

## Notes on Collection and Research

### *An Ayrshire gentleman's farmhouse : a drawing of Mossgiel*

BASIL MEGAW

Convincing representations of Scottish dwellings of the humbler sort, particularly interior views, are rare before the early years of last century. Even then many are partly imaginative, or at least romanticized, and few indeed are adequately documented as to status and locality. Best known are the attractive pictures of David Allan (1744–1796), and his follower Alexander Carse, whose *Evening in a Scots Cottage* (c. 1805) was reproduced in a previous issue of *Scottish Studies* (Megaw 1965: plate VI). Many views of this nature were commissioned as illustrations for pastoral works then in fashion, such as Allan Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd* (1788 edition) and the poetry of Burns—the subjects usually drawn from Lothian and the Border country, occasionally from Ayrshire. These appear to reflect actual rural scenes in those regions around the turn of the century, though for greater realism the drawings of Walter Geikie (1795–1837), if a little later, are often to be preferred: his numerous sketches provide an invaluable and sympathetic record of Lothian domestic life and its setting, in both town and country.

The unusual interest of Sir William Allan's study of *The Interior of the Kitchen of Mossgiel Farmhouse* (plate II) is that here we have a direct record of a small eighteenth-century farmhouse whose status and history is exceptionally well known. While the poet Burns's family had in fact left Mossgiel about a generation before this drawing was made, we are told that the building itself remained entirely unaltered until 1858. Following their father's death at Lochlea, Robert Burns and his younger brother Gilbert had removed in March 1784 to Mossgiel farm, about a mile north-west of Mauchline, a house 'connected with so many of the most memorable facts in the poet's history' (Chambers-Wallace 1896: I, 111). The farm of Near Mossgiel (O.S. 'East Mossgiel'), at an altitude of about 530 ft. O.D., comprised 118 acres, for which the annual rent was £90. 'The *steading* furnished a more comfortable residence for the family than they had ever before known, for it had been built to serve as a sort of country house for the family of Mr Gavin Hamilton, writer in Mauchline, who as first tenant from the proprietor, the Earl of Loudoun, had sublet the farm to the Burnses' (Chambers-Wallace 1896: I, 111–13, 197–98, 256, n.).

Although clearly built as a farmhouse, Mossgiel thus seems to belong to a special

