

Burns the Man, Burns the Poet:  
Critical Studies and Receptions of Scotland's National Bard

BY

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To Professor Claire Buck, who took on a project that was slightly outside her normal scope, and was extraordinarily generous with her time, advice, and expertise.

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## Introduction

Almost every critical work on Robert Burns begins with a declarative biographical statement. The context matters little. Some authors choose to describe the circumstances of his birth, others decide to provide a full character sketch, but biography is unquestionably central to understanding Scotland's "Bard." Roland Barthes' claim that "the author is dead" holds no weight in the scholastic and popular community, which dissects Burns's works two hundred and thirty years after their publication. Within these circles, the man and his work are often inseparable.

It is not a coincidence that Burns is often represented as "Scotland's Bard," a designation that carries significant nationalistic and artistic connotations. Katie Trumpener wrote an epochal study of bardism, concluding that "for nationalist antiquaries, the bard is the mouthpiece for a whole society, articulating its values, chronicling its history, and mourning the inconsolable tragedy of its collapse. English poets, in contrast imagine the bard... as an inspired, isolated, and peripatetic figure."<sup>1</sup> These distinctions are particularly useful in understanding the way that Burns was dissected and constructed to suit the differing needs of audiences in the period following his death. For Scots, who wished to represent Burns as a uniquely Scottish property, the poet represented the views of all those who fought against unification in the first century after the 1707 Act of Union. For the English, Burns became an "inspired" figure, who represented an the perfect "British" Scot, someone who accepted the union and whose artistic output derived from this acceptance.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, representing Burns became an inherently nationalist struggle, reflecting the political views of competing parties. Burns

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<sup>1</sup> Trumpener, Kate. *Bardic Nationalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. 6.

wrote at a unique moment, when Scots and the English were attempting to assimilate into a cohesive “British” whole. Burns became an intermediary figure in this struggle. He was assigned a role in this conflict by partisans of both unionist and nationalist narratives. Over the past two hundred and fifty years, from the period immediately following his death until the present day, partisans have continually redefined his biography and poetry as a rhetorical device to strengthen their argument.

This thesis operates as a critical reception study and focuses specifically on issues surrounding Scottish identity, which were represented as foundational components of Burns’s life story and artistic output. The process that led to Burns being declared “Scotland’s National Bard” was never inevitable. Jane Tompkins contends, “critics, the context in which the critic reads, and the text that is interpreted are simultaneous features of a single historical moment.”<sup>2</sup> This distinction is particularly useful when comprehending the responses that have shaped public opinion on Burns. Unquestionably, critical responses and representations have imprinted themselves and shaped public consciousness of Burns’s work. The mutable nature of these representations has resulted in a constantly shifting portrait of the poet. As a direct result of the complicated critical dialogue surrounding Burns, at individual moments following his death, he became representative of something much larger than his poetic oeuvre would have suggested; for better or worse, he became illustrative of the successes and failures of Scotland’s assimilation into Great Britain.

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<sup>2</sup> Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. 20.

## Background

When Burns was born on January 25, 1759,<sup>3</sup> Scotland largely lagged behind their southern neighbors in many key economic areas. The census of 1755 showed that Scotland had 1,255,663 inhabitants, 59,000 of whom lived in Burns's native county of Ayrshire, located about seventy miles southwest of Edinburgh.<sup>4</sup> The largest of the county's three towns was Kilmarnock, whose population numbered fewer than 4,500. The society was largely rural and poverty-stricken.

The agricultural revolution was slow in coming to Burns's Scotland. Writing in 1784, Andrew Wight claimed, "the bulk of our farmers are creeping in the beaten path of miserable husbandry, without knowing better or even wishing to know better."<sup>5</sup> Tenant farming was the pervasive economic model; Burns's father was a tenant farmer until his death. Farms were leased for extremely short periods, usually two to four years, discouraging any attempt at growing sustainable crops.<sup>6</sup> Instead, farmers raced to eke out whatever meagre harvest they could without regard to long-term consequences to the land. As a direct result, the land was, according to a government report, "like a piece of stripped cloth with banks full of weeds and ridges of corn in constant succession from one end of a field to another."<sup>7</sup> The most commonly planted grain was bere, a coarse kind of barley, and grey oats, notorious for their poor yield.

Politically, Scotland was having great difficulty exerting influence in the new political order. Since the 1707 Act of Union, the nation's parliamentary delegation had

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for a full timeline of Burns's life.

<sup>4</sup> McIntyre, Ian. *Dirt and Deity: A Life of Robert Burns*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers 1995. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Wight, Andrew. *Present State of Husbandry in Sctoalnd, Extracted from Reports Made to the Commissioners of the Annexed Estates Vol I*. Edinburgh: William Creech 1784. vii.

<sup>6</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, James. *General View of the Agriculture in the County of Perth, with Observations on the Means of Improvements*. Glasgow: A. Napier 1811. 72.

remained at forty-five members out of a total body of five hundred and fifty-eight, a proportion that would not change until 1832. Fewer than one out of three hundred residents of Ayrshire possessed the right to vote in the 1780s.<sup>8</sup> Scotland was dominantly Presbyterian; the most important political organization of the period was not Parliament, but the Scottish kirk which operated on a both a local and national level in the form of parishes and a General Assembly.

Though most Scottish peasants lived and worked in a relatively restricted environment, international events did have an impact through the imposition of taxes. In the year of Burns's birth, Europe was at war with the War of Austrian Succession expanding into a worldwide struggle through proxy conflicts in colonial territories. Though Burns's life was short (he died in 1796 at the age of thirty-seven), he lived through an enormously influential period in the history of British Empire. By the time that he died, the American colonies had seceded, France had regained its stature as Britain's foremost political rival, and democratic ideals were percolating throughout the European continent. Burns's political views would produce reams of interpretation, as scholars and biographers attempted to bend his responses to contemporary events to their own rhetorical aims.

### **Methodology**

This thesis is divided into three chapters, designed to enhance the readers' understanding of critical responses to Burns and the significance of those responses. The first chapter deals directly with biographical depictions in the centuries following his death. Understanding the different visions of Burns that circulated is a necessary component of comprehending his work, since this work is almost never read in a vacuum.

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<sup>8</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 7.

Seemingly the only thing that all Burns enthusiasts can agree upon is the shoddiness of previous generations' work. Writing in 2001, academics Patrick Scott Hogg and Andrew Noble claimed, "Burns's biographers and editors have been, as we shall see, either anodyne or, in some early instances, deliberately mendacious... a whole segment of late-enlightenment liberal, Scottish culture of which Burns was an integral part was, as far as possible, obliterated from the national memory."<sup>9</sup> Their harshness is representative. Indeed, the pair were themselves attacked on the grounds of misrepresenting Burns's legacy, setting off a firestorm of controversy that still divides the academic community.

