It's always a pleasure to welcome Dr. Patrick Scott back to the pages of Robert Burns Lives! His writings continue to be enlightening and add much to our study of Scotland's famous Bard. Today Dr. Scott introduces us to a Burns contemporary, poet and ornithologist, Alexander Wilson. As I write these words, Patrick is in Scotland doing further research and visiting with dear friends at the University of Glasgow. I imagine from somewhere along the way during his travels there will appear another article for our website. My compliments and continued thanks to Patrick for enriching the content of Robert Burns Lives! from its inception. For our new readers, please see our index page for Chapter 135, “A Tribute to Dr. Patrick Scott, A Noted Robert Burns Scholar”, which is the talk I gave when he retired from the University of South Carolina few years ago. (FRS: 4.13.16)

A Scottish Contemporary of Burns: Alexander Wilson (1766-1813), Poet and Ornithologist

By

Patrick Scott

One of the great unanswerable questions about Robert Burns is "What if he had emigrated"? How would he have supported his family? Would he have found some new career? Would he have continued writing? How would his perspective on Scotland have changed if he had been writing from overseas? He thought of emigrating, in the mid-1780s, but at that time, in the immediate aftermath of the American war of independence, he had arranged to go to Jamaica, not to the United States. But in the 1790s, as his family responsibilities grew, and the constraints of Scottish politics tightened on him, what if Burns had broken free and set off to establish a new life in the new United States, about which he wrote so admiringly?
Many contemporary Scots did emigrate, both for economic and political reasons. Among them were at least two young Scots poets of Burns's own generation: Alexander Wilson from Paisley, who went to the States in 1794 and lived chiefly in Pennsylvania, and Gavin Turnbull from Kilmarnock and Dumfries, who settled in South Carolina the following year (see Robert Burns Lives! 159, and other references below). Both Wilson and Turnbull had published books of poetry in Scotland before they left, and though both continued writing after they emigrated, neither published any more poetry in book form. Both became better known for other accomplishments, Turnbull making a modest reputation as an actor, and Wilson becoming one of the greatest American ornithologists, before his achievement was overshadowed by John James Audubon.

Wilson’s extraordinary later achievement has often deflected attention from the significance of his pre-emigration life and writings. One specific effect has been to deflect attention also from the relevance of Wilson’s experiences to the choices that Burns was making in the same period. Wilson’s writings and struggles in Scotland provide a kind of mirror image to Burns’s experiences in the same years. And towards the end of his life, he wrote a fascinating poem, recalling Burns’s appearance and the effect of meeting him many years before.

I was surprised to find how little reference to Wilson there is in books about Burns (no entry in Lindsay’s Burns Encyclopaedia for instance, no index reference in Mackay’s biography), though there is good evidence that Burns knew Wilson’s poetry, and at least some indication that the two met. A very interesting recent book, Alexander Wilson, ‘The Scot Who Founded American Ornithology,’ by two American scholars, Edward H. ‘Jed’ Burtt, Jr., and William E. Davis, Jr. (Harvard University Press, 2013), provides a useful introduction to Wilson’s life as well as a more detailed study of his later achievement. As reviewers pointed out, the book’s emphasis is on Wilson as ornithologist, not poet (see e.g. Altenberg, in Wall Street Journal; Paxton, in New York Review of Books). Well produced and very modestly priced, the book is also copiously illustrated, mostly from Wilson’s original drawings of American birds rather than from his published engravings. The authors’ initial spur to writing the book was the discovery of new Wilson drawings, and their focus is very much on Wilson’s scientific and artistic accomplishments in America rather than on his writing in Scotland. Their account suggests it may be time for Scottish researchers, and particularly Burnsians, to look further at Wilson’s early life and literary achievement. This short essay is not the full study or critical assessment that is needed, but I hope it may whet interest for forthcoming research on Wilson, including a forthcoming essay by Gerard Carruthers on Wilson as laboring-class writer (Carruthers 2016) and a volume of essays on all aspects of his achievement planned by Professor Burtt and currently in preparation.

