

BURNS IN ULSTER

FOR OVER TWO CENTURIES, THE WORKS OF ROBERT BURNS HAVE BEEN MUCH-LOVED AROUND THE WORLD.

Ulster has a particularly close relationship with Scotland's National Bard – some of his friends had Ulster connections, and his poems were first published outside Scotland in the city of Belfast in 1787. In later years, his son Robert Burns Jr came to Belfast to meet his daughter and granddaughter who lived in the city for almost 25 years. They later gave many of their personal artefacts to friends and collections in Belfast.

THE STORY OF BURNS IN ULSTER IS ONE OF AN AULD ACQUAINTANCE THAT SHOULD NEVER BE FORGOT.


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BURNS IN ULSTER

Robert Burns

AYRSHIRE & ULSTER; BURNS' EARLY LIFE

Ayrshire is on the west coast of Scotland, with County Antrim just a short boat journey away. The close relationship of the two coastlines, with the sea as the highway between, has meant there have been centuries of natural cultural migrations across the water.

1315 – THE BRUCE BROTHERS

In 1315, **Edward Bruce**, the brother of King Robert the Bruce of Scotland, sailed from Ayr with 6,000 men in 300 boats, in an alliance with the Ulster O'Neills to oust the Anglo-Normans from Ireland.

1606 – HAMILTON AND MONTGOMERY

The Bruces' plan failed, but almost 300 years later in 1606 it was another two Ayrshire men – **James Hamilton** from Dunlop and **Hugh Montgomery** from Braidstane Castle near Beith – who struck a deal with the Clancloye O'Neills and began a huge migration of thousands of Lowland Scottish families into County Down, which eventually spread across the rest of Ulster. The Scots language, Presbyterian faith, and many other cultural traditions came with them, the legacy of which is still with us today.

REV GEORGE LAURIE'S

ULSTER COVENANTER ANCESTRY

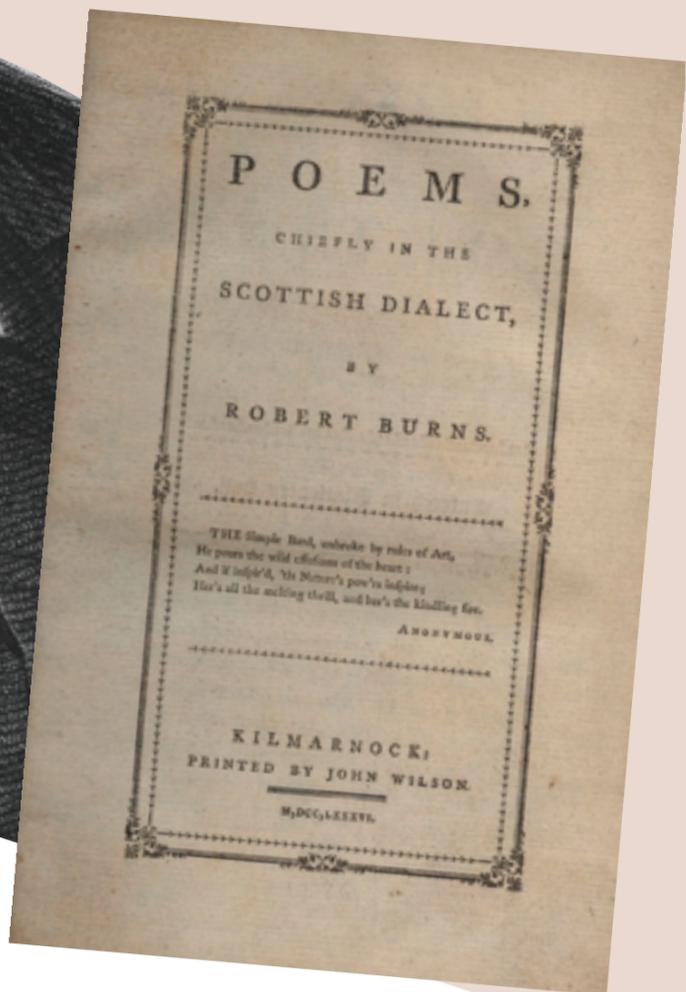
Burns was born at Alloway on 25 January 1759. Shortly after his first edition was printed in 1786, the 27-year-old Robert Burns was encouraged in his poetry by the **Rev George Laurie** of Newmilns in Ayrshire – a man with a knowledge of the literature of both Scotland and Ireland. Laurie's grandfather, **John Laurie**, had been the Presbyterian Covenanter minister of Auchinleck in Ayrshire. Like so many others he came to Ulster in the 1670s during Scotland's 'Killing Times' of persecution and became minister of Macosquin near Coleraine. Earlier Lauries are also said to have come to Ulster.

