

## Burns at Brow<sup>1</sup>

Let the sun shine in upon us, my dear young lady;  
he has not long to shine upon me <sup>2</sup>

I wish this evening to discuss with you a period of about fifteen days towards the end of the life of Robert Burns. It is of course too late a period to have influenced his writing, and probably for this reason little is written about it, but I find the period to be helpful in developing my personal view of Burns the man. The talk then will be partly a factual account of the days, how he came to be at Brow and what happened on his return; and part speculation.

Burns' early death has been the cause of much discussion. At first it was common to use his early death as a cautionary tale to warn us:

When e'er to drink you are inclin'd,  
Or cutty-sarks run in your mind, *Tam o' Shanter*, lines 221-223

From an obituary entitled, 'Robert Burns the Scotch Poet', that appeared in a newspaper shortly after his death I would like to cite the following passages:<sup>4</sup>

On the 21st inst [July 1796] died at Dumfries, after a lingering illness (as we before mentioned) Robert Burns who has excited so much interest by the peculiarity of the circumstances under which he came forward to public notice and the genius discovered in his poetical compositions...

His early days were occupied in procuring bread by the labour of his own hands, in the honourable task of cultivating the earth, but his nights were devoted to books and the muse, except when they were wasted in the haunts of village festivity and in the indulgences of the

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<sup>1</sup> In September 1996, following an extensive tour of Scotland, this paper was presented to the Sydney Society for Scottish History in honour of the 200th anniversary of the death of Robert Burns on 21 July 1796. It is very much a personal essay and I make no claim to original research.

<sup>2</sup> See *Infra*, Appendix A, p. 8 and n. 32.

<sup>3</sup> J. Kinsley, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 Vols (Oxford, 1968), Vo. II, p. 564; *cutty-sark*: a short chemise or undergarment.

<sup>4</sup> A full transcription of the obituary appears in, 'Appendix B', at the end of this article. Unfortunately, the date, place and name of the publication in which the obituary appears was not preserved by the then owner of the 1790 edition of, Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (William Gilbert, Great George's Street, Dublin, 1790), which I purchased a number of years ago. I am grateful to Ms Pat Fenech, Fisher Library, University of Sydney, for her research regarding the identification of the precise publication. It must be assumed that the obituary appeared in a local newspaper as it did not appear in *The Times* between 21st July and 2nd August, 1796. Hereafter passages cited from the obituary will be referenced simply as 'Appendix B'.

social bowl, to which the poet was but too immoderately attached in every period of his life...

Such we believe is the character of a man who in his compositions, has discovered the force of native humour, the warmth and tenderness of passion, and the glowing touches of a descriptive pencil — a man who was the pupil of nature, the poet of inspiration, and who possessed in an extraordinary degree the powers and failings of genius. Of the former his works will remain a lasting monument; of the latter, we are afraid that his conduct and his fate afford but too melancholy proofs.<sup>5</sup>

One of his earliest biographers, James Currie, perpetuated this attitude when he wrote that 'he who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape other pollution, ... but let us refrain from the mention of errors over which delicacy and humanity draw the veil'.<sup>6</sup> This gratuitous and unctuous remark has been widely interpreted as suggesting venereal disease as a possible cause of death. In the 1920s there was reconsideration of the view that he had died from the scourges of dissipation. In 1925 Sir James Crichton-Browne published a view that he had been a life long invalid and had eventually died from rheumatic endocarditis.<sup>7</sup> Since then there has been further speculation and conditions which 'could not be excluded' have been suggested are polyarteritis nodosa, or Kussmaul's disease, systemic lupus erythematosus, carcinomatosis, hepatitis, leukaemia and tuberculosis. Additionally, quite a convincing case has been made out for brucellosis or undulant fever, a condition unrecognised in the late eighteenth century. Robert Hindle Fowler made a contribution to the discussion from Australia. A past senior vice-president of the Melbourne Burns Club and a former Director of the Melbourne Science Museum, he supported the brucellosis theory saying that it would account for many of the symptoms displayed by Burns during the last two years of his life. Hindle describes brucellosis as 'a feverish disease that can persist for years, sometimes in phases of remission. It can cause depression, lassitude, loss of appetite, headache and enlargement of the liver.'<sup>8</sup> The manner of Burns' death Fowler asserts, 'attracts a strong presumption of terminal pneumonia'. He goes on to suggest that Burns' condition may have been aggravated by lead poisoning, pointing to the practice of using metallic lead,<sup>9</sup> or its oxide litharge, in the making and subsequent improvement of wine.

