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David W. Purdie

“Never Met—and Never Parted”: The Curious Case of Burns and Boswell

Over two hundred years ago—in May 1791—there were published in the city of London the greatest single works of two of Scotland’s literary giants—her national poet and her greatest biographer. Two men of Ayrshire who never met, spoke or corresponded had produced, like two rapid thunderclaps, *Tam o’ Shanter—A Tale*, which appeared in Francis Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland*, followed a few weeks later by *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*

Some time ago I was asked to give a paper to the Boswell Society of Auchinleck on the subject of the physical and mental ailments of that remarkable biographer, advocate and laird, James Boswell. It was while assembling material on the rather prosaic problems of his ingrowing toenails and skin afflictions, together with his more serious—and much more interesting—malarial attacks, manic-depression and (nineteen) bouts of gonorrhoea, that I began to notice with increasing interest, the personality traits, interests and personal friendships which he shared with his contemporary, Burns. I also noted the political allegiances and social class backgrounds which divided them. Ultimately, I found it highly remarkable that they had died, Boswell in 1795, Burns a year later, personally—though not professionally—unknown to each other. I concluded, on the available evidence, that their failure to meet was not by accident but by clear design—and that the design was Boswell’s.

Speculation as to what might have happened had they been brought face to face would be idle and profitless. However, it is not unreasonable to regret, at the very least, that Boswell, with his quasi-photographic memory, his genius for scene setting and for verbatim recording of dialogue, could never fill the one yawning gap in our knowledge of Burns—his apparently electrifying con-

versation. Although its range and quality is repeatedly attested by such direct observers as the philosopher Prof. Dugald Stewart and by the socialite Duchess of Gordon, little of consequence survives. Burns needed a Boswell. Boswell, unfortunately, did not need Burns. To set the scene, let us examine their lives in parallel, taking as our datum points the major removes of the Burns family prior to the poet's arrival in Edinburgh in November 1786—some months after the Boswell family's departure from Edinburgh for London.

In 1759, the year of Burns's birth at Alloway, Boswell, born in 1740, was a final year undergraduate at the University of Edinburgh and as enthusiastic an admirer of that city's actresses as Burns was to be over twenty years later. In that year he was preparing his first prose work, *A View of the Edinburgh Theatre during the Summer Season, 1759*. It is thus perhaps no coincidence that later that year he was sent by his father, Lord Auchinleck, to take Prof. Adam Smith's course of moral philosophy lectures at Glasgow University. Interestingly, Smith was known in his lifetime principally as a philosopher rather than an economist, whereas his great friend, the philosopher David Hume, was then known as an historian. There are distinct parallels in the character of both Lord Auchinleck and William Burns, father of the poet; both were stern Presbyterian moralists who displayed serious concerns over the attractions of the flesh for their elder sons.

In 1766 the Burns family removed from the cottage built by William Burns at Alloway to the farm of Mount Oliphant. In this year Boswell, his celebrated meeting with Johnson three years behind him, returned to Edinburgh after a protracted Grand Tour which had taken him to France, Holland, Germany, Austria and Corsica. In the latter country he had interested himself in the struggle of the Corsican people for independence under Gen. Pasquale Paoli, who was to become Boswell's particular friend during his sojourns in London. Also in this year, Boswell successfully submitted his Latin legal thesis *De supellecte legata*—on the heritability of domestic furniture—to the Faculty of Advocates among whom he was to practice at the Court of Session for twenty years.

In 1777 the Burns family removed from Mount Oliphant to the farm of Lochlie in the parish of Tarbolton, the poet being then in his nineteenth year. Meanwhile, over in Edinburgh Boswell was lamenting the death of his infant son, David, and living for the summer in a house in the great park of The Meadows just south of the Old Town. It was in this park in the late 1740s that William Burns had worked as a landscape gardener after leaving his family's Angus farm on the Braes of Bervie. He was later to depart for Ayrshire where he was to marry and to recommence farming.

In 1784, on the death of William Burns from tuberculosis, Robert, his brother Gilbert and their sisters removed to the farm of Mossgiel near Mauchline where his literary career began. At that point Boswell had been Laird of Auchinleck for two years following the death of his own father. We also find Boswell in this year supporting the successful candidacy of James Hunter Blair

for Lord Provost of Edinburgh. In this he was unwittingly helping Burns since, two years later, Hunter Blair, together with the Earl of Glencairn, was to be among those Ayrshire gentry responsible for the introduction of the poet into Edinburgh high society.