Ian McIntyre ascribes a quote from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* to Burns's biographers and critics, claiming that the statement, "when the legend conflicts with the facts, print the legend," could serve as Burns's epitaph.<sup>10</sup> James Mackay, writing a 1992 biography of Burns, stated, "I soon discovered that ninety per cent of [responses to Burns's work] merely reported uncritically the 'facts,' including a great many unsupported and unsupportable anecdotes, which appeared originally in Currie [1800], Cromek [1808], Lockhart [1824], and Cunningham [1832]."<sup>11</sup> The first chapter attempts to untangle the responses of Currie, Cromek, Lockhart, and others and critically examine how their representations of Burns's life stories shaped responses to his work. Though there is general acclimation that the influence of these early biographers is damaging, contemporary critics rarely go beyond condemnation to examine the influence of the earliest depictions of Burns's life.

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<sup>9</sup> Hogg, Patrick Scott and Noble, Andrew. *The Canongate Burns*. Edinburgh: Canongate Classics 2001. ix-x.

<sup>10</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, xv.

<sup>11</sup> Mackay, James. *Burns: A Biography of Robert Burns*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 1992. 14.



The first chapter, “Biographical Constructions of Burns,” delves into how early biographers represented his early life, allowing them to construct a “poet-ploughman” who served the rhetorical purposes of nineteenth-century unionists. “The Cottager’s Saturday Night,” a poem that was held up as one of the finest examples of Burns’s work throughout the nineteenth century, serves as a case study for the manner in which biographical descriptions of Burns directly impacted understandings of his creative work. Burns was popularly represented as an alcoholic in the years following his death. Though this claim has recently drawn scrutiny, it is now an accepted part of the poet’s mythos. Particularly in the nineteenth century, alcoholism was viewed as the common failing of genius. This process rendered outstanding intellectual talents “safe” for public consumption. The decision to portray Burns as an alcoholic had a lasting impact upon how his work was read by audiences.

The second chapter, “Romantic Entanglements,” deals with depictions of Burns’s love life. One of Burns’s favorite poetic subjects was love, and his three main inspirations - Jean Armour, Mary Campbell, and Agnes McLehose - each came to represent different aspects of his personality for biographers. Burns’s love poetry was inevitably read as expressions of his biographical narrative. Jean Armour, his legitimate wife, was largely neglected in early biographies. When she was invoked, it was usually as an attempt to portray Burns as a dedicated family man. The poet’s complicated relationship with his wife was shaped and reshaped to fit the needs of various biographers. For those that wished to portray Burns as a moral and moralizing figure, his relationship with his wife was above reproach. James Currie, Burns’s earliest biographer, took great pains to ascribe Burns’s poetic publication to his relationship with Jean. The next important

female figure in the Burns mythos is “Highland” Mary Campbell, who came to represent Burns’s relationship with Scottish Nationalism. Among biographers who wished to tie Burns to separatist political views, Campbell served as a conduit to a uniquely “Scottish” identity. Agnes McLehose, on the other hand, was viewed as a representative of Edinburgh’s “British” society. She served as a bridge between Burns and the upper-middle class, allowing the poet access into a conventional unionist narrative.

My third chapter, “Burns and Politics,” deals explicitly with Burns’s political poetry and responses to those poems. Burns wrote a number of poems sympathetic to the American Revolution, which were generally and wrongfully dismissed in the nineteenth century as shallow attempts to provoke audiences. By continually undermining Burns’s understanding of political events, unionist commentators were able to render political poems “safe” for public consumption. Many of Burns’s political works were heavily edited, demonstrating contemporary concerns surrounding his invocation of potentially seditious political sentiments. More broadly, Burns also dealt with democracy and liberty, two ideals that were anathema in Britain following the French Revolution. Depictions of Burns’s politics are inevitably representative of contemporary concerns; when democracy was viewed as an insidious force, Burns’s support for the subject was de-legitimized. When democratic sentiments came back into favor, he was once again allowed to embrace the concept by critics, who continually reshaped the political narratives surrounding the poet to fit the needs of their own era.

My thesis began with two main goals: to untangle the “why” of how Burns has been represented at different points in history and to grapple with how those representations have changed understandings of Burns, both as a biographical figure and

as a poet. As a general rule, responses to Burns can be divided into two camps, the British Unionists and the Scottish Nationalists. Unionists attempt to fit Burns into a cohesive narrative of British history, where the Scot successfully assimilates into British culture and embraces the union between Scotland and England politically and socially. Scottish nationalists are diametrically opposed to this view. They wish to represent Burns as a uniquely Scottish figure, who claims identity markers associated purely with the separate nation. Discussions of Burns have evolved into proxy wars for these two parties, as they compete to present the picture of Burns that best fits their narrative. Representations of Burns necessarily operate through different lenses, including biography and critical response. However, almost without exception, these responses are fundamentally political, and they have made both Burns the man and Burns the poet into a partisan figure.

## Chapter I: Biographical Constructions of Burns

Biographical myths have been an integral part of Robert Burns's legacy since he became known to the wider public in 1787 with the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition of his poetry. The frontispiece of this first edition began the work of mythologizing, with Burns claiming that "the poetic genius of my country found me... at the plough, and threw her inspiring mantle over me. She bade me sing... the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my native soil, in my native tongue; I tuned my wild, artless notes as she inspired."<sup>12</sup> With this wildly romanticized version of biographical background serving as many an individual's first encounter with the life story of Burns, it is perhaps little wonder that for the next two centuries, legends surrounding his birth, life, and death would proliferate and irrevocably change the public's perception of the poet.

In this short passage alone, readers had the material that would come to define Burns. He portrayed himself as "at the plough" and also bound with "the poetic genius of my country." Therefore, in his preface, Burns had successfully created a vision of rustic simplicity and Scottish nationalism that persists to this day. However, the reality of the situation was much more complicated. Far from being inspired at the plough to produce miraculously perfect naturalist poetry, Burns meticulously reworked his poems until they fit his vision. This vision was inspired by repeated exposure to acknowledged masters such as Alexander Pope, whose "Essay on Man" he quoted in early correspondence.<sup>13</sup>

It is little wonder that Burns's preface has subsequently been described as "one of the canniest exercises in literary self-promotion ever penned."<sup>14</sup> Burns was extremely

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<sup>12</sup> Burns, Robert. *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. Kilmarnock: Robert Burns 1786. i.

<sup>13</sup> Crawford, Robert. *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Prandi, Julie. *Poetry of the Self Taught*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008. 15.

self-conscious about the social image that he projected, particularly in the time period immediately surrounding the publication of his poems. By describing himself as an untutored ploughman, he accomplished a number of practical goals. First, he created an intriguing narrative that distinguished him from the torrent of literary producers that were flooding eighteenth-century Edinburgh with their work. Second, he created a different set of expectations for his poetry. By making himself distinct from the likes of Pope and Thomson, Burns was allowed to tread his own stylistic and thematic path. He could not be held to the standards of the past and was therefore judged on his own merit. As a direct result of his chosen method of marketing, critical reception was extremely kind, and almost all reviews mentioned his (fictitious) lack of literary and educational background as a central premise.

