

A NEW COAT FOR THE BARD

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The Rt. Hon. Lord Lyon King of Arms

People have asked me whether Robert Burns had ever been granted a coat of arms. The question is easily answered: there was never any official recording of arms in his name within the Registers of All Arms and Bearings of Scotland which are held in my Office.

There is clear evidence that many people from all levels of Scottish society in the eighteenth century had an interest in heraldry, coats of arms and seals, and their meaning for their own personal identity. In relation to Robert Burns, it has been said that heraldry was surely rather removed from the circles in which he moved, however there is evidence of clear interest by both Burns himself and many others in his society regarding heraldry and the related issue of individual identity.

There is no doubt in my own mind that Robert Burns' greatness lay in his celebration of the ordinary common folk of Scotland, and yet he also once described himself thus:

"I am a bit of a herald".

The use of seals slowly but surely made its way from the Continent into everyday life in Scotland, particularly in relation to correspondence and documents, and the eighteenth century saw a wide use of seals in Scotland. Robert Burns himself used a seal, and we know that he obtained a new seal in 1794, as he wrote in a letter to the jeweller Alexander Cunningham on 3 March 1794:

"There is one commission that I must trouble you with. I lately lost a valuable seal, a present from a departed friend, which vexes me much. I have gotten one of your Highland pebbles, which I fancy would make a very decent one; I want to cut my armorial bearings on it, will you be so obliging as to enquire what will be the expense of such business?"

In his letter to Cunningham, after declaring that he is 'a bit of a herald', Burns goes on to describe the blazon of his proposed arms as follows:

"On a field, azure, a hollybush seeded, proper; in base; a Shepherd's pipe and crook, Saltier-wise, also proper; in chief. On a wreath of the colours, a woodlark perching on a sprig of bay-tree, proper; for a crest. Two mottoes: round the top of the crest, "Woodnotes wild". At the bottom of the shield, in the usual place, "Better a wee bush than nae bield".

This description, albeit dated and clearly by someone who was an amateur in the art and science of heraldry, could be drawn and illustrated. The science of heraldic language can often be offputting and create an unnecessary mystery around its structure. However, for those who have an interest and a basic understanding of heraldry, the technical language is clear and opens new doors to understanding of individuals, places and organisations. Robert Burns displays in his description of arms a fair understanding of heraldic terms, as exemplified by his use of the term "saltirewise" to describe the positioning of the

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Figure 1.

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shepherd's pipe and crook. He was also obviously well aware of the use of the term 'azure' to depict the colour blue. He demonstrates further knowledge of heraldry by his use of the word 'proper', which in the language of heraldry represents the object described as being 'in their natural colours', and by his description of the technical part of the coat of arms known as the 'wreath'.

Each of the charges or objects contained in his proposed coat of arms had a significance for Robert Burns, and previous writers have expanded on their meanings. The clear message which I personally take from Burns' proposed blazon is his sense of romantic aestheticism. **Figure 1** is a black and white bookplate of the Arms of Robert Burns as described by himself in his letter to Alexander Cunningham.

We have now established that Burns not only had an interest in heraldry, but had also made preparations for his proposed coat of arms. Let us now journey back into the eighteenth century and ask the question: "Would Robert Burns be eligible for a grant of arms?"

It is the well-established custom and practice in Scots heraldry, which is also enshrined in legislation, that the Lord Lyon is the sole authority in Scotland who can legitimately grant arms. It would be fair to say that the system of heraldry in Scotland is the last in the world to form part of the law of the land. Indeed, the Lord Lyon not only has the sole right to grant arms, but is empowered to enforce the law if misuse or abuse of arms is proven.

