

Janet Little (1759-1813)

Description

Janet Little was born in Nether Bogside, Dumfriesshire; although her exact birth date is unknown, she was baptized on 13 August 1759 (Perkins). The “Scottish Milkmaid” was not afforded more than a common education, though she may have acquired some education from an early employer, Rev. Mr. Johnstone (Perkins).

Entering into service at a young age for several families before taken into the employ of Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, the patroness of the poet Robert Burns (Patterson, 79), Little had shown a talent and passion for poetry in those early days. It is more than likely that Burn’s fame helped “fan the flame for poetic distinction” (79). After landing the financially secure position of dairy superintendent at Loudoun Castle (79), Little published a volume of poems that earned her many subscribers with the help of her patroness.

Ferguson purports that, as a Scottish poet and laboring woman, Little writes poems that “frequently function as gendered, anticolonial testimonials” (*Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 91) that run contrary to contemporaries and English nationalists like Mary Collier and Ann Yearsley. Nonetheless, Little, along with other women poets, engaged in class, gender, and nationalist issues, collectively upholding a positive laboring-class identity underscored by cultural ties to location. The versatility and virtuosity of such writers is exemplified in the wide-range of genres and forms they worked in; and in her short comedic bursts, Little distinguishes herself as a conscientious and complex writer.

“From Snipe, A Favourite Dog, To His Master” is a short comic poem that appears as part of her only published collection, *The Poetical Works of Janet Little, the Scotch Milkmaid* (1792), printed by J. & P. Wilson. The poem also appeared in James Patterson’s *The Contemporaries of Burns and the More Recent Poets of Ayrshire, With Selections From Their Writings* (1840) published by H. Paton, Edinburgh.

Sources:

Pam Perkins, “Little, Janet (1759–1813),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2006 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40635>, accessed 6 Dec 2014]

J. Paterson, *The contemporaries of Burns and the more recent poets of Ayrshire* (1840)

Moira Ferguson, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (1995)