of these pieces Richmond's daughter remembered having carried often to the school with her, and used as "marks" for her reading books. His course of study being finished, Mr Richmond returned to his native village, and commenced practice there as a writer. He lived to the advanced age of 84, and was to the last a sociable, "crackly" old gentleman. The day before his death, so eager was he for news, that on an old acquaintance entering his room, he accosted him with "what news, James?" He left behind him an only daughter, who is still living — and living, too, in the same house where her father spent the most of his days.

WILLIAM FISHER
(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 10 July 1858)

None of the Mauchline Characters possesses so unenviable a notoriety as William Fisher, Burns' "Holy Willy". We have already alluded to one of his worthy ancestors, and in this case the mantle of the father fell on the son. The subject of our present notice followed the patriarchal occupation of a tiller of the ground, first of all in the farm of Blackbriggs, afterwards in Blackhill, and finally in Tongue, Auchencloigh.

(This was corrected by a correspondent "Veritus" in the issue of 31 July to "William Fisher, farmer, first in Mid Montgarwood, and subsequently in Briggs, and Tongue, Auchencloigh").

Of his character we need say little: no reader of Burns's poems can be a stranger to it... He could not resist the temptation of getting himself "fou" every fair-night — especially when liquor did not flow at his own expense. He naturally enough, too, fell into the very prevalent error of those times of mistaking cant for religion, and of considering three-mile prayers and half-mile graces as the infallible signs of godliness. He had besides the reputation of being more inquisitive in the examination of female transgressors who came under the cognizance of the session, than seemed altogether decorous to the rest of the brethren. To crown all, he was charged with making free with the money set apart for the poor. Such is an account of this man's failings. Of his virtues, unfortunately, no details have come down to us; else we should have been very happy to have reported them. Such a character was the one most exactly calculated to draw out Burns' most unmitigated detestation and contempt. The
immediate cause, however, of the poet’s evident antipathy to Fisher, was the prominent part which the latter took in the prosecution of Gavin Hamilton. Mr Auld seems to have been in a great measure urged on to harsh proceedings by his elders; and Fisher is said to have cultivated the good graces of his minister with the greatest diligence. When any measure was under the discussion of the session, he always endeavoured to discover the mind of the minister on the subject. “And what say you, Mr Auld? I’ll say wi’ you, Mr Auld”, was a constant expression of his on such occasions. On this particular occasion, he used his influence so strongly against Mr Hamilton, and made it such a personal question, that though the edge of the poet’s satire was directed against a whole religious party, the choicest vials of his wrath were reserved for the devoted head of the luckless Fisher...

(William Fisher is further dealt with in the issue of 17 July 1858)

That Holy Willie’s Character has not in general been misrepresented by public fame, is attested by several anecdotes which are floating about concerning him. One of these, at the same time that it illustrates the inerete drinking propensities of the Mauchline elder, shows also that he was, at least, when the liquor was in, somewhat tyrannically disposed towards his dependents at home. He had one night been partaking rather freely of the good Mauchline ale—so freely, indeed, that he forgot entirely the upright, steady gait which became a sober elder of the Kirk as William Fisher pretended to be. As he went staggering along on his way home, taking all possible assistance from the full breadth of the road, some one observed him juculating fiercely and shaking his fist in rather an unrighteous fashion, at some unknown object of his indignation. Curious to learn the cause of these wrathful indications on the part of the godly elder, he slipped up behind him and overheard the following soliloquy, delivered amid sundry flourishing of the arms and clenching of the fist—“If the door’s barr’d, I’ll mak it a faut; and if it’s no barr’d, I’ll mak it a faut; and if there’s nae faut, I’ll hae a faut.”

Another incident which illustrates well a different point of our hero’s character, is told by a person at present in Mauchline, who has often heard it from his father, so that there can be no doubt of its truth. Holy Willie was, on one occasion, called in to exercise his craft, offering up a prayer for a sick person, thinking more than another in which he himself, it was in his superior gift of heat, was the leading reason Burke against that worthy personage, in which it occurs. After giving them in this line, he turned with the great good man of the house, and asked a parallel of that?”

The manner of his death corresponded well with the godliness of the Mauchline elder, he was in a wayside ditch! He had been drunk in Mauchline, and was seen last on a very zig-zag route to his own house. His appearance there, however, his absence, and taking a lantern with him for this conjugal task, she herself who had, it appears, got her husband in this way, “as if,” they were a hare or a pattrick. Thus they went along the road, till they came to a South Auchenbrain, where the unfortunate man was found smothered among a pool of mud. A fence from which Fisher had been walking home, were found at some distance making for a light in the farm-house ditch by the road side, from which we see no intoxication to rise. Such was the end of the life of a holy man.

