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Robert Burns and the  
Scotch Excise Board

By  
James Adams



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ROBERT BURNS  
AND THE  
SCOTCH EXCISE BOARD.

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# ROBERT BURNS

AND

## SCOTCH EXCISE BOARD.

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Was Burns ever reprimanded, suspended, or dismissed by the Board of Excise? Nine-tenths of fairly well-informed persons will answer "Yes," so commonly is the alleged fact assumed. But it will be added that there is some mystery as to the form of the punishment, and of the fault for which it was inflicted; the latter probably drunkenness, irreligion, indecent life, disloyalty, or neglect of duty. Friends of Burns grieve that such a scandal, said to have been *officially recorded*, should dog the memory of Burns.

*Ala. v. Burns*

I never believed in this tradition, because Mr Findlater, the immediate superior of Burns, was a patient and friend of my father, and he often assured my father that Burns was never "faulted" for *any cause*, had never been absent or unfit for duty—except once when disabled by his horse falling with him, or during the rheumatic fever that was the beginning and end of his fatal illness. Mr Findlater discussed many other imputations, with the result of impressing on my father a conviction that Burns was a man "much misunderstood"—a conviction transmitted to and abiding with me, and I, as a playmate of Findlater's grandchildren, have treasured all gossip derived from such a source. For it cannot be too strongly borne in mind that Mr Findlater was a highly regarded official; that from the hour Burns entered the Excise till the day of his death he was under observation and on terms of friendly intercourse with that official; and that any expression of censure from the Board of Excise could only be conveyed through Mr Findlater. What, then, is the *fama* I purpose to refute? Even this, that for discreditable conduct Burns was censured and dismissed from employment, and that the deliverance of the Scotch Board of Excise effectively

bars any defence attempted by his friends against scandals which affirm that Burns was not a reputable member of society. Surely if this *fama* is dispersed, the achievement should stimulate many half-hearted friends of the poet to tackle, with abundant evidence that is freely accessible, and to disprove, many other scandals imputed, which dog his fair fame!

The origin of the *fama* clearly proceeded from Burns himself, who in December, 1792, wrote to Mr Graham of Fintry, one of the five Commissioners who formed the Board of Excise, that he was "surprised, confounded, and distressed" because of a hint he had got, that the Board was going to inquire into his political conduct as being "suspected of disloyalty to Government." Burns anticipated any inquiry by making a clean breast of his opinions. Mr Graham, it is *believed*, showed this letter to his colleagues, who were evidently satisfied that no inquiry was needed, and *no inquiry was made*, nor was any official notice taken of the incident. But Burns was greatly frightened, chattered over the matter, and thereby started a rumour which, like the three black crows, became "something as black, sir, as a crow;" for he (in January, 1793) wrote to his universally respected friend Mrs Dunlop with reference to his prospects in the Excise—"I cannot possibly be settled as supervisor for several years. I must wait the rotation of the list, and there are 20 names before mine. Besides, some *envious, malicious devil* has raised a demur on my political principles. . . . I have set henceforth a seal on my lips as to these unlucky politics," &c., &c. To quiet reports he wrote to Mr Erskine of Mar—"You have been misinformed as to my dismissal from the Excise. I am still in the service. . . ." From such meagre data biographers and commentators have raised the mischievous superstructure that has existed till the present moment.

Cromek, in a note to an early edition of Currie's, writes—"In consequence of the poet's freedom of remark on public measures, maliciously misrepresented to the Board of Excise, he was represented as *actually dismissed* from his office. The report induced Mr Erskine of Mar [a noted Whig] to propose a subscription in his

