



West Stormont's

Auld Times



#10 Festive Issue 2024



Our friends at Bankfoot House in the Glass Mountains, Queensland (See #5 Spring 2023) sent a Xmas card. It features Mary Fenwick, formerly of Bankfoot and husband, William Grigor.



Auld Times is the journal of

The West Stormont Historical Society

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Look out for . . .

Monday 13 January at 7.30pm

Luncarty Church Centre

Scotland Made the World

live historical comedy
prior to a tour of Australia

with

Bruce Fummey



Monday 27 January at 7.30pm

Bankfoot Church Centre

A Scottish Evening

Music, Stories

Traditional songs

featuring

PlaidSong, Peter Bruce,

&

Craig Allan



NE'ERDAY DRINKS

& NIBBLES

FURTHER TO ...

JENNIFER MCKAY

A Champion of the Working Man Comes to Logiealmond

Paul's fascinating article, *Working Man's Diary*, which appeared in the last issue of *Auld Times* put me in mind of a story my mother told me around forty years ago. The memory was triggered by the mention of debating at the Murthly Mutual Improvement Society.

My mother claimed that her Auntie Bunt (Agnes Clark Taylor) who was born in Harrietfield in 1897, started a literary and debating society in Logiealmond. Her story was that Joe Corrie, the socialist poet, playwright, pacifist and workers' rights campaigner, was once invited to speak at the society. At some point during his visit, my mother, then a small child was handed to him so that in later life she could tell people that Joe Corrie had held her in his arms.



The author's mother, Nancy Ferguson

This is the total sum and substance of the story and many more questions are raised than answers given. The sparse and sketchy answers which follow are based on memories from the 1920s, which were repeated over the years to someone who had no recall of the events, my memory of a conversation which took place a long time ago and guesswork, lots of guesswork. Chinese Whispers, anyone? This, dear readers, is an example of how history and myth evolve.

The narrative of the evolution starts with, "I have no idea but it may have been ..." which escalates to, "It must have been...". This speculation is written down somewhere, is seen, the doubts are ignored and it becomes received

wisdom and "history". Repeat something often enough and people will believe it. Searchers after the truth, beware!

Assuming that Bunt did start up a society, when would that have been? The nearest guess I can give is sometime in the early to mid 1920s, certainly no later. Bunt left Logiealmond upon her marriage in 1926. How long did the society exist? Who else was involved? Where did it meet? Was Joe Corrie a typical guest speaker? What topics did they debate? I have asked members of Bunt's family if they have any information about a Logiealmond debating society and the answer was an unequivocal 'No'. All knowledge of the society seems to have vanished from the family memory; except the wee anecdote related above.

When did Joe Corrie visit? My mother was born in the summer of 1923, thus giving us a date before which the visit could not have happened. I don't imagine she was taken along, as an infant, to a literary and debating society meeting. No doubt the Taylors gave the guest speaker, who had likely travelled from his home in central Fife, a bed for the night and a hearty meal. Granny Taylor was an accomplished cook and a generous hostess. The encounter probably took place in their house. On the other hand, that could be an assumption too far and I could be barking up the wrong tree.

It would seem that Joe Corrie had charmed the family, when they felt it fitting to hand their daughter and granddaughter over to him to give her something to boast about in the future. The main suspect here is her father. My grandfather was quite the showman, full of tall stories and possessed of a grand theatrical manner. He would have loved to tell the tale of his daughter and the famous writer. Only, Joe Corrie wasn't famous yet but he clearly made quite an impression; one senses a strong, charismatic, likable personality. He was a young man on a mission; he was going to change the world. He would have seemed an exotic creature in conservative, rural Logiealmond. Or, was Logiealmond a hotbed of seething socialism in the 1920s?

If my mother's family sensed that they were in the presence of a man who would gain fame and make his mark on the world, their instincts were sound. By 1928 a collection of his poems was published with a preface by the former Independent Labour Party coalition prime minister, Ramsay Macdonald who wrote that, "Joe Corrie is a man with a gift of a vision of beauty". In the same year, TS Eliot wrote of Joe Corrie's "forceful genius" and asserted that, "Not since Burns has the voice of Scotland spoken with such an authentic lyric note."