The children are often punished for what we do not do, and so it was with William Fisher. On an occasion applying for a situation in a country school, he referred them to Mauchline, who had lately settled in on being applied to, said that it was a young Fisher except that he was a
occasion, called in to exercise his function as elder, in offering up a prayer for a sick person. Now if there was one thing more than another in which William Fisher prided himself, it was in his superior gift of prayer, and this (by the way) is doubtless the reason Burns has thrown his satire against that worthy personage, into the peculiar form in which it occurs. So after giving them a specimen of his power in this line, he turned with the greatest complacency to the good man of the house, and asked, “Did you ever hear the parallel o’ that?”

The manner of his death corresponds well with what we know of his life. Alas, for all the pretensions of external godliness of the Mauchline elder, he died a drunkard’s death in a wayside ditch! He had been drinking deep with his landlord in Mauchline, and was seen late at night returning by a very zig-zag route to his own house at Tongue. Not making his appearance there, however, his wife got alarmed at his absence, and taking a lantern with her, proceeded to search for him. In this conjugal task, she was assisted by the laird himself who had, it appears, got home in safety, and whose house was situated at a short distance from Tongue. As they went along he continued to beat the bushes on either side of the road with his stick, and uttered every now and then a cry of “shoo! shoo!” saying to his companion, by way of explanation, “for we dinna ken, what spot he may spring frae.” Mrs Fisher was in a little rage at the laird for treating her husband in this way, “as if,” she said, indignantly, “he were a hare or a patrick.” Thus they continued their search along the road, till they came opposite the farm-house of South Auchinbrain, where the unfortunate elder was found smothered among a pool of mud. A loaf and a whisky bottle, from which Fisher had been regaling himself on the way home, were found at some distance. It was thought that in making for a light in the farm-house, he had sunk into the ditch by the road side, from which he was too far gone in intoxication to rise. Such was the end of Holy Willie.

The children are often punished for the sins of their parents, and so it was with William Fisher’s son. He was on one occasion applying for a situation in Ayr, and when asked for testimonials of character by the parties to whom he made his application, he referred them to a gentleman belonging to Mauchline, who had lately settled in that quarter. This person on being applied to, said that it was little he knew about young Fisher except that he was a son of Holy Willie’s. This

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settled the matter at once, and the unfortunate applicant was instantly informed that his services would not be required.

(In the issue of 31 July 1858 a correspondent, “Veritus”, attempted to correct the above “erroneous account . . . of a much-maligned man”: “he was the victim of those whom he had befriended I acknowledge for they required to drug his ale with brandy before they could intoxicate him; and those same persons who could shake the hand of friendship with him at parting, could say, when he was gone, ‘see the auld white-haired b———r how he’s rinnin’. Yes running, for he had oversat his regular time of being home; and when he was found the next morning among the snow, dead from cold and that malignant draught, his pockets were crammed with ‘fairins’ for his boy, and presents for his wife. That there was ever a substantial charge preferred against him for ‘making free with the poor’s money’ is equally false. He was a man who had not a motive for so doing, for he was always a few hundreds before the world; and, when he died, left upwards of three hundred pounds, besides the stock and furnishings of a large farm.” “Veritus” followed this with an attack on Burns who “could desert his own home and carouse with the ‘lowest of the low’ and on Gavin Hamilton, his ‘boon companion in wickedness’. In the issue of 7 August another correspondent, “Veritas”, replied to this “issue of falsehoods” by citing Fisher’s conduct at the funeral of his neighbour, Highbriggs, in March 1800, officiating at the service then going home and ‘emptied his well-filled pouches of burial bread—‘fairins for the boy’”; returning to join the funeral to Sorn kirkyard, officiating at the “dreggy” or after-service, and “again appropriated some more funeral bread—‘presents for his wife’”. “Veritas” added further evidence against Fisher: “Elizabeth Breckenridge often told that, while she was servant to ‘Holy Willie’, his little boy used to rin for the milk luggie when he saw his father comin’ hame frae the kirk on the Sunday afternoons, to get the bawbees he brought wi’ him. In course of time such weekly ‘fairins’ would help the holy man up with the £300.” In the same issue another anonymous correspondent championed Gavin Hamilton as “a singularly upright, benevolent, frank, and kind-hearted man” in the opinion of “several who have spent their whole lives in Mauchline”.)

DR JOHN MACKENZIE
(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald)

Among the Mauchline friends of Burns, one must not be forgotten. This gentleman of the office of village doctor during his residence in Mauchline, being brought from Edinburgh to do duty for the Earl of Eglinton, as well as have to perform professional duties in Edinburgh University, numbered among his acquaintance several who have spent their whole lives in Mauchline.)
Among the Mauchline friends of Burns, John Mackenzie must not be forgotten. This gentleman occupied the important office of village doctor during the poet's residence in Mauchline, being brought from Edinburgh when a young man, by Sir John Whiteford of Ballochmyle. We have already had occasion to mention, that his shop was in the house at present tenanted by Mr James Lambie, tailor and clothier. This was where he first commenced business but he afterwards removed to the other side of the cross, to the house now occupied by Mr John Crawford; Mr Mackenzie himself lodged in the Sun Inn, close adjoining. Being of a shrewd, liberal cast of mind, he seems early to have recognised the man of genius under the coarse, rustic garb of the Mossgiel ploughman. At any rate he was not backward in forming an acquaintance with the poet.

