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THE JOURNAL OF ILAY BURNS, RECORDING A JOURNEY FROM EDINBURGH TO BRECHIN, AND BACK AGAIN, 1799

Transcribed by

Liz Donald

with an introduction by

Christopher A. Whatley



THE EUROPEAN
ETHNOLOGICAL
RESEARCH CENTRE

The Journal of Ilay Burns, recording a journey from Edinburgh to Brechin, and back again, 1799

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Brechin Cathedral and Round Tower, Forfarshire, Scotland
by Edward Dayes, 1797.
(Wikimedia Commons)

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CONTENTS

Editing	ii
Facsimiles	iii
Maps	ix
Introduction	xi
Journal	1
Appendix	12
Further Reading	15

EDITING

In preparing the diary for publication, the aim has been to create an edition that is both true to the original and accessible to a wide readership. To achieve this, the following editorial conventions have been adopted.

Spelling
The original spelling has been retained. For misspelled words or archaic spellings that might be confused with another word, the correct form is given in [*i.e.*]. Sic has been used to indicate irregular spellings that might otherwise be taken for transcribal or typographical errors, but only on the first appearance of the word in the text. The amount of capitalisation has been reduced.

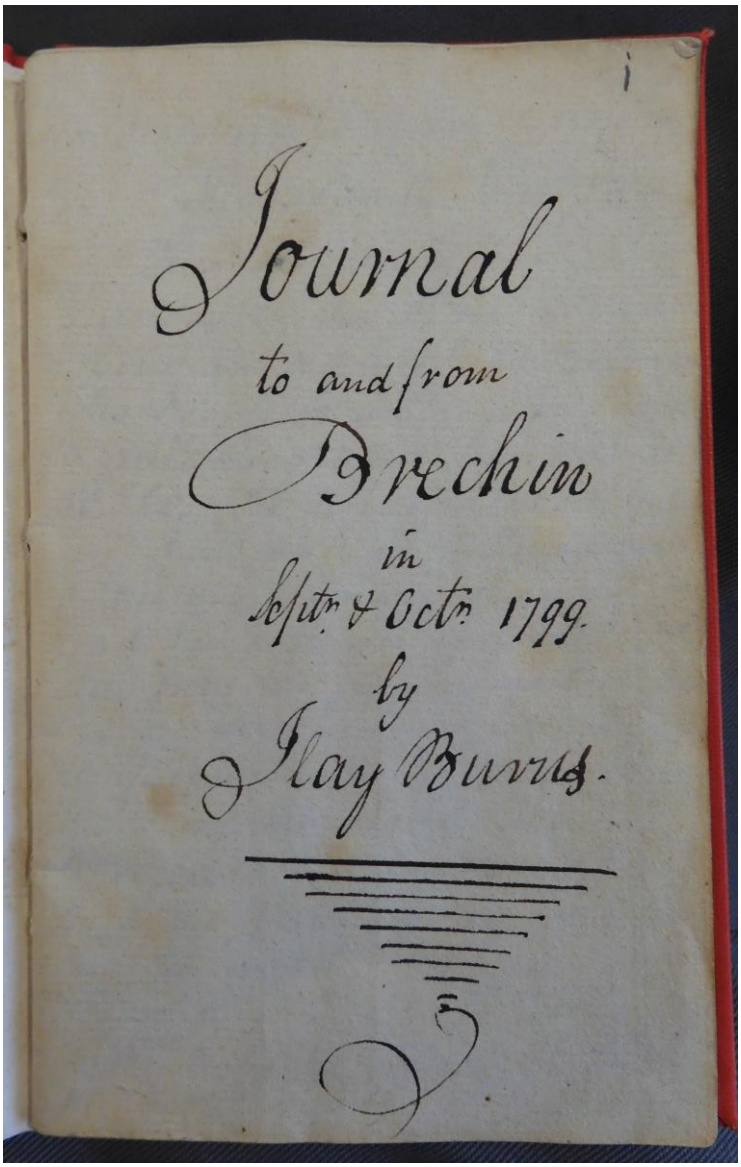
Abbreviations
Burns often used an ampersand in place of 'and'. He always wrote 'tho'' instead of 'though', and frequently abbreviated past participles by replacing the letter *e* in the suffix *-ed* with an apostrophe, for example 'cross'd' and 'walk'd'. He occasionally contracted words, with the terminal letter of the shortened form being given in superscript, for example 'Edin^{r}' (Edinburgh). All of these abbreviations have been silently expanded.

Punctuation
Burns ended each daily entry with a full stop and occasionally punctuated sentences with commas, semi-colons and colons. His most frequently used punctuation mark, however, was the dash. It was widely used in informal writing during this period to join independent clauses, where nowadays a semi-colon or full stop would be employed. When a dash is followed by a capital letter, it has been converted to a full stop. Otherwise, the original punctuation has been retained.

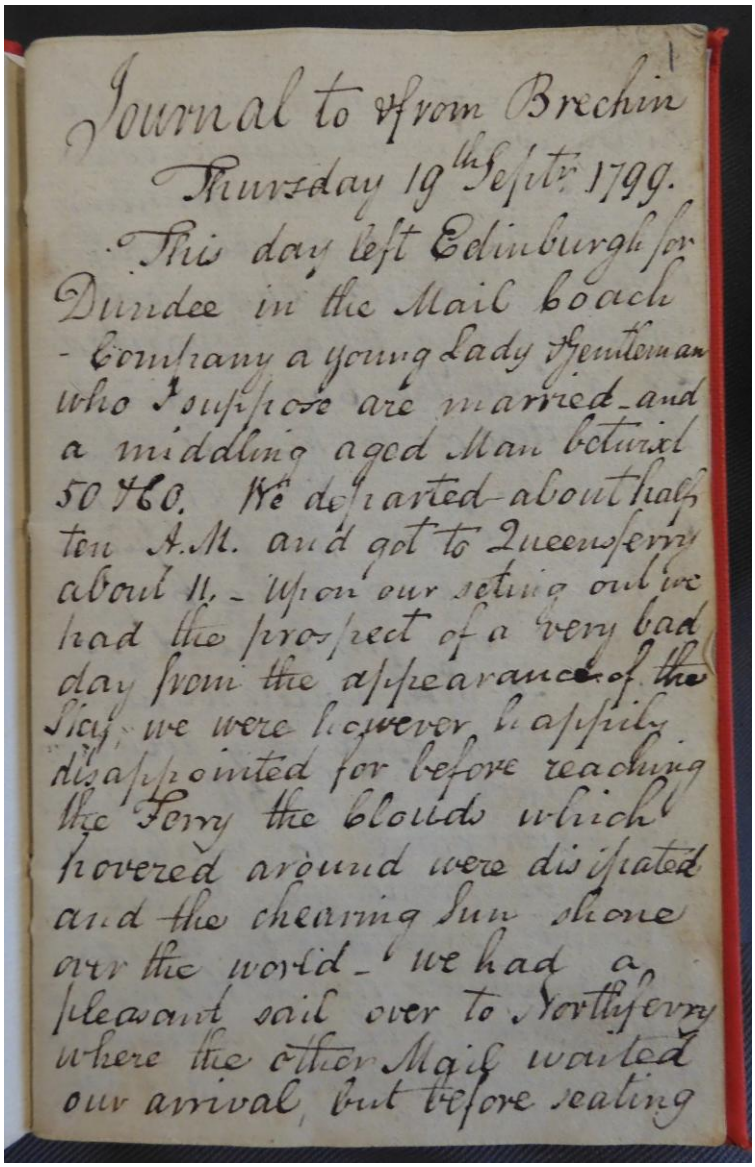
Layout
In all but a few cases, Burns headed each entry in his journal with the name of the day of the week, and the name and date of the month. These headings have been made to conform to a single pattern, e.g. 'Saturday 21 September'. A space has been introduced between each entry. The catchword that Burns added to the foot of nearly every page has not been reproduced (see example and accompanying comment in Facsimile 4).

THE JOURNAL:
A SHORT DESCRIPTION, WITH FACSIMILES

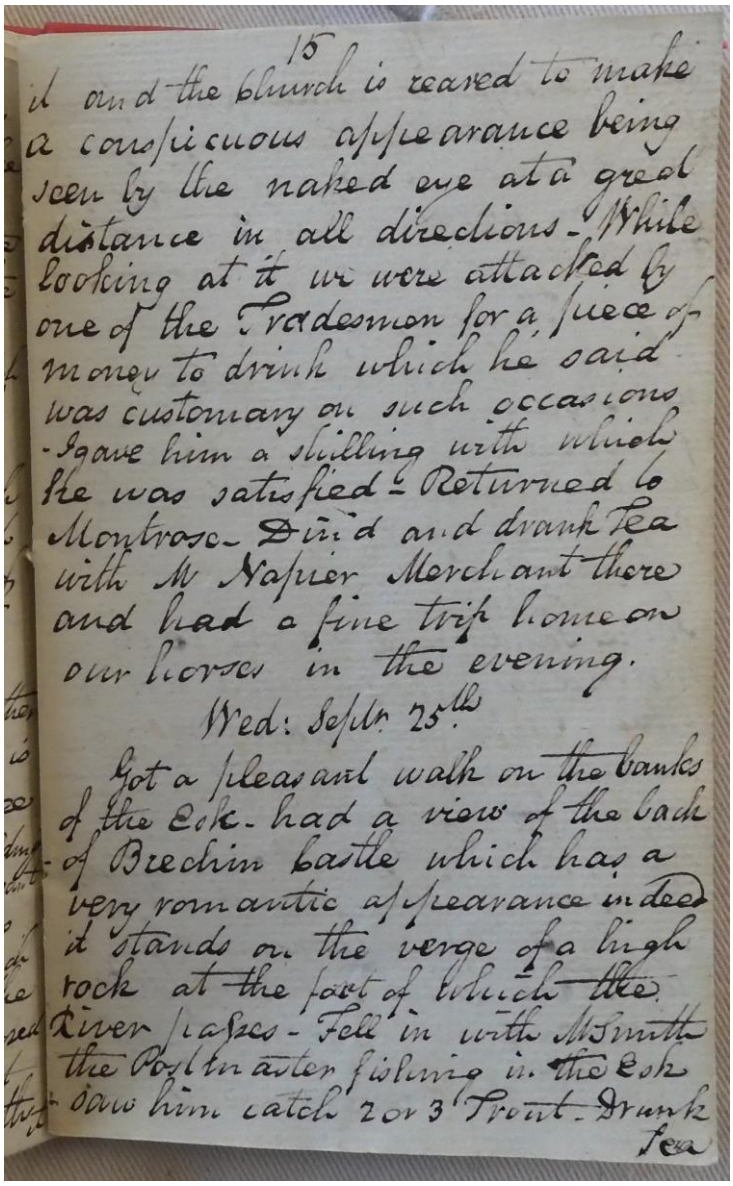
The book used by Ilay Burns for his travel journal comprised twenty-two sextodecimo (*c.*10 cm x *c.*15 cm) blank leaves bound in a limp cover of rough paper. The cover is stained and some of the thread used to bind the leaves is missing. The pages are discoloured and slightly dog-eared but are otherwise in a fair condition. Burns wrote on all the leaves except the final one.



