
Bitesize History - People

Alexander Wilson poet 1766 - 1813

Scottish - American poet and ornithologist, his connection with Lochwinnoch



Old Saunders Wilson is stated to have been a dadgeon weaver, and likewise an illicit distiller of whisky. In pursuing the latter occupation, he was persuaded to leave Paisley, and take up his residence at Auchinbathie, in the parish of Lochwinnoch. This place afforded more facilities than Paisley for carrying on his unlawful traffic in erecting his “wee still.” It is in the immediate neighbourhood of Beith, then a famous nest of smugglers.

Young Sannie was put as an apprentice to be made a silk weaver in Paisley. After his probationership was done, he often visited his favourite Lochwinnoch. He came one time in 1787, and stayed about a year and a half; of course the village was then very small. The first cotton mill in it was built in 1788, by Houston, Burns & Co.: The second in 1789, by Fultons and Pollock.

Young Wilson formed some friendship with a John Orr, a sober and industrious lad, of the same craft with him. He “buirdit’ with Robert Orr, his friend’s brother. He drove the shuttle in Matthew Barr’s workshop.

Mathew Barr’s house, or shop, near the pump well, known as the clachan nymphs, was at that time the western extremity of the village.

He had no habit of tipping, and he was no lover of the “lasses.” He was fond to wander about the beautiful and romantic scenes which bound in the neighbourhood, such as Calderbank, the Kame and Garple Burns, the Loch, the Peil, Castlesempill etc. He “uggit” or abhorred the loom. He was very lazy, and had nothing to give for his “buirding” and hence he was remembered as a lazy wabster, and contempt, “who made poems.” His “pirn winder” was one of the notable four village matrons called by the same name, Meg or Peggy Orr. Lochwinnoch Parish has been the headquarters of the Orrs for above 500 years.

After he published his poems in 1790, at Paisley, he wrote his best piece, “Watty and Meg” when he was in “durance vile” in the tollbooth, in consequence of Sheriff Orr’s just and mild sentence, for his rash conduct as the satirist. His admirable Wattie and Meg was founded on a well remembered scene from his rural and peaceful life at this interesting village.

Dadgeon: An outcast. Buirdit: boarded with. Wabster: weaver.

Pirn: A quill or reed on which thread is wound.



Wattie and Meg

By

Alexander Wilson

Verses 1 - 9

Verses 41 - 49

Keen the frosty winds were blawin',
Deep the snaw had wreathed the ploughs,
Watty, wearied a' day sawin',
Daunert down to Mungo Blue's.

Dryster Jock was sitting cracky,
Wi' Pate Tamson o' the Hill;
"Come awa," quo' Johnny, "Watty—
Haith, we'se hae anither gill!"

Watty, glad to see Jock Jabos,
And sae mony neibours roun';
Kicket frae his shoon the snawba's,
Syne ayont the fire sat down.

Owre a board, wi' bannocks heapit,
Cheese, and stoups, and glasses stood;
Some were roaring, ithers sleepit,
Ithers quietly chew their cud.

Jock was selling Pate some tallow,
A' the rest a racket hel'—
A' but Watty, wha, poor fallow,
Sat and smoket by himsel'.

Mungo filled him up a toothfu'
Drank his health and Meg's in ane;
Watty, puffing out a mouthfu',
Pledged him wi' a dreary grane.

"What's the matter, Watty, wi' you?
Trowth your chafts are fa'in' in!
Something's wrang—I'm vexed to see you
Gudesake! but ye're desperate thin!"

"Ay," quo' Watty, "things are altered,
But its past redemption now;
L—d! I wish I had been haltered
When I married Maggy Howe!"

"I've been poor, and vex'd, and raggy;
Try'd wi' troubles no that sma',
Them I bore—but marrying Maggy
Laid the cap-stane o' them a'.

Ilka word came like a bullet,
Watty's heart begoud to shake,
On a kist he laid his wallet,
Dichted baith his een and spake.

"If ance mair I could by writing,
Lea' the sodgers and stay still,
Wad you swear to drap your flytin'?"
"Yes, O Watty! yes, I will."

"Then," quo' Watty, "mind, be honest;
Aye to keep your temper strive;
Gin ye break this dreadfu' promise,
Never mair expect to thrive.

"Marg'et Howe! this hour ye solemn
Swear by everything that's good,
Ne'er again yoor spouse to scauld him,
While life warms your heart and blood.

"That ye'll ne'er in Mungo's seek me,
Ne'er put drucken to my name,
Never out at e'ening steek me,
Never gloom when I come hame.

"That ye'll ne'er, like Bessy Miller,
Kick my shins or rug my hair,
Lastly, I'm to keep the siller;
This upon your saul you swear?"

"O—h!" quo' Meg; "Aweel," quo' Watty,
"Fareweel! faith I'll try the seas;"
"O stand still," quo' Meg, and grat aye;
"Ony, ony way ye please."

Maggy syne, because he prest her,
Swore to a' thing owre again:
Watty lap, and danced, and kiss'd her;
Wow! but he was wondrous fain.

Down he threw his staff victorious;
Aff gaed bonnet, claes, and shoon;
Syne below the blankets, glorious,
Held anither Hinneymoon!