

## **Of Scotland's Bard, the Poet Robert Burns** **A Biography in Verse**

The date of January 25<sup>th</sup> in seventeen-fifty-nine,  
Is honoured all around the globe, this day for auld lang syne.  
Wi' right guid cheer we celebrate and toast his name in turns,  
Scotland's own Immortal Bard, the poet Robert Burns.

His father William Burnes met his mother Agnes Broun  
At a country fair in Maybole, more a village than a town.  
Agnes kept another suitor waiting for seven years,  
Till she found he'd been unfaithful, confirming her worst fears.

But Fortune smiled when she beguiled a man of greater measure;  
They'd raise a child who worldwide became a priceless treasure.  
They married late in '57 and planned to settle down  
In a rural Ayrshire hamlet far removed from world renown.

The family were of modest means and dwelt in Alloway,  
In a two-room cotter's thatched abode, built of mud and clay.  
'Twas there that Robert first drew breath, the flame of genius lit,  
Some day the world would know his name, his passion, sense and wit.

Robert's brother, Gilbert, was born near two years later on,  
Followed by three sisters, and young brothers, William and John.  
Agnes, Isabella and Annabella in between,  
All surviving infancy, though John died at just sixteen.

William strove to school his sons and build a strong foundation  
Of pious faith and godliness, and a basic education.  
He set about to start a school right there in Alloway,  
And chose the young John Murdoch as its able Dominie.

Murdoch's teaching methods were designed to place great stress  
On the rudiments of language, and on literature no less.  
His vital early influence may have helped provide the lift  
That played a part in nurturing the poet's special gift.

William later took to farming, a life of sweat and toil,  
Extracting mere subsistence from a barely-giving soil.  
His plan was to ensure his sons would never risk the harm  
Of grinding drudge for little pay on someone else's farm.

Robert proved a sturdy lad and was early at the plough,  
Composing verse to fill the void as time would oft allow.  
At harvest time he partnered with a lass who cast the spell  
That first inspired '*the sin of RHYME*', in lines of 'Handsome Nell'.

He was sent off to a summer school when just fifteen years old,  
To study math and surveying in nearby Kirkoswald.  
The subjects - mostly technical - were not his strong forte,  
But would be useful when employed as a gauger one day.

A further opportunity for both the brothers Burns,  
Let Rob and Gilbert take a class each week-about in turns.  
The school was in Dalrymple, just o'er three miles from their home,  
With varied subjects old and new, like the rise and fall of Rome.

The family moved from farm to farm, to three in eighteen years,  
Mount Oliphant and Lochlie both, were doomed to end in tears.  
But Mossgiel Farm, near Mauchline town, fared better in the end,  
Though tilling sandy, acid soil left naught to recommend.

At first a shy retiring youth, and slow to court a lass,  
Our lad would learn the art of love, and other friends surpass;  
'*Fair Enslavers*' could captivate, and oftentimes would infuse  
His passionate, creative mind, that gave flight to his muse.

A brash elan would soon emerge as youth was left behind,  
With age came self-assurance and an independent mind.  
He formed Tarbolton's Bachelors' Club, a forum for debate,  
Attracting lads not settled yet upon the married state.

He and David Sillar began a friendship that would last  
For many years as brother poets, but Davie was outclassed;  
A published volume of his works failed to spark the flame  
That helped his good friend Robert Burns become a household name.

At twenty-one young Rab's keen eye alighted on a beauty,  
But from afar, they'd never met, she knew him not, how could she?  
Robert wished to launch his suit, and did so in a letter,  
Addressing her as Alison...maybe that upset her!

Her name, Elizabeth Gebbie, he came to know in time,  
Entreating her in scribbled notes and lofty-sounding rhyme!  
A marriage offer that he'd made had come to no avail -  
She jilted him, though graciously, but also through the mail.

At twenty-two Burns launched a plan to learn another skill,  
Flax-dressing being the curious choice, which proved a bitter pill;  
After seven months in Irvine, an illness laid him low,  
And a fire that razed the heckling shed struck the final blow.

But all was not disaster as he learned a thing or two,  
About the seamy side of life he'd not known hitherto;  
His friend and mentor, Captain Brown, had left him quite wide-eyed  
With Brown's unchecked licentiousness, even Burns could scarce abide.

