



Thomas Burns, the most important religious leader in the early settlement of Otago, was baptised at Mauchline, Ayrshire, Scotland, on 17 April 1796, the son of Gilbert Burns, a farmer and estate manager, and his wife, Jean Breakenrigg, the daughter of a farmer. His father was the brother of the poet Robert Burns. His mother, and his paternal grandmother, Agnes Brown, who lived with the family

The family lived in comfortable circumstances on the East Lothian estates managed by Gilbert Burns. In his childhood Thomas acquired practical farming skills, which proved useful when he became a colonist. He attended Haddington Grammar School, where he was taught by the young Edward Irving, at that time an enthusiastic evangelical. Once Irving marched Thomas and other pupils 35 miles to Edinburgh to hear Thomas Chalmers preach. Irving's friend Thomas Carlyle and his wife, Jane Carlyle, visited the Burns family.

At the age of 16 Thomas Burns went to the University of Edinburgh to study theology, giving up farming with some reluctance. He was not especially gifted but completed his BA, and progressed to the Theological Hall in 1815. He received his licence from the Presbytery of Haddington on 3 December 1822 and worked as a tutor in the family of Sir Hew Dalrymple-Hamilton of Berwick. On 13 April 1826 he was ordained as minister of the parish of Ballantrae.

Ballantrae provided a good living and Burns felt sufficiently secure to marry Clementina Grant there on 4 January 1830. She was the daughter of the Reverend James Francis Grant, an episcopal minister in Edinburgh and later rector of Merston and prebendary of Chichester Cathedral. Clementina was to prove an ideal helpmeet, as effective an agent of moral discipline as Thomas himself and winning the respect of most settlers.

Thomas Burns returned with his bride to the parish of Monkton, where Clementina had already kept house for five years for her uncle, the Presbyterian minister there. This was one of the most lucrative livings in rural Scotland, worth £400 a year. The Burns lived in great comfort in the spacious manse, and Thomas built a large neo-Gothic church with seating for 800 people.

At the age of 47 Burns joined the Free Church secession from the Church of Scotland. He was one of the oldest ministers in the breakaway group; his standard of living was greatly reduced. His family shifted to a small house at New Prestwick, and his parishioners were forced to worship in the rain. The proposal for a Free Church settlement in New Zealand, to be called New Edinburgh, held out new hope and soon won Burns's interest.

He was offered the position of minister of the New Edinburgh scheme in June 1843 by the Colonial Committee of the Free Church of Scotland. Long delays in implementing the scheme caused further personal hardship. William Cargill and Burns established a lay association to promote the settlement in May 1845, but Burns was forced to take up an appointment at Portobello in June 1846. Before his withdrawal, however, he succeeded in forcing out the more liberal-minded founder of the scheme, George Rennie, and persuaded Cargill to establish an exclusively Free Church settlement. He won the support of Cargill in changing the name from New Edinburgh to Otago, and tramped all over Scotland promoting the scheme with but limited success.

In October 1847 Burns returned to his position as minister to the colony of Otago. He set about the task of selecting emigrants with enormous enthusiasm. In all, 239 people sailed with him and his family on the *Philip Laing* from Greenock on 27 November 1847. The tall, well-built, grey-headed Burns sailed with his wife, one son and five daughters. He made it clear that he wanted to build a new Geneva and ran his ship like a floating theocracy. Divine service was held every day and three times on Sunday. Discipline was strict and Burns was viewed as an Old Testament patriarch by the young migrants. One passenger, J. de la C. Carnegie, was constantly harassed by Burns because of his common law marriage; his partner was subjected to severe censure by Clementina Burns. Burns's moral policing made him enemies even before he arrived at Otago.

Soon after arrival on 15 April 1848 Burns assumed a lower profile and left civil and political matters to Cargill. He concentrated on looking after the spiritual welfare of the migrants and visited every Presbyterian home on a regular basis. He proved to be a muscular Christian, in the mould of Bishop G. A. Selwyn, and walked many miles tending to the pastoral needs of his congregation and establishing new rural churches. Once he realised that many migrants were not Free Church members he compromised his ideal of a new Geneva and concentrated instead on ensuring that the settlers behaved in a godly fashion. His influence may have contributed to early Dunedin's very low crime rate.

Burns built a strong organisation for the Presbyterian church in Otago, with himself as undisputed head. All ministers who followed were carefully screened and the Presbytery of Otago, established in 1854, was unashamedly Free Church in tone. Later Burns agreed to let more mainstream Presbyterians and Congregationalists found Knox Church as a 'higher' and more liberal church in 1860. He presided over the setting up of the Synod of Otago and Southland in 1866, and established the three presbyteries of Dunedin, Clutha and Southland. Naturally Burns was foundation moderator. First Church, built by R. A. Lawson in fine Gothic style, and opened in 1873, provided a fitting memorial to Burns's religious enterprise.

Other denominations were treated shamefully. Anglicans had to meet in the gaol because of the lack of an appropriate building. Methodists were condemned in a bitter public correspondence and sectarian tensions rose to a high pitch. Later Burns learnt to work with the other denominations against the ungodly secularism of the 'new iniquity', the goldminers.

Burns was always a strong supporter of public education. Initially he wanted the school to be allied to the church and the schoolteacher to have a status almost equal to that of the minister. He established four schools and four Sabbath schools. But as the settlement became more diverse and secular he championed public schools in order to keep other creeds from intruding into the education of children. Bible reading and moral instruction in day schools were acceptable, but training in religious matters was best left to Sabbath school. He supported the establishment of both the boys' high school (1863) and the girls' high school (1871), and worked with the synod in endowing a chair of literature for the new University of Otago (1869). The foundation chancellor of the university would have liked theology to have assumed greater prominence in the university curriculum, but he was pleased that chairs were established in Classics (including English) and in mental and moral philosophy. Burns also took great pride in the doctorate of divinity awarded to him by the University of Edinburgh in 1861.

On occasion Burns showed himself to be more democratic than Cargill. The most famous instance was his support for shorter hours and higher wages demanded by workers in 1849. The fact that Sam Shaw and his men won this dispute was partly attributable to Burns's influence. The incident also suggests that Burns was much less wedded to Wakefield's ideal of a hierarchical class settlement than Cargill. Burns supported the ideas of concentration and contiguity because they enabled him to exercise a degree of social control, not because he was a disciple of Wakefieldian theory.

Thomas Burns died in Dunedin on 23 January 1871; his wife, Clementina Burns, died on 19 July 1878. Their son, Arthur, became a minor political figure and is remembered for his part in establishing the Mosgiel Woollen Mill. Two of their daughters made advantageous marriages, Clementina to Captain A. J. Elles and Jane to the Reverend William Bannerman, but the Burns did not establish a family dynasty like that of the Cargills.

Burns has received an unfavourable press from modern historians. His stern, humourless puritanism holds out little appeal in a more secular world. Contemporary English commentators also found him singularly unattractive. Yet to the Presbyterian settlers of Otago he appeared quite differently. He was an energetic minister of the Free Church, who did everything expected of him. His farming skill also made him an ideal pioneer, and grain from his farm at Grants Braes helped keep many migrants alive during the difficult early years of settlement. The traits which so infuriated the English settlers and government officials - obstinacy, dourness, narrowness, inflexibility, parochialism - were seen as real strengths by the majority of Otago settlers. His huge funeral procession attested to the fact that these qualities were more appreciated in death than in life.

Thomas Burns is buried in the family grave in a prominent position in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery.

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