Joe Corrie's family had moved from the Falkirk area to Cardenden, in the central Fife coalfield around 1896 when he was two years old. His father was not a miner, contrary to the assertions of many commentators; he was a time-served journeyman grocer. The young Joe started work in the mines in 1908, at the age of 14. In 1915, his father

died of pneumonia and Joe, the oldest child, became the family's main breadwinner. His deteriorating health broke in 1923 and he left the pit and tried to make a living selling pins and needles round the doors of Cardenden.

Coming from a family of Burns enthusiasts, he was well schooled in Burns' poetry and, towards the end of World War I, he had started writing poems and occasional articles for the miners' newspaper, for a few shillings. A pit electrician, Andrew Doig, recognised his talent and took him under his wing, giving him encouragement and advice on his writing. Corrie also had the good fortune, in 1922, to meet his great mentor, Hugh Robertson, musician, poet and socialist, founder and conductor of the world-famous Glasgow Orpheus Choir. They became close, lifelong friends.

In 1924 the miners' union created a job for Corrie on their newspaper, *The Miner*, on a wage of £3.00 a week. From



Joe Corrie by Thomas Bonar Lyon (1873—1955)

Courtesy of East Ayrshire Council

that time onwards, he lived from his writing. He published 75 plays, many of them written for the Scottish Community Drama Association. He may have written another 75 or so plays which were never published. His genre was social realism but he also wrote comedies. His work gave voice to the labouring classes of industrial Scotland.

Joe Corrie's best-known play, "In Time of Strife" was written during the general strike of 1926 and is set in the living-room of a miner's cottage. The characters: older miners who, unable to confront their dire circumstances,

spend their time and what little money they have gambling and drinking in the pub; their adult children, among them cynics and idealists; the blackleg and undecided and, most prominently, the miners' wives are all put in the spotlight. The despair, desperation, sacrifices and heroism of the women are powerfully and sympathetically handled. The playwright's aim was to tell the world what it was like to live through those hard times in a striking mining community. The play, unsurprisingly, does not have a happy ending.

In his poetry we reach a deeper understanding of the man himself. His anger and bitterness are clear to see in his best-known poem, "The Image o' God" published in 1927. Here he is on his experience of working in a coal mine and his contempt for religion.

The Image O' God

Crawlin about like a snail in the mud,
Covered wi clammy blae,
ME, made in the image o' God –
Jings! But it's laughable, tae.

Howkin' awa neath a mountain o' stane,
Gaspin' for want of air,
The sweat makin streams doon my bare back-bane
And my knees aw hauckit and sair.

Strainin' and cursin' the hale shift through,
Half-starved, half-blin, half-mad;
And the gaffer he says, 'Less dirt in that coal
Or ye go up the pit, my lad!'

So, I gie my life to the Nimmo* squad
For eicht and fower a day;
Me, made after the image o' God –
Jings! But it's laughable, tae.

When did Joe Corrie visit Logiealmond? My guess is 1926, during the General Strike when he was campaigning to raise awareness of the plight of the strikers. He also toured with an amateur group of actors, the Bowhill Players. (Bowhill a village near Cardenden.) The group formed originally to perform his play, "The Poacher", to raise money for soup kitchens and the strike fund. Later they became a professional company and toured Scotland with "In Time of Strife".

Why did Bunt invite Joe Corrie to Logiealmond? We'll never know but, as a speaker, he ticked both the literary and the debating boxes and he would have given folk plenty to talk about at the meeting and afterwards,

whether they agreed with him or not.

I can't help but feel that Joe Corrie would have relished an opportunity, thirty years earlier, to join the debate held in Murthly, back in Alexander Campbell's day. A staunch pacifist, he would have had some bons mots up his sleeve for the topic: "Poet or soldier which have (sic) done the most (sic) good for Great Britain?"

