

Jean Armour Oration 2015

What creates the character of a town such as ours? Like other provincial towns, Dumfries has many redeeming man-made features in its fine buildings, bridges and churches. Although important, they would not exist, without the people in whose memory they serve or indeed the blood sweat and tears shed in their construction. Without these influential people our town in consequence would be devoid of character. Can you imagine Dumfries without Burns' Statue or Devorgilla Brig?? When you think of all the famous characters who have left their mark historically in this town, why has Jean Armour (above all others) been captured in Bronze and at great expense, for what on the surface appears to be, merely playing the roll of a dutiful wife???

When Jean Armour was born, second eldest of 11, in Mauchline in 1765, who would have thought this daughter of an Ayrshire stonemason would be so influential in the success and celebrity of one of the greatest poets that ever lived? Apart from the rather fine bronze of Elizabeth Crichton at Easterbrook, the free standing monuments to influential women in Dumfries can be counted on the fingers of one hand. In fact, there is only one other statue of note and thanks to the Burns Howff Club and the generosity of many sponsors, we stand in front of it today.

When Jean first met Burns in the Spring of 1785, she was immediately smitten by this handsome farmer /poet. When she chased his dog off her laundry on the drying green and jokingly *scolded the poet*, there was an instant and mutual attraction. It's no surprise they became 'acquainted' at a dance in Mauchline just a few days later. The chemistry between them was clear and it wasn't long before she worshipped the very ground he walked on. She fell under his spell and almost as quickly, fell pregnant to his amorous advances Reflecting on that first encounter,

Burns wrote ...

**'Then come sweet muse inspire my lay
for a the lee-lang Summer day
I couldna sing, I couldna say
How much, how dear, I love thee
I see thee dancin oe'r the green
thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean
thy tempting lips, thy rougish een
by Heav'n and Earth I love thee'
Oh were I on Parnassus Hill written Aug 1788**

The extract from '*Oh were I on Parnassus Hill*' does little to disguise his feelings. Although Burns had many lovers it was Jean he turned to constantly, in sickness and in health. She was intelligent and indeed a 'bonnie' Ayrshire lass. With Burns she shared a passion for dancing and singing - she also shared his roguish sense of humour.

Burns appreciated Jean's honest critique of his poems. In return for his love, she tolerated his imperfections as much as she embraced his virtues. She was a very forgiving wife, nurturing not only their own children but also Burns' children from other lovers and openly remarked Robert would have been better sometimes having two wives.

She loved him dearly during his life and indeed long after his death. No other man would capture her heart and she died 38yrs after the poet, in the same house, most likely the same bed as her only true love. Robert and Jean now sleep together with the centuries a short distance from where we stand. When Jean fell pregnant to Burns, shortly after they met, she was forced by her father to distance herself from the self appointed '*Rob of Mossgiel*'. Her protective father did not appreciate Burns' attentions to his daughter and as a staunch Calvinist, viewed her pregnancy out-with marriage a shameful affair. His view of the cocky young farmer poet at that point in time was one of complete disdain. Unsurprisingly, his initial reaction was to protect and shield his daughter from further disgrace. Jean must have been heartbroken when she was spirited away to stay with relations in Paisley??

**' Wee crimson tipped flo'er
thou's met me in an evil hoor,
for I maun crush amongst the stour thy slender stem,
to spare thee noo, is past my po'er
thou bonnie gem!**

When Robert Burns wrote these lines in 1786 at Mossgiel he was in a dark place. In poor health, struggling financially, he was still coming to terms with the death of his father and the birth of his illegitimate daughter by Elizabeth Paton. Compounding his misery, a few months after the birth, his youngest brother died. Shortly after this and estranged (not by choice) from his pregnant wife, Burns was branded a fornicator by the church and rejected by an angry father in law, who didn't recognise him, his poetry, or his marriage. In those dark months it must have felt his whole world was caving in. It was little wonder, Burns took steps to emigrate to the West Indies! The publication of the Kilmarnock edition was to assist him with his passage. How lucky then for Dumfries, the relationship with Jean Armour was re-ignited for if she had rejected him at that crucial point in time, Burns may well have left these shores for good. The debt Scotland and Dumfries in particular owes Jean Armour is *immeasurable!!!* Could you imagine Dumfries without Robert Burns... *it's just unthinkable!* Jean was a remarkable woman. Burns was her one and only true love! The statue, erected in her memory, is as much to honour her many redeeming features; unconditional love, tolerance, forgiveness and humanity, as it is to mark her association with one of the greatest poets who ever lived. So, when anyone asks you why there's a statue here, to honour Jean Armour, you can tell them quite honestly - *without Jean's influence, Scotland may well have been robbed of its national poet!!*

John Clark (past President Burns Howff Club)