

written another syllable, would not have been sufficient to have transmitted your name down to posterity with high reputation.<sup>1</sup>

### Further reading

Robert Burns, *The Kilmarnock Poems* ed. Donald A. Low (London, 1985).

Tom Crawford, *Burns: A Study* (Edinburgh, 1960).

David Daiches, *Robert Burns: The Poet* (London, 1950, rev. 1966).

Maurice Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopaedia* (London, 1959).

James Mackay, *Burns: A Biography* (Edinburgh, 1992).

Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA, 1985).

Franklyn Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (London, 1932).

## Epistle to J. Lapraik,<sup>1</sup> an old Scotch bard, 1 April 1785

### *From Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786)

While briers an' woodbines budding green,  
An' pairicks<sup>2</sup> sraichan loud at e'en,  
And morning poossie<sup>3</sup> whiddan<sup>4</sup> seen,  
Inspire my muse,  
This freedom, in an *unknown* frien', 5  
I pray excuse.

On Fasteneen<sup>5</sup> we had a rockin,<sup>6</sup>  
To ca' the crack<sup>7</sup> and weave our stockin;  
And there was muckle fun and jokin,  
Ye need na doubt; 10  
At length we had a hearty yokin,<sup>8</sup>  
At sang about.<sup>9</sup>

There was ae sang<sup>10</sup> amang the rest,  
Aboon them a' it pleased me best,  
That some kind husband had addressed 15  
To some sweet wife:  
It thirled the heart-strings through the breast,  
A' to the life.

## Notes

### THE SAVAGE OF AVEYRON

<sup>1</sup> *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* ed. Donald A. Low (London, 1974), p. 95.

### FROM POEMS, CHIEFLY IN THE SCOTTISH DIALECT

<sup>1</sup> John Lapraik (1727–1807) was a tenant farmer imprisoned for debt in Ayr, 1785. He composed poetry in prison, and published his *Poems on Several Occasions* in Kilmarnock, 1788. Burns had not met him at the time he composed this epistolary poem.

<sup>2</sup> *pairicks* partridges.

<sup>3</sup> *poossie* hare.

<sup>4</sup> *whiddan* scudding.

<sup>5</sup> *Fasteneen* Shrove-Tuesday evening.

<sup>6</sup> *rockin* social evening featuring stories and songs.

<sup>7</sup> *ca' the crack* have a chat.

<sup>8</sup> *yokin* set-to.

<sup>9</sup> *sang about* singing in turn.

<sup>10</sup> *ae sang* Lapraik's 'When I upon thy bosom lean', a song addressed to his wife at a time when she was anxious about their misfortunes. It was published in Lapraik's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1788).

I've scarce heard aught described<sup>11</sup> sae weel  
 What gen'rous,<sup>12</sup> manly bosoms feel; 20  
 Thought I, 'Can this be Pope or Steele  
 Or Beattie's wark?'<sup>13</sup>  
 They tald me 'twas an odd kind chiel<sup>14</sup>  
 About Muirkirk.<sup>15</sup>

It pat me fidgean-fain<sup>16</sup> to hear't,  
 An' sae about him there I spier't,<sup>17</sup> 25  
 Then a' that kent him round declared  
 He had ingine,<sup>18</sup>  
 That nane excelled it, few cam near't,  
 It was sae fine. 30

That set him to a pint of ale,  
 An' either douse<sup>19</sup> or merry tale,  
 Or rhymes an' sangs he'd made himsel,  
 Or witty catches –  
 'Tween Inverness and Tiviotdale<sup>20</sup> 35  
 He had few matches.

Then up I gat, an swoor an aith,<sup>21</sup>  
 Though I should pawn my pleugh an' graith,<sup>22</sup>  
 Or die a cadger pownie's<sup>23</sup> death  
 At some dyke-back,<sup>24</sup> 40  
 A pint an' gill I'd gie them baith  
 To hear your crack.<sup>25</sup>

But first an' foremost, I should tell,  
 Amaist as soon as I could spell,  
 I to the crambo-jingle<sup>26</sup> fell, 45  
 Though rude an' rough,  
 Yet crooning to a body's sel<sup>27</sup>  
 Does weel enough.

