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## The fiddle that taught Robert Burns his manners

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► **To cite this version:**

| Cameron Morin. The fiddle that taught Robert Burns his manners. 2019. hal-03119931

**HAL Id: hal-03119931**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03119931>**

Submitted on 25 Jan 2021

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**Morin, Cameron. 2019. The fiddle that taught Robert Burns his manners. European Romanticisms in Association, Project RÊVE (Romantic Europe: The Virtual Exhibition).**



**Location:** Alloway, Ayrshire (Scotland)

**Date:** c. 1770s

**Creator:** Unknown, probably local to Ayrshire

**Subject:** Robert Burns (1759-1796), William Gregg (1766-18??)

**Media rights:** Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, Alloway

**Object type:** Musical instrument

**Format:** Wood and gut

**Publisher:** Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, Alloway

**Digital collection record:** <http://www.burnsmuseum.org.uk/collections/>

**Catalogue number:** 97.90.0

**Description:** This beautiful, good-as-new instrument, made of pine and sporting a flower-like red, green and black design on the back, is displayed in the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, Alloway, as ‘the fiddle of William Gregg’. Born in 1766 in Ayr, Gregg learned to play the violin at a very young age, eventually becoming what was called a “Dance Tutor” or a “Master of Manners”, based in Tarbolton, Ayrshire. In 1779, he accepted a most peculiar pupil: Robert Burns.

Burns later recalled that *‘In my seventeenth year, to give my manners a brush, I went to a country dancing school. My father had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was, what to this hour I repent, in absolute defiance of his commands. My father, as I said before, was the sport of strong passions; from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me...’* (Letter to Dr John Moore, Mauchline, 1787, RBWF 2018) Burns was certainly aware that his father found “country music” sinful, and would have attended lessons out of cheek; but also, surely, for his own enjoyment. William would have accompanied the lessons on his violin. The terms “violin” and “fiddle” mean the same instrument but suggest different styles of playing: the former fits classical compositions, while the latter evokes the “fiddling” style, jauntier, folkier and more traditional to Ayrshire.

Folk music, especially that which was played and sung in Scotland, was central to Burns’s poetry, in fact it was a pretext for it. In one of the rare texts he devotes to reflexive and theoretical considerations on writing poetry, he describes words as transient, bound to time and place, and music as perennially timeless:

*[M]usic is the language of nature: and poetry, particularly songs, are always more or less localised... By some of the modifications of time and place, this is the reason why so many of our Scots airs have outlived their original, and perhaps many subsequent sets of verses: except a single name, or phrase, or sometimes one or two lines, simply to distinguish the tunes by* (notes found in Burns’s personal copy of James Johnson, *The Scots National Museum*, 1787-1803).

The fiddle in particular plays an essential role in this musical heritage, which provides the framework for many of Burns’ lyrics: jigs (*My Girl She’s Airy*), reels (*The Reel o’ Stumpie*) and strathspeys (*Act Sederunt of the Session*), all traditionally involve the fiddle. Burns was alleged to know a few rudiments of fiddling as well.

If folk-music was important to Burns as a poet, it was also important as a factor in his subsequent celebrity. As the Romantic revolution increasingly laid stress on locality and celebrated rustic heritage, Burns became a principal figure of the new pan-European “folklorism” (Cabanel 1997: 18-19; Morin 2017). As it spread from country to country, its supporters hailed it as part of the new age of art and thought after the long reign of French, Greek and Roman-inspired Neoclassicism (Thiesse 1999).

On William’s death in the early 1800s, the fiddle was handed down from generation to generation of the Gregg family but never really played. It was just about two hundred years later, in 1995, that Wallace Galbraith of the Ayrshire Fiddle Orchestra came to be aware of its continued existence at a farm near Mauchline. The farm belonged to Major John Weir, who was then Chairman of the Bachelors’ Club, a debating society founded by Burns in 1780 which originally allowed only bachelors in its midst. Galbraith then took it to David Martin, a

retired scholar and skilled violin restorer, who brought it back to the state in which one can see it today. For several years, the fiddle toured with the Orchestra around the world, until it was finally housed at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway. But it might not have played its last dance yet: as recently as January 2015, it was played once again at the eighteen-day-long event Celtic Connections in Glasgow.

## References

Cabanel, Patrick. *La question nationale au XIXe siècle*. Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1997.

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Thiesse, Anne-Marie. *La création des identités nationales, Europe XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999.