

Honorary members 1828 – John Galt, James Montgomery

John Galt (1779-1839)

John Galt was born in Irvine, the son of a sea captain. His family moved to Greenock in 1789. Working there, and later, from 1804, in London, where he printed an epic on the Battle of Largs, he tried both commerce and law, but failed in each, and went abroad for some years with the sole purpose of re-establishing his health. Travelling to the Mediterranean, he had the good luck to make the acquaintance of Lord Byron. As Galt travelled, via Malta and Constantinople, he gathered materials for his book 'Voyages and Travels'. Returning in 1812, he made his name as a writer with 'The Ayrshire Legatees' (1820), 'Annals of the Parish' (1821), 'The Provost' (1822), 'Sir Andrew Wyllie' (1822) and 'The Entail' (1823). The work mentioned in the minute of his nomination is 'The Ayrshire Legatees'.

He unsuccessfully represented Canadian claimants in their attempt to recoup war losses of 1812. His life was one of imaginative enterprises, and scheme after scheme, although prosperous for a while, brought only disappointment and bitterness in the end.

In 1826, he was awarded the freedom of the Burgh of Irvine by Bailie Fullarton (a councillor for 42 years, 1790-1832), his model for Provost Pawkie in *The Provost*.

In Canada, as manager of a land development company, from 1826, John Galt enjoyed short-lived success. Leading ox-teams from the town of Galt in 1827, he established Guelph, so named to honour King George IV. Later accused of overspending on the new settlement, in 1829 he returned to Britain as an impoverished adventurer, lost his case, and spent the rest of his life in poverty. In total, John Galt wrote about 50 novels, 30 dramas and many poems. He died in Greenock. In 2007, the City of Guelph initiated an annual John Galt Day on the first Monday in August.

Letter of acceptance, written from Guelph, Ontario, on 20 July 1828

Sir,

When an opportunity occurs you will have the goodness to intimate to the Irvine Burns Club that I feel exceedingly gratified with the honour conferred in electing me as honorary member. The distinction is the more agreeable as it has been, probably in part, bestowed by the goodwill of some of my old schoolfellows & longsyne companions.

For the manner in which you have been pleased to communicate the circumstance of my election I can only beg your acceptance of my best acknowledgements.

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your most obedient humble servant

John Galt

Notes:

His letter is addressed to the then Secretary of Irvine Burns Club: James Dobie, Esq., Beith, N.B. [*North Britain*] and is postmarked "Lewiston / July 30 / N.Y."

A plaque marking the site of his birthplace is on the wall of the Bank of Scotland building on the High Street.

James Montgomery (1771-1854)

Between 1771 and 1776, James Montgomery's parents, Brother and Sister John Montgomery, attempted to set up a church of the Moravian Brethren at the Braid Close in the Halfway district of the town. Though there was as yet no church of any kind in Fullarton, their efforts met with little success. In 1776, they moved to Ireland and, shortly afterwards, to Yorkshire. Thus, by the time he was eight, he had lived in Scotland, Ireland and England. He was born at 26 Montgomery St (now demolished). Our minutes record him as "the Author of 'The World before the Flood'".

James Montgomery was greatly esteemed by his contemporaries, first as a journalist and reformer (he was one of the main campaigners against the practice of using children as chimney-sweepers), then as a poet, (including numerous epitaphs for Sheffield graves, and many hymns, of which thirteen are still in today's Church of Scotland hymnary) giving him the title 'the Christian poet', and finally as an editor (of the weekly 'Sheffield Iris') and critic. His work and character were praised by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and many others, on both sides of the Atlantic. William Howitt (hon. member 1851) wrote: "Perhaps there are no lyrics in the language that are so truly Christian."

His 'West Indies' is an impressive anti-slavery document, born from the experiences of his parents, sent as missionaries in 1783 to the West Indies, where they died and were buried.

Aged 70, he re-visited Irvine, and was presented with the freedom of the burgh. When he died in Sheffield in 1854, the cortege and procession took over four hours to pass by.

[Marking the Club's purchase of his birthplace, and his help to a Derbyshire friend after a business failure, the friend's son presented the Club with a Loving Cup in January 1870.]

