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# ROBERT BURNS AND HIS MYTH



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*An Inaugural Lecture delivered on 10th December, 1970 at the  
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**A** WART, whether on the nose or on any part of the body would seem to be no more remarkable than some of the other physical oddities which appear on most of us, including, I suspect, even Venus herself. To Oliver Cromwell, however, despite his other apparently greater considerations, the wart—and even the pimple, were not to be neglected. You remember the threat to his portrait-painter:

‘Mr. Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it.’

Realism, as so expressed, is a dangerous thought, for pimples and even warts tend to come and go, and when one has to advise students and others about authors it is difficult to decide how important are the warts and pimples, how relevant is the life to the works. Sometimes ‘difficult’ passages can be more deeply appreciated if the circumstances under which they were written are explained. But recently critics and biographers seem to have given such support to Cromwell’s realism, that the pimples and warts, the ‘peculiarities,’ aberrations and apparent or latent perversions have so blemished the features of their subject that it is difficult to find the character behind the measles-like mask, and one wonders how the poet or novelist ever managed to write how and what he did.

Sometimes the victim escapes, and the number of his warts (and where on his person they were) will never be known. Shakespeare is the obvious example; it is unlikely that his personal history will now ever be revealed, however many tombs are opened up. And does it matter? His plays tell much, and for those not content with them, every year on 23rd April a solemn procession will march through the streets of Stratford-on-Avon, with international flags flying on either side, to everyone’s satisfaction, and, I imagine, to the concealed delight of the ghosts who once wrote *Hamlet* (and now that St. George has been discredited he need fear no competition).

Shakespeare's secret is his own, but at the other extreme Robert Burns insists on birthday greetings:

'Our monarch's hindmost year but ane  
Was five-and-twenty days begun  
'Twas then a blast o' Janwar' Win'  
Blew hansel in on Robin.'

So around January 25th, preparations for the 'Immortal Memory' are made around the world from Tokyo to Auchtermuchty, from Auckland through Toronto and Washington to Kirkcudbright. Cleveland's 'ubiquitous Scot' and his descendants may originally have been responsible but now cargoes of haggises are flown out of Scotland to all parts, regardless of expense.

How did it all happen? There is no literary parallel. Every year, irrespective of climate or conditions, the Scots and their followers get ready; all inhibitions are discarded and the kilt is taken out of moth-balls — a garment Burns never wore. His songs are sung, his 'homely' wit repeated and his eighteenth century clichés framed in the Scots dialect achieve their annual living moments of humour and depth.

The haggis must be solemnly introduced in a way that must make the gourmets of the Sunday papers envious:

'Fair fa' ye honest sonsie face  
Ye chieftain o' the pudden race . . .'

The evening of liberation will end, as the company jumps around singing Auld Lang Syne to a tune that Burns did not choose, muddling the words that he was so careful to rewrite, and misunderstanding the theme of a song which is one of reunion of old friends and not one of farewell.

However I suppose it is as good a way of ending a party as any other.

Burn's myth has many parts and the first was self-created when he published his extraordinary first volume of poems. Many Scottish villages had their own rhymesters who amalgamated the task of town-crier with that of the local gossip-columnist. Burns

1 Burns own note on this line is 'Jan. 25th 1759 the date of my Bardship's vital existence' (*There was a lad*).

very quickly seemed to be more and when he published he aimed to be not the village but the county poet, the 'Ayrshire Poet.' In his Preface he writes:

'Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule; he sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around, in his and their native language.'

He continues:

'He begs his readers, particularly the Learned and the Polite, who may honour him with a perusal, that they will make every allowance for Education and Circumstances!'

What were these 'Circumstances.' and his English is surprisingly 'correct'? When Robert was born in 1759 (the year when General Wolfe captured Quebec), his father, an exile from the north, was a market-gardener in the village of Alloway outside Ayr, on the West coast of Scotland. A typical Scot he wanted to preserve the 'independence' of his family and seven years later he decided to become a farmer, and Robert grew up in misery and poverty. His brother wrote later:

'For several years butcher's meat was a stranger in the house . . . [Robert] at the age of thirteen assisted in threshing . . . and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm . . . I doubt not but the hard labour and sorrow of this period . . . was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits with which Robert was often afflicted through his whole life' . . . He had 'a dull headache which was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night-time.'

A significant comment, and not many years later he had an attack of rheumatic fever.

Trouble came after twelve years; the landlord died and his executors wanted outstanding debts to be settled. Somehow the Burns family got out, took a larger farm and remained there until the father's death when all was in confusion and involved in law-suits. With the help of a lawyer friend Robert and Gilbert managed to take on yet another farm to protect the widow and younger children.

The Burns' family and their biographers insist that bad landlords, wicked agents, bad weather (a favourite one with farmers) ruined their prospects, and farming was difficult if you had not the means of improvement. I am going to be heretical and say the Burns' family were bad farmers and extremely inefficient business people. Robert seems to have made two attempts to escape; at the age of fifteen he was sent down to a nearby village to learn mathematics. Then he fell in love and the girl next door

'overset my Trigonometry and set me off in a tangent from the sphere of my studies.'\*

When he was twenty-three he went off to learn the flax-dressing trade and greater disaster followed. 'His partner' was a thief who burnt the house down through drunkenness. It was clear by temperament and constitution Robert was no farmer however industriously the rest of the family worked. He would work twice as hard as normal for a few hours, and then give up and retire to read a book.

The lack of Education? While in the village of Alloway he received a solid rudimentary education from an intelligent young student in a school instituted by his father and neighbours:

'Though I cost the schoolmaster some thrashings, I made an excellent English scholar; and against the years of ten or eleven, I was absolutely a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles.'

After they moved to their first farm he had largely to depend on his father for the rest of his schooling. William Burness was determined that his children should not be illiterates and Robert read an odd collection. He writes of this period:

'My knowledge of ancient story was gathered from Salmon's and Guthrie's geographical grammars; my knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator. — These, with Pope's works, some plays of Shakespeare, Tull and Dickson on Agriculture, The Pantheon, Locke's Essay on the human understanding, Stackhouse's history of the bible, Justice's British Gardiner's directory,

\* cf. Appendix. Most of the quotations concerning Burns' early life which follow are from his letter to Dr. Moore.

Boyle's lectures, Allan Ramsay's works, Taylor's scripture doctrine of original sin, a select Collection of English songs, and Hervey's meditation had been the extent of my reading. — The Collection of Songs was my *vade mecum* — I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. — I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is.—'

When Robert was twenty-three and the family had made their next move he came into contact with a larger community in the villages of Tarbolton and Mauchline. He read 'with an avidity scarcely to be equalled' all the important or popular eighteenth century poets. He joined the Freemasons (in preparation for going into trade) and so began to meet lawyers, gentlemen farmers and minor gentry with useful and wider connections. His ability to write sharp and piercing satirical verses against the more strict Calvinist ministers of the county enhanced his reputation. He circulated copies of 'Holy Willie's Prayer,' a perfect minor masterpiece of satire, and we must wonder how such a man of limited range of human experience could delve so deeply into the personality of a religious hypocrite, and so subtly expose the weaknesses of his doctrines. Poetry was his particular interest, and the two eighteenth century Scottish poets, Ramsay and Fergusson excited him:

'I strung anew my wildly-sounding rustic Lyre  
with emulating vigour.'