Different interpretations of Burns's biography have indisputably led to different readings of his oeuvre. Particularly during the nineteenth-century, which was a formative period for Burns scholarship,<sup>15</sup> biographers tended to shape their narrative of Burns's life to match their conception of what his poetry meant. For many, this required ignoring his more radical, unsettling works and the messier details of Burns's unique and occasionally sordid life story. Frequently, Burns's temporary romantic conquests were recast as visions of true love, fidelity, and beauty. These readings of the poet's life provided early audiences with a skewed framework within which to view the poet. Throughout the past two centuries, Burns's life story has evolved to suit audience's desires and demonstrates the malleable nature of Scotland's Bard.

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<sup>15</sup> The notion of "scholarship" must be placed in its proper cultural and academic context. Certainly early Burns "scholars" did not hold themselves to the same standards of professionalism and research as modern academics.

## Sources of Knowledge

The little concrete knowledge that biographers do possess concerning Burns's life comes almost exclusively from his letters. In 1931, American scholar John Delancey Ferguson, published a widely praised collection of Burns's correspondence, which was subsequently updated by G. Ross Roy in 1985. Roy claims that there are approximately 750 surviving Burns letters, the most notable of which is the autobiographical letter that Burns wrote to Dr. John Moore in 1787.<sup>16</sup> The letter is particularly notable for its account of Burns's early years, which would remain almost entirely obscured if it were not for the letter's existence. In the letter, Burns demonstrates the falsity of several concepts that would become key to his biographical myth, including his lack of formal reading:

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 get 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 Gardner's directory, Boyle's lectures, Allan Ramsay's works, Tayler's scripture doctrine of original sin, a select collection of English songs, and Hervey's meditations had been the extend of my reading.<sup>17</sup>

This is not the reading list of an uneducated ploughman. In fact, the extensive list is meant only to convey Burns's reading up to the age of 20, and his early poetry demonstrates his knowledge of unmentioned poets and authors, including Thomas Grey and William Shenstone.

Burns maintained regular and extensive correspondence with several figures, including his main editors James Johnson and George Thomson, as well as social

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<sup>16</sup>Roy, G. Ross. "Robert Burns: A Self Portrait." *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*. Ed. Donald Low (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.: 1975. 13.

<sup>17</sup>Roy, *Portrait*, 21.

acquaintances, such as Mrs. Frances Dunlop.<sup>18</sup> Collectively, the letters provide a unique perspective that would be used to frame later biographers' accounts of his life. Burns's letters to Thomson were first collected in the fourth volume of Dr. James Currie's hugely important biography of Burns's life.<sup>19</sup> Currie's work was first published in 1800 and proved to be immensely popular. Within four years, four editions of Currie's work had been published, and by 1820, the work was entering its eighth printing.<sup>20</sup> Currie's edition would eventually raise over £1200 for a Trust Fund established to ensure the well-being of Burns's wife and surviving children.<sup>21</sup> It is notable that the Edinburgh edition of Burns's poetry, which would prove the foundation of his later, widespread fame, would only bring the poet £450.

Currie's work has become intensely politicized in recent years, as his foundational role in establishing the myth of Burns has been discussed at length. Some, such as the authors of *The Canongate Burns*, find his representation of Burns appallingly inaccurate and tantamount to character assassination, especially with regards to his treatment of Burns's infidelities and alcoholism. Noble and Hogg claim, "Currie creates a situation in which, from now on, any conformist critical hack can and indeed, did, have the prescriptive power to censor any of Burns's poetry not conforming to that respectability which was the first line of defense of conservative political correctness."<sup>22</sup> More reasoned, academic approaches suggest that Currie was making the best of a difficult

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<sup>18</sup> Dunlop would prove to be one of the most important sources of knowledge about Burns following his death in 1796. The pair corresponded extensively from 1786 until his death, leaving behind dozens of illuminating letters. Burns tended to be particularly open with Dunlop in a way that he was not with his editors or business acquaintances.

<sup>19</sup> Roy, *Portrait*, 24.

<sup>20</sup> "Currie, James." *Burns Encyclopedia Online*.

<sup>21</sup> Snyder, Franklin Blyss. *The Life of Robert Burns*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932. 481.

<sup>22</sup> Noble, Andrew and Hogg, Patrick Scott, *The Canongate Burns*, XLI.

situation.<sup>23,24</sup> Though Currie did change the content of several of Burns's letters in order to protect both Burns's reputation and his readers' sensibilities, in doing so he was not operating outside the boundaries of accepted biographical practices of the time.<sup>25</sup> His main fault lies in his creation of Burns as an alcoholic:

perpetually stimulated by alcohol in one or other of its various forms...his temper became more irritable and gloomy, he fled from himself into society, often of the lowest kind. And in such company, that part of the convivial scene, in which wine increases sensibility and excited benevolence, was hurried over...he who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape other pollution? But let us refrain from the mention of errors over which delicacy and humanity draw the veil.<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, the passage refrains from the "mention of errors" in theory only, and the portrait of Burns as a brilliant drunkard would continue to flourish well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Over the next hundred years, dozens of would-be biographers tried their hand at depicting Burns's life, some with more success than others. Notably, John Gibson Lockhart would produce a panegyric that would be widely circulated due to his reputation as the writer of *The Life of Walter Scott*, a successful biography published in seven volumes throughout 1837 and 1838. However, in his early 20<sup>th</sup> century review of Burns scholarship, Franklyn Bliss Snyder would comment that Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns* was "inexcusably inaccurate from beginning to end, at times demonstrably mendacious, and should never be trusted in any respect or detail."<sup>27</sup> Snyder, who would later go on to become president of Northwestern University, was one of the first to question biographical portraits of Burns, a practice that persists to this day.

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<sup>23</sup> Snyder, *Life*, 482.

<sup>24</sup> The Burns Encyclopedia Online,  
<http://www.robertburns.org/encyclopedia/CurrieDrJames17561511805.260.shtml>

<sup>25</sup> Snyder, *Life*, 482.

<sup>26</sup> Currie, James. *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns: With Explanatory Notes and a Life of the Author, Volume I*. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1830. 214.

<sup>27</sup> Snyder, *Life*, 488-9.



Thomas Carlyle would publish another hugely influential essay on Burns's life, making a preliminary attempt to protect the poet from puritanical judgments. His essay was so well received that it remained required reading for students preparing for the New York State Regents' Examination and was a staple of the college preparatory curriculum in the United States into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> By the late nineteenth century, however, Burns's reputation and popularity were in decline. Carol McGuirk claims that "outside Scotland the familiarity of the Carlyean/Emersonian Burns—all those statues at the plough, staking their contradictory claim to humble monumentality—eventually bred, if not contempt, an incurious and inert species of fondness."<sup>29</sup>

In 1939, John Delancey Ferguson, editor of the first modern collected edition of Burns's poetry omitted footnotes from his biography, *Pride and Passion: Robert Burns*, on the grounds that no critical community existed to respond to them. He complained, not without merit, that his earlier writings on Burns had been greeted with "almost passionate apathy."<sup>30</sup> Raymond Bentman, writing for the academic journal *Studies in Romanticism* in 1972 claimed "Robert Burns's poetry is all but ignored in current scholarship of British literature. During the past twenty-five years, critics and scholars have often acted as if his poetry did not exist or have treated him as if he were a poet worth scant attention."<sup>31</sup> By 1987, *Studies in Romanticism*, which specializes in Burns's era, had published only two articles on the poet in over twenty years, one of which was Bentman's piece.<sup>32</sup> All of this

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<sup>28</sup> McGuirk, Carol. "Burns Country: Critics and Cultists." *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*. Ed. Carol McGuirk. New York: GK Hall and Company, 1998. 2.