FROM KILMARNOCK TO EDINBURGH

Burns had decided to emigrate to Jamaica, and while travelling to the docks at Greenock he called at Laurie's manse, where he enjoyed an evening of music, song, dancing and poetry with the family. A letter arrived for Laurie, from a Dr Blacklock, requesting Burns to come to Edinburgh – Burns later wrote that this 'overthrew all my schemes' of emigration. He stayed in Scotland, and soon a new edition was printed in Edinburgh.

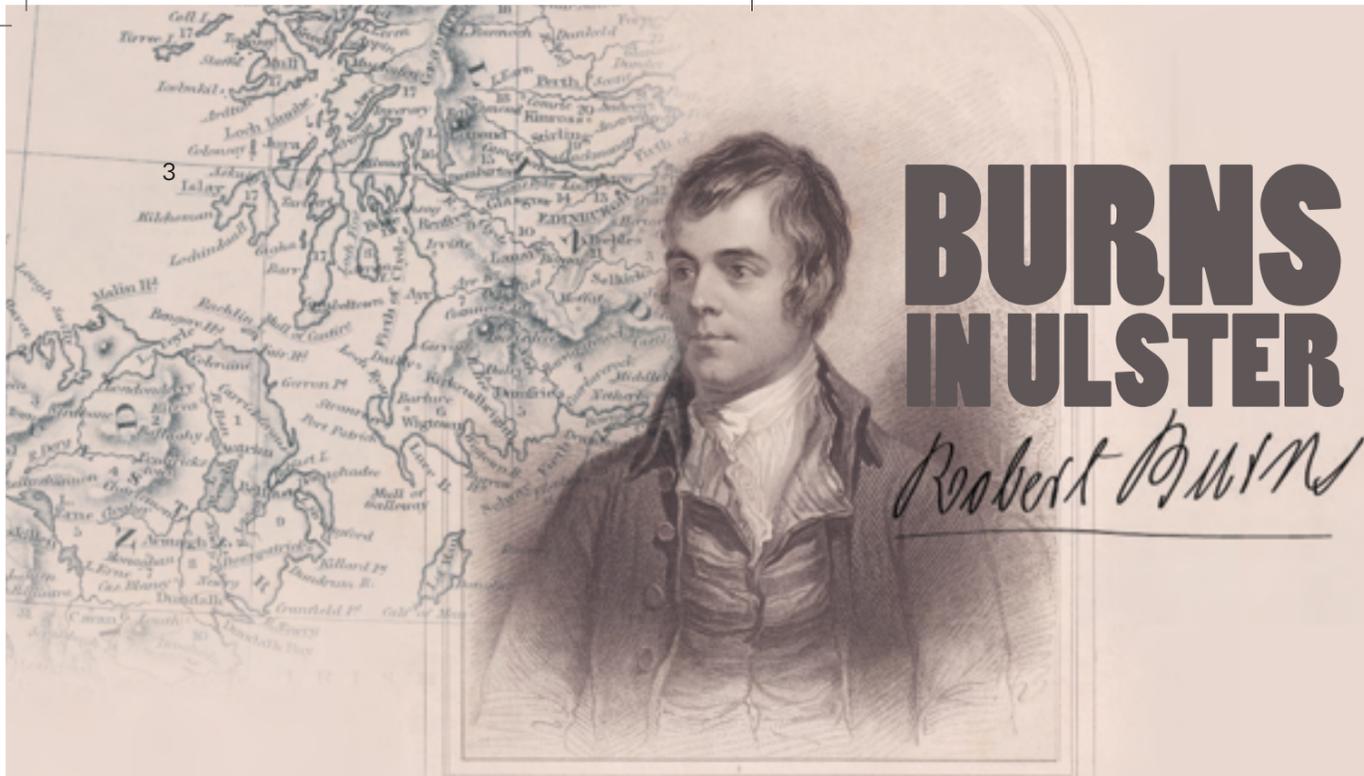
Burns, the 'Ayrshire Ploughman', had gone national.