No longer the casual verifier, he acquired a mastery of Scottish verse and idiom that had been part of the Scottish literary tradition since the fifteenth century; the 'sardonic element,' the bitter laughter that went beyond the deliberate middle-class satire of the earlier eighteenth century was revived. Perhaps it required a small active community with its local gossip-writer, and religious and political controversies to allow a man such a man as Burns to fight and against which to pit his wits. He could assimilate and make use of his reading in an unexpected and forward-looking literary manner that made him envied among his local rivals. In two years his poetical development was remarkable: he took hold of eighteenth century poetry and thought tossed them around, often with complete irreverence, humanised it, added an instinctive musical appreciation of old Scottish stanzas which had only been

stiffly used by his predecessors and so produced the most liberal statement of the period. Professor W. P. Ker noted:

'... his poetry is struck out in full perfection all of one piece, in one volume; his rendering of the world to which he belonged. It was Mauchline for religion and other humours; for politics it was nothing smaller than the United Kingdom under King George, with the example of Chatham to encourage the king's ministers. There is nothing like it anywhere for complete security of vision and of utterance; and this was attained by the man of genius through the school to which he naturally belonged, the conventional and artificial form of Scottish eighteenth-century poetry.'

It had been a varied century; Allan Ramsay had produced anthologies of English and Scottish verse. Gray's *Elegy* had helped him in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night,' Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and *Sentimental Journey* encouraged the idea of sensibility. Beattie's *The Minstrel* that was to have such an influence on his own myth had already told of the 'natural man' and his link with the verse of nature.

In July 1786 appeared 'Poems chiefly in the Scottish Dialect by Robert Burns printed by John Wilson, printer Kilmarmock, price 3/-. Six hundred and twelve copies were printed. 350 copies were subscribed for and the rest were sold within a few weeks of publication.

The poems were published when Burns' private affairs were in confusion. He had signed over his share of the farm to his brother, and had ideas of emigrating to Jamaica. He had gone through a 'common law' form of marriage with Jean Armour but her Father repudiated the contract, although Jean was pregnant, and was endeavouring to claim compensation from the bankrupt Poet.\*

After the success of his poems he changed his plans and decided to try for a second edition in Edinburgh. Before his arrival at the end of November the first review appeared in *The Edinburgh Magazine* (by Robert Anderson) which admired the power of his 'native

\* Incidentally it is not part of my theme to linger on Burns' love affairs; they are not mythical, but all too real in 18th century fashion. He was attracted to the 'lassies,' and they at every degree were attracted by him (If not, Heaven preserve them from his pen), and he enjoyed being a father under any circumstances. (cont'd.)

genius,' and thought he should not be judged 'by the fastidious rules of art' (Whatever they are!)

'but those who admire the exertions of untutored fancy, and are blind to many faults for the sake of numberless beauties, his poems will afford singular gratification.'

The expression 'untutored fancy' was in line with the character he created in the poems. It was hardly fashionable to use an archaic Scottish dialect in verse or to address the King and the Devil with equal familiarity, intimacy and lack of reverence. Or mockingly and sardonically to censure the Prime Minister and his Opposition for their human weaknesses. If the House of Commons insisted on increasing the price of whisky by imposing taxes on the Scottish Distillers this was a serious and national affair! All this was in the collection. More importantly in the political and religious satires, Burns himself intrudes. This was possibly the most 'personal' volume to appear during a century which was somewhat reticent in self-exposure. He appears directly in most of the poems. He sees himself as the Poet of Ayrshire; his Muse is no classical figure but has 'A wildly-witty, rustic grace' and;

'Down flow'd her robe, a tartan sheen,  
Till half a leg was scrimply seen;  
And such a led! my bonie Jean  
Could only peer it;'

His Scottishness was his boast; he extols the lowliness of his position, he panders to the notions of contemporary 'simplicity' and 'sensibility' by such pictures of poverty and pride as in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', when the family meets together and

'... the supper crowns their simple board,  
The healsome porritch, chief o' Scotia's food.'

A sentiment that George Crabbe could not endorse! Family prayers follow and the party breaks up. But the sentiment remains:

'From scenes like these, old Scotia's grandeur springs,  
That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad:  
Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,  
"An honest man's the noblest work of God."'

This may not be Burns at his best; the most prominent feature of this 'personal' poet was his determination to define the instinctive inspiration of the poet. He was no Professor Beattie dreaming of the ideal poet of nature in 'The Minstrel' but the simple poet who lived the natural life; poverty was near, but poetry would sustain him; he might have to beg, but poetry would be a comfort. He had had no education, but no matter —

'What's a' your jargon o' your Schools,  
Your Latin names for horns an' stools?  
If honest Nature made you fools,  
What sairs your grammars? [serves]

Often through this volume comes the sentimental romantic plea that was to be so influential and almost to define the attitude of poets for many years:

'Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,  
That's a' the learning I desire;  
Then, tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire  
At pleugh or cart  
My Muse, tho' hamely in attire,  
May touch the heart'

'The heart,' sensibility, the 'feeling' rather than the 'rational' aspect of the natural man was his appeal:

'If happiness hae not his seat  
An' centre in the breast  
We may be wise, or rich or great,  
But never can be blest!  
Nae treasures nor pleasures  
Could make us happy lang;  
The heart ay's the part ay  
That makes us right or wrong.'

In such lines the farmer's son artfully and deliberately imposed his self-created myth of the Ayrshire ploughman on the world at large, disguising his debt to the spirit of Sterne, Beattie, and his Scottish predecessor, Fergusson. 'Untutored' yes, illiterate, no.

Within two weeks of his arrival in Edinburgh, subscription lists for a new edition were opened. He was fêted by the Masons, and introduced to the influential Caledonian Hunt Club. The social season was in full swing, and this ploughman who could write

verses became the novelty of the period (the previous year Lunardi with his flights in a balloon had been the excitement). One elderly gossip (Mrs. Cockburn) wrote to a friend:

'The town is at present agog with the 'Ploughman Poet'; he receives adulation with native dignity, and is the very figure of his profession — strong but coarse; yet has the most enthusiastic heart of love. He has seen the Duchess of Gordon, and all the gay world.'

He was hailed as 'Caledonia's Bard,' a promotion he was anxious to accept while maintaining his character of the poet inspired by nature alone. His first reviewer wrote later:

'It was, I know, a part of the machinery, as he called it of his poetical character to pass for an illiterate ploughman who wrote from pure inspiration. When I pointed out some evident traces of poetical imitation in his verses, privately, he readily acknowledged his obligations, and even admitted the advantages he enjoyed in poetical composition from the (*copia verborum*) the command of phraseology, which the knowledge and use of the English and Scottish dialects afforded him; but in company he did not suffer his pretensions to pure inspiration to be challenged, and it was seldom done where it might be supposed to affect the success of the subscription for his *Poems*.'

He need not have worried about his subscriptions. Henry MacKenzie, the much respected novelist and critic, ended his now well-known review (*The Lounger*, December 1786) with an appeal:

'I trust . . . that I do my country no more than justice when I suppose her ready to stretch out her hand to cherish and retain this native Poet, whose "woodnotes wild" possess so much excellence. To repair the wrongs of suffering or neglected merit; to call forth genius from the obscurity in which it had pined indignant, and place it where it may profit or delight the world; these are exertions which give to wealth an enviable superiority, to greatness and to patronage a laudable pride.'

When the new and enlarged edition appeared in April 1787 much to Burns' annoyance thirty-eight pages were devoted to the names of the wide variety of subscribers: Earls and Duchesses were mingled

with ship's carpenters and corsetmakers, and 2,800 copies out of 3,000 were sold before publication. The volume was dedicated 'To the Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt' and the Preface struck a new note:

'A Scottish Bard, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his Country's service, where shall he so properly look for patronage as to the illustrious Names of his native Land;'

A direct invitation! He had acquired national status. His new publication was a success; London publishers were interested, and he was likely to make at least about £800.