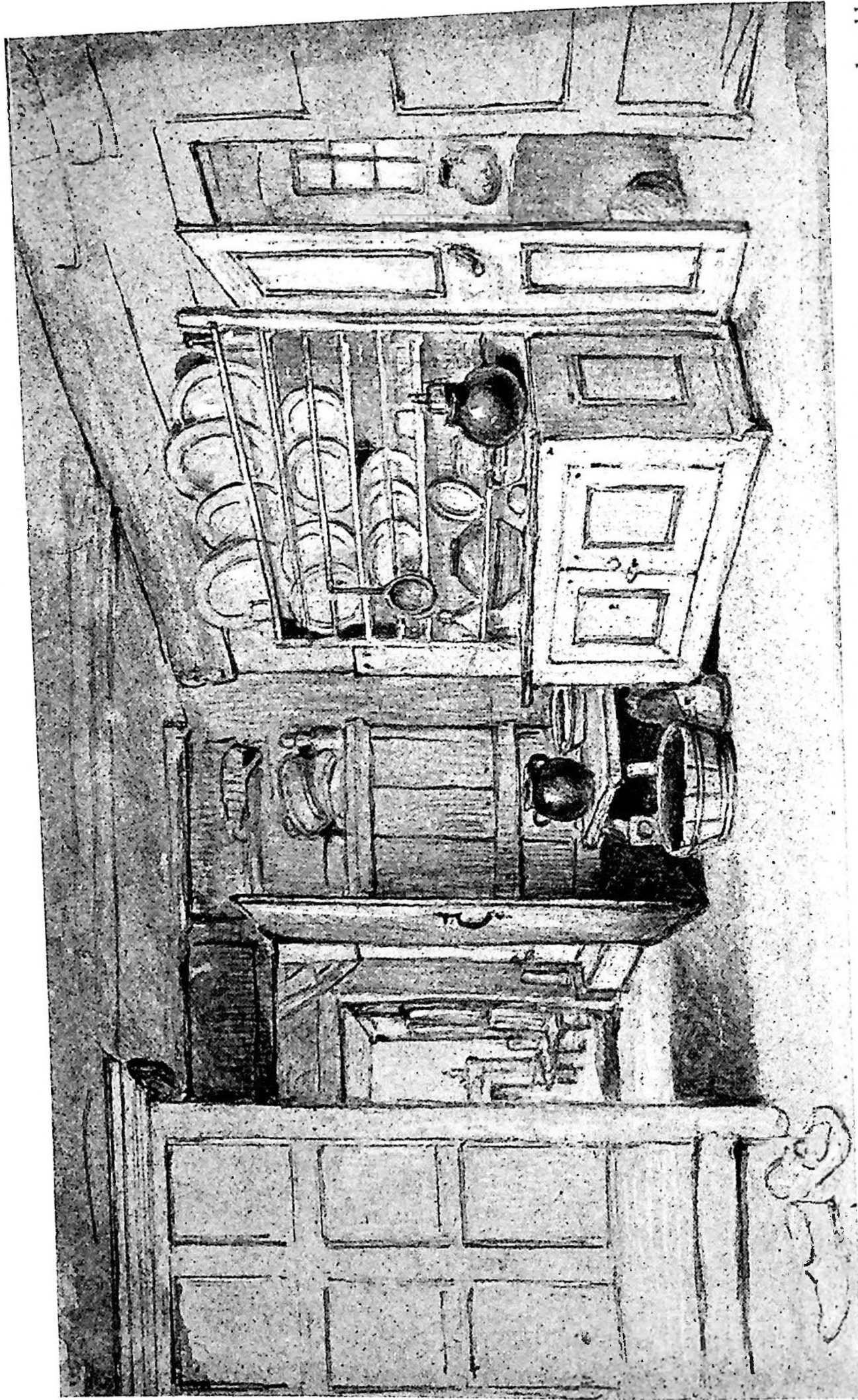


PLATE II. Interior of the Kitchen at Mossiel Farm House, about 1827. From the original drawing by Sir William Allan, P.R.S.A., R.A., reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Scotland (see page 67).

class of dwelling which has received little attention from the social historian: a farmhouse that was the occasional residence of the gentleman-owner. Those familiar with Bishop Robert Forbes's diary of his travels in the north and north-west of Scotland in 1762 and 1770 (Forbes 1886), or such unpublished letters as the Delvine Papers in the National Library of Scotland (Delvine Papers, *passim*, e.g. MS 1349, fo. 163) may recall that many of the Scots gentry had their summer retreats, pleasantly informal places, often referred to as their 'shiels', sometimes within only a mile or two of their principal residence. Thus in the mid-eighteenth century the baronet Mackenzie of Coul, in Easter Ross, was usually in July and August at his farmhouse of Comry in the glen of Strathconan, about four miles from his manor-place; the laird of Grant had his summer-place about six miles upstream, at Culnakyle on the Spey, at least in the seventeenth century (Fraser 1883: I, 312); and even great nobles might find it both desirable and necessary to remove higher up the glen for the support of their 'family' and stock during the summer, as instanced by an undated letter of the 1690's in which the Marquis of Atholl, writing from his chief residence at Dunkeld, refers even to Blair Castle as his 'shiel' in this sense (Atholl 1908: I, 340). The builder of Mossgiel (born in 1751), on the other hand, who lived at the small medieval towerhouse of Mauchline Castle, was perhaps influenced less by an immortal peripatetic tradition, with its deeper roots both in the true shieling-practice of the stock-farmer and the manorial 'circuit' of the medieval hierarchy, than by the current craze for farming amongst the gentry. Nevertheless Mossgiel farmhouse was the kind of rustic retreat to which generations of Scottish gentry had evidently been accustomed to remove during part of each year for a variety of reasons, social, economic and recreational. The old custom of 'going to the hills to drink goat's whey' for health reasons certainly played a part in encouraging the continuance of such seasonal migration; but, as travellers grew numerous on the improved highways, for many gentry with strained finances a more pressing attraction perhaps lay in avoiding the calls of incessant hospitality at a time when inns were few and bad.

Mossgiel, like many another gentleman's farmhouse in the eighteenth century, was simple enough in lay-out and appearance, indeed hardly to be distinguished from the homes of the better-off tenant farmers. Though now changed beyond recognition, the earliest edition of the relevant Ordnance map was fortunately surveyed in 1857, just before the first alteration of the house: it was then a simple rectangle, overall about 50 ft. long and a little under half that in breadth. In the year following the alterations the Burns's former herd-boy and outdoor servant, Willie Patrick, recalled the house as 'only a "but and ben", or a kitchen and parlour, with a garret above, to which a movable "trap" or wooden steps led up, in the lobby behind the [centrally-placed] door. This garret consisted of three small apartments, the two nearest to Mauchline being used as bedrooms, and the third as a lumber chest, reached from the kitchen. The end room [in the garret] had a single small window of four panes, in the gable. The small middle apartment was lighted by a larger four-paned window or skylight ["to the back of the cottage", p. 21 n.] placed in the sloping roof, and formed the bedroom

and private chamber of the two brothers, Robert and Gilbert; containing their joint bed, and a small table under the window used for writing on, with a drawer in which the poet kept his papers. The best room, or "ben house", was at the end next to Mauchline. The roof [ceiling?] was so low that it could easily be touched when standing. The door was opened by a string on the outside, hanging through a hole in the wood, which lifted the "sneck" or latch. . . . This room contained fixed beds along the back wall for some of the women of the house, the rest sleeping in the kitchen.

