

ROBERT TANNAHILL: WEAVER POET OF PAISLEY

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If e'er in musing mood you stray
Along the classic banks of Tay,
Think of our walks by Stanley tower
And steep Gleniffer brae.

SO wrote Robert Tannahill to his friend and brother poet, James Scadlock, a native of Paisley who was then living in the city of Perth by the banks of the river Tay.

The grandparents of Robert Tannahill moved from Kilmarnock to Paisley in 1756; they were Thomas and Mary (Bunting) Tannahill, with a family of four sons and three daughters. James, the eldest son, married Janet Pollock, 29 August, 1763, at nearby Loch Winnoch. They had a family of six sons and one daughter; Robert, the poet, was the fifth child and fourth son of his parents, being born 5 June, 1774. The family lived in a small one-storeyed cottage in Castle Street. The Tannahills moved from Castle to Queen Street in 1775, when Robert was one year old. James Tannahill, the father, acquired a building lot on Queen Street and erected upon it a one-storey thatched cottage, with a passage through the centre, the north side being occupied as a dwelling house and the south side as a four-room weaving shop. All the children were brought up in this cottage and their earliest associations were connected with a happy home life.

Robert Tannahill was a sickly child during his early years. Careful nursing of his tender frame established his health and strengthened his body. A slight bend in the right foot was straightened, and the slender appearance of the leg was overcome by the simple contrivance of wearing additional stockings. During his childhood he was shy with strangers, and this bashfulness continued more or less during his whole life.

Both father and mother had received a good education and were both able and willing to give their children the same advantage. Robert was sent to school about the age of six years and continued for six years to receive the usual instruction of Scottish schools for the children of parents moving in their position. All of Robert's brothers received a common school education. The sister, Janet, was sent to a ladies' school to learn sewing, a course of instruction now given in common

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schools, but in these days a course only enjoyed by the daughters of the upper class in the town of Paisley.

During his schoolboy days, Robert rambled much in the grounds of Woodside and the lands of Ferguslie, which were within three minutes' walk of his father's cottage—up King Street, into the dark, waving plantings and green shady bowers of Craigelee. As he grew older he extended his rambles to Meikleriggs Muir, Newton Woods, the Braes of Gleniffer, Stanley Castle, Cruikston Castle, Neilston, Kilbarchan, Loch Winnoch and Beith. During those delightful excursions he was storing his mind with material that afterwards broke forth in lyric strains that astonished his companions. Indeed, at the age of ten, he surprised his schoolmates with impromptu rhyming and making verses on local characters. Robert Tannahill's early career presents but few salient points beyond the common curriculum at school.

After leaving school, Robert was bound, in 1786, apprentice to his father at the weaving trade for the space of five years. It was the custom at that time to bind all apprentices, whether they learned the trade with their parents or other masters. Robert proved assiduous and attentive, and consequently became an expert workman. Muslin, linen, and silk gauze weaving was very light employment; being brought up with his father and two elder brothers, and weaving shop and dwelling house being a "But and Ben," he would occasionally try his hand at the shuttle. It was not from necessity and poverty that he was thus early sent to the loom, but from the industrious habits of the family and the lightness of manual labour. Tannahill's apprenticeship terminated in 1791, the year Burns' "Tam O' Shanter" was published in Captain Grose's Antiquities. The literature that claimed Robert's attention in large measure treated of poetry and music; the songs of the bards were his chief delight, and his favourite musical instrument a German flute. He became known among his companions for the gift of song.

The young poet's spare hours were devoted to reading and study, or the converse of a few congenial friends. Very early Tannahill had exhibited a taste for the muse, and out of his constant study of the works of Burns, Fergusson, and Ramsay, the ambition was developed in him of emulating these favourite authors. On Saturday afternoons Tannahill was in the habit, either alone or with a chosen companion, of rambling among the romantic scenery in the neighbourhood of his native town.

His favourite haunts on these occasions, during which he enriched his memory with the images of natural beauty with which his verse is so richly adorned, were the braes of Gleniffer, Stanley Green Shaw, with its castle "old and grey," and the bonnie woods of Craigielee, or Ferguslie, all of which he has celebrated in never-dying song. He spent six weeks in the land of Burns, storing his mind with the beauties of Coila, and on reaching Ayr, he wrote the song "My ain kind Dearie." His poetry soon became known and made him something of a local celebrity; in 1807 a collection of his verse, "Poems and Songs," was issued to the public and found success.