Where did he stand as a Man and a Poet? He was caught in his own myth. As a Poet he had gone beyond the stage of rhyming 'for fun,' his literary horizon had widened and he could not return to the 'manners-painting strain' of Mauchline, neither was he conscious of what should be his next step. He needed if not a forward-looking model, at least a guide who could share some of his own ideas and hopes. He had numerous advisers, but it was one of the dry periods in English poetry, and most of his literary Professors looked backwards; several suggested he should write a long rustic poem after the manner of Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* or try a Scottish drama after the style of Home's *The Douglas*.

More deliberately he was advised to write in English, for the theories of 'taste,' 'refinement' and 'sensibility' were popular. Many Scots felt with Dr. Johnson that the Scottish language was 'vulgar,' (though Johnson had no objection to his own midland accent,) and though they spoke Scots the *literati* wrote English even though it was often ponderous and strictly "correct," reminiscent of the pulpit rather than a creation of a natural written style.

As a man he clearly hoped with Mr. Micawber that something would turn up, to prevent him returning to the difficulties of farming. Did he hope that he might emulate 'Ossian' Macpherson and become a Member of Parliament? As a national poet did he hope for a pension to free him from the fears of poverty? It might have been, but in his new preface he had bravely written 'I was bred to the plough, and am independent.' The attitude of his patrons seems to have been that, as this inspired genius came from the

plough, looked like a countryman though his breadth of conversation surprised many, then he should return to the soil for further inspiration. He had created this myth and now he was caught in its fiction.

In the summer and autumn he made 'leisurely pilgrimages' to historic spots and great houses in the South and North of Scotland in the character of 'Caledonia's Bard.' He was sumptuously entertained and honoured wherever he went. I suspect it was not just a sentimental journey but he was hoping for some concrete help for his future.

Nothing happened, his novelty had worn off and at the beginning of the year 1788 he was exploring the idea of joining the hated Customs and Excise — or taking a farm. He did both and in June he was sitting in the farm-house of Ellisland near Dumfries which he had leased from a banker friend, Patrick Miller, one of his Edinburgh patrons. He had an Excise commission in his pocket. Jean Armour was now acknowledged as his wife. It was a sad anti-climax:

'By banks of Nith I sat and wept'

A most pathetic cry from a defiant character!

In little over a year (1789) he decided to combine farming with being an Excise Officer. It may have seemed a practical sensible move, but it was far too strenuous. Within four months he is writing ominously:

'I have . . . been ill . . . the whole winter. An incessant headache, depression of spirits, and all the truly miserable consequences of a deranged nervous system, have made dreadful havoc of my health and peace.'

and later

'Besides . . . my farm business, I ride on my Excise matters at least 200 miles every week. . . . I have not by any means given up the Muses.'

These years almost to his death were glossed over by his early biographers and it was suggested that he had 'fallen,' his success was only momentary. Of course he was a sadder and a wiser man and he now had family responsibilities. Many writers have found that the second volume after a successful first is very difficult.

But he was exploring possibilities by creating a library for himself. When he was in Edinburgh he met among his more bohemian friends a young engraver James Johnson who was anxious to preserve the tunes and songs of Scotland. Burns took over and virtually became the editor of at least four volumes of *The Scottish Musical Museum*. His was a work of great scholarship, and let it be said, instinct. He wrote songs to fit old tunes, so that they seemed authentic, he completed fragments where often only the chorus perhaps was intact, and he 'cleaned' up bawdy songs (e.g. 'Green grow the rashes o' and gave them a native simplicity. He himself contributed more than 200 songs to the collection.

In 1792 he was asked to contribute to another collection of Scots songs by one George Thomson, a much more ambitious man, who wanted to anglicise both words and tunes. Burns helped him but grew very angry when his words and tunes were arbitrarily altered, Thomson wanted his songs to be concert-platform pieces and he is responsible for ruining many of Burns' songs. Later he offered Beethoven twenty-pounds to compose an overture to Burns' 'cantata' *The Jolly Beggars*, a rollicking collection of songs by wandering ex-soldiers and their 'doxies.' Walter Scott and Matthew Arnold considered this Burns' best poem, but I would depart from such distinguished company to assert that his masterpiece is 'Tam o' Shanter' written at the end of 1790. I have heard it said that 'Tam' and 'The Ancient Mariner' are the two most perfect pieces of imagination during the period. I agree.

Finally, with his name already on the promotion list in the Excise he gave up the farm and moved into the town of Dumfries. Promotion came a few months later (February 1792). Now it seemed that he might relax; his visitors were many and frequent. His advice was sought by many budding authors and he added more poems for the new edition of his poems (1793). His correspondence, which he enjoyed, became more extensive. He shared the enthusiasm of many for the principles behind the French Revolution, until he was rebuked by the Excise and Customs for conduct unbecoming to a Government Officer. However, when the war with France started he helped to form the Dumfries Volunteers.

He was soon appointed acting supervisor of Excise at Dumfries 'a department that occupies his every hour of the day.' Meanwhile

as the war progressed and famine was rampant in the area the cost of living went up and Burns' income went down. Early in 1796 he writes of the famine:

'Many days my family, and hundreds of other families, are absolutely without one grain of meal;'

The dread note comes just before the end of 1795:

'I became myself the victim of a most severe Rheumatic fever, and long the die spun doubtful; until after many weeks of a sick-bed it seems to have turned up more life.'

He never recovered. He was sent down to 'sea-bathing quarters' on the exposed Solway Firth. He returned to die worrying about his debts on 21st July 1796. Four days later he was given a grand funeral with full military honours with all the local dignitaries in attendance.

On the same day his widow gave birth to his last child (Maxwell).

Even though the nation was at war with a threat of invasion imminent his death created a wide-spread sensation. I would say that now began the type of myth that can never be controlled when journalists and the instincts of man to believe the worst take over.

The first obituary notice was in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* and was copied by many journals north and south of the border. It praised his genius, with a most discordant note:

'The public . . . will learn with regret that his extraordinary endowments were accompanied with frailties which rendered them useless to himself and family.'

This notice started countless rumours and speculations that were soon accepted as facts. What were these 'frailties?' 'Frailty thy name is woman?' Hardly an accusation strong enough to have killed him! Radical opinions? He had been exculpated by the Excise and was a member of the Dumfries Volunteers. One vice was left: drunkardness.

His Executors were worried over the financial position and decided quickly to launch an appeal on behalf of the widow and her family. The result was disappointing; only £400 was raised in Scotland and £700 from Scots in England. One of the villains was

a hack-journalist, Robert Heron, who quickly circulated a memoir as though he had first-hand intimate knowledge, detailing the rise of the 'Ayrshire Ploughman' and concluding with his fall in Dumfries amidst debaucheries, extravagances and continued drunkardness (Heron later died in the bankrupt's jail). Many rose up in anger, but the passion of attack is often more attractive than the rational argument of defence.

With this disappointing response the next best course seemed to be to publish the *Life and Works* for the benefit of the family. Who could do it? Eventually Dr. James Currie announced he was willing. Nowadays the story would be different; some generous American University would make such an offer for the manuscripts that his family could live in comfort! And the whole posthumous history of Burns would be different.

A spirited defence of Currie has recently been put forward, but I am not convinced. He was a minor landlord from Dumfriesshire who had settled in Liverpool. A writer of medical treatises, he was often hampered in his rounds by recurrent attacks of rheumatic fever, but he did not recognise the same symptoms in Burns' papers. It was not until more than a century later that an eminent physician (Sir James Crichton Browne) worked through Burns' medical case-book (as revealed in his and Gilbert's letters) and firmly concluded that he died of endocarditis.

