

Cherish the Ladies

Dear Mackintosh Choristers,

I confess up front, I am not a Burns scholar. My starting point for this short address was an article by Dr Pauline Mackay from the magazine section of The Herald newspaper, on Saturday January 23, 2021.

And no, I have not read her new 620-page tome entitled "Burns for Every Day of the Year".

And so, like others who are in need of information and inspiration to augment their ignorance, I turned to Wikipedia and must hope that what I found was reasonably accurate.

So, with my prior apologies to those of you who know Burns inside out, here we go.

There were three well-documented ladies in the Life of Rabbie Burns.

Jean Armour, Mary Campbell aka Highland Mary and Agnes McElhose aka Nancy.

It seems that Oor Rabbie's true love must have been Jean Armour, the girl he wooed and tried to marry not once but twice. Jean was one of 11 children which reminds us large families were the norm.

At Oor Rabbie's first time of asking, even though she was pregnant, Jean Armour was forced to refuse because her father, James Armour said "NO!".

It seems likely James was aware Burns had already sired a daughter to Elizabeth Paton, a sonsie 25-year-old servant at a neighbouring farm, a simple country lassie who subsequently gave birth to Elizabeth "Bess", Burns' first recorded child, later eulogised in his ode: 'Address to an illegitimate Child' where he refers to her as "*the dear bought Bess*".

I think the timeline here is important.

Rabbie was 26 when Bess was born in May 1785 and Elizabeth was 25 so quite old to be unwed for those days. The record shows Rabbie met Jean four months later in September when she was probably 21.

By Rabbie's own hand we know he had been chasing the lassies from age 15 and I will hazard a wild guess that **before** and possibly even **while** he was wooing the spinsters Elizabeth Paton and Jean Armour there may well have been at least a handful of other single lassies and married ladies Rabbie was also courting and had probably impregnated.

So, we can say with some certainty that by 1786 aged 27 and still a bachelor, Rabbie Burns was a well-known womaniser on his home patch, behaviour described by the local

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Kirk as 'incontinence'. And yet, while other women were attracted to Rabbie as moths to his flame, the record shows it was Jean Armour he would cherish above all the others.

So, to get around her father's refusal, Robert then concocted a 'marriage contract', which may have included an exchange of Bibles over running water. Jean's father took this 'unlucky paper' to a lawyer who defaced it, thereby annulling his daughter's common law marriage. Soon after, when his daughter's condition became more evident, James sent her to see out her confinement with a relative in far off Paisley, out of reach of her Rabbie.

"Deserted by his Bonnie Jean" was how Rabbie seems to have interpreted this new situation, leaving him distraught, cast down, lonely, I imagine.

Oh , but no, no - not for long.

Enter, stage left, Highland Mary of Argyle.

Within weeks of being denied Jean Armour, Oor Rabbie has moved on to woo Mary Campbell also called Margaret, a 22-year-old tall, blue-eyed, fair-haired beauty who was in service near Tarbolton where our Bard was putting the finishing touches to his collection of poems and songs song to become 'The Kilmarnock Edition'.

Despite his growing literary fame, Robert had signed over his tenant farm to his brother Gilbert and was making plans to move to Jamaica, his serious intent at that time.

It seems Margaret-Mary was head over heels in love but without a father and family on hand to protect and guide her. Within months of his 'failed marriage' to Jean Armour, this happy couple contracted a second common-law marriage sealed with an exchange of Bibles over running water, Bibles preserved for posterity by Mary's mother.

Originally from Argyle, Highland Mary's family were now based in Greenock and quite wealthy. Mary, now calling herself Mrs Mary Burns, was sent home to settle matters with her family with the intention of starting a new life in Jamaica with *her* Rabbie.

Questions arise in my simple mind.

Was Burns hoping Mary Campbell might bring back a dowry?

Was Highland Mary expecting his child?

We will never know because poor Mary-Margaret died very soon after arriving in Greenock, probably of typhus.

Mired in melancholy for but a few weeks, Rabbie perks up and moves to live in Edinburgh to promote his Kilmarnock Edition and was soon caught up in the social whirl, the new boy in town, "The Fermer Poet", the man whom everyone wants to meet and greet.

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Did women swoon in his arms and tumble into his bed?

I boldly say "Yes!".

In handfuls or hundreds?

On and off, no pun intended, our *Rantin', Rovin' Robin* was sojourned in Edinburgh for nearly two years, say 600 nights, so I suggest he might have bedded nearer a hundred than a handful.

During this social round he met Mrs Agnes McElhose (nee Agnes Craig). Unlike Rabbie who was born in humbler circumstances, 'his Nancy' was from a well-to-do Glasgow family; her father was a Surgeon. Unlike many middle-class girls of her ilk, Agnes was well educated and was already writing poetry when they met. The main point to note here, please, is that Agnes was **not** Robert Burns's usual simple country lassie.

To understand their situation, we must rewind Nancy's life before Rabbie.

When they met, Agnes had already given birth to four children but had been deserted by her drunken and abusive husband, a failed Glasgow lawyer called James McElhose. James immediately high-tailed it to Jamaica, as did many others of his ilk when they hit tough times in Scotland of that era.