I first encountered Wilson several years ago because, alongside the Roy Collection, which has copies of Wilson’s poems, the University of South Carolina library also has a great collection of natural history (Scott, 2001). The library bought Wilson’s scientific works in the first decades of the nineteenth century, volume by volume as they were being published. The series that made Wilson famous was his American Ornithology; or, the Natural History of the Birds of the United States, illustrated with plates (9 vols., Philadelphia, 1808-1814), and after Wilson’s death the illustrations were handsomely republished without the text (Philadelphia, 1829). A few years later, the college would also be among the first American subscribers to John James Audubon’s rival series, Birds of America (1827-1838). Both Wilson and Audubon utilized the same basic technique for their illustrations (hand-colored copperplate engravings), but Wilson either did the engraving himself or worked closely with a fellow emigrant Scot Alexander Lawson, a leading Philadelphia engraver, while Audubon’s work were engraved for him in Britain, a few by John Lizards in Edinburgh, but most by Robert Havell in London. Both Wilson and Audubon traveled widely in search of new bird species, and Wilson also had the benefit of being able to use specimens recently brought back from the west by Menwether Lewis, who after his return had settled in Philadelphia to write an official account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804-1806. Audubon generally depicted only one life-sized species in each engraved plate, but Wilson grouped several birds together on each, so that, even though he is (I am told) more accurate than Audubon on specific details, Wilson’s engravings have not been as sought after by collectors as the Havell Audubons and do not command the same astounding prices at auction.

Alexander Wilson, “Orchard Oriole,” from American Ornithology, vol. 1 (1808), pl. 4. From the South Carolina College Library: Irvin Dept. of Rare Books & Special Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries
Wilson's reputation as an ornithologist means that, unlike Gavin Turnbull, there has never been a time when his life or achievement has been wholly neglected. Soon after his death, his American friend George Ord produced the first short biography, and only a few years later an older Scottish friend, Thomas Crichton, contributed a memoir to a local Paisley magazine. In 1816, Wilson's soberly-titled first volume Poems (Paisley, 1790) was recycled by a London publisher with a new title Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect to bring out the Burns connection. In 1832, the Scottish scientist William Jardine wrote a prefatory life of Wilson for a British reprint of Wilson's American Ornithology, and in 1840 Wilson was given his own chapter in James Paterson's book, The Contemporaries of Burns. In the 1870s, a Presbyterian minister, the indefatigable Dr. Alexander Grosart, edited a two-volume collection of Wilson's writings for a Paisley publisher. In 1906, a descendant, James Southall Wilson, put into print Wilson's correspondence with President Thomas Jefferson. More recently, there have been two substantial modern biographies of Wilson, by R. G. Cantwell in 1961 and by Clark Hunter in 1983. Both Cantwell and Hunter provide fuller detail about Wilson's Scottish life than is given in the new biography, but the new book is much to be welcomed, not only because of its significant new material on Wilson's later accomplishments, but because none of these earlier sources is now easily available outside major libraries.

The story of Wilson's life is both exciting and moving. He was born in Paisley in 1766, son of a weaver who also ran a sideline in smuggler and illegal distilling. Wilson's parents had at first hoped he would become a minister, and his later autobiographical poem "The Solitary Tutor" recounts both his rejection of orthodox religion and recalls his early education, which, like Burns's, introduced him to classic English poets such as Milton. After his mother died in 1776 and his father remarried, Wilson, then aged ten, was removed from school and, after working first on a farm, served a three-year apprenticeship to his brother-in-law, also a weaver. His first recorded poem, celebrating completion of his indentures, aged sixteen, is in Scots:

Be't kent to a' the warld in rhime
That wi' right mickle wark and toil
For three lang years I've sert my time …  [sert: served]

(Grosart I: xxii)

Wilson went on to work as a journeyman-weaver for the brother-in-law, and after a time started to alternate periods of weaving, either in Paisley or in his brother-in-law's shop, now near Edinburgh, with periods traveling through west and central Scotland as a chapman. Chapmen or peddlars walked the countryside from farmstead to farmstead with a backpack of small items such as needles, ribbons, buttons, and of course chapbooks, the little pamphlets in which country people read popular traditional stories, history, poems and songs (on chapmen, see e.g. Cowan; Cowan and Paterson).

