

# The recent discovery of a previously unpublished 1789 letter & original manuscript of a poem in Burns handwriting.

This news item was received from  
**Professor David Purdie the Editor of the  
Burns Encyclopaedia and  
Secretary of the Edinburgh Burns club.**



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On 10th January 2011 in company with Dr Iain Gordon Brown of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, I examined a letter and manuscript at Floors Castle, in the Scottish Borders. We confirmed to the owner, the 10<sup>th</sup> Duke of Roxburghe, that the letter was an unpublished work of Burns, the poem being an early draft of a work published in 1793: 'On seeing a wounded Hare'

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*Ellisland near Dumfries 13<sup>th</sup> May 1789*

*Sir,*

*I beg your pardon for not returning Mrs Hunter's poem sooner. The fact is, I did not wish to send it till I could accompany it with something of my own, not indeed as a reward for, but as a mark of my sense of your goodness. In the inclosed piece I have at least attempted to catch a little of Mrs Hunter's spirit. If you could spare a leisure moment to mark the faulty lines with your pencil, and give the bagatelle, so corrected, to Peter Hill, Bookseller, it will reach me & lay me under an additional [obligation] to you. I have received so many obliging instances of your attention both to the poet & his works, that to trouble you with a tedious apology for this freedom would be affectation. As for your abilities as a Critic, I am in the predicament of the devils, "I believe & tremble."*

*I have the honor to be,*

*Sir,*

*your deeply indebted humble Serv<sup>t</sup>*

*Robert Burns.*

Thus wrote Scotland's greatest poet and songwriter to one of the greatest physicians of the Age of Enlightenment. The letter which has come to light at Floors castle is the only one known to have been written by Burns to Prof. Gregory and is highly illustrative of several aspects of the poet's life and work.

Burns had clearly received from Gregory some poetry by Mrs Anne Hunter, the wife of the famous Scots surgeon and anatomist John Hunter. A minor poet whose work is little known now, she achieved local celebrity for her lyrics some of which were set to music by Haydn during his stay in London. Anyone familiar with Burns' acute sense of humour, however, will spot the dry irony with which he assures Gregory that he has tried to catch 'a little of Mrs Hunter's spirit' in his own work. At first sight It may seem odd that an established and famous poet should submit new work for criticism by

Edinburgh University's Professor of Medicine and head of the city's great medical school. Burns, however, had a high regard for Gregory and often sent new works to men whom he rated as literary critics - although very rarely accepting the advice offered. On the advice of the historian Prof. Alexander Fraser Tytler, he did take out four lines from *Tam o' Shanter* mercilessly flaying the lawyers and the clergy, while the respected divine Dr Hugh Blair of St Giles managed to effect only a one-word change to *The Holy Fair*, Burns' great satire on hellfire open-air preaching. Other Edinburgh *literati* to whom the poet sent work for comment included Andrew Dalzell, Professor of Greek at the University and of course James Gregory. The latter, a man of seismic personality, was perhaps best summed up by Lord Cockburn as:

'a curious and excellent man, a great physician, a great Lecturer, a great Latin scholar and a great talker, vigorous and generous, large of stature and with a strikingly powerful countenance'.

He was treated warily by Burns who lamented to the philosopher Prof. Dugald Stewart that, as a critic: 'Gregory is a good man, but he *crucifies* me!' Indeed the Floors letter ends humorously with the poet quoting from the New Testament (James 2:19) to the effect that, like the Devil, he believes and trembles when faced with Gregory as a critic.

The two men, if not close personal friends, clearly had a warm regard for each other. Burns was the recipient from Gregory of eight volumes of *Cicero's Select Orations* edited by William Duncan, the poet inscribing it: 'a present from the truly worthy and learned Dr Gregory. I shall preserve it to my latest hour, as a mark of the gratitude, esteem, and veneration I bear the Donor. So help me God!'

On Sunday 19 April 1789, Scotland's greatest poet and songwriter was out early on his farm by the river Nith, sowing grass seed. The thirty year-old Robert Burns, tenant of Ellisland farm in lower Nithsdale, some six miles north of Dumfries, had just moved his wife Jean Armour and their 18 month old son Robert Jr. into the newly rebuilt farmhouse. Walking the field and scattering seed from his sowing sheet, Burns heard the report of a shot from a neighbouring plantation and, as he later wrote to a friend, 'shortly afterwards, a poor little wounded hare came crippling by me.'

Enraged that a doe hare should have been hunted and shot in mid-April when their leverets are newly born, Burns left his sowing and went hunting himself. He soon caught up with the huntsman who turned out to be James Thomson, the son of a neighbouring farmer. Burns was never to describe the confrontation which followed; but Thomson was never to forget it. Decades later, the poet's biographer Allan Cunningham interviewed the now middle-aged farmer who clearly remembered the incident as if it were yesterday. Burns, he recalled: 'was in great wrath, and cursed me, and said little hindered him from throwing me into the Nith; and he was able enough to do it, though I was both young and strong.'

Burns had an abiding affection for the animal and plant life which surrounded him in his early years. All his life he was opposed to hunting for sport and had a remarkably modern and inclusive approach to what he called 'nature's social union' some two centuries before the emerging concept of the ecosystem.

'The Wounded Hare' is thus seen to lie at the heart of one of the poet's great *leitmotifs*; the defence of living creatures no match for the power of Man.

The Floors manuscript of the poem and the letter to Gregory will go on display when the Castle opens to the public, and now take their place alongside the 720 known letters of Burns and the 630 works which stand to the name of a man who was gone at 37 leaving a body of song and poetry which will remain always as one of Scotland's greatest literary achievements.

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