favour, which was refused by the Bard with that elevation of sentiment," &c., &c. Allan Cunningham, always prompt to assume evil, writes as if he had acted as the clerk of the Board, while Chambers, Scott Douglas, and others up to A. Smith, have in the indexes to their writings duly chronicled "the Board of Excise Reprimand," expatiating in their text on the inexact form of the investigation, censure, or punishment. But it was by J. G. Lockhart that the *fuma*, which had become faint, was resuscitated and made substantial; because he was a high priest of Torydom for many years, and therefore was assumed to be confidentially inspired anent the official acts of "the stately Toryism" prevailing the society and political magnates of Dumfries, amidst whom Burns followed his vocation. Lockhart assumed [Life of Burns, 1828] what had only been dubiously surmised, and wrote — "The exact result of the *Excise Board Investigation* is hidden, as has been said above, in obscurity; nor is it at all likely that the cloud will be withdrawn hereafter. A general impression appears to have gone forth that the affair terminated in something which Burns himself considered as tantamount to the destruction of all hopes of future promotion in his profession, and it has been insinuated by almost every one of his biographers that the crushing of these hopes operated unhappily, even fatally, on the tone of his mind, and, in consequence on the habits of his life. In a word, the early death of Burns has been (by implication at least) ascribed mainly to the circumstance in question. Even Sir Walter Scott has distinctly intimated his acquiescence in this prevalent notion." Here Sir Walter is quoted, and Lockhart continues:—"Whatever the rebuke of the Excise Board amounted to, Burns was admonished, and told it was his business to act, not to think." . . . In whatever language the censure was clothed, the Excise Board did nothing from which Burns had any cause to suppose that his hopes of ultimate promotion were extinct. Nay, if he had taken up such a notion rightly or erroneously, Mr Findlater, who had him constantly under his eye, and who enjoyed then, as he still enjoys, the

utmost confidence of the Board, must have known the fact to be so. Such, I cannot help thinking, is the fair view of the case." But such, I think, is a very unfair and altogether perverted view, which has helped to form and mislead the minds of others, and to deter from independent inquiry. From whence did Lockhart get the expressions, "the investigation," "the reprimand," "the rebuke," "the censure," and "he was admonished"? Lockhart drives home these expressions by adding—"It appears that Burns being *guilty unquestionably of great indiscretion and indecorum both of word and deed, was admonished.*" [Where did it so appear?] "On the whole, I am of opinion that the Excise Board have been dealt with harshly when men of eminence have talked of their conduct to Burns as affixing disgrace to them." And with much more to the same effect Lockhart's *quasi*-inspired deliverance stands on record. His narrative shows that the action of the Board—its *supposed* action, I interpolate—hurried Burns, in the opinion of Sir Walter Scott and many others, "precipitately into those excesses (?) which shadowed his life;" while Allan Cunningham holds that "Burns's letter to Mr Erskine of Mar's covers the Board of Excise and the British Government of that day with eternal shame." What a strangely-constituted mind was that of Allan Cunningham! I have elsewhere, in "Burns's Chloris," cited instances of his disposition to invent facts, and base judgments upon them, as a peculiarity of mind that claims much of our charity when forming a judgment upon *him*.

It is tedious to give passages from the writers who have commented on the reprimand tradition. I have given the gist of their conclusions. The "cloud of mystery," as Lockhart termed it, had been dissipating at the period that he so effectively regenerated it. How it will be dissipated I shall now demonstrate.

About 40 years back the Scotch Board of Excise was merged in, or transferred to, that of England, and a mass of old books and papers was sent to London and lodged in the new wing of Somerset House. The collection was practically rubbish, and preparatory to it being cut up and sold for waste paper, precaution was taken for

the preservation of anything likely to be of value or useful for after-reference. An officer of position was deputed, with a general mandate, to superintend the men employed. That officer was Mr J. Macfadzean, at one time Collector of Customs, Glasgow, now for many years retired. He knew the existing tradition, and conducted a very careful search for any reference to Burns. He was successful, and discovered the Register in which Burns is minuted as a revenue official; that in which his "official character" is recorded; that which records the minutes of the Board; the Censures and Penalties inflicted on officers during the period of Burns's service; that in which Burns is minuted for promotion, and elevated to the list of Examiners, together with a complete list of all the officers of "the Dumfries Collection" of 1791, then under the control of Collector Mitchell, a gentleman whose name appears in several of the poet's letters. Mr Macfadzean made literal transcripts of this "treasure-trove," an act for which his name should be borne in kindly remembrance by all who value the character of our greatest Scotchman. Mr Macfadzean's excerpts occupy eight pages of large folio--now lying before me--and he has kindly--for "a fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind"--explained to me their general nature and special significance, and permitted me to make a "*judicious*" use of them, carefully suppressing names.