Both occupations were solitary, even lonely, leaving Wilson master of his own time and thoughts, and over the next few years he produced a significant body of poetry. As with Gavin Turnbull's poetry, some of Wilson's early poems, such as his "Morning" or "Evening an Ode," were accomplished exercises in eighteenth-century neoclassical pastoral. Some early poems, though, are more lively, colloquial, even scurrilous, satire on local characters, notably Wilson's "Elegy on the long expected death of an old miser," a scornful account of the elderly James Craig who had married the Wilsons' minx of a maidservant (with whom Wilson himself had had a brief teenage affair). Wilson already had a local reputation as a poet before the success of Burns's Kilmarnock edition in 1786, and it is not clear when he first read Burns, but the subscriber's list for the Edinburgh edition of 1787 includes Alexander Wilson of Paisley as having ordered two copies. The Currie Inventory records that in November 1789 Wilson wrote a letter to Burns, but the inventory records very little about what Wilson wrote: "A youth—A stranger—Expresses in …" (Ewing, p. 13, entry 132 (1); cf. Scott and DuRant, Robert Burns Lives!, no. 207). It is also reported that Wilson once went over "to Ayr" (presumably to Mauchline), to try to visit Burns, but found he was away (Jardine, p. xxvi).

In due course, in 1790, Wilson decided to follow Burns's example, publish a book of his own poetry, and try his fate in guid black prent. For initial sales of the book, Wilson followed the subscription method that
Burns had used four years earlier for his Kilmarnock poems, but he lacked Burns’s strong support with a network of local patrons soliciting groups of individual subscribers. His very positive poem in the volume praising the local landowner and benevolent factory owner William McDowell, M.P., of Lochwinnoch, had been written before he sought out McDowell’s patronage, and it earned Wilson McDowell’s approval but no financial backing. Instead, Wilson had to seek out most of the individual subscribers himself on his travels as a chapman. He had 600 copies printed by Neilson of Paisley, and then after publication he carried the books with him for delivery. Burns’s Kilmarnock edition sold its 612 copies immediately. Wilson found many of his 400 pre-publication subscribers reluctant to pay up, and sales were disappointingly slow.

Title-page from Alexander Wilson, Poems (Paisley: Neilson for the Author, 1790) G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries. The image includes show-through from the other side of the page, which has an engraved frontispiece illustration for Wilson’s historical poem “Hardyknute.”

It certainly took time for Wilson’s book to reach the attention of Robert Burns. The first mention of Wilson’s book in Burns’s correspondence only comes in January 1792. On January 25, Mrs. Dunlop wrote to Burns:

All this week I have done nothing but read Wilson’s poems, which Jenny Little brought me … their author, I am told, was really in the situation he ludicrously enough describes of a travelling packman, and is now actually an operative weaver in the little village of Lochwinnoch … it is the only one of the many spurious progeny to which your genius has given existence … that one is not ashamed to hear called poetry. This is the product of a manly mind … I fear it will hurt Jenny by comparison (Wallace II: 182-183)

“Jenny” of course, was Mrs. Dunlop’s poetic protégée, Janet Little. Burns responded on February 3, chiefly to write about new excise prospects, and to send Mrs. Dunlop some smuggled brandy, but he also asked to borrow Wilson’s book in a way that suggests he already knew something of the author:

“Wilson’s book I have not yet seen; but will be much obliged to you for a sight of it” (Roy II: 132).

But, despite the financial loss on his book (about which Neilson the printer seems to have been patient), Wilson developed a circle of friends in Paisley who encouraged his poetic ambition. His poem "The Group" depicts his friendship with the Paisley poets James Kennedy and Ebenezer Picken, who in 1787 wrote what was probably the first of several contemporary poetic responses to Burns, "The De'il's Answer to his verra worthy frien' Robert Burns" (Egerer 7; Jardine, p. xxvii; cf. ). In April 1791, along with Picken, Wilson entered a contest at an Edinburgh debating society, The Pantheon, for poems about Burns's great predecessors Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson. The question was "Whether have the Exerptions of Allan Ramsay or Robert Ferguson done more Honour to Scotch Poetry." Wilson is said to have written his 200-line poem, memorized it ready for the contest, and woven 50 yards of cloth to pay for his expenses getting to Edinburgh, all within a week. Picken wrote a formal Augustan poem in praise of Ramsay, while Wilson drew unanimous applause with his vernacular poem on behalf of Fergusson:

My heart cry'd out, while ears war drappan fast,  
O Ramsay, Ramsay, art thou beat at last!  
What he describes, before your een ye see't  
As plain and lively as ye see that peat.  
It's my opinion, John, that this young fallow,  
Excell's them a', an' beats auld Allan hallow,  
And shews, at twenty-twa, as great a giftie  
For painting just, as Allan did at fifty….  
Let ane and a' here vote as they incline,  
Fraise heart and soul Rab Fergusson has mine.  

Incidentally, Wilson's strategy in this poem, of presenting his case in the vernacular and through the voice of a countryman uncontaminated by the pretensions of the literati, was taken up by his friend Gavin Turnbull in his prologue to Ramsay's Gentle Shepherd (Dumfries, 1793), written in Ramsay's voice. In the event neither Picken nor Wilson won the contest, because the winner was determined by a vote of the audience, and some well-heeled Edinburgh poetaster had bought up tickets and packed the house with friends. However, Picken and Wilson published their poems together as a forty-page quarto pamphlet, The Laurel Disputed (Edinburgh: Guthrie, 1791). During this visit to Edinburgh, banking on the publicity that the contest gave to his poetry, Wilson arranged for Burns's friend, the bookseller Peter Hill, to issue a second edition of his poems as Poems, Humorous, Satirical and Serious (Edinburgh: Hill, 1791). This added several additional poems and an expanded version of his prose journal about life as a chapman. Since the new poems occur at several points through the second half of the book, Hill must have reprinted the entire book, not just recycled unsold copies from 1790 with extra pages, as sometimes thought. This new edition is said to have been a success, but if current library holdings are any indication the expanded edition sold even worse than the first one, and it seldom comes up in the antiquarian book market. Unlike the 1790 version, it has even escaped digitization.

Alongside his own publications, though, Wilson was also keeping track of Burns's. Among the poems that Grosart notes as added in 1791 was an anti-clerical "Ode for the Birthday of Our Immortal Scottish Poet, Set to Music by a Baccanalian Club" (Grosart II: 77). The "Ode" praises two specific Burns poems, "The Ordination," and "The Holy Fair," as "glorious effusions," tells Excisemen not to fear the after-life as "All hell will befriend you for rare Robin Burns," and calls on the "nymphs of old Coila" to leave their "raw lifeless clodpoles, your cows and your churns," to "encore the great sportsman, O rare Robin Burns." One stanza in particular gives the flavor of Wilson's enthusiasm:

Clear the road, ye dull churchmen! Make way for our bard,  
To whose tow'ring genius bo task is too hard;  
Your glories, your precepts, your nonsense he spurns,  
And Europe loud echoes, "O rare Robin Burns!"

The same month that Wilson delivered his poem at the Pantheon, April 1791, was when Burns's "Tam o' Shanter" was reprinted in two Edinburgh periodicals, and Wilson was very struck by it. Jardine reports...
him as having visited Burns "at his farm," presumably Ellisland. Wilson had apparently written a review of "Tam o' Shanter" that he sent to James Anderson's _The Bee_, though Anderson refused to publish it. Wilson then sent his review to Burns himself, and Jardine says that Burns replied justifying his poem against Wilson's comments (Jardine, pp. xxvi-xxvii). Certainly, Wilson's most successful poem, "Watty and Meg," published in 1792, shows the influence of Burns's verse-tale, in its contrast between alehouse camaraderie and domestic conflict. Wilson's plot, subsequently reused by Turnbull for his short play _The Recruit_ (Dumfries, 1794), depicts Watty, a henpecked husband, hauled out of the pub by Meg, his besom of a wife, but getting his revenge and regaining marital ascendancy by preparing to enlist as a soldier and leave her with the children:

Keen the frosty winds were blawing,
Deep the snaw had wreathed the ploughs,
Watty, wearied a' day sawing,
Daundert down to Mungo Blue's ...
Mungo fill'd him up a toothfu',
Drank his health and Meg's in ane;
Watty, puffing out a mouthfu',
Pledged him wi' a dreary grane...