## Notes

<sup>11</sup> *aught described* anything that described.

<sup>12</sup> *gen'rous* kind, sympathetic.

<sup>13</sup> *Can this be...wark* all writers skilled at describing tender feelings – Pope in such poems as *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*, Steele in his essays, James Beattie (1735–1803) in *The Minstrel*, a semi-autobiographical poem in Spenserian stanzas. Burns is almost certainly recalling Beattie's account of Edwin's sensitivity and kindness.

<sup>14</sup> *chiel* man.

<sup>15</sup> *Muirkirk* Lapraik lived at Dalfram, on Ayr Water, near the village of Muirkirk.

<sup>16</sup> *fidgean-fain* fidgeting with eagerness.

<sup>17</sup> *spier't* asked about him.

<sup>18</sup> *ingine* genius, ingenuity.

<sup>19</sup> *douse* sweet.

<sup>20</sup> *'Tween Inverness and Tiviotdale* between the north and south of Scotland.

<sup>21</sup> *swoor an aith* swore an oath.

<sup>22</sup> *pleugh an' graith* plough and harness. Throughout his work Burns portrays himself as a humble ploughman. Although he had much experience as a farmer, it was a pose that belied both his education and his long apprenticeship in literary Edinburgh.

<sup>23</sup> *cadger pownie* pony belonging to a hawker.

<sup>24</sup> *dyke-back* behind a wall.

<sup>25</sup> *crack* conversation.

<sup>26</sup> *crambo-jingle* rhyming songs.

<sup>27</sup> *crooning to a body's sel* singing to oneself.

I am nae poet, in a sense,  
 But just a rhymer like by chance, 50  
 An' hae to learning nae pretence –  
 Yet what the matter?  
 Whene'er my muse does on me glance,  
 I jingle at her.

Your critic-folk may cock their nose 55  
 And say, 'How can you e'er propose  
 You wha ken<sup>28</sup> hardly verse frae prose,  
 To mak a sang?'  
 But by your leaves, my learned foes,  
 Ye're maybe wrang. 60

What's a' your jargon o' your schools,  
 Your Latin names for horns an' stools?  
 If honest nature made you fools,  
 What sairs<sup>29</sup> your Grammars?  
 Ye'd better taen up spades and shoos<sup>30</sup> 65  
 Or knappin-hammers.<sup>31</sup>

A set o' dull, conceited hashes<sup>32</sup>  
 Confuse their brains in College classes!  
 They gang in stirks<sup>33</sup> and come out asses,<sup>34</sup>  
 Plain truth to speak; 70  
 An' syne<sup>35</sup> they think to climb Parnassus  
 By dint o' Greek!

Gie me ae spark o' nature's fire,  
 That's a' the learning I desire;  
 Then, though I drudge through dub<sup>36</sup> an' mire 75  
 At pleugh or cart,  
 My muse, though hamely in attire,  
 May touch the heart.<sup>37</sup>

Oh for a spunk<sup>38</sup> o' Allan's glee,  
 Or Ferguson's, the bauld an' slee,<sup>39</sup> 80  
 Or bright Lapraik's, my friend to be,<sup>40</sup>  
 If I can hit it!  
 That would be lear<sup>41</sup> enough for me,  
 If I could get it.

## Notes

<sup>28</sup> *ken* know.

<sup>29</sup> *sairs* serves.

<sup>30</sup> *shoos* shovels.

<sup>31</sup> *knappin-hammers* hammers for breaking stones or flints.

<sup>32</sup> *hashes* fools.

<sup>33</sup> *stirks* steers.

<sup>34</sup> *asses* young bullocks.

<sup>35</sup> *syne* then.

<sup>36</sup> *dub* puddle.

<sup>37</sup> Wordsworth was so attached to this stanza that he used lines 73–4 and 77–8 as an epigraph to 'The Ruined Cottage' MS.B.

<sup>38</sup> *spunk* spark.

<sup>39</sup> *bauld an' slee* bold and clever.

<sup>40</sup> Allan Ramsay (1686–1758), Scottish poet; Robert Fergusson (1750–74), whose *Poems* (Edinburgh, 1773) strongly influenced Burns; John Lapraik (1727–1807), whose *Poems on Several Occasions* was published at Kilmarnock, 1788.

