

Robert Burns (1759-1796)

Year	Event	Commentary
1759	January 25th. Robert Burns is born at Alloway, near Ayr; his father, William Burnes, is from Kincardineshire; his mother, formerly Agnes Brown, was from Carrick, Ayrshire; William has been described as "intelligent and industrious", Agnes sang old Scottish folksongs to her children.	Although William Burnes, a farmer, struggled financially all of his life, he would nowadays be considered a member of the "middle class", as would the other members of our "magnificent seven"; most creative geniuses spring from the middle classes (see Ochse, ch. 3).
1765	Robert attends school in Alloway; his excellent teacher, John Murdoch, gave him a good grounding in English language and literature; Murdoch is hired by William and four other families, indicating their commitment to their children's education; "Painstaking attention to syntax and precise meaning suited Robert so well that Murdoch considered Gilbert (Rob's brother) to possess a more lively imagination."	<p>There are a few points worth mentioning about Robert's early education:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Although he and his family must physically work hard to make a living, the family values education and intellectual pursuits (see Ochse, ch. 3 & Simonton, ch. 4); 2. Robert's finest teacher gives him a grounding in precisely the domain — language — of Robert's subsequent creative genius (see Simonton, ch. 4, Ochse, ch. 5). 3. Despite his skill as a teacher, Murdoch appears to have made a common mistake about creative genius: He appears to have forgotten that the creative genius must be the master of the relevant knowledge and skill for his or her domain — although hard-won knowledge and skill are not sufficient condition for creative genius (there are lots of knowledgeable but uncreative people), they are necessary conditions for creative genius (there are no creative geniuses who are not masters of the relevant knowledge and skill) — the initial phase of creative genius is usually not unusual "imagination", but unusual talent and dedication towards mastery within a domain (see Simonton, ch. 3, and Ochse, ch. 8).
1766	William Burnes, looking to improve his family's condition, rents a 70-acre hilltop farm, Mt Oliphant, on a loan.	
1769	Murdoch leaves for a position in Ayr; Betty Davidson, Robert's aunt, moves in with the family; she had, Robert remembered, "the largest collection in the county of tales and songs concernina devils. dhosts. fairies.	Along with his mother, country folk like Betty Davidson were a fountain of information that Robert would later spin into his poems and songs — taken together with his astute observations of human nature, these formed the "knowledae base" from which he worked.

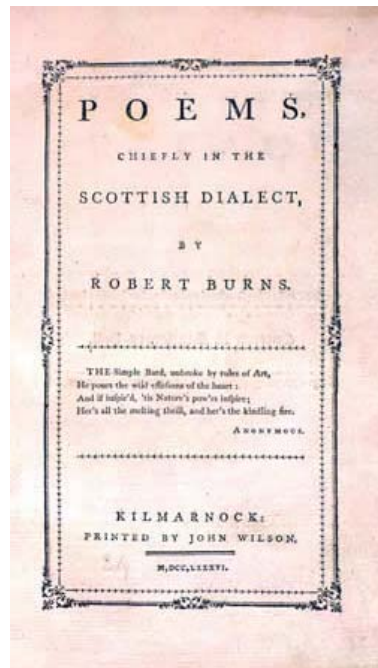
brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraipts, giants, enchanted towers, dragons, and other trumpery."

much as James Hutton's observations of soils and rock formations formed the knowledge base for his theory of the earth.

- 1770 Robert's father teaches him arithmetic, geography, natural history, Christian doctrine (the elder Burnes is a fundamentalist), and English literature.
- 1772 William Burnes sends Robert and Gilbert on alternate weeks to the village school in Dalrymple, four miles away from the farm.
- 1773 Robert boards with Murdoch in Ayr for a few weeks, studying English grammar and some French and Latin; soon after he "first commits the sin of RHYME", writing his first poem: "My Handsome Nell", based on a 14-year-old's adolescent infatuation.
- 1773–75 Due to their poor financial situation, William is forced to work Robert hard on the farm, which probably weakens Robert's heart, compromising his health and shortening his life.
- 1775 Went to study "Mensuration, Surveying, Dialing, &etc." in Kirkoswald, on the "smuggling coast" — made good progress in his formal studies, including Shakespeare, as well as in his study of mankind (in the pubs, etc.).
- 1777 William leaves Mt Oliphant for Lochlea Farm, in Tarbolten Parish; Robert, now seventeen, helps found the Tarbolten Bachelor's Club, founded on the twin principles of "professed love for the female sex" and "generous and kind-spirited conduct."
- 1781 Becomes a freemason in St. David's Lodge, Tarbolten; Robert Fergusson's poems are discovered; although Robert and Gilbert are helping their father with farm, Robert begins serious writing.
- 1784 William Burnes dies and is buried in the churchyard at Alloway's "old haunted kirk"; Robert and Gilbert rent Mossgiel Farm, near Mauchline; Robert meets Jean Armour, his future wife.
- 1785 Jean is pregnant, and Robert "declares" them man and wife; Robert composes some of his finest poems, including "To a Mouse", "The Cotter's Saturday Night", and "Holy Willie's Prayer".