Part of Wilson's success reportedly came from people thinking that his anonymously-published poem had been written by Burns. Robert Chambers recounts a story told by Burns's widow, that Burns was sitting at his desk by an open window, and heard a chapman crying up his latest offering, "Watty and Meg, a new ballad by Robert Burns." "The poet looked out and said 'That's a lee, Andrew, but I would make your plack a bawbee [double your money] if it were mine'" (James Grant Wilson, p. 421 n). Perhaps because of this public misperception, Wilson's chapbook was a runaway success. Neilson was able to recoup his losses from printing Wilson's earlier book and to buy Wilson a new greatcoat. In due course, Burns's own former printer, John Wilson (no relative), by now operating a print-shop in Ayr, produced a chapbook, _Four Funny Tales_, reprinting the two poems together, along with Wilson's "The Loss of the Pack," and an older tale by Allan Ramsay. Significantly, the John Wilson title-page gave no hint that the two major poems were not by the same author.

Like Burns, in the early 1790s, Wilson was restive under the increasing political repression of Scotland, but Wilson was less careful, or less adroit, than Burns in negotiating the dangers. Burtt and Davis summarize this phase of Wilson's Scottish experience quite well, but the biographies by Cantwell, rather protectively, and Hunter, more critically, deal with it in more detail, and provide the basis for the summary here. (The actual writing that Wilson did in this phase of his career is most thoroughly examined in Gerard Carruthers's forthcoming essay, mentioned above). One of Wilson's first separate publications had been a satirical poem _The Hollander, or Light Weight_ (Paisley: Neilson, 1790), which had accused a local factory owner William Henry of shortchanging payment to his weavers. Wilson also published a second similar satire, "Hab's Door; or the Temple of Terror." These satires made Wilson a local hero, and they also (not coincidentally) provided publicity for his forthcoming book. Henry took out a summons against Wilson for libel, and, more threateningly at that time, for "incitement to unrest." Though Wilson asserted that the poem did not refer to Henry, or that if it did it was justified, these claims were soon rejected. Partly because Wilson kept disappointing himself on his journeys selling chapbooks, the case dragged on for the rest of the year, before being quietly dropped.

But Wilson's next such effort had graver consequences. Egged on or used by canniest local radicals, Wilson wrote another attack, on a different factory owner, "The Shark, or Lang Mills Detected." The
Ye weaver blades! Ye noble chiels!
Wha fill our land wi' plenty,
And mak our vera barest fiels
To wave wi' lika dainty...

But Wilson then goes on to denounce the factory owner Shark/Sharp:

Wha cou'd believe a chiel sae trig
|Wad cheat us o' a bodle?
Or that sae fair a gowden wig
Contained sae black a noodle?
But Shark beneath a sleekest smile
Conceals his fiercest girning;
And, like his neighbours of the Nile,
Devours wi' little warning
By night or day.

Indeed the poem imagines Shark being hung and flogged and shot:

Kick out the scoun'rel to his shift,
We'll pay him for his sporting.

In May 1792, while the new poem was still in manuscript, Wilson’s target William Sharp received an anonymous letter threatening its publication if he did not send five guineas to “A.B.,” c/o of Neilson the Paisley printer. Sharp immediately petitioned the authorities against “these highly libelous, incendiary and dangerous publications,” a warrant was issued prohibiting publication, and Wilson was arrested for libel and blackmail. He admitted that the letter was in his handwriting, but at first he denied authorship of the poem. Then he admitted authorship, but denied the poem referred to Sharp, a denial that Sharp’s lawyer easily demolished. In June 1792, Wilson was ordered to appear in court, to “beg pardon of God and the complainer,” and to be imprisoned till he had paid a substantial total of over £60 in damages, a fine, and costs. It didn’t help that Wilson was off on his wanderings when the case was heard, and his subsequent claim that he had asked a lawyer to represent him who had also failed to show up was unavailing. He was fined another £10 and had to get his brother-in-law to stand surety. Despite the Sheriff’s warrant, the poem was then printed and circulated, and in January 1793, Wilson was imprisoned again in the Paisley Tolbooth, and ordered to burn all copies of all three poems publicly, on the Tolbooth steps. Additional small fines began to accumulate for aggravating the offense. Though Wilson complained in court about persecution (“the foolish and determined severity of a rigorous prosecution”), Hunter suggests that neither Sharp nor the authorities pushed their legal advantage to its limit.