Robert T Fitzhugh in his book, *Robert Burns the Man and the Poet*, cites in his Appendix B an opinion by a Dr Stanley Bardwell which quotes

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix B.

<sup>6</sup> J. Currie, *The Works of Robert Burns*, 4 Vols (Edinburgh, 1819), p. 215.

<sup>7</sup> I. McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity: A Life of Robert Burns*, (London, 1995), p. 431.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432.

<sup>9</sup> Lead reduced acidity and helped to dispel cloudiness.

ninety-three contemporary references to Burns' health. He generally supports the diagnosis of rheumatic fever leading to endocarditis, the inflammation of the lining of the heart, probably brought about by his hard work and exposure to the elements as a boy and a young man. In most cases it appears where the heart has previously been damaged by rheumatic fever, and the symptoms of Burns' recurrent illnesses were often consistent with the symptoms of rheumatic fever: prostration, feverishness, malaise and loss of appetite. These symptoms and his later skin hemorrhages weight loss and occasional joint pains could well be attributed to endocarditis. Dr Bardwell concludes that in his opinion:

There is nothing in the record to suggest either venereal disease or the usual stigma of alcoholism. Almost certainly Burns had recurrent attacks of rheumatic fever; bacterial endocarditis may have been present terminally, but not necessarily. If rheumatic heart disease is not granted, then endocarditis as a diagnosis is not justified. Prompt recognition of symptoms, and assessment of the clinical situation would today lead to appropriate treatment with penicillin, or other suitable antibiotics, and probably cortisone or one of its derivatives.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Burns had a long history of illness. His job as an Exciseman kept him out in all weathers riding thirty to forty miles a day. In January of 1796 he had a bout of illness which prevented him from working and he was reduced to half pay. As a result he appears to have struggled back to work, but had to give up. Whatever the eventual verdict by the retro-diagnosticians, his own physician and close personal friend, James Maxwell, diagnosed floating gout, and prescribed sea bathing, and riding and, according to James Barke, mercury and laudanum washed down with port wine to take away the taste.<sup>11</sup> Burns had great faith in Maxwell who had studied medicine in France where he developed republican sentiments and joined the National Guard. In this capacity he attended the execution of Louis XVI, dipping his handkerchief in the executed monarch's blood. On his return to Scotland, Maxwell recommended that Burns should take the waters at Brow Well which is about ten miles south-east of Dumfries, standing on the Solway shore. Burns went to Brow on horseback on 4 July 1796. According to Fitzhugh, Sir James Crichton Browne described Brow Well as being, 'the meanest, shabbiest little spa in all the world'. He continues that,

it consists of three whitewashed cottages; a tank the size of a dining table and lined with red stone, into which through an iron pipe, the

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<sup>10</sup> R.G. Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet* (London and New York, 1971), p. 415.

<sup>11</sup> J. Barke, *Bonnie Jean*, (London, 1959), p. 289; see also his, *Well of the Silent Harp* (London, 1954).

mineral water trickles; an esplanade a score of yards long, of coarse tufted grass; and the pump room, a dilapidated wooden shed, the walls and benches of which are graven over and over again with the initials of those who have sought healing at the well. The country immediately around is flat and uninteresting. Inland there are a few stunted plantations of gnarled oaks and shaggy Scotch firs, which by their bent backs bear witness to the rough usage of the western winds, while in front there is a broad flat, hillocky expanse, studded with bent grass and furze, and ending in the sea- beach, consisting of a mixture of sand and clay known locally as sleetch. This uninviting substance extends for several miles into the Solway, with so slight a declination that the tide at low water slides entirely out of sight and leaves to the eye a barren and cheerless waste. ... On a dull day, with the skies draped in cloud and at low water, a more forlorn and desolate place than the Brow Well — for that is how this spa is named, no one knows how or why — it would be difficult to imagine; but when the sun shines and the skies clear and the tide is in, it becomes a fascinating spot, for a magnificent panorama is disclosed to view. ... Crichton-Browne concludes this passage by referring to Brow as the 'Gethsamane of Robert Burns.'<sup>12</sup>

I visited Brow on 17 August 1996. The water flows into a tank but passes through and does not accumulate. It drains into a little burn. The water, apparently, has a high iron content staining the tank and clouding the burn with a reddish brown tincture. There is a plaque headed, 'Robert Burns and Ruthwell Parish'.<sup>13</sup> There are no buildings in the immediate vicinity other than a group of farm buildings about 500 metres to the west. The coast is about half a kilometre south of the well. We walked through flat deeply rutted country covered with coarse grass, flowering clover, thrift and sea asters. The area now is part of Caerlaverock National Nature Reserve and has world heritage status as a bird sanctuary, it being home to a wide variety of birds including barnacle geese. The tide was low but not out. As it was, one would have had to walk a kilometre for the water to reach one's knees let alone armpits. Burns daily routine would have been controlled by the time and the size of the tides.