Letter of acceptance, written from Sheffield on 16 Feb., 1828

Sir,

Please to accept my best thanks for the kind manner in which you have communicated to me the honour, which so respectable a class of my native townspeople have conferred on me, in token of their approbation of my sincere and strenuous endeavours (however humble and feeble comparatively) to deserve the regard of my countrymen. I was removed from Irvine at so early a period that it is now remembered only as the first, perhaps the loveliest, of my morning dreams in life. Though naturalized in England, my pulse has ever beat true to the land of my birth, and while it beats at all, I trust it will always quicken at the sound of whatever is said or done to the glory of Scotland. My estimate of the talents of Robert Burns, the members of your Society may perhaps have found in my latest publication, the volume containing "The Pelican Island", etc.

Please to present my grateful acknowledgements to the Irvine Burns Club and believe me, truly, your obliged friend & servt,

J Montgomery

Notes:

'The Pelican Island' (1827), his last and greatest long poem, also his most original and most powerful, shows a sympathetic and humanistic approach to Man.

His surname appears as Montgomery both in the Church of Scotland hymnary and in Strawhorn's "History of Irvine"; however, while the end of his signature is unclear in the letter, the spelling on its reverse is the older version 'Montgomerie'.

The Moravian Brethren were a Protestant sect holding Hussite doctrines (from John Huss, a Bohemian religious reformer of the 15th c.), founded in Saxony by emigrants from Moravia (now the eastern half of the Czech Republic).

His 'Robert Burns' (1820) begins: "What bird, in beauty, flight, or song, Can with the Bard compare?" and ends: "Peace to the dead! - in Scotia's choir / Of Minstrels great and small, / He sprang from his spontaneous fire, / The Phoenix of them all". (A rather ornithological tribute, with 19 birds in its 11 verses.)

The plaque which once marked his birthplace is now in the nearby Fullarton Parish Church.

A Symbol of Friendship – the website description of the Sheffield Loving Cup

Used at the Club's Annual Celebration, this Loving Cup was given to the Club in 1870 by Mr John Rhodes, following the purchase of the house where James Montgomery, the 'Christian Poet', was born in 1771 and lived until 1776. The inscription on the base reads:

PRESENTED TO THE IRVIN BURNS CLUB BY Mr John Rhodes OF SHEFFIELD THROUGH Mr Robert McTear GLASGOW TO COMMEMORATE THE PURCHASE BY THE CLUB OF THE HOUSE IN IRVIN IN WHICH James Montgomerie THE CHRISTIAN POET WAS BORN – 1869 (*the inscription, shown slightly inaccurately in McJanet's "Royal Burgh of Irvine", mis-spells the town name*). Montgomery lived only five years in Irvine; the family moved, via Ireland, to Yorkshire.

John Rhodes was probably the eldest son of Sheffield Master Cutler **Ebenezer Rhodes** (1762-1839), a conspicuous member of a debating society named the Society of Friends of Literature. It met in a Sheffield pub and, like other such societies, was later proscribed - regarded as a hotbed of sedition. Ebenezer Rhodes was an intelligent and fluent participant, and something of a poet. James Montgomery was one of its other prominent members. Rhodes made many excursions to the Derbyshire Dales with Montgomery, and published books on scenery, including a four-part work on the Peak District. When his business failed in 1827, his remaining years were made comfortable through the help of his friends, including Montgomery (who subscribed £100 to a fund for his support), so the Cup represents a son's appreciation of the help given to his father by a good friend. John Rhodes was a member of the Glasgow-Irvine Society.

Robert McTear, the Glasgow auctioneer, presented the Cup on John Rhodes' behalf at the close of a lecture given in Irvine on 4 March 1870 on the subject of "A Continental Trip and a visit to the Italian Hero General Garibaldi at Caprera". The "handsome Loving Cup of Silver plate" was "a mark of his [Rhodes'] appreciation of the honour done to the Memory of James Montgomery, the Christian Poet, by several Members of the Club who had recently purchased the house in Halfway in which the Poet was born". Mr Rhodes and Mr McTear were entertained at Supper in the Kings Arms Inn when James Dickie presided and Bailie Jack discharged the duties of Croupier. It is fairly certain that McTear arranged the acceptance of Honorary Membership by Garibaldi on his visit to him.

The property transaction mentioned is obscure, for the Montgomery birthplace house was not purchased by the Club, but (*as the 1869 minutes of 31 May record*) by Maxwell Dick, paying £125 and retaining a half-interest, the other half-interest (£125) being shared by a group of other members, Alexander Longmuir, Alexander Gilmour and James Dickie (Secretary).