Left: Rev George Laurie of Newmilns
Below: Title page of Burns' first edition,
printed in Kilmarnock in 1786




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1787: BURNS' POEMS PRINTED IN BELFAST

Robert Burns' poems quickly became popular in Ulster-Scots-speaking Belfast. Literature in the Scots language had been popular in the city for decades – works by Scottish poets such as Sir David Lindsay, Alexander Montgomerie and Allan Ramsay had been printed in Belfast as well as in Scotland.

'BROAD SCOTCH'

When Amyas Griffith from Tipperary came to Belfast in 1780 as Surveyor of Excise he noted that **'the common people speak broad Scotch, and the better sort differ vastly from us, both in accent and language.'**

'SCOTCH TOWN'

French aristocrat Le Chevalier de la Tochnaye, when visiting the city in 1797, wrote that **'Belfast has almost entirely the look of a Scotch town and the character of the inhabitants has considerable resemblance to that of the people of Glasgow. The way of speaking is much more Scotch than Irish.'**

1786: BURNS' POEMS PRINTED

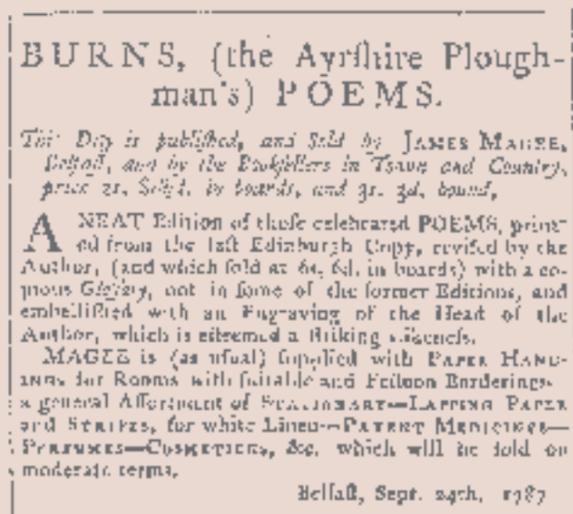
Burns' first edition of *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was published in Kilmarnock in July 1786. It sold out within weeks, and individual Burns poems were printed in the *Belfast Newsletter* from October 1786 onwards.