There is no doubt, that particularly when overcast, Brow Well provided a sombre setting which would have echoed the mood of Burns during the days he spent there. I wondered as I watched the water trickle through the pipe and gazed across the Solway what had exercised his mind during the fifteen days he spent there. While this is a matter of speculation, it may be aided by his letters and the observations of people who met him at the time. He was concerned about his health of course. We can imagine him anxiously looking

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<sup>12</sup> Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet*, p. 378.

<sup>13</sup> *Infra*, Appendix A.

for signs of improvement as he followed the regimen prescribed by Maxwell. So he wrote to his wife, Jean, from Brow on Thursday, [14 July 1796]:

My Dearest Love,

I delayed writing until I could tell you what effect sea-bathing was likely to produce. It would be injustice to deny that it has eased my pains, and I think it has strengthened me; but my appetite is still extremely bad. No flesh nor fish can I swallow; porridge and milk are the only thing I can taste. I am very happy to hear, by Miss Jess Lewars, that you are well. My very best and kindest compliments to her, and to all the children. I will see you on Sunday,

Your affectionate husband, R. B.<sup>14</sup>

And to James Gracie on Saturday, 16 July 1796:

My Dear Sir,

It would [be] doing high injustice to this place not to acknowledge that my rheumatisms have derived great benefits from it already; but alas! my loss of appetite still continues. I shall not need your kind offer this week, and I return to town the beginning of next week, it not being a tide week. I am detaining a man in burning hurry.

So, God bless you. R.B.<sup>15</sup>

Notwithstanding his attempts to effect a cure, and his eagerness to notice some sign of improvement, he was aware of his impending death. His fears are referred to in several letters of the time. By coincidence, Maria Riddel was also taking the waters at Brow Well and living nearby. When she learned that Burns was also there she sent her carriage for him the day after he arrived, on the Tuesday 5th July. She described his entry to her room:

I was struck with his appearance on entering the room. The stamp of death was imprinted on his features. He seemed already touching the brink of eternity. His first salutation was: "Well, Madam have you any commands for the other world?" I replied, that it seemed a doubtful case which of us should be the sooner, and that I hoped he would yet live to write my epitaph. He looked at my face with an air of great kindness and expressed his concern at seeing me look so ill.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> W. Gunnyman, *The Complete Works of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1872), p. 347.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 349.

<sup>16</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, Vol. III, p. 1546; see also, Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet*, p. 379.

The prospect of death would have stirred thoughts of life after death. What were his beliefs? His friend Willie Nicol once wrote to him as, 'Dear Christless Bobbie',<sup>17</sup> and he had often held up aspects of religion and churchmen to ridicule, but his satires were directed at hypocrisy and barren doctrinal squabbles. He also was friendly with and respected a number of churchmen. He gave a brief statement of his religious beliefs in a letter to Mrs Dunlop dated Sunday evening, 21 June 1789.

I have just heard Mr Kirkpatrick preach a sermon. He is a man famous for his benevolence, and I revere him, but from such ideas of my Creator, good Lord deliver me! Religion, my honoured friend, is surely a simple business, as it equally concerns the ignorant and the learned, the poor and the rich. That there is an incomprehensible great Being to whom I owe my existence, and that He must be intimately acquainted with the operations and progress of the internal machinery, and consequent outward deportment of this creature which He has made — these are, I think, self-evident propositions. That there is a real and eternal distinction between virtue and vice, and consequently, that I am an accountable creature; that from the seeming nature of the human mind, as well as from the evident imperfection, nay positive injustice, in the administration of affairs, both in the natural and moral worlds, there must be a retributive scene of existence beyond the grave, must, I think, be allowed by every one who will give himself a moments reflection. I will go farther, and affirm that, from the sublimity, excellence, and purity of His doctrine and precepts, unparalleled by all the aggregated wisdom and learning of many preceding ages, though to appearance, He himself was the obscurest and most illiterate of our species — therefore Jesus Christ was from God. ... Whatever mitigates the woes or increases the happiness of others, this is my criterion of goodness; and whatever injures society at large or any individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity. ... What think you, madam of my creed? I trust that I have said nothing that will lessen me in the eye of one whose good opinion I value almost next to the approbation of my own mind. R.B.<sup>18</sup>