Joe Corrie's work is classic. A simple definition of classic literature is that it has universal appeal and that it has stood the test of time. His work moved with the times and is still fresh and meaningful to the modern reader. In the 1930s he wrote anti-war plays, one of which was translated into French, and Irish Gaelic. "In Time of Strife" was translated into Russian.

Later he immersed himself in the Scottish folk revival, penning songs and poems, along with his friend the folklorist, Hamish Henderson. After moving to the south of England in 1950, he confronted the issue of race relations in his 1954 play, "Colour Bar" which flags up the ambivalence and hypocrisy of some soi-disant social liberals. In this play an apparently enlightened clergyman and advocate of racial harmony is unable to accept his daughter's black boyfriend. Does that theme sound familiar? In the 1980s the 7:84 theatre group toured Scotland with "In Time of Strife". Also in the eighties, the musician Alan Reid arranged Corrie's poem, "I am the Common Man" for the Battlefield Band's album "Anthem for The Common Man".

This short poem, written in the 1930s, resonates almost a century later, in the present-day era of food banks.

Eat More

'Eat more fruit!' the slogans say,
'More fish, more beef, more bread!'
But I'm on unemployment pay
My third year now, and wed.

And so, I wonder when I'll see
The slogan when I pass,
The only one that would suit me,
'Eat More Bloody Grass!'

*Sir Adam Nimmo was a coal-mine owner who wanted to cut miners' wages.

Sources:

Joe Corrie Biography for University of St Andrews Joe Corrie conference, 2018. The research Computing Team, University of St Andrews

Professor Robert Crawford, 'The Image o' God'. Paper presented at the Joe Corrie Conference. 2018

Dr Tom Hubbard, *By the Folk, of the Folk, and for the Folk:*

Joe Corrie and the Bowhill Players. A blog. 2019

Twentieth Century Scottish Drama, Ed. Cairns Craig and Randall Stevenson. 2001

BACK IN THE DAY



From the Perthshire Advertiser of 24th December, 1924.

Especially for the gentlemen who liked to live dangerously, shopping only at the last minute, Cooper's ad notes:

'Business will be continued until 7 pm.'

A SOLDIER OF THE BLACK WATCH

DR NICOLA SMALL

William Butter McLaren was a Black Watch soldier who died, like so many others, at the battle of Loos, in September 1915. A rather graphic headline in the local press announced this to readers in his home town of Helensburgh.

HELENSBURGH SERGEANT SHOT THROUGH THE BRAIN.

Yesterday, unofficial but reliable information reached Helensburgh that Ser-Major W. B. McLaren, of the Black Watch, had been killed in action in the western front on September 25. The Quarter-Master-Sergeant of the company writes that the ser-major was shot through the right eye and brain while his company was leading a charge.

Previous to re-enlisting in his old regiment on the outbreak of war, Ser-Major McLaren was janitor and drill instructor of Hermitage Higher Grade School, Helensburgh. Before coming to Helensburgh, five years ago, he was janitor and drill instructor at Kilsyth.

Sergeant Major McLaren had been shot through his right eye. Death was instantaneous. Another Great War casualty, another grieving family bereft of a beloved son. However, this soldier was no boy or even a young man. He was a husband and father, and he did not hail from Helensburgh either. He had enlisted in the Black Watch in 1881, 34 years before his death. Flanders was not his first theatre of war. McLaren actually came from Redgorton and the Black Watch museum is home to a small collection of his effects, most notably an army account book.

This small item tells us a great deal about William and through this, and other avenues of research, it has been possible to piece together the story of a soldier who was born locally, travelled the world in military service and who died in the Great War.



The account book tells us that William Butter McLaren joined up in 1881. He was 18 years and 7 months and had been born in Redgorton where his trade had been the same as his father's, a blacksmith. With a fair complexion, grey eyes and light brown hair this young man was recorded as having no distinctive marks and was a Presbyterian. After a very short while he began his first tour of duty, Egypt and the Sudan.