The first step towards a grant of arms is submission of a formal "Petition" to the Lord Lyon requesting that the Lord Lyon, at his discretion, should grant arms to the petitioner and have those arms recorded in the Public Registers of all Arms and Bearings of Scotland. On receipt of such a Petition, the Lyon of the day would have to establish in law that the Petitioner's claim falls within his jurisdiction. There are several criteria which establish this jurisdiction, such as being of Scottish birth, having Scottish parents, being resident in Scotland or being able to prove Scottish heritage. Even in the eighteenth century, such a Petition by Robert Burns would have passed the first hurdle as he was born in Alloway, Ayrshire, in 1759 of Scottish parents, his father being from Kincardineshire, with several known addresses in Scotland from Ayrshire to Edinburgh to Dumfries. Another requirement to establish jurisdiction would have been that the Petitioner was over 21 years old, which Burns was by the time he wrote the above letter to Cunningham concerning his proposed arms.

Let me take a short sojourn away from the main elements of this article to consider which Lord Lyon might have dealt with a Petition by Robert Burns. During the period of Burns' life, three Lord Lyons were appointed to this position of a Great Officer of State: John Hooke-Campbell of Bangeston (1754 to 1795), Robert Boswell, *interim*, Lyon Depute (1795), and Robert Auriol, 10th Earl of Kinnoull (1796 to 1804). One may assume that, if Robert Burns had submitted a petition, it would be most likely to the Lord Lyon John Hooke-Campbell (**Figure 2 and 3**). He was the second son of John Campbell of Cawdor and lived mainly in Bath, England. The records show that he died on 7 September 1795 by falling over a precipice.

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Figure 2: John Hooke-Campbell painted by Francis Cotes in 1762
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Figure 3: Arms of the Lord Lyon John Hooke-Campbell. Source: Wikimedia.

Returning now to the Petition that Robert Burns might have submitted, the Lord Lyon, having established jurisdiction, still had to be satisfied on the more difficult question of whether the petitioner Robert Burns was a ‘virtuous and well-deserved person’. This remains one of the key pieces of evidence required by the Lord Lyon before granting arms. The vast resources which have been written on the life of Robert Burns and within his poetry itself leave us in no doubt that numerous groups would have taken a view and possibly attempted to influence the answer to this key question. The Church,

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the Lairds, the Brethren of his Masonic Lodge, the men and women of the local inn and the general populace of Scotland would certainly have had varying opinions concerning Robert Burns' suitability for the grant of a coat of arms. The Lord Lyon however, then as now, remains the sole judge of whether a petitioner passes the test of being 'a virtuous and well-deserved person'.

As a Petition was never submitted by Burns to any Lord Lyon, the answer remains undetermined. On the basis of all the material before me as the reigning Lord Lyon, it is my view on the balance of probabilities, and within the context of eighteenth century Scotland, that the key test for a grant of arms to Robert Burns would be met.

The Petitioner having established jurisdiction and passed the above test as a 'virtuous and well deserved person', the Lord Lyon would move to grant a Warrant in favour of the Petitioner and instruct the Lyon Clerk to record the arms in the Register. The Warrant in the style of the eighteenth century and signed by John Hooke-Campbell might have read as follows:

'The Lyon having considered the Petition whereby authorises the Lyon Clerk to prepare Letters Patent for Robert Burns, Poet, of which the destination is to be unto the Heirs of his body, and the Blazon of the same agreeable to the following:

"On a field, azure, a hollybush seeded, proper; in base, a Shepherd's pipe and crook, saltier-wise, also proper, in chief. On a wreath of the colours, a woodlark perching on a sprig of bay-tree, proper, for a crest. Two mottoes: round the top of the crest, "Woodnotes wild". At the bottom of the shield, in the usual place, "Better a wee bush than nae bield".'

After the issue of this Warrant, the Patent of Arms would be granted to the petitioner stating that "the Ensign Armorials assigned by the Lord Lyon to the said Robert Burns Esq. are Matriculated in the Public Registers of the Lyon Office." As is still the practice today, the Patent of Arms would be issued to the petitioner only after the account by way of Exchequer Dues issued by the Lyon Clerk has been settled in full, which in Burns' time would have amounted to £6, 17 shillings and 6 pence.