If he was concerned about the future of his soul, and I do not doubt that such reflections were in his mind, he was also concerned about how he would be remembered by posterity. This concern was also evident in his interview with Maria Riddel who commented:

He shewed great concern about the care of his literary fame, and particularly the publication of his posthumous works. He said he was

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<sup>17</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 296.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p.296.

very well aware that his death would occasion some noise, and that every scrap of his writing would be revived against him to the injury of his future reputation: that letters and verses written with unguarded and improper freedom, and which he earnestly wished to have buried in oblivion, would be handed about by idle vanity or malevolence, when no dread of his resentment would restrain them, or prevent the censures of shrill-tongued malice, or the insidious sarcasms of envy, from pouring forth all their venom to blast his fame. He lamented that he had written many epigrams on persons against whom he entertained no enmity, and whose characters he should be sorry to wound; and many indifferent poetical pieces, which he feared would now, with all their imperfections on their head be thrust upon the world. On this account he deeply regretted having deferred to put his papers into a state of arrangement, as he was now quite incapable of the exertion <sup>19</sup>

He was deeply concerned about his financial affairs. Contrary to some accounts he did not live in poverty nor did he die a pauper. He had improved the fortunes of his family considerably by his work in the Excise. This had enabled him to leave the farm at Ellisland and move to Dumfries, first to rather cramped quarters in what was no doubt appropriately named Stinking Vennel, later to a quite comfortable house in Mill Vennel, now Burns Street. He was intelligent, conscientious very hard working. He was evidently an excellent officer and most importantly he had an influential patron. Had he lived he could have been promoted to a supervisorship which was vacant in Dunblane. At his death his estate, including his library and money owed to him by his brother Gilbert, exceeded £300, but he had few liquid assets. While he received a relatively good salary, he had expenses, — postal expenses stationery and books alone must have been considerable. Jean was evidently a good manager, but they did not save. While he maintained his health they could manage, but when he was unable to work because of illness his salary was reduced by one half, which theoretically went to the payment of his replacement. He wrote to his great friend Alexander Cunningham from Brow, 'Sea-Bathing Quarters', on the 7th July 1796:

Alas! my friend, I fear the voice of the bard will soon be heard among you no more! For these eight or ten months I have been ailing, sometimes bedfast and sometimes not: but these last three months I have been tortured with an excruciating rheumatism which has reduced me to nearly the last stage. You actually would not know me if you saw me. Pale, emaciated, and so feeble as occasionally to need help from my chair — my spirits fled! fled! — but I can no more on the subject, only the medical folks tell me that

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<sup>19</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, Vol. III, p. 1546; see also, Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet*, p. 380.

my last and only chance is bathing and country quarters and riding. The deuce of the matter is this: when an Exciseman is off duty, his salary is reduced to £35 instead of £50. What way, in the name of thrift, shall I maintain myself and keep a horse in Country quarters with a wife and five children at home, on £35 instead of £50. I mention this because I had intended to beg your utmost interest and all the friends you can muster to move our Commiss'srs of Excise to grant me the full salary. I dare say you know them all personally. If they do not grant it me, I must lay my account with an exit truly en poete, if I die not of disease I must perish with hunger.<sup>20</sup>

A footnote in the Nimmo edition reads: 'Mr Cunningham very properly says: "It is truly painful to mention — and with indignation we record it — that the poet's humble request of the continuance of his full salary was not granted!"'. The Commissioners, says Currie, were guilty of no such weakness'.<sup>21</sup> The Excise records in Edinburgh show that Burns received full payment of £6 for the period ended 3rd March 1796. McIntyre says that:

He obviously struggled back to work again after that, because he was paid a further £6 on the 2nd June. The last recorded payment, however, made on the 16th July shows that his salary had once again been halved. The decline in his condition is graphically attested by his signature on the receipts. Still bold and clear in the spring, by July it had become a palsied squiggle.<sup>22</sup>

A further pressing worry was the threat of gaol for debt. He wrote to his cousin James Burness, writer Montrose, from Dumfries on 1st July 1796:

My Dear Cousin,

When you offered me money assistance, little did I think I should want it so soon. A rascal of a haberdasher, to whom I owe a considerable bill, taking it into his head that I am dying, has commenced a process against me, and will infallibly put my emaciated body into jail. Will you be so good as to accommodate me, and that by return of post, with £10? Oh James did you know the pride of my heart, you would feel doubly for me! Alas! I am not used to beg! The worst of it is, my health was coming about finely; you know, and my physician assured me, that melancholy and low spirits are half my disease: guess, then, my horrors since this business began. If I had it settled, I would be, I think, quite well in a manner.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 347.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>22</sup> McIntyre, *A Life of Robert Burns*, p. 392.