Facsimile 1. As well as providing Burns with the opportunity to display his penmanship, the inclusion of a title page gave his journal a formal, bookish appearance. Facsimile 4 and Facsimile 5 provide further examples of how the presentation of the journal was influenced by printed books of the period. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)


Journal to & from Brechin
Thursday 19th Septr. 1799.
This day left Edinburgh for
Dundee in the Mail Coach
- Company a young Lady & Gentleman
who I suppose are married - and
a middling aged Man Returned
50 M.C. We departed about half
ten A.M. and got to Queensferry
about 11. - Upon our setting out we
had the prospect of a very bad
day from the appearance of the
Sky, we were however happily
disappointed for before reaching
the Ferry the Clouds which
hovered around were dissipated
and the cheering Sun shone
over the world - we had a
pleasant sail over to Northferry
where the other Mail waited
our arrival, but before seating

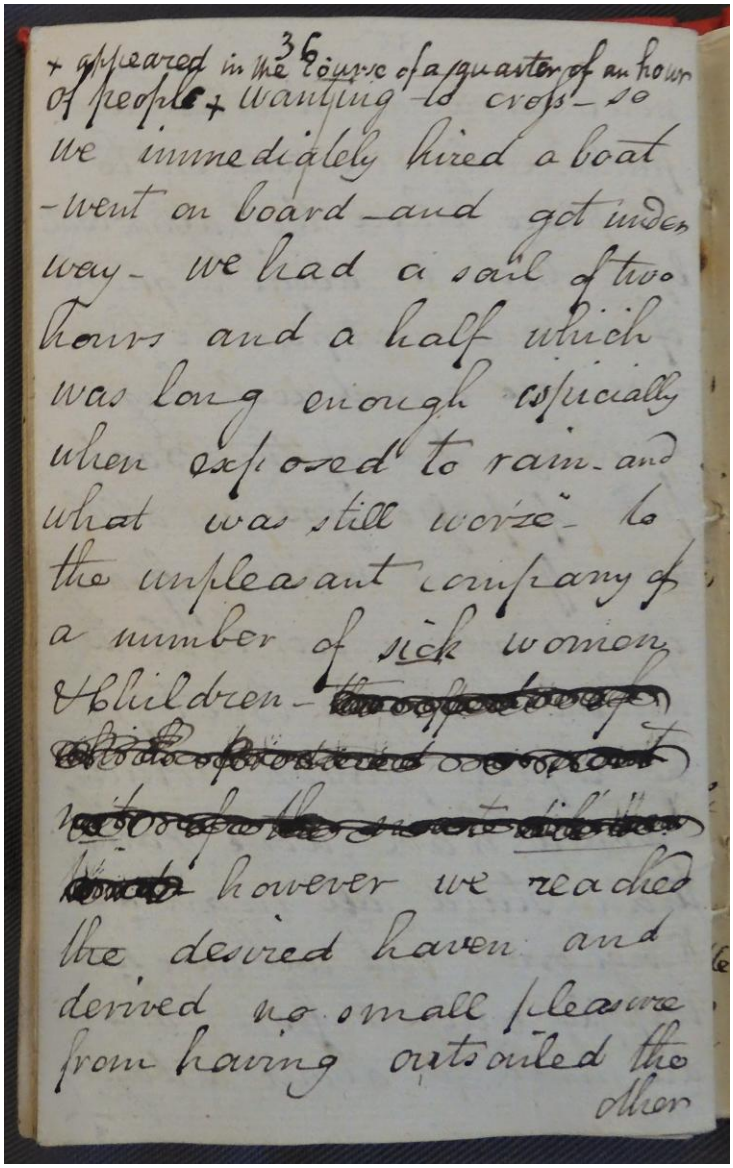
Facsimile 2. Burns included a shortened version of the title above the first entry in his journal. His habit of connecting an ampersand to the following word can be seen in the title and elsewhere on this page. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)


15
id and the Church is reared to make
a conspicuous appearance being
seen by the naked eye at a great
distance in all directions - While
looking at it we were attacked by
one of the Tradesmen for a piece of
money to drink which he said
was customary on such occasions
- I gave him a shilling with which
he was satisfied - Returned to
Montrose - Dined and drank tea
with M Napier Merchant there
and had a fine trip home on
our horses in the evening.

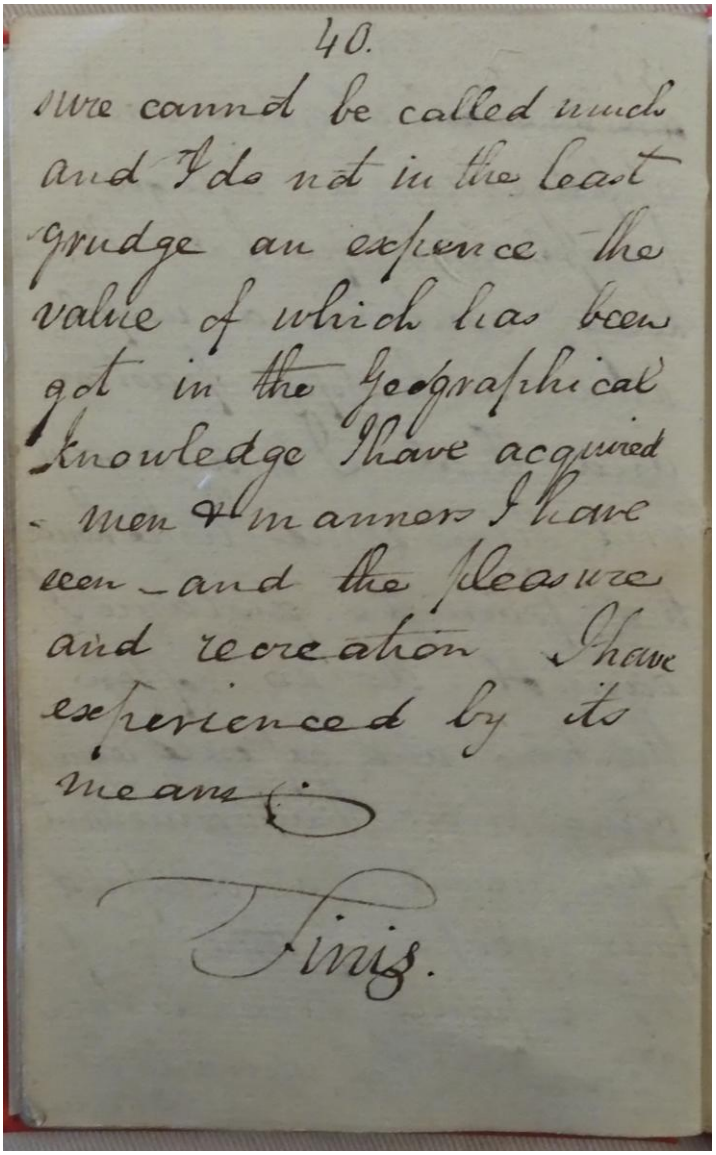
Wed: Septr 25th

Got a pleasant walk on the banks
of the Esk - had a view of the back
of Brechin Castle which has a
very romantic appearance indeed
it stands on the verge of a high
rock at the foot of which the
River passes - Fell in with M Smith
the Postmaster fishing in the Esk
- saw him catch 2 or 3 Trout - Drunk
tea

Facsimile 3. Burns provided each entry in his journal with a header that recorded the day of the week, and the date and name of the month. This example on page 15 shows how he often shortened these headers. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)



Facsimile 4. Page 36 contains examples of text that has been added to and deleted from the original entry. Note also the catchword that has been added to the bottom right-hand corner of the page. Catchwords were widely used by printers to ensure that the pages of a book were bound in the correct order. The book used by Burns was pre-bound, so he appears to have adopted the practice simply to give his journal a more bookish appearance.
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)



Facsimile 5. Burns brought the final entry in the journal to a close with a flourished letter *s*. He also provided it with a final bookish touch by adding 'Finis'.
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)

MAPS



Map 1. A detail from Menzies' *Map of Scotland with Roads* (*c.*1799). Ilay Burns' route from Edinburgh to Brechin has been marked in red. His return route has been marked in blue. The slight detour he took after following the wrong road outside Dundee has not been marked. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)



Map 2. A detail from Ainslie's *Map of the County of Forfar or Shire of Angus* (1794).
Some of the places that Burns visited during his country walks around Brechin can be seen on the map, including the farm of Kintrockat (given here as Kintroaket) to the west of the burgh, and the farm and mill of Arrat to its east. The house and policies of Eskmount, which Burns commented upon in his journal, are also depicted.
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)

INTRODUCTION

Travellers in Scotland

Ilay Burns' journal of his journey from Edinburgh to and from Brechin in the early autumn of 1799 is one of several hundred published and manuscript tours and travels in Scotland between 1720 and 1830. Fifty-eight manuscript Scottish tours are held by the National Library of Scotland, including this one. There are others in the County Record Offices in England and Wales.[1] The number of records of such perambulations rose sharply during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, at the very end of which Ilay Burns embarked upon and recorded his trip from Edinburgh, across the Forth and then through the counties of Fife, Perthshire, and Angus (or Forfarshire as the county was sometimes called, after the county town of Forfar).[2]

Interest in Scotland on the part of both visitors and home-domiciled Scots had grown during the later eighteenth century. This is not to overlook the many travellers who had spent time in Scotland before 1700, with the 'The Voyage of Kynge Edward into Scotland' having been written as early as 1295.[3] Thereafter travellers continued to visit and record their impressions, albeit sporadically. The flow of sightseers intensified in the seventeenth century, although many – xenophobic English writers and cartoonists in particular – were critical of the country's poverty and filth and its peoples' habits.[4] A major change came in the following century with the appearance of antiquarians interested in Scotland's Roman heritage: 'Agricolamania' was the subject of Walter Scott's satirical *The Antiquary* (1816), which was set in the 1790s. With the dismantling of the Jacobite threat after Culloden in 1746, the Highlands became a magnet for tourists from south of the border as well as overseas. Many were drawn by the romance associated with the Highland clans, whose chiefs had now been stripped of their military functions, and the epic Gaelic poetry of James Macpherson, otherwise known as Ossian.[5] Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* was published in the early 1760s.

