

**Deep Roots**  
By Wilma Heberling  
**Robert Burns**

With Burns' Nicht just around the corner, I thought I would pay tribute to Scotland's Bard.

There was a lad was born in Kyle  
But whatna day, o' whatna style\*  
I doubt it's hardly worth the while  
To be sae nice wi' Robin

He'll hae misfortunes great an' sma',  
But aye a heart aboon\* them a'  
He'll be a credit till\* us a'  
We'll a' be proud o' Robin

*(style refers to the calendar, which was changed in 1752;  
aboon = above, till = to)*

This bit of his own poetry refers, of course, to himself--Robert Burns, Scotland's premier poet. No other writer of any nationality is celebrated and remembered each year in the way in which Robert Burns is. His birthday is toasted on every continent, in every language.

We know a great deal about Burns the man. We know he worked as a farmer and as an exciseman. We know he loved many women and married one. We know he was recognized in high places and moved within a circle of intelligentsia—yet never forgot the common man and his own humble beginnings. We know that he died at the youthful age of 37.

What I want to do this week is talk about his early life. How did he get to be so prolific a writer in both the broad Scots tongue and in the "King's English"?

He started school aged six along with his brother Gilbert. The school was at Alloway Mill, close to their home, and had been opened by a Mr. William Campbell, who hoped to scratch a living teaching a handful of local boys. Unfortunately, Mr. Campbell was offered a more stable and lucrative position in Ayr after being in Alloway only two months. So what next? William Burns (Robert's father) heard of a young man who was looking for a position. John Murdoch, who was only 18, was lodging in a local Inn. He was interviewed by William Burns and one of his neighbors and found to be proficient in several subjects including foreign languages. He was hired for sixpence a day and would lodge, in turn, with five families.

All was in order. John Murdoch set out on his teaching career taking with him “ some clean shirts, Fisher’s English Grammar, Masson’s Collection of Prose and Verse, a New Testament, and a new seven-thonged leather tawse\*.” (*tawse* = the method of discipline, used on an outstretched hand, NOT on the rear)

Both Robert and Gilbert thrived under his tutelage, but years later, after Robert had died, Murdoch wrote, “ Both made rapid progress in reading and writing... parsing sentences. Both were generally in the upper end of their class, even when it included boys far their senior.” His next remarks, however, may surprise you,

“Gilbert always appeared to me to possess a more lively imagination and to be more of a wit than Robert... If asked which one would be more likely to court the muses, I surely never would guess that Robert had a propensity of that kind.” Boy! Was he wrong!

Robert Burns’ education was always being interrupted. In the first place, the family was not wealthy and needed the help of the boys at home on the farm, and in the second place the teachers never stayed very long. There was always a better job offer, and in those days there were no such things as contracts.

When there was no teacher available, William Burns himself saw to his sons’ education, by candlelight, after the farm work was done. William borrowed books on Grammar, Astronomy, Physics, and History which he supplemented with the Holy Bible. He also had a collection of literature. Robert is said to have enjoyed reading *Life of Hannibal* and *Life of Wallace* more than studying Physics.

When Robert was about 13, he re-met Mr. John Murdoch, who had been given a post as teacher of English at the Ayr Grammar School. Robert visited with him as much as he could , and Murdoch made it a point to visit often with the Burns family. The Rev. James Muir, in writing about Burns said in 1929, “...it may with truth be said that Murdoch’s chief influence upon the poet was that of providing him with a stimulus to continue self-education.”

Under Murdoch’s guidance, Robert studied at home French and Latin, and read poetry and literature, especially volumes of letters including *A Collection of Letters By the Most Eminent Writers of the Days of Queen Anne*, as well as volumes on expository style.

In 1775, when Robert was sixteen, his father sent him to school in Kirkoswald, on the road to Girvan, to learn mathematics, including trigonometry and land surveying. He was able to lodge with family relatives, thus saving money. It was this portion of his education which prepared him for his job as an exciseman. While in Kirkoswald, Burns fell madly in love (of course!) with Peggy Thomson, the “charming fillette” who lived next door to the school. This was to be the first of a long line of fond loves.

Also, while in Kirkoswald, he met people on whom he would fashion characters in his wonderful *Tam O’Shanter*. Some say that the first draft of *Tam O’Shanter* was scribbled

down after he encountered a Mrs. Graham, a “querulous and superstitious body” who entertained Robert with her vehemence and “colorful” expressions.

So, what can I say? We have a genius who lived to be 37, but never spent a full year in school. His most enduring teacher was always his father. In all, if added up, he probably spent no more than four or five years in formal education, which ended with these ten or eleven weeks in Kirkoswald. However, Burns had the capacity to soak in life-enriching experiences and store them in his wonderfully creative mind so that we can enjoy them two hundred and eleven years after he has died.

“ The gossip\* keekit\* in his loof\*  
Quo’ she: ‘Wha lives will see the proof,  
This waly\* boy will be nae coof\*  
I think we’ll ca’ him Robin”

(*gossip* = intimate friend/god-parent, *keekit* = glanced,  
*loof* = palm, *waly* = strong, *coof* = fool)