

Justifiably Burns's most celebrated poem (it was indeed his own favourite), Scottish schoolchildren for generations have been familiarised with Tam's wild ride home.

The inspiration for the poem is localised, but the result is a poem with clear universal appeal. Burns's linguistic craftsmanship here reaches its frenzied forte.

Compositional history

'Tam o' Shanter' was composed to accompany a drawing of Alloway-Kirk in the second volume of Captain Francis Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland* (April [1791](#)).

Burns specifically requested that Captain Grose include Alloway-Kirk in his volume, as it was the resting place of his father's bones and the projected resting place of his own. Grose agreed providing that Burns submit a witch story to accompany the drawing.

This arrangement may have been made as early as [1789](#), but the poem was not evidently composed until the autumn or winter of [1790](#).

In her memoirs, Mrs. Jean Burns recalls the autumnal day when her husband walked fitfully up and down the banks of the Nith, reciting loudly to himself the verses and rhymes that would eventually become 'Tam o' Shanter'.

The first recorded draft was sent to Mrs. Dunlop at Loudoun Castle in November [1790](#), and her correspondence with the poet reveals this draft to be a work in progress.

Burns sent a copy to Captain Grose on the 1st of December [1790](#), and the poem was printed as a reduced-type footnote in his antiquarian volume - a rather jaded presentation!

However, the poem was also published in *The Edinburgh Herald* (18 March [1791](#)) and the *Edinburgh Magazine* (March [1791](#)) and later was included in the *Edinburgh Edition* of [1793](#).

For the interested scholar, several manuscript copies survive.

Folkloric and Local Inspiration

In a letter to Captain Grose in the summer of [1790](#), Burns recounts three witch stories, two of which appear to form the folkloric roots of 'Tam o' Shanter'.

The first recites the adventures of a drunken farmer who courageously enters Alloway-Kirk on a stormy night after seeing strange lights. Within the Kirk he finds the remnants of an infernal meeting (boiling babes and the like!).

The second tale mirrors 'Tam o' Shanter' even more closely. A farmer on his way home from the market in Ayr comes across a party of wildly dancing witches in the Kirk.

The short sark of one member of the party inspires him to shout out and a diabolical chase to the brig of Doon commences. The farmer escapes, but his vigorous steed is sans a tail.

Burns was privy to a great wealth of supernatural tales through his mother and his childhood nurse, Betty Davidson, and he indicates that these particular tales represent only a small fraction of those surrounding Alloway-Kirk.

The Kirk had been abandoned since 1690, and the continued efforts of the community, including Burns's father, to preserve it from utter ruin made it a vivid focal point for local imagination.

Its geographical location, 200 yards north of the brig of Doon (the only crossing of the Doon River between Kyle and Carrick in the eighteenth century) also made it a memorable landmark for travellers. Luckily, everyone knows that the diabolical visitant cannot cross beyond the keystone of the brig.

Ayrshire locals claimed a more literal and contemporary inspiration for Burns's poem. The 'real' Tam o' Shanter may have been Douglas Graham (1739-1811), a tenant on the farm of Shanter. His wife, Helen McTaggart (1742-98), was as well known for her nagging as he was for his drinking.

After bouts of dissipation, Douglas is said to have blamed the Ayrshire witches for lost possessions, including his mare's tail on one occasion. Tam's drinking companions are also said to be based on real persons.

The Poem

The range of style and diction employed by Burns enables a nearly cinematographic portrayal of Tam's tale. The narrator can both comment on Tam's story from afar and zoom in to see the action through Tam's eyes as he relays the tale to all of us who may 'sit bousing at the nappy'.

As he gets caught up in the tale, the pace increases and the language becomes more infiltrated with Scots. His moralising on the temporality of pleasures (i.e. boozing and flirting) is left in the dust as he himself is caught up in the hedonistic diabolical encounter.

After a long day of overindulgence, Tam makes his way home from Ayr through a roaring storm. Upon passing Kirk-Alloway, he sees an 'unco sight' - witches and warlocks dancing to the Devil's piping song.

Tam gapes with wonder at the filthy underbelly of civilisation: the bones, bodies, and weapons of murderers and thieves are laid upon a table alight with the candles of the dead.

Such sights should sicken him, but instead of turning away, he looks on and spies a buxom young witch whose scanty underclothes and vigorous dancing excite him to a fevered pitch.

His ejaculatory 'Weel-done, Cutty-Sark!' inspires the dramatic chase to the brig. Tam has transgressed the divide between this, the civilised world of decorum, and the other world of forbidden desires.

And what is the consequence? Does he drown in the Doon as his wife Kate prophesied? No, his poor mare Meg loses her tail! Tam's avoidance of all serious consequence negates the moralising coda.

Boozing and wenching, in direct contrast to the Protestant ideals of Burns's community, seem to in fact be held up as imaginative catalysts, albeit, dangerous ones.

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