1787: THE BELFAST EDITION

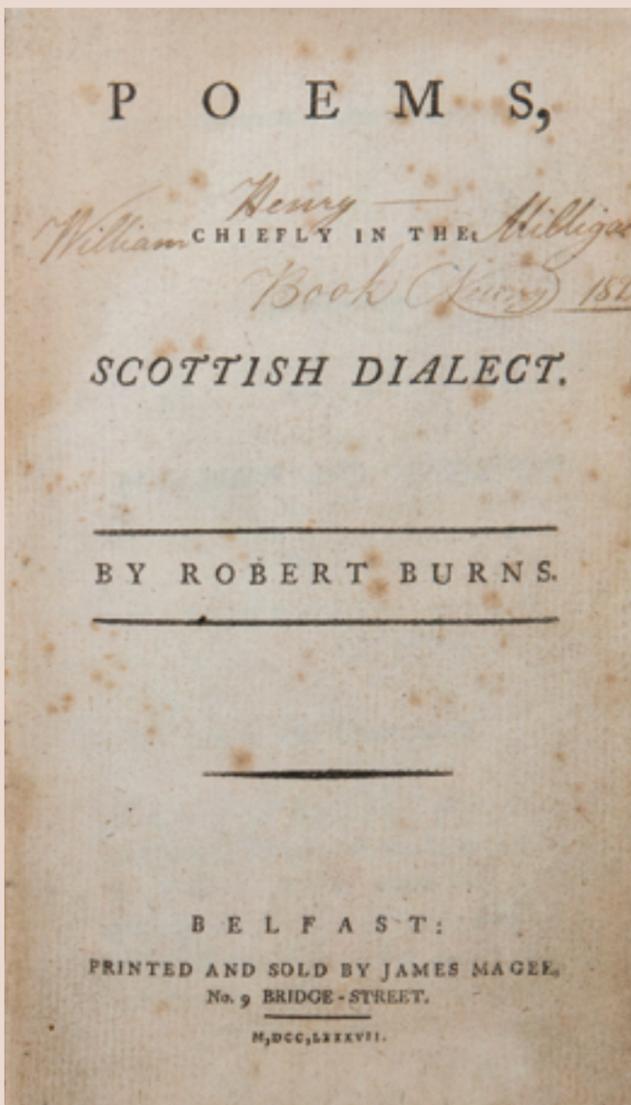
Burns then headed for Edinburgh where a second edition was published in April 1787. Back in Belfast, the city where **'Clabber Loning'**, **'Point Loning'** and famously **'The Pass Loning'** (from the Scots word 'loanen' which means 'lane') would all be marked on James Williamson's 1791 map, demand for Burns' poems was increasing.

The popularity caught the attention of Belfast printer **James Magee**, who placed an advert in the *Belfast Newsletter* on 24 September 1787, announcing that he has printed his own (unauthorised) edition. A copy of this edition is in the Gibson Collection in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast. Many other editions would be printed in Belfast and Ulster towns in the centuries that followed.

Below: Title page of James Magee's 1787 Belfast printing of Burns' poems
Left: Magee's advert in the *Belfast Newsletter*