The Highlands too satisfied contemporaries' search for the 'sublime'. Scotland, for many, seemed to fulfil a Romantic ideal, mysterious and closer to nature than other parts of the British Isles. Others – British patriots, usually English and often Whigs (like Thomas Pennant, a Welshman who toured in 1769 and 1772) – were intrigued by the notion of 'North Britain', and its progress after the Union of 1707.[6] As the fashion for tourism intensified, and with much of Europe cut off by conflict and political upheavals from before the French Revolution until the demise of Napoleon in 1815, journeys within Britain were a substitute that could be afforded by the growing, aspirational

middle classes.[7] They were a domestic variant of the aristocrats' European Grand Tour of previous decades; embedded in both were educative and moral purposefulness.[8]

Infused with the Enlightenment spirit of enquiry, Scots too were keen to know better their own country, and to take pride in its achievements, in history and in the near past – although there were sixteenth-century precursors such as Hector Boece. After 1707, awareness of a distinct national identity grew, in part as a response to fears of English domination. A prime eighteenth-century manifestation of this is the poet Robert Burns, who embarked on lengthy tours of the Borders and the Highlands over the summer months of 1787.[9] With the publication of the Edinburgh edition of his *Poems*, and newly acclaimed as 'Caledonia's Bard', he began his travels as something of a celebrity with an excursion through the Borders, thereby taking him beyond Ayrshire, the county of his birth and source of much of his inspiration. Another enthusiastic Scottish traveller was Uist native the Reverend James Macdonald, unashamedly a Scottish (Tory) patriot, who undertook an ambitious tour of Scotland in the early summer of 1796. Macdonald's principal enthusiasms were Scotland's history, Ossianic literature and Robert Burns (whom he visited just prior to the poet's death). Like several of his fellow countrymen, he also witnessed and admired colliery steam engines and the New Lanark mills, signs that the country was an active participant in the new, exhilarating and still innocent age of industry.[10] By the 1790s the works at New Lanark were attracting several hundred visitors each year, mostly from Scotland, with the rest coming from England and, less often, from mainland Europe and even America.[11] It was in this spirit of enquiry, but from within, that in 1790 Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, MP for Caithness, launched his 'Statistical View of North Britain' project, a systematic parish-by-parish survey of the 'general state of Scotland, as might enable me to give a sufficient idea of the political situation of that part of the British empire'.[12]

Only to an extent did the motives outlined here seem to have applied to Ilay Burns. His primary purpose was to visit one of his brothers, James, who had been ordained as minister of Brechin Cathedral church less than a year earlier, in October 1798. Born in 1774, James had been educated at the universities of Glasgow and St Andrews prior to his ordination.[13]

The route Ilay Burns took differed from most visitors to Scotland or even Scots who wished to see more of their native land. Edinburgh, Perth and to a degree Dundee were much frequented, but much less common – unfashionable but not entirely overlooked – were Forfar and Brechin. Even so, like many of his contemporaries, Burns took a keen interest in what he saw on his journey and must have kept detailed diary notes on most days in order to write up his journal.

Ilay Burns, boy and man

In 1799, Ilay Burns was a relatively young man. He had been born in 1770 to John Burns (1730–1817) and his wife Grizel Ferrier, whose third brother was the father of the novelist Susan Ferrier, author of *Marriage* (1818) and other closely observed novels of Scottish life. She therefore was Ilay Burns' cousin. John Burns had witnessed the Jacobites' narrow victory at Falkirk in January 1746 – an episode about which he was fond of telling, so instilling an historical awareness in his auditors, including his nine children. Earlier in his career he had been a manufacturer and merchant in Scotland's rising staple trade, linen cloth. Most of his adult life was spent in the bustling port and coal-mining and salt-manufacturing town of Bo'ness (then called Borrowstouness), where from 1779 he was the government-appointed Surveyor of Customs.[14] Highly respected for his honesty and integrity, Burns also spent fifteen years as the factor of the absentee dukes of Hamilton's vast mineral-bearing estate of Kinneil.[15] Not 'a penny was ever lost' in Burns' care it was claimed on behalf of a man renowned for his 'singular prudence and piety'.[16] Judging by what little his son Ilay spent on his Brechin venture, allowing himself not the slightest extravagance, the elder Burns' parsimoniousness was an inherited trait.

Not surprisingly, John Burns' piousness was the dominant value in the home life of Ilay Burns and his siblings. Their father was a lifelong Presbyterian and Hanoverian. John Burns' paternal grandfather had signed the National Covenant at Falkirk in 1643, while on his mother's side there were reports of religious persecution. Although none of John Burns' forebears had joined the ministry, as his sons grew up, 'the influence of such a father […] began to appear'. The three of the four who would become ministers even 'played' at their future roles in a home-made kirk – a room set aside for the purpose and called 'The Kirk'. To this end, James, the object of Ilay Burns' trip to north Angus in 1799, had at the age of thirteen bought a wooden pulpit which he complemented later with a precentor's desk. Robert (another brother, born in 1789) denied that he and his brothers were playing; as far as they were concerned, their adolescent preaching was the real thing.[17]

But the family was far from oblivious to the world around them; it could hardly be otherwise given John Burns' familiarity with trade, traders and shipping, whether this was coastal or foreign. Linen, his initial speciality, was booming at the end of the eighteenth century; the handloom weavers who wove the cloth had never been better off, nor would they be, ever again.[18] Bo'ness had grown rapidly in the first half of the eighteenth century and by 1750, and still by the time of John Burns' appointment as Surveyor of Customs, was the second most important port in the east of Scotland, after Leith. A few miles to the west, Carron iron works, the fiery herald of the Scottish industrial revolution, had been established in 1759. At the time of Burns' journey to Brechin, the firm was thriving, not least by manufacturing ordnance for the

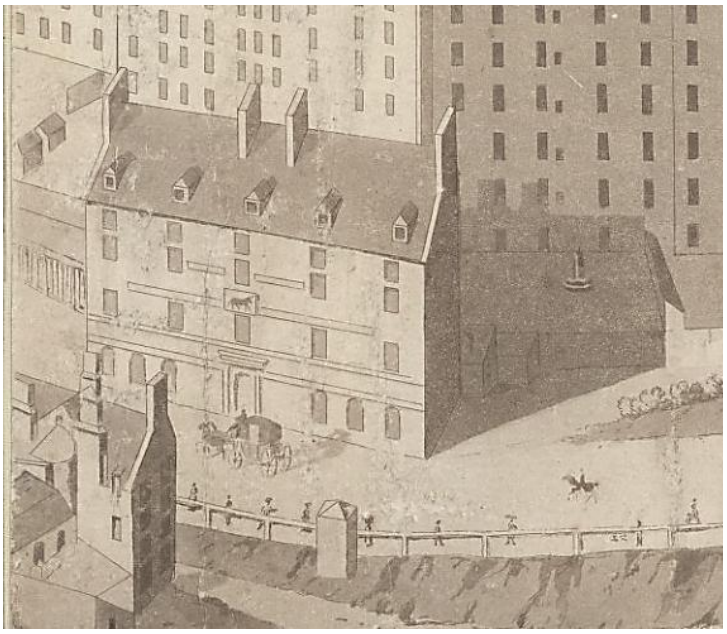


Figure 1. A coach waits outside the Black Bull Inn in Robert Barker's *Panorama of Edinburgh from the Calton Hill* (1790).
(Courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)

armed forces, including the immensely successful carronade. On the other hand, and unfortunately, the Forth and Clyde canal, the main artery of Scottish industrialisation that linked east-coast manufacturers and other producers with Glasgow, the Clyde and the Atlantic, terminated in the east at Grangemouth, rather than Bo'ness, and took away some of the latter's trade even though the upstart rival had only been founded just over two decades earlier, in 1777.[19]

Journeying, by coach, on horseback and by foot

The means by which Burns travelled is central to his experience of the journey he made to Brechin and back. Strikingly similar to William Lovel, Walter Scott's fictional English traveller in *The Antiquary*, he began his journey in Edinburgh. Unlike Lovel however, Burns travelled on a mail coach, which on Thursdays (and Tuesdays and Saturdays) left the capital at 10.30 am. Lovel, on the 'Queensferry Diligence, or Hawes Fly' (the name deriving from the seventeenth-century coaching inn in South Queensferry) should have departed at noon on a Tuesday during the summer of 1794, the year in which Scott's novel is set, but was delayed. On 19 September 1799, however, Burns' coach left punctually, arriving at Queensferry half an hour after leaving the Black Bull Inn at the head of Leith Walk. After boarding the passage boat, he would have



Figure 2. A passage boat sets out across the Firth of Forth in John Clerk of Eldin's *The Queen's Ferry* (1770s). (Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland)

observed clouds of smoke and steam rising from the many salt pans that lined both banks of the upper Forth. Arriving in North Queensferry, he alighted on a second coach. This was destined for Aberdeen, via Kinross, Perth, Dundee and thence up through Angus and the Mearns.

The end of the eighteenth century was a better time to travel by this means than it would have been a few years earlier. Burns had the good fortune of travelling during what has been described as the golden age of the stagecoach.[20] True, the route the mail coach took from Edinburgh to Dundee (on the way to Aberdeen), crossing the Forth from Queensferry rather than going on the longer sea passage over the Firth of Forth to Kinghorn, had been adopted as early as 1747. However, after *c.*1790 there was a sharp rise in the number of post towns in Scotland as well as in the number of times post was sent each week.[21] Accordingly, more passengers could be carried. The precise route by mail coach Burns took had only recently been adopted, following pressure from commercial interests in Perth.[22]

We can assume Burns enjoyed the coach trip in relative comfort, so much so that two of his fellow travellers were able to sleep after their conveyance had left Perth, while he was able to converse with another of his temporary companions about the scenery outside. Travel speeds were brisk – some eight miles an hour – but not necessarily hazardous (the state of the roads was one determinant in this regard). Passenger accommodation on mail coaches, however, was limited. Even so, William Lovel's coach, had it appeared, would have carried at least six passengers.

But if space was restricted, there were frequent stops, providing respite for horses as well as passengers. The journey to Dundee was broken every fifteen

or so miles, during short rests at coaching inns, such as the Salutation Inn in Perth – one of the oldest in Scotland, if not the oldest. But as Burns learned as early as his stop at the inn at North Queensferry, where he was met with a sow instead of a publican, and as was recognised by most long-distance travellers in Scotland, standards in the hospitality trade could vary immensely.[23] Generally speaking though, these were better in 1799 than had been the case four decades earlier. The best inns now had stabling facilities and even separate bedrooms rather than the once ubiquitous common dormitories.[24]

Burns' more enjoyable journey had much to do too with recent developments on the country's roads. These included the levelling of the steepest gradients, better, smoother surfaces, more direct routes and the replacement of fords with bridges, all of which made it easier for wheeled traffic – large horse-drawn carts for goods and carriages for people.[25] The road improvement process in Scotland that had got into full swing from the 1760s was largely funded by turnpike trusts, encouraged on occasion by the Post Office, and established by private Acts of Parliament. The lead was often taken by landowners who realised the benefits that could accrue if goods including estate produce were carried faster and more easily to nearby towns. The speed with which commercial information was delivered and sent also increased. Near Brechin and again at Montrose, Burns came across at least two wooden bridges (iron bridges were then in their infancy, the first in the world – Iron Bridge – having been erected across the River Severn as recently as 1779). The first of the two wooden bridges, near Brechin Castle, had been erected by William Ramsay Maule, 1st Baron Panmure. The second gave Burns the greater pleasure, as it opened to let ships pass through, even if his approval was tempered somewhat by having to pay a toll to use it. This though was the primary means of paying for such facilities and maintaining them. Not many years earlier Burns might have been even more irritated, as he would either have had to have boarded a ferry to cross the River South Esk or walk or ride seven miles around the great tidal basin that barred the direct route into Montrose.