Currie was bewildered by the confused mass of papers, songs, poems, letters and fragments. For Burns never threw anything away. As he tried to read his way through them, Currie was alarmed to discover that the author of *The Cotter's Saturday Night* was not the simple gentle sentimentalist that he had supposed. He also had received Heron's memoir. And most importantly he was an enthusiastic temperance reformer. Without any real understanding of the poems, regarding the songs as worthless, and not knowing many of the people involved in the letters, influenced by Heron and his own temperance the result could not be satisfactory or comprehensive.

He decided to follow Dr. Johnson's method of biography; to write the life first and then to compose a critique of the works. A passage in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* had a great influence on his determination to introduce Burns' 'vices' but Currie ignored

the typically Johnsonian contradictions. It is worth recalling the conversation between Boswell and Johnson, and remembering that Johnson knew how to adapt his knowledge to his own prejudices:

‘Talking of biography, I said, in writing a life, a man’s peculiarities should be mentioned, because they mark his character. Johnson. “Sir, there is no doubt as to peculiarities: the question is, whether a man’s vices should be mentioned; for instance, whether it should be mentioned that Addison and Parnell drank too freely: for people will probably more easily indulge in drinking from knowing this; so that more ill may be done by the example than good by telling the whole truth.” Here was an instance of his varying from himself in talk; for when Lord Hailes and he sat one morning calmly conversing in my house at Edinburgh, I well remember that Dr. Johnson maintained, that “If a man is to write *A Panegyrick*, he may keep vices out of sight; but if he professes to write *A Life*, he must represent it really as it was:” and when I objected to the danger of telling that Parnell drank to excess, he said, that “it would produce an instructive caution to avoid drinking, when it was seen, that even the learning and genius of Parnell could be debased by it”’.

Currie was no Dr. Johnson, and so much of the result is an indictment of alcohol, a moral lesson was to be learnt. It seems incredible that any doctor who had access to Burns’ papers and could see that his latest letters were as clear as ever, and that the last songs had not lost their lyrical quality should write:

‘. . . Perpetually stimulated by alcohol in one or other of its various forms the inordinate actions of the circulating system became at last habitual.’

He attempted to mitigate the damage by explaining that ‘Genius’ must be allowed to have its own peculiarities and, by definition, invariably has some weakness.

His four-volume edition was published in 1800. The issue of 2000 copies was quickly sold, and a reprint came out in the following year. Apart from American and Irish publications five further editions met a continuous demand until the end of the copyright

in 1814. All his readers did not approve and Charles Lamb, an early admirer of Burns, was not alone when he wrote:

'I have only been able to procure the first volume which contains his life — very confusedly and badly written and interspersed with dull pathological and medical discussions.

Meanwhile interest in, and curiosity about Burns, was increasing, particularly in England, and Currie's volumes were not enough.

So more and more writers and journalists arrived in Scotland to collect anecdotes; the volumes grew, and presumably as the drinks flowed, any imaginative Scot would produce a good if impossible story! Even the boy who was kicked by one of the soldiers lining the route of the poet's funeral found in later years that his experience could be rewarding. Burns the man, was retreating into a confused and shadowy myth.

Quite quickly Scotland began to close its ranks against the English in particular. Coleridge was only one of those who attacked the 'illustrious . . . Scotch nobility' for neglecting their national poet. It was a good opportunity for the English to reproach the barbaric North for its neglect of genius. Soon after the poet's death Mrs. Burns was told that a memorial would be erected over his grave. Then one of his prominent friends (Maria Riddell) heard that subscriptions were to be asked from outside Scotland, and she withdrew her support. Eventually Mrs. Burns ordered a simple stone, disliking an unmarked grave. But as the 'Burnomania' grew that was not good enough, and amid the native red-stone or granite monuments of the churchyard it was decided to construct a white domed Grecian temple trimmed with thistles. Inside was to be a sculptured tableau of his Muse crowning the Bard at the plough. His original grave was too small, so the coffin had to be moved — despite his widow's protest. At her own death the tomb was again opened and with no Shakespearean curse upon it the coffin was opened and his head examined by a phrenologist.

Scotland seems to have been on the defensive. Perhaps to salve the national conscience or as a gesture of defiance to England. The determination to honour Burns publicly grew. In 1820 James Boswell's son, Alexander, began a subscription to erect a monument at Alloway, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Ayr, Paisley, Dumfries, Glasgow

— and New York followed. Much to Thomas Carlyle's disgust who thought the money involved should have gone to the family.

The first big celebration dinner was held in Edinburgh in 1816. It began at 6 o'clock in the evening and finished in the early hours of the next morning. Walter Scott was a prominent guest.

Some years later (1844) Burns' sons were honoured at Alloway amid large crowds with the Professor of Moral Philosophy\* of Edinburgh University ecstatically pronouncing his devotion and enthusiastically dancing on the dinner-table.

Perhaps the climax of this mythical fantasy was reached in the centenary year of his birth 1859 when an elaborate exhibition of 'relics' was held in the Crystal Palace. How all the exhibits could have been housed in any of Burns homes was not explained.

The Scottish character is paradoxical; it might and, as arranged by John Knox, should have rejected this 'fallen poet.' Perhaps John Knox did not know all aspects of his countrymen. The defence against England broke down slowly and many shared Charles Lamb's bewilderment at the contradictory attitude:

'I have always found that a true Scot resents your admiration of Burns (his compatriot) even more than he would your contempt of him. The latter he imputes to your "imperfect acquaintance with many of the words he uses;" and the same objection makes it a presumption in you to suppose that you can admire him!'

I doubt whether Burns can now be dislodged or that the Burns' Birthday Celebrations will cease; at least most of the audience have read some of his poems.

While Burns was being converted into a national hero, the poet was being acclaimed in England. He provided the example for many young poets with such lines already quoted, as 'Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire' and his general romanticised freedom from the dictates of 'the Establishment.' While remaining fervent in his patriotism he answered the questions of many 'rebels,' in the middle

\*Professor Wilson, *alias* Christopher North.

of a war. Wordsworth, (before his lamentably moralising poems, one beginning 'Too frail to keep the lofty vow' and the other 'To the Sons of Burns') had written more profitably:

'I mourned with thousands, but as one  
More deeply grieved, for he is gone  
Whose light I hailed when first it shone,  
And showed my youth  
How Verse may build a princely throne  
On humble truth.'

It would be good to reflect that Wordsworth and Burns could have helped each other. The *Lyrical Ballads* hardly suggest that much could have been understood between them. This is emphasised by Hallam Tennyson's account of the different reaction of his father, Alfred (1842), who delicately remarked:

'Read the exquisite songs of Burns . . . In shape, each of them has the perfection of the berry; in light the radiance of the dewdrop: you forget for its sake those stupid things, his serious pieces.'

At the same time Wordsworth praised Burns 'as the great genius who had brought Poetry back to Nature'; but ended

"Of course I refer to his serious efforts, such as the 'Cotter's Saturday Night'; those foolish little amatory songs of his one has to forget".

Wordsworth's regard was sincere in his own fashion; he and Dorothy arrived in Dumfries in 1803 (he wanted to pay his respects to Burns and Ossian). Mrs. Burns was tactfully away from home, but those intrepid travellers penetrated beyond the front door to note, with some apparent surprise, that her home

'was cleanly and neat in the inside, the stairs of stone scoured white.'