In 1795, Tannahill became acquainted with Jenny Tennant, who resided in the vicinity of Queen Street. She was born in Dunblane in 1770, and came to Paisley with her mother to reside. Jenny and Tannahill kept company for three years, walking along quiet roads in the vicinity, dancing together, and meeting occasionally with friends for a night's enjoyment. During his courtship days, Tannahill wrote the song entitled "Jessie the Flower of Dunblane"

The sun has gane doun on the lofty Ben Lomond,
An' left the red clouds to preside o'er the scene,
While lonely I stray in the calm simmer gloaming
To muse on sweet Jessie, the flower o'Dunblane

Another weaver wanted to attend the annual ball of the district. Not having an engaged sweetheart, he asked Jenny Tennant to accompany him, and she informed him she would have to ask Tannahill's consent. She did so and obtained it. As the day approached Tannahill became uneasy, and resolving to watch their behavior on returning from the dance, he concealed himself in the end of the passage to Jenny's house, where he could see and not be seen. The dancers arrived in the passage, exchanged the usual salutations, and the new beau, on leaving, implanted a kiss on the ruby lips of the beautiful Jenny. This formed no part of the contract; the Tannahill pride was touched, the chord of love was broken, and the green-eyed monster entered Tannahill's soul! The following day Jenny received a poetical "Fareweel." We quote the first stanza:

But when I knew thy plighted lips
Once to a rival's prest,
Love-smothered independence rose,
And spurned thee from my breast.

This stung Jenny to the core, and she gave vent to distress in weeping. On her grief's subsiding a little, she ran with the epistle to her close companion Janet Crawford for counsel, and with a sobbing heart handed it to her saying "See what Bob has sent to me." Janet Crawford, reading over the final "Fareweel," deeply sympathized with the disconsolate Jenny and remarked that Bob would be lost to her forever. The rival and Jenny were married in 1798.

Tannahill, an ardent admirer of the drama, was acquainted with several actors, particularly Archibald Pollock and William Livingstone, both very worthy men. In the year 1803, Tannahill was induced by Pollock to write a dramatic piece, and accordingly wrote "The Soldier's Return." The author considered it a masterpiece, and was not prepared for the coolness with which it was received. This made him morose and sullen, but it was the means of bringing him into contact with R.A. Smith, William M'Laren, and John Ross. M'Laren, in his biography of the author, says: "Such was the extreme modesty of his nature, that, though the qualities of his mind had ripened into superior excellence, it was with difficulty that his friends could persuade him to offer any of his pieces for publication; but whether from that modesty for which he was conspicuous, or from a dread that his name swell the list of disgraced correspondents, they appeared under a fictitious character."

There was nothing very striking in the personal appearance of Tannahill; he was a slender, mild-looking man, his features rather inclined to the feminine. He was about five feet four inches tall, his head well proportioned; his hair, a fine light brown; his eyes, a soft mild grey; the nose, slightly aquiline and long; the mouth, small; lips, thin; and chin, round. In walking he had a slight limp. A staid, quiet, inoffensive man, beloved by his townsmen, he was frequently visited by literary friends and strangers.

Tannahill's muse was now finding favour with publishers of periodicals and magazines. In a lengthy poetical epistle to a brother poet, Robert Allan, of Kilbarchan, Tannahill says:

My sangs are now before the warl,
An' some may praise, and some may snarl,
They hae their fauts, yet I can tell
Nane sees them clearer than mysel;
But still I think, they, too, inherit
Among the dross, some sparks o'merit.

Ramsay, in his memoir of the author, says: "The fame of the

obscure verse-making weaver (as he styles himself) now reached London, and about 1805, having been requested to become a contributor to a leading metropolitan magazine he responded; he also contributed to the *Caledonian Musical Repository*, the *Nightingale*, the *New Modern Songster*, in 1806."

The Burns' Anniversary Society was instituted in 1805, William M'Laren and Robert Tannahill being the chief promoters. The former was chosen the first President, and the latter first Clerk of the Society, and they acted in these capacities on Tuesday, 29 January, 1805, when the first anniversary of Burns was celebrated in Paisley. Tannahill duly attended all meetings of the Society during his lifetime, and also wrote odes for 1807 and 1810.

