

Annie Laurie

— The heroine of what has been described as
“the world’s greatest love song” —

by Mitsuyuki Tomita

Those poems and ballads of Scotland and Ireland, which make us lose no interest in them, how often we may read or sing them, I think, cannot help giving us Japanese deep emotion or high aspiration in all seasons — as it were, something like a kind of nostalgia.

When the spring comes and all is covered with a renewed atmosphere, anybody who is interested in English poems will surely think about Scotland and Ireland far away.

As for me, every year, when it is the spring, I cannot spend it without reading or singing loud some of the poems and ballads which the countries have ever produced. The ‘Annie Laurie’ which I have particularly taken up as the theme of this article is my indispensable Nature in the spring. The historicity of the heroine herself of the song, however, had not been known to me. So I came to wish for knowing it one way or another.

Twenty-four years ago now, in the spring the hope grew hotter and hotter, and finally I decided on inquiring of her historicity by sending a letter to Maxwelton, the birthplace of Annie Laurie. As I, however, had no acquaintance in there, I lost patience, March passing into April, April into May like a dream ; and it had already been towards the end of May.

Come on! an adventure. I will dare to send a letter directly to the provost of Scotland. It was at about 8 p.m. on the 31st of May, when the spring was about to pass away, that I instructed

myself to have him write an answer by this burning passion, taking up a pen. At that time my heart was in the mood that I flew far away — to Scotland six thousand ‘ri’ from here and then I was setting forth the earnest desire in the presence of the provost. The letter which I wrote that night is as follows:

31st May 1958.

Dear Sir,

I am extremely glad to write a letter to you, though I may trouble you by asking the following question. I am a senior high school teacher of English of 53 years old. Every year, when the spring comes, I can’t help thinking of the famous and beautiful and eternal poem “Annie Laurie” produced in your country and sung all over the world, and I teach my students the poem and sing it with them cheerfully. To speak the truth, I have been longing to know some things about Annie Laurie. Meanwhile I came to hear that one of her descendants — Sir John Laurie is still alive as retired major general, and that the mansion where Annie Laurie lived is still standing in Maxwelton. Of course I don’t know if it is true or not. So I am writing this letter to you asking such things. I have no other man than you I can ask anything about your country. If you will tell me what you know about her descendants, if possible, including the great poet William Douglas, I shall be much obliged to you. Such being the case, I strongly want to correspond with their descendants, too.

As has been said, "Japan is the England of the far East". But in my mind, Japan is truly the Scotland of the Far East. It is going to be summer all over the world tomorrow. But it doesn't yet dew in Japan, as in the poem

Maxwelton's braes are bonnie ,

Where early fa's the dew.

Oh! Scotland, Scotland, which has produced many great unique poets and writers. How much I do long to see it! I can't stand still. My imaginative wings are fluttering far, far away — oh! to your beautiful country. When it dews about me — in the garden, on the grass, or even under the eaves, I wonder if I can even for a moment help thinking of the Maxwelton's braes and the beautiful tragedy between the young people — Annie Laurie and William Douglas.

In Japan almost all the poems(songs) made in your country have been sung by young and old, rich and poor, since long, long ago. Every Scottish folk-song is wonderously familiar to us Japanese. I suppose there must be some common sentiment flowing between the two countries — Scotland and Japan.

I want to tell you as many things as I see, hear, or know, through this letter. But to my regret, it is going to be June soon. I want to finish writing this letter before the summer comes. It is night now: all is quite calm. But the summer will soon come in one hour or two with a light step. I will write a letter to you again telling as many things as possible about my country.

Looking forwards to your excellently kind

and nice letter.

Yours truly,
M. Tomita.

It was on the morning of the next month June that I sent it through the international post. I had been looking for a correspondence to come for a month and a half since then.



Hon. G.J. McDowall,
Provost of Dumfries

It was on the twenty-first of July that the summer vacation began. Just as I came home after finishing my business in Nagano City, I was extremely affected at the news by some members of my family of the correspondence having reached, my heart throbbing audibly, my hands trembling, my face burning; and I could not calm myself for about thirty minutes. As it was when the anxiety as to the result was in fact beginning to take root in my mind on one hand, convinced of the correspondence

arriving, the astonishment and exultation were not what could be described.

First, in the letter, autographed by the Honorable provost, were the simple but sincere sentences typewritten, which will be shown as follows.

Municipal Chambers,
Dumfries.
17th June, 1958.

Dear Sir,

I thank you for the good wishes contained in your letter of 31st May and in answer to your queries I enclose some notes by the Curator of the Burgh Museum, Mr. A. E.

Truckell. I also send a copy of the official guide to the Burgh which you might find of interest.