Keats was one of the few who did not intrude on Mrs. Burns' privacy. He made the pilgrimage with his friend Brown in a happy mood, and his fur-cap must have bewildered the natives of South-west Scotland. From his letters may I suggest that he enjoyed the wine of the country?

'My pulse is warm with thine own Barley-bree  
My head is light with pledging a great soul'

Burns would have approved, but at the tomb of Burns a more seriously typical note is struck:

'All is cold Beauty; pain is never done:  
For who has mind to relish, minos wise,  
The realm of Beauty, free from that dead hue  
Sickly imagination and sick pride  
Cast wan upon it! Burns! with honour due  
I oft have honoured thee. Great shadow, hide  
Thy face; I sin against thy native skies.'

They are wonderful lines from a Cockney to a Scot.

I would go further than Professor Ker and say that Burns moved the Eighteenth Century into the Nineteenth. If he and Wordsworth had met, much reciprocal help could have been given, but Burns was moving away from his 'serious pieces' and surely Keats and he should have met. He represented the uninhibited delight and romance of life and poetry, even when like Keats he knew his own life was coming to an end. A few years more and all would have been well —

When Scotland conscience-stricken was turning him into a national hero and Currie's followers were lamenting his 'frailties' the poet himself was becoming the representative of the age. He was the 'poet's poet' of the period; not in matter or language — they were his own, — but in freedom and liberty, in the idea of 'ae spark o' nature's life;' in his determinedly anti-academic approach, and in his general humanitarian attitude he represented something that now might be called 'romantic.'

Leigh Hunt, who faced his world squarely, wrote:

'A fervid, large-hearted, open-hearted, manly, un hypocritical, uncastrated edition of a human being — one who, though he could make a heaven for himself out of love and song, had anxious thoughts for the whole human race; and was Christian enough, like divine Uncle Toby, to wish the very devil himself out of his "den"'.  
'

It was the age of the devil, and even the aristocratic Shelley could not ignore him:

'And Burns, a Scottish peasant boy —  
His errors prove it — knew my joy  
More learned friend, than you.'

He may have been thinking of Milton's Satan, but Richard Le Gallienne maintained that

'Shelley's book-stilled gospel of Liberty would have been so much Greek and moonshine. Such a verse as

"A prince can mak a belted knight  
A marquis, duke, and a' that;  
But an honest man's aboon his might"

has had more influence in the spread of the democratic ideas than the whole of Shelley's poetry.'

I wonder whether Burns would have wanted it that way. However Whitman, who hated 'Burns' Nichts' felt that he 'would have been at home in the Western United States, and probably become eminent there.'

It is difficult to catch this man — 'democrat' was not a good word in his day. Clearly whichever poems were personally preferred he could not be ignored. Keats enjoyed his spirit, and I suspect his power of musical language. Wordsworth liked, in traditional eighteenth century fashion, his 'serious' or moralising poems, Scott considered that the song 'Ae fond kiss, and then we sever' contained 'the essence of a thousand love songs' (The first poet I think, to value the songs so highly before Tennyson).

The new century seemed to start cheerfully; The *Lyrical Ballads* had both friends and enemies. Robert Bloomfield, aided by the Burns' tradition, sold nearly 26,000 copies of his lengthy *The Farmer's Boy*. But it was not enough, and later Byron uttered tirades against the decadence of his contemporaries:

'What! must deserted Poesy still weep  
Where her last hopes with pious Cowper sleep?  
Unless, perchance from his cold bier she turns  
To deck the turf that wraps her minstrel Burns'

I suppose Hazlitt felt much the same way when he wrote:

'He did not "create a soul under the ribs of death" by tinkling siren sounds, or by piling up centos of poetic diction; but for the artificial flowers of poetry he plucked the daisy under his feet; and a field-mouse, hurrying from its ruined dwelling' could inspire him with the sentiments of terror and pity.

He was a rebel, poetically, socially and politically and those who succeeded were possibly more fortunate in their environment and circumstances. The nineteenth century is littered with 'peasant' poets, miners, milkmaids, surfacemen, and ploughmen. Scotland was afraid that another Burns might be around, and so for a short time they all had their period of glory.

Not from Scotland but from Northampton, England, came the only true successor; John Clare shared Burns' adoration of nature and 'the light from Heaven'. Carlyle considered that 'three gates of deliverance . . . were open to Burns, — clear poetical activity, madness or death'. Clare was to have madness thrust upon him and how unfortunate the 'peasant' English poets have been, but he enjoyed Burns' stanzas and metres; he seemed to understand:

'He loved the brook's soft sound,  
The swallows swimming by,  
He loved the daisy covered ground,  
The cloud-bedappled sky.  
To him the dismal storm appeared  
The very voice of God.!

Another poet that Burns could profitably have met, for Clare had the 'spark o' Nature's fire.'

No poet of the nineteenth century could ignore his fresh air and enthusiasm that made him, the first poet to define one aspect of the word 'romantic' in its contemporary sense. He may have missed the moment when 'Great spirits now on earth are sojourning' but many years later Browning lamented in 'The Lost Leader'

'Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us  
Burns, Shelley, were with us — they  
watch from their graves'.

Artistically Burns' was a lonely life, and it is made more poignant because so many were waiting around the corner. He remained a powerful figure, and he strove for hope and articulation in years of solitary creation, and he might have cried with Keats in answer to his critics:

'O Muse thou knowest what prison  
Of flesh and bones curbs and confines and frets  
Our Spirit's wings: despondency besets

Our Pillows and the fresh tomorrow morn  
Seems to give forth its light in very scorn  
Of our dull uninspired snail paced lives'

For neither Burns nor Keats were their lives 'snail paced'. They rushed unnaturally; Burns was thirty-six when he died, but only ten of those were spent in the glare of notoriety. The Burns myth of the self-created poet persisted, he gave an impetus to the young poets of the succeeding generations 'the heart's ay the part ay'. It worked and the literary myth became a reality until the end of the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria was amused and chuckled over 'Tam o' Shanter', presumably with the help of her faithful John Brown, but Elizabeth Barrett Browning was writing:

'And Burns, with pungent passionings  
Set in his eyes: deep lyric springs  
Are of the fire-mounted issuings.'

It is myth that has helped English literature although Burns himself may have suffered, and I wish that the Scots would allow Burns to stand as a literary figure rather than a symbol of their suppressed desires. However I do not think we should be too critical of the 'Burns Nichts.' It is not often that a man of letters becomes a National Hero, and it is less dangerous to have a Poet on a pedestal than some I can think of. All the damage he might do is to protest against the price of Scotch whisky and to appreciate the charms of the opposite sex.

Beneath their dour exterior the Scots are a sentimental race, often urged by 'pulse's maddening play'. Consider their heroes; William Wallace, a gigantic and remote symbol of Scotland's fight against the English. Burns is more human. Robert Bruce is as much noted for his observation of spiders as his victory at Bannockburn. Burns' concern over upsetting a Mouse's nest is more commonly understood. Bonnie Prince Charlie shares some of Burns' character; he may have been more handsome, but they both 'lo'ed the lassies O'.

Certainly, Mary Queen of Scots was more beautiful than Burns. As an indication of how sentimental, romantic and impossible I believe my countrymen to be, let me quote a remark made by a Dumfries elder statesman sitting in one of Burns' 'howffs' or

tavern some years ago. He had been talking to me as though the Poet was likely to come in at any moment. Then he heaved a sigh, and with a faraway look in his eyes, breathed out 'Ay, if only Mary had met Burns, losh, what a difference there wud hae been in the history o' Scotland'.

We both sighed.