In summer, seventeen-eighty-one, our lad became a Mason,  
Inducted as Apprentice in St David's Lodge, Tarbolton.  
He later joined St James's Lodge, soon rising to the role  
Of Depute Master with the task of day-to-day control.

The fellowship of masonry and the contacts he acquired  
Would later help him to secure a post he much desired.  
He thought the Excise Service would sustain a better life,  
And support his growing family, and Jean his loving wife.

But what of Jean - his bonnie Jean - who won his wayward heart,  
Both first enraptured by their love, but later doomed to part.  
The story of their courtship and the drama t'would entail,  
Will be a later topic that we'll look at in detail.

Betsey Paton, their Lochlie maid, would be his first true love,  
A pleasant lass, though plain of face - a diamond in the rough.  
They courted much in secret and in nine months, more or less,  
He hailed a right guid welcome to their daughter, '*dear-bought Bess*'.

He '*commenc'd a Fornicator*', when he broke the golden rule,  
And the Kirk demanded penance upon the 'cutty-stool';  
The guinea fine demanded as repentance would inspire  
His claim the Kirk was satisfied he'd '*pay'd the buttock-hire*'.

(The Fornicator)

(Ditto)

The Mauchline Kirk's dour minister, bespectacled and bald,  
Became young Robert's nemesis, named William 'Daddy' Auld.  
Burns' fragile pride was sorely tried by this humiliation,  
And stirred him in satiric rhyme to seek retaliation.

Auld at least had principles and was steeped in Holy Writ,  
But Elder Willie Fisher was a thorough hypocrite;  
And though in Robert's troubles he was just a minor player,  
The poet skewered him ruthlessly in '*Holy Willie's Prayer*'.

A tulzie waged for several years convulsing Mauchline's Kirk,  
Brought charges of deceit and fraud and forbidden sabbath work;  
Gavin Hamilton, Robert's friend, was called before the Session  
To answer to each sham complaint, and trumped-up transgression.

*battle*

Bob Aiken was a lawyer friend of Burns and Hamilton,  
Well known for his sharp legal mind and even sharper tongue;  
His cool disdain and piercing gaze could terrorize Auld Nick,  
With guile, dissemblance and surprise, and every courtroom trick.

Aiken represented him before this inquisition,  
The Elders being no match for his '*glib-tongu'd*' erudition.  
The charges were abandoned, and the witch-hunt thus laid bare,  
Described by Burns, as per above, in Holy Willie's Prayer.

Robert's father William died in seventeen-eighty-four,  
A victim of consumption and the bitter strife he bore.  
Years of litigation with his landlord took its toll -  
He won the case but suffered from the 'snash' he had to 'thole'.

*abuse, endure*

Following all these bleak events, and to mitigate the harm,  
Robert and his brother took a lease on Mossgiel farm.  
The poet served as family head, his father now being gone,  
Though Gilbert soon would take the reins as the poet's life moved on.

O'er many years young Robert Burns had earned a reputation  
For works of great poetic worth compelling admiration.  
As undisputed local bard, his fame soon spread afar,  
An Ayrshire lad, but soon to be his nation's rising star.

In April seventeen-eighty-five, the poet met his Jean,  
While she was laying out the wash upon the village green;  
The poet's dog had muddied up the linens Jean had spread,  
Resulting in a harsh exchange, with both going head-to-head.

But soon the anger softened as they caught each other's eye,  
And hurt gave way to laughter and some tender words forby;  
Careless Fate had played its part, the rest would be divined  
By genius, fame and consequence, and fortunes intertwined.

*as well*

This lass had Robert much in thrall, she'd be his Bonnie Jean,  
Praised in verse admiring '*thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean*'.  
But out-of-wedlock motherhood caused bitterness and strife,  
Despite 'attesting' marriage, that declared them man and wife.

*slim*

(O Were I on  
Parnassus Hill)

Jean's father, Adam Armour, so despised this profligate  
Whose lust had placed his daughter in a much-dishonoured state.  
He banished her to Paisley, and in shame poor Jean agreed,  
But Robert felt betrayed and from his wedding vows then freed.

But Armour set the law upon the wretched cad, which then  
Forced Robert into hiding, to evade the bailiff's men.  
It drove him to a desperate scheme to which he was resigned:  
Book passage to Jamaica and leave Scotland far behind.