As Mackenzie was the principal medical man for a considerable distance around Mauchline, and the family physician at first of Sir John Whiteford, and afterwards of the Earl of Eglinton, as well as a man of considerable intelligence and conversational power, — he necessarily numbered among his acquaintances, most of the gentry and nobility round about. Among these was Dugald Stewart the celebrated metaphysician, who, when released from his professorial duties in Edinburgh University, passed the most of his time at Catrine House, a quiet country-seat two miles distant from Mauchline. During one of the frequent visits which Dr Mackenzie paid to this worthy man, he spoke in such high terms of Burns, that the professor expressed a desire to see him, and requested the doctor to bring him along with him the next time he came to Catrine House. This was the origin of Professor Stewart's acquaintance with the poet, an intimacy from which the latter derived much pleasure, and to which he owed in a great measure his introduction to the elite of Edinburgh Society. On this first visit of the poet's to Catrine House, there happened also to be present a young scion of nobility, a former pupil of the professor's, of the name of Lord Daer. Burns was highly gratified by the reception he met with on this occasion, and in a letter which he wrote to his friend Mackenzie, he has given us his estimate of the character of both the distinguished personages to whom he was then
introduced. The professor he compliments in prose; but his interview with Lord Daer is made the subject of a half-serious, half-playful poem, which displays great spirit, and not a little graphic power. On another occasion, Burns sent a rhyming epistle to Mackenzie, inviting him to attend a masonic procession connected with St. James’s Lodge, of which the poet was a member. In it he makes reference to a discussion which the two friends had had on some metaphysical difficulty. These are the only poems with which the subject of our present notice is connected; for it is very doubtful whether, as is believed by some, there is any allusion made to him in these lines of the Holy Fair—

For Peebles frae the Water-fit,
Ascends the holy rostrum,
See, up he’s got the Word o’ God,
And meek and mim has view’d it,
While Common Sense has taen the road,
And aff and up the Cowgate
Fast, fast that day.

Mackenzie had recently written on some controversial topic, under the signature of Common Sense, and it is generally believed that he is referred to under that name in this passage. What strengthens this opinion, is that on the day in question, the doctor was actually observed, after attending church and hearing some of the out-door services, to make his escape by the Cowgate, at the very time that Mr Peebles commenced his harangue. This was owing to his having received an invitation to dinner that day, with the Earl of Dumfries, and he had to pass up the Cowgate on his way to Ballochmyle, in order to join Sir John Whiteford, who was also proceeding to Dumfries house. This is the common mode of understanding the passage, though the more literal interpretation is probably the correct one. Burns may, however, have had both these significations in his mind when he wrote the lines.

When the Earl of Eglinton removed to Eglinton Castle, he took Dr. Mackenzie with him to Irvine; but before the doctor left Mauchline, he entered into marriage relations with Elizabeth Miller, one of the Mauchline belles; but of this more anon. Mackenzie commenced medical practice in Irvine, and so well was his worth appreciated, that he soon rose to the highest honours in the magistracy of that ancient burgh. In 1827 he retired to Edinburgh, where he died January 11th, 1837, at an advanced age.
JAMES HUMPHREY

(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 24 July 1858)

Though James Humphrey holds an humble position among the Mauchline "Characters", he is not altogether undeserving of notice in this place. We cannot indeed rank him among the friends of Burns; but yet he seems to have occupied no small share of the poet's attention. In fact a character like Humphrey — the village gossip, whose tongue was never at rest, whose conversation abounded in rare touches of humour, and was withal a keen hand for debate — could not fail to attract the curious observation of Burns, who delighted to study human nature under all its aspects. . . . Humphrey was by profession a stone-mason, and is said to have built the poet's outhouses on the farm of Mossgiel. . . . He was one day lounging about one of the streets of Mauchline, when he observed the poet coming towards him on his way from Mossgiel. . . . When the poet came up to him with the usual question, "Weel, Jamie, what news?" he immediately answered, "Oh! nothing very particular on earth, but there's strange news from below." "And what may these be?" inquired Burns with a look of expectant wonder. "Why," answered the polemic, "they say there's a great dispute just noo among the fallen spirits, whether to keep on wi' the auld deil, or to appoint in his place ane Rob Burns, a wild young poet frae Ayrshire. The elder part o' the assembly are for haudin' on by the auld deil, but the younger imps, that have read the poet's writings, are clean for electin' him to the office." After indulging in a hearty laugh at the poor mason's conceit, Burns went away, saying, in a rough way, that "he was a bletherin' bitch". Shortly after, by way of retaliation, he wrote this epitaph — On a Noisy Polemic . . .

(There follows a series of anecdotes concerning Humphrey as "the bletherin' bitch".)

