

**BURNS  
CHRONICLE**  
1977

# Mauchline Ware

by J. S. BUIST

IN the first *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1792), the Rev. William Auld—Burns's "Daddy" Auld—lamented posthumously that his parishioners of Mauchline were at "a great disadvantage" because there was no manufacture in the village. They were, he wrote, "willing to promote the improvement of agriculture, commerce and manufacture," in all of which they were "making some progress".

It was not until the 1820s that Mauchline got the industry with which it was to be most closely associated for more than a century. In or about 1825 two Mauchline men, William and Andrew Smith, set up in the village as snuff-box makers. Out of this venture, in which Andrew was and remained the leading spirit, grew a highly diversified industry which at its heyday dominated the market for wooden souvenirs which were so much to the Victorian taste.

In the course of the diversification which was the secret of their survival three generations of the Smiths produced a seemingly endless variety of souvenirs in half-a-dozen styles of decor. Their greatest success from the late 1850s was in the production of nicknacks, almost all of them useful as well as decorative, embellished with trans-

ferred engravings of scenery.

William (1795-1847) and Andrew (1797-1869) were the youngest of five children of William Smith, mason in Mauchline, and his wife Jean Merry. The brothers followed their father's trade. In the early 1820s, both still bachelors, they were running a hone manufactory at Milton Mill, Stair, on the north bank of the river Ayr. It has been assumed that the Smiths started as box-makers in Mauchline because they wished to have their own source of cases for their "Water of Ayr stones". This may have influenced them, but what, by his own account, decided them was Andrew's exploitation, if not actual invention, of a variant of the pantograph, by which prints and pictures could be brought down to the size of a snuff-box lid.

Snuff-box making was already well established in Ayrshire, having started in Cumnock round about 1807, when William Crawford, "a clever and ingenious man" according to a contemporary's description, successfully reproduced the famous "Scotch hinge". This mechanism, a series of knuckles cut alternately in the side and lid of the box, has never been bettered for snuff-boxes and tea-caddies. Until Crawford applied himself to it, the hinge had been the monopoly of Charles Stiven, of Laurencekirk, Kincardineshire.

Crawford was not the only "clever and ingenious man" in his part of Ayrshire. By the time the Smiths set up in Mauchline, snuff-boxes (decorated with miniature paintings and pen-and-ink drawings, and in tartan) were a well-

The author has been collecting Mauchline Ware for the past twelve years. The items of Burnsiana shown on these pages are only one aspect of his large collection.

established and still moderately prosperous industry in Cumnock, Auchinleck and Catrine. The decline in snuffing had, however, already begun, and the box-makers of these three villages were seeking to offset it by extending their range to ladies' work-boxes, tea caddies, trinket boxes and (later) card- and needle-cases. Relying chiefly on the London market, they almost certainly lacked an adequate sales organisation. They quite definitely lacked Andrew Smith's knack of attracting distinguished patronage.

The first application of Andrew's "profile machine", as he sometimes called it, was to snuff-boxes, for which Birmingham, not London, was the chief market. As early as 1829 William opened a Birmingham warehouse which later developed into a factory with independent production, mostly for the English market, and some finishing of articles made in Mauchline.

Andrew was later to describe William as "a man of the most excellent taste and of the most sober and industrious habits". Sad to relate, the brothers quarrelled. From 1843 till William's death four years later, each ran his own establishments in Mauchline and Birmingham, each producing the same range of goods as the other, and each claiming royal patronage on the basis of a warrant granted the joint firm in 1832 by William IV, at the request of the second Marquis of Hastings.

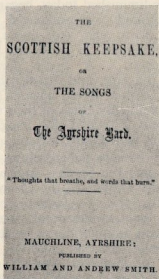
On William's death, his independent business was wound up. The firm W. & A. Smith was reconstituted, the new "W" being Andrew's son William, then aged only 20, but already with clear proofs of his business and artistic talent behind him. George Smith son of the deceased brother William, assumed charge of the firm's "mercantile business" in Birmingham. The next 20 years saw the Smith's at the height of their powers.