In the present connection, the most important of these registers is that in which all Censures and Penalties are recorded; and "the absence of Burns's name from this Register proves conclusively," Mr Macfadzean explains, "that Burns was *never censured by the Board*, not even in the mildest form in which they were in the habit of expressing their sense of what is termed 'trivial faults.' It may therefore be safely averred, and my words will not be disputed by any revenue officer of experience, that none but painstaking, careful, steady officers could or practically did avoid what are termed 'trivial faults;'" and Mr Macfadzean adds--"Much nonsense has been talked and written about Burns and his drinking habits, for if they had been at all, or *in any way approaching what has been imputed*, it would have been impossible, *quite impossible*

that he could have escaped censure, suspension, or discharge; for once convicted there was no mercy, no mercy."

To show the liability of being caught in "trivial faults," Mr Macfadzean explains that all officers acted under a code of instructions, contained in a huge volume of 939 pages, rivalling in size a big ha' Bible, and comprising references to everything excisable, and it would be difficult to name an article that was not excisable in the days preceding Free Trade. At same time the discipline and surveillance to which the officers were subjected were severe and comprehensive. All the revenue officers in Scotland were alphabetically registered in a list that gave the name, age, number of his family, when appointed, to what district, division, and duty assigned, and how long in the service till date of being "struck off" by "suspension," "discharge," or "death," as the case might be. Opposite each name a ruled line led to the "character" column, which had limited space for a brief marginal note, in which was summed up, with stern and often amusing brevity, the "character" of the officer. These decisive summaries of character were made with inimitable candour, and emphatically with no forbearance to any sinner who had a weak side to a bottle. A tendency to *tippling* was *invariably recorded*. I will give extracts at random from this interesting Register, so all important in its bearing on Burns's *habits*. I say "at random," because of their number and variety, which touch on every ill or weakness that flesh is heir to. Thus of one officer it is written "once a good officer, but now tipples;" another is "a lazy supervisor much given to his bottle;" another is "a trifling officer—drinks;" another is succinctly "a drunken creature." And this course of plain speaking is followed throughout, and applied with "no mercy, no mercy." Thus *A* is "but indifferent;" *B* has "a bee in his bonnet;" *C* is "middling;" *D* is "a bad moral character;" *E* "a conceited, trifling officer;" *F* "slow, needs spurring;" *G* a "good officer, but insolent;" *H* is "a gentleman and a scholar," but of his qualities as a "gauger" there is silence, *perhaps significant*; *I* is "self-opinionative;" *K* "has a farm and attends to it more than to the

revenue;" *L* is "active, and much for his own interests;" *M* is "willing to learn;" *N* is "meddling"—my readers cannot grudge the space I am giving to these, evidently carefully considered, *judgments*, which glaze over no blemish, and have so very special bearing on my text; *O* is "sensible, lame of a leg, and blind of an eye;" *P* is "a good officer, but *suspected* by his neighbours;" *Q* is "a good officer, *were he in another county*;" *R* "a good officer, *but has friends traders*." As coming events usually cast their shadows before it is a fair inference that *P*, *Q*, and *R*, as early as conditions permitted, got marching orders to other localities, where they were kept apart from "neighbours" and friends who chanced to be "traders;" *S* is "a suspicious character"—does this mean suspicious of others, or suspected by others? *T* is "a simple man—drinks," and, as may be inferred, has no "good or ill in him aye;" *U* is "a good officer, but courts popularity;" *V* "can do middling, deals in the marvellous, needs looking after;" *W* is "a confused bad officer;" *X* is "but lame in business;" *Y* is "a blunderer." How these officers were kept up to the mark, by censures, *duty intimated*, and by punishments is illustrated by some records:—*AB* is "*suspended* three months for giving too much weight in candles;" *BC* is "*struck off* for being below when it was his watch on deck;" *CD* "is *suspended three months* for not swearing his tanners properly." I am dubious what this offence means, but I do not think that it means "swearing" *at* the tanners. *DE* had not profited by former mercy, and is now pilloried for ever, as "*once suspended, and discharged* for drunken frolics and neglect of duty, again *discharged* for *do.*;" *EF* is "lax in duty," and is "*suspended three months* for shameful allowances in malt, ales, candles, &c.;" *FG* is "*discharged* for neglect of duty and seizing goods out of shops for himself." I suspect this had been a case of compulsory blackmailing. *GH* is "*discharged* for running off with the king's money." Deserving men are not wanting good records. For *AI* is commended as "an active pointed man, makes seizures, and reports detections;" *B?* is "a decent, modest man, does