<sup>29</sup> McGuirk, *Critics and Cultists*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> McGuirk, *Critics and Cultists*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Bentman, Robert. "Robert Burns's Declining Fame." *Studies in Romanticism* 11.3 (1972): 224.

<sup>32</sup> McGuirk, *Critics and Cultists*, 7.

marked an astonishing drop-off in attention to a poet whose work had supposedly been more popular than Shakespeare's in the nineteenth-century.<sup>33</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, academic interest in Burns is reviving, based upon the concerted efforts of Scottish studies scholars such as Carol McGuirk, Donald Low, G. Ross Roy, James Kinsley, and Robert Crawford. However, these academics still have to fight popular conceptions of the poet that had been formed during the massively influential era of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The return of professionalism to Burns scholarship has resulted in some bitter conflict. *The Canongate Burns*, whose portrayal of James Currie was unflattering in the extreme, has come under direct fire for what academics have seen as taking liberties with the poet's works. Joseph Fisher writing in *Dark Horse Magazine*, a Scottish literary journal with focus on poetry, claimed "if one were asked to say, briefly what the consensus opinion on these two volumes has been, it would be difficult to avoid producing a list of descriptions like 'over-politicised', 'incomplete documentation', 'slovenly', 'full of personal abuse', slidshod scholarship.'"<sup>34</sup> Scotland's paper of record, *The Scotsman*, piled on in 2003 with an article entitled "Many Errors in the Canongate Burns." For the next ten years, the battle has raged on, centering mainly on *Canongate's* incendiary introduction and its inclusion of multiple poems of dubious authorship. Though some reputable Burns scholars are willing to give credence to the possibility that the "new" poems were, in fact, produced by Burns himself (a group that includes Carol McGuirk and Thomas Crawford), others claim that such beliefs are unfounded (headed by Gerald Carruthers, head of Glasgow University's Centre for Burns Scholarship and

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<sup>33</sup> Low, Donald. "Introduction." *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*. Ed. Donald Low. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Fisher, Jonathan. "A' Oot O'Step Bur Oor Jock." *The Dark Horse Magazine* (2002): 89.

Robert Crawford). Nevertheless, *Canongate* continues to be made publically available and has now assumed the position of the most publically available complete edition of Burns's works. Though readers would have trouble finding James Kinsley's authoritative three-volume edition outside of an academic institution's library, *Canongate* is freely available for readers at Waterstone's<sup>35</sup> on Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

### **Early Life**

Despite the contested nature of his life story, there are a few indisputable biographical facts regarding Burns. The man who would become Scotland's most famous poet was born on January 25, 1759 to William and Agnes Burnes<sup>36</sup> in a cottage in the Scottish village of Alloway, three miles from the larger town of Ayr. From this factual groundwork, mythical origin tales have proliferated, a persistent biographical trend that has dogged Burns.

Alan Cunningham's 1855 *Life of Robert Burns* provides an excellent example of the type of romanticized prose that tended to accompany nineteenth-century depictions of the poet. Describing the night of Burns's birth, Cunningham claims, "As a natural mark of the event, a sudden storm at the same moment swept the land: the gabel-wall of the frail dwelling gave way, and the babe-bard was hurried through a tempest of wind and sleet to the shelter of a securer hovel."<sup>37</sup> Within the first paragraph of his biography, Cunningham is already providing problematic interpretations. His description of Burns as the "babe-bard" is meant to convey to readers a notion that Burns was destined to become

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<sup>35</sup> A major book retailer in the UK, equivalent to Barnes & Nobles in the US.

<sup>36</sup> William used a different spelling of the last name that was common in 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, though Robert would choose to adapt it to the somewhat Anglicized "Burns" from 1786 onward. An alternate spelling of the last name was Burness.

<sup>37</sup> Cunningham, Alan. *The Works of Robert Burns; With his Life in Eight Volumes: Volume III*. London: James Cochran and Co, 1834. 121.

a famous poet. This depiction necessarily discounts the many life-altering events that would occur through the next three decades that would turn Burns into an artist, and turns a complicated issue of personal identity and struggle into a fated event. Cunningham mythologized Burns in a manner that would not have been out of place in a tale about a member of the Greek Pantheon.

Burns himself could be guilty of this type of self-mythologizing, as seen in his portrayal of being struck at the plough by the Muses. Such rhetoric was considered necessary to establish poetic legitimacy throughout the eighteenth century. Where Burns is separated from his peers is how his description of the Muse continues to shape readers' views of his poetry, unlike the works of contemporaries such as William Blake and Wordsworth. In an 1815 edition of his poetry published by Alexander Peterkin in Edinburgh, the author prefaces a section of the poetry with the sentence, "the reader will probably think many of the songs which follow among the finest production of his muse."<sup>38</sup> Twenty years after his death, Burns's Muse was still spoken of as the "true" author of his work. By ascribing his poetic production entirely to his muse, Peterkin implicitly suggests that the man himself is not responsible for their message. Peterkin's preface contains a spirited defense of Burns against James Currie's misinterpretation of his life story. However, Peterkin offers only a more romanticized tale and tries to protect the poet from himself by shifting agency to the Muse, rather than the poet.

Burns's early years were difficult in many ways, and different biographers would take divergent approaches, attempting to successfully integrate the challenges of eighteenth-century Scottish tenant farming into their desired biographical sketches of

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<sup>38</sup> Peterkin, Alexander. *The Life and Works of Robert Burns as Originally Edited by James Currie MD*. Edinburgh: Michael Anderson, 1815. 269.

Burns. Currie's famous biography, first published in 1800, began with a sketch of the Scottish public education system: "In the very humblest condition of the Scottish peasants, every one can read, and most persons are more or less skilled in writing and arithmetic."<sup>39</sup> The reality was far less appealing. Though Burns himself would receive a serviceable education from tutors such as James Murdoch, the vast majority of Scottish peasants were underserved by a state that lacked the resources to mandate universal education. Teachers were paid between £5 and £10 annually, a sum they had to collect individually from their pupils.<sup>40</sup> The total wage was little more than that of a laborer, ensuring that if prospective teachers had better offers elsewhere, they took them. Murdoch was only hired after Burns's previous teacher, William Campbell, left his position to become Master of the Workhouse in Ayr, and William Burnes arranged for the tutoring of his own sons as well as the children of four surrounding families.<sup>41</sup>

### **"Cotter's Saturday Night" and Burns's Experience of Rural Life**

Burns recognized the shortcomings of rural life, and his autobiographical letter to John Moore explicitly states his dissatisfaction with his time as a ploughman. William Burnes worked as a tenant farmer, renting land from larger land-owners who took the lion's share of profits (when there were any). Farms often failed in Scotland's poor soil, leading to the ruination of tenants, who would be pursued legally until they paid the remainder of their rent. Burns would carry a hatred for "factors" (or lawyers) throughout his life, making them the frequent target of poetic diatribes.<sup>42</sup> Though later critics would