<sup>23</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 348.

James Burness did send the money, which was acknowledged with thanks by Jean after the death of her husband. The debt was for a uniform for the Dumfries Volunteers supplied by David Williamson. Burns may well have exaggerated the danger he was in, but there is no doubt the threat preyed on his mind. He also sought money from John Clark, this was in fact no more than the repayment of a favour done by Burns. But Burns despite his distress had the delicacy not to refer to it in his letter.<sup>24</sup>

Burns had contributed about 114 songs to George Thomson for publication in his *Select Scottish Airs*, a series which eventually numbered six volumes. He had indignantly refused any payment for this work.

As to any remuneration, you may think my songs either above or below price: for they shall absolutely be the one or the other. In the honest enthusiasm with which I embark in your undertaking to talk of money, wages, fee, hire and etc., could be downright Sodomy of the Soul! A proof of each of the songs that I compose or amend, I shall receive as a favour.<sup>25</sup>

When the first volume was published in June 1793 containing twenty-five songs from Burns, Thomson sent him a copy enclosing a five pound note: 'I cannot express to you how much I am obliged to you for the exquisite new songs you are sending me. Burns replied: 'I assure you, my dear Sir, that you truly hurt me with your pecuniary parcel; it degrades me in my own eyes'.<sup>26</sup> Thomson did not try again. How difficult then this letter to Thomson must have been to write from 'Brow on the Solway Firth', on 12th July 1796:

After all my boasted independence, curst necessity compels me to implore you for five pounds. A cruel wretch of a haberdasher, to whom I owe an account, taking it into his head that I am dying, has commenced a process, and will infallibly put me in into jail. Do send me that sum, and that by return of post. Forgive me this earnestness but the horrors of a jail have made me half distracted<sup>27</sup>

His health, his expectation of death, his financial pressures and his fear of gaol all preyed on his mind not because of the threat they posed to him directly, but because of the effect they would have on his family. His young family of four children shortly to be added to and his wife were foremost in his thoughts. There is the tender letter to Jean mentioned earlier. To his brother Gilbert he wrote from Brow on 10th July 1796:

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<sup>24</sup> McIntyre, *A Life of Robert Burns*, p. 393.

<sup>25</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 353.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 386.

Dear Brother,

It will be no very pleasing news to you to be told that I am dangerously ill, and not likely to get better. An inveterate rheumatism has reduced me to such a state of debility, and my appetite is so totally gone, that I can scarcely stand on my legs. I have been a week at sea-bathing, and I will continue there or in a friend's house in the country, all the summer. God keep my wife and children: if I am taken from their head, they will be poor indeed. I have contracted one or two serious debts, partly from my illness these many months, partly from too much thoughtlessness as to expense when I came to town, that will cut in too much on the little I leave them in your hands. Remember me to my mother.

Yours, R.B.<sup>28</sup>

Burns also wrote a letter of farewell to John Clarke, concluding it not only with resignation but also with great concern for his wife and young family:

As to my individual self, I am tranquil and would despise myself if I were not; but Burn's poor widow and half a dozen of his dear little ones — helpless orphans — there, I am weak as a woman's tear. ... If I must go, I shall leave a few friends behind me, whom I shall regret while consciousness remains. I know I shall live in their remembrance. Adieu dear Clarke. That I shall ever see you again is, I am afraid, highly improbable. R.B.<sup>29</sup>

According to Maria Riddel, who reported on Burn's visit to her on 5 July 1796 during her sojourn at Brow:

We had a long and serious conversation about his present situation, and the approaching termination of all his earthly prospects. He spoke of his death without any of the ostentation of philosophy, but with firmness as well as feeling — as an event likely to happen very soon, and which gave him concern chiefly from leaving his four sons so young and unprotected, and his wife in so interesting a situation — in hourly expectation of lying-in of a fifth. He mentioned with seeming pride and satisfaction, the promising genius of his eldest son, and the flattering marks of approbation he had received from his teachers, and dwelt particularly on his hopes of that boy's future conduct and merit. His anxiety for his family seemed to hang heavy upon him, and the more perhaps from the reflection that he had not done them all the justice he was so well qualified to do.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>30</sup> Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet*, p. 379.