his business with discretion;" C3 is "a rattling, slaving, good officer, keeps his officers to their duty;" D4 "a distinct good man, behaves as a gentleman and good officer."

To come back to Burns and his record—It is minuted that he was appointed on 28th July, 1790, to the Dumfries third division, called the Tobacco division; and on 26th April he was placed on Dumfries first division at his own request, and it was his last division, and involved much heavier and more responsible duties.

From the list of "character" and "censure" records I have given, it is very evident that the revenue officers stood in slippery places, insecure alike under sharp inspection of superiors and vengeful observation of small traders and smugglers, who had suffered seizures or fines; and who, as their opportunity came round, could indicate by direct accusation, or secret information, an officer given to "tippling" habits, drunken frolics, blunders, remissness in duty, for any or every fault, however trivial, that made them amenable to censure.

But *no charge exists* against Burns, whose conduct throughout avoided "spurring" to his unpopular *duty*, or to reproach for merciless consideration of poor traders over whom he was "drest in a little brief authority." His conduct and progress in his new employment were indeed *beyond that of his brother officers*.

Carlyle, the most able analyst of Burns's character, speaks of him as one who in any station of life—king, legislator, or merchant—would show as "a man among men," and speedily rise head and shoulders above his fellows. Let us test this estimate by tracing the progress of Burns as a mere "gauger," a humble revenue officer of the "rank and file," where at first he encountered misgivings, as is evident from the sobriquet, "the poet," attached to him in the first "character" list, drawn up within three months after he entered on duty. He is there registered as 29 years old, with a family of six, and opposite his name, in the "character" column, there is the entry, "Never tried a pret," significant of doubt, followed by an after interlineation, significant of pleased surprise, "Turns out well." He was speedily trans-

ferred from the simple "tobacco foot walk" to the important and arduous duties of a district, technically called one of "14 rides," comprising 10 parishes, with distances apart of fully 15 miles; and assuredly these "rides" tried the poet in more ways than his superiors meant, for they averaged 200 miles a week, or from 30 to 40 miles every day. And it was while occupied on these solitary rides, communing with his own heart and with Nature, that many of his immortal poems were composed, and many admirable prose compositions blocked out, which are found in his correspondence. But it was only after the scrupulous discharge of his duty, only after the toil of a day of monotonous drudgery in heat, cold, or wet, and after a dinner consisting often of a bit of bread and cheese—which, nevertheless, contented him—that he had leisure (*sic?*) to rest, and rock himself in his coarse wooden chair, before committing to paper his day's musings and transcribing copies of his poems for the gratification of numerous greedy applicants and admirers. The time occupied in exigent official duty, and the physical labour of transcribing the numberless writings still floating round the world and selling above their weight in gold, should demonstrate to the least reflecting how impossible it was for him to indulge in drinking habits; while his firm, bold handwriting shows no traces of infirmity from bodily excesses. He determined soon after beginning duty to reach the rank of Supervisor, which would ensure a sufficing competence, leisure for literature, relief from unceasing drudgery, and an elevated social position. But the prospect seemed remote, and he somewhat sadly corrected a friend for addressing to him a letter superscribed "Supervisor," because, as he observed, he not only did not possess the coveted title, but its attainment was very doubtful. To qualify himself he must learn certain branches of *practical* mathematics or physics, and acquire such experience as could pass him through an examination. *Then* he would rank as "Examiner," and thereafter, if life was spared, a supervisorship would be a matter of rotation after his seniors on the list and on the chances of vacancies. In this connection he

