

11th April 2018

The last of the wandering minstrels: the life and work of Robert Gray, the Yetholm Poet

Dr Graeme Watson gave us a fascinating talk which vividly evoked the life and times, and poetry of the Yetholm Poet. Graeme, originally from County Durham and now living in Yetholm, has taken a keen interest in the poet and his research has utilised parish records, anecdotes, stories and writings.

Robert Gray, now largely forgotten, in his day was well known on both sides of The Tweed as the Yetholm Poet. Born at Yetholm in 1796, he died a pauper in 1844 at the Glendale Union Workhouse in Wooler (in what is now the Cheviot Centre). Two death notices (one in a Newcastle paper), and a warm and appreciative obituary in *The Kelso Chronicle* hint that, despite his impoverished and itinerant life, he was fondly appreciated.

Baptismal records show his father (also Robert) was a stocking weaver/crofter. This was a common type of work in the area and a Yetholm Weavers Banner can be seen today in the National Museum of Scotland. Robert senior borrowed heavily to buy a small cottage in Town Yetholm, still existing and now called Huntsman's Cottage, where Robert the poet spent his childhood. He was lame from birth, perhaps caused by cerebral palsy, and his disability meant he was unable to do manual work, follow a profession or earn a living, so he was dependent on his parents. He was well educated in the parish school and it was soon known that he had a gift for verse, though he often had to ask others to write it down for him. His simplistic poetry was wide-ranging and reflected this education, sometimes drawing on the classics, sometimes influenced by Robbie Burns, sometimes idealistic or romantic.

In 1817 Robert (The Poet) married Agnes Brown, in an irregular marriage. They had one son who died aged 20. In 1825 after the death of his father with debts outstanding, Robert had to sell the cottage. His poor health and disability coupled with a liking for the whisky, were disadvantages and it may be from then that he started wandering from place to place, spiralling gently downwards. Records show that in 1827 his wife Agnes applied for parish relief from Kelso; there is no further mention of her. 1834 saw the introduction of The New Poor Law, with poor relief based on the workhouse test and system. The loss of outdoor relief may have eventually forced him into the Wooler workhouse. However, for many years the Yetholm Poet was certainly a well recognised Border character, who spent much of his life wandering about the lanes and reciting his poetry whenever he could and perhaps with a wee dram in mind.

His three published works are: *Poems, On Various Subjects, Kelso 1813*; *The Evening Companion* (miscellany of prose and verse), Hawick 1817; and *A Poem on the Death of Princess Charlotte of Wales, with other poems, Jedburgh 1820*. A copy of each is held by the National Library of Scotland. His last poem, *The Emigrant*, about those sailing for a new life in Canada, was published in the *Berwick Advertiser* in 1838. He was a contemporary of Robert Davidson, the Morebattle Poet (1778–1855) but it is not clear whether they knew each other.

For more information, see Graeme Watson's book: *The Last of the Wandering Minstrels, Selected Poems of Robert Gray The Yetholm Poet*, Culver Press. 2016, which is beautifully illustrated by his daughter Beatrice Smith. Graeme is currently writing a book about James Thomson, another Border poet.