The network of improved roads, however, was patchy. The road from Edinburgh, through Fife, to Perth and thereafter along the Carse of Gowrie to Dundee, made it possible to complete that leg of Burns' journey in less than ten hours. However, until around 1788 there were no turnpike trusts north of Perth. Hence the roads in Angus, to Forfar to the north of Dundee, were notoriously poor even though there had been a road leading from Dundee through the steep Hilltown to Forfar for some time. 'Infernal' is how one Forfar-based linen manufacturer described the 15-mile road to Dundee as late as 1814.[26] In such circumstances horses could be crippled, and cartwheels and axles cracked and broken. In wet weather, conditions were worse. Rain-soaked Russian and Baltic flax being taken on horseback or in wagons from the harbour at Dundee to Forfar to spin was made useless or at least more difficult

for the spinners to work than if it was dry.[27] Not turnpiked, and therefore 'the business of no-one to mend it', the poor condition of the road to Forfar caused Burns to decide to travel from Dundee to Brechin on horseback. There was another road further to the east: the 'King's Way' – which linked Dundee with Brechin, avoiding Forfar, but he evidently ignored this.[28] And a fly coach did run from Edinburgh to Perth and thereafter to Aberdeen – on the Forfar road. However, while this mode of transport was fast, it had its limitations.[29] Yet whatever his travails on the route he did take, beyond Forfar and as he neared Brechin, Burns found himself on the 'best [road] I ever saw'. He was not alone in commending what was a stretch of the main road between the south and north of the country; it was, the Reverend James Headrick observed in 1813, not only level but also 'kept in excellent order'.[30]

Burns' return journey reveals the very real challenges there were in getting about the country at the time for those with limited financial resources or a reliable horse. On 14 October, after travelling in a phaeton (a light, open, four-wheeled, fast-moving horse-drawn carriage) with another of his brothers, Alexander (or Sandy), from Brechin to Forfar, a 13-mile journey, the two men began to walk to Dundee. If they had hoped to hire horses, they were unlucky, although this was not altogether unusual. Had the brothers been in Brechin on a Tuesday in February or March they would have been present at a horse sale that lasted for six successive weeks. They might well have found one for hire. Even better would have been the Trinity Fair in June, reputedly 'the finest horse market in the north of Scotland'.[31] (The situation had hardly improved four years later, when Burns visited Brechin again. On this occasion, in March 1803, having on his way back walked from Brechin to Forfar, but unwilling to then trek to Dundee and unable to pay for a chaise, he had taken a lift to Dundee with a postman 'on a sort of tax cart' that could accommodate both men, sitting outside).[32]

On the return leg in 1799, after a four-hour walk broken only by a less-than-pleasant stop for bread rolls and ale at a toll house, the brothers reached Dundee. There followed a rough crossing of the Tay, some bread and cheese served at an inn at Woodhaven on the Fife shore, and yet another hike on foot. They found their way to their next destination, Cupar, by moonlight, after a gruelling walk of 25 miles. This though was far from a rare feat at this time. Travel by foot was the principal means by which ordinary people tramped from place to place – to attend the kirk or market, as packmen to sell their wares, to visit a healing well, or in search of work, or as vagrants.[33]

Having spent the night in Cupar, the two men managed to hire a horse that carried them through central Fife to Kirkcaldy and finally to Kinghorn and Pettycur, the shipping point for Leith. There, despairing as the last scheduled passage boat for the day sailed away, they managed along with other disappointed passengers to hire a boat for what would be a rough, wet and altogether unpleasant crossing. Although Burns drew some immediate satisfaction from the



Figure 3. The sixteenth-century bridge across the River Eden at Dairsie, Fife, as depicted in John Clerk of Eldin's *Dairsie* (undated). Burns would have crossed here on his return trip from Brechin in 1803. (Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland)

fact that the hired craft had arrived at Leith before the one that had left before them, he later chastised himself: 'this sort of enjoyment proceeds not from the purest principles' and was 'strong proof of the depravity of human nature'. Burns and his brothers were products of the evangelical wing of the Church of Scotland (the so-called Popular Party), which was then in the ascendancy; humankind, its adherents believed, was debased by sin, thereby incurring the wrath of God and perhaps eternal damnation.[34] Burns' Presbyterian conscience had been in evidence three weeks earlier, at a wedding in Brechin. Almost certainly this was a 'penny wedding', greatly enjoyed by the lower classes who paid to attend, but disapproved of by the Church owing to their popularity.[35] They were typified by loud and rousing music, expressive dancing and the consumption of large quantities of alcohol. Despite his discomfort at being in a packed crowd of 'common people' and having to eat (from a shared plate) at an earlier hour than usual, he managed to take part in dancing two reels. That however was all, reminding himself that such 'innocent amusement' could be abused if taken to excess.

The improving countryside

Burns was underwhelmed with what he saw on the first stage of his journey through Fife. The countryside between North Queensferry and Kinross he described as being 'very bleak and the crop in general very far behind' when elsewhere the harvest would soon get under way. The Reverend Archibald Smith, compiler of the *Old Statistical Account* for Kinross, would have concurred, having in 1793 commented that while change was afoot, agricultural improvements 'have hitherto advanced but slowly'.[36] Even twenty-one years later the author of the agricultural report on Kinross and Clackmannan noted how much mossy ground was to be seen, despite attempts on the part of one proprietor to reduce this. Draining, Patrick Graham wrote, remained the main improvement required of the county as a whole.[37]

It was once he was past Perth that Burns was most enthusiastic about what he saw from his coach window. He was now in the Carse of Gowrie, that stretch of low-lying land and gentle slopes along the Tay valley between Perth and Dundee, but he could also see across to the coast of Fife, on the south side of the River Tay. The ground was 'the most fertile I had ever seen', he noted, a comment no doubt informed by the abundant fields of wheat, potatoes and other crops including fruit that would within weeks be harvested. His heady praise is reinforced by the observations of James Donaldson, factor for the Maules of Panmure estate in Angus, who surveyed the Carse of Gowrie for the Board of Agriculture, a body established in 1793 to promote agricultural improvement. In his report, Donaldson observed that no part of Scotland 'enjoys a climate so mild and favourable to vegetation'.[38] Sheltered from the north by the Sidlaw Hills, and from the east by the higher ground in Angus and Fife, farming operations could be carried out throughout most of the year. Much of the soil was of the highest quality – a 'deep hazle coloured loam'[39] in the carse itself, and cultivable gravelly soil almost to the tops of braes where there was also pastureland, along with plantations of various kinds of wood.

With so much change in the rural landscape in progress, and the fruits of improvement clearly visible, it was little wonder that Burns was delighted with what he saw. More so than most other Perthshire districts, former fermtouns and pendicles worked by cottars, labourers and servants had been cleared or were in the process of being cleared, large fields laid out and enclosing stone walls erected at higher levels. Flatlands that had formerly been liable to flooding had been drained. Liming was carried out extensively and crop rotations were rigorously adhered to. The mud- and clay-built housing that had formerly prevailed – largely owing to the abundance of these materials – was replaced by 'commodious' two-storey, slate-roofed farmhouses and farm offices. According to Donaldson, the diffused spirit of improvement had been affected in the district with greater intensity, perhaps, than in 'any other quarter of the kingdom', spearheaded by individuals such as George, 7th Lord Kinnaird and his



Figure 4. The fertile lands along the River Tay between Perth and Dundee as depicted in Alexander Campbell's *The Carse of Gowrie* (*c.*1802). (Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland)

son Charles, Peter Hay of Leys, and above all by George Paterson of Castle Huntly, which property he had bought in 1777 after a 'staggeringly successful' career in the East India Company. The monies generated by men like Paterson from their service in the East Indias – and there were many of them – were substantial. Much was invested in landed property near Dundee and elsewhere in Angus from the 1770s onwards that was then improved and, in some instances, subsequently witnessed by Burns.[40]

Rural Lowland Scotland on the whole was on the brink of a radical but multi-paced transformation, the main features of which were larger farms under the control of a single tenant or perhaps two dominant tenants, the forcible removal of sub-tenants and cottars, the creation of an army of wage-dependent farm workers, and the conscious adoption of crop and animal rotations. East Lothian may have been in the vanguard of change, but districts like the Carse of Gowrie, where some small holdings remained, were close behind.[41]

From inside the mail coach Burns would not have been aware of the costs of more efficient, profit-conscious farming. Lapwings had more or less disappeared, although with the draining of low-lying land, the absence of rushes and the ague (a common type of fever) was to be welcomed. On the other hand, and behind the calm orderliness of the countryside that he was able to observe in passing, and the warm social relations about which he might have read, Burns would not have known that the house of one of the early improvers, the first to introduce sheep to the Carse, Thomas Mylne of Mylnefield, had been ransacked by a mob from Dundee. Evidently numbers of the crowd had been



Figure 5. *Brechin Castle, Angus* (*c.*1790) by Francis Grose.
(Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland)

given no option but to accept poorly paid and uncertain employment in Dundee.[42] The process by which age-old rhythms were being disrupted was not as warmly welcomed as the lofty, complacent pronouncements of some historians suggest.[43]

Some two weeks later Burns would himself connect with one of the peaks of the rhythmic cycle that governed rural Scotland – the harvest. In the company of a Mr Thomson, a substantial tenant farmer and partner in a lint mill at Arrat some five miles west of Montrose, he joined with the reapers who were then at work with the harvest. Unlike the farm hands however, he had eaten well before taking up the scythe and was able to abandon it once he had revived the memory of a task he had carried out as a young boy in Bo'ness. Parts of the following two days he spent pulling apples. About the state of agriculture in this part of Angus, Burns had little to say, other than to express his general contentment with what he saw. He was more struck by Brechin Castle, and other grand houses such as Eskmount, the 'Pleasure Ground' and ornamental verges of which had only recently been planted but promised much in the future. In common with many of his contemporaries, inspired by the English cleric and landscape artist William Gilpin, Burns sought out 'picturesque' landscapes – not as created by nature but as curated by fashion-conscious landowners or as painted according to rules of composition enunciated by Gilpin.[44] And Brechin and its surrounds provided just such a desirable scene –

the castle, river, houses, bridges, trees, woods and gardens which, interspersed, afforded, he noted in his journal, 'a view which for beauty and scenery [… was] not to be every day met with in Scotland'.[45] Burns' assessment mirrored that of the English traveller Henry Skrine, who in 1793, and equally influenced by notions of the picturesque, had noted the emergence of the powerful, valley-ravaging River South Esk from the Grampian mountains and the various 'seats' on the 'eminences above this great river', along with the stately bridge of seven arches that crossed it.[46]

