

REV JOHN SKINNER AUTHOR OF TULLOCHGORUM



Reverend John Skinner's Gravestone, Longside Churchyard

Scots churchmen throughout history seem to have been endowed with great literary ability, and Rev. John Skinner, born in Birse, but better known as the Episcopal minister of Longside, was no exception. He could write in Scots, English and Latin with equal skill. Yet the verses for which Skinner was remembered were those of *The Reel of Tullochgorum*, which no less than Robert Burns described as 'the best Scots sang I ever saw'.

Rev. Skinner, though brought up in a Presbyterian household, joined the Episcopal Church in the late 1730s. This was no small decision, as it cost him his schoolmaster's job. He had to move to Shetland securing the post of private tutor to the Sinclair family. Happily, it was also where John met his wife, Grissel Hunter. By the time their first son was born in 1742, the Skinners had returned to the mainland and John had been ordained at Longside. These were dangerous times, however, as government troops attacked all Episcopal churches and manses, believing the whole denomination to be on the side of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Skinner himself was no enemy of the Protestant Hanoverian monarchy, yet this meant nothing to rapacious soldiers intent on destruction. In July 1746, following Culloden, a local informer brought the Redcoats to Longside; it was said she was seen exulting as Skinner's church was razed to the ground.

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With no church, the minister preached from the manse to small groups of his congregation sitting in different rooms or standing in the garden, all to evade the legal restrictions against Episcopal services. In 1753, again due to this particular female informer, Rev. Skinner found himself imprisoned for six months at Old Aberdeen. It is little surprise considering he wrote scurrilous verses against his persecutor, describing her as a 'shrine-destroying Jezebel', after the Pagan queen of Israel. In 1760 things began to improve; George III was far more tolerant of the Scottish Episcopalians, leaving Skinner to continue his ministry in peace.

Tullochgorum, which contains the lines 'Let Whig and Tory all agree', represents John Skinner's amazing capacity for tolerance, but also his wit against the proud and foolish. The composition originated after a hot debate at the house of his friend, Mrs Montgomery in Ellon, who, exasperated with her guests, begged Skinner to write words to what was a popular fiddle tune. She is immortalised in the opening stanza 'Come gie's a sang, Montgomery cried/ And lay your disputes all aside.' Skinner makes clear his distaste for those who would be 'oppression's tool' and declares 'May envy gnaw his rotten soul/ And discontent devour him.' He lived to see his church freed from persecution, yet experienced the sorrow of outliving his beloved Grissel, who died aged 80. 86-year-old John died peacefully on June 16, 1807 in Aberdeen, surrounded by his family.