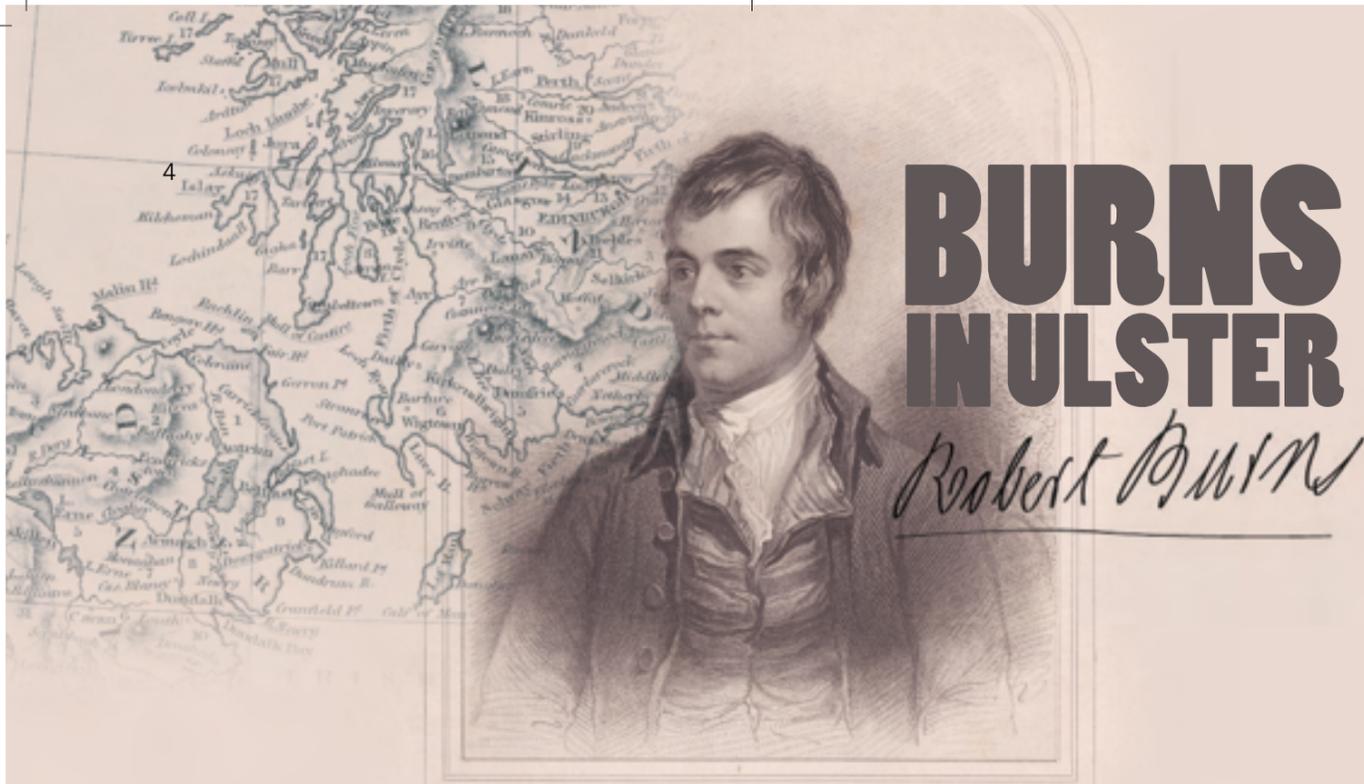


In the following 40 years, an estimated 30 editions of Burns' poems were printed in Belfast




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1790s: ULSTER-SCOTS POETS AND BURNS

Ayrshire, Burns' home county, is visible from Ulster. Naturally, there were several influential Ulster-Scots poets who saw Burns – his rural roots, his language and his aspirations – as being almost identical to their own, all part of a common cultural community that spanned the North Channel.

SAMUEL THOMSON OF CARNGRANNY, THE 'FATHER OF ULSTER-SCOTS POETRY'

In particular, **Samuel Thomson of Carngranny** (near Roughfort, between Mallusk and Templepatrick) was regarded as the 'Father of Ulster-Scots poetry'. He was a schoolteacher and inspired a group of younger men in the locality to write in their own tongue. In 1793, aged just 27, Thomson published his own collection of poems – *Poems on Different Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect*, and dedicated it to "Mr Robert Burns, the Ayrshire Poet". It included a poem entitled 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns'

**I've aften read their pages a'
An' monie mair o' deep ingine
But frae a' the verses e'er I saw
Your Cotter fairly taks the shine**

SAMUEL THOMSON VISITS BURNS

In early 1794 Thomson and his friend **John Williamson** travelled to Dumfries to meet Burns – Thomson and Burns sent each other letters, books and even snuff. In July of the same year **Henry Joy**, the publisher of the *Belfast Newsletter*, and **William Bruce** also visited Burns. Thomson's friend **Luke Mullan** visited Burns in Edinburgh in 1796.

Right: A letter from Burns which was printed in the *Belfast Newsletter*

JAMES ORR, ULSTER'S BURNS

Burns died on 21 July 1796 at his home in Dumfries and was greatly mourned in Scotland and Ulster. **James Orr of Ballycarry**, a young protégé of Thomson's, published his own *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1804, which included an 'Elegy on the Death of Robert Burns'.

**Dumfries might weel steek ev'ry shap,
An' sen' her tribes to bury Burns
Oh Burns! oh Burns! the wale o' swains
Wi' thee the Scottish music fell**

In later years, James Orr would be described as 'Ulster's Robert Burns'. Some scholars have suggested that some of Orr's writings were better than Burns'.

LEGENDS OF ROBERT BURNS IN ULSTER

Despite many rumours and legends from County Antrim and County Down, there is no firm evidence that Burns himself ever visited Ulster. This folklore shows that people here wanted to believe that he might have – but Robert Burns' descendants certainly did come to Belfast.

