



Robert Burns Association with & Alison Begbie

The most important of the early friends of the opposite sex with whom the poet associated, Alison Begbie (1762–1823) is a somewhat shadowy figure. Indeed, other biographers of Burns also refer to her as Ellison Begbie or Elizabeth Gebbie. One editor has highlighted his thoughts that Burns' youngest sister Isobel Burns may have confused her name, which was really Elizabeth Gebbie.

She is said to have been born in the parish of Galston, the daughter of a farmer, and at the time of her courtship by Robert Burns she is thought to have been a servant or housekeeper employed at Carnell House, then known as Cairnhill, on the River Cessnock, situated about 2 miles from Loudoun Mill. Burns was living at Lochlea Farm at this time.

Alison reportedly met Burns in 1781 near Lochlea Farm, either when he was passing Carnhill with his cart for coals or collecting lime from the Carnhill lime kilns located between Dykehead and Snodston.

Life and character

Although not a beauty, she had many charming qualities. Burns said of her

"All these charming qualities, heightened by an education much beyond anything I have ever met in any woman I ever dared to approach, have made an impression on my heart that I do not think the world can ever efface."

Burns had hoped to set up a household of his own with Alison. Her rejection of him may have significantly contributed to the depressive illness that he suffered whilst living and working in Irvine.

Five letters from Burns were claimed by Dr James Currie (the editor of the first book on Burns work and life) to have been sent to Alison Begbie. Of these, only one in manuscript form survives, this being the first, in which Burns using the introduction "*My dear E*", hopes the recipient will not despise him because he is '*ignorant of the flattering arts of courtship*'. The other letters were only found by Dr Currie in draft form among Burns' papers as lent to him by his wife Jean Armour after his death.

A proposal of marriage is made in the fourth letter:

'If you will be so good and so generous as to admit me for your partner, your companion, your bosom friend through life, there is nothing on this side of eternity shall give me greater transport.'

It seems that Burns may have been too shy to propose to her in person. It is clear from the fourth letter that a reply had been received from "*My dear E*". As the fifth draft letter includes the line "*I am a stranger in these matters A --*".

In his autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore, Burns said that in his 23rd year, somebody, '*a bellefill whom I adored*', jilted or refused him '*with peculiar circumstances of mortification*'. The fifth letter in the series, supposedly to Begbie, gives no indication of the existence of any such circumstances. However, it was Burns' sister Isabella who first said that Alison Begbie was the person her brother referred to.

Ferguson another early editor of Burns life and work, goes so far as to suggest that the letters may not have been 'personal letters of Burns' at all, since we have his own testimony that he often acted as go-between for his shy and less literate friends.'

Reference to Alison Begbie in Burns Poems & Songs

Alison's surname Begbie was difficult to pair in rhyme, so Burns is said to have used artistic licence and named her in his work as 'Peggy Alison'.

It is thought that Alison is likely to be the '*lass of Cessnock Banks*' who inspired Burns to write '*On Cessnock banks a lassie dwells*', and the Peggy Alison included within '*And I'll kiss thee yet, yet*', both of which appeared in the *Scots Musical Museum* to the tunes of 'The Butcher Boy' and 'Braes o' Balquidder' respectively. Burns called his Cessnock Lass work his '*Song of Similes*'.

But her main claim to our grateful remembrance is that, according to some Burns scholars, she seems much more likely to have been the inspiration of that exquisite love song '*O Mary at thy window be*' rather than the actual Mary Morrison who lies buried in the churchyard at Mauchline, and whom the poet is thought to have met only once. This song was marked by Burns to go to the tune 'Duncan Davidson', as printed by Dick in *The Songs of Burns*. Thomson published it with the tune 'Bide ye yet'. It was matched to 'The Glasgow Lasses' in a collection, *Scotch Airs* published in 1818, but since then is usually published with the tune 'The Miller' (in the second volume of the *Museum*), one of the few unauthorised airs that suit the words better than the air chosen by the poet.

Alison Begbie is said to have married another a few years after her alleged 'jilting' of Burns and to have settled in Glasgow.

