

own trade, Madam, a poetic one, and when it is my own property—that I take a pencil and mark at the ends of verses, or note on margins and odd paper, little criticisms of approbation or disapprobation as I peruse along. I will make no apology for presenting you with a few unconnected thoughts that occurred to me in my repeated perusals of your poem. I want to show you that I have honesty enough to tell you what I take to be truths, even when they are not quite on the side of approbation; and I do it in the firm faith that you have equal greatness of mind to hear them with pleasure. [Here follows a list of strictures.]

I had lately the honour of a letter from Dr. Moore, where he tells me that he has sent me some books; they are not yet come to hand, but I hear they are on the way.

Wishing you all success in your progress in the path of fame, and that you may equally escape the danger of stumbling through incautious speed, or losing ground through loitering neglect, I am, etc.

R. B.

CXXXI.—TO MR. ROBERT GRAHAM, OF FINTRY.

ELLISLAND, 31st July 1789.

SIR,—The language of gratitude has been so prostituted by servile adulation and designing flattery that I know not how to express myself when I would acknowledge receipt of your last letter. I beg and hope, ever-honoured "Friend of my life and patron of my rhymes," that you will always give me credit for the sincerest, chastest gratitude. I dare call the Searcher of hearts and Author of all Goodness to witness how truly grateful I am.

Mr. Mitchell* did not wait my calling on him, but sent me a kind letter, giving me a hint of the business; and yesterday he entered with the most friendly ardour into my views and interests. He seems to think, and from my private knowledge I am certain he is right, that removing the officer who now does, and for these many years has done, duty in the

* A collector in the Excise.

Division in the middle of which I live, will be productive of at least no disadvantage to the revenue, and may likewise be done without any detriment to him. Should the Honourable Board [of Excise] think so, and should they deem it eligible to appoint me to officiate in his present place, I am then at the top of my wishes. The emoluments in my office will enable me to carry on, and enjoy those improvements on my farm, which but for this additional assistance, I might in a year or two have abandoned. Should it be judged improper to place me in this Division, I am deliberating whether I had not better give up my farming altogether, and go into the Excise whenever I can find employment. Now that the salary is £50 per annum, the Excise is surely a much superior object to a farm, which, without some foreign assistance, must for half a lease be a losing bargain. The worst of it is—I know there are some respectable characters who do me the honour to interest themselves in my welfare and behaviour, and, as leaving the farm so soon may have an unsteady, giddy-headed appearance, I had better perhaps lose a little money than hazard their esteem.

You see, Sir, with what freedom I lay before you all my little matters—little indeed to the world, but of the most important magnitude to me. . . . Were it not for a very few of our kind, the very existence of magnanimity, generosity, and all their kindred virtues, would be as much a question with metaphysicians as the existence of witchcraft. Perhaps the nature of man is not so much to blame for this, as the situation in which by some miscarriage or other he is placed in this world. The poor, naked, helpless wretch, with such voracious appetites and such a famine of provision for them, is under a cursed necessity of turning selfish in his own defence. Except a few instances of original scoundrelism, thorough-paced selfishness is always the work of time. Indeed, in a little time, we generally grow so attentive to ourselves and so regardless of others that I have often in poetic frenzy looked on this world as one vast ocean, occupied and commoved by

innumerable vortices, each whirling round its centre. These vortices are the children of men. The great design and, if I may say so, merit of each particular vortex consists in how widely it can extend the influence of its circle, and how much floating trash it can suck in and absorb.

I know not why I have got into this preaching vein, except it be to show you that it is not my ignorance but my knowledge of mankind which makes me so much admire your goodness to me.

I shall return your books very soon. I only wish to give Dr. Adam Smith one other perusal, which I will do in one or two days.

R. B.

CXXXII.—TO DAVID SILLAR, MERCHANT, IRVINE.*

ELLISLAND, 5 Aug. 1789.

MY DEAR SIR,—I was half in thoughts not to have written to you at all, by way of revenge for the two damn'd business letters you sent me. I wanted to know all about your publications—your news, your hopes, fears, etc., in commencing poet in print. In short, I wanted you to write to Robin like his old acquaintance Davie, and not in the style of Mr. Tare to Mr. Tret, as thus:—

“Mr. Tret.—Sir,—This comes to advise you that fifteen barrels of herrings were, by the blessing of God, shipped safe on board the *Lovely Janet*, Q.D.C., Duncan Mac-Leerie, master, etc.”

I hear you have commenced married man—so much the better. I know not whether the nine gipsies are jealous of my lucky, but they are a good deal shyer since I could boast the important relation of husband.

I have got about eleven subscribers for your book. . . . My best compliments to Mrs. Sillar, and believe me to be, dear Davie, ever yours,

ROBT. BURNS.

* This letter was first published in 1879. The original is probably lost, but a copy is to be found in the minute-book of the Irvine Burns Club. Sillar was “Davie, a brother poet.”