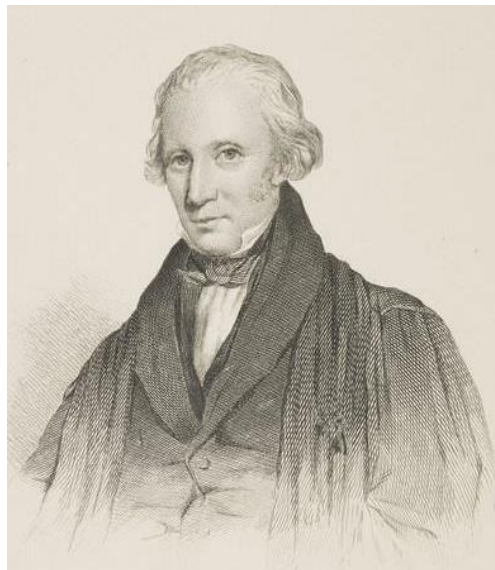


William Tennant, 16.05.1784 – 14.10.1848



'William Tennant',
Francis Croll (1827 - 1854),
National Galleries Scotland

William Tennant was born in Anstruther, the son of Alexander Tennant, merchant and farmer, and Anna Watson. He lost the use of both feet in childhood and used crutches throughout his life.

After attending the burgh school in Anstruther, where he was a contemporary of Thomas Chalmers, he studied at St Andrews University for two years, but was forced to leave early for financial reasons. For a time he acted as clerk to his brother Alexander, a corn factor. Owing to a crisis in business his brother disappeared, and Tennant suffered a short period of imprisonment for his brother's debts.

Tennant was a committed student of languages and while at St Andrews, created verse translations and a Scottish ballad, 'The Anster Concert' (1811). With *Anster Fair*, published anonymously in 1812 by William Cockburn in Anstruther, Tennant instantly achieved fame. Based on the Fife folksong 'Maggie Lauder', it combines local folk tradition with Italian elements drawn principally from Tasso's *Orlando Furioso*, and is composed in the style of a mock epic. The poem was incredibly well-received, and six editions were published in the author's lifetime.

Tennant's father's house had long been a focal point for gatherings of visitors and townsfolk with literary interests and Tennant's own literary aspirations were encouraged by this atmosphere. In 1813 he formed, along with Captain Charles Gray, Matthew Conolly, and others, the 'Anstruther Musomanik Society'. The main purpose of the society was to recite verse, much of which was composed expressly for the meetings. Honorary members included James Hogg and Sir Walter Scott.

In 1813, Tennant was appointed parish schoolmaster of Dunino, five miles from St Andrews. The close proximity of the university and its library gave him the opportunity not only to develop his Hebrew scholarship, but also to gain a knowledge of Arabic, Syriac, and Persian. In 1816, he became schoolmaster at Lasswade, Midlothian. In 1819, the year in which his edition of Allan Ramsay's poems was published, he was elected teacher of

classical and oriental languages at the Dollar Academy, Clackmannanshire, and held the post with distinction until 1834, when he was appointed professor of Hebrew and oriental languages in St Mary's College, St Andrews, where Tennant established a reputation for being a talented and well-liked lecturer.

None of Tennant's later literary work, however, lived up to the initial promise of '*Anster Fair*'. In 1822 he published '*The Thane of Fife*', in 1823 '*Cardinal Beaton*', a tragedy in five acts, and in 1825 '*John Baliol*', a historical drama. His mock epic of 1827, '*Papistry Storm'd, or, The Dingin Doon o' the Cathedral*' was written in Scots. He also published a number of works which reflected his interest in oriental languages, including fictional and educational works, literary discussion and translations.

William Tennant retired, owing to ill health, in 1848, but continued to write and to research. He died, unmarried, at Devon Grove, Clackmannanshire, and was buried at Anstruther where an obelisk monument with a Latin inscription was raised to his memory.