To the **PRINTER.**

SIR,

If the productions of a simple Plow-Boy can merit a corner in your paper, your insertion of the inclosed trifle will be succeeded by future communications from

Your's, &c.

R. BURNS.

*Ellie'sland, near Dumfries,
May 18, 1789.*

DELIA.

FAIR the face of orient day,
Fair the tints of op'ning rose;
But fairer still my **DELIA** dawns,
More lovely far her beauty blows.

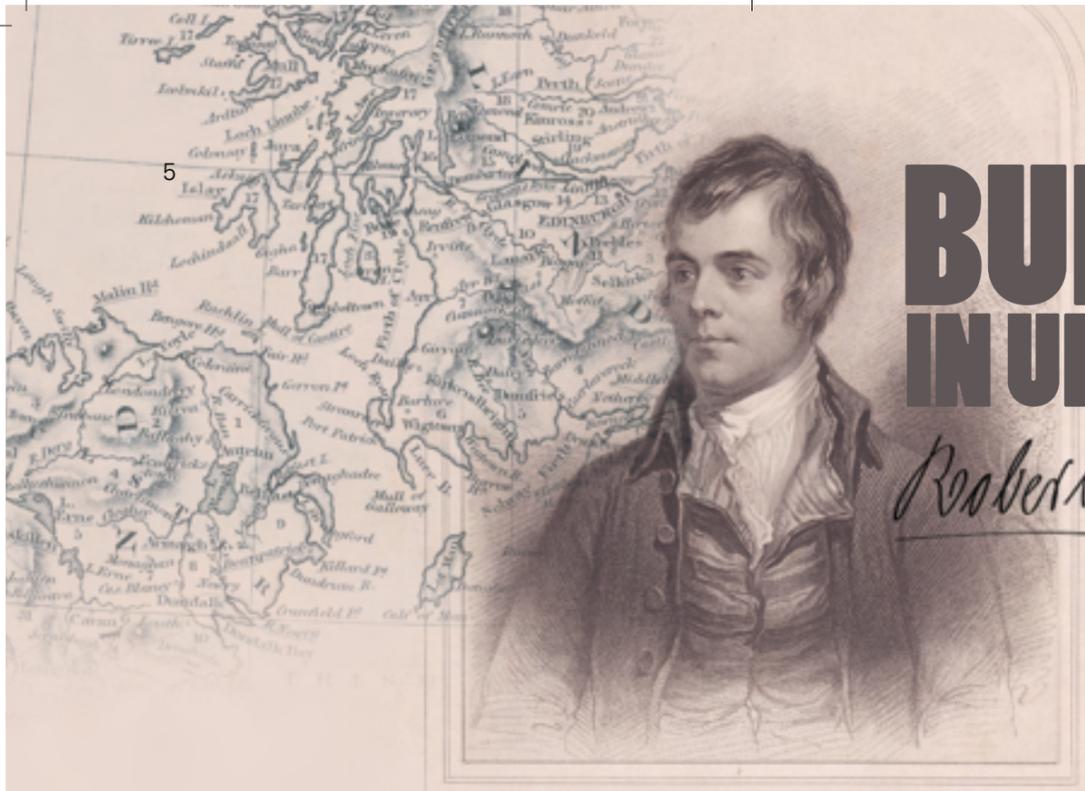
Sweet the Lark's wild-warbled lay,
Sweet the tinkling rill to hear;
But Delia, more delightful still,
Steal thine accents on mine ear.



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JAMES GRAY OF DUMFRIES & BELFAST

Robert Burns moved to Dumfries in 1791. His children attended the grammar school in Dumfries where the Rector was Presbyterian minister Rev James Gray. Gray was the son of a shoemaker, but even as a child he showed a love of literature. He and Burns struck up a close friendship – Gray described Burns as ‘a kind and attentive father’.

GRAY AND BURNS

Gray wrote that Burns ‘took great delight in spending his evenings in the cultivation of the minds of his children. Their education was the grand object of his life... he bestowed great pains in training their minds, habits of thought and reflection, and in keeping them pure from every form of vice.’ Robert Burns Jr, aged only nine, was capable of Latin translation thanks to his father’s tuition.

