

Honorary members of 1875-1881

1875 James McKie, Rev. George Gilfillan

1880 Sir James Salmon

1881 John White

Another **1876** nomination: The 1876 minutes record the nomination for Honorary Membership of Col. E B Hamley, R E, an eminent Literary man and distinguished Soldier, though presumably no letter of acceptance was received.

1875 James McKie (1816-1891)

James McKie was a printer and bookseller at 2 King Street in Kilmarnock. He collected rare editions of Burns and published facsimiles. His 'Bibliotheca Burnsiana' of 1866 listed all the various editions in his private library (the University of Michigan copy is viewable on the Web). In 1867, McKie published 600 copies of a facsimile of the Kilmarnock Edition, and in 1868-70, he published 600 copies of a 4-volume set titled the "Kilmarnock Complete Edition of Burns' Poems & Songs".

James McKie also published the poems of Kilmarnock poetess Marion P Aird in the 1840s and 1860s, as well as starting the 'Kilmarnock Journal' (1844-1857) and the 'Kilmarnock Weekly Post' (1856-1865). His 'Plan of the Town of Kilmarnock' of 1868, showing the newly constructed John Finnie Street, is still of use to planners..

East Ayrshire's 2009 'Burns First Edition Project' aimed, inter alia, to ensure that his important collection of Burns memorabilia, by then in storage for 30 years, is made available to the public.

In our minute book, James McKie is wrongly listed in the list of "gentlemen elected ordinary members of the Club", though there is a faint pencil cross in the margin opposite. From his letter of acceptance, we know that this enthusiastic Burnsian and literary publisher was indeed honoured by Irvine Burns Club in 1875, along with the Rev George Gilfillan (see next entry).

Letter of acceptance, written from Kilmarnock, on 6th February 1875:

My Dear Sir

I should & would have written you on receipt of your note I received with the pleasing intelligence that I was elected a member of the Irvine Burns Club.

I delayed expecting to be in your Royal Burgh personally & in accepting the honour thank you across a dram - however although I have threatened over & over again to visit Irvine for the past fortnight I have not been able to accomplish it & hence my now writing you to say "thank you" for the honour your Club has conferred upon me by electing me one of your Members.

Allow me to remark at same time that in the reports of your last Anniversary you note as to me having presented you with an "Edition of Burns" while the expression ought to be a copy of the "Burns Calendar".

I certainly am very sorry at the overlook & omission of not noticing the ring presented to the Monument at the Brig O' Doon by Mr Dick [?] but shall take the earliest possible opportunity I can place to remedy the omission.

Do you know if Mr Murchland is alive & in his usual health as when I was last in Irvine I paid him half a guinea for a picture which he has never yet sent me !!! I am

My Dear Sir

Yours faithfully

James McKie

P.S. no word of Mr Balsillie yet.

Notes:

The letter heading bears the town name and a portrait of the Bard, as suited a Burns collector and a printer. His 'Burns Calendar' is not mentioned in our minutes.

Is the 'ring' the wedding ring of Jean Armour (1788) (still displayed there)?

Charles Murchland was Club President in 1879, while Provost of Irvine Burgh Council.

William Balsillie was a local businessman, perhaps by then retired (he had given up the lease of Duntonknoll Quarry in 1867)

1875 Rev. George Gilfillan (1813-1878)

Our minute book clearly records the reason for Rev Gilfillan's nomination, that he "had recently edited an Edition of the Works of Burns with a comprehensive Biography and criticism of the man and the Poet". 'The National Burns, edited by Rev. George Gilfillan, including the Airs of all the Songs and an original life of Burns by the Editor' had been published in 1872 by William Mackenzie of Edinburgh. Illustrated throughout, both by engraved plates and within the text, it was published in 15 parts, costing two shillings each, making it an affordable way for people to purchase the complete works of Robert Burns. He was a leading figure in the Burns movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He was also instrumental in having the statue of Robert Burns by Sir John Steell erected in Albert Square, Dundee. Born in Comrie, Perthshire, and educated at Glasgow University, he had been ordained pastor of a Secession congregation in Dundee in 1836.

His earlier set of volumes, 'The Poetical Works of Robert Burns, with Memoir, Critical Dissertation and Explanatory Notes, by Rev. George Gilfillan' was published in 1856 by James Nichol, Edinburgh - it opens with the words: "Robert Burns, the greatest poet, save Shakespeare, . . ". In his work on Shakespeare, he names the two greatest of all poets as Homer and Shakespeare.

In fact, Gilfillan wrote commentaries on, and produced editions of, many poets - Alexander Pope, about eight other lesser-known poets, and many minor poets. From 1853 to 1860, he edited the 48-volume 'Library Edition of the British Poets'. He died having just finished a new life of Burns designed to accompany a new edition of the works of that poet; it was published shortly after his death.

In his own poetic compositions, Gilfillan can be categorised as a Spasmodic poet - a term applied by William Edmonstoune Aytoun (an honorary member in 1854) to a group of British poets of the Victorian era, certainly with some derogatory as well as humorous intention. Their brief floruit closely followed (writes F S Boos, in 'Victorian Poetry', winter 2004) one of 19th century British radicalism's most signal defeats, the rejection of the 1848 People's

Charter; spasmodic poems often took as their subject a young poet's struggle to achieve fame; poets such as Alexander Smith (also an honorary member in 1854) were working- or lower-middle class in their origins. In this spirit, Gilfillan encouraged, in general, the young Spasmodics in his literary reviews written under the pseudonym Apollodorus, and, in particular, his friend William McGonagall, whose first poetic production in 1877 was 'An Address to the Rev. George Gilfillan', quoted in the preface to 'Poetic Gems' (1890) ("My blessing on his noble form, / And on his lofty head, / May all good angels guard him while living, / And hereafter when he's dead."). The Reverend's testimonial is also printed there: "I have heard him [McGonagall] speak, he has a strong proclivity for the elocutionary department, a strong voice, and great enthusiasm." One of the 'Poetic Gems' is 'Burial of the Rev. George Gilfillan' ("It was a most solemn sight to see, / Not fewer than thirty thousand people assembled in Dundee, / All watching the funeral procession of Gilfillan that day, / That death had suddenly taken away.").