. . . Reduced in circumstances towards the decline of life, poor Humphrey considered himself fortunate in finding refuge in the private hospital erected at Failford by Mr Cooper of Smithston, enjoying at the same time the usual pension of 3s a week, from a fund left by that gentleman. To eke out a scanty subsistence he had recourse to the practise of begging, and every day he was to be seen at the landing of the stage-coach in Mauchline, scraping upon an old fiddle, and asking the strangers to remember poor Jamie Humphrey.
— Burns’s “bletherin bitch” . . . James Humphrey died in 1844, at the advanced age of 84.

THE MAUCHLINE BELLES.
(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 31 July 1858)

... It is a curious instance either of poetic license, or — what is more probable — of poetic delusion in regard to female charms, that, of the six young women, whom Burns chose to designate as the Mauchline belles, and whom he has described by such epithets as “fine”, “braw”, “divine” — there was only one who could be considered a “beauty”; that of the rest, one was blind of an eye, another strongly marked with small-pox, and the other three possessed of no more than ordinary attractions; and finally, that he should have given his decided preference to that one of them who was the plainest and least attractive of all. They were all, however, of excellent character, moving in a respectable sphere of society, and most of them possessed of good strong sense, and a comparatively well-educated mind.

MISS HELEN MILLER, who is the first-mentioned of the belles in the above lines, was the eldest daughter of Mr John Miller, of the Sun Inn. She would have been almost considered a beauty, had it not been for an unfortunate defect in one of the visual organs — she was blind of one eye. This defect, however, she very dexterously concealed by a habit which she had of blinking with the damaged organ, so that it was hardly noticed by a stranger. Beside being possessed with a more than ordinary share of personal attractions, Miss Miller was rendered still more attractive by the prospects which she had of a considerable dowry in the event of her entering the marriage relation. She was blessed with one of those affectionate brothers who go out to India, work hard, make a fortune, come home with a broken constitution and spend the rest of their lives in giving presents to their friends and settling marriage portions on their sisters.

Alexander Miller left his native country a penniless lad, and returned to it with an independent fortune, and laden with the spoils of India. Besides a considerable amount of hard cash, he brought along with him as presents to his friends abundance of rich stuffs — silks and cambries — from the looms of the East. Poor fellow! He brought with him also, what he would have given all his fortune to have left behind in India — a ruined constitution, and a commotion the news of his landing in the peaceful village. Voyages to India were few days, and the friend to whom you have paid the cost of such a voyage, you had little left to take away. Judge then of the excitement which was breathed among the peaceful villagers, when they heard from mouth to mouth, that “you yanked away the Indies”. Their wonder was course no abatement, when they were brought along with him a native of a real, live, black boy from the East. The Asiatic made his appearance in none of whose quiet-living inhabitants was there a blackskin before, he drew wonderful who watched his motions with all the more, having bestowed on some strange and made a present of him to Sir John, sent to the parish-school, held the old church. Under the care of Mr — the elements of a sound worthy, who was attending the service that on the falling of the first hammer of the good-natured school master let out the honour of their black companion, his first time in his life. The little fellow was disappointed, when, running to pick up the young black was, at the age of church, by the rite of baptism. Onant tells us, the old church was earnest on-lookers, eager to see the several questions had been put to up his right hand to take the water sprinkled on his face, he was rec-christian name from Sir John Wh-Church. He took the name his lady. The connection which our subject is, that Sandy Miller’s a higher position in the estimation he had occupied before. We have already was a lodger in the Sun Inn; and time began seriously to pay his ac-
in India — a ruined constitution, and a total blindness. When he arrived in Mauchline his sight was completely gone! What a commotion the news of his landing made in his native village. Voyages to India were few and far between in those days, and the friend to whom you bade farewell, on the eve of such a voyage, you had little expectation of ever seeing again. Judge then of the excitement caused in the breasts of the peaceful villagers, when the news spread like wild-fire from mouth to mouth, that “young Sandy Miller was hame frae the Indies”. Their wonder and interest suffered, of course no abatement, when they were informed that he had brought along with him a native of that far distant country — a real, live, black boy from the Indies. When the young Asiatic made his appearance in the streets of Mauchline, none of whose quiet-living inhabitants had probably ever seen a blackskin before, he drew wondering crowds after him, who watched his motions with all the curiosity they would have bestowed on some strange animal in a menagerie. Miller made a present of him to Sir John Whitefoord, who had him sent to the parish-school, held then under the east loft of the old church. Under the care of Mr Noble, a gentleman well remembered to this day in Mauchline, the young Indian acquired the elements of a sound Christian education. An old worthy, who was attending the school at that time, tells us that on the falling of the first hail shower that winter, the good-natured school master let out all the boys to see it, in honour of their black companion, who then saw hail for the first time in his life. The little fellow, he said, was dreadfully disappointed, when, running to pick up the little “sweeties”, as he supposed them to be, he found them melt away between his fingers. After having received a good education, the young black was, at the age of 17, admitted into the church, by the rite of baptism. On that occasion, our informant tells us, the old church was crowded to the door by earnest on-lookers, eager to see the black man baptized. After several questions had been put to him, he was asked to hold up his right hand to take the vows, and the water being sprinkled on his face, he was received into the membership of the church. He took the name of John Cartwright — the Christian name from Sir John Whitefoord, the surname from his lady. The connection which all this digression has with our subject is, that Sandy Miller’s money raised his sisters to a higher position in the estimation of the world than they had occupied before. We have already said that Dr Mackenzie was a lodger in the Sun Inn; and it appears that he at this time began seriously to pay his addresses to Miss Miller. He
was received favourably, the match was approved of by the parents, and in due time Helen Miller became Mrs Mackenzie, in which capacity she shared all the honours and successes of her husband.