Gray visited Burns just days before he died – ‘though the hand of death was upon him, he repeated to me a little poem he had composed the day before, full of energy and tenderness’.

James Gray relocated to Edinburgh in 1801; he married the sister of Scottish poet **James Hogg**, the Ettrick Shepherd, and featured in Hogg’s poem ‘Queen’s Wake’.

GRAY COMES TO BELFAST

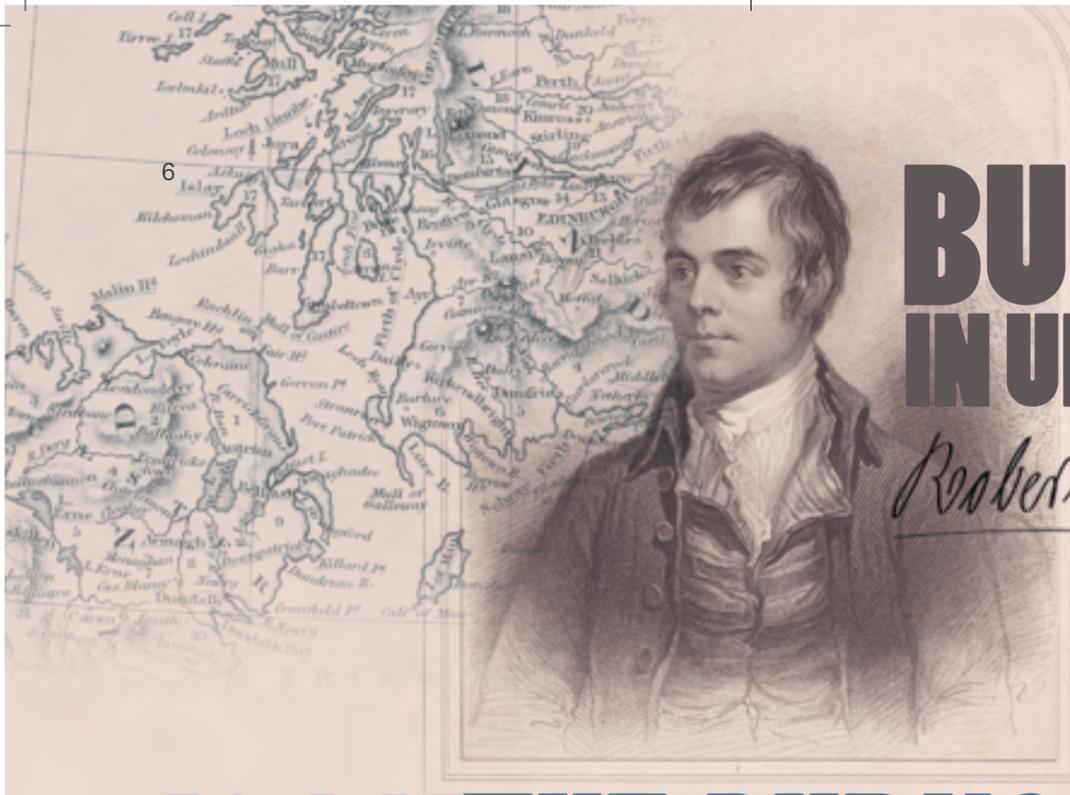
After 21 years in Edinburgh, James Gray came to Belfast to become Principal of **Belfast Academy** in November 1822, succeeding **William Bruce** (who had himself visited Burns in Dumfries). However, Gray’s earlier calling to church life drew him to become a deacon of the Church of Ireland. In 1826 he left Belfast Academy to become a chaplain in India. He was personal tutor to a young Indian king and translated the four Gospels into the local language. Gray died in India in 1830.

Right: Rev James Gray portrait, courtesy of Belfast Royal Academy.




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BURNS IN ULSTER

Robert Burns

1844: THE BURNS FAMILY IN BELFAST

Between 1840 and 1844, Robert Burns' granddaughter Eliza settled in Belfast. Eliza Burns met and married Bartholomew J. Everitt (originally from County Wexford) when she was in India. Tragically on their return voyage to Britain their infant son Robert Burns Everitt died at sea.