Finally, in 1786 Burns, encouraged by the roar of public applause and by the initial critical approval which followed the July publication of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, decided to abandon his scheme of emigration to Jamaica and prepare a second edition of his poems in the capital. He arrived in November, taking lodgings in the Lawnmarket, scarcely half a mile from the house which, eight months previously, had been vacated by the Boswell family upon their remove to London. Within weeks of his arrival, Burns had been introduced by Sir John Whitefoord, The Earl of Glencairn, and other prominent Ayrshiremen including the Lord Provost to membership of the Canongate Kilwinning masonic lodge, of which Boswell himself was one of the brethren. Both were to remain members for the rest of their lives—and still they did not meet.

Mention of Sir John Whitefoord leads to one of the most remarkable associations between the two men—their passion, unrequited in both cases, for the same woman. In 1786 Burns, strolling in the woods of Ballochmyle near Mauchline, encountered and was severely smitten by the sight of Wilhelmina Alexander. She was the youngest sister of Claud Alexander, a nabob of the East India Company, who had purchased the Ballochmyle estate from Whitefoord when the latter failed in the notorious crash of the Douglas & Heron Bank in Ayr. Burns sent her a grandiloquent letter accompanying his song "The Lass o' Ballochmyle," a letter to which, on her brother's advice—or perhaps command—she did not reply. The song, glorious when sung to its air *Ettrick Banks*, does get rather close to the bone with its promise of Wilhelmina being "strained," that is crushed, nightly, to the bosom of a happy country swain, namely Burns. This would not be at all what Claud Alexander had in mind for his sister, especially as he would be well aware that she had another, and altogether more upmarket admirer in his neighbor laird, James Boswell of Auchinleck. Burns had seen her walking in the woods. Boswell saw her driving in her chaise—but the effect was exactly the same. So taken was Boswell that he kept a separate sub-journal in which he carefully recorded his twenty meetings with her which were to end in 1791. He had by then been a widower for some years but, for whatever reasons, his passion for her did not trespass the limits of platonic friendship. She must have been one determined spinster. Both men were highly attractive to women. Both had dark complexions, handsome features, were brilliant conversationalists and famous authors. Both were highly versed and successful in the seducer's art and both were turned down flat by Wilhelmina. She was to die, unmarried, at the age of ninety in 1843 when, according to a strong but unsubstantiated local Ayrshire tradition, Burns's song and letter were found upon her person. She lives on, nevertheless, in that very song and his praises of the "Bonie Lass" are still

belted out worldwide each January in a thousand locations—and sometimes in several keys. Those who introduce the song should perhaps confide in the audience that, in his admiration, the poet was not alone.

Ten days after he wrote to Miss Alexander enclosing his song, Burns left Ayrshire for Edinburgh. Indeed, he asked her permission—not granted—to include the song in his second or Edinburgh edition which William Creech, his publisher, brought out in April 1787. Burns was the star of the social season in the capital in the winter of 1786-7 when that splendid Edinburgh hostess Alison Cockburn, author of “The Flowers of the Forest,” wrote to a friend, “The whole town is agog with the ploughman poet who...is the very figure of his profession, strong—and *coorse*.”¹ However, as noted above, the Boswells were gone. Edinburgh, for all its attractions as the Age of Enlightenment drew to a close, could not hold Boswell as London could. It was the lure of great company in the Literary Club with such as Reynolds, Burke and Garrick, the hint of political patronage, of practice at the English Bar and the necessity of progressing with the *Life* of the now deceased Johnson that held him like a vice. Burns, from 1788 resident in Dumfriesshire, first as farmer, then as an officer of the Excise, was not infrequently back in his home county. Still there was no meeting. Boswell never appears to have visited Dumfries and Burns was to turn down a suggestion of the editor of the *London Star* newspaper that he remove himself to the capital and take up the profession of journalism. Their paths were not going to cross spontaneously. Someone would have to make a move.

