

Heritage Trails, Captain Richard Brown, 1753-1833

The Story



In the painting above (by Ted & Elizabeth Odling) in Irvine Burns Club, **Robert Burns listens to the stories of Captain Richard Brown, in 1781**, at Irvine harbour. Richard, six years older (28 to Robert's 22), was an important influence on Robert, regarding both women and poetry.

In a later letter to Brown (no. I below), the poet wrote: "**Do you recollect a Sunday we spent in Eglinton woods?...You wondered that I could resist the temptation of sending verses of such merit to a magazine: 'twas actually this that gave me an idea of my own pieces which encouraged me to endeavour at the character of a Poet**".

Richard Brown was **born** on 2nd June 1753, in Irvine, his parents being William Brown and Jane Whinie (note 1 below). In 1785, on 13th May, described as "Sailer (sic) in Irvine", he **married** Eleanora Blair, daughter of the late David Blair of Girtrigg (in Dundonald parish), at Broomhill (note 2 below). Burns' letter to Brown of 7th March 1788 is addressed to "Captn Richard Brown of the ship Mary & Jean at Mrs Wylie, Greenock". His letter of 4th Nov. 1789 is addressed to "Captn Richard Brown of the Ship Home, Port Glasgow". Their **family** were Jean (christened 24/2/1786 in Dundonald parish), Anne (chr. 5/9/1788 at Girtrigg), William (5/8/1790), Eleonora (11/8/1792), Alexander (13/6/1796, to "Richard Brown Shipmaster in Port Glasgow and Helen Blair his spouse"), and David (28/8/1799), the last four all christened at Port Glasgow. He **died** in 1833 at Port Glasgow [evidence to be added].

In 1787, Burns described his friendship as follows (to Dr John Moore, CL/254):

"I formed a bosom friendship with a young fellow, the first created being I had ever seen, but **a hapless son of misfortune**. He was the son of a plain mechanic; but a great Man in the neighbourhood taking him under his patronage gave him a genteel education with a view to bettering his situation in life. The Patron dieing just as he was ready to launch forth into the world, the poor fellow in despair went to sea; where after a variety of good and bad fortune, a little before I was acquainted with him, he has been set ashore by an American Privateer on the coast of Connaught, stript of everything. I cannot quit this poor fellow's story without adding that he is at this moment Captain of a large west indiaman, belonging to the Thames.

This gentleman's mind was fraught with courage, independence, Magnanimity, and every nobler manly virtue. I loved him, I admired him; and I strove to imitate him. In some measure I succeeded: I had the pride before, but he taught it to flow in proper channels. His knowledge of the world was vastly superior to mine, and I was all attention to learn. **He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool than myself when WOMAN was the presiding star**; but he spoke of a certain fashionable failing with levity, which hitherto I had regarded with horror. Here his friendship did me a mischief, and the consequence was, that soon after I resumed the plough, I wrote the WELCOME inclosed".

[This refers to the poem 'A poet's Welcome to his Love-begotten daughter', addressed to Elizabeth Paton's child 'Dear bought Bess'.]

Burns' seven known letters to Capt Brown, as printed in Mackay's "Collected Letters", and **Brown's seven known letters to Burns**, as recorded by Currie's list (published in the Burns Chronicle 1933, pp.20-75) are:

- I (168) CL/418, from Edinburgh, 30th Dec 1787
- II (205) CL/419, from Edinburgh, 5th Feb 1788 (1789 date on facsimile?); No.45, from Capt Brown in Greenock, 13th Feb 1788
- III (211) CL/419, from Mossgiel, 24th Feb 1788 (1789 on facsimile!); No.46, from Capt Brown in Greenock, 28th Feb 1788
- IV (220) CL/420, from Mauchline, 7th Mar 1788 (to ship 'Mary & Jean', lying at Greenock awaiting departure for Grenada); No.47, from Capt Brown in Greenock, 16th March 1788
- V (228) CL/421, from Glasgow, 20th Mar 1788; No.70, from Capt Brown in Port Glasgow, 28th Sept. 1788; No.72, from Capt Brown in Port Glasgow, 15th Nov. 1788
- VI (344) CL/421, from Mauchline, 1st May 1789; No.120, from Capt Brown in Port Glasgow, 5th Oct. 1789; No.129, from Capt Brown in Port Glasgow, 29th Oct. 1789
- VII (369) CL/422, from Ellisland, 4th Nov 1789 (to ship 'Home')

Footnotes:

1. Mackay (p.104) records Richard's mother as Jean Whamie, claiming (p.699, note 30) that Jane Whinie is based on a clerical error. On the contrary, the Old Parish Register for 2nd June clearly shows Jane Whinie (or possibly Whirrie?), while an earlier 6th Feb. 1753 record shows a son John born to a William Brown and Jean Wharrie (definitely 'rr' not 'm').

2. Mackay (p.699, note 34) cites OPR Irvine. The banns would be read there, but we have used the record in the Dundonald OPR. In 'Collected Letters', Mackay states he married late in 1787, but the correct date is in his biography of the poet.