Adam Smith, also, was a keen observer of human nature, especially in regards to economics.



1786 A momentous year for Robert (now 27):

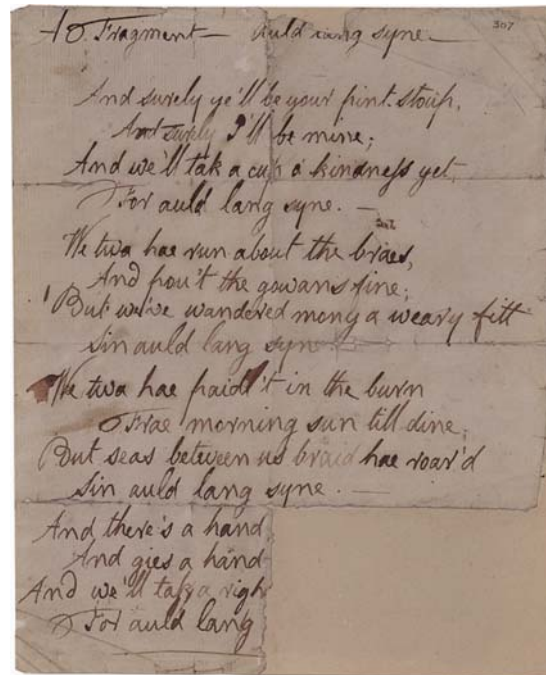
1. *Personal Life*. Jean's father "mutilates" her marriage to Robert, Robert "publicly rids" himself of Jean by standing in Kirk on three Sundays for public ridicule, and Jean gives birth to twins; estranged from Jean, Robert and "Highland Mary" plot their troth; Mary dies in October in Greenock.
2. *Professional Life*. Robert publishes the Kilmarnock Edition of his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*; a friend of Robert shows his poems to Dr. Thomas Blacklock, the blind Edinburgh poet, who is "astonished" at the quality of the poems; Robert is invited to dine at Professor Dugald Stewart's country home near Mauchline, where Robert hears of the stir his *Poems* have caused in the capital.

Robert Burns,
by Alexander Nasmyth



1787 Another remarkable year for Robert: He visits Edinburgh, where the Edinburgh Edition of his *Poems* is published, and Robert himself is lionized by the Edinburgh *literati*; Henry MacKenzie (whose opinion is law among the *literati*) writes his review of Robert's *Poems* for *The Lounger*, in the review MacKenzie states "this Heaven-taught ploughman" who, despite "the lowness of his birth" was a genius of the no ordinary rank; Robert takes lengthy tours of the Borders and the Highlands; confined to Edinburgh because of a knee injury, Robert engages in a letter romance with Agnes "Nancy" McLehose (Clarinda).

Auld Lang Syne manuscript



1788 Robert leases Ellisland Farm, 6 miles north of Dumfries

1789 Robert marries Jean Armour; finally is appointed an exciseman; composes Tam o' Shanter for Captain Francis Grose.

1791 Gives up Ellisland to work excise full time; has two children, one by his wife Jean, and one by the barmaid, Anna Park.

And for auld lang syne, my jo,
For auld lang syne,
We'll tak a cup o' kindness yet
For auld lang syne

Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And days o' lang syne?

And surely you'll be your pint-stoup
And surely I'll be mine;
And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,
For auld lang syne.

We twa hae run about the braes,
And pou'd the gowans fine;
But we've wander'd mony a weary fit
Sin auld lang syne.

We twa hae paidl'd in the burn,
Frae morning sun till dine,
But seas between us braid hae roar'd
Sin auld lang syne.

And here's a hand, my trusty tier!
And here's a hand o' mine!
And we'll tak a right gude-willy waught,
For auld lang syne.

- 1792 Promoted in his job as exciseman; working hard on Scottish songs and tunes; Robert begins to live a "normal" life, devoted to his friends (including women, such as Maria Riddell, but strictly "Platonic" relationships), family and work.
- 1793 New edition of the *Poems*; moves into a fine new red sandstone house in Millbrae Vennel (now Burns Street); another promotion to Acting Supervisor of the Dumfries Excise (Rob went about his exciseman duties, which required capturing and arresting smugglers, with great vigor and bravery — on one occasion he boarded and captured a smuggling ship all by himself).
- 1795 Burns joins the Dumfries Volunteer Corps formed in view of a possible war with France.
- 1796 Burns continues his writing and his official duties, caring for his wife and a family of four boys and one girl; his health had been failing for some time, and after a short illness he dies on July 21st; he is buried in St Michael's Churchyard, Dumfries.

Maria Riddell,
by Sir Thomas Lawrence



Burns was active and creative almost until the day he died, composing about 300 lyrics in the last 10 years of his life