He found a post as overseer on a sugar plantation,  
A folly that could well have led to morbid ruination.  
But happily this reckless plan was finally discarded,  
When fortune smiled and Ruin's scowl could now be disregarded.

His saviour was a printer who fulfilled his hopes held long,  
To publish a modest volume of his poetry and song;  
He'd faith in his poetic skills and nurtured the ambition  
That one day he'd achieve his goal of national recognition.

Meanwhile he succumbed again to a lass he did adore -  
They pledged their troth, but all too soon, alas she was no more.  
A fever dealt the mortal blow with random cruel disdain,  
He never would forget this love, nor soothe the lifelong pain.

Margaret Campbell was that lass, his 'Highland Mary' in rhyme,  
Immortalized in verses filled with sentiment sublime;  
The rapture of their feelings shared by '*Afton's murmuring stream*', (Sweet Afton)  
Matched later only by his love professed for Bonnie Jean.

Mariolaters have idolized this maid as being chaste,  
But evidence suggests, perhaps, that attribute misplaced;  
Accused of being a '*lightskirt*', which the poet might deplore,  
Though 'twas brought to his attention, he chose just to ignore. *supporters of  
Highland Mary*

The Kilmarnock volume of his poems was published to acclaim,  
In July of seventeen-eighty-six, ensuring Robert's fame;  
Although a modest volume, it was greatly in demand,  
Its author hailed a genius and soon known throughout the land.

Following publication and success of this edition,  
Burns was soon befriended by a lady on a mission;  
The much-older Mrs. Dunlop volunteered as confidante,  
Offering comments on his works, as might a maiden aunt.

They corresponded frequently, o'er many years to come,  
Their letters far exceeding those from any other one.  
She lectured him to expurgate the rhymes she deemed unchaste,  
But he demurred to her demands, ignoring her distaste.

But still he seemed to value her opinion and advice,  
At least on some occasions, it was worth the purchase price!  
Their correspondence often was in disputatious vein,  
With politics a source of grief and in the end, of pain.

It was that very topic that destroyed their long rapport,  
When Burns expressed some views that she had reason to deplore.  
She chose to end all contact and stood fast in stubborn pride,  
Despite his last forlorn appeal, just days before he died.

Another stranger helped the poet alter his decision,  
And give up on Jamaica to pursue a new edition.  
The respected Thomas Blacklock, in writing to a friend,  
Extolled the poet's works as having much to recommend.

When Burns was shown the letter, it helped to change his mind,  
And launched a correspondence with this man he knew was blind.  
They met in Edinburgh during Burns' last winter stay,  
And communicated often till Blacklock passed away.

The poet and his Bonnie Jean at last were reconciled,  
Their differences now settled and as parents filled with pride.  
Jean had given birth to twins, named Robert, yes, and Jean,  
Paternity of three for Burns, that ended in thirteen!

Some influential friends encouraged yet another mission,  
To take himself to Edinburgh to launch a new edition.  
Three thousand handsome volumes bound in French grey paper-board,  
Announced a well-deserved result, his future plans restored.

This new expanded opus had a hundred added rhymes,  
But leaving out some doubtful works published at future times;  
These were thought indelicate or subversive in some way,  
And those that Burns had ridiculed might vengeance seek someday.

The many months he sojourned in Auld Reekie set the scene *Edinburgh*  
For new insights and friendships that would change what might have been.  
He mingled with aristocrats and Scotland's leading lights,  
Lionized by the Hoi Polloi and other worthy wights. *fellows*

James Cunningham - Earl of Glencairn - and Burns were introduced,  
In Edinburgh before his new edition was produced.  
The Earl received him warmly, with the utmost of respect,  
Resulting in a friendship that Burns could never expect.

Glencairn became his patron and a benefactor too,  
Promoting him to many influential friends he knew.  
Burns was deeply thankful *'for a' that thou hast done for me'*,  
The last line in his eulogy, as a grateful devotee.

His Edinburgh volume now in print, Robert turned his hand  
To planning three quite lengthy tours of Scotland's rugged land;  
First it was the Borders, then three Highland expeditions,  
A gift-to-self to celebrate two published verse editions.