## APPENDIX

The following letter was written by Burns in response to a request from Dr. Moore to tell him of his early life. It is a most revealing statement, and justifies Dr. Johnson's idea that 'every man's life may be best written by himself'. Burns is writing deliberately and to some extent 'showing off' his literary knowledge in accordance with the best eighteenth century tradition of letter-writing. But it is more; it reveals with natural dignity, power, imaginative detachment and humour how his life had gone to that date. Self-pity is never apparent. In a century of letter-writers, this must stand as a 'precious' example of natural cleverness, with complete command of English prose.

Dr. Moore was a well-known Scottish doctor of the period, a travel-writer, and novelist. His most famous novel, *Zeluco*, (1789), gave Byron a figure on which to model Childe Harold. Moore was also the father of General John Moore of Corunna ('Not a sound was heard, not a funeral note . . .').

The Miss Williams mentioned, is Helen Maria, a minor poetess who achieved some fame around the same time as Burns' first edition. Later she became more notorious as the mistress of Imlay (who deserted Mary Wollstonecraft) and as a wildly misguided supporter of the French revolutionaries who did not appreciate her enthusiasm.

August 1787.

(Dr. John Moore, London).

Sir,

For some months past I have been rambling over the country, partly on account of some little business I have to settle in various places; but of late I have been confined with some lingering complaints originating as I take it in the stomach. — To divert my spirits a little in this miserable fog of Ennui, I have taken a whim to give you a history of MYSELF. — My name has made a small noise in the country; you have done me the honor to interest yourself very warmly in my behalf; and I think a faithful account of,

what character of a man I am, and how I come by that character, may perhaps amuse you in an idle moment—I will give you an honest narrative, though I know it will be at the expense of frequently being laughed at; for I assure you, Sir, I have, like Solomon whose character, excepting the trifling affair of WISDOM, I sometimes think I resemble, I have, I say, like him “Turned my eye to behold Madness and Folly;” and like him too, frequently shaken hands with their intoxicating friendship—In the very polite letter Miss Williams did me the honour to write me, she tells me you have got a complaint in your eyes—I pray God that it may be removed; for considering that lady and you are my common friends, you will probably employ her to read this letter; and then goodnight to that esteem with which she was pleased to honour the Scotch Bard.—After you have perused these pages, should you think them trifling and impertinent, I only beg leave to tell you that the poor Author wrote them under some very twitching qualms of conscience, that, perhaps he was doing what he ought not to do: a predicament he has more than once been in before.—

I have not the most distant pretensions to what the pye-coated guardians of escutcheons call, A Gentleman.—When at Edinr last winter, I got acquainted in the Herald’s Office, and looking through that granary of Honors I therefore found almost every name in the kingdom; but for me,

“ . . . My ancient but ignoble blood  
Has crept thro’ Scoundrels ever since the flood”—

Gules, Purple, Argent &c. quite disowned me—My Fathers rented land of the noble Kieths of Marshal, and had the honor to share their fate—I do not use the word, Honour, with any reference to Political principles; loyal and disloyal I take to be merely relative terms in that ancient and formidable court known in this Country by the name of CLUB-LAW.—Those who dare welcome Ruin and shake hands with Infamy for what they sincerely believe to be the casue of their God or their King.—“Brutus and Cassius are honourable men”—mention this circumstance because it threw my father on the world at large; where after many years’ wanderings and sojournings, he pick up a pretty large quantity of Observation and Experience, to which I am indebted for most of my little pretensions to wisdom—I have met with few who

understood "Men, their manners and their ways" equal to him; but stubborn, ungainly Integrity, and headlong, ungovernable Irrascibility are disqualifying circumstances: consequently I was born a very poor man's son.—For the first six or seven years of my life, my father was gardiner to a worthy gentleman of small estate in the neighbourhood of Ayr. — Had my father continued in that situation, I must have marched off to be one of the little underlings about a farm-house; but it was his dearest wish and prayer to have it in his power to keep his children under his own eye till they could discern between good and evil; so with the assistance of his generous Master my father ventured on a small farm in his estate.—At these years I was by no means a favourite with any body.—I was a good deal noted for a retentive memory, a, stubborn, sturdy something in my disposition, and an enthusiastic idiot piety.—I say idiot piety, because I was then but a child.—Though I cost the schoolmaster some thrashings, I made an excellent English scholar; and against the years of ten or eleven, I was absolutely a Critic in substantives, verbs and particles.—In my infant and boyish days too, I owed much to an old Maid of my Mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity and superstition.—She had, I suppose, the largest collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, enchanted towers, dragons and other trumpery.—This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles, I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of Philosophy to shake off these idle terrors.—The earliest thing of Composition that I recollect taking pleasure in was, The vision of Mirza and a hymn of Addison's beginning.—"How are Thy servants blest, O Lord!" I particularly remember one half-stanza which was music to my boyish ear —

"For though in dreadful whirls we hung,  
"High on the broken wave" . . .

I met with these pieces in Mas(s)on's English Collection, one of my school-books.—The two first books I ever read in private, and which gave me more pleasure than any two books I ever read

again, were, the life of Hannibal and the history of Sir William Wallace. — Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest. — Polemical divinity about this time was putting the country half-mad; and I, ambitious of shining in conversation parties on Sundays between sermons, funerals, &c. used in a few years more to puzzle Calvinism with so much heat and indiscretion that I raised a hue and cry of heresy against me which has not ceased to this hour. —

My vicinity to Ayr was of great advantage to me. — My social disposition, when not checked some modification of spited pride, like our catechism definition of Infinitude, was “without bounds or limits.” — I formed many connections with other Youngkers who possessed superior advantages; the youngling Actors who were busy with the rehearsal of PARTS in which they were shortly to appear on that STAGE where, Alas! I was destined to drudge behind the SCENES. — It is not commonly at these green years that the young Noblesse and Gentry have a just sense of the immense distance between them and their ragged Play-fellows. — It takes a few dashes into the world to give the young Great man that proper, decent, unnoticing disregard for the poor, insignificant, stupid devils, the mechanics and peasantry around him; who perhaps were born in the same village. — My young Superiours never insulted the clouterly appearance of my ploughboy carcass, the two extremes of which were often exposed to all the inclemencies of all the seasons. — They would give me stray volumes of books; among them, even then, I could pick up some observations: and ONE, whose heart I am sure not even the MURNY BEGUM'S scenes have tainted, helped me to a little French. — Parting with these, my young friends and benefactors, as they dropped off for the east or west Indies, was often to me a sore affliction; but I was soon called to more serious evils. — My father's generous Master died; the farm proved a ruinous bargain; and, to clench the curse, we fell into the hands of a Factor who sat for the picture I have drawn of one in my Tale of two dogs. — My father was advanced in life when he married; I was the eldest of

seven children; and he, worn out by early hardship, was unfit for labour. — My father's spirit was soon irritated, but not easily broken — There was a freedom in his lease in two years more, and to weather these two years we retrenched expences. — We lived very poorly; I was a dextrous Ploughman for my years; and the next eldest to me was a brother, who could drive the plough very well and help me to thrash. — A Novel-Writer might perhaps have viewed these scenes with some satisfaction, but so did not I: my indignation yet boils at the recollection of the scoundrel tyrant's insolent, threatening epistles, which used to set us all in tears.—