ELIZA AND MARTHA COME TO BELFAST

The couple settled in London where a daughter, **Martha Burns Everitt**, was born in October 1839. Tragedy struck the family again when Bartholomew died in April 1840. Eliza and their baby daughter Martha moved to Belfast, to Brougham Street off York Street.

ROBERT BURNS JR COMES TO BELFAST

In 1844, Eliza's father, **Robert Burns Jr**, came to Belfast. There had been a major Burns commemoration in Ayr on 6 August, and the people of Belfast took the opportunity to hold their own celebration later that month. At **Burns Tavern** in Long Lane, and also at the **Belfast Music Hall**, events were held under the auspices of 'Belfast Burns Club'. A public breakfast event was held on 4 September at the **Donegall Arms Hotel**.

BURNS' PERSONAL SEAL IN BELFAST

Robert Burns Jr died on 14 May 1857, and in his will he left Eliza his father's personal wax seal. It is therefore likely that the seal was in Belfast for some years.

MARTHA BURNS EVERITT - RAISED IN BELFAST

Eliza and Martha moved to Wilmont Terrace on the Lisburn Road around 1858, where they remained until around 1865. Martha, aged 26, had effectively spent all of her life in Belfast. They moved to Scotland and settled at Barns Terrace in Ayr. In later years, **Rev Thomas Hamilton**, Principal of Queen's College Belfast, said that Martha had been 'an early and much valued friend of my own'. The Everitts had attended York Street Presbyterian Church where Hamilton's father had been minister – the two families had often shared Christmas dinner together.

Right: Robert Burns Jr and a newspaper account of the event at Burns Tavern in Belfast



Robert Burns' seal (courtesy of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum)

THE BELFAST BURNS' CLUB.

Monday night, the members of this club entertained Mr Robert Burns, son of the poet, at supper, in the Burns Tavern. Mr Archibald Ferguson presided, and Mr James Grant occupied the vice-chair.

The cloth having been removed, and the usual loyal toasts drunk,

The Chairman said, the next toast he had to give was one which they would receive, and respond to, with all that respect which the imperishable memory of the bard deserved; he would give them "The Memory of Burns." Drank in silence.

Mr Robert Burns said he need not say, that a son of Burns had all the feelings that he ought to have, on an occasion so interesting to himself. The present was the first occasion he had an opportunity of returning thanks for the toast of his father's memory in this country—a country distinguished for its hospitality, generosity, and kindly feeling; and he had only to say, in addition, that he felt highly honoured to being invited to meet them on that occasion—(cheer.)

Mr Lewis in a lengthened and complimentary speech, in which he pointed out the many bright traits in the character of the Scottish bard, begged leave to propose "The health of our distinguished guest, Robert Burns, Esq."—(loud and continued cheering.)

Mr Robert Burns said, for the honour they had done him, he thanked them most sincerely. He would not say it was altogether undesired, for he was proud to state that he was the eldest son of the bard of Scotland—(tremendous cheers.) Though the son of Burns, he was a humble individual, and had nothing to boast of. Nevertheless, he could appreciate their kindness, and he trusted his conduct among them would justify the favourable opinion which they had been kind enough to form of him—(hear, hear.) Though not having had the honour of being in Ireland before, he was nevertheless a strong tie to this country. His sister was the widow of an Irish gentleman, who, when alive, resided at (as we understand) New Ross, and his second brother, Colonel Burns, was the widower of an Irish lady—(cheers.) He thanked them for their attention on the occasion, and for placing behind him the national emblem of Scotland—the thistle—which the bard never forgot—(loud and continued applause.)

After some other toasts, Mr Burns, in complimentary terms proposed "The Belfast Club and prosperity to it." He then requested to be admitted an honorary member—(loud and continued applause.)

Several other sentiments were given and responded to during the evening; and the company separated at a late hour, much pleased with the evening's entertainment.—Northern Whig.