Urban observations

On his journey to and from Brechin, Burns rested overnight in the towns of Dundee, Forfar, Cupar and North Queensferry. *En route* he passed through many more: travelling north these included Kinross and Perth, and on the return leg, as we have just noted, Kirkcaldy and Kinghorn. Whilst in Brechin he took the opportunity of visiting Montrose. Most of the towns Burns commented upon were small by modern standards, with populations of around 5,000 or less. More Scots lived in places this size (or smaller) than towns twice or more as populous.[47] Yet at the time Montrose, Brechin and Forfar were amongst Scotland's top twenty towns by population size. Of those on Burns' itinerary only Perth and Dundee were larger, the last-named boasting some 26,804 inhabitants in 1801, although this was far fewer than either Edinburgh (82,560) or Glasgow (77,385).[48] As an observer for only a few weeks, he was able only to see snapshots as opposed to dynamic time series. While therefore he may have sensed that change was in the air and on occasion he did note what was new, he would not have been aware of how dramatically the places he saw and referenced in his journal were changing. Nowhere was this truer than in their populations. Over the second half of the eighteenth century (1755 to 1801), each of the towns Burns spent any time in more than doubled the number of their inhabitants. In the lead was Dundee (115 per cent), followed by Forfar (111 per cent), Montrose (92 per cent), Brechin (72 per cent), and Perth (65 per cent), with cloth production being the main driver.[49]

The end of the eighteenth century was an intriguing time to be taking note of what was happening in urban Scotland. Although large-scale steam-powered mechanisation and concentrations of large numbers of workers in mills and factories lay mainly in the future, towns generally in Scotland were expanding rapidly, more so than virtually everywhere else in Europe or the rest of the British Isles. Scotland was experiencing the first, textiles-led phase of industrialisation. And it was those places where cloth was spun and woven – broadly speaking this meant linen in the east and cotton in the west – that grew the fastest. Although weaving was performed on handlooms, with which he would have been familiar, the scale of the trade would have been new to Ilay Burns, as while many women in Bo'ness hand spun silk yarn, the burgh only housed half a dozen weavers.

Other than spectacular population increases, and although at different speeds, almost all of the towns that Burns had time to explore were experiencing another kind of dramatic change: modernisation. Contemporaries called the process 'improvement' – which we have already seen in the rural context. It was a complex phenomenon, born of a spirit of emulation of English and Dutch towns the roots of which dated back to the seventeenth century. It incorporated too Enlightenment rationalism and a rejection of Scotland's 'feudal' past. The underpinning motivation was the search for increased wealth, allied to growing confidence amongst ambitious urban elites that led them to create more efficient (for commerce and trade) and more orderly towns.[50] Manifestations of this included the removal of older structures – ramshackle housing, obstructions of various sorts including external stairs, town walls, market crosses and other 'nuisances'. Instead, new public buildings were constructed and streets widened and straightened, while there was a move towards greater cleanliness and salubriousness, and tighter regulation of the population.[51] But if the primary motivation behind such measures was economic gain, which demanded better access to and from markets in and beyond the towns, there was also a cultural dimension, and a desire for 'ornament'. Scotland's burghs, albeit organised along rational lines and thriving as industrious centres, had also to be sociable, humane and urbane, and pleasing on the eye.[52] Thus decaying, cramped tolbooths were replaced by larger, architect-designed, prestigious townhouses.

These characteristics of what urban improvement comprised were a kind of prism through which contemporaries viewed, assessed and approved or otherwise the country's towns. 'Orderliness' was key. As indicated above, older, irregular street patterns were frowned upon. Meriting praise were places with wider, straight, paved, lamp-lit streets, slated roofs and sash and case windows.[53] We see this admiration for what was new in Burns' comments on the towns he passed through or stayed in. Inverkeithing in Fife was 'small and mean', a verdict only partly qualified by some beautiful gardens nearby. Inverkeithing was certainly small, with a population in 1793 of 1,330, but Burns' description of it as 'mean' may have been a little unfair. It was certainly not opulent, but according to the parish minister, Andrew Robertson, a 'good town house' which served as a meeting room and prison, had recently been built. A new quay, to serve the sizeable coal trade, was under construction. And the magistrates were commended for being 'very attentive and active in making improvements […] for the advantage and convenience of the inhabitants'.[54]

Perth by contrast was 'genteel looking', with its modern and regular streets and houses gaining Burns' approval. There the process of improvement had begun early. By the mid-1750s the old burgh cross had been removed, 'being found considerably to impede the carriage way'.[55] A new bridge over the River Tay in 1771 helped in this regard too. Less than two decades later, street lighting had been enhanced, with the aim of reducing night-time criminality.



Figure 6. The newly built stone bridge across the River Tay at Perth as depicted in John Clerk of Eldin's *Perth Bridge with a Tower in Gowerys Garden* (1775). (Courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland)

Burns though would not witness the full extent of Perth's move to gentility, which was only fully evident by the 1820s and 1830s.[56] Even so, by the time of his journey, much street widening and paving had been accomplished, as part of 'a programme of urban aggrandisement unmatched in ambition and scale anywhere else in provincial Scotland', other perhaps than in Aberdeen.[57]

Burns was less impressed by Dundee, which he thought was 'far inferior in appearance and situation' than Perth, although the harbour and the town's location at the mouth of the Tay and the proximity of the North Sea augured well for seaborne trade. Burns' unfavourable impression – not entirely coloured by the 'laziness' he had experienced in the inn in which he had stayed overnight – partly accords with the opinion of the aforementioned Henry Skrine. Six years before Burns' arrival Skrine had admired Dundee's 'handsome tower' (of St Mary's kirk, formerly 'one of the outstanding parish churches of Scotland', and of a size that rivalled Arbroath Abbey and Glasgow Cathedral). The approach to Dundee from the west had also impressed Skrine, not least because of its location by the broad estuary of the great River Tay. He noted with approval, too, the large open central marketplace, and the 'elegant' Palladian townhouse designed by the Scottish architect William Adam, which had been built between 1732 and 1734.[58]

Skrine's favourable first impressions though were fleeting. After closer inspection, Dundee, he wrote, was 'an irregular and unpleasant place'.[59] Streets that were laid down centuries earlier were incredibly narrow; the Nethergate passage to the town's market was only two metres wide; the Seagate – a main route to the harbour – was even tighter. Along with dirt, nauseous smells abounded, while the people, 'strangely huddled together in every street', were

'unusually coarse both in their manners and figures'.[60] In large part this was due to Dundee's role as one of Scotland's pioneer textile-manufacturing centres. Hundreds of handloom weavers turned out canvas for the Royal Navy.[61] Coarse linen, much of it destined for the slave plantations of the Caribbean and the cotton-growing states of North America, was the other mainstay. Adding an aural dimension to what was a fast-transforming manufacturing metropolis was the tip-tap of the beetlers' hammers resounding incessantly as they flattened the finished webs after they were taken out from the looms.[62]

Yarns were spun on the hundred or more nearby country mills that took their water from the modest streams that ran into and through Dundee, the Scouringburn and the Dighty Burn. Flax-spinning machinery, driven by erratic steam engines housed in repurposed grain mills and similar buildings had only recently been introduced. Even so, as with the weaving trade in the 1760s and 1770s, machine spinning was beginning to draw in dispossessed former rural dwellers. These were women and children from the surrounding countryside and, increasingly, from Ireland, who were generally poor, desperate for work for which they had little prior training, and who sought basic accommodation in the town's overcrowded, largely medieval core. Furthermore the linen trade was highly volatile, with periods of prosperity followed by deep depressions that brought in their wake wage reductions, bouts of large-scale unemployment, and hunger. Burns' prediction that Dundee would continue to grow was highly prescient; in the 1830s the town's population swelled faster than anywhere else in the country, a consequence of which over time was immense social suffering.

Forfar, the next place of note on Burns' journey north, was 'decent enough'. On a smaller scale, in many respects Forfar was similar to Dundee, with a modest army of handloom weavers working on Osnaburgs, the town's coarse linen speciality. Brechin, Burns' destination, and another weaving centre, was neither 'regular' nor 'compact'. Even so, Henry Skrine had been impressed as he approached the town. For Burns too the burgh looked well, although he benefited from being able to view it from the church steeple. From this height, what Skrine had described as the town's 'romantic position on an eminence', which shelved down to the River South Esk, was revealed. Contrasting with this was Burns' visit on 4 October to a recently inaugurated, loudly rattling spinning mill which employed mainly boys and girls. Although the workings of the machinery baffled him, Burns was sufficiently aware that the arrival of such technology could deal a blow to the women whose earnings from hand spinning – almost always less than men – helped to sustain numerous Scottish households.[63] The domestic spinners' collective culture of song and ribaldry would also suffer, although in Dundee and the other textile towns it was sustained in the jute mills and factories of the nineteenth century.[64]

But with his primary focus being roads and transport, agriculture, the appearance of towns and their church buildings, and the services conducted therein, Burns was either uninterested in, or largely ignored for the purposes of

his journal, the condition of the people and contemporary political issues. It is striking that the earliest recollection of Brechin's mid-nineteenth-century town clerk, David Black, was from 1799, the year of Burns' visit. Black recalled crowds of ordinary people desperately searching for a quantity of meal, their staple foodstuff, as famine threatened. This carried on into the new century; in 1800 so necessitous were the inhabitants that a soup kitchen was opened.[65] With Britain at war with Revolutionary France from 1792, along with anxieties of insurrection at home there was the threat of invasion, and in 1795 some forty-eight loyal citizens established the Brechin Volunteers of which Provost John Molison was a prominent figure. In 1803, as war with what was now the French Republic under Napoleon Bonaparte began, a more socially diverse body of volunteers was formed, of which Burns' brother James was chaplain.[66]

Also benefiting from its situation, this time at the mouth of the Esk, where it flowed into the North Sea, was the 'fine' town of Montrose. Like Dundee, as well as several other Scottish towns at the time, the relatively new townhouse (1761) stood out, as did a fine church, the incongruously tall steeple of which was visible for miles around.[67] Here as elsewhere, and difficult to find by transient visitors like Ilay Burns, were features of Enlightenment culture that to a greater or lesser degree were to be found in all but the smallest Scottish towns. Montrose indeed was one of the country's more affluent and genteel of these, the locus of 'numerous and brilliant' assemblies, the rendezvous of the surrounding countryside's fashionable set.[68] Even as Dundee was transformed into a work-focused steam-powered mill and factory town of the first order, its middle classes were able to enjoy a rich cultural life with theatres, concerts, balls and Enlightenment-influenced scientific and speculative societies.