But the screw was tightening. In January 1794, the accusations against Wilson got more dangerous, this time for writing and circulating an advertisement for “the Friends of Liberty and Reform.” He denied the charges, and amazingly, once he had found friends to stand surety for an increased bond for his good behaviour, the authorities again let him out. In the Scottish sedition trials of 1793, the much-feared sentence was transportation to the new prison-settlement of Botany Bay. If the authorities avoided making Wilson a political martyr, it is hard not to believe that they also wanted him to go away, to solve their problem by “self-transportation.”

In May 1794, out on bail, and fearing that he would inevitably, sooner or later, face charges of sedition, Wilson took passage across the Atlantic as a deck passenger from Belfast to Delaware, a voyage that took nearly two months. He knew no one. He was responsible for a young nephew he’d brought with him. Yet, on the second day in America, as the pair of them were walking away from Wilmington towards Philadelphia, a brilliant plumaged bird caught Wilson’s eye, and the seed was planted for his future career. Eventually he picked up some weaving work near Philadelphia, where his imagination was fired by observing great migratory flocks of ducks and geese. He met a fellow-Scot, the engraver Alexander Lawson (1772-1846), from Lanarkshire, who had himself emigrated for political reasons in 1793, and who would later work on Wilson’s American Ornithology and on the illustrations of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Wilson himself trained and worked for a time as an engraver, and then found a series of positions as a schoolteacher, where (as Burtt and Davis reveal) he drew pictures of birds in his students’ exercises books as a reward for good work. He put down a payment on a farm and sent home for his sister and other family members. In 1804 he became an American citizen. In 1806, Wilson took an editorial job with a Philadelphia publisher, and in 1808 he published the first volume of his great work on ornithology, completing nine volumes before his death in 1813. He went on writing poetry, for respected American magazines. Like Turnbull, Wilson did not collect these later writings in volume form himself, but some of his American poems were included in the posthumous edition of his work that was published in London in 1816. Unlike Turnbull, Wilson does not seem after emigration to have written any new poems in Scots.

For Burnsians, one of Wilson’s American poems is of particular interest, because it includes the only firsthand evidence that Wilson actually met Burns. In 1801, another Philadelphia publisher, Thomas Dobson, had issued a (pirated) American edition of James Currie’s four-volume Works of Robert Burns. This required, not just resetting the type of Currie’s edition, but a re-engraving by Wilson’s friend Alexander Lawson of the famous frontispiece portrait from Currie, which itself was already a re-engraving, with elaborations, from the Nasmyth-Beugo portrait for the 1787 Edinburgh edition.
When he saw the portrait of Burns that his friend Lawson had produced, Wilson was both impressed and moved. He wrote a poem about Lawson’s portrait, which was first published in the Literary Magazine and American Register (Philadelphia: J. Conrad), 5:6 (June, 1806): 477-478:

ON SEEING THE PORTRAIT OF ROBERT BURNS
ADDRESS TO THE ARTIST

Yes, it is he! The hapless, well-known Burns;
His looks, his air, his very soul exprest;
That heaven-taught bard whom weeping Genius mourns,
For cold in earth his silent relics rest.

Through tears that ease the anguish of my heart,
I view this faithful image of my friend;
And vainly wish, dear Lawson, that thy art
Could life once more to these lov’d features lend.

Who sees not here, in this expressive eye,
The independent soul, the ardent mind;
The boundless fancy, Pity’s generous sigh,
The heart to all but its possessor kind.

Alas! I knew him when his country’s pride,
Yet left dark Poverty’s cold winds to brave;
And those who then the friendly hand deny’d,
Now strew with flowers his green unconscious grave.

The dear, remember’d scenes we oft have seen,
The burnies, haughs, and knows of yellow broom,
The hazel-glen, the birk-surrounded linn,
The blossom’d heather, and the hawthorn’s bloom.