For his part, Boswell was back irregularly at Auchinleck, but no tie based on mutual friendship, literature or even simple curiosity was enough to generate interest in the Ayrshire farmer-poet whose fame was now general in Scotland. Perhaps it was verse itself that held Boswell aloof. Although he clearly enjoyed both poetry and folksong, he seems to have felt that formal creative and scholarly activities in prose and verse were the province, indeed the duty, of the gentry. Burns’s place, he may have felt, was at the plough tail and on the threshing floor. Boswell may also have feared what the poet, famous for his ready and devastating wit, would have made of him as a versifier. For Boswell’s poetical output—and there is much of it—is quite simply appalling. It does not scan, it does not flow, it exhibits hyperbole and bathos by turns—it is indeed a harbinger of the Poetry & Tragedian of Dundee, William McGonagall himself. Here, for example, he salutes the formation of the Edinburgh Defensive Band which was one of the Fencible regiments—the Territorial Army of the day—raised for the home defense while the regular army was largely deployed abroad:

¹*Letters and Memoirs of her Own Life*, by Mrs. A. Rutherford or Cockburn, ed. T. Craig Brown (Edinburgh, 1900), p. 68.

Colonel CROSBIE takes the field
To France and Spain, he will not yield,
But still maintains his high command
At the head of the noble DEFENSIVE BAND
Hark! What a glorious volley
At the word of command of Major Jolly!
 On Heriot's Green
 Now with wonder are seen,
The bravest Warriors in all the land!²

There is more—and worse.

Burns mentions Boswell twice in his works. Boswell being minded to stand for the Ayrshire seat in the parliamentary elections of 1788, Burns speculated in verse about whom the electors should return to the House of Commons in his "Fête Champêtre." This work describes a festival held by William Cunningham of Annbank and Enterkin on succeeding to his grandfather's estates. Burns reviews the three potential candidates thus:

Oh wha will to Saint Stephen's house,
 To do our errands there, man;
O wha will to Saint Stephen's house,
 O' the' merry lads of Ayr, man?
Or will we send a Man-o'-law,
 Or will we send a Sodger?
Or him wha led o'er Scotland a'
 The meikle URSA MAJOR?³

The final lines refer to Boswell's having conducted Samuel Johnson—indeed a great bear of a man—on their celebrated tour of the Highlands and Islands in 1773, described by Boswell in his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, which was published in 1785.

Burns's other poetic mention of the biographer appears in "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable and Honorable, the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons," a protest against an Act of 1786 which removed certain tax advantages from Scotland's distillers. In the tenth stanza we find:

But could I like MONTGOMERIES fight
Or gab like BOSWELL (Burns, I, 187).

²"An Excellent New War Song" was issued by George Reid as a broadside, dated Parliament House, 16 July 1782.

³*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 417. Henceforth Burns.

Montgomerie, Earl of Eglinton, was a professional soldier and is brigaded here with Boswell who, though a civilian, was also a doughty fighter for his clients before the Court of Session.

The only mention of Burns in the Boswell papers is an annotation in Boswell's holograph upon a letter from Burns to Bruce Campbell of Millrig, Boswell's second cousin and agent. Campbell had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Burns's Kilmarnock edition and he and the poet appear to have been firm friends. The letter to Campbell is from Mauchline, dated 13th November 1788, and is in the poet's best Augustan English style. The desire to meet Boswell is both patent and potent:

I inclose you, for Mr Boswell, the Ballad you mentioned; and as I hate sending waste paper or mutilating a sheet, I have filled it up with one or two of my fugitive Pieces that occurred.—Should they procure me the honor of being introduced to Mr Boswell, I shall think they have great merit.— There are few pleasures my late will-o'-wisp character has given me, equal to that of having seen many of the extraordinary men, the Heroes of Wit & Literature in my Country; & as I had the honor of drawing my first breath almost in the same Parish with Mr Boswell, my Pride plumes itself on the connection.— To crouch in the train of mere, stupid Wealth & Greatness, except where the commercial interests of worldly Prudence find their account in it, I hold to be prostitution in any one that is not born a Slave; but to have been acquainted with such a man as Mr Boswell, I would hand down to my Posterity as one of the honors of their Ancestor.—

I am, Sir, your most obedient
& very humble servt
Robt Burns⁴

The Ballad was "The Fête Champêtre" with its reference to Boswell, but neither it nor the fugitive pieces have survived among the Boswell papers.