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<sup>39</sup> Currie, *The Life of Robert Burns*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 67.

often recognize the influence of his poverty-stricken youth, they generally portrayed it as a learning experience, failing to convey the lasting psychological impact that would later lead Burns to write poems such as “The Twa Dogs,” which served as vicious satire of upper class indifference to the poor. Burns wrote on the subject, “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, with the heartless gloom of a hermit and the unceasing toil of a galley slave, brought me to my sixteenth year.”<sup>43</sup>

This is not the same description of Scottish country life that Burns would provide in “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” a work that was hailed as his masterpiece until the early twentieth century, when the tide of critical opinion turned decisively against it:

With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet,  
And each for other's weelfare kindly speirs:  
The social hours, swift-wing'd, unnotic'd fleet:  
Each tells the uncous that he sees or hears.  
The parents, partial, eye their hopeful years;  
Anticipation forward points the view;  
The mother, wi' her needle and her shears,  
Gars auld claes look amaist as weel's the new;  
The father mixes a' wi' admonition due.<sup>44</sup>

Biographers would seize upon this description to create a picture of Burns as a paragon of virtuous work, ignoring the misery of his daily existence. Much of this association derived from a letter penned by Gilbert Burns, Robert’s elder brother, who delivered to James Currie several important letters that provided the basis for sweeping generalizations regarding Robert’s views. According to Gilbert, the cotter of the poem resembled the boys’ father “in his manners, his family devotion, and exhortations.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Burns, *Letters*, to Dr. John Moore, August 2, 1787.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Burns, “The Cotter’s Saturday Night.” *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968. ll. 33-40.

<sup>45</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 90.

The early critical response to the poem was rapturous. William Hazlitt, an early nineteenth century English writer known for his literary criticism, claimed “Cotter’s Saturday Night” was “a noble and pathetic picture of human manners, mingled with a fine religious awe. It comes over the mind like a slow and solemn strain of music.”<sup>46</sup> Hazlitt’s praise depends upon understanding “Saturday Night” as a realistic portrait of life in rural Scotland. His frame of reference was the idealized representation provided by Burns in a commercialized setting.

As the preface to the 1787 edition of his poetry lays out, Burns clearly understood the positive implications of tying himself to a fanciful version of Scotland’s peasantry. Trouble arose when intermediaries such as Hazlitt believed that the poem stood for the larger condition of “human manners” in such circumstances. Franklin Snyder, who would condemn the poem as representative of “the best of Burns and virtually the worst of Burns lie [in ‘Cotter’s Saturday Night’] side by side in unseemly incongruity,”<sup>47</sup> still understands the poem as a reflection upon “the simple dignity of an honest laborer’s home life... the accuracy of the poet’s vision every reader can illustrate for himself.”<sup>48</sup> Snyder’s entire analysis of the poem depends upon it accurately reflecting Burns’s experiences as a Scottish peasant. Furthermore, it is not sufficient for Burns’s experience to stand upon its own merits. Instead, Snyder and others translate “Cotter’s Saturday Night” into a picture that all Scots can identify with and comprehend. Every reader of the poem is supposed to be able to “illustrate” the accuracy of Burns’s vision for themselves, clarifying Snyder’s portrayal of the work as representative.

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<sup>46</sup> Hazlitt, William. *Complete Works of William Hazlitt Volume V*. Ed. PP Howe. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1930. 127-140.

<sup>47</sup> Snyder, *Life*, 171.

<sup>48</sup> Snyder, *Life*, 173.

Even James Mackay, a late twentieth-century academic whose work on Burns is generally well respected, falls prey to portraying the young child's early experiences as the formative basis for the poet's later work. He claims, "the seeds sown in the boy's mind during his earliest schooldays had merely borne their natural fruit"<sup>49</sup> with the publication of poems such as "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "Halloween." Once again, a critic implies that Burns's work on the Scottish peasantry is the product of his natural inclinations rather than the calculated invention of a supremely talented poet. Though Mackay's reading is perhaps unconsciously dismissive, his use of the word "merely" serves to further undermine the notion of Burns as an independent actor, denying the poet agency.

In addition to its supposed championing of rustic simplicity, "The Cotter's Saturday Night" would also be read as an expression of Scottish nationalism. In a centenary essay celebrating the work of Burns, William Henley, who would eventually edit yet another "complete" edition of Burns's works claimed "the Saturday Night was doomed to popularity from the first... being of its essence, patriotic- an assertion of the glory and the piety of Scotland."<sup>50</sup> Things are rarely so simple with Burns. The poet's revelatory condemnation of the rigors presented by rural Scottish peasant life in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore suggests that his own understanding of the subject was complicated, rather than clarified, by his personal experiences.

As Burns became increasingly popular as a cultural icon in nineteenth-century literary circles, readers began to envision "Cotter" as an expression of the poet's personal

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<sup>49</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 90.



identity.<sup>51</sup> Imitations of “Cotter” became a genre unto itself with *The Edinburgh Magazine* noting in 1824 that “the poor man’s Sabbath has been said and sung under a great variety of aspects... And it is indeed a most interesting and hallowing recollection to contemplate the father, in the midst of his family, clothed in his best, and leisurely inquiring into the condition, and participating in the happiness of his children.”<sup>52</sup> The genre then became a “record” of the condition of Scottish peasant life.<sup>53</sup> Burns was no longer just an observer of the Scottish peasantry but the shaper of its image.

Early biographers tended to agree that Burns’s exposure to the working conditions of the peasantry had a formative impact on his artistic output. Thomas Carlyle wrote that “the four years which he resided [in Mossgiel on the family farm] were the most important of his life. It was here he felt that nature had designed him for a poet, and here, accordingly, his genius began... which will make his name familiar to all future times.”<sup>54</sup> Carlyle’s suggestion removes all traces of complexity and personal growth from Burns’s narrative, instead suggesting that nature and inherent inclination bred his poetic genius. However, this was not the case. Burns expressed dissatisfaction with his early artistic output, describing his earliest poem in his *Commonplace Book* as

a little awkward and the sentiment too serious... the first distic of the first stanza is quite too much in the flimsy strain of our ordinary street ballads, and on the other hand, the second distic is too much in the other extreme... the fourth stanza is a very indifferent one; the first line is, indeed all in the strain of the second stanza, but the rest is mostly an expletive. The last line halts a little. The same sentiments are kept up with equal spirit and tenderness in the sixth stanza, but the second and fourth lines, ending with short syllables, hurts the whole.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Radcliffe, David Hill. “Imitation, Popular Literature, and ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night.’” *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*. Ed. Carol McQuirk. New York: GK Hall and Company, 1998. 263.

<sup>52</sup> Radcliffe, *Imitation*, 264.

<sup>53</sup> Radcliffe, *Imitation*, 264.

<sup>54</sup> Carlyle, Thomas. *Life of Robert Burns*. New York: Hurd and Houton, 1870. 37-38.

<sup>55</sup> Burns, Robert. *Commonplace Book*, 6.