If most of this escaped Burns' notice, in other regards, as he himself concluded in his journal, he had gained a great deal from his various town visits as well as much geographical knowledge. His month's travel had cost him just over three pounds, not a lot, and worth only some £140 today. Nevertheless, Burns considered this money well spent. Over two centuries later we can be thankful that he did take the time to visit his brother and that he kept such a keenly observed record of his journey.

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THE JOURNAL OF ILAY BURNS, RECORDING A JOURNEY FROM EDINBURGH TO BRECHIN AND BACK AGAIN, 1799

Journal to and from Brechin

Thursday 19 September 1799

This day [I] left Edinburgh for Dundee in the Mail Coach[1] – company a young Lady and Gentleman who I suppose are married – and a middling aged man betwixt 50 and 60. We departed about half ten A.M. and got to Queensferry about 11 – upon our seting out we had the prospect of a very bad day from the appearance of the sky, we were however happily disappointed for before reaching the ferry the clouds which hovered around were disipated and the chearing sun shone over the world – we had a pleasant sail over to Northferry[2] where the other Mail waited our arrival, but before seating myself in it went into the public house to get change – could see nobody save a sow grunting through the house – a genteel waiter indeed! I therefore came out without getting what I wanted stepped into the coach and proceeded on to Kinross which is 15 miles from Northferry, the country betwixt the two places is very bleak and the crop in general very far behind – so much so, that unless we have some warm and dry weather [a] great part of it in all probability will never come to maturity a dismal prospect this! In this stage we passed through the Burgh of Inverkeithing which though a small and mean looking place is not without attractives [*sic*] – it has some advantages both as a sea port and inland village being situated on the coast and the place itself beautifully interspersed with gardens trees etc. We reached Kinross about 2 o'clock, this is but a small and insignificant town – its situation however is much to its advantage, the beautiful and extensive Loch Leven comes very near it, in the middle of which there is a small island whereon some vestiges of the ancient castle of Leven are still to be seen – this castle is famous in history Queen Mary having been concealed in it for sometime from the fury of her enemies[3] which with its mouldering look and peculiar situation renders it an object of curiosity to strangers. Loch Leven I am told abounds with fish particularly pike and salmon of an excellent kind – I would have tried them at Kinross had it not been too early for dinner – we took only a drink of brisk small beer here – then resumed our seats in the Mail and pursued our journey – country still barren and the crop in some places very green. Got to Perth about ½ past 4 ready to partake of a good dinner which waited our arrival. Perth is a genteel looking town, the

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1 The mail coach for Aberdeen departed from the Black Bull (aka Robertson's) at the head of Leith Walk, Edinburgh, at 10.30 am every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. It travelled via Queensferry, Kinross, Perth, Dundee, Arbroath, Montrose, Bervie, and Stonehaven.

2 Another name for North Queensferry.

3 Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587), visited the castle on a number of occasions, although Burns is probably alluding to her time there as a prisoner in 1567-1568.

houses and streets are modern and regular – its situation is beautiful being close by the River Tay – besides there are a number of excellent walks in the immediate vicinity and the surrounding country is variegated and affords an agreeable landscape – these advantages render it a desireable place – the distance betwixt it and Dundee is 22 miles a longer stage than any of the former though not the less pleasant – the road goes a great way in sight of the Tay and the ground on both sides of that river is the most fertile I have seen and well known by the name of the Kerse of Gowrie[4] – the harvest is further on here than in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh, but from the crop being strong the effects of the late rains have done much injury espicially [*sic*] to the wheat which is terribly laid and is both rotting and growing so that the flour this season must be of an inferior quality. The Lady and Gentleman two of my companions in the Mail though very loquacious before dinner yet here all the beauties of nature could not keep them awake, they both took a good knap [*i.e.*, nap] while the old fellow and I continued to make our remarks upon the different objects that came in view. We got to Dundee near 8 at night when my journey in the Mail ended – I went into the inn where it stops was asked to join a gentleman at meals to which I had no objection, understood he was from Glasgow and a partner in a company of merchants there – we passed the evening together comfortably enough – we got supper betwixt 9 and 10 and after drinking two tum[b]lers of rum punch went to bed.

Friday 20 September

After a sound sleep got up betwixt 6 and 7 wished to go out before breakfast to look at the town of Dundee but could not get that accomplished from the laziness of the people ~~of~~ in the town – had to ring repeatedly for my boots and did not get them till near 8 but as it began to rain I amused myself within doors writing part of this journal till nine when I got breakfast after which I hired a horse to Forfar about 14 miles from Dundee – set off about 10 got a superficial view of Dundee as I left it – which is larger than Perth but far inferior in appearance and situation – there is a good harbour however and as the town is placed at the mouth of the Tay on the German Ocean[5] it is well calculated for trade and of course will rapidly increase in size and population. Found the nag I had hired to be an old stiff hack and needed the rod – broke my stick upon him! and was at some loss to get him pushed on – luckily met a raw looking lad with a large thick rung[6] – asked if he would sell it. Told me he would not – but if I wished the stick he would give me it for nothing – thanked him – gave him my own to make the best off [*i.e.*, of], which he took, and we parted.

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4 *i.e.*, the Carse of Gowrie, a formerly boggy district that had been effectively drained and converted to agricultural use earlier in the century.

5 Now known as the North Sea.

6 A stout stick, staff or cudgel.

About two miles or so from Dundee came to two roads asked a man who was passing on a cart which was the one to Forfar – his answer was either so indistinct or intentionally wrong that it led me astray for I ~~asked~~ [*interlined*: found] soon after by asking at [*sic*] a woman that I was upon the old road to Arbroath – I was however just bye [*i.e.*, by] a cross road which she said would take me to the right one – I followed her directions and soon got to the road I wanted. After proceeding about two miles further came up with a northland lad belonging to Huntly – understood he was returning from Dundee fair which was held the preceding day – said he had gone there to purchase horses having heard they were cheap and that he had bought this "ill faur'd brite"[7] meaning the one he was riding upon – he was very kind in his way gave me a snuff and lent me his whip which made my lazy horse proceed with more speed – found after all that I had some difficulty in keeping up with him, but we obviated this by changing horses which made us more equally matched and we got [*interlined*: on] for 6 or 8 miles very quickly in this way – we changed again about a mile from Forfar as I did not chuse to go into the town on my companions large beast with two saddles upon his back which would have made me an object of derision! When my companion got upon his own horse he left me and I saw him no more – I reached Forfar about one Oclock [*sic*] which is a decent enough looking town – but the country betwixt it and Dundee is very moorish[8] – I put up at Scrimgeours Inn where I met with a man just going to Dundee who willingly agreed to take back my horse – got a bottle of porter and proceeded to Brechin on foot – the road the best I ever saw and nothing worse of the rain – the country however is but wild though it sensibly improves as you approach Brechin. Began to weary for a sight of that city asked two young men how far I was from it – told me about a mile which gave me some comfort – thinking it rather a long mile I enquired at another person who said about 2 miles still! this [was] rather provoking but such are the disappointments which strangers must encounter. ~~In spite of them~~ I got to the end of my journey at last betwixt 4 and 5 found my brothers in good health – being a little tired after my travels I had no desire to look out again this day.

Saturday 21 September

Took a look of [*i.e.*, at] the church which is an old clumsy building and would be much the better of being repaired[9] – there is a round spire detached from the church and standing alone which is nearly as high as the steeple of the

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7 'ill-faured' has a number of meanings in Scots, including 'ugly', 'ill-tempered' and 'of poor quality'. The word 'brite' is Burns' attempt to capture the boy's pronunciation of 'brute'.

8 *i.e.*, the countryside consisted chiefly of muirland.

9 Burns was referring to what was once, and is again, known as Brechin Cathedral. At the time, however, it served as a parish church.

church,[10] and is a great curiosity particularly to strangers, I am told that it has been observed to vibrate with a high wind – I went up to the top of the church steeple where I got a fine view of the town of Brechin which though not regular and compact looks well and its beauty is greatly encreased [*sic*] by the South Esk a beautiful river which passes along the south side of it – the castle of Brechin too, and the surrounding policy is a great ornament to the city.[11] Afterwards went with James[12] and saw a wooden bridge lately erected by Mr Maul of Panmuir proprietor of the castle – it has three arches and must be a fine object to view from the castle.

Sabbath 22 September
Went to the church and heard sermon from William[13] in the forenoon and Mr Coutts[14] in the afternoon and evening – the church quite throng though not many genteel people – I intended to have gone in the evening to the Magistrates loft but Sandy[15] stupidly took me to the Shoemakers!

Monday 23 September
Employed in the forenoon – writing this journal and puting James letters and papers into order – Walked none – Dined at Mr Ferriers[16] in company with Mr Mitchell,[17] James and William – spent an agreeable afternoon – Drank tea also and returned home about 8.

Tuesday 24 September
James and I took a ride to Montrose – the country betwixt Brechin and that town is rich and well cultivated – the road good and quite level and you have a view of the Esk all the way – Montrose is a fine town beautifully situated at the mouth of the Esk which with the sea almost completely surround it and forms a peninsula. The famous bridge of Montrose is well worth the seeing

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10 The eleventh-century round tower adjacent to the cathedral.

11 Brechin Castle was the seat of William Ramsay Maule, 1st Baron Panmure (1771-1852).

12 Ilay Burns' brother the Reverend James Burns (1772-1803), who held the first charge of the parish of Brechin and Kelimore.

13 This was perhaps Ilay Burns' brother William (1779-1859). He was a licentiate minister, that is, he had completed his theological training and his probationary period but had not yet been ordained into a parish charge.

14 The Reverend Robert Coutts (1772-1803) held the second charge of the parish of Brechin and Kelimore.

15 This was perhaps Ilay Burns' brother Alexander (1787-1832).

16 Probably James Ferrier (1742-1848), a burgess of Brechin. His surname suggests a family connection with Burns' mother, Grizel Ferrier.