wrote to Dr Moore, February, 1791 :—" As to private means, I am going on, a mighty tax-gatherer before the Lord, as I have lately had the interest [not interest, but the ability] to get myself ranked on the list of Excise as supervisor. I am not yet employed as such, *but in a few years* I shall fall into the file of supervisorship by *seniority*." He worked with a will, and within six months of entering on the service, viz., on 27th January, 1791, he passed his examination, and was raised from the rank and file to the list of "Examiners," which is the probationary stage of Supervisor. So creditable, therefore, was his conduct and progress, that on analysing the list of Examiners, I find the names of 39 persons aged up to 53 years, of whom as many as 29 had been from 16 to 20 years—the larger number nearing the latter point, and seven who had been above 20 years—in "the rank and file." Thus speedily—within six months—had Burns "risen head and shoulders above his fellows." After this stage, further promotion was possible only through chance vacancies, arising from deaths, promotion, or "struck offs," and Burns therefore remained on the list of Supervisors *in relents* till his death, and the word "dead" is entered in a column which would otherwise have recorded his promotion to a supervisorship. And such is the irony of Fate, as pointed out by Mr Macfadzean, that had the "grim King of Terrors" delayed his visit for only a few months, Burns would, on 12th January (the customary date), 1797, have been promoted not only to the so envied office of full Supervisor, but, further, to the District of Dunblane, a part of the country in which he had long desired to reside. Several of his seniors on the list of excisemen had been "struck off," and among them that individual who immediately preceded Burns, on whose death his immediate junior on the list became supervisor of Dunblane.

There is much unavoidable sadness when reflecting on this close. But there is none in following Burns's efforts. "'Tis not in mortals to command success; they may do more—they may deserve it." I find in the next "character" list, three years after the time

he was "tryed," and found to "turn out well," the entry is—"The Poet does pretty well," and this character is recorded soon after the time when by common report and by Lockhart's statement he was "found unquestionably guilty of great indiscretion and indecorum both of word and deed, and was admonished." But, as I have shown, there is not a trace of dispraise or a hint of even a "trivial fault" in the Register of Censures, where they were invariably minuted, and the official "character" ranks with that of any other. It is a character of commendation with no drawback.

Conjectures have been hazarded, in lack of direct evidence, as to "what" induced Collector Mitchell to give Burns a friendly hint that his outspokenness might cause trouble. The dominant political class—the Tories—have been held responsible. When to this imputation is added the fact that, while literally on his death-bed, Burns' little salary of £70 was reduced by one-half, there is good reason for red faces in "stately Torydom" and ireful faces among Liberals. Every generous heart must suffer a rebound when that letter is read, written by poor Burns on 12th July, exactly nine days before his death, in which he implores a friend to use influence with the Commissioners to permit his salary to remain, for the sake of his unprovided wife, then peculiarly helpless, and his helpless little ones, whose position, he declared, was "half his complaint." The appeal did reach the Board, but Mr Graham, no more than his colleagues, could override a positive regulation in use during the preceding two years, which reduced salaries one half "while off duty." But Mr Graham proposed a subscription, failing in which he sent immediately—*i.e.*, July 15—a letter and a private donation of £5. This fact Scott Douglas discredits, as Mr Graham's cheque was not among the poet's papers. But at this moment Burns was verging on unconsciousness, his very hours numbered, and neither himself nor his wife fit to deal with cheques. Besides, the known condition of the dying man's household makes it probable that bank notes were sent. Be this as it may, the entire pitifully tragic circumstances attaching

to Burns's deathbed have intensified feelings evoked on all sides, and Torydom has suffered much in the opinion of Scotchmen. For that result, more blame is due to Lockhart than to any other man, for Conservatives have naturally a difficulty in repudiating assertions from a seemingly inspired source, so identified was Lockhart with Toryism. Therefore, Torydom has suffered silently, but unjustly, in my opinion, and I cannot but sympathise with it while smarting under the stigma.

So the struck eagle stretch'd upon the plain,  
No more through rolling clouds to soar again,  
View'd his own feather on the fatal dart  
And wing'd the shaft that quiver'd in his heart;  
Keen was the pang, but keener 'twas to feel  
He nursed the pinion that impelled the steel.

