# Who is the new woman in Burns' life and what was their secret?

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Finding something new when looking for something else has resulted in many great scientific discoveries. In Aberdeenshire, it has led to a fascinating literary find which has Burns' academics hotly debating the mysteries it holds.

An unpublished letter written by Robert Burns in 1794 will be published for the first time today. The letter was unearthed during a Heritage Lottery funded project, introducing over 1,000 school children in the North-East to Burns and his contemporaries during the Scottish Enlightenment. Found during research, it will be published in the Enlightened Burns celebratory book which has been produced as part of the project.

The letter, which has been authenticated both forensically and by an international Burns expert, was written to the highly-accomplished actress Elizabeth Kemble (nee Satchell). The Kembles were the greatest acting dynasty of the 18th Century who also owned theatres, including the first theatre in Aberdeen and the Haymarket Theatre in Edinburgh. The Kembles were Freemasons and great supporters of the abolition of slavery, as was Burns. Elizabeth Kemble is best known for her performance in Inkle and Yarico, an anti-slavery play which was popular with radicals at that time.

The discovery of this letter brings to light a friendship between Burns and Elizabeth Kemble which, until now, was unknown. The letter contains further mystery regarding a secret and an enclosed manuscript:

"& as being in the secret is an enviable business even where the secret is of no importance, I venture to send you a Manuscript of mine which has very little other value than its being a private thing."

The letter goes on: "All I have to ask of you is, lay the book under lock & key, when you go out, as you will easily believe that I do not wish to expose such a thing to the random perusal of Chance."

The precious manuscript, which Burns wished to keep private, was a collection of his letters which he had collected "as a boon of Friendship to a much valued Character who is, Alas! Now no more". The character referred to is Robert Riddell of Glenriddell, a country gentleman and land owner who was a great friend of the poet for several years. Glenriddell was a radical so shared the same sympathies as Burns, and the Kemble family.

Commenting on the discovery of the letter, Helena Anderson Wright, Project Director of Enlightened Burns, said: "It is quite remarkable that over two hundred years after Burns death, a find like this is still possible. Now that we have had it authenticated, we are delighted to share this letter with the world. There is still a mystery surrounding its complete interpretation which will no doubt be hotly debated by academics for years to come."

Colin McLean, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Scotland, added: "We knew that through this project, hundreds of children and young people would discover the life and works of Burns, but we never for a moment anticipated a discovery such as this.

"Robert Burns is one of the most celebrated figures in Scottish culture. His enduring legacy and humanitarian values have introduced people in all corners of the world to Scotland's heritage, the Scots language and to the unique living tradition of the Burns Supper. This letter gives us a glimpse into a part of his life, which until now was unknown, as we

piece together our understanding of the man."

The Enlightened Burns book is available for sale and in the true spirit of Burns, all proceeds will go to local charities in the North-East. To order a copy, contact: robertburnscomp@aol.com.

**Notes to editors**

The Enlightened Burns project began in 2009 with the help of Heritage Lottery Funding to explore Burns and his contemporaries during the Enlightenment. The project has included staging two historical playlets and a ballet as part of the Aberdeen International Youth Festival. Puppet workshops across 13 primary schools brought to life the words of Burns for over 1,000 children. The publication of the Enlightened Burns celebratory book, which contains the unpublished letter; poems with artworks by Alexa Rutherford, who held interactive art and poetry workshops for the schoolchildren; and children's comments and inspirational thoughts, marks the completion of the project.

On seeing Elizabeth Kemble in Inkle and Yarico at the Globe Theatre in Dumfries on 21 October 1794, Burns penned an epigram and presented it to her:

"Kemble, thou cur'st my unbelief
For Moses and his rod;
At Yarico's sweet nor of grief
The rock with tears had flow'd"

**Further information**

Enlightened Burns: Helena Anderson Wright on 01224 868 988 or 07703 517 900, email: robertburnscomp@aol.com.

Heritage Lottery Fund: Shiona Mackay on 01786 870 638 or 07779 142 890, email: shionamackay1@btinternet.com.