These would last from May through August, the Borders venture first,  
Joined by his friend Bob Ainslie, as both companion and guest.  
He took a break to visit home, but just the briefest stay,  
Seeming in a hurry despite so many weeks away.

And so in June the prodigal was welcomed at Mossgiel,  
And also by the Mauchline folks, their admiration real;  
His great success in recent weeks now held them quite in awe,  
Even Armour thought him worthy as a future son-in-law.

He now resumed his tours of which three areas remained,  
The Western Highlands first and then the northern domain.  
For the first his travel partner was Dr. George Grierson,  
Replaced by Willie Nicol soon after Grierson had gone.

Nicol, a Latin master and curmudgeon to a fault,  
Was the brewer who inspired *'O, Willie Brewed a Peck O' Maut'*;  
They'd been friends through Burns' first winter in Edinburgh Town,  
But Willie proved a cross to bear, as such he'd earned renown.

Their stops included places like Inverness and Strathspey,  
And Bannockburn, inspiring Scotland's Anthem *'Scots Wha Hae'*.  
He ended with the Stirling leg, and companion James Adair,  
Then back again to Edinburgh for a second winter there.

This added sojourn started as a requisite detour,  
With many matters yet to solve, and problems to endure,  
Including all his issues with procrastinator Creech,  
Payment for Burns' copyright still maddeningly out of reach.

A scheme that caught his interest, and eclipsed his own affairs,  
Involved a publication of Scots traditional airs.  
Johnson's 'Scots Musical Museum' was at an early stage,  
But Robert had the vision and commitment to engage.

Five more volumes would complete the final enterprise,  
With Burns' input prolific before his sad demise;  
He chose melodies for some, improved rhymes of many more,  
The end result - a treasury of Scottish music lore.

Later Burns agreed to serve a similar worthy aim,  
To help preserve still more Scots songs deserving of acclaim;  
The object was to gather and then publish these old airs,  
Burns would compose new content, and on others make repairs.

George Thomson was the man behind this laudable intent,  
And Burns the best of choices for poetical content;  
He dedicated countless hours throughout his last three years,  
To this 'Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs'.

Sad news of Robert's daughter Jean would leave him mortified -  
The infant had been taken ill and sadly not survived.  
Word had reached him mid-October, defying all belief  
That God and Nature had conspired to inflict such savage grief.

Edinburgh's Crochallan Fencibles issued a request  
That the poet attend a meeting as their honoured guest.  
Most members were recruited from the city's upper crust,  
Who revelled in crude banter and the art of cut-and-thrust.

William Smellie was the founder and Robert's new-found friend,  
Who prodded him to share some bawdry verses that he'd penned;  
This well may be the origin of rhymes deemed so risqué,  
Destined for the 'Merry Muses', though not published in his day.

Auld Reekie shared a special place that pulled at Robert's heart,  
As home of Robert Fergusson, his spiritual counterpart;  
Like Burns he was a Scottish poet and mentor in some ways,  
Who lived in meagre solitude, denied much well-earned praise.

He died at only twenty-four, his unmarked grave scarce known,  
So Burns took up the noble cause to raise a fine headstone.  
The sculptor idled at the task, it took him two long years,  
And Burns demurred for just as long in settling his arrears.



A friendship from that winter would unmentioned be remiss,  
His meetings with Clarinda, and his plea for 'ae fond kiss';  
His Nancy in some verses, Mrs. Agnes McLehose -  
Who some think became his lover, but rash to thus suppose.

While courting Nancy's company Burns took a nasty fall,  
Victim of a 'drunken coachman', he could barely walk at all;  
They planned to meet, but this mishap detained him in sick bay,  
Forcing them to correspond by mail, twice at least each day.

They oft met in secret later, both knowing it was wrong,  
Though Robert felt great fondness he expressed in verse and song;  
But she being wed to someone else would doom them soon to part,  
An ending of sweet sorrow that would wound the poet's heart.

Despite their close liaison and the trust that should endow,  
Rab managed to seduce Clarinda's maid, young Jenny Clow.  
Jenny ferried notes between them, most often after dark,  
But then she got her fairin' when the rascal loosed her sark!

*reward, chemise*

Howe'er she was persuaded, or her fears were overcome,  
Poor Jenny payed the 'buttock' price as mother of his son;  
Robert proposed to raise the child, an offer she denied,  
She kept their son but sad to say, just three years on, she died.

