

Honorary members of 1836-1839

1836 Sir James Shaw

1837 The 13th Earl of Eglinton

The minutes also record the nominations of others, whose acceptance letters, if written, are not extant:

1837 Mr John Shaw, Rev. Mr Campbell – identities not known

1838 Robert Chambers, William Chambers, Lord James Stuart, MP

1839 Alexander Rodger, Robert Gilfillan

1836 Sir James Shaw (1764-1844)

James Shaw started life as the son of a farmer at Mosshead near Riccarton in East Ayrshire, and became Lord Mayor of London in 1805, where he was responsible for leading the funeral of Admiral Lord Nelson after Trafalgar.

He was a real-life Dick Whittington. When he was barely five years old his father died and his mother was forced to move the family into Kilmarnock, where Shaw was educated at the Grammar School. At the age of fifteen, he followed his older brother to seek his fortune in USA, where he was able to secure employment in commerce. In 1784 he returned to Britain and quickly rose to become a junior partner in the London office of the company he had worked for in New York. He began to move in influential circles and won respect from his peers such that he was appointed Lord Mayor of London in 1805.

His respect for Robert Burns was such that, after the death of the poet in 1796, Shaw helped support his widow and gained employment for his sons.

In 1806 Shaw was elected a Member of Parliament in London, a position in which he served until 1818. In 1809 he was created a Baronet. In 1816, Shaw defended the Royal Exchange when it was attacked by radicals, intervening to capture one of the leaders of the protest. He served as an Alderman of London until 1831 when he was raised to the office of Chamberlain of the City, resigning from this office shortly before he died.

Shaw is remembered by a marble statue in Kilmarnock, erected by public subscription. The statue, by sculptor James Fillans (1808-52), was unveiled in 1848.

(information courtesy of The Gazetteer for Scotland at www.geo.ed.ac.uk/scotgaz)

Letter of acceptance, written from London on 1st February 1836, addressed to W. Thomson Esq., Chairman, and the members of Burns Club, Irvine.

Dear Sirs,

Accept my acknowledgements for the honour done to me by the Burns Club of Irvine, on the 25th ult., in electing me an Honorary Member of their society, and believe me to be with great respect

Dear Sir

Your [Ob.] Sert

Jam^s Shaw

1837 The 13th Earl of Eglinton (1812-1861)

Archibald William, 13th Earl of Eglinton, Knight of the Thistle, was grandson of Hugh, the 12th Earl; he succeeded to the title in 1819, at the age of 7, and was educated at Eton. At a dinner for his 20th birthday, in September 1832, he was presented with the freedom of the burgh. As he was only 24 in January 1837, his nomination as an honorary member reflects the standing of the family in North Ayrshire rather than his own, later, achievements, outlined below.

The Montgomeries of Eglinton (lords in the Scottish peerage from 1427) had, like the Cunninghams of Kilmaurs, extended their possessions and influence during the 16th century, and the 3rd lord Hugh (Montgomerie) was created Earl of Eglinton in 1508 [or '06 or '07 or '03]. The 13th Earl's grandfather, the 12th Earl, Hugh, had commissioned Eglinton Castle (completed 1802), had employed the services of the celebrated engineer Thomas Telford to survey the Bay of Ardrossan, leading to the 1805 Act of Parliament empowering a company to be formed to construct a harbour and canal to Glasgow, had joined the British peerage as Baron Ardrossan in 1806, had built Bath Villa, a hydropathic bathing facility in Ardrossan, in 1807, and had obtained a Royal Charter for Irvine Academy in 1818. An accumulation of debt led to the estate's 20th century decline: the 12th Earl left family debt of £269,000; the 13th Earl's expensive tastes were not covered by the considerable new income from coal and iron, and the 14th Earl suffered in the 1878 Glasgow Bank crash. The present (at time of writing) 18th Earl, Archibald George Montgomerie, also 7th Baron Ardrossan, 6th Earl of Winton, and 19th Lord Montgomerie, born in 1939, succeeded to these titles in 1966 and lives elsewhere.

The 13th Earl, Archibald William, was (quoting his obituary in 'The Gentleman's Magazine') "a leading patron of the turf and had at one period one of the largest and best racing studs in the country; his success on the turf was considerable". The local Bogside races, initiated by his father in 1808 and held until 1824, were revived in 1838, when the course was extended and steeplechasing was introduced into Scotland, though in the 13th Earl's later absence, from 1852, they again lapsed (until 1867). The Earl ran winning horses in the St Leger (1842, '47 & '49) and the Derby (1849). His obituary recalls: "His pleasures, like his business occupations, were such as benefited others, for they were eminently sociable."

He is best known locally for the Eglinton Tournament of 1839. Described by a county historian as "one of the most gorgeous spectacles ever witnessed", it is said to have cost £40,000. It was the last tournament in Britain, hosted in temporary pavilions, grandstands and canopies in the grounds of the Castle. It attracted to Irvine the cream of society, including Prince Louis Napoleon (later Emperor Napoleon III of France), and vast crowds which arrived by coach, carriage, steamboat and railway, but suffered greatly from unfavourable weather over the first two days. To commemorate the event, the Earl was presented with the magnificent silver Eglinton Trophy, now displayed in Cunninghame House, Irvine.