The simple tales of Scotia’s hardy swains,
The loves and sports their circling seasons bring;
Who now will celebrate in equal strains?
What bard like Burns will ever, ever sing?

O he was Nature’s genuine warbler born,
Too early lost, from pensive Scotia tore;
Death snatch’d him from us in life’s early dawn,
Ere half the raptures of his song were o’er.

Thus soars the thrilling lark at dawn of day,
Sweet to each list’ning swain her warblings flow;
And thus the hawk sweeps down upon his prey,
And leaves the world in solitude below.

A.W.

Gray’s Ferry, April 25, 1806.
It is an interesting poem in at least three ways. First, it provides a direct statement that Wilson had met Burns and remembered what he had looked like. Second, its imagery of the poet as bird, and poetry as bird-song, unites Wilson’s two enthusiasms. Third, it exemplifies the bitter-sweet tone of exile poetry, looking back not only on “dear remember’d scenes,” but “dark Poverty’s cold winds,” in a Scotland that Wilson, Lawson, and Turnbull had all left in the 1790s for good reason. It may well be one of the better among the many poetic tributes paid to Burns in the years after his death (cf. Roy, “The mair they talk”).

What might have been Burns’s future if, in the mid-1790s, he, like Turnbull and Wilson, had emigrated to the United States? Would he have settled in one place as Turnbull and Wilson did, or would he have moved on, as so many Scots immigrants did, down through Virginia to the Carolina upcountry, or on to Kentucky or Tennessee or north Georgia? Burns was a farmer, not a weaver, and he had already rescued and improved two farms in Scotland. Would he have stayed with farming, and gone south and west to find land to clear, or like Turnbull and Wilson would he have found that, even without much formal education, a Scottish upbringing had given him the skills and talents that would open up some new career that would have been closed to him in Scotland? Like Turnbull and Wilson, would he have gone on writing poetry?

In a poem about Scottish emigration, “The Tears of Britain,” apparently written before he emigrated but first published in an American periodical, Wilson presciently portrays the exiles of his generation, people like himself and Turnbull, as a real loss to the country that let them go:

   Down yonder rough beach, where the vessels attend,
   I see the sad emigrants slowly descend;
   Compell’d by the weight of oppression and woe,
   Their kindred, and native, and friends to forego,
   In these drooping crowds that depart every day
   I see the true strength of the State glide away,
   While countries that hail the glad strangers to shore
   Shall flourish when Britain’s proud pomp is no more. (Grosart II: 213).

Of course, we can’t know what would have happened to an emigrant Burns. But the contrasted and intertwined stories of the three young poets from the west of Scotland, one who stayed and two who crossed the Atlantic, are nonetheless instructive, thought-provoking, and in some ways inspiring. They remind us of the close ties between Scotland and America, and that the Scottish heritage has at its best always been not only about the past but about the future.

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__________, and Ebenezer Picken, The Laurel Disputed; Or, the Merits of Allan Ramsay and Robert Ferguson <sic> Contrasted in Two Poetical Essays (Edinburgh: Guthrie, 1791).


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the age of twelve. The difficulty of the labor later had a crippling effect on his health. The family worked hard on the Ayrshire farm and at several others, but their lives were never made easier. Ongoing troubles with landlords and their agents fueled the rebellion that Burns felt against authority, which later became a major theme in his poetry.
Robert Burns was a famous Scottish poet and lyricist, who was also known as the national poet of Scotland. Read more about his life and works in the following article.

Quick Facts. Robert Burns is the best loved Scottish poet, admired not only for his verse and great love-songs, but also for his character, his high spirits, "kirk-defying", hard drinking and womanising! He came to fame as a poet when he was 27 years old, and his lifestyle of wine, women and song made him famous all over Scotland. He was the son of a farmer, born in a cottage built by his father, in Alloway in Ayr. This cottage is now a museum, dedicated to Burns. 7 facts about Robert Burns, Scotland’s national bard. Famed as Scotland’s national bard, Robert Burns (1759–96) penned many famous verses including 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'Address to a Haggis'. His life and work are celebrated by many Scots on Burns Night, 25 January, on the anniversary of the poet's work. Writing for History Extra, Dr Ronnie Young, a lecturer in Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, shares seven lesser-known facts about the Scottish hero...