More time was spent in Edinburgh pursuing monies owed  
By William Creech, his publisher, that very slippery toad!  
But almost one full year would pass before the whole account  
Was settled on the poet in the full agreed amount.

While living in her parent's home poor Jean began to show  
A second wayward pregnancy that proved the final blow.  
Her father turned her out of doors upon his finding out  
She'd taken up with Burns again, that fornicating lout!

The poet knew he must return and solve Jean's awful plight,  
So, back he went to Mauchline now to put the matter right.  
But on the way he stayed the night in bustling Glasgow town,  
Meeting up with brother Will and his old friend, Captain Brown.

Robert found them lodgings that would serve their present need,  
In Mauchline, with a doctor's ready access guaranteed.  
His Jean would soon give birth to twins, their second in two years,  
But tragedy would drown their joy in bitterness and tears.

Alas, the twins would each survive a mere two weeks or less,  
We can but barely now conceive their parents' deep distress;  
But life's events marched on apace with little time to grieve,  
Important business now compelled that Robert had to leave.

His published works had earned him fame, but still he had to toil,  
To earn an honest living as a tiller of the soil.  
He chose the farm of Ellisland, just six miles from Dumfries,  
The tenancy established in a seventy-six-year lease.

He'd also lately heard the news, fulfilling an ambition,  
Of being appointed gauger in the Excise Division.  
The salary of fifty pounds per annum guaranteed  
A decent life, and freedom from the poverty he'd feared.

Now he had the challenge of two concurrent occupations,  
Exciseman and farmer, each being full-time obligations.  
His excise duties called sometimes for ten-hour working days,  
And still find time to plough, then plant, the crops he had to raise.

He took control of Ellisland in June of '88,  
With Jean and Robert junior coming at a later date.  
They moved into a farmhouse newly built by Nith's clear stream,  
True riparian beauty to fulfill a poet's dream.

His neighbour north of Ellisland, on Friar's Carse Estate,  
Became a friend of poet Burns and offered to donate  
Free access to The Hermitage, a sylvan, hushed retreat,  
Where Burns could write in solitude, and they might sometimes meet.

Robert Riddell was a country laird who shared his new friend's zeal  
For poetry and music, and the finer arts' appeal.  
He introduced the poet to the local country brass,  
And his own extended family, well-heeled and upper class.

This is how he met Maria, Mrs. Walter Riddell,  
Wife of the laird's young brother, and a much-admired belle;  
Maria was a poet and in literature well versed,  
Becoming friends with Robert Burns, innocently at first.

Robert played the part of mentor, but again was held in thrall,  
Careless of her married state, and the time's strict protocol.  
But still they met at intervals and corresponded too,  
But were they ever lovers?...no, such gossip was untrue.

Seventeen-ninety saw the launch of Robert's 'Tam O'Shanter';  
His best-known ballad told the tale of Tammie's midnight canter.  
His good wife Kate had prophesied that some day '*late or soon*',  
He'd surprise a dance of witches and be '*found deep drown'd in Doon*'.

This rhyme was loosely tied to antiquarian Francis Grose,  
A man Burns met at Friar's Carse, fat, frumpy and jocose.  
*The Antiquities of Scotland* was the subject of a work,  
The poet thought should also include Alloway's auld Kirk.

The kirk was not quite suited for inclusion on its own,  
But might be in a tale of ghosts and witches overblown;  
Grose so liked the poem, he just had to find a place,  
Featured in the second volume, now Burns had made the case.

Robert's grueling weekly rides o'er a two-hundred-mile range,  
Took its toll upon his health, which he knew would have to change.  
A foot-walk in Dumfries would do, if he could just be moved,  
And in due course his transfer came, officially approved.

Despite his posting to Dumfries his home was Ellisland,  
So, weekdays Burns would stay in town, a later move being planned.  
His favoured tavern, the old Globe Inn, was where he often stayed,  
And Anna Park, the landlord's niece, worked as a young barmaid.

Well, Anna was a bonnie lass, and Rab had time to spare,  
And as was quite predictable, they had a brief affair.  
At eighteen she was still a maid, her innocence defiled,  
While Jean, the poet's wife, was also carrying his child.