Upon completion of the process, the petitioner's arms are recorded, and preserved for future reference and study, in the Public Register of All Arms and Bearings in Scotland, which is maintained by the Lyon Office and stretches back over four centuries.

As stated at the beginning of my article, Robert Burns did not petition for a grant of arms, thus the proposed arms which he described in his letter to Cunningham have never been depicted. Nevertheless, various versions of his proposed arms have been used by organisations associated with Robert Burns, such as the Robert Burns World Federation, who recorded a version of these arms on 12 August 1988 which are contained in volume 69 folio 89 of the Public Registers of Arms and Bearings of Scotland.

In Scotland we have a magnificent and long-standing tradition of heraldry and of heraldic art, and our highly skilled heraldic artists play an important role in keeping the science and art of heraldry alive. My final illustration (**Figure 4**) is a depiction, in eighteenth century style, of Robert Burns' proposed arms, which was kindly provided to the Court of the Lord Lyon by Mark Dennis, Advocate and former Ross Herald Extraordinary.

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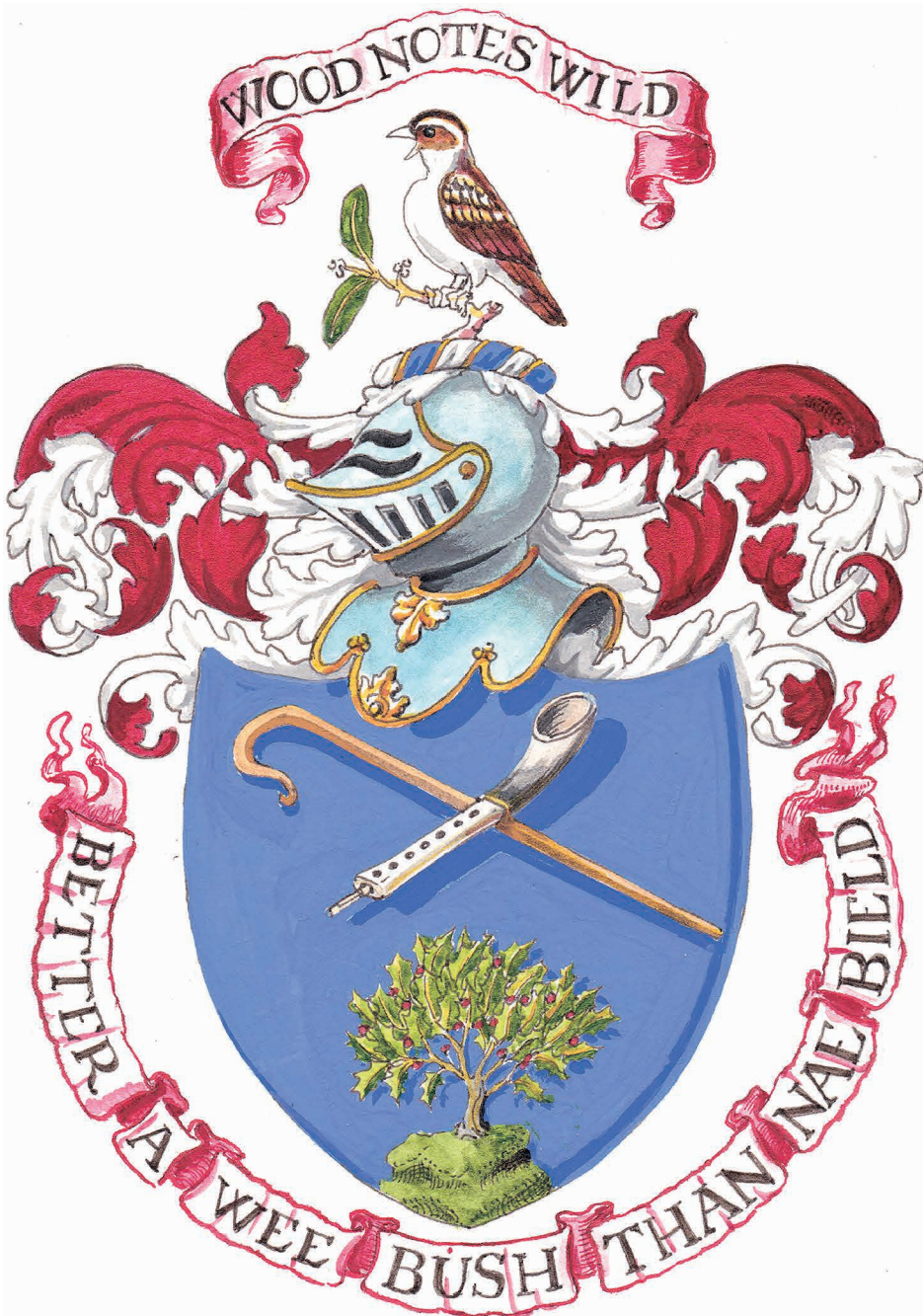