It was at the loom that the greater portion of his poetry was composed, and it is well known that the visitations of the muse most frequently occurred while his hands were busily plying the shuttle. Genius was never with him an excuse for idleness. His earnings were at all times amply sufficient for his simple wants, and he could truly say:

Tho' humble my lot, not ignoble my state,
Let me still be contented though poor,
What Destiny brings be resigned to my fate,
Though misfortune should knock at my door.

Unfortunately, despite the contentment that he has here expressed, he was throughout life liable to fits of gloomy dependency. His poetry and his letters afford abundant proof of his constitutional proneness to mental depression. Like a shadow of the coming event, how affecting is the following passage to his friend Scadlock as early as 1804:

But ere a few short summers gae,
Your friend will meet his kindred clay
For fell disease tugs at my brest,
To hurry me away.

Ultimately, in 1810, his health, which had never been robust, sank under the pressure of his dark imaginings. His body became emaciated, his eyes hollow, and his expressive countenance pallid and careworn. At the same time the wanderings of his mind were made obvious by the incoherent nature of some of his poetical effusions and by his jealousy of those whom he best loved.

On 16 May, 1810, Tannahill walked to Glasgow and called on his friend Alexander Borland, a brother poet with whom he

had a long conversation; but the speech of Tannahill was so incoherent that Borland deemed it prudent to accompany him back to Paisley. Tannahill endeavoured to elude him, but Borland prevented him doing so and accompanied him to the head of Queen Street and, after seeing him enter his mother's dwelling, returned to Glasgow. His mother and brothers observed the progress of the physical disease but were loth to believe he was suffering from a disorder, the most calamitous that can afflict the human race. Tannahill had retired to rest when his two brothers, James and Matthew, called at their mother's house in Queen Street. Mrs. Tannahill, after listening at Robert's bed and hearing him breathing as if in a sound sleep, told her two sons to go home to their families, for she would attend to Robert herself. They acted on her advice, and she lay down on her bed, as she required a little rest, and unconsciously fell into a drowsy sleep. Hearing a little noise about three o'clock in the morning, she immediately arose and went to the poet's bed and discovered it empty. She immediately sent for her two sons and Peter Burnett, a mutual friend. The three met and took different courses to find the poet. Peter Burnett found the poet's coat and watch on the south side of the Culvert of Candren Burn, an inverted stone syphon under the canal. The instruments of the Humane Society were procured, and the body was lifted therefrom. Tannahill was buried on 21 May, 1810, in the Presbyterian Church burying ground, Canal Street, at the age of 36.

For vigorous eloquence and striking fidelity to the Scottish scene, Robert Tannahill, with the single, exception of Burns, is the sweetest lyrical poet of Scotland. Tannahill generally wrote from real scenery or actual models before him and did not indulge much in fancy or fiction. He was free from mercenary motives, and his love of nature and of the beautiful impelled him to put on paper his thoughts, irrespective of pay or patron. Like Burns, Tannahill was a genius; in different walks both are true to living nature. We quote what is probably one of the most beautiful passages in one of Tannahill's songs, where the dreary appearance of the winter scene is strikingly portrayed:

Keen blows the wind o'er the braes o'Gleniffer,
The auld castle turrets are covered wi' snaw;
How changed from the time when I met with my lover
Among the broom bushes o' Stanley Green Shaw

From the brow of Gleniffer Braes one looks down on a landscape beautiful and far-reaching, in which every wood, and green knoll, quiet nook and lofty crag, has been consecrated by the muse of Robert Tannahill, who knew and loved the countryside his pen glorified.

Burns turned his wild, artless notes to sing the loves, joys, rural scenes and rural pleasures of his beloved Scotland; and in time Scotland accepted him as her singer. The lover revels in Burns, but the sentimentalist finds delight in Tannahill. Variety and power are on the side of the former, sweetness and delicacy on that of the latter. In the love songs of Burns, the woman is always in bold relief; in those of Tannahill, she is half-hidden among the flowers.

As a song-writer Tannahill continues to be remembered. He gathered his songs principally from the woods and fields and streams surrounding his native Paisley. He displayed a genuine lyrical gift, a surety of touch, much tenderness of sentiment, and a true eye and feeling for the simple effects of nature with which he was familiar; of the forces and passion of Burns, he has nothing; but in grace and sweetness, Burns himself scarcely, perhaps, surpassed certain of his happier passages.

Jenny Tennant, Tannahill's first and only sweetheart, died in Paisley in 1833. Some of her descendants moved to Canada, and it is said that, on each recurring New Year's day, they sing "Jessie the Flower of Dunblane" and "Fareweel."