Maria Riddel referred to the four sons. Burns himself referred to half a dozen of his dear little ones. This is the more accurate account of the household he was to leave behind. It consisted of his wife, Jean, then aged thirty, Robert, ten; Francis Wallace, seven; William Nicol, five; James Glencairn two and Elizabeth, his illegitimate daughter by Ann Park, who was generously taken in by Jean only days before the birth of William Nicol. She was also five years of age. The sixth of the half dozen was of course the child Jean was carrying. His other daughter, Elizabeth, aged twelve years, 'Dear bought Bess', the daughter of Elizabeth Paton, lived with his mother and brother at Mossiel. There was at least one other illegitimate child the daughter of May Cameron, an Edinburgh serving girl.

The thought of his impending death led him to tie up loose ends with his friends. He wrote to Mrs Dunlop, one of his closest correspondents from whom he had sadly become estranged, a farewell letter from Brow on Tuesday, 12 July 1796:

Madam,

I have written you so often, without receiving any answer, that I would not trouble you again, but for the circumstances in which I am. An illness which has long hung about me, in all probability will speedily send me beyond that bourne whence no traveller returns. Your friendship, with which for many years you honoured me, was a friendship dearest to my soul. Your conversation, and especially your correspondence, were at once highly entertaining and instructive. With what pleasure did I break up the seal! The remembrance yet adds one pulse more to my poor palpitating heart. Farewell!!! R.B.<sup>31</sup>

He also wrote an affectionate letter to Johnson with whom he was collaborating on *The Scots Musical Museum*.

How did he spend his time at Brow? The plaque on the site advises that the inn was demolished in 1863. No doubt it was a very basic structure. His eating was confined to porridge and milk. The tides would regulate his day as he underwent his daily ordeal of immersion in the cold waters of the Solway. He saw Maria Riddel twice. He also accepted an invitation to Ruthwell Manse, rather a grand house to take tea with the widow of the late minister. When the minister's daughter, Agnes Craig, went to draw a blind to keep the glare of the sun from the poet's face he said, 'Let the sun shine in upon us, my dear young lady; he has not long to shine upon me.'<sup>32</sup> On another occasion unable to purchase the port wine he was prescribed at the Brow Inn he walked a mile

<sup>31</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 348.

<sup>32</sup> Appendix A (plaque at Brow Well).

to Clarencefield<sup>33</sup> to an Inn where, finding he had no money, he offered to leave as a pledge the seal on his watch. On recognising him, the landlord and his wife refused to accept the seal or any money from the much loved poet.

I reflected during my visit to Brow Well in July 1996 on whether Burns may have visited the Ruthwell Parish Church. I believe it is likely that he did so. It is about the same distance from the Well as Clarencefield, and he visited the Manse. Had he worshipped at the beautiful little church it would explain his invitation to take tea with the minister's widow. Had he done so he may have walked over the ancient Saxon cross which lay buried under the dirt floor of the church since its removal in the Reformation. It was restored in the late nineteenth century to a position inside the church.

Burns' biographers have also speculated on his life at Brow. According to Fitzhugh:

Once at the Brow, removed from his friends and family, almost entirely alone, Burns sat under a Hawthorne tree and saw his strength gradually slip away. Each day he waded out until the cold water came up to the armpits, and then waded back to sit under the Hawthorne tree again and think of his daily more apparent end.<sup>34</sup>

The image of the poet thus evoked, however, does not accord with what we know of his days at Brow. He clearly thought of much more than his impending death, and though weakened by illness, he was also more active than is suggested. He visited people, he walked several miles, he wrote letters. He thought about his family, his past and the future and he still composed his beloved songs. One of the most astonishing aspects of Burns' life is the sheer quantity of his output and he continued to work even at the brink of death. Over fifty of the songs he composed and amended for the Scots Musical Museum were probably the work of the last year of his life. He was also sending songs regularly to Thomson. In the same letter, mentioned previously, of 12 July 1796 from Brow, Burns informs Thomson that:

I do not ask all this gratuitously; for, upon returning health, I hereby promise and engage to furnish you with £5 worth of the neatest song-genius you have seen. I tried my hand on *Rothemurche* this morning. The measure is so difficult that it is impossible to infuse much genius into the lines, they are on the other side.<sup>35</sup>

On the other side he had written the words of, *Fairest Maid on Devon Banks*, his final song composed to what some believe was his favourite air nine days

<sup>33</sup> There is still a public right of way through the fields from Brow Well to Clarencefield.