Such measured and thorough self-criticism of an early work puts to rest any notions that Burns himself was a purely “natural” poet who wrote without thinking. Instead, he clearly carefully considered the impact of each stanza upon the work as a whole and even analyzed his own poems on a granular, line-by-line basis that demonstrates care and fanatical consideration. Burns’s genius did not merely “begin,” as Carlyle suggested. Instead, it was honed and painstakingly developed, and the poet’s work was the production of careful deliberation.

Early Burns scholars are not the only parties guilty of glossing over the hard work Burns put into his poetry. The Scottish Poetry Library’s official biography of Burns makes the laughable suggestion that “the language [Burns] was most fluent in wasn’t so much Scots or English- it was the language of the heart. All too human in his personal life, he carried that humanity over onto the page... a poet for all season, Burns speaks to all, soul to soul.”<sup>56</sup> As an official biography stemming from an institution which claims to “have the professional skills to open up the world of poetry to readers, researchers, and writers through librarianship, educational services, and in an advisory capacity, whether on an individual or institutional basis,” the Scottish Poetry Library demonstrates the pervasiveness of the naturalist narrative, which suggests that Burns’s work was the product of innate understanding rather than calculated artistry.

### **Production of Kilmarnock Burns**

Burns spent from the summer of 1785 to the spring of 1786 producing an extraordinary volume of poetry which would prove the foundation for his enduring fame. By 1786, he expressed a desire to see his work published, remarking in a verse epistle to

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<sup>56</sup> Scottish Poetry Library. *Robert Burns (1759-1796)*. Online.

his friend James Smith of Mauchline, “this while my notion’s taen a sklent / to try my fate in guid, black prent.”<sup>57</sup> It was only when Burns needed money for a voyage to Jamaica that his notion became a reality. As with most biographical details surrounding Burns’s life, accounts vary as to why he sought refuge in Jamaica. Currie, who steadfastly refused to acknowledge Burns’s extramarital affairs, ascribed his planned emigration as the result of his failure as a farmer.<sup>58</sup> Carlyle, on the other hand, chose to focus on Burns’s difficulties with Jean Armour, his future wife.<sup>59</sup>

In 1786, Burns was faced by prospective fatherhood for the second time. Armour’s father refused to recognize an irregular (though strictly speaking, legal) marriage between the pair. At the time of Burns’s first involvement with Jean, a written acknowledgement of marriage was accepted as legal evidence of matrimony. However, it appears that Armour’s father, disapproving of the match, convinced her to burn the paper, effectively dissolving the marriage. Carlyle states that Burns, “thus wounded in the two most powerful feelings of his mind, his love and his pride, was driven almost to insanity. Jamaica was his destination; but as he did not possess the money necessary to defray the expense of his passage out, he resolved to publish some of his best poems, in order to raise the requisite sum.”<sup>60</sup> In Carlyle’s version of events, Burns’s emotional state was the key inspiration behind his decision to immigrate to Jamaica, a narrative which enhanced the view of Burns as a passionate artist moved by his emotions. For Currie, practicality provided the motive, providing a different (and less flattering) context for the Kilmarnock edition.

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<sup>57</sup> Burns, Robert. “Epistle to James Smith.” *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns: Volume I*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968.

<sup>58</sup> Currie, *The Life of Robert Burns*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Carlyle, *The Life of Robert Burns*, 41.

<sup>60</sup> Carlyle, *The Life of Robert Burns*, 41.

It is notable that even the earliest accounts of Burns's life acknowledge the central role his planned emigration to Jamaica played in the publication of his poems. Burns's first obituary, published in the *London Chronicle* in 1796 claimed:

[Burns] wrote not with a view to encounter the public eye, or in the hope to procure fame by his productions, but to give vent to the feelings of his own genius... [he] proposed to emigrate to Jamaica in order to seek his fortune by the exertion of the talents which he felt himself possessed. It was upon this occasion that one of his friends suggested to him the idea of publishing his poems, in order to raise a few pounds to defray the expense of his passage. A coarse edition of his poems was first published at Dumfries. They were soon noticed by the gentlemen in the neighborhood. Proofs of such uncommon genius in a situation so humble made the acquaintance of the author eagerly sought after.<sup>61</sup>

This narrative suggests that Burns's decision to publish his poems was almost haphazard and emphasizes the "coarse" nature of his first edition. In fact, Burns took great pains before publishing the Kilmarnock edition, working with a local publisher, John Wilson, to collect more than three hundred subscriptions (no small feat in eighteenth-century rural Scotland) before the first copy went to press. Burns described his decision making process in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore: "I weighted 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... I was pretty sure my Poems would meet with some applause."<sup>62</sup> Burns's own words underscore the care and consideration he put into publishing his poems.

The concept of publication was not a coincidence. Evidence suggests that Robert's brother Gilbert encouraged him to send his poems to magazines.<sup>63</sup> Though Burns did not choose to pursue this route, the existence of multiple publication options

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<sup>61</sup> Ferguson, J. Delancey. "The Earliest Obituary of Burns: Its Authorship and Influence." *Modern Philology* 32 (Nov 1934): 179-184.

<sup>62</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 233.

<sup>63</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 210.

demonstrates the consideration that he put into the final decision. However, the *Chronicle*'s narrative shaped public perceptions of Burns's life and his work, impacting subsequent biographies, which in turn allowed for the narrative of his "natural genius" to flourish.<sup>64</sup> J. Delancey Ferguson goes so far as to suggest that the obituary "set the tone, long before the appearance of even Robert Heron's biography, for all public comment on Burns's life and character."<sup>65</sup> Such a monumental impact cannot be discounted as incidental, making the very nature of Burns's choice to publish central to later narratives of identity and influence.

At the time Burns published the Kilmarnock edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, self-publication operated on a subscription model, which ensured that if the book was not a success, the expense of printing would not be disastrous for the parties involved. Burns's advertisements for subscriptions were notable in their claim that "as the Author has not the most distant *Mercenary* [sic] view in Publishing, as soon as so many Subscribers appear as will defray the *necessary* Expence, the Work will be sent to the Press."<sup>66</sup> Though some of this overwrought language was standard boilerplate for self-published works, Burns's emphasis on his lack of "mercenary" view is particularly ironic in light of his original motives for publishing the volume.

By all accounts, *Poems* was an immediate success. A month after its original publication, 599 copies had been sold, while only thirteen remained.<sup>67</sup> The immediate profit was in excess of £54, though Burns himself would later claim a figure of £20 when

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<sup>64</sup> Ferguson, *Obituary*, 184.

<sup>65</sup> Ferguson, *Obituary*, 184.

<sup>66</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 211.

<sup>67</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 236.

writing his autobiographical letter.<sup>68</sup> Robert Carlyle would be moved to remark that “it is hardly possible to imagine with what eager admiration and delight [the volume] was received. They possessed in an eminent degree all those qualities which invariably contribute to render any literary work quickly and permanently popular.”<sup>69</sup> Robert Heron commented, “old and young, high and low, grave and gay, learned or ignorant, all were alike delighted, agitated, transported... I can well remember how even plough-boys and maid-servants would have gladly bestowed the wages which they earned the most hardily, if they might but procure the works of Burns.”<sup>70</sup> Heron’s accomplishment is two-fold. He elevates Burns to the plane of universal genius by describing the wide nature of the poet’s audience and emphasizes the connection between Burns and the lower classes by commenting on the plough-boys and maid-servants’ reactions.