By the late 1840s, perhaps even

earlier, tartan had overtaken oil painting and pen-and-ink drawing in the decoration of the increasing range of Mauchline ware. The proscription of the tartans of the clans, one of the severest aftermaths of the Forty-five, was lifted in 1782, but it was only after that grotesquely comical visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822 that the tartan craze, undiminished today, began. The visit, brilliantly stage-managed by Sir Walter Scott had (to quote John Buchan) initiated "a golden age for the haberdashers. A bogus Celticism became the rage, and Scottish houses, whose ancestors would have as readily worn woad as the dress of their secular foes, were provided by imaginative tradesmen with family tartans".

Others besides haberdashers joined in, including the Smiths—indirectly at first as the printers of the 75 coloured plates for the *Vestiarium Scoticum* (1842), that monumental work of imaginative antiquarianism by the self-styled John Sobieski Stuart. Partly because of Sobieski Stuart's wilder flights of fancy, in which others were all too ready to follow him, the Smiths prepared, and published in 1850, their *Authenticated Tartans of the Clans and Families of Scotland, Painted by Machinery*. Printed by McCormick and Gemmell, *Ayr Advertiser*, it is dedicated to the President of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (the Marquis of Breadalbane) and the Vice-Presidents and Fellows of the Society. The Marquis was already a well publicised patron of the Smiths, whose immensely popular tartan buttons were named after him. The Marquis had even induced his master and friend Prince Albert to put the buttons under his "especial patronage".

The Smiths make great play of the historical authenticity of the 69 tartans illustrated in their textbook. In fact they relied most heavily on the tartan trade who, with the clan and anti-



A hinged case made about 1885 by W. and A. Smith for a Glasgow hone-maker. Left—The Smiths bound many books in decorated wooden boards but published only one, this edition of Burns's songs (in the 1850's). Bottom left—A rolled tape casket. Below—One of a pair of vases with views of Mauchline.





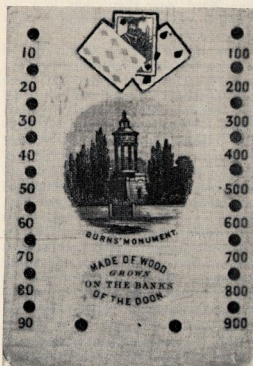
quarian sources they consulted, were all too willing to suspend disbelief for the sake of a picturesque sett. Now superseded, even forgotten, it served its day as a standard work of a kind. Its chief merit was, and remains, the brilliance of the illustrations. "Mauchline Machine Paintings," the Smiths explained, was "a weaving with colours". "Exactly as each thread of the weft is successively introduced so each line of colour in . . . the Tartans is drawn in succession, and thus produces the desired result by the same harmonious co-mingling of the primary colours."

The publicity and prestige resulting from the *Authenticated Tartans* was reinforced by the Smiths' success at the International Exhibition in London, in 1851. The Smiths exhibited "a variety of Scotch fancy woodwork, made chiefly from the wood of the sycamore tree: consisting of snuff-boxes, cigar-cases, card-trays, writing-folios, books bound in wood, candlesticks, &c., ornamented in different styles". They were awarded a "prize medal", the only one to go to Ayrshire. At that time the Smiths employed about eighty artisans. These were local people. According to William, "We have more than once brought hands from Birmingham and London, but our best workmen have been reared by ourselves". He left the following description of the business at mid-century:

"Our premises are situated in a garden, light and airy; the people enjoy health far above the average, are all cleanly in their persons and sober in their habits; the girls are so superior to factory girls generally that their appearance always excites the admiration of our numerous visitors. Among these sixty men, women and boys there is not one who cannot read, and not more than one or two who cannot write" (though he does not claim credit for this).



Nothing that might attract the tourist was neglected, with every article having an easily identifiable purpose. The Burns portrait (above), after Nasmyth, adorned a brooch. Below is a bezique marker.



There is an outside glimpse of the Smiths' prestige in an account of Mauchline's celebration in 1859 of the centenary of Burns's birth. A procession to Mossiel was led by a "rustic triumphal car" on which two of Burns's contemporaries carried a bust of the poet encircled by a lyre. Then came the Smiths' workmen, the "females of the work and other Mauchline Belles" and finally "several promiscuous parties, each having some appropriate banner or device". At Mossiel Andrew "addressed the multitude", and his youngest child Agnes, aged 12, crowned the bust with holly.