McLaren was involved in active service in the first and second battles of El Teb on the 4th and then the 29th of February 1884. Britain's involvement in Sudan was a consequence of its support for the Khedive of Egypt. Despite Egypt still being nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, the Khedive's rule was dependent on direct British support, given to ensure the security of the Suez Canal and the elimination of the Sudanese slave trade. The British government had sought to stay out of affairs in Egyptian-governed Sudan, but this was threatened by an uprising led by the Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad. The Mahdist forces enjoyed considerable success against Egyptian troops in 1882 and 1883, and several towns garrisoned by Egyptian troops found themselves surrounded so conflict could not be avoided. Forces under the command of General Valentine Baker and Sir Gerald Graham arrived on the 4th and then the 29th, to engage and defeat the Mahdists. These were the battles of El Teb. We know that William Butter McLaren was present.

In 1884 he was also present at the battle of Tamaii.



The Battle of Abu Klea followed. This has been described as the “quintessential Victorian battle, fought in the Sudan on 17th January 1885 by the lauded ‘Camel Corps’ against the Mahdi’s Dervishes , during the desperate attempt to rescue General Gordon in Khartoum” Sir Henry Newbolt’s poem ‘Vitali Lampada’ described the fighting: ‘the sand of the desert is sodden red, red with the wreck of the square that broke; the Gatling’s jammed and the colonel dead and the regiment blind with dust and smoke.....’Play up! Play up! And play the game!’

William Butter McLaren was not present for this later battle but he would have fought in the famous square formation illustrated here.



From there William was posted to Malta. Malta of course has an incredible history given its strategic position in the Mediterranean. McLaren and the Black Watch arrived there in May 1886 and they would have been billeted at the St Nicholas bastion in Cottonera. The Cottonera Lines are a line of fortifications in Bormla, Malta. Cottonera, is a double-fortified harbour city in the Port Region. Along with Birgu and Senglea, it is one of the Three Cities located within the Grand Harbour to the east of the capital city Valletta. The Cottonera Lines were built by the Knights of St John during the 17th and 18th Centuries. These Lines included eight bastions which, with the

interior of the walls, were used extensively by the British for gun emplacements, quarters and support activity. St Nicholas Bastion was primarily used by the British for barracks.

A postcard from 1890 illustrates what the barracks would have looked like then.



McLaren moved on from Malta in 1889 and his next destination was Gibraltar. He had a photograph taken there and remained in post until 1893.



his posting coincided with the introduction of football to the Iberian peninsula. A football historian has recently examined the Black Watch's role in making football popular with the crowds who turned out to watch games between them and other regiments. The grand finale of the second edition of the Governor's Cup took place on February 13 1892, in front of 7,000 spectators. It was noted that:

"The 42nd Black Watch faced the Royal Engineers and within seven minutes, the Highlanders, captained by Joe Duncan, were already winning 3-0, thanks to their short pass game, which was executed to perfection. By the end... they won by a resounding 9-0." The Gibraltar Chronicle, the local newspaper, once again highlighted the popularity of the 42nd Black Watch among the civilian population.

You have to imagine that William Butter McLaren was most certainly at that match.

After another short posting, this time to Mauritius, William Butter McLaren arrived home in January of 1893. William's family were at Luncarty. His father was David McLaren (1825-1916) and his mother, Margaret Jack (1825-1869). They had married in 1853 when David was the blacksmith at Redgorton. William had four brothers and one sister. Soon after he returned home William got married in Eastwood, Glasgow. His bride was Isabella Cramb (1871-1906), who must have been a childhood sweetheart. Like William she was born in Redgorton parish and her family had lived at Scarth near Luncarty. Her father, Thomas Cramb (1829-1898), was a gardener and had come from St Martins originally. Her mother, Isabel Taylor (1827-1893), had been born in Logiealmond and the family had lived there for a while. They had also lived in Blairgowrie, where Isabella's father was a 'strawberry grower', but just prior to her marriage in 1893 the family had moved to Newton Mearns and her father, still gardening, was at Todhill Bank Stables. Isabella was 24 when she married William and the couple first settled in Glasgow. William then returned to Mauritius for a year (July 1894 to June 1895) and finally arrived back in Scotland for good. The couple had their first child in 1896, little William Thomas. On the child's birth certificate his father is noted as a sergeant in the Black Watch and his address was The Castle, Edinburgh. Two more children followed, Isobel Margaret in 1899 and David Alexander in 1902. These children were born in Lochgelly, Fife where William was working as a drill instructor. However, the little family was broken in 1906 when Isabella died,

suffering from TB.