In fact, despite the initial popularity of the volume, both Burns and his printer were uncertain about the viability of producing a second edition. Though Burns cleared at least twenty pounds as the result of the first edition, he was still planning to depart for Jamaica as late as September of 1786. Burns’s “big break” came in the form of a review by Robert Mackenzie, writing for *Lounger*, a short-lived literary magazine well-known to Edinburgh’s literary elite.<sup>71</sup> Mackenzie went so far as to compare Burns to Shakespeare, writing “whoever will read his lighter and more humourous poems... will perceive with what uncommon penetration and sagacity this Heaven-taught ploughman, from his humble and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners.”<sup>72</sup> Burns could not have written a better advertisement for himself. However, it helped perpetuate the

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<sup>68</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 237.

<sup>69</sup> Carlyle, *Life of Burns*, 42.

<sup>70</sup> Roy, *Self Portrait*, 15.

<sup>71</sup> “Robert Mackenzie.” *The Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>72</sup> “Mackenzie.” *The Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

inaccurate picture of Burns as an untutored genius, which persists in some criticism to this day.<sup>73</sup> In fairness to Mackenzie, Burns used his preface to introduce himself in a similar manner, indicating his desire to be represented as a rural genius. For almost all reviewers of Burns's initial work, his use of Scots instead of English was either not commented upon or viewed with disfavor. Mackenzie's review led to the publication of the first Edinburgh Edition of his poetry in 1787.<sup>74</sup> Modern estimates state that Burns managed to clear £855 for this printing,<sup>75</sup> after which he sold the copyright to William Creech for £100. Thus, less than a year after he was considering leaving the country to "make his fortune," Burns had amassed more than £1000 from the sale of his poetry. At a time when the average wage of an excise officer (the profession Burns would eventually enter) was £50,<sup>76</sup> this represented a literal fortune.

### **Burn's Later Life and Death**

Unsurprisingly, most of Burns's biographies focus far more extensively on his youth and his time in Edinburgh than on the last decade of his life. This is undoubtedly partially due to the extensive source material available from Burns's stay in Edinburgh (the majority of surviving Burns correspondence dates from 1786-1787) as well as the rhetorical desirability of emphasizing his origins and discounting his time as an excise officer. Burns's death has become a matter of great contention and mythological speculation, partially because early biographers (including Currie) emphasized the role alcohol played in his death. In fact, alcoholism remained the accepted cause of his death

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<sup>73</sup> Low, *Introduction*, 18.

<sup>74</sup> Carlyle, *Life of Burns*, 45.

<sup>75</sup> "Editions Published in Burns's Lifetime." *The Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>76</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 238.

until the early twentieth century, when it was convincingly demonstrated by Sir James Crichton-Browne that the poet had succumbed to endocarditis.<sup>77</sup> Contemporary medical opinion seems to have coalesced around this opinion, with Dr. Harry Anderson and Dr. Robert Gilchrist both suggesting that while alcohol may have exacerbated the symptoms of Burns's illness, it had no causal role in his death.<sup>78</sup> There is epistolary evidence to suggest that Burns's reputation as an alcoholic had its origins during his lifetime and only grew worse following his death.

In a letter to Samuel Clark, Burns described his worries about his reputation. He confided, "some of our folks about the Excise Office, Edinburgh, had and perhaps still have conceived a prejudice against me as being a drunken dissipated character.- I might be all this, you know, and yet be an honest fellow, but you know that I am an honest fellow and am nothing of this."<sup>79</sup> As James Mackay points out in his biography, alcohol makes an appearance in thirty six of his seven hundred and twenty letters, (a little more than one out of every twenty letters) and many references are made jokingly.<sup>80</sup> Burns further clarified his position in a note, claiming that though "I love drinking now and then... a man perpetually in the paroxysms and fevers of inebriety is like a half-drowned, stupid wretch condemned to labour unceasingly in water."<sup>81</sup> However, many early biographers excised portions of his letters to make it appear as though the poet's drinking habits were ruinous.<sup>82</sup>

Burns did not help his own cause by writing several poems that glorified drinking, including some of his best known early works such as "John Barleycorn," "The Jolly

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<sup>77</sup> "Death of Burns." *The Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>78</sup> "Death of Burns." *The Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>79</sup> Roy, G. Ross, *Letters of Robert Burns (Book II)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. 702.

<sup>80</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 634.

<sup>81</sup> Chambers, Robert. *Life and Works of Burns Volume 4*. London: W & R Chambers Ltd. 1896. 428.

<sup>82</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 636.



Beggars,” and the immortal “Tam O’Shanter.” Before James Currie had even begun to write his biography, he wrote to a friend that “by what I have heard, [Burns] was not very correct in his conduct; and a report goes about that he died of the effects of habitual drinking.”<sup>83</sup> The second-hand nature of such “reports” would eventually pass into unquestioned fact, calcified by decades of repetition. Currie and Heron provided the accepted and uncontested biographical sketches of Burns for at least twenty years, before Alexander Peterkin published his denunciation of Currie’s work in 1815.<sup>84</sup> Added to the volume were letters from individuals who had actually known him, including his brother, Gilbert. However, the damage had been done. Walter Scott praised the “pious care with which the late excellent Dr Currie had performed the task of editing the works of Burns.”<sup>85</sup> In general reference works, including David Irving’s *Lives of the Scottish Poets* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Burns was portrayed as an unredeemable alcoholic.<sup>86</sup> Irving brutally condemned Burns, after admitting that he drew mainly from Currie for biographical information. He wrote, “[Burns’s] constitution was deprived of its native energies, and could only be preserved from overwhelming languor by the aid of stimulant liquors... he degraded his noble faculties to so mean a level, that many of his earlier friends became half-ashamed of having contracted such an intimacy.”<sup>87</sup>

Though many of Burns’s most ardent defenders in the twentieth century have condemned James Currie, Robert Heron, and other perpetrators of the alcoholic myth, there was a practical motive behind the early “scholarship.” Currie’s biography in particular was aimed at providing Jean Armour and Burns’s children with enough money

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<sup>83</sup> Syme, *Burns Chronicle 1919*, 11-12.

<sup>84</sup> Peterkin, *Burns*, xlv.

<sup>85</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 663.

<sup>86</sup> Snyder, Franklin. “Burns and His Biographers.” *Studies in Philology* 25 (October 1928): 401-415.

<sup>87</sup> Snyder, *Biographers*, 406.

to live on and painting a picture of Burns as an alcoholic made his family's plight more sympathetic. The ploy worked admirably. In the three months following Burns's death, Currie's biography had raised £1400 for Jean and her daughters, providing a very reasonable annuity of £60. In addition, Burn's illegitimate daughters were able to receive £200 each upon reaching the age of majority.<sup>88</sup>

Though almost all reputable Burns scholars now deny that he was an alcoholic, popular accounts still make his drinking habits a central part of his life-story. In 1991, Alan Bold wrote a biographical sketch of Burns which claimed that the poet was a "bout-alcoholic," drawing a circumstantial link between his periods of intense creativity and sessions of binge drinking.<sup>89</sup> The persistence of the alcoholic myth convincingly demonstrates the power that Currie and other biographers had to enduringly shape Burns's reputation and reception among the general public.