At a dinner that evening Andrew was croupier, and William recited a poem written for the occasion (author undisclosed) in praise of Burns's friend and patron, Gavin Hamilton. This was all most appropriate, considering that the Smiths were about to embark on a new style of decor for their woodware—the transferred engravings that look so effective on the creamy white of sycamore wood.

The application of engravings to wooden surfaces might have begun a century earlier than it did, had there been a market for goods so decorated. The transfer process was discovered about 1750, and its application to pottery followed almost at once. All my research suggests that transfer decoration of Mauchline ware, which is not mentioned as one of the styles exhibited by the Smiths at the 1851 Exhibition, began about 1858. This coincides with the opening up of Britain to the new class of tourist created by the first railway boom. A wooden nicknack decorated with a local view made an attractive souvenir of one's travels, especially when it purported to be made of local wood.

The tourist boom came timeously for the Smiths. The popularity of their tartan ware, on Andrew's own admission in 1850, was waning in England,

though still holding in France. In Scotland the market maintained by the zeal of Victoria and Albert for all things Scottish, and by the romantic appeal of the kind of scenery hitherto only accessible in Switzerland, an appeal enhanced by the popularity of Scott and Burns, was virtually limitless. In England, London apart, the market was chiefly in the seaside resorts and inland watering-places which the railways had given a new accessibility.

While there tended to be a predominance of places of historic interest and natural beauty, nothing that might attract the tourist was neglected, else why were prints of Portland Terrace and Tichfield Road, Troon, chosen to decorate a miniature wheelbarrow in my collection? The Smiths also supplied souvenirs decorated with French and American views as part of an extensive export drive—they had Paris agents for many years—and one can occasionally pick up, in this country, these foreign souvenirs, identifiable as Mauchline-made by their workmanship. I have seen no examples of the transfer ware they are said to have exported to Australia.

I have in my collection souvenirs decorated with 41 different views of places in the Burns Country. All are prints except for one photograph of the Auld Brig o' Doon by Archibald Brown, a Mauchline man who opened the Caledonian Box-works in Lanark in 1866 and used his own photographs to decorate his products. In weight of numbers and variety of engravings, the Burns shrines rank thus: The Cottage where Burns was born (eight different views of the exterior and three of the interior), the Monument (10) and Alloway Kirk (four). There are also pieces with views of: the Auld Brig o' Doon, Scene on the Doon, the Twa Brigs o' Ayr and Tam o' Shanter and Souter Johnnie (in their familiar effigies).

Engravings of Mauchline and neigh-

bourhood make a pleasant series: the house in the village where Burns and Jean Armour lived after their marriage, Nanse Tinnock's, Mossgiel, Ballochmyle and the nearby Ballochmyle Viaduct (completed in 1845) with an early engine chuffing across. Other Mauchline views are: High Street, New Road (where the Smiths' had their box-works) and Barskimming House and Netherplace.

Comparatively rare today are examples of a lithograph bust portrait of Burns (after Nasmyth) used by the Smiths, either singly (as on a brooch) or flanked by Burns association engravings (as on a volume of Burns's poems). Even rarer are copies of the small *Scottish Keepsake* (subtitled *The Songs of the Ayrshire Bard*) published by the Smiths for sale in wooden covers.

As elsewhere in Scotland, the Victorian passion for named "Association" and "relic" woods found a ready response in the Smiths' production for the Burns Country, with "Wood Grown on the Banks of the Doon" and (much less common) "Wood Grown on the Banks of the Ayr". I have a piece made of "Wood which Grew within the Railing of the Burns Monument"—could association be more tenuous?

I have found scepticism in Ayrshire about the genuineness of the Doon and Ayr woods, probably unjustified considering how many small souvenirs could be got of one tree trunk. In any case, most of the anonymous sycamore, the Smiths' staple raw material, was blown timber collected in various parts of Ayrshire and carefully matured at the box-works.

Unusual Mauchline association/relic woods are: "Wood grown in Gavin Hamilton's garden" and "Wood from the house in Mauchline which was the first home of Robert Burns and Jean Armour after their wedding in 1788" (both light oak), and my favourite (on a memorandum book which bears an

engraving of Mossgiel) described thus: "During the residence of Burns at Mossgiel and for 40 years afterwards the House was sheltered from the East and West Winds by two rows of hawthorn trees from the Wood of which this Memo Book is warranted to have been made."