'Patrick gave a pleasing picture of the hard-working family. The Burnses lived chiefly in the busy kitchen, at the other end. Mrs Burns, the good old [recently-widowed] mother, then between fifty and sixty, a "wee boo'd body", he said generally occupied a chair close by the fire; . . . The house was kept by the youngest daughter, Isobel, called "Bell" by Patrick, in the usual plain Scotch style, afterwards the well-known Mrs Begg, . . . only thirteen years old on their taking the farm. The other members of the family were the eldest and head, the poet himself; his brother Gilbert, who, though younger, took principal charge; another sister, a female friend who assisted in the kitchen, the "bonny sweet wee lady", his sonsy smirking dear-bought Bess, ' . . . an infant child of the poet, and latterly, his eldest son, Robert by Jean Armour.

'During their whole residence at Mossgiel [1784-94, though the poet removed to Ellisland in 1788], there were no female servants—as Burns says, he had "nane in female servin' station",—the whole household and dairy work being carried on by the women of the family, as was customary in Scotland in those hard-working days. Besides these, there were men-servants required for the rougher work of the farm,—Robert Allan, a relation of the family, John Blane, the "gaudsman" who was driving the horses when the house was unearthed, . . . Davie Hutchison, generally known as "girnin' Davie", and Willie Patrick, having all served in this capacity, three being required at one time ["the poet then used to plough with four horses"]. . . . All the household slept in the house except the three male servants, who had their beds in the stable loft. . . . Patrick [a boy of 8 years in 1784] used chiefly to be employed about the kitchen and farm-yard, doing little jobs, feeding and herding the cattle, mucking the byre, acting on occasion as "gaudsman", running to town [Mauchline] with letters and on other errands, and making himself generally useful. He remembered, when the family were employed during the long winter nights in the kitchen, to have sat on the other side of the great fireplace, opposite Mrs Burns, peeling potatoes for supper and next day's dinner, or being otherwise engaged; while the "women folk" were working and chatting at their various occupations. The boys were accustomed to retire to the stable loft early in the evening, so that, he said, they were never present at "the reading", or family worship, which was held nightly in the house, conducted by the poet, or by his douce brother in his absence. The whole of this numerous family were accustomed to take their food in the kitchen, and Patrick mentioned that he never saw the poet at any meal except when he was reading, spoon in the one hand, book in the other . . .'

(Jolly 1881: 5-27).

The outer walls of the house were of 'substantial masonry', but even after the first alterations of 1858 the roof of the dwelling was still thatched with straw (Gibb 1896: 71): the original state of the exterior is represented in pleasant watercolour in the National Gallery of Scotland. Adjoining the house on the north side lay an open farm-court flanked east and west by parallel, single-storey outbuildings, the barn and a stable-and-byre respectively. In 1870 'the walls of the dwelling were further raised and the roof slated', its state before and after this being recorded in contemporary photographs (Gibb 1896: 71 and 72).

In the light of the recollections of Burns's herd-boy, confirmed by Robert Chambers (see below), the interior lay-out and furnishing of Mossgiel as sketched in Allan's drawing of the house may readily be interpreted. The artist, seated in the farmhouse kitchen with his back to 'the great fireplace', looked through two wooden partition-walls that screened the central entrance-lobby and the great garret stair. Beyond, he had a glimpse of the parlour, with its smaller fireplace at the far end of the house, and two chairs apparently backing on to a pair of box-beds (for the women-folk) against the rear wall of the parlour. What at first looks like an oblique member of the roof-frame, between parlour and stair-door, must be the casing of the upper section of the stair.