Yours sincerely
G. J. McDowall
Provost.

Second, in addition to this, the two sheets of note by Curator A.E. Truckell, and official guide to the Royal Burgh of Dumfries(Scotland) had been reached. I shall publish here the notes.

* * *

The home of the Lauries is at Maxwelton in Glencairn, ten miles from Dumfries. The founder of the family was Stephen Laurie, a Dumfries merchant, who in 1611 purchased from James, 7th Earl of Glencairn, and his father-in-law, Sir Robert Gordon of Lochinvar (Mr. Tomita will probably know Scott's poem "Young Lochinvar" which refers to a member of this family), the lands of Bellicbought, Shancastle and Maxwelton in the parish of Glencairn.

He married Marion, daughter of John Corsane of Meiklenox, M.P. for Dumfries, and had three children. His son John, who succeeded, married in 1630 Agnes, daughter of Sir Robert Grierson of Lag. John took the Covenanting side in the Civil Wars and was fined £3,600 Scots. His son Robert married Mary, daughter of Robert Dalzell of Glenae. He took the Government side during the persecution of the Convenanters, assisting Graham of Glaverhouse, and was made knight

Baronet on 21st March 1685.

His second wife Jean, daughter of Walter Riddel of Minto, an Edinburgh lawyer, bore him three sons and four daughters. One of these was Anne — the "Annie" of the song — born at Maxwelton on 16th December 1682.

As a young woman she(Annie Laurie) was famed for her beauty. She was courted by William Douglas of Fingland but jilted him and married Alexander Fergusson of Craigdarroch in 1709. Fingland like Anna's father was a strong persecutor of the Covenanters and it is thought that Anna, like Fergusson of Craigdarroch, was in favour of the Covenanters.



ANNIE LAURIE
(The heroine of what has been described as
"the world's greatest love song.")

The Lauries are of course still in Maxwelton — though the descent has come down on the female side, the Laurie line ending last century in daughters and a son of one of these taking the name Laurie by deed-poll and inheriting the states.

Anna's boudoir is now an annex to the dining-hall at Maxwelton and on its wall hang the portraits of Alexander

Fergusson and Anna, originally at Craigdarroch and handed down among Anna's descendants until bought back by the Lauries during last century.

William Douglas, of Fingland in the parish of Dalry (town 80 kilomiles N.W. of Maxwelton), was born in 1672 and died about 1760. He was commissioned in the Royal Scots in 1688 as Ensign and as Captain in 1689 — Captains of 17 were quite common then — was prominent in the persecuting party prior to the Revolution of December 1688, and fled to France as a supporter of James II and VII, taking part in the Battle of Steinkirk in the Netherlands in 1692.

He married Elizabeth Clerk, daughter and

coheir of Capt. Alexander Clerk of Glendorth or Glendorch in Lanarkshire, in 1706 — his granddaughters said it was a runaway marriage — and there are many of their descendants scattered over the world today.

He was a noted swordsman and duellist: tradition says he fought a duel with Anna Laurie's Father in the grounds of Craigdarroch House: he certainly fought a duel with his cousin Capt. Menzies of Enoch, nearly killing him, and had to hide in Tynron Parish with Lady Stenhouse until Menzies recovered. At the instigation of the Duke of Douglas he fought a foreign bully, a professional swordsman, and wounded and disarmed him — less, the defeated man said, by skill in fence than by "his fierce and squinting eyes"

Like most of the Border Lairds of his period his house, Fingland, was a fortified Tower House, or "Peel Tower", tall, narrow, and with a winding wheel-stair going up to the battlements. It is in ruins now — there is a hammer from the ruins in this Museum — but Amisfield, Elschieshiels, Fourmerkland and other good examples of the type still stand. Photos of the site of Fingland and of one or more of the existing tower-houses could be got without too much difficulty if Mr. Tomita wanted them.

As for the poem, Douglas was not known as a poet: indeed, this single poem — the original, not the one we sing — is the only one attributed to him. The poem he wrote was written down by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe of Hoddam from the recitation of Miss Margaret Laurie of Maxwellton some time in or before 1812: he wrote her for more information about it in September of that year. It was of two verses:

"Maxwelton Banks are bonnie
Whare early fa's the dew;
Whare me and Annie Laurie

Made up the promise true;
Made up the promise true.
And never forget will I;
And for Bonnie Annie Laurie
I'll lay down my head and die.

She's backit like a Peacock,
She's breastit like a Swan,
She's jimp about the middle,
Her waist ye weill may span;
Her waist ye weill may span,
And she has a rolling eye,
And for Bonnie Annie Laurie
I'll lay down my head and die."