MISS JANE MARKLAND, who is next mentioned by the poet, was the daughter of a respectable draper in Mauchline. Though Burns has described her as “devine”, she was more a neat, than a handsome woman. Her beauty consisted in a good figure and a pleasing manner. Concerning Miss Markland we have little information except that, after her father’s affairs became somewhat embarrassed, she was considered to have obtained a good match in a Mr Findlay, an exciseman in Tarbolton. On the promotion of her husband to a superior post in Greenock, she went with him to that place, and for anything we know to the contrary lived there for the rest of her days.

MISS JANE SMITH, who is next in order, was, as we have already said, the only sister of James Smith, Burns’ bosom friend. She was a little, dark-eyed, lively creature, though like the rest of the belles her beauty was not of a very high order. She was possessed of considerable wit, and was a clever, managing woman. Mr Candlish, a teacher of languages, who had been engaged to give her lessons, succeeded in gaining her affections, and as a natural consequence, (for Miss Smith was free as the wind to act as she pleased) — her hand. It would appear that Mr Candlish afterwards removed with his wife to Edinburgh, where he continued to teach till his death, when Mrs Candlish took up the same profession and taught with great success. She was thus enabled to give her family a good education, and had the happiness of seeing one of her sons rise to a very high position among the great men of the times. We allude, of course, to Dr Candlish of Free St. George’s Edinburgh. Mrs Candlish was the latest survivor of the belles, having died but a year or two ago.

MISS BETTY MILLER, who ranks next among the belles, was another daughter of Mr John Miller’s. She might perhaps have been what Burns styles her, “braw”, if her face had not suffered severely from the ravages of small-pox. That the two Misses Miller were on terms of friendship with the poet is shown from a circumstance told us by Matthew Leerie, one of our surviving “worthies”. He remembers his father, who was a mason, going one morning at an early hour to knock out a door in one of the rooms, of the Sun Inn. He was about to commence operations immediately at her appearance, and forbade him to proceed, said the good wife, “ye wad oot be awa” last night at Mossgie! said Robin Burns.” However others mention the poet, Mrs Miller seems to have entertained him, when she thus expressed herself, having had been at a “rocking” the night before. Elizabeth Miller, after her sister left the village, and was married to a draper, who came from Auchinleck. She died on the birth of her first child.

MISS CHRISTINA MORTON was another of the belles. Possessed of a remarkable agreeable manner, and what would become some — a fortune of £500 or £1000 in disposal, she would certainly be a beauty was of the full, ripe, rosy countenance, and been a young woman of great promise, but of the sweetness of manner. According to the share in procuring for Burns his introduction to Miss Armour. Miss Armour attended a Mr. Blane, Burns’ ploughman was also hand to convey to her a request for Bar. Miss Morton volunteered to accompany her to the place and the destiny of Jean Armour’s day.

In Blackie’s edition of Burns it is said to have contained a secret attachment for the poet, affected when his preference for the fair line and engaged with a farmer in the harvest operation, privately assigned. It is said also that on that occasion, and engaged with a farmer in the harvest operation, privately assigned, were so many clashes going on about they wished to be out of the way.”

JEAN ARMOUR

(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald)

Of all the Mauchline belles the poet claims the highest share of our attention.
to commence operations immediately, when Mrs Miller made her appearance, and forbade him on any account to do so for, said the good wife, "ye wad disturb our twa lasses, who were awa' last night at Mossgiel seeing that nice young lad Robin Burns." However others may have looked upon the poet, Mrs Miller seems to have entertained a good opinion of him, when she thus expressed herself after her two daughters had been at a "rocking" the night before at Mossgiel. Miss Elizabeth Miller, after her sister left Mauchline became post-mistress to the village, and was married to Mr Templeton, draper, who came from Auchinleck to succeed James Smith. She died on the birth of her first child.

MISS CHRISTINA MORTON was the most attractive of all the belles. Possessed of a remarkably handsome person, an agreeable manner, and what would be still more attractive to some — a fortune of £500 or £600 entirely at her own disposal, she would certainly be a highly eligible match. Her beauty was of the full, ripe, rosy cast, and she is said to have been a young woman of great propriety of demeanour and sweetness of manner. According to some accounts, she had a share in procuring for Burns his first interview with Jean Armour. Miss Armour attended a music-class where John Blane, Burns' ploughman was also a pupil. Blane took in hand to convey to her a request from Burns that she would grant him an interview, and when she expressed a feeling of delicacy about going without a female companion, Miss Morton volunteered to accompany her. The meeting took place and the destiny of Jean Armour was fixed from that day.