<sup>41</sup> *lear* learning.

Now sir, if ye hae friends enow, 85  
 Though real friends I b'lieve are few,  
 Yet, if your catalogue be fow,<sup>42</sup>

I'se no insist;  
 But gif ye want ae friend that's true,  
 I'm on your list. 90

I winna blaw<sup>43</sup> about mysel,  
 As ill I like my fauts to tell;  
 But friends an' folk that wish me well,  
 They sometimes roose<sup>44</sup> me –  
 Though I maun own as monie still 95  
 As far abuse me.

There's ae wee faut they whiles lay to me:  
 I like the lasses (Gude forgie me!);  
 For monie a plack<sup>45</sup> they wheedle frae me 100  
 At dance or fair –  
 Maybe some ither thing they gie me  
 They weel can spare.

But Mauchline Race<sup>46</sup> or Mauchline Fair,  
 I should be proud to meet you there;  
 We'se gie ae night's discharge to care 105  
 If we forghather,  
 An' hae a swap o' rhymin-ware  
 Wi' ane anither.

The four-gill chap,<sup>47</sup> we'se gar him clatter,  
 An' kirs'n<sup>48</sup> him wi' reekin<sup>49</sup> water;  
 Syne we'll sit down an' tak our whitter<sup>50</sup> 110  
 To cheer our heart;  
 An' faith, we'se be acquainted better  
 Before we part.

Awa ye selfish, warly<sup>51</sup> race, 115  
 Wha think that havins, sense an' grace,  
 Ev'n love an' friendship should give place  
 To 'catch-the-plack'<sup>52</sup>!  
 I dinna like to see your face,  
 Nor hear your crack. 120

But ye whom social pleasure charms,  
 Whose hearts the tide of kindness warms,  
 Who hold your being on the terms,

## Notes

<sup>42</sup> *fow* full.

<sup>43</sup> *blaw* boast.

<sup>44</sup> *roose* praise.

<sup>45</sup> *plack* coin.

<sup>46</sup> *Mauchline Race* Horses still race at the course in Mauchline, East Ayrshire.

<sup>47</sup> *chap* cup. A 'gill' is a small measure (of alcohol).

<sup>48</sup> *kirs'n* christen.

<sup>49</sup> *reekin* steaming.

<sup>50</sup> *whitter* draught.

<sup>51</sup> *warly* worldly.

<sup>52</sup> *catch-the-plack* money-making.

'Each aid the others' –  
Come to my bowl, come to my arms,  
My friends, my brothers! 125

But to conclude my lang epistle,  
As my auld pen's worn to the grissle;<sup>53</sup>  
Twa lines frae you wad gar me fizzle,<sup>54</sup>  
Who am, most fervent, 130  
While I can either sing or whistle,  
Your friend and servant.

*Man was Made to Mourn, A Dirge*  
(composed August 1785)

## I

When chill November's surly blast  
Made fields and forests bare,  
One ev'ning, as I wand'red forth  
Along the banks of Aire,<sup>1</sup>  
I spied a man whose aged step 5  
Seemed weary, worn with care;<sup>2</sup>  
His face was furrowed o'er with years  
And hoary was his hair.

## II

'Young stranger, whither wand'rest thou?'  
Began the rev'rend sage, 10  
'Does thirst of wealth thy step constrain,  
Or youthful pleasure's rage?  
Or haply, pressed with cares and woes,  
Too soon thou hast began  
To wander forth, with me to mourn 15  
The miseries of man.

## III

The sun that overhangs yon moors,  
Out-spreading far and wide,  
Where hundreds labour to support  
A haughty lordling's pride; 20  
I've seen yon weary winter sun  
Twice forty times return,  
And ev'ry time has added proofs  
That man was made to mourn.

## Notes

<sup>53</sup> *grissle* his quill pen is worn down.

<sup>54</sup> *gar me fizzle* make me fidget (with excitement).

### MAN WAS MADE TO MOURN

<sup>1</sup> The River Ayr rises on the western border of Scotland and flows east to the sea.

<sup>2</sup> *I spied a man...care* This solitary was an influence on Wordsworth's leech-gatherer in *Resolution and Independence*.