Figure 4: A version of the self-adopted arms of Robert Burns drawn by Mark Dennis

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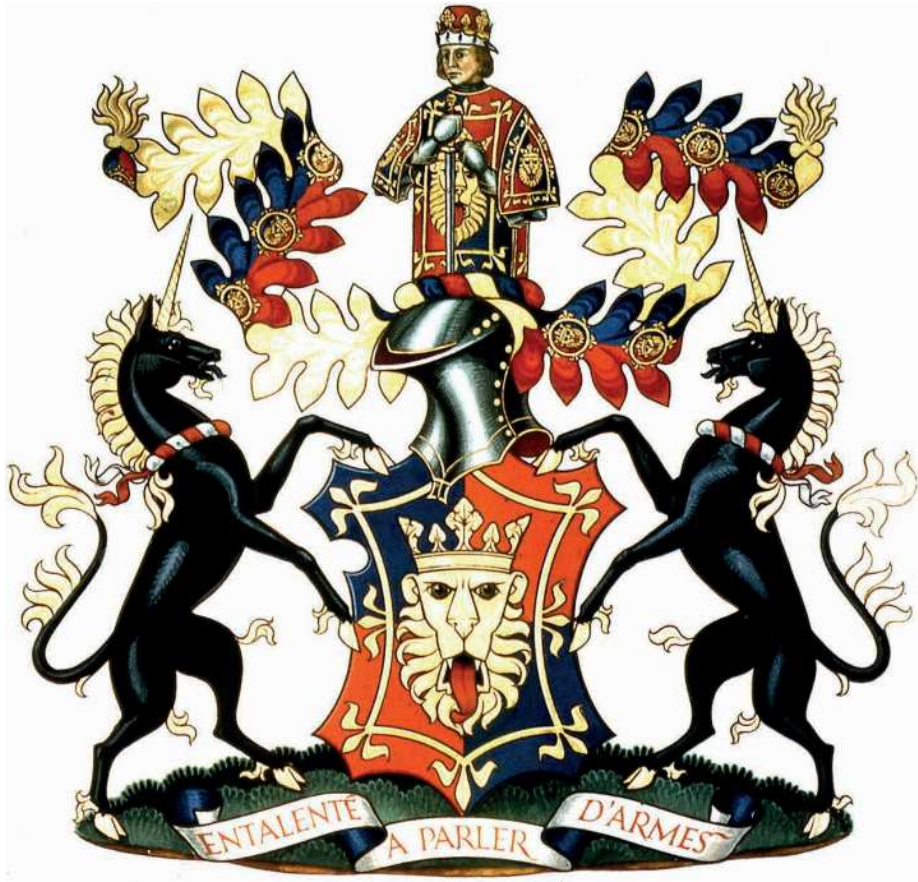
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