This kind of life, the cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing toil of a galley-slave, brought me to my sixteenth year; a little before which period I first committed the sin of RHYME. — You know our country custom of coupling a man and woman together as Partners in the labors of Harvest. — In my fifteenth autumn, my Partner was a bewitching creature who just counted an autumn less. — My scarcity of English denies me the power of doing her justice in that language; but you know the Scotch idiom, She was a bonie, sweet, sonsie lass. — In short, she altogether unwittingly to herself, initiated me in a certain delicious Passion, which in spite of acid Disappointment, gin-horse Prudence and bookworm Philosophy, I hold to be the first of human joys, our dearest pleasure here below. — How she caught the contagion I can't say; you medical folks talk much of infection by breathing the same air, the touch, &c. but I never expressly told her that I loved her. — Indeed I did not well know myself, why I liked so much to loiter behind with her, when returning in the evening from our labors; why the tones of her voice made my heartstrings thrill like an Eolian harp; and particularly, why my pulse beat such a furious rattan when I looked and fingered over her hand, to pick out the nettle-strings and thistles. — Among her other love-inspiring qualifications, she sung sweetly; and 'twas her favourite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle in rhyme. — I was not so presumptive as to imagine that I could make verses like printed ones, composed by men who had Greek and Latin: but my girl sung a song which was said to be composed by a small country laird's son, on one of his father's maids, with whom he was in love; and I saw no reason why I might not rhyme

as well as he, for excepting shearing sheep and casting peats, his father living in the moors, he had no more Scholarcraft than I had.—

Thus with me began Love and Poesy; which at times have been my only, and till within this last twelvemonth have been my highest enjoyment. — My father struggled on till he reached the freedom in his lease, when he entered on a larger farm about ten miles farther in the country. — The nature of the bargain was such as as to throw a little ready money in his hand at the commencement, otherwise the affair would have been impracticable. — For four years we lived comfortably here; but a lawsuit between him and his Landlord commencing, after three years tossing and whirling in the vortex of Litigation, my father was just saved from absorption in a jail by phthisical consumption, which after two years promises, kindly stept in and snatch'd him away. — “To where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary be at rest.”

It is during this climacterick that my little story is most eventful. — I was, at the beginning of this period, perhaps the most un-gainly, awkward being in the parish. — No Solitaire was less acquainted with the ways of the world. — My knowledge of ancient story was gathered from Salmon's and Guthrie's geographical grammars; my knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I got from the Spectator. — These, with Pope's works, some plays of Shakespear, Tull and Dickson on Agriculture, The Pantheon, Locke's Essay on the human understanding, Stackhouse's history of the bible, Justice's British Gardiner's directory, Boyle's lecture, Allan Ramsay's works, Taylor's scripture doctrine of origin sin, a select Collection of English songs, and Hervey's meditation had been the extent of my reading. — The Collection of Songs was my vade mecum. — pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse; carefully noting the true tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. — I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is. —

In my seventeenth year, to give my manners a brush, I went to a country dancing school. — My father had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was, what to this hour I repent, in absolute defiance of his commands. — My father, as I said before, was the sport of strong passions: from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe was

one cause of that dissipation which marked my future years. — I only say, Dissipation, comparative with the strictness and sobriety of Presbyterean country life; for though the will-o'-wisp meteors of thoughtless Whim were almost the sole lights of my path, yet early ingrained Piety and Virtue never failed to point me out the line of Innocence. — The great misfortune of my life was, never to have AN AIM. — I had felt early some strings of Ambition, but they were the blind gropings of Homer's Cyclops round the walls of his cave: I saw my father's situation entailed on me perpetual labor. — The only two doors by which I could enter the fields of fortune were, the most niggardly economy, or the little chicaning art of bargain-making: the first is so contracted an aperture, I never could squeeze myself into it; the last, I always hated the contamination of the threshold. — Thus, abandoned of aim or view in life; with a strong appetite for sociability, as well from native hilarity as from a pride of observation and remark; a constitutional hypochondriac taint which made me fly solitude; add to all these incentives to social life, my reputation for bookish knowledge, a certain wild, logical talent, and a strength of thought something like the rudiments of good sense, made me generally a welcome guest; so 'tis no great wonder that always "where two or three were met together, there was I in the midst of them". — But far beyond all the other impulses of my heart was, un penchant à l'adorable moitié du genre humain. — My heart was completely tinder, and was eternally lighted up by some Goddess or other: and like every warfare in this world, I was sometimes crowded with success, and sometimes mortified with defeat. — At the plough, scythe or reap-hook I feared no competitor, and set Want at defiance; and as I never cared farther for my labors than while I was in actual exercise, I spent the evening in the way after my own heart. — A country lad rarely carried on an amour without an assisting confidant. — I possessed a curiosity, zeal and intrepid dexterity in these matters which recommended me a proper Second in duels of that kind; and I dare say, I felt as much pleasure at being in the secret of half the amours in the parish, as ever did Premier at knowing the intrigues of half the courts of Europe. —

The very goosefeather in my hand seems instinctively to know the well-worn path of my imagination, the favourite theme of my song; and is with difficulty restrained from giving you a couple of

paragraphs on the amours of my Compeers, the humble Inmates of the farm-house and cottage; but the grave sons of Science, Ambition or Avarice baptize these things by the name of Follies. — To the sons and daughters of labor and poverty they are matters of the most serious nature; to them, the ardent hope, the stolen interview, the tender farewell, are the greatest and most delicious part of their enjoyments.—

Another circumstance in my life which made very considerable alterations in my mind and manners was, I spent my seventeenth summer on a smuggling (coast) a good distance from home at a noted school, to learn Mensuration, Surveying, Dialling, &c. in which I made a pretty good progress. — But I made greater progress in the knowledge of mankind. — The contraband trade was at the time very successful; scenes of swaggering riot and roaring dissipation were as yet new to me; and I was no enemy to social life. — Here, though I learned to look unconcernedly on a large tavern-bill, and mix without fear in a drunken squabble, yet I went on with a high hand in my Geometry; till the sun entered Virgo, a month which is always a carnival in my bosom, a charming Fillette who lived next door to the school overset my Trigonometry, and set me off in a tangent from the sphere of my studies. — struggled on with my Sines and Co-sines for a few days more; but altitude, I met with my Angel

. . . “Like Proserpine gathering flowers,  
Herself a fairer flower” . . .

It was vain to think of doing any more good at school. — The remaining week I staid, I did nothing but erase the faculties of my soul about her, or steal out to meet with her; and the two last nights of my stay in the country, had sleep been a mortal sin, I was innocent. —

I returned home very considerably improved. — My reading was enlarged with the very important addition of Thomson’s and Shenstone’s works; I had seen mankind in a new phasis; and I engaged several of my schoolfellows to keep up a literary correspondence with me. — This last helped me much on in composition. — I had met with a collection of letters by the Wits of Queen Ann’s reign, and I pored over them most devoutly. I kept copies of any of my own letters that pleased me, and a compari-

son between them and the composition of most of my correspondents flattered my vanity. — I carried this whim so far that though I had not three farthings worth of business in the world, yet every post brought me as many letters as if I had been a broad, plodding son of Daybook & Ledger. —

My life flowed on much in the same tenor till my twenty third year. — *Vive l'amour et vive la bagatelle*, were my sole principles of action. — The addition of two more Authors to my library gave me great pleasure; Sterne and McKenzie. — Tristram Shandy and the Man of Feeling were my bosom favourites. — Poesy was still a darling walk for my mind, but 'twas only the humour of the hour. — I had usually half a dozen or more pieces on hand; I took up one or other as it suited the momentary tone of the mind, and dismissed it as it bordered on fatigue. — My Passions when once they were lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme; and then conning over my verses, like a spell, soothed all into quiet. — None of the rhymes of those days are in print, except Winter, a dirge, the eldest of my printed pieces; The death of Poor Mailie, John Barleycorn, And songs first, second and third: song second was the ebullition of that passion which ended the forementioned school-business. —