Letter of acceptance, written from Dundee, on 28th Janry, 1875:

Dear Sir

Please return my warm thanks to the Irvine Burns Club for the great honour they have done me in electing me a member of their body and also for their kindness in sending me a facsimile of the Poet's Masterpiece which I gladly receive and highly value.

I am

Dear Sir,

Yours very truly

George Gilfillan

1880 Sir James Salmon (1811-1886)

" Our minute book makes clear the reason for Sir James Salmon's nomination in these terms: "H M Inspector General of Hospitals and Fleets at Gosport and an Honorary Physician to the Queen, a native of Irvine". Thus, in two successive years, 1880 and 1881, the Club honoured two Irvine natives, the second (Dr White) having made his mark in his own town, the first (Sir James, recently knighted in 1878) having made his mark nationally.

Dr Salmon held the post at Gosport from 1869 to 1873, at that time being only "J Salmon MD". The details of his career appear in his obituary in the British Medical Journal of Jan. 1st, 1887, which it is best simply to quote verbatim:

Sir James Salmon, Knt., M.D., Inspector-General of Hospitals and Fleets, and Honorary Physician to the Queen, died at Anglesey Crescent, near Gosport, on December 17th, at the age of 75. Sir James entered the Royal Navy, August 1st, 1833; was made Fleet-Surgeon, August 1st, 1840; Deputy Inspector-General, June 30th, 1855; and Inspector-General, December 2nd, 1868; he retired, February 4th, 1875. He served on the coast of Spain during the first Carlist war, 1837-38, promoted; in 'Neptune', in the Baltic expedition, 1854; present at the operations in the Gulf of Bothnia (Baltic medal); Deputy Inspector-General, Malta Hospital, during part of the Crimean war; Inspector-General of Haslar, for four years, being the first medical officer entrusted with the general superintendence of the hospital; Sir

Gilbert Blane's Gold Medal, 1852; knighted, November 27th, 1878; granted a pension for good and meritorious service, July 24th, 1874.

[His birth is not recorded in the Old Parish Records - this and his joining the Navy in 1833 suggest he was the son of shipmaster James Salmon, married 1811, of Montgomery Street, a member of the Relief Church, and we are unable to link him with William Salmon, master saddler, a Bailie of the Burgh when President of Irvine Burns Club in 1840, and Provost from 1841 to 1845, whose family were members of the Established Church.]

Letter of acceptance, written from 10 Anglesey Crescent, Gosport (Hants), on 16 February 1880, addressed to Jas. Dickie, Esquire, Town Clerk, Irvine (Honorary Secretary of the Club).

My Dear Sir

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your kind letter of the 12th instant, conveying to me the honor done me by my fellow townsmen in electing me an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns' Club.

I beg to assure you that I highly appreciate this kind remembrance of me, and I thank you very much for your own considerate kindness in sending me the fac simile of that beautiful poem, The Cotter's Saturday Night. - so true to nature and the character of our forefathers.

I would wish to revisit once more my native town, but I fear much I can only visit it in memory for I am not likely to be able to travel so far.

I am obliged to live by rule and to guard myself as much as possible from every thing that might produce a cold and I can only go out when the sun is shining and the wind moderate.

I have been able however to go out more this winter than the one before, and in summer time. My walks extend to 4 miles a day.

Till my illness 2 years ago I was an active I may say young man, but heavy disease has made me feel my years.

I beg to remain with Every kind expression

My Dear Sir

Yours very truly

J A Salmon

1881 John White (1817/18-1896)

John White was commercial and later mathematics master for thirty-two years, from 1834 to 1866, at Irvine Academy (opened in 1816; the royal grant to the former burgh school justified the new title Irvine Royal Academy when the new building opened in 1901). Like the Rector and the English master, White was not a graduate, but was so outstanding as to be awarded an honorary doctorate. He was the son of James White, coal merchant.

White was the author of several textbooks as well as slim volumes of verse and essays. Taking the rector's mathematics classes from 1845, he taught so successfully that he had inscribed on a board a list of former pupils who had distinguished themselves, including thirty-six prize-winners at Glasgow University - among them was William Jack (hon. member

1871, see notes there). He was an enthusiast for archery, fishing and music, a Conservative and a churchman, fond of snuff and practical jokes. He was also a hard taskmaster who kept the pupils who boarded at his home in Bank Street at their studies even on Marymass Saturdays till after noon (John Strawhorn, "The History of Irvine", 1985).

Dr White had served as Irvine Burns Club President in 1871. He was the son of James White, coal merchant, and had married Grace Welsh. His house on Bank Street was "Cosie Ha", more recently, until 2008, the office of T E Docherty, the coach hirers. He died in March 1896, a few months before the arrival in Irvine of the statue of Robert Burns.

Letter of acceptance, written from Bank Street, Irvine, on February 3rd, 1881, addressed to James Dickie, Esq., Solicitor, Irvine (Honorary Secretary of the Club).

My dear Sir,

I duly received your official note informing me that I was, at a recent meeting of the Irvine Burns' Club, elected an Honorary Member. The honour I duly appreciate and I hope that you will, at your convenience, intimate to the members that I am proud of the compliment conferred upon me. I am

My dear Sir,

Yours Very Truly

John White