This version was published by Sharpe in "A Ballad BooK"(1823): Allan Cunningham reproduced it in his "Songs of Scotland"(1825). Lady John Scott saw it in Cunningham's book about ten years later, altered the words to the verse we now sing, and set it to a tune she had originally composed for the ballad "Kempye Kaye" — the tune we all sing it to now. She added the third verse also.

As for contacting the descendants of Douglas of Fingland, they are legion: I would suggest that Mr. Tomita obtain through the Japanese Central Library, which is a member of the international inter-library loan scheme, a copy of "A History of the Family of Morton, (Dumfriesshire) and their Descendants "by Percy W.L. Adams, published at Bedford by the Sidney Press in 1921.

As for Scottish poetry, Mr. Tomita will probably already be familiar with the works of Barbour, Henryson, Dunbar, Lindsay and Burns.

Finally — Lady John Scott's version makes Annie Laurie have a "dark blue eye" — but the portrait shows her to have had brown eyes. She died at Friar's Carse near Dumfries on April 4th. 1764, in the 82nd year of her age.

*The verse we now sing is as follows: it may be interesting for us to compare it with the original one.

Maxwelton Braes are bonnie,
Where early fa's the dew.
And it's there that Annie Laurie
Gied me her promise true;
Gied me her promise true;
Which ne'er forgot will be,
And for Bonnie Annie Laurie
I'd lay me doun and dee.

Her brow is like the snow drift,
Her neck is like the swan.
Her face it is the fairest,
That e'er the sun shone on,
That e'er the sun shone on.
And dark blue is her e'e.
And for Bonnie Annie Laurie
I'd lay me doun and dee.

Like dew on the gowan lying,
Is the fa' o' her fair feet.
And like winds in summer sighing
Her voice is low and sweet.
Her voice is low and sweet.
And she's a' the warld to me
And for Bonnie Annie Laurie
I'd lay me doun and dee.

[The last line of each stanza not only in the original but also in the alerted expresses how furiously William Douglas fell in love with Annie Laurie and how ardently he yearned her even after parting with each other.]

I sent, of course, a letter of thanks to the provost and the curator. But I shall omit mentioning it here, which contents are not concerned directly with the study of Annie Laurie.

But I must write down here about the following event. On 28th June 1979, I received a photo along with a letter after a long interval from Hon. Provost G. J. McDowall. The letter was a thank-you letter to my book (titled "Robert Burns: Life and Thoughts", 1978), and the photo was concerned with Annie Laurie.

First, I want to rewrite down the thank-you letter. It runs as follows:

Dumfries 2963 Ardbeg
Castledouglas Boad
Dumfries
21th June 1979

Dear Mr. Tomita,

I really do not know how to thank you for the wonderful gift of your book on our Scotland Bard, your dedication to me on the front page is something I will always treasure.

I have had a picture taken of Maxwelton House, the home of Annie Laurie which I trust you will like.

Please accept it as a small tribute to a very remarkable & kind man.

I trust this finds you in good health.

Yours sincerely,
George J. McDowall.

Second, I shall explain about the photo. Her mansion is standing still on the green hill of Maxwelton, in the suburbs of Dumfries. It is a very grand and elegant one which is composed of several lofty buildings (closely interlocked to one another). As is naturally expected, it is felt to be a noble mansion where she was born as many as 300 years ago. It may fairly be said that it is a kind of castle.

Such being the case, I should like to insert the photo here; but to my great regret, I cannot do so because space does not allow.

Be the matter as it may, just before finishing

this manuscript, I happened to open my book at page seven and note an article about Annie Laurie. She was born, it is no wonder, in this mansion on 16th December 1682, just 300 years ago. As for me, I am writing the same manuscript before the coming 16th December, it is wonder of wonders, and going to publish it to some friends of the similar taste in Japan, which is felt to be my great beatitude and honour and gratitude. Thanking Hon. Provost

G. J. McDowall and Curator Dr. A. E. Truckell Burgh Museum especially here again, I will put down my pen.

Mitsuyuki Tomita

In the mid autumn on 5th October, 1982.

At Nagano University in the suburbs of Ueda City, Japan.

Awfully fortunately, while I was correcting the proofs, I just remembered that I had sent on 4th December last year three congratulatory messages on the tercentenary of Annie Laurie's birth to Hon. Former Provost G.J. McDowall of Dumfries, Dr A.E.Truckell, Curator of the Burgh Museum, and the Dumfries and Galloway Standard Press. Each of them published the above message at a meeting, and it was, to my great joy, very much appreciated by the people present.

The congratulation was colourfully held here and there in Scotland — especially at Maxwellton, and some gorgeous pageants concerned with Annie Laurie and William Douglas were performed, too.

on 26th January 1983.