In Blackie's edition of Burns it is said that Miss Morton entertained a secret attachment for the poet, and was much affected when his preference for Miss Armour became evident. It is said also that on that occasion she left Mauchline and engaged with a farmer in New Cumnock to assist in harvest operation, privately assigning as a reason that "there were so many clashes going on about Robert Burns and her, she wished to be out of the way."

JEAN ARMOUR

(from Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 7 August 1858)

Of all the Mauchline belles the poet's "bonny Jean" naturally claims the highest share of our attention. though inferior to
most of her compeers in personal attractions, the fact that, in
the poet’s estimation at least, she surpassed them all, and that
she was chosen by him to share the joys and sorrows of his
troubled but brilliant career, is sufficient to give her a
decided pre-eminence over all the other belles. While their
names will sink into forgetfulness, that of Jean Armour,
enshrined in the history, and consacred by the genius, of our
national bard, will enjoy a deathless fame.

Jane, or Jean Armour, was the daughter of a respectable
master-mason, or builder, in the village of Mauchline. Her
father, douce James Armour, was a quiet, sober man, who,
by giving his close and unremitting attentions to his business,
succeeded in gaining the esteem and patronage of the more
respectable class of the community, as well as the gentry
round about. The principal charge, however, of a family of
eleven sons and daughters, devolved not upon her father —
for his business engagements left him but a little time to
spend in the domestic circle — but on the mother, a person of
quite a different cast of character. Mrs Armour appears to
have been a woman of a light-hearted, almost thoughtless
disposition, not very remarkable for her depth of mind or
superiority of judgement, and indulgent to her children to a
degree which did more honour to her heart than her head.
Herself fond on music, it was a great object of her
ambition — to the neglect, perhaps, of more important things
— to see her children proficient in that art; and her house was
the favourite resort of all lovers of the song and the dance.
Perhaps it is to the effects of her mother’s injudicious
training that we must trace, in some degree, the grievous
errors into which Jean Armour was led in the early part of
her life — the clandestine interviews she encouraged her lover
to seek, her facility in yielding to the temptations of
youth, her irresolution and weakness of moral purpose, by
which, on one fatal occasion, she had almost driven the poet
to distraction. In after years no doubt she obtained the
mastery, in a great measure, over the effects of her defective
education; but it required a long life of suffering and trial to
obliterate the traces of Mrs Armour’s injudicious training.

In person Jean Armour was rather above the middle height,
of dark complexion, and irregular features; but her neat
figure, her jet-black eyes sparkling with animation, her
pleasing address and her gentle disposition, rendered her an
object of considerable attraction, and quite entitled her to
the name of “bonny Jean”. Besides, she was an uncommonly
fine singer and a graceful dancer — accomplishments having been
constant practice. Her voice was a without effort, as high as B natural
of her, she was just what the poet lacked at the commencement of their acquaintance:

“A dancin’, sweet, young, handsome
O’ guileless heart.”

The origin of Burns’ intimacy with Jean Armour is variously related. It would appear that
it was customary for young men to choose, off the street, into an humble dance with them. Burns and Jean Armour in this way in the same dance, but a little merriment was occasioned by
possibly his favourite Luath — tracking through the room. Burns made a partner, which was overheard by —
could get some of the lasses to like did.”

Shortly after this the poet had occasion to the public green, where Jean Armour
some clothes. Burns was this time
the dog, and the animal, anxious apparent his master into notice, thought the
doing this than by running with
clothes, which Jean’s fair hands were
the green. The dog was instantly on
feet; but his object was accomplished
which was overheard by —
could get some of the lasses to like did.”

At a rocking held at Mossgiel, a large
a number of songs in rather a
retiring for the night to his sleeping
loft, asked John Blane, his bed-fellows
Sillar’s singing. “Oh!” answered Blane
connoisseur in the fine art, “I wo
fine singer and a graceful dancer — a natural talent for these accomplishments having been perfected by an almost constant practice. Her voice was a brilliant treble, and rose, without effort, as high as B natural. To close our description of her, she was just what the poet has himself described her at the commencement of their acquaintanceship.

"A dancin', sweet, young, handsome queen, 
O' guileless heart."

The origin of Burns' intimacy with Miss Armour has been variously related. It would appear that on Mauchline race-day it was customary for young men to invite those girls they chose, off the street, into an humble ball-room, to have a dance with them. Burns and Jean Armour were both engaged in this way in the same dance, but not as partners, when not a little merriment was occasioned by the poet's dog — possibly his favourite Luath — tracking his master's footsteps through the room. Burns made a playful remark to his partner, which was overheard by Jean, that "he wished he could get some of the lasses to like him as well as his dog did."