She was flattered enough however to commit Burns' 'Cessnock Banks' verses about her to memory and when as an older lady, living in Glasgow, at 74 King Street, was able to repeat, accurately, most of them, 26 years after first hearing them, to Robert Hartley Cromek of Hull, the author of the 1811 publication "Reliques of Robert Burns." Cromek does not give the first name of Mrs Brown, simply stating that the song was from "A lady residing in Glasgow, whom the bard in early life affectionately admired." Elizabeth Brown, née Gebbie, her husband Hugh are known to have moved to Glasgow. They had four children, Helen (b.Nov. 1784), Agnes (b.June 1787), Hugh (b.June 1789) and Elizabeth (b.April 1791).

As with several of the female acquaintances Burns had during his life, the full details are not always clear and straightforward. However, what is clear is that Burns was attracted to Alison Begbie and held her in high regard. Below are the words to the three poems / songs he wrote highlighting his affection for her:

The Lass of Cessnock Banks

On Cessnock banks a lassie dwells;
Could I describe her shape and mien;
Our lassies a' she far excels,
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

She's sweeter than the morning dawn
When rising Phoebus first is seen
And dew-drops twinkle o'er the lawn;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

She's stately, like yon youthful ash
That grows the cowslips braes between
And drinks the stream with vigour fresh;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

She's spotless, like the flow'ring thorn
With flow'rs so white and leaves so green
When purest in the dewy morn;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her looks are like the vernal May
When ev'ning Phoebus shines serene,
While birds rejoice on ev'ry spray;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her hair is like the curling mist
That climbs the mountain sides at e'en,
When flow'r-reviving rains are past;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her forehead's like the show'ry bow
When gleaming sun-beams intervene
And gild the distant mountain's brow;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her cheeks are like yon crimson gem,
The pride of all the flowery scene,
Just opening on its thorny stem;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her teeth are like the nightly snow
When pale the morning rises keen,
While hid the murmuring streamlets flow;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her lips are like yon cherries ripe
Which sunny walls from Boreas screen;
They tempt the taste and charm the sight;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her breath is like the fragrant breeze
That gently stirs the blossom'd bean,
When Phoebus sinks behind the seas;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

Her voice is like the ev'ning thrush
That sings on Cessnock banks unseen,
While his mate sits nestling in the bush;
An' she has twa sparkling, rogueish een.

But it's not her air, her form, her face,
Though matching beauty's fabled Queen;
'Tis the mind that shines in ev'ry grace,
An' chiefly in her rogueish een.

And I'll kiss thee yet, yet

An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
An I'll kiss thee o'er again;
An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
My bony Peggy Alison.

Ilk Care and Fear, when thou art near,
I ever mair defy them, O;
Young kings upon their hansel throne
Are no sae blest as I am, O!

An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
An I'll kiss thee o'er again;
An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
My bony Peggy Alison.

When in my arms, wi' a' thy charms,
I clasp my countless treasure, O!
I seek nae mair o' Heav'n to share,
Than sic a moment's pleasure, O!

An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
An I'll kiss thee o'er again;

An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
My bony Peggy Alison.

And by thy een sae bony blue,
I swear I'm thine forever O!
And on thy lips I seal my vow,
And break it shall I never O!

An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
An I'll kiss thee o'er again;
An I'll kiss thee yet, yet,
My bony Peggy Alison.

Mary Morison

O Mary, at thy window be,
It is the wish'd, the trysted hour!
Those smiles and glances let me see,
That makes the miser's treasure poor:
How blythely wad I bide the stoure,
A weary slave frae sun to sun,
Could I the rich reward secure,
The lovely Mary Morison.

Yestreen when to the trembling string
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha'
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard nor saw:
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd, and said amang them a',
"Ye are na Mary Morison."

O Mary, canst thou wreck his peace,
Wha for thy sake wad gladly die?
Or canst thou break that heart of his,
Whase only faut is loving thee?
If love for love thou wilt na gie
At least be pity to me shown:
A thought ungentle canna be
The thought o' Mary Morison.

