

Music and Clan Irwin Association Part VII

This article will be my last in this series of Music and the CIA. I have completed my appointed task to preserve the special set of tunes about Irwins, Irvines and Irvings, et al, which was handed down to our Association in past years. This music is now preserved in perpetuity in the Holly Leaf Chronicles archives as well as the Music Folder in our Google Workspace.

The name of our collection is the ***Irwins Musical Museum***, inspired by James Johnson, who collected Scottish traditional tunes from 1787 to 1803, and produced a six-volume set with the title the Scots Musical Museum. Robert Burns contributed over 200 poems and lyrics written especially for some of those tunes to this collection. It is important to know that “museum” used in this sense refers to a collection of items, in this case musical ones, dedicated to the muses rather than one of artifacts of a past civilization.

“Song – verse married to music – was Burns’ earliest, his latest, his strongest, and his most enduring poetic interest...that his early interest in songs was well known is evident from a comment he made, after he had begun to assist with the Scots Musical Museum, to his boyhood friend James Candlish. ‘...this, you will easily guess, is an undertaking exactly to my taste’”¹

I could say the same about my undertaking of this Music Project. Being an amateur musician with a love for Scottish, Irish and all Celtic music, it was “exactly to my taste”. Everything about it has been a labor of love, from researching the stories behind the poems, tunes, and songs; the poets and musicians who wrote them; and writing about them. Engaging professional musicians, as well as our own members to participate has been a very exciting venture as well as an educational one.

Inspired by the Bard’s creativity of matching his poems and lyrics to Scots tunes, I have matched a tune to one of his poems. Also following up on the idea of composing a tune or song and dedicating it to an individual or group, I am dedicating my first original composition of ***The Night was Still*** to Barbara Edelman, who commissioned me to start this amazing musical journey.

This poem has a special connection to our Clan Irwin Association as it speaks of the bairns of the town of Irvine in Ayrshire. Burns spent some time learning the flax industry in Irvine in 1782, attempting to escape the rigors of farming. Although it was not a successful venture for him, he seemed to retain a fondness for the children there.

The Night was Still is quite short and uncomplicated, but is true to the Bard’s fondness for writing about the natural world. It is printed in several different collections, the earliest in our personal library being The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns, Cabinet Edition, with a copy write of 1807 and 1900. It is also included in THE CANNONGATE BURNS, which is considered the most comprehensive and challenging edition of Burns works. The editors added a note under the poem in their edition which says, “This charming little lyric was written and given to a daughter of Dr George Lawrie, Minister of Loudon, in 1786.”²

Burns was introduced to Dr Lawrie, who became a good friend, while spending the winters of 1786-7 in Edinburgh. He attended a social gathering at his friend's house, noted as the "manse on Irvine Water"³, where he heard the minister's daughter Christina Lawrie playing the spinet. Apparently, it was the first time that he had heard anyone play that instrument and remarked that, "By far the most agreeable hours I spend in Edin' must be placed to the account of Miss Lowrie and her Piano Forte".⁴ He wrote several poems for this family and consistently misspelled their name with a 'o'. Research did not turn up anything else on "Irvine Water" but seems quite a coincidence and another mystery to solve. The fact that it was written for a young lady who played the piano was another one of those serendipitous findings for me personally.

I am not sure exactly where I first came across this poem, but I am certain that Google was involved! I found myself humming a tune to the words one day and decided that it was worth trying out on the piano. I managed to get the basic score written myself, but the finishing touches, getting the text lined up with the notes and such, were done by my friend and now publisher, Jamie Laval. Many thanks, once again, to him for his help with this Project. My score and piano recording will be in the Music Folder in Our Google Workspace and on my UTube Channel.

I would be amiss not to mention Robert Burns Selected Poems and Songs, Edited by Robert P Irvine, 2013. Though his volume does not include this poem, he had this to say in his introduction about the tunes collected by Burns and his collaborators, "...what made these songs 'Scottish' was not their preservation of a national 'tradition'...what gave them their national status was rather their ubiquity across the social hierarchy in the present day. They were sung at the keyboard in Edinburgh parlours and at the fireside in rural cottages alike; a ubiquity facilitated, rather than threatened, by popular literacy and the modern technology of print".

Hopefully the ***Irwins Musical Museum***, will be as ubiquitous as those Scottish tunes, and enjoyed by even more in this present day through our modern technology. I hope to eventually have it also in print for those of us who still like to hold a book in our hand. It has been my pleasure to put it all together!

Susan Irvine McRae

¹ Robert Burns The Man and the Poet, A Round and Unvarnished Account, Robert T Fitzhugh, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1970, p.288.

² The CANNONGATE BURNS, The Complete Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Andrew Nobel and Patrick Scott Hogg, Editors, 2003 p. 644

³ Dirt & Diety. A Life of Robert Burns, Ian McIntyre, HarperCollins *Publishers*, 1995, footnote on p.83

⁴ Ibid, p.109