With the new market for cheap souvenirs came an extension of the range of the Smiths' production. Andrew once said they were making "every article you can almost conceive it possible to make". My own, admittedly extensive, collection contains over 100 different types of article, many of which can be sub-divided into different designs—books, boxes, games and toys, household articles, knitting and sewing accessories, personal articles, trinket-holders, writing accessories and one unclassifiable gavel showing signs of use. Every article has an immediately identifiable purpose, even the miniature wheelbarrow and a miniature cradle (for dressing-table odds and ends). In every way the Smiths were attuned to the domestic spirit of their age.

In 1862 Andrew Smith built himself a new house—with the uncompromising name of Box Villa—in Barskimming Road, Mauchline, clearly minded to enjoy the fruits of his industry. Four years later William's Springfield Villa, in Townhead, was ready for him and his wife and their six children. Then misfortunes crowded in, thick and fast.

On May 23, 1867 William died after a short illness, aged only 40. On January 13, 1869 his wife died. On June 10 Andrew lost his wife Agnes, whom he had married in Tarbolton in 1821 while still a hone-maker. Andrew survived her by less than three weeks.

At this juncture the natural successor as head of W. & A. Smith would have been Andrew's last surviving son James, who had trained as a box-maker. James, however, died in 1875 without apparently having taken any share, financial

or managerial, in the business, probably because of poor health—he died of “phthisis” after a year’s illness. At this juncture the family were fortunate to have in their employment, a Mauchline man David McQueen, who had entered Andrew Smith’s employment as a clerk in 1867.

McQueen became Manager of the Mauchline box-works in 1876, while George Smith was in charge in Birmingham (and appears to have been chief proprietor, the other being William Smith’s trustees). Between them McQueen and George Smith held the business together adequately, without breaking much new ground. McQueen continued as works manager, and family man of business in everything short of legal matters, until 1887. William Smith, Andrew’s grandson, then took over at the age of 25.

Substantially, this last of the box-making Smiths also conducted a holding operation, particularly until the death of his Birmingham second-cousin in 1902, and the closing of the Birmingham branch in 1904, left him in sole charge. In the last decade of the old, and the first of the new, century the fancy wood-ware trade was in a decline which swept away successively Wilson & Amphlet and John Davidson & Sons, the two other Mauchline box-works, and Mackenzie & Meikle, Brown’s successors at the Caledonian Works in Lanark.

It has been suggested that an upsurge in German competition was responsible for the decline of the industry in Scotland. A much more relevant cause was the postcard craze, which reached its incredible peak in the early 1900s. But the simple explanation was that public taste was now increasingly sophisticated. I have been told in Ayrshire that the last William, a bachelor and independent of the box-works for his livelihood, let things slide. This may have been true in his later years in business, but before 1914 he does seem to have tried

his hand at diversification, probably with some success. Unfortunately he lacked the inventiveness and commercial acumen so pronounced in his grandfather and father.

The business, though diminishing, survived the first war. A fire in the late 1920s destroyed the Smiths’ eight tartan-ruling machines and stopped their own production of tartan paper. A second fire in 1933 was the end of the road for William, at 72. After prolonged hesitation he sold out to three local men, and W. & A. Smith (1937) Ltd. was formed. The business promised well, and employed about a dozen men and six women. But the capital for new machinery was not forthcoming; the firm went into liquidation.

The stock and machinery were sold, and the name of W. & A. Smith disappeared after 114 years. So too did the possibility of reviving an industry whose products are now very much to the taste of an age which has just enough sense to see the stupidity of cocking snooks at the Victorians.

---

## Art Competition 1976

Prizewinners were as follow and in addition twenty-four Certificates of Merit were awarded:—

1st—Robert Nicholson, St. Cuthbert’s School, Hutchison Crossway, Edinburgh.

2nd—Ian Penman, Alloway Primary School, Alloway.

3rd—Ruth Pelham, Dean Park Primary School, Balerno, Midlothian.

4th—Diane Thomson, Sanday School, Sanday, Orkney.

5th—Neil Gardiner, Glebe Primary School, Kirk Vennel, Irvine.