My twenty third year was to me an important era. — Partly thro' whim, and partly that I wished to set about doing something in life, I joined with a flax-dresser in a neighbouring town, to learn his trade and carry on the business of manufacturing and retailing flax. — This turned out a sadly unlucky affair. — My Partner was a scoundrel of the first water who made money by the mystery of thieving; and to finish the whole, while we were giving a welcoming carousal to the New Year, our shop, by the drunken carelessness of my Partner's wife, took fire and was burnt to ashes; and left me like a true Poet, not worth sixpence. — I was obliged to give up business; the clouds of misfortune were gathering thick round my father's head, the darkest of which was, he was visibly far gone in a consumption; and to crown all, a belle-fille whom I adored and who had pledged her soul to meet me in the field of matrimony, jilted me with peculiar circumstances of mortification. — The finishing evil that brought up the rear of this infernal file was my hypochondriac complaint being irritated to such a degree, that for

three months I was in (*a*) diseased state of body and mind, scarcely to be envied by the hopeless wretches who have just got their mitimus, "Depart from me, ye Cursed," —

From this adventure I learned something of a town-life. — But the principal thing which gave my mind a turn was, I formed a bosom-friendship with a young fellow, the first created being I had ever seen, but a hapless son of misfortune. — He was the son of a plain mechanic; but a great Man in the neighbourhood taking him under his patronage gave him a genteel education with a view to bettering his situation in life. — The Patron dieing just as he was ready to launch forth into the world, the poor fellow in despair went to sea; where after a variety of good and bad fortune, a little before I was acquainted with him, he had been set ashore by an American Privateer on the wild coast of Connaught, stript of every thing. — I cannot quit this poor fellow's story without adding that he is at this moment Captain of a large westindiaman belonging to the Thames. —

This gentleman's mind was fraught with courage, independence, Magnanimity, and every noble, manly virtue. — I loved him, I admired him, to a degree of enthusiasm; and I strove to imitate him. — In some measure I succeeded: I had the pride before, but he taught it to flow in proper channels. — His knowledge of the world was vastly superior to mine, and I was all attention to learn. — He was the only man I ever saw who was a greater fool than myself when woman was the presiding star; but he spoke of a certain fashionable failing with levity, which hitherto I had regarded with horror. — Here his friendship did me a mischief; and the consequence was, that soon after I resumed the plough, I wrote the WELCOME inclosed. — My reading was only increased by two stray volumes of Pamela, and one of Ferdinand Count Fathom, which gave me some idea of Novels. — Rhyme, except some religious pieces which are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour. — When my father died, his all went among the rapacious hell-hounds that growl in the kennel of justice; but we made a shift to scrape a little money in the family amongst us, with which, to keep us together, my brother and I took a neighbouring farm. — My brother wanted my harebrained

imagination as well as my social and amorous madness, but in good sense and every sober qualification he was far my superior. —

I entered on this farm with a full resolution, "Come, go to, I will be wise!". — I read farming books; I calculated crops; I attended markets; and in short, in spite of "The devil, the world and the flesh," I believe I would have been a wise man; but the first year from unfortunately buying in bad seed, the second from a late harvest, we lost half of both our crops: this upset all my wisdom, and I returned "Like the dog to his vomit, and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire". —

I now began to be known in the neighbourhood as a maker of rhymes. — The first of my poetic offspring that saw the light was a burlesque lamentation on a quarrel between two revd. Calvinists, both of them dramatis personae in my Holy Fair. — I had an idea myself that the piece had some merit; but to prevent the worst, I gave a copy of it to a friend who was very fond of these things, and told him I could not guess who was the Author of it, but that I thought it pretty clever. — With a certain side of both clergy and laity it met with a roar of applause. — Holy Willie's Prayer next made its appearance, and alarmed the kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers. Unluckily for me, my idle wanderings led me, on another side, point-blank within the reach of their heaviest metal. — This is the unfortunate story alluded to in my printed poem, The Lament. — 'Twas a shocking affair, which I cannot yet bear to recollect; and had very nearly given [me] one or two of the principal qualifications for a place among those who have lost the chart and mistake the reckoning of Rationality. — I gave up my part of the farm to my brother, as in truth it was only nominally mine; and made what little preparation was in my power for Jamaica. — Before leaving my native country for ever, I resolved to publish my Poems. — I weighed my productions as impartially as in my power; I thought they had merit; and 'twas a delicious idea that I would be called a clever fellow, even though it should never reach my ears a poor Negro-driver, or perhaps a victim to that inhospitable climate gone to the world of Spirits. — I can truly say that pauvre Inconnu as I then was, I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and my works as I have at this moment. — It [is] ever my opinion that the great,

unhappy mistakes and blunders, both in a rational and religious point of view, of which we see thousands daily guilty, are owing to their ignorance, or mistaken notions of themselves. — To know myself had been all along my constant study. — weighed myself alone; I balanced myself with others; I watched every means of information how much ground I occupied both as a Man and as a Poet: I studied assiduously Nature's DESIGN where she seem'd to have intended the various LIGHTS and SHADES in my character. — I was pretty sure my Poems would meet with some applause; but at the worst, the roar of the Atlantic would deafen the voice of Censure, and the novelty of west-Indian scenes make me forget Neglect. —

I threw off six hundred copies, of which I had got subscriptions for about three hundred and fifty. — My vanity was highly gratified by the reception I met with from the Publick; besides pocketing, all expenses deducted, near twenty pounds. — This last came very seasonable, as I was about to indent myself for want of money to pay my freight. — So soon as I was master of nine guineas, the price of wafting me to the torrid zone, I bespoke a passage in the very first ship that was to sail, for

“Hungry wind [ruin] had me in the wind” . . .

I had for some time been sculking from covert to covert under all the terrors of a Jail; as some ill-advised, ungrateful people had uncoupled the merciless legal Pack at my heels. — I had taken the last farewell of my few friends; my chest was on the road to Greenock; I had composed my last song I should ever measure in Caledonia, “The gloomy night is gathering fast,” when a letter from Dr. Blacklock to a friend of mine overthrew all my schemes by rousing my poetic ambition. — The Doctor belonged to a set of Critics for whose applause I had not even dared to hope. — His idea that I would meet with every encouragement for a second edition fired me so much that away I posted to Edinburgh without a single acquaintance in town, or a single letter of introduction in my pocket. — The baneful Star that had so long shed its blasting influence in my Zenith, for once made a revolution to the Nadir; and the providential care of a good God placed me under the patronage of one of his noblest creatures, the Earl of Glencairn: “Oublie moi, Grand Dieu, si jamais je l'oublie!”. —

I need relate no farther. — At Edinr. I was in a new world: I mingled among many classes of men, but all of them new to me; and I was all attention “to catch the manners living as they rise”. —

You can now, Sir, form a pretty near guess what sort of a Wight he is whom for some time you have honoured with your correspondence. — That Fancy & Whim, keen Sensibility and riotous Passions may still make him zig-zag in his future path of life, is far from being improbable; but come what will, I shall answer for him the most determinate integrity and honor; and though his evil star should again blaze in his meridian with tenfold more direful influence, he may reluctantly tax Friendship with Pity but no more. —

My most respectful Compliments to Miss Williams. — Her very elegant and friendly letter I cannot answer at present, as my presence is requisite in Edinburgh, and I set off tomorrow. —

If you will oblige me so highly and do me so much honor as now and then to drop me a letter, Please direct to me at Mauchline Ayrshire. —

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your ever grateful humble servant,

Robt. Burns

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