Robert's two wee bairns were born with just nine days between,  
His erstwhile couplings shared with little time twixt Ann and Jean;  
But Jean was most forgiving and agreed she'd raise the twain,  
Her infant son and Anna's Beth, as if both were her ain.

*two  
own*

The landlord of Ellisland offered to end Robert's lease,  
Enabling the poet's family to move then to Dumfries.  
They settled for a modest flat on what is now Bank Street,  
Regrettably where mariners and prostitutes would meet.

With three small rooms and a kitchen, 'twas far from elegant,  
Located in a building we might class a tenement.  
Six months was all they could endure in such congested space,  
The family now comprising six, and growing quite apace.

But Jean and Rob embraced the town's great energy and zest,  
And by its thriving social life were pleasingly impressed.  
Dumfries being such a busy port, Burns' duties had increased,  
But offset by the long commutes that thankfully had ceased.

It was around this time that Robert's muse was in full flight,  
Perhaps to fill a new edition whenever the time seemed right?  
Burns had produced so many works in just a three-year spell,  
A quarter of his legacy, as near as we can tell

He wrote to Nancy frequently, long past their last adieu,  
But she set sail for Jamaica in early '92;  
Her planned reunion with her husband met with cool disdain,  
And though she quickly came back home, they never met again.

An incident of great import took place about that time,  
The seizure of the Rosamond to foil a smuggler's crime.  
Robert played a crucial role in arresting those involved,  
And may deserve much credit for how it was all resolved.

His leadership and bravery were part of the success  
In their taking down the culprits, without a bloody mess.  
The contraband was auctioned off and funded an award,  
As bounty for each exciseman, a well-earned cash reward.

A third Edition of the poems, in seventeen-ninety-three,  
Had been produced by William Creech, but Burns could claim no fee.  
Creech now owned the rights to many early compositions,  
Though Burns had in the meantime penned many new additions.

Dumfries had lacked a public theatre prior to '92,  
The year of the Theatre Royal's much-acclaimed debut.  
Burns enjoyed performances and earned free attendance rights  
By writing public prologues, delivered on opening nights.

One such monologue he penned, the timeless 'Rights of Woman',  
Delivered by Miss Fontenelle, an angel sent from Heaven!  
With elegance the beauty spoke, addressing mostly men,  
Her words resound through centuries, as potent now as then.

It was in this same theatre where Robert risked his job,  
The national anthem, about to play, being challenged by a mob;  
Then 'Liberty' was much in style, and dreams of Shangri La,  
Whose supporters' cri de guerre became the call of 'Ça Ira'!

*(Revolutionary call:  
'It'll be fine!)*

The Anthem then resounded from the stage arena pit,  
The audience rising with respect, while Robert chose to sit;  
His pose, grim-faced, unmoving, hat still firmly on his pate,  
Thumbing his nose at monarchy and the British nation state!

Burns' politics and social views, and causes for which he stood,  
He guarded from his superiors, at least as best he could;  
But this time he'd exposed himself and heard the warning knell,  
'Mend your ways or be dismissed', a caution he'd now heed well.

In May of 1793 came time for a larger yhouse,  
The flat now being too crowded e'en for Burns' 'wee...tim'rous' mouse! (To a Mouse)  
With two children being added, and more yet to be hatched,  
They took the rental on a house, two-stories and detached.

Built of solid sandstone and located on Mill Hole Brae,  
Called Mill Street for a while, then Burns Street as it's known today.  
Robert and his bonnie Jean were so thankful for the space,  
And Jean would live there all her days in comfort, peace and grace.

Soon after moving Burns embarked upon another tour,  
Through Galloway with friend John Syme he'd met some months before.  
It adds little to our story and should not impede its pace,  
Except to say it was the time he wrote the 'Selkirk Grace'.

The friendship mentioned earlier with young Maria Riddell  
Was thriving through late '93, and still going very well.  
But that would end abruptly in a rancorous dispute,  
That brought the Bard dishonour and the pall of disrepute.

Burns had been invited to a social at Friar's Carse,  
With many friends attending, but it ended all in farce;  
The men contrived to cast a skit, Robert playing a villain,  
Enacting Rome's mythic tale, 'Rape of the Sabine Women'.