Under pressure from her cousin and benefactor Lord Craig, previously a lawyer now a Judge, Agnes had been pressurized into following her man to Jamaica to do her decent Christian best to restore her marriage and free Lord Craig of his moral and financial burden.

When Agnes got to Jamaica, she discovered her errant hubby already had a local slave girl as his 'wife', a 'marriage' sealed by a child. Mr McElhose told Agnes he had no need of her and her interfering and imperious family.

Agnes then returns on the same ship she had sailed out on, her marriage in limbo.

Back in Edinburgh, aged 29, Mrs Agnes McElhose is resigned to living out the remainder of her life in genteel poverty as a single woman under the protection and direction of her stern and sanctimonious cousin, Lord Craig.

Into her life comes the dashing 28-year-old Rabbie Burns, possibly the most eligible bachelor in Edinburgh at that time.

They meet at a poetry reading soiree. Nancy is still a fine, strong and attractive prospect.

At their first encounter Cupid shoots his bolts of passion straight into both hearts, we are told.

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The next morning, Nancy writes to Rabbie, inviting him to visit her for a more intimate tete-a-tete.

Rabbie accepts by return letter then falls heavily from a horse-drawn cabby, severely injuring a leg.

Confined to his lodgings for months on end, Rabbie woos Agnes by letter.

His Nancy responds, morphing to become Clarinda and Sylvander.

Physically unrequited, their passion grows. Letters fly back and forth daily.

These red-hot epistles are carried to and fro by Nancy's maid, a lass called Jenny Clow. As we might expect, Jenny soon succumbs to Rabbie's seductive endearments.

With his leg improved, Rabbie is transported by sedan chair to see his object of desire.

There is no record of hanky-panky but shortly after this visit, Jenny's condition has been revealed and Rabbie is the culprit.

Cupid's quiver is empty. Rabbie's pursuit of Agnes has stalled.

Frustrated, Rabbie makes a tiring ten-hour stagecoach journey back to Glasgow then onwards to his base in Ayrshire to seek out Jean Armour, the mother of his twins from their first romance.

Their flame of passion rekindles. True love blossoms again.

Back again in Edinburgh, Agnes writes, ending their 'affair'.

The Star o' Rabbie Burns is no longer in the ascendancy. With established fame and sufficient wealth, his notion of moving to Jamaica has evaporated. Our Bard quits Edinburgh and returns lock, stock and 'smoking gun' back to his roots to continue his writing, intending to become a Gentleman Farmer.

Jean Armour again.

The year is 1788. In Ayrshire, Rabbie is the local hero. He is 29 and Jean is 23, expecting what will be a second set of twins.

With James Armour's blessing, it is agreed that at Rabbie's second time of asking, the couple may marry. The record shows this happy event takes place a mere six weeks after his dismissal letter from Mrs Agnes Mcelhose.

During their 8 years of marriage, Jean births five more children, making nine in total. Sadly, only three of these legitimate children survive to become adults.

Throughout their entire marriage, Rabbie is unreformed, still chasing the lassies, broadcasting his seed.

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Indeed, a few days before the birth of her final child, Rabbie brings Jean a newly born infant, his love child by Anna Park, a local barmaid at the Globe Tavern in Dumfries, an establishment owned by her mother. The record hints that Anna may have died in childbirth. His Bonnie Jean accepts this foundling child and raises it as her own.

Here I offer a particular insight for your consideration.

It is November 1791, three years after Jean and Rabbie marry. They are in Dumfries where he is an exciseman by day, working on his song collection and corresponding with notable figures from around the world.

His works are selling well, and his star is rising again.

Mrs Agnes Mcelhose writes to Rabbie about Jenny Clow.

Her censorious letter is long and written in a pretentious, tongue-twisting style.

Here is a snippet from the Wikipedia entry:

"to all appearances Jenny Clow is at this moment dying. Obligated, from all the symptoms of a rapid decay, to quit her service, she is gone to a room almost without common necessaries, untended and un-mourned. In circumstances so distressing, to whom can she so naturally look for aid as to the father of her child, the man for whose sake she has suffered many a sad and anxious night, shut from the world, with no other companions than guilt and solitude? You have now an opportunity to evince you indeed possess those fine feelings you have delineated, so as to claim the just admiration of your country. I am convinced I need add nothing farther to persuade you to act as every consideration of humanity must dictate."

The Wikipedia account goes on to tell, that Rabbie directed his wife Jean to send a messenger to Jenny Clow with a gift of 5/- which, in today's world may amount to as much as £350, according to Google.

To summarise:

The official record shows that Robert Burns fathered 12 children by 4 different women.

Were there other children not recorded?

I boldly say, "Almost certainly!"

So, dear choristers, I repeat my earlier questions:

Did Rabbie Burns 'Cherish his Lassies?'

Or, was he a reckless and selfish womaniser out to satisfy his lust at any cost?

You must decide for yourselves. **My** canter through Rabbie's love life is at an end.

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It is now my duty and pleasure to ask our Mackintosh Gentlemen to please raise your glasses and join me in a toast to our very own amazing and wonderfully tuneful lassies:

To Our Mackintosh Lassies!

"Our Mackintosh Lassies!"