In 1843, Sir Robert Peel appointed him Lord-Lieutenant of Ayrshire (succeeding George Boyle, the 4th Earl of Glasgow). In 1852, Lord Derby appointed him Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and the Earl's obituarist wrote: "the rare social qualities of his lordship, combined with his princely hospitality, rendered him a most popular viceroy". He retired from that dignity at the end of 1852 but held it again from 1858-59. In 1859, the Earldom of Winton (held by his kinsfolk the Setons until the 5th Earl's treason in 1740) was conferred on him by Lord Derby.

Other, less momentous, events include: from 1836 to 1852, he was colonel of the Ayrshire militia; in 1844, the Countess of Eglinton endowed a school to provide instruction for 80 girls in reading, sewing and knitting (the Council made available a room in the old school building at Kirkgatehead); in 1851, the Earl gave the Town Council the Bogside Flats, in exchange for land he wanted at Knadgerhill to create a new entrance to his policies; and, in 1852, he was elected Lord Rector of Glasgow University.

He died in 1861, at only 49, after a golf match at St Andrews, from "a fit of apoplexy which at once rendered him unconscious", and was succeeded by his son, aged 20, also named Archibald William; he had a daughter Egidia and two other sons. His first wife had died suddenly in Dec.1853, and his second (Lady Adela, only daughter of the Earl and Countess of Essex) had died suddenly in Dec.1860. The 13th Earl's portrait hangs in Irvine Burns Club premises. Our website contains a commentary on his uniform in the painting.

Letter of acceptance, received from Eglinton Castle on 27th January, 1837, on a card addressed to Mr John Dean, Chairman [President] of The Irvine Burns Club

Sir,

I beg to return you & the other gentlemen of the Burns Club my thanks for the honor [sic] you paid me in drinking my health on the anniversary of the poet's birthday.

I also have to thank you for having proposed me as an honorary member of the Society, & assure you that I feel great pleasure in becoming one.

I have the honor to be

Your Obedt Servt

Eglinton

Nominated in 1838, but no extant acceptance letters

Robert Chambers (1802-1871), the Edinburgh publisher and author, who had started as a bookseller at age 16. He published a Life of Sir Walter Scott in 1832, and in that year launched Chamber's Edinburgh Journal. He was in whole or in part the author of the Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen (4 vols., Glasgow, 1832-1835), the Cyclopaedia of English Literature (1844), and the Life and Works of Robert Burns (4 vols., 1851); he published at the rate of one book every year or so. We have his letter of 1842 thanking Irvine Burns Club for its contribution to a fund he had set up to benefit the sister of Burns' 'Chloris' (Jean Lorimer).

William Chambers, Robert's brother (1800-1883), publisher and politician. He opened his own shop in 1819, branched out into printing, and joined his brother in W & R Chambers. Chambers' Encyclopaedia was published in 1859. As Lord Provost of Edinburgh (1865-69), he was responsible for the restoration of St Giles Cathedral. He is commemorated by a statue in Chambers Street, Edinburgh.

Lord James Stuart, MP (1794-1859), MP for the Ayr District of Burghs (1835-52 and 1857-his death) and Lord-Lieutenant of the County of Bute. "His estimable public life and private virtues had secured for him . . . honour for his memory far beyond the county where he was so intimately known, and which in Parliament he so faithfully represented."

Nominated in 1839, but no extant acceptance letters

Alexander Rodger (1784-1846), the Glasgow Radical poet, and merriest of the contributors to Whistle-binkie. Resident in Glasgow from teenage years, he was famous for politics, lyrical letters and poetry - "every adversary who fell from the attack of his pen may be said to have perished in a paroxysm of laughter". His efforts led to establishing a public footpath on the banks of the Clyde. He contributed to the Liberator, a Radical weekly, and later worked for The Reformer's Gazette. His poetry reflected his racy and genial humour, and included some well-known love-lyrics. He was a friend of William Motherwell (honorary member 1829) - though opposed in politics, they shared a common interest in publishing, editing and local humour. He is buried in the Glasgow Necropolis, not far from his friend Motherwell. One of his short poems is:

"The greatest sumphs in a' our core,
Are sure to be promoted,
While men of mettle are passed o'er,
And scarcely ever noted.
This truth may seem a paradox,
But mark ye how I'll clear it,
Promotion amang Highland folks
Gangs mair by _Mac_ than merit."

Robert Gilfillan (1798-1850), poet, resident for much of his life in Leith. At first, he enjoyed the popularity of his songs, unpublished, though circulated over the whole of Scotland, and sung both at public festivals and at social and domestic gatherings. He dedicated his first, small, 1831 collection of songs to Allan Cunningham (see honorary member entry for 1829), bringing out new editions in 1835 and 1839. He became a frequent contributor to the Edinburgh Journal and the Dublin University Magazine. His admirers subscribed to a monument for his grave in South Leith churchyard. "A Rhythmical Rhapsody addressed to Robert Gilfillan, Leith (to be sung to a new Tune called 'The Social Three')" (by our 1829 Hon. Member William Tennant?) was written into our Minute Book (p.92) - it was also printed in the Dublin University Magazine of 1834.