<sup>34</sup> Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet*, p. 379.

<sup>35</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 386.

before his death. He would have reflected on his early poems, his early loves, the religious politics which so concerned him as a youth. How he was lionised in Edinburgh; his disappointments and triumphs; his loves and his sorrows. He would also have thought of his beloved music, and sougled through many of his favourite melodies. Here in his 'Gethsamane', he would have weighed his life and thought of how he would be treated by posterity. Maria Riddel said that during their meeting at Brow that, 'the conversation was kept up with great evenness and animation on his side. I had seldom seen his mind greater or more collected.'<sup>36</sup>

On Monday afternoon 18 July 1796, he returned to Dumfries in a gig, which Carswell says was 'the first seen in Scotland', lent by a farmer friend, John Clark of Lockerwoods. 'The weather was very rainy, coarse and boistrous',<sup>37</sup> and he was hardly able to stand when he arrived and was put straight to bed. Still, in his weakened condition his thoughts were for his family. His concern for Jean's predicament gave him the strength to write this letter to his father-in-law. It is the last surviving work from his pen. The letter, written from Dumfries on 18 July 1796, is addressed to 'James Armour, Mason, Mauchline:

My Dear Sir,

Do for heaven's sake, send Mrs Armour here immediately. My wife is hourly expecting to be put to bed. Good God! what a situation for her to be in, poor girl, without a friend I returned from sea-bathing quarters to-day, and my medical friends would almost persuade me that I am better but I think and feel that my strength is so gone that the disorder will prove fatal to me,

Your son-in-law, R.B.<sup>38</sup>

He was visited by friends now aware of his desperate condition. 'Findlater and other friends sat for a time at his bedside. One of them, a fellow-Volunteer [in the Dumfries Volunteers], called Gibson could not hold back his tears. Burns smiled at him and said, "John don't let the 'awkward squad' fire over me."<sup>39</sup> He died at five in the morning on 21 July 1796. His funeral was four days later. It was a splendid occasion. The streets were lined with troops from the Angus Fencibles and the Cinque Ports Cavalry both quartered in the town. The church bells tolled. The procession marched to the beat of muffled drums and the strains of Handel's *Dead March* from his

<sup>36</sup> Fitzhugh, *Robert Burns: the Man and the Poet*, p. 380.

<sup>37</sup> C. Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns*, (London, 1951), p. 449.

<sup>38</sup> Gunnyman, *Works of Robert Burns*, p. 349.

<sup>39</sup> McIntyre, *A Life of Robert Burns*, p. 398. The 'awkward squad' were the Dumfries Fusiliers.

Other reference works consulted: J.C. Dick, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (1903); M. Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopaedia* (London, 1959) and Y.H. Stevenson, *Burns and His Bonnie Jean* (Sidney, BC, Canada, 1967).

oratorio, *Saul*. He was buried in the uniform which had been the cause of the process commenced against him. The 'awkward squad' did fire a ragged volley over his grave. The only immediate member of his family to attend was his brother Gilbert. At the time of his funeral his wife, Jean was giving birth to his youngest son whom she named Maxwell after the doctor who had in the space of four days attended the death of her husband and the birth of her son.

Neil Morrison  
Sydney Society for Scottish History

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### APPENDIX A

The following statement is reproduced from the plaque erected at Brow Well:

#### ROBERT BURNS AND RUTHWELL PARISH

Burns was sent to Brow on the advice of his doctor to drink the water of Brow Well (a chalybeate spring) and to bathe in the Solway. Brow at that time was a hamlet of about twelve cottages, one of which was an Inn, used mainly by cattle drovers and by invalids seeking the assumed medicinal properties of the well water.<sup>40</sup> The poet went to Brow on 4 July 1796, wrote a note to John Clark of Locharwoods requesting the loan of a gig for his return journey to Dumfries because, 'getting wet is perdition', and arrived back in Dumfries on the 18th and died on the 21st.

During his stay at Brow, Burns met his old friend Mrs. Walter Riddell, who was also in the vicinity for the sake of her health and who later recalled that his greeting to her was: 'Well madam have you any commands for the other world?' From an invitation to tea at Ruthwell Manse comes another well remembered incident. Agnes Craig, daughter of the Minister, tells of Burns calling himself 'a poor plucked pidgeon' and of how, when she went to pull down a blind to keep the glare of the sun from Robert Burns' face, he said 'Let the sun shine in upon us, my dear young lady; he has not long now to shine upon me'. That scene was captured in a painting by Duncan McKellar now held in the Dick Institute in Kilmarnock. Agnes Craig later married her father's successor, the Reverend Henry Duncan, who became widely known as the founder of the Savings Bank movement. Ruthwell Manse is now a Country house Hotel.