With three small children to support, William married again. His second wife was Elspeth Taylor (1877-1918) and they stayed initially in Kirkcaldy where their own daughter, Elspeth Taylor McLaren was born in 1908. At this point we know that William was discharged from the Black Watch, his military career over. He took a job as the janitor at Hermitage Academy, Helensburgh and the family moved again. In the 1911 census we find that William's father, David was also living with the family.

It's interesting to see what happened to the rest of the McLaren family, William's siblings. In 1911, William's father David was 85. William's mother, Margaret Jack had died in 1896. William had four brothers. Thomas emigrated to South Africa, got married there in 1879 and died in 1941. James Bruce McLaren moved to Forfar after marrying Betsy Brown in 1878. He was a linen factory worker at that time and they had six children, all born in Forfar. By the 1891 census they were in Partick, Lanark and James was a life assurance agent; the same in 1901. Betsy died in 1892, aged 39, from asthma and complications. James and his son David emigrated to Canada in 1906. He died in 1948 at Kamloops British Columbia, aged 91. John Clark McLaren married Ann Liddle in 1876 and yet in the 1881 and 1891 census he does not feature with his wife and children. Ann Liddle was from Forfar and she lived there with her daughter Jessie and her son, also John McLaren, and it seems John Clark McLaren worked with the railways. However, in 1920 Ann died aged 74 and then her husband died at sea. He was travelling home from South Africa and took ill on board, some form of pneumonia.



David McLaren, the last of William's brothers, also had a military career. Information taken from the family grave states that he died in 1901 and was buried in Bethlehem, South Africa. He had joined the Staffordshire Yeomanry

(Queen's Own Royal Regiment) which was a mounted auxiliary unit of the British Army raised in 1794. It first sent units overseas at the time of the Second Boer War and it was then that David McLaren was killed on active service.

The family share various second names, Clark, Bruce, and Butter. William's only sister was Ceclia Bruce McLaren and she had been the last child of David and Margaret. In 1871, David McLaren married for the second time. Incredibly, his new wife shared the very same name as his only daughter, Cecilia Bruce. Margaret Jack's mother was Agnes Butter and Ceclia Bruce's mother's maiden name was also Butter. This connection of maternal maiden names suggests that Cecelia was related in some way to the family but its not quite clear save for the two women sharing the same name.

William Butter McLaren was not done with being a soldier after his time in the Black Watch up to 1908. The Great War came along and changed his life once more. He joined up, in Helensburgh, and was initially involved in recruiting at Perth and then in training new soldiers at Aldershot. He was promoted to Sergeant Major. Posted to the front in 1915 he was killed at the battle of Loos on September 25th. Mourned by family and friends it was noted that he had met the king and also been commended by Kitchener as a credit to his country.

Fife and Edinburgh. His son, William Thomas was a merchant seaman, killed at sea in 1941. His other son, David Alexander, went to sea as a very young man in the Great War and then was also a merchant seaman and eventually settled in Canada. He and his wife, Agnes Hunter, had three sons and his obituary names other relatives in the wider McLaren family.

William Butter McLaren's account book has been conserved and digitised; with some of the funding coming from West Stormont Historical Society. It has been very rewarding to uncover this soldier's story and the information will be placed alongside his account book and medals in the Black Watch Castle and Museum archive. We have been given a rare glimpse into the life and experiences of a young lad who joined his local regiment in his youth and who died in France, a Black Watch soldier to the end.