Unsuspecting, Burns was plied with overmuch libation,  
Before the mock assault that caused such shock and consternation;  
Accused of shameless conduct towards Maria Riddell,  
They cast him rudely out-of-doors, into the pit of Hell.

His breach with the Riddell family included young Maria,  
A banishment that would deny attempts to ever see her.  
It was unjust, he'd never act with such unguarded shame,  
It left him bitter and distraught, what now his vaunted fame?

A letter of apology, admitting deep contrition,  
Was served upon the hostess, but snubbed with cruel derision.  
He shunned the taint of self-reproach for righteous indignation,  
With satire dripping from his quill, in lieu of vindication.

He directed lines of crass rebuke at Maria, once his friend,  
Who'd been so very loyal, yet forsook him in the end.  
The venom of his wrath should well have poisoned all past ties,  
But later they'd reach out and once again become allies.

Another bonnie lass became his focus of obsession,  
Perhaps to fill the void of Maria's lost affection?  
Jean Lorrimer, near half his age, a flaxen-haired young goddess,  
Became the subject of his muse, disguised in rhyme as Chloris.

She was the inspiration for some twenty-four new rhymes,  
Ascribed as fond orations for his Bonnie Jean, oft-times.  
But to question 'were they lovers?' would serve but to belie,  
And obfuscate the answer, however much we try!

Burns became a 'sodger' in seventeen-ninety-five,  
Joining the Dumfries Volunteers, in a recruitment drive.  
This band of civic patriots were sworn to take a stand,  
Should that wee sh\*te Napoleon invade their native land.

The war with France had slashed the country's European trade,  
Cutting back on the extra fees the excisemen were paid.  
This loss of income weighed on Burns and raised the grave concern,  
His living costs now far surpassed the total he could earn.

But fate came to his rescue when his superior fell ill,  
The vacancy being offered Burns, embraced with right good will.  
His pay would more than double in this four-month acting post,  
And speed his rise to greater heights, the goal he wished for most.

Mid-'95 ushered in what we now know was a trend,  
Of ever-worsening illnesses foreshadowing the end.  
By early 1796 the signs were very clear,  
And he himself gave warning to the folks he held most dear.

That year in early July his prognosis was so poor,  
He agreed to try a therapy we'd now call 'kill-or-cure';  
He travelled to the Solway coast for the waters of Brow Well,  
For riding, and immersion in the ocean's frigid swell.

He stayed three weeks despite his feeling more and more unwell,  
But thrilled when asked to dine with once-estranged Maria Riddell.  
He'd failed for long to make his peace, despite his many tries,  
Now both were ill and had to share in tearful last goodbyes.

When once returned to Mill Hole Brae, his strength now almost spent,  
He shuffled up the gradual slope, quivering as he went.  
His poor diminished frame most longed for peace and quiet rest,  
It now was clear his time was short, a brief few days at best.

Jean Armour was just days away from childbirth once again,  
While caring for the man she loved and coping with his pain.  
And in her time of desperate need an angel would appear,  
In the guise of sweet young Jessie Lewars as willing volunteer.

Jessie toiled with selfless zeal attending to the poet,  
While he in turn voiced gratitude as only he could show it.  
*'The brightest jewel in my crown', she surely would have been,  
If he 'were monarch of the globe', then she 'wad be my queen'.*

(O, Wert Thou In  
The Cauld Blast)

Death beckoned July 21<sup>st</sup>, seventeen-ninety-six,  
A few short years from birth to death, just thirty-seven betwixt.  
So much achieved, so short a time, with all its twists and turns,  
From ploughman poet to Scotland's Bard, the Immortal Robert Burns.

His funeral had the semblance of a State-approved event,  
Attended by ten thousand souls expressing their lament.  
Soldiers lined the chosen route, erect and eyes downcast,  
A stately guard of honour for the cortège as it passed.

The mourners paced in solemn step to St. Michael's old churchyard,  
The chosen final resting place of Scotia's timeless Bard.  
They passed close by the poet's house where Jean was giving birth,  
About the time Maxwell, his son, was taking his first breath.

The legacy of Robert Burns will live for evermore,  
For all he has contributed to Scotland's treasured lore.  
He stood for truth and liberty, and an independent mind,  
Integrity, equality and love of humankind.