Another event during that fortnight happened when Burns was unable to purchase port wine at the Brow Inn and walked to Clarencefield, about a mile

<sup>40</sup> The Inn was destroyed in 1863, no-one at that time thinking it of any great importance.

away, to the Inn run by Mr and Mrs. Burney. Having no money with him he offered his watch-seal (of which he was very fond) as a pledge but was given his bottle of wine without 'either money or pledge'. He is quoted as having said 'the muckle deil had got into his pouch'.

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## APPENDIX B

The following is the text of a newspaper cutting pasted inside the front cover of the author's copy of: Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (William Gilbert, Great George Street, Dublin, 1790).

### Robert Burns, the Scotch Poet

On the 21st inst. [July 1796] died at Dumfries, after a lingering illness (as we before mentioned) Robert Burns who has excited so much interest by the peculiarity of the circumstances under which he came forward to public notice, and the genius discovered in his poetical compositions.

Burns was literally a ploughman, but neither in that state of servile dependance or degrading ignorance which the situation might bespeak in his country. He had the common education of a Scotch peasant, perhaps something more, and the spirit of independence, which though banished in that country from the scenes of aristocratic influence, is sometimes to be found in a high degree in the humblest classes of society. He had genius starting beyond the obstacles of poverty, and which would have distinguished itself in any situation.

His early days were occupied in procuring bread by the labour of his own hands, in the honourable task of cultivating the earth, but his nights were devoted to books and the muse, except when they were wasted in the haunts of village festivity and the indulgences of the social bowl, to which the poet was but too immoderately attached in every period of his life. He wrote, not with a view to encounter the public eye, nor in the hope to procure fame by his productions, but to give vent to the feelings of his own genius — to indulge the impulse of an ardent and poetical mind. Burns, from that restless activity, which is the peculiar characteristic of his countrymen, proposed to emigrate to Jamaica, in order to seek his fortune by the exertion of those talents of which he felt himself possessed. It was upon this occasion that one of his friends suggested to him the idea of publishing his poems, in order to raise a few pounds to defray the expenses of his passage. The idea was eagerly embraced. A coarse edition of his poems was first published at Dumfries. They were soon noticed by the gentlemen in the neighbourhood. Proofs of such uncommon genius in a situation so humble made the acquaintance of the

author eagerly sought after. His poems found their way to Edinburgh; some extracts, and an account of the author, were inserted in the periodical paper, *The Lounger*, which was at that time in the course of publication.

The voyage of the author was delayed in the hope that a suitable provision would be made for him by the generosity of the public. A subscription was set on foot for a new edition of his works, and was forwarded by the exertions of some of the first characters in Scotland. The subscriptions list contains a greater number of respectable names than almost have ever appeared to any similar production; but as the book was sold at a low price, we have reason to know that the return to the author was not very considerable. Burns was brought to Edinburgh for an few months, every where invited and caressed, and at last one of his patrons procured him the situation of an Exciseman, and an income of somewhat less than £50 per annum. We know not whether any steps were taken to better this humble income. Probably he was not qualified to fill a superior situation to that which was assigned. We know that his manners refused to partake of the polish of genteel society; that his talents were often obscured and finally impaired by excess, and that his private circumstances were embittered by pecuniary distress.

Such we believe, is the character of a man, who in his compositions, has discovered the force of native humour, the warmth and tenderness of passion, and the glowing touches of a descriptive pencil — a man who was the pupil of nature, the poet of inspiration, and who possessed in an extraordinary degree the powers and the failings of genius. Of the former, his works will remain a lasting monument; of the latter, we are afraid that his conduct and his fate afford but too melancholy proofs.

Like his predecessor, Fergusson, though he died at an early age, his mind was previously exhausted; and the apprehensions of a distempered imagination concurred along with indigence and sickness to embitter the last moments of his life. He has left behind a wife, with five infant children, and in the hourly expectation of a sixth, without any resource but what she may hope from public sympathy, and the regard due to the memory of her husband.

Burns, who himself erected a monument to the memory of his unfortunate poetical predecessor, Fergusson, has left in his distressed and helpless family an opportunity to his admirers, and the public, at once to pay a tribute of respect to the genius of th Poet, and to erect a substantial monument of their own beneficence. .... SURREY [?]