Although addressed to Campbell, this letter was clearly meant to be read by Boswell himself, whose dislike of the Scots vernacular in speech and prose was well known. It is also carefully pitched to accommodate Boswell's innate sense of social superiority over a tenant farmer and contains the usual Burnsian disclaimer of any servile pursuit of patronage. It was all for naught. Bruce Campbell duly passed the poet's letter to Boswell who annotated it: "Mr Robert Burns the Poet expressing very high sentiments of me." Not high enough, it would seem, to merit an invitation to Auchinleck House. If we discard the preening of the final phrase we are left with the only five words in the entire Boswell archive which directly refer to Burns. It is essential not to dredge them for real or implied meaning, but one or two comments may be

⁴*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 335-6.

made. First of all, Boswell clearly read and did not destroy the letter. Second, he refers to Burns not as "a" poet, but as "the" poet and applied the title of Mr. to him. In the correspondences of the late eighteenth century the application of the title Mr. was not lightly given by the gentry to artisans and the overall impression is of Boswell being rather flattered by this appeal for his acquaintance made by a fellow man of letters.

Whatever it was that repelled Boswell it was powerful and decisive. It is likely that it had much to do with their relative social positions and with their politics. When Burns rented Mossiel farm after the death of his father in 1784, he was the tenant of 160 acres. Two years previously, when Boswell had succeeded to the estate of Auchinleck, not 10 miles from Mossiel, he found himself the owner of 16,000. Yet Burns was no stranger to the tables and patronage of the great. He was ushered into Edinburgh society by Sir John Whitefoord, a fellow aspirant with Boswell to that Ayrshire seat in the Commons, and by Lord Glencairn and James Hunter Blair, both men whom Boswell knew well. One of the poet's greatest friends and admirers was John M'Adam of Craigen-Gillan, who was also a personal friend and neighbor of Boswell.

Perhaps politics itself imposed distance between them. Burns was well known as a radical Whig and remained a devoted follower of Charles James Fox even after the great rupture of 1793 when Edward Burke left the opposition on the outbreak of war with revolutionary France. Devoted to the cause of free speech, secret ballots and parliamentary reform, Burns's letters reveal his support for the egalitarian principles of the French Revolution and for extension of the franchise. Such was his public radicalism that, as an Excise Officer in 1792, he had to be summoned by his patron Robert Graham of Fintry, Excise Commissioner for Scotland, and formally warned to watch his tongue—and his pen. In these times of high political tension and Government alarm, the seditious libel laws were regularly sending men to Botany Bay and sometimes to the gallows for advocating the very political aims which the poet espoused.

Boswell, on the other hand, was a high Tory and a persistent—if unsuccessful—aspirant for the political patronage of Henry Dundas in Edinburgh and William Pitt in London. It is likely that he would have regarded Burns as a political opponent and possibly as a subversive, all the more dangerous because his works had a massive audience among the common people of Scotland—Boswell's many tenants among them. Indeed, given the lengths to which the Government was apparently prepared to go to silence political opposition in the 1790s, it is not impossible that Dundas, or one of his agents, quietly discouraged Boswell from extending any form of support or patronage to the poet. To the grave, a year apart, went their separation.

Whatever its cause, the indifference of Boswell to Burns was to be reversed with the next generation. The biographer's son and heir, Sir Alexander Boswell, Bart., a warm admirer of the poet, convened a meeting in Ayr for the

purpose of forming a committee to erect a suitable monument at his Alloway birthplace. The meeting attracted only one other person, the Rev. Hamilton Paul. Nothing daunted, Boswell and Paul appointed each other Chairman and Secretary of the Committee respectively and set about raising the funds required. So successful were they that, in 1819, Boswell laid the foundation stone and in 1821 he and Robert Burns Jr., the poet's eldest son, stood side by side in the platform party at the inauguration of the Burns Monument. It stands to this day on the northern bank of the river Doon within sight of Burns's birthplace, its nine pillars—for the nine Muses—a fitting memorial to this brave singer. Thus did Alexander redress the indifference of his father, James—a year before he himself was to be slain by James Stuart of Dunearn in what is believed to have been the last formal duel fought in Scotland.

Boswell was the consummate biographer. Burns was one of the greatest lyric poets and song writers ever to lift a pen. They clearly sensed of the genius of each other and at least we who know them both also know that, if they did not meet in life, they have not been parted subsequently in the esteem of scholarship and among those who cherish the graphic imagery and verbal fire-power of the Scots tongue and the English language.⁵

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⁵The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Professor Alex Turnbull, Yale University; Sheriff Neil Gow, Chairman of the Boswell Society of Auchinleck; and Dr. Iain Brown, National Library of Scotland, for their review and comments on the manuscript.