Nearer the artist, and in the left corner of the kitchen, what looks like a stoutly-framed cupboard must be another box-bed, which (as the herd-boy recalled) stood in the kitchen. Parallel to that, and clearly seen in the light from a window in the front wall of the house, is the kitchen dresser, with its complement of dishes, plates and basins, and capacious cupboards below. Here a wooden ladle hangs by its crook handle; the largest of the dishes may be of pewter. Through a half-open door in the wooden partition-wall to the right of the dresser is seen the shelved pantry, with window in the rear wall of the house. As the first edition of the Ordinance Survey map indicates that all the rooms were enclosed within the simple rectangular plan of the house, it is clear that the pantry was not formed in a projecting wing, but was merely a small space partitioned off from the kitchen area: to allow for this, and for the garret stair, Mossgiel was evidently some feet broader than the normal tenant farmhouse of the period.

Sir William Allan's drawing of the interior of Mossgiel, though undated, is accompanied by a note in the hand of Robert Chambers, addressed to W. F. Watson, the Edinburgh bookseller from whose collection it passed to the National Gallery of Scotland. This records Chambers' memory (evidently some years after the drawing was made) that it represents the 'Interior of the Kitchen of Mossgiel farmhouse . . . looking through the passage to the "spence" [parlour] alluded to in *The Vision* . . . [and showing] the foot of the stair which leads up to the poet's little bedroom and study. R.C.' We know that Robert Chambers 'furnished Mr Lockhart with a variety of valuable notes for his *Life of Robert Burns*,' published in 1828 (Chambers 1884: 213), and perhaps Chambers also had a hand in commissioning the Mossgiel drawing, as he certainly did in Nasmyth's full-length oil-painting of Robert Burns (engraved the following year for Lockhart's *Life of the poet*) according to a contemporary letter of Chambers to

Constable, November 1827 (Skinner 1963: 13). Elsewhere Chambers recorded that Sir William Allan 'also painted a picture of the peasant bard . . . representing him seated in his working attire with a pen in his hand, but in a much roomier apartment than any contained in the farmhouse of Mossgiel' (Brydall 1889: 275). Allan's more realistic Mossgiel interior may possibly have been intended as an illustration for Lockhart's *Life of Burns*. From 1819, at least, Lockhart had been interested in encouraging 'Mr Allan, the Scotch painter', and with or without his friend Chambers's assistance, Lockhart may have urged Allan to provide Burns illustrations for his biography, begun in 1825. Allan's trouble with his eyes between 1826 and 1830 might explain why such a plan (if formed) apparently did not mature, and for the present Allan's drawing of the Mossgiel kitchen may perhaps be assigned a provisional date about 1827.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The original drawing of Mossgiel (plate II), reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Gallery of Scotland, is catalogued thus: 'Allan, Sir William, P.R.S.A., R.A. (1782-1850) . . . D. 2563. Interior of the kitchen at Mossgiel Farm House. Pen and watercolour on brown paper, 8 × 10 $\frac{5}{8}$  inches. Watson Bequest, 1886' (Andrews and Brotchie 1960: 30).

The kind advice of Mr Keith Andrews, Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings, National Gallery of Scotland, of Miss K. Brander, of the same Department, and of Mr David Murison, Editor of the *Scottish National Dictionary*, is also gratefully acknowledged.

## REFERENCES

- ANDREWS, KEITH  
and BROTCHE, J. R.  
1960 *National Gallery of Scotland: Catalogue of Prints and Drawings*. Edinburgh.
- ATHOLL, JOHN [MURRAY],  
7th Duke of  
1908 *Chronicles of the Atholl and Tullibardine Families*. Edinburgh. 5 vols.
- BRYDALL, ROBERT  
1889 *Art in Scotland—Its Origin and Progress*. Edinburgh and London.
- CHAMBERS, WILLIAM  
1884 *Memoir of William and Robert Chambers*. 13th edition. Edinburgh and London.
- CHAMBERS-WALLACE  
1896 *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*. Edited by Robert Chambers, revised by William Wallace. Edinburgh and London. 4 vols.
- DELVINE PAPERS  
MS Correspondence of the Mackenzies of Delvine. National Library of Scotland, MSS. 1101-1530.
- FORBES (BISHOP), ROBERT  
1886 *Journals of the Episcopal Visitations of . . . Robert Forbes . . . 1762 & 1770*. Ed. J. B. Craven. London.

FRASER (SIR) WILLIAM

1883        *The Lairds of Grant*. Edinburgh. 3 vols.

GIBB, J. T.

1896        'More Mauchline Topography', in *Burns Chronicle*, 5 (18th Ser.), 70-81.

JOLLY, WILLIAM

1881        *Robert Burns at Mossgiel*. Paisley.

MEGAW, B. R. S.

1965        'Evening in a Scots Cottage', in *Scottish Studies*, 9 106-108.

SKINNER, B. C.

1963        *Burns Authentic Likenesses*. Edinburgh.