17 This was probably Alexander Mitchell, convenor of the guilds of Brechin. His son David went on to marry Elizabeth Ferrier, daughter of the aforementioned James Ferrier.

being large and consisting entirely of wood – a part of it in the centre lifts up so as to permit the ships to pass – we had to pay a half-penny for going over it which is the first charge of the kind I ever paid – if we had had our horses it would have cost us 6^{d} each and for that reason we put them up in the town – Mr Molleson[18] one of the ministers conveyed us the length of the bridge but the bawbee[19] prevented his going further. We walked on to Craig which is a mile south of Montrose to see a new church that is now building there – it is very neat and even elegant – built in the gothic stile [*i.e.*, style] and has a large steeple at one end which is not all proportional with the rest of the building, but I supposed is intended by the heritors[20] at whose desire and expence [*sic*] both it and the church is reared to make a conspicuous appearance being seen by the naked eye at a great distance in all directions. While looking at it we were attacked by one of the tradesmen for a piece of money to drink which he said was customary on such occasions[21] – I gave him a shilling with which he was satisfied. Returned to Montrose – Dined and drank tea with Mr Napier merchant there and had a fine trip home on our horses in the evening.

Wednesday 25 September

Got a pleasant walk on the banks of the Esk – had a view of the back of Brechin Castle which has a very romantic appearance indeed it stands on the verge of a high rock at the part of which the river passes. Fell in with Mr Smith[22] the Postmaster fishing in the Esk – saw him catch 2 or 3 trout – drunk tea and supped at his house in company with some ladies and gentlemen, the conversation at supper chiefly upon puns on words which though not very instructive is amusing enough.

Thursday 26 September

Took a walk out to Mr Ferriers new house which is now nearly finished – the house is plain – the situation good – and it is within a gunshot of the Esk.

Friday 27 September

James, Sandy and I went to a marriage – was amused not a little with the manner of the common people – was crushed up at ~~the~~ a corner of the table at supper, Sandy and I eating off the same plate – could not help smiling when

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18 The Reverend Alexander Molleson (1749-1825), minister of Montrose parish.

19 Scots for a halfpenny.

20 Scots for landowners, although the term was most commonly used with regard to their liability to contribute to the upkeep of the parish church.

21 It was a custom in Scotland for workmen to be given a free drink by their client on the commencement of a building project (sometimes known as the 'founding pint'). In this instance, however, the church was almost finished.

22 John Smith jnr, postmaster, Brechin.

looking along the table to see so many forks and knives employed carving each dish – and the carvers standing upright – their remarks too excited risibility – when supper was over the tables were removed with some difficulty to make room for dancing – one of them could not be got out but by a window which looks into the street – an awkward maneuvre [*sic*] this – danced two reels which is a merry and innocent amusement but like other things may be abused if indulged to excess – returned home about 9 having got supper at 6!

Saturday 28 September
Walked this forenoon for more than two hours partly on the Arbroath Road which lyes [*sic*] on the south side of Brechin – had a delightful prospect of Brechin and the vicinity – here the eye is feasted with the sight of a castle – a river – houses – steeples – bridges – trees, woods – gardens etc and so finely interspersed as to afford a view which for beauty and scenery is not to be every day met with in Scotland.

Sabbath 29 September
Went to Brechin Church and heard Mr Coutts and James preach – James and I visited a Sabbath School in the evening – convinced that these institutions if properly conducted are calculated to do much good.

Monday 30 September
Walked to Arrat a farmers house about 3 miles on the Montrose road – the tenant Mr Thomson[23] is a fine hospitable man, dined and drank tea with him; but betwixt the two had a pleasant walk on part of his farm which lyes on rising ground upon the northside of the Esk – while looking around us we discovered a fishing boat coming down the river which Mr Thomson informed me would stop and fish just opposite where we were – curiosity led me to desire a more narrow view of their operations accordingly we descended to the edge of the water where we saw the fishermen draw their nets three times with great success – was entertained to see the large salmon brought to dry land quite alive – it is barbarous however to observe the fishers knock them on the head and put an end to their existence – Mr Thomson purchased one of them for 2 shillings which he thought cheap being little more than 2^{d} per pound. We then went and looked at a lint mill[24] which belongs in part to Mr Thomson – saw the operations necessary for dressing lint but these I decline mentioning brevitatis causa.[25] Returned to Mr Thomson's to tea staid [*i.e.*, stayed] till James called who was dining at a farmers house further off . We left Arrat about

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23 James Thomson, tenant of Arrat, a farm on the estate of Southesk.

24 Arrat Mill, which was situated to the immediate south east of Thomson's farmhouse. Built in 1786, it was converted to a corn mill in the nineteenth century.

25 'For the sake of brevity'. The Latin phrase was commonly used in Scots Law.

7 and arrived at the manse about 8 – was a little surprised at the Brechin carriers bringing in the best half of the salmon which I saw Mr Thomson buy – he did not mention a word to us of his having sent it – must pay him another visit before I leave this place.

Tuesday 1 October
Was introduced to the provost and his son, and Bailie Molleson[26] – had also a very pleasant walk in a large nursery of young trees which belongs to a company in Perth and is situated at the east end of the town of Brechin betwixt the tenements, two long rows of houses lying without the royalty and well known and distinguished by the names of Upper and Lower Tenements. I wished to have seen the overseer – to ask him some questions, but we neither saw him nor any other body.

Wednesday 2 October
James, Sandy and I took a long walk on the old road to Forfar which runs along the south side of the Esk and commands an extensive and beautiful view of the surrounding country – we crossed the water in a boat opposite Eskmount, got a fine sight of that house which stands upon high ground on the north side of the Esk and is aptly named Eskmount – it is a pleasant place the policy about it however has not yet come to any maturity so that its beauty will not fade but increase. Returned home to dinner by the road which leads to Dr Ferriers new house.[27] Dined upon Mr Thomsons, present James, William and I, supped with Mr and Mrs Mitchell and had an agreeable and friendly meeting.

Thursday 3 October
We walked this forenoon on the north east side of Brechin but were unexpectedly attacked by a shower of rain which obliged us to take shelter in an old and ruinous stable or byre at the farm house of Pitforthie[28] which at present is vacant by the bankruptcy of the tenant – here we were blocked up for a quarter of an hour when the rain ceased and we prosecuted our walk in the course of which we joined the high road to Aberdeen and returned by it to Brechin – this road enters at the north west end of the town but the approach is none of the best the road just as it enters the city being very unlevel – this

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26 The provost of Brechin at this time was John Smith. Thomas Molleson was one of two baillies on the town council. Both Smith and Molleson had held their respective offices since 1789. Molleson (whose name also appears in the records as Mollison and Molison) went on to serve as provost of Brechin from 1800 to 1814.

27 Dr Alexander Ferrier (1749-1809). He had bought the Kintrockat estate after making a small fortune in the service of the East India Company. He was the brother of the aforementioned James Ferrier of Brechin. Another brother, Captain David Ferrier (1744-1804), also lived on the estate.

28 The lands of Pitforthie lay to the immediate east and north east of Brechin.

however, I am told, is intended soon to be repaired. Dined at Mrs Nish's with a large company – admired the elegance of the dinner and the uniformity in which the dishes were placed on the table.

Friday 4 October
Though not a very good day yet we did not lose our walk for all that – we went and looked at a spinning mill – which belongs to Baillie [*sic*] Molleson and Mr Mitchell – it is certainly an ingenuous [*i.e.*, ingenious] thing and I understand is but of modern invention[29] – such a number of boys and girls, wheels and other instruments moving at once is sufficient to baffle the clearest brain that is not acquainted with the business – I would have asked some questions to obtain information but could not get that done from the noise which the machine makes while going – this is an expeditious way of spinning – and if these establishments become general there will be little need for women spinning upon wheels.

Saturday 5 October
Walked today on the Aberdeen road. Saw the House of Keithick[30] belonging to a Mr Richardson which is nothing remarkable – the situation is low but the surrounding country make[s] up for this disadvantage – met with no other thing that attracted attention.

Sabbath 6 October
At church as usual – heard good sermons from Messrs Burns and Coutts.

Monday 7 October
Confined to the house by bad weather – called on Mr Ferrier in the afternoon – drank tea and supped with him.

Tuesday 8 October
Could get no walk this day either, on account of rain – called upon the Misses Bissets in the forenoon about James's affairs and at Wilsons the Booksellers.[31]

Wednesday 9 October
Went to Kintrokat called at Rob. Sutters[32] the tenant whom we found engaged with the harvast [*sic*] – chatted a little with the goodwife and then returned home.

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29 The mill was located just outside the town's south-eastern boundary, on the River South Esk. It had been established by the East Mill Spinning Company earlier in 1799.

30 Keithock.

31 Patrick Wilson, bookseller, Brechin.

32 Robert Souter, tenant farmer, Kintrockat.

Thursday 10 October
A fine day embraced it by paying another visit at Arrat – found Mr Thomson throng at the harveast – dined with him and then went to look at the reapers – joined for a while in their work which recalled to my mind the pleasure I took in such employment when a boy – these days however are now gone – the rememberance [*sic*] of them excites a kind of painful and pleasant sensation – after drinking tea with my friend took farewell of him and his family whose kindness gratitude forbids I should forget; and returned home to Brechin in the evening.

Friday 11 October
Rather a bad day – diverted myself most of the forenoon pulling apples – Got my coat and hat a good deal dirtied the trees being wet and their bark not very clean. Drank tea with Mrs Nish who has a fine little daughter that amused us much by its juvenile sayings and doings.

Saturday 12 October
Pulled some more apples – took care to have on an old coat and hat! had a walk also in Mr Coutts garden during which I settled the time and manner of my journey south viz – to set off on Monday at 8 o'clock AM. Mr Coutts, Sandy and I to travel in a phaeton to Forfar and James to accompany us on his poney – he and Mr C. to return again to Brechin and Sandy and I to walk on to Cupar in Fife and to ride from thence to Kinghorn.

Sabbath 13 October
Heard William preach all day in Brechin church to a crouded [*sic*] audience – more genteel folks than usual, but whether this circumstance is to be imputed to the popularity of the preacher or the good day I cannot say – perhaps partly to both.

Monday 14 October
Got up early to prepare for my journey – was puzzled a good deal when I observed there had been a great fall of rain the preceding night and the appearance of more – however after a heavy shower about 7 Oclock the sky assumed a more favorable [*sic*] aspect and I determined to proceed – Accordingly after an early breakfast we left Brechin in our phaeton and got to Forfar about 11 Oclock and with as little delay as possible Sandy and I set off for Dundee on foot – went into the toll house which is just half way betwixt Forfar and Dundee, to get a refreshment – the goodwife a gay[33] sour piece seemingly! but we were not long troubled with her company for after eating penny rolls a piece and drinking a bottle of ale we paid our fare and bid her

[33] More commonly written as 'gey', Scots for very.

good day. Reached Dundee a little past three just in time for the boat crossing the water and after a rough enough passage of 40 minutes we got to the other side a little below Gordons Inn,[34] which we could not reach being too late for the tide. Went into a small public house at the place where we landed and got some bread and cheese which we preferred for the sake of dispatch for we immediately shoved on to Cupar, the afternoon being good and the moon light rendered our walk more agreeable than it would otherwise have been – when within a mile of Cupar we made up with a man who amongst other things recommended Mrs Cockburn vintner in Cupar as the best place for accommodation – I took his advice and had no cause to regret having done so – we arrived at her house exactly as the town clock was striking 8 and were ushered into a small place where there was a good fire – a very desireable thing after the chillness of the evening and walking 25 miles – here we tarried all night.