Williams' father David died in 1916. He was 90 years old but surely the death of his son was a great blow. His second wife, Elspeth died, aged 41, in 1918. William's daughters, Isobel and Elspeth, both married and lived in

WRITE FROM THE HEART

MICHAEL LAWRENCE

A poetic tradition has been strong in Scotland since the early Middle Ages. Back then, poetry and balladry were used to communicate important news and historical events to the Royal Court and amongst the elite land-owning families and clan chiefs. These songs and poems were passed by word of mouth but what little survives was only recorded in writing from the 16th century.

It was during the reigns of James IV from 1488 to 1513 and James V from 1513 to 1542 that named poets began to emerge when renowned makars such as William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas and David Lyndsay wrote satires, narratives, epic poems and comic verse for the entertainment of the Scottish royal household.

After the Union of the Crowns in 1603, King James VI/I soon favoured the language and poetry of southern England. Poems in the vernacular of different parts of Scotland were frowned upon by his courtiers in London and regarded as inferior to those written in English.

The Acts of Union in 1706 and 1707, however, sparked a revival in the Scots poetic tradition of using their own native tongue. During the 18th century, Scottish poets including Allan Ramsay, William Hamilton, James Thomson and James Macpherson were working in both Scots and English and their work developed national and international reputations.

Walter Scott and Robert Burns found fame as poets of the Romantic Movement. Scott was the son of a solicitor and gained an elite education in Edinburgh at the Royal High School and then the University. Burns was born the son of an estate gardener and lauded as a man with natural genius who overcame the disadvantages of his lowly birth and adventure school education to become a highly successful poet. Scott was by far the most widely read of all the romantic poets, selling several thousand copies of his poetry books. But only 612 copies of the Kilmarnock edition of Burns's first book, 'Poems Chiefly in the Scottish

Dialect' were printed. Burns's success was mostly posthumous and continues to this day.

It was as collectors of ballads, songs and tales from spoken word performance that both Scott and Burns revealed the hidden depth of local folklore across Scotland. Walter Scott worked with James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, to gather traditional verse from around Scotland. These were compiled and issued as 'Minstrelsy', an anthology of Border and North East Scotland ballads edited by Walter Scott and published in 1802. It included many famous ballads such as 'Sir Patrick Spens', 'The Twa Corbies', 'The Flowers of the Forest' and 'The Dowie Dens of Yarrow'. Of the 48 ballads in the two volume 'Minstrelsy', 26 had been recited from memory for centuries but never published before in print.

Burns contributed some two hundred old Scots songs to The Scots Musical Museum collection which was published in six volumes with one hundred songs in each volume. As well as collecting old songs, Burns also wrote new words to well-known tunes. Many of the songs attributed to Burns such as 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose' have very old roots.



A view of Bankfoot. Courtesy of Culture Perth and Kinross Museums & Galleries

Robert Burns had set the gold standard for the 'peasant poet' and he provided the inspiration for others to follow. James Sim from Kinclaven, James Duff from Logiealmond, Robert Nicoll and his brother William Nicoll from Little Tullybelton near Bankfoot were all from humble backgrounds and published poets during the first half of the 19th century in the wake of Burns. Their first edition total book sales, however, amounted to no more than one hundred copies between them. Robert Nicoll's 'Poems and Lyrics' achieved success after his death in 1837 and the Centenary Edition published in 1914 was the sixth edition

of the book.

Very little poetry was published in daily or weekly newspapers during the 18th century. The Stamp Act of 1712, originally designed to raise money for the war against France, imposed a tax on British publishers, particularly of newspapers. Anything literary that was critical of the government was put on the back burner.

The initial stamp rate was one penny per whole newspaper sheet and a halfpenny for a half newspaper sheet. It was also applied to all pamphlets, legal documents, commercial bills, and other papers. The upshot was that the price of newspapers simply increased, the number of pages of each edition was reduced, and publishers limited the circulation. The one penny single sheet papers aimed at the working classes were hit hard because the flat rate tax doubled the purchase price at a stroke.

The stamp tax was increased in 1797 to four pence on all newspapers. This was a cynical ploy by the Tories under William Pitt the Younger to suppress the dissemination of revolutionary ideas and anti-government writing by the radical press in the years following the French Revolution. Government supporting publications, of course, were exempt from the tax.