Because of Lockhart's truly loyal service otherwise in all that pertains to Burns, I strive to think of him as misled while furbishing up and reanimating the rusty old tradition and expatiating on its imputed fatal consequences. And in a forgiving mood I wrote, in the *Burns Chronicle* for 1834—"In my opinion, Lockhart is only culpable in believing, and without inquiry propagating, positive inventions, or fictitious facts, chiefly of Allan Cunningham's forging." I did this because Mr R. C. Hall, of Liverpool, who published his father's personal reminiscences of Burns in the *Burns Chronicle* for 1893, tells us that his father felt so strongly indignant that he could never speak of Lockhart but "as that blackguard, Lockhart!" How this reprimand tradition rose, spread, and was propagated, I have sufficiently explained, but a guess only can be offered regarding the prime mover. I have little doubt it was due mainly to unguardedness of speech in Burns, who was impulsive, and in some moods inaccessible to, and resentful of, advice. It could never have occurred to him that his first duty as a Government official was "to act, not to think." He spoke "ram-stam" on any subject on which he felt, and "at the beginning of the French Revolution" he admits that he felt and spoke strongly. Indeed, he crystallised his thoughts at that period in his imperishable poem, "Is there for honest poverty, wha' hangs his head and a' that." And he tells us

that he "kept that poem by him for some time" before parting with it. These thoughts were to him as instinctive as was the breathing of air or the taking of food, and no doubt he often expressed them. He did not, sufficiently for his own interests, realise that Dumfries, with all its surroundings, comprised a community pervaded with high Tory principles and belief in "the right divine" of kings, and the duty of submission to, and prayer for, "all placed in authority over us." And when he got the private and altogether friendly hint from Collector Mitchell, that his "outspokenness" might cause doubts of his loyalty to the Government, he was stunned. He realised in exaggerated apprehension the consequences suggested, and this all the more because he really was thoroughly loyal to the British Constitution, and that with an intelligent consideration that would be creditable to Tory and Radical alike. But he was hurt by the suggestion and the apprehended consequences, and, as was his wont when hurt, he cried loudly. He talked and wrote hurriedly to his friends, declaring his loyalty, and affirming that the imputed allegation, "whatever villain has made it, is a lie." He evidently suspected some "envious, malicious devil" of an informer, as I infer from the allusions he makes at this period to execrable informers and the misery they cause, and he almost indicates one person who, he says, "was known as a smuggler," and who had suffered through the official actions of Burns. But he did not suspect "political" or "religious" enemies, although in the latter connection there have been some surmises. That Lockhart is also largely responsible for handing down an imputation that Burns was a scoffer at religion, and disregarded morality, is clearly shown in an admirable booklet, "Robert Burns, by a Scotchwoman" (M. S. Gairdner, 1887). The authoress, "with small blame to Lockhart," makes it easily understood that Lockhart was misled by a party in the Scottish Presbyterian Church, some individuals of which were implicated in such "profane rhymes" as "The Holy Fair" and "Holy Willie's Prayer," and tried to blunt the edge of sarcasm so galling as that of Burns by assuming

that the Poet's attacks were levelled at religion itself. But Burns always carefully discriminated between the "religion" of fanatics and hypocrites and the "religion" of Christianity. In a rhyming letter to a clergyman friend, he says:—

God knows, I'm no the thing I should be,  
Nor am I even the thing I could be,  
But twenty times I rather would be  
    An Atheist clean,  
Than *under Gospel colours* hid be,  
    Just for a screen.

    . . . . .  
All hail Religion! maid divine!  
Pardon a muse sae mean as mine,  
Who in her rough imperfect line  
    Thus daurs to name thee.  
To stigmatise *false friends* of thine  
    Can ne'er defame *thee*.