Shortly after this the poet had occasion to pass through the public green, where Jean Armour was engaged bleaching some clothes. Burns was this time also accompanied by his dog, and the animal, anxious apparently to bring himself and his master into notice, thought there was no better way of doing this than by running with his dirty paws over the clothes, which Jean's fair hands were busy spreading out on the green. The dog was instantly ordered back to his master's feet; but his object was accomplished, and some badinage was interchanged between the young pair, in the course of which Jean archly inquired "if he had got any of the lasses yet to like him as well as his dog." They seem both, on this occasion, to have been favourably impressed with one another; for it was not long after this till Burns obtained the private interview with her which we have already referred to in our article on Miss Morton.

At a rocking held at Mossgiel, a lad named Ralph Sillar, sang a number of songs in rather a superior style. Burns on retiring for the night to his sleeping apartment in the stable loft, asked John Blane, his bed-fellow, what he thought of Sillar's singing. "Oh!" answered Blane, who pretended to be a connoisseur in the fine art, "I would not give Jean Armour
for a score of him." "You are always talking of this Jean Armour," said Burns, "I wish you would contrive to bring me to see her." Blane readily promised to do so, and the very next night they set out for Mauchline for that purpose. Burns went into a public house immediately under the singing-school of which Blane and Miss Armour were both pupils, and waited there till the class was dismissed. Blane found Jean not averse to grant an interview to the poet, of whose talents she had heard, and her only objection was removed by Miss Morton offering to accompany her. From this time forward, their intimacy gradually ripened into a strong mutual attachment, which death alone was able to terminate.

In the prosecution of this intimacy Burns was sometimes assisted by a woman of the name of Catherine Govan, who acted occasionally as "black-fit" or go-between to the lovers. George Patrick, her son, of whom we have already had occasion to speak, tells us that he remembers having often seen the poet coming into his mother's house, to get her to assist him in procuring a meeting with Jean. One evening he remembers in particular, his mother was sitting sewing at a table at which a lighted candle was placed, when Burns entered the room. His face was flushed, and his manner excited; and, knocking over in his hurry both table and candlestick, he said with a hasty impatient gesture, "Come awa', Kate, I want to speak tae ye."

Jean Armour had been for considerably more than a year "the goddess of the poet's idolatry", when, in the spring of 1786 it appeared that the fruits of their imprudence could no longer be concealed. Yielding to the wishes of his partner in guilt, Burns granted her a written acknowledgement, sufficient in the eye of Scottish law to make them husband and wife. . . . Jean was a favourite daughter and her parents still entertained hopes of a more respectable settlement in life for her, in spite of all that had happened. Many distressing scenes occurred between the parties. The poor girl, after an agony of doubt and hesitation, yielded to her father's stern demand, and delivered up her marriage lines, which were speedily consigned to the flames. The state of Burns' mind on hearing that Jean had thus cast him off, can hardly be imagined . . .

(In the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, 14 August 1858, the story is continued, with the birth of twins on 3 September 1786.)
... Though the breach between the two families — the Burnses and the Armours — was as wide as ever, arrangement were immediately entered into by both parties for the future provision of the children. One, a fine boy, who received the name of his father, was guaranteed the protection of the MossgIEL family; the other a girl who survived only fourteen months, was taken under the immediate charge of the mother herself. ... the first edition of Burns' works met with the most flattering reception, and the voice of fame now called him to the capital. ... The very first time that he returned to Mauchline, in June 1787, he could not resist the temptation, of calling at James Armour’s house — ostensibly to see his daughter, but with the secret desire, we doubt not, to see also the mother of his daughter, and to discover what feelings Jean now entertained towards him. The result may be easily guessed. ... When, in the following winter, the consequences of their renewed intercourse became apparent, the indignation of James Armour against his daughter knew no bounds. Considering her now as finally lost, he turned her fairly out of doors; and when Burns came back to Mauchline in the end of February, he found her, as he himself says — “banished like a martyr — forlorn, destitute, and friendless.” The poet did all he could for her in the circumstances. He obtained shelter for her, first of all, in the house of a friend, Mrs Muir, wife of the honest Tarbolton miller, who is alluded to in “Dr Hornbook”; and then, after he had obtained a promise from Mrs Armour, that she would attend her daughter in her present delicate condition removed Jean for that purpose to lodgings in Mauchline. In Burns’ “Family Bible”, the following record occurs ... “March 3, 1788 — Were born to them twins again, two daughters who died within a few days after their birth” ... Burns was now finally returned from Edinburgh, and he resolved on a real union with Jean Armour. ... It appears that Jean Armour was finally united to the poet, on the 3rd August, by what is called a justice-of-peace-marriage, in the writing chambers of Burns’ friend and patron, Gavin Hamilton. ...