Tuesday 15 October

This morning made enquiry for a retour horse going to Kinghorn[35] which however I could not get so had to hire one. After breakfast we left Cupar which is a very fine inland burgh situated in the bosom of the rich and extensive county of Fife – on the road from it to Kinghorn besides a beautiful fertile country and several gentlemens seats we have a sight of the country parishes of Kettle and Markinch both sweet looking places espicially the former which is almost covered with trees intermixed with gardens and other rural beauties. We also passed through Kirkaldy a considerable sea port town about 3 miles from Kinghorn – it is remarkable for <u>length</u> but not for <u>beauty</u> – the streets are horribly narrow and there are a great number of old ugly houses – however it seems to be in a flourishing way for though there be a great number of <u>old</u> houses there are some new ones too which are upon the increase – on our right hand I observed a very large house – to appearance almost new – it looks well and is removed from the street a good space which affords room for a fine green in front occupying I daresay nearly an acre of ground – the borders of which are ornamented with shrubery [*sic*] and flowers of various kinds. Got on to Kinghorn before two Oclock which is a pleasant enough little town though I noticed ~~little~~ nothing remarkable about it – the church indeed is rather singular being situated upon a rock just at the side of the sea, but we did not linger to view it or the town particularly – we rode on to the place where the passage boats lye which is about a quarter of a mile west from the town – we were a good deal chagrined at seeing one of the boats full of passengers just a little way off and were affraid [*sic*] of not getting over to Leith without hiring a boat for the express purpose which I would have done rather than staid [*i.e.*, stayed] all

34 An inn at Woodhaven, Forgan parish.

35 *i.e.*, a horse that needed to be returned to Kinghorn from Cupar.

night at Kinghorn: but we were soon happily relieved from this dilemma for about a dozen of people [*interlined*: appeared in the course of a quarter of an hour] wanting to cross – so we immediately hired a boat – went on board – and got under way – we had a sail of two hours and a half which was long enough espicially when exposed to rain and what was still worse – to the unpleasant company of a number of sick women and children [*a section of the text has been heavily deleted*] however we reached the desired haven and derived no small pleasure from having outsailed the other boat and getting safe into the harbour when it was not much past the roads – this sort of enjoyment proceeds not from the purest principles – it arises from the disadvantage of others and is a strong proof of the depravity of human nature for I believe there are but few indeed who can say that they do not draw satisfaction from a similar source. After getting ashore we walked to Edinburgh where we arrived about 6 in the evening.

Conclusion

Thus this jaunt is ended which has afforded me a great deal of pleasure being attended with peculiar circumstances for I have in the course thereof seen several of the principal towns in Scotland, and besides being on a visit to Brother James who is well settled in a fine town and country – a good living and among an ~~among an~~ attentive and apparently a religious people – I hope he will long continue a useful and a happy pastor and that I may again visit him some time hence though from the distance I cannot do so often – the time and expence required being more than is convenient – the present has occupied four weeks of time and the expence exceeds three pounds – this sum to be sure cannot be called much and I do not in the least grudge an expence the value of which has been got in the geographical knowledge I have acquired – men and manners I have seen – and the pleasure and recreation I have experienced by its means.

Finis

APPENDIX

A transcript of a letter written by Ilay Burns to his brother James in 1803 was published in the Brechin Advertiser*, 29 October 1929. The following is an edited version of that transcript.*

Edinburgh 31st March 1803

Dear James,

I have taken the pen into my hand to give you a detail of my proceedings from Brechin to this place, which you will naturally be expecting, and which it is my duty to render.

After leaving you about 7 on Friday morning[1] I walked on to Forfar, where I arrived between 10 and 11, and took breakfast, for which by the way I was not so well prepared, my stomach being blunted with your salt beef, cake and ale. Here I enquired for a horse to carry me to Dundee but was astonished that none were to be had, owing as I understand to some cattle market at Kerrymuir[2] which had completely drained the town. This put me in a dilemma. To walk on I was hardly able, at least I was unwilling. To hyre a chaise I could not think of. The only other way by which I could proceed was along with the Postman, who keeps a sort of tax cart,[3] that holds another besides himself. I therefore took a seat with him, left Forfar about ½ past one (the intermediate time I spent looking about the town, reading the newspapers, etc.) and reached Dundee a little before 5, and before halting I immediately went down to the harbour where I found a boat just setting off. After a pretty rough passage of 50 minutes we got to Gordon's Inn[4] where I intended to remain all night as it was getting dark, but I very conveniently found a retour chaise[5] just going to Cupar which carried me to Dairsie, where I lodged very agreeably all night with Mr and Mrs McC.,[6] who were glad to hear about Mr C. I left them next morning after an early breakfast, intending to walk to the Plaisterer's Inn[7] and then hyre a nag to the waterside, but as at Forfar, so here no horse was to be had. I was therefore obliged to take my stuff in my hand and walk on, not however until I had taken a good hearty dinner. I got to Pettycur about 5, pretty fatigued, and to my embarrassment found no passage was to be had owing to the high wind. While going about musing on what I was to do, I accosted a driver fellow, enquiring where he was from and whither he was going. I understood he had come with some gentlemen from Edinburgh who had gone round by the Ferry[8] as no passage could be got at Leith, and

that he was to return immediately with an empty chaise. I thought it best to go with him and reached North Ferry about 9. Here no passage was to be got that night, which necessitated me to take up my abode in the inn where I found several people who like myself were stopped in their journey; every one told his particular case, and I was satisfied when I found none of them so easy as my own. I got up next morning betwixt 6 and 7 and soon after a boat went off and with a passage of 12 minutes we landed on the south side. I was at some loss, whether to go home or to come here. If I did go home (to Bo'ness), I behoved to walk, which I found would be rather uphill work after the fatigues of the previous day. I therefore took the 3rd of a chaise with a lady and gentleman, who I afterwards found were acquainted with Dr Ferrier[9] and were going to Captain Drumond's for whom you know I had a letter from the doctor. The lady is a cousin of the captain. The gentleman I supposed to be her husband. He asked if I was the clergyman of Brechin. When I told him I was a brother, he said he supposed so from my appearance and that he recollected of seeing you more than once at the Doctor's. Well, I got here about 10, and after cleaning myself and getting breakfast I got to the chapel and heard my old favourite Jones[10] – and excellent lecture from Romans 3rd chapter, 1-4. In the afternoon I heard Mr Anderson of the College Church[11] – 3 pretty good sermons, on Providence from Genesis xxxii, last clause of the 10 verse.

Thus you see I have given you an account of my journey and in doing so have almost consented [*sic*] my paper – indeed I have little else to say. I have seen nobody yet. Walter[12] tells me Mr and Mrs Hamilton are here. They are going to set up in style, having ordered a carriage. They dined with Mr Bruce one day. Walter is saying nothing of his matter, so I suppose it will not be so soon. I think I will leave this on Wednesday. Jean will write Anne[13] some days after. A. Ferrier[14] is still far from being well. Susan[15] is also confined. Walter called today on Miss Blair and delivered Miss McPherson's letter. Brown the doctor called when he was there, from which I suspect there is something going on. Time will show. I don't think I will see her.

Best wishes to Mrs Burns.[16] Write soon. Believe me,

Yours very affectionately,
Ilay Burns

NOTES

[1] 25 March 1803.

[2] A cattle market was held in Kirriemuir on the last Friday of every month from December through to April.

[3] A two-wheeled (originally springless), cheaply built open cart drawn by one horse. It qualified for a lower level of tax than was levied on other horse-drawn transport.

[4] An inn at Woodhaven, Forgan parish.

[5] A post-chaise that had completed a one-way hire and was making its way home.

[6] The Reverend Dr Robert McCulloch (1740-1824), the minister of Dairsie, and his wife Janet Campbell. The 'Mr C.' mentioned in the next line is no doubt the aforementioned Reverend Robert Coutts, the minister of the second charge at Brechin, who was married to their daughter.

[7] A coaching house in the parish of Markinch, Fife. It stood on the turnpike road from Pettycur to Newport-on-Tay.

[8] *i.e.*, the crossing between South and North Queensferry.

[9] For Dr Alexander Ferrier (1749-1809), see page 27, note 7.

[10] The Reverend Thomas Snell Jones (1779-1837), the minister of Lady Glenorchy's Chapel, Edinburgh.

[11] The Reverend Robert Anderson (1768-1837), the minister of Trinity College Church, Edinburgh.

[12] Probably his cousin Walter Ferrier (1784-1856).

[13] No doubt his sisters Jean (1768-1840) and Anne (1784-1870). The latter lived in Brechin. Her husband, David Guthrie, was a banker and businessman in the town. He later served as the provost of Brechin. One of their sons was the popular preacher, philanthropist and Free Church minister Thomas Guthrie (1803-1873).

[14] Probably his cousin Archibald Ferrier (1773-1814).

[15] Probably his cousin Susan Ferrier (1782-1854), who later found fame as a novelist.

[16] James Burns' wife Christina Chalmers (1774-1837).

FURTHER READING

The original journal can be consulted at the National Library of Scotland: Journal of Ilay Burns, concerning a journey to Brechin, MS.6324.

Details about the Burns family can be found in the first chapter of Burns, R F. *The Life and Times of the Rev. Robert Burns, D.D.* Toronto, 1872. Biographical information about the Reverend James Burns and the Reverend William Burns can be found in Scott, H. *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanae*, 7 vols, Edinburgh, 1915-1928, V, 377, and III, 480, respectively.

Near-contemporary accounts of Brechin can be found in *The Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, V (1793): Brechin, Forfarshire, 457-463; and *The Gazetteer of Scotland*, Dundee, 1803. See chapter 8 of Black, D D. *The History of Brechin*, 2nd edn, Edinburgh, 1867, for a general account of the burgh's history during the period of Ilay Burns' visit.

For travel during the period, see Durie, A. Movement, transport and travel. In Foyster, E and Whatley, C A, eds. *A History of Everyday Life in Scotland, 1600 to 1800*, Edinburgh, 2010, 252-272; and Gordon, A. *To Move with the Times. The Story of Transport and Travel in Scotland*, Aberdeen, 1988.

Other relevant titles can be found in the notes to the Introduction.

SOURCES IN LOCAL HISTORY

GENERAL EDITOR: KENNETH VEITCH

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