Those who would look more closely into the church scandals involving Burns will find full and authoritative details in an able pamphlet, *privately printed*, called—"Burns and the Ayrshire Moderates ('Aliquanto Latior'), 1883." For at this time there was strong feeling between "Auld Lights" and "New Lights," or congregations of the "Narrow" Church and "Broad" Church, and he had long espoused the latter and had castigated, in "Holy Willie," with a terrible castigation, the views imputed to the Narrow Church. I think with Burns, some "envious" person, jealous of his head-and-neck advancement in the Excise, had been covertly casting stones, using indifferently religious or political missiles, preferably the latter. But Burns's exaggerated fright was so speedily allayed that within a few weeks or days he evidently thought it unworthy of further mention, as I think it now should be except as a phantasma, like that of the Giant Spectre of the Brocken, due to the image of the observer (Lockhart *et sic genus*) reflected on a mass of vapour. Therefore I say "let Whig and Tory all agree" that henceforward this tradition is only to be spoken of as one of the many misrepresentations through which Burns is "a man much misunderstood."

Having demonstrated the unreal basis of a scandal that has helped other scandals affecting Burns, I trust that few will require to be

reminded that the space of time I have dealt with is that of the last six years of Burns's life. That this period was passed in Dumfries in an exacting, arduous employment, from which he was never absent for even one hour—that it was passed under continuous and rigorous official surveillance—a surveillance that in its unbending procedure registered in permanent record even what were termed “trivial faults”—that not a single instance is recorded even of a fault which might be condoned, although “no mercy, no mercy” could hinder the original record. And yet, this period of Burns's life is that which, according to his detractors, was passed “openly wallowing,” “naked but not ashamed,” in habitual drunkenness, in debased and debasing society. That he did not, could not, dared not do so, is the calm judgment of Collector Macfadzean, than whom no man can be cited better qualified to deal judicially with the official record of the last six years of Burns's life. No means of screening from the official eye even trivial faults existed, and Collector Macfadzean pronounces that it is impossible—“impossible”—that Burns's habits could be, or could approach, what is represented.

That Burns's society, because of his attractive conversation, was sought for after business hours is a matter of notoriety, and that he was importuned and beset to give reluctantly to his admirers “slices of his constitution,” as he regretfully described his occasional late hours in festive company, and he—often protestingly—participated with the clergy, county gentry, and upper-class farmers, in the then universal habit of drinking at such companies. He suffered much at all times from dyspepsia and hypochondria, and those ailments, natural to him, were linked with a weak stomach, which usually made drink distasteful, despite his stalwart physical frame. And because of his participating with other guests in prevalent usages, Burns has been called “a drunken blackguard,” and his Feeble-Heart class of admirers are too slow to resent and repudiate the epithet. A man whose manners and sentiments are decidedly below those of his class deserves to be called a “blackguard.” But it is surely unfair to apply such a word of

reproach to one who is only what his neighbours are, and what the great mass of every community must inevitably be. And what the very upper crust of that community consisted of I am reminded by a venerable lady, who associated much with Mrs Kirk Dunlop, daughter of the Mrs Dunlop so highly placed in Dumfries society, and so universally respected. At her house Burns was a "welcome and respected" guest. Mrs Dunlop and her daughter were frequent visitants to Burns's widow. Indeed, for some time after the poet's death they were daily visitors. Mrs Kirk Dunlop (the brevet title of "Mrs" is often given to unmarried ladies), who died at the age of 90 years, when conversing with my correspondent, with whom she had much association, and recalling the state of Dumfries society within her experience, said—"Why do the people cry out about Burns's drinking habits? Was he the only man in Scotland who drank? I remember the gentlemen slapping their chests and boasting of their capacity in drinking, telling the number of *bottles* of wine they could swallow at a sitting. Burns was never half as bad as they were—in comparison he was a pearl among swine, and yet see how *he* is trodden under foot."

Another conclusion settles into my mind after this investigation, and it is through considerations that arise freshly on every occasion upon which I reflect on the character of Burns—that conclusion is a reflex of, and is best expressed in the words of, Carlyle:—

"Was it his aim to enjoy life? To-morrow he must go drudge as an exciseman! We wonder not that Burns became moody, indignant, and at times an offender against certain rules of society; but rather that he did not go utterly frantic, and run amuck against them all. How could a man, so falsely placed by his own or others' fault, ever know contentment, or peaceable diligence for an hour? What he did under such perverse guidance, and what he forbore to do, alike fill us with astonishment at the natural strength and worth of his character."

JAMES ADAMS, M.D.

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*Reprinted from Glasgow Mail, April 16th and  
20th, 1895.*



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