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, a campaign was launched to remove the Stamp Act. This was led by newspapers such as the Manchester Guardian and by the National Union of the Working Classes who argued that the Act imposed a tax on knowledge and denied workers access to the important national and international news of the day.

The Peterloo Massacre in 1819, unfortunately, sparked further restrictions on newspapers. The Blasphemous and Seditious Libels Act 1819 and the Newspaper and Stamp Duties Act 1819 extended the stamp duty to all publications including those which did not carry news but expressed only opinions – these papers had been previously exempt. The immediate effect was to cause the closure of magazines like *The Spectator* and the prosecution of *The Black Dwarf*. Quality newspapers, such as *The Times*, which were priced at more than seven pence were exempt from the new legislation.

These punitive measures on the press by the Tory government led by the Earl of Liverpool sparked the so-called War of the Unstamped in which a number of radical newspapers refused to pay the stamp tax and there were hundreds of prosecutions of publishers and distributors of

newspapers. Nearly 800 people were jailed.

Pressure to abolish newspaper taxes was building on the government. Stamp duty was reduced in 1836 and finally abolished on July 1 1855 by the Whigs under Lord Palmerston. The repeal was the main factor which led to a rapid increase in the number of newspapers and other publications. The age of mass media had arrived. New newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph* were established and many major town newspapers quickly converted from weekly to daily editions.

The most immediate impact of the abolition was seen in the provincial press. Between 1854 and 1856, the number of newspaper titles outside of London jumped by over 40% from 473 to 629. In Scotland, the number of local newspapers doubled in the decade after 1855 and this number would double again before the end of the 19th century.

Newspaper reading habits also changed. The old practice of the majority of the population using a reading room or sharing newspapers in the pub or at work was replaced with individuals buying a paper and reading it at home. The working classes now obtained their news and leisure reading from all the dailies, weeklies and periodicals that were available and literacy standards improved remarkably as a result.

In 1855, the people of Perthshire, Fife and Angus were already well served by newspapers, all weekly. Perthshire had the *Perthshire Advertiser*, *Perthshire Constitutional & Journal* and the *Perthshire Courier*. Dundee was home to the *Dundee Courier*, *Dundee Perth & Cupar Advertiser* and the *Northern Warder*. Fife was covered by the *Dunfermline Journal*, *Kirkcaldy Times*, the *St Andrews Citizen*, and *St Andrews Gazette*. Angus was served by the *Arbroath Herald*, *Montrose Review*, and *Montrose Standard*.

The *Weekly News* was first published in Dundee in 1855 and aimed at working people, or artisans as publisher Robert Park preferred to call them. It was the first weekly penny newspaper in Scotland. Park would also bring out Dundee's first daily newspaper, *The Daily Argus*, in 1859.

John Leng launched *The People's Journal* in Dundee in 1858 as a penny Saturday newspaper devoted to the interests of working people. The newspaper mixed local, national and international news with political opinion. Its first editor, William Latto, also ran poetry and story competitions and was keen that local writers submitted entries in their own vernacular rather than standard

English.

The People's Journal was inundated with contributions, some excellent, some acceptable, and some very bad. Soon serialised stories and a Poets Corner column were regular features of each edition. The Weekly News, of course, reacted by inviting their readers to send in stories and poems. Almost all local newspapers across Scotland soon jumped on the bandwagon and by the final quarter of the 19th century at least one poem per issue was the norm.

The People's Friend was launched in Dundee by John Leng on 13 January 1869 as an offshoot of The People's Journal to deal with the sheer volume of reader input. It was originally published monthly but became a weekly magazine in 1870. The original aim of The People's Friend was to 'promote self-improvement and studious, sober habits' among the working classes. Readers were encouraged to submit 'Scotch stories, poetry and other articles, written by Scotchmen'. It also published puzzles, brainteasers, jokes, and pithy advice on how to lead a good and healthy life.