... Burns was getting Ellisland prepared for the reception of his bride; and meanwhile he took an apartment in Main Street, which was thus honoured as being the place, where the poet and his Jean first “took up house”. George Patrick tells us that, at that time, James Armour whose indignation against his daughter had not yet fairly subsided, would not suffer any of his family to carry over a single piece of furniture to the new house in Main Street. George himself
ca\jeried over a few things for Jean, and among them her chaff-bed. The house of which Jean Armour thus for a time became mistress, is now, as we have formerly mentioned, occupied by an aged female, Mrs Paterson, (better known in the village by her maiden name of Bell Black) who has herself some recollection of the poet. Many a visit she has had from the admirers of Burns, who were naturally eager to get a look at the house and bed once occupied by the poet and his bonny Jean; for there is still shown the identical bedstead which, being attached to the house, was used by Burns when he stayed beneath that humble roof. The worthy dame tells us that she has often been pressed by strangers, to allow them to pass a night on the same bed where the immortal bard, so oft before has reposed his we\jeried limbs after travelling all the way from Ellisland, to visit his Jean . . .

Jean Armour is now become Mrs Burns, and henceforth her history mingled with that of the illustrious bard, and need not here be followed out . . . Several relations of Mrs Burns are still living in Mauchline. Among them are a son and daughter of her sister Nelly, a widow of her nephew Robert Armour; and a niece, daughter of her brother Adam, (who was doubly related to Burns, by marriage with Fanny Burns, a cousin of the poet’s). It may be interesting to state that Mary Armour, the last-mentioned of these, has in her possession a table of Nanse Tinnocks, procured from a nephew and successor of the ale-wife’s, a chest which belonged to the poet, and which held his clothes; and a chest or drawers presented by Burns as a marriage gift to the mother of the present owners, and in which he was wont to keep his private papers.

Thus ends for the present our series of articles on “Mauchline and its Characters” . . .

(Only a few months after the publication of these articles in the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, there died one of the “worthies” whom the author mentioned as an informant. There happens to have survived a printed obituary notice of this Nelly Millar, which is appended here. It contains references to Mary Campbell and Jean Armour, which may be attributed to the year 1785.)
Death of a contemporary of Burns

Death is fast thinning the ranks of our small band of contemporaries of Burns. On Wednesday week he removed from amongst us Mrs Martin, better known as Helen, or Nelly Millar, who had attained to ninety-two and a half years, and had still vivid recollections of the Poet and Mary Campbell, his much-loved Highland Mary. In July, 1766, Nelly was born at Grassmilees, a farm as far east as Mossgill is west of the village; and though not one of the "six charming young belles", she became acquainted with them at school, and used to tell that many a happy hour she spent with them playing at chucks — still the school-girls' favourite pastime. Having been the playmate of the famous belles, Nelly was next a neighbouring servant with Highland Mary. She had a high opinion of Mary Campbell, who, she said, "was an unco bonnie bit lass, wi' two fine black een, but gae an' Heelan' spoken." Mary was for half-a-year servant along with her in the Castle, where Burns was first introduced to Mary, before she went to Coilsfield. Nelly was afterwards a servant to Mr Waddel, saddler, when the poet's brother, Wm Burns, was serving his apprenticeship with her master, so that, as might be expected, Nelly became William's lass. According to her statement, William courted her for many a day; but, like other lads and lasses, they had a "bit cast out"; and, although it was never "soutered up" again, they were ever afterwards on most friendly terms. As a proof of this, when Nellie was about to be married to Mr Martin, she walked all the way to Kilmarnock, where her old lad was then working with Mr Rodger, father-in-law of Mr Waddel, and invited to her marriage William Burns, who accepted the invitation, and fulfilled an old promise that he would dance at her wedding. Nelly remembered being at a lad and lass meeting, as she called it, with William Burns, and Robert and Jean Armour. She and her lad, and other lads and lasses, met in Nance Tannock's, where, during the evening, Robert stood up, and, taking from his pocket a large paper, recited to them the "Holy Fair", and other poems, which she heard for the first time. Such a night's laughing and fun she never saw. In speaking of Jean Armour, she described her as a common-looking lass, with nothing remarkable about her but her black eyes, and that she was always either singing or dancing. Nelly often met the poet coming from Mossgill with a book in his hand; he was a swarthy looking lad, but very nice to speak to, or in company. After Nelly and her husband had resided near Failford for a few years, they removed to the Townhead of
Mauchline, where she afterwards lived. The first house they occupied was a few yards above Mr Waddell's, and was so frail that, a few days after the birth of her third son, she made a narrow escape for her life; part of the roof fell in on her and the child, but they were not materially injured. She then removed to the house in which she died, and which she has occupied about fifty years. She was noted for a genuine piety and was always found reading the Bible, with which she was most familiar. It was her only companion in her dreary widowhood, and had been a "light unto her feet, and a lamp unto her path" throughout her lengthened pilgrimage; for she died full of hope, joy, and peace. Her husband died early, and of her three sons only one survives—Mr Wm Martin, farmer, Whitehill, Symington. Deceased was able to walk about till within two weeks of her death, and still retained, to a remarkable degree, the use of all her mental faculties. She was one of our oldest inhabitants, and, on account of her great age and Christian attainments, was much respected. Being what few attain to, a great-great-grandmother, we saw at her funeral, on Friday, her great-grandchildren, and one or two of our few remaining contemporaries of Burns.
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