William Latto knew he was tapping into a rich literary vein when he invited reader submissions. Originally the school master at Johnshaven, on the coast north of Montrose, he was well aware that most villages and town communities had a bard who created poetic verse for both the entertainment and comfort of relatives, friends, neighbours and workmates. Verses would be created to add to the jollification of a wedding, record an important event such as births or marriage, praise the local beauty spot, satirise a village worthy or laird, or console a grieving family with some words on the departed.

These poets composed for recitation to a local audience in the field, factory, pub, or village hall. They would create verses in their head at work for an impromptu performance or write at home after their shift ended. Rhyme and rhythm were seen as important but so too was the use of the vernacular of their peer group because, usually, it better fitted the subject matter.

The Victorian newspapers favoured poems about love, nature, religion, military heroes, morals and childhood. They also liked humour and seasonal themes such as Christmas and Easter. Editors did not like poems overtly about politics, trade unions or the divide between the rich and poor in society.

From 1860 until the outbreak of the First World War there were a few West Stormont poets who did become regular

published poets in the local and national newspapers, particularly The People's Journal, The People's Friend, and The Weekly News.

John Campbell from Charleston Farm, between Murthly and Stanley, wrote using the pseudonym Will Harrow:

*I view the waters rush tumultuous by,
An' canna comprehend, O Linn, how ever
Your narry chops can twig this mighty river.*

To Ye Linn o' Campsie

Please click [here](#) to read the full poem.

James Ferguson from Stanley wrote under the nom de plume of Nisbet Noble:

*But the loon took a lass frae the Tulloch,
A fig for the taste o' a lad
That coo'd me for Maggie M'Culloch,
The freckl'd an' red-headed jaud.*

There's Somebody, Somegate

Please click [here](#) to read the full poem.



Percy St, Stanley. Courtesy of Culture Perth and Kinross Museums & Galleries'

Jessie King from Bankfoot found fame as the best-known female journalist in Scotland and wrote for the Dundee Advertiser, Evening Telegraph and The People's Friend. She was also a poet:

*Some leaves o' last autumn cam' sailin' doon,
Ilk riggit wi' moonbeams an' helm o' fate;
An' steered wi' a stalk o' hemlock broon
The barges o' fairies travellin' in state.*

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Please click [here](#) to read the full poem.

William Paton was universally known as the Bard of Luncarty:

*Says Tam M'Glashan to his wife,
'The times are guid an' money's rife,
Sae I've been thinkin' I wad like
To buy a braw pneumatic bike'.*

Tam M'Glashan's First and Last Bike

Please click [here](#) to read the full poem.



Downhill, Luncarty. Courtesy of Culture Perth and Kinross Museums & Galleries

John Reid from Stanley used the pen name Pate Pleugh:

*There stoppit in ancient Airtully,
'Bout sixty years sin' syne,
A queer, eccentric, knackie billie,
John Clark, a freend o' mine.*

John Clark's Famous Fishing Adventure

Please click [here](#) to read the full poem.

William Robertson worked as a clerk in the Airleywright Linen Works and then as a salesman in the Auchtergaven Provision Society:

*O bonnie's the heather on Formal hill
When waves the ripe corn aroun' Corrielea!
'Twas there I first saw bonnie Maggie Cargill,
The maiden wha shore in the bandwin wi' me.*

The Maiden Wha Shore in the Bandwin wi' Me

Please click [here](#) to read the full poem.

These men and women helped create a sense of community across West Stormont by writing poetry about local places, local characters, local beauty spots and local events in their native tongue. To the wider world these poems all offered a window into the lives of those who lived in the villages and hamlets north of Perth, west of

the Tay, and south of the Grampians.

The circulation of The People's Journal rose from 11,500 in 1858 to 250,000 by the outbreak of the First World War. In 1914, The People's Friend had a readership of almost 1 million around the world and The Weekly News was selling 300,000 copies each week. The newspaper poets of West Stormont were read by millions which gave them local celebrity status. And the people of West Stormont were very proud of their success.

Please click [here](#) to read a selection of poems by the Poets of West Stormont.

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