In both life and death, Robert Burns proved to be enormously controversial. Though his works were generally regarded as the production of a poetic genius, his biographers painted different portraits of an exceedingly complex man. Each myth impacted how readers understood his poetry, leading to still-extant factions which hold on to different readings of the same poems, based upon skewed perceptions of the poet's life story. Almost every Burns biography begins by decrying the perversions of other biographies, contributing to a cycle of assigning and re-assigning meaning to his work

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<sup>88</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 679.

<sup>89</sup> Bold, Alan. "Regret, Remorse, Shame." *The Scotland Herald* 20 June 1990.

## Chapter II: Romantic Entanglements

Burns' career as a manual laborer on his father's farm would continue without major incident until 1774, when he was sent to Kirksowald to finish his education under a tutor. In 1777, William Burnes moved his family from their failing farm at Mount Oliphant to a new farm in Lochlea near the village of Tarbolton. The local tailor, Alexander Tait, painted a picture of Tarbolton as a bustling community of farmers, gardeners, housewives, drinkers, ministers, blacksmiths, and a place where lewdness had its day.<sup>90</sup> Tait wrote some poetry of his own, in which he described "Braw hizzies too, to bob in beds / Until ye tire,"<sup>91</sup> a prospect which would have appealed immensely to an increasingly sexually active Robert.

The correspondence between Tait and Burns reveals a trend increasingly evident among educated rural Scots in the late eighteenth century. Though Burns remains notable for both the quality and reception of his work, there was a flourishing community of poets who wrote recreationally rather than professionally. James Kinsley claims that "the most striking feature of eighteenth-century Scottish culture, philosophy and historiography aside, is the cultivation of folk-song and traditional music. Scotland's passionate concern for her cultural heritage was reflected in-and in turn nourished by-innumerable gatherings of poetry and airs."<sup>92</sup> No fewer than thirty collections of Scottish airs were collected by publishers between 1782 and 1800. However, there was an

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<sup>90</sup> MacIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 85.

<sup>91</sup> MacIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 85.

<sup>92</sup> Kinsley, James. "The Music of the Heart." *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, Ed. Donald A. Low. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 131.

important caveat: nearly all of these collections were published in London.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, their continued popularity stood not as testament to the timelessness of Scottish folk tunes but as the reflections of British society's political and literary taste.

Burns's position in this dynamic was unique, as he was one of the few to produce and publish this type of poetry. He wrote a passionate explanation of the enduring popularity of Scottish music and poetry, explicitly linking its success and desirability to its connection to humanity's more primal emotions, including love. In September 1785, before the publication of the Kilmarnock Edition of his poetry, Burns explained, "how flat and spiritless will [English poetry] appear, how trite, and tamely methodical, compared with the wild-warbling cadence, the heart-moving melody of the first...there is a degree of wild irregularity in many of the compositions and Fragments which are daily sung to them by my compeers, the common people."<sup>94</sup> The repeated linkage between raw emotion and poetic achievement would become an important point of contention among those who would read Burns's work and contest his life story, reflecting once more on the inseparability between Burns the man and Burns the poet.

### **Jean Armour**

By the time he was established as an independent farm-holder in Mauchline, villagers noted Burns's appearance in their midst. After the poet's death, David Sillar, a fellow farmer who had been his contemporary, founded Irvine's Burns Club, and gave an account of the Burns's time in the village:

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<sup>93</sup> Kinsley, *Heart*, 131.

<sup>94</sup> Burns, Robert. *Commonplace Book*. Edinburgh: Privately Printed, 1872. 49.

[Robert's] social disposition easily procured him acquaintance; but a certain satirical seasoning, with which he and all poetical geniuses are in some degree influenced, while it set the rustic circle in a roar, was not unaccompanied by its kindred attendant- suspicious fear... I have frequently been struck by his facility in addressing the fair sex, and many times, when I have been bashfully anxious how to express myself, he would have entered into conversation with them with the greatest ease and freedom, and it was generally a death blow to our conversation, however agreeable, to meet a female acquaintance.<sup>95</sup>

Even in an passage that was highly complementary of Burns' facility as a poet, some implicit criticism seeps into Sillar's account. The two men were lifelong friends, and Burns would actually write several poems directly addressed to his "brother poet."<sup>96</sup>

These flaws would prove immensely complicated for biographers, as they were faced with a difficult decision: did they address Burns' lechery, or let it pass unremarked?

Writers in the early eighteenth century, when many biographers were releasing their "life stories" of Burns, were usually loathe to fully explore non-marital sexual partnerships.

Therefore, when a biographer did choose to dwell on Burns's relationships with women besides his wife, the discussion took on a moral component and was usually meant to discredit Burns "the man" to a certain degree. However, this particular type of personal failing was viewed as the inevitable product of artistic genius, thereby elevating the poetry of Burns to a separate plane.

Currie explained Burns's artistic output through the lens of his relationship with his wife and took great pains to emphasize the purity of the love between Robert and his eventual spouse, Jean Armour. Robert's relationship with his wife did not begin in the most conventional of circumstances. It appears, though sources are still uncertain as to

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<sup>95</sup> MacIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 88-89.

<sup>96</sup> Burns would write "An Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet" In 1785.

the veracity of these claims, that he and Armour had a sexual relationship, and following the exposure of their relationship to the kirk, they attempted to marry.<sup>97</sup> However, Jean's parents did not approve of Burns, viewing him as a man with no significant prospects, and therefore an unsuitable candidate for marriage. Currie claims that his devotion to Jean was absolute, and explained that Burns reluctantly acquiesced to her father's demands: "Robert at length consented to their wishes; but his feelings on this occasion were of the most distracting nature: and the impression of sorrow was not effaced till by a regular marriage they were indissolubly united."<sup>98</sup> The passage makes Burns into a resolute figure of moral fortitude; his entire mindset was supposedly negatively affected by his inability to live in matrimonial union with Jean. Burns himself depicted the situation quite differently. He wrote to his friend Robert Ainslie that when the couple were reunited "I have been prudent and cautious to an outstanding degree; I swore her, privately and solemnly, never to attempt any claim on me as a husband... she did all this like a good girl, and I took the opportunity of some dry horse litter and gave her such a thundering scalade that electrified the very marrow of her bones."<sup>99</sup> Unsurprisingly, the passage was excised from Robert Chambers's *Life and Works*, replaced with a genteel series of asterisks.<sup>100</sup> Chambers explains that he drew the letter from Alan Cunningham's earlier biography, which also excluded the offending lines. G. Ross Roy returned the

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<sup>97</sup> "Burns, Jean Armour," *Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>98</sup> Currie, *Life of Robert Burns*, 39.

<sup>99</sup> Burns, *Letters*, March 3<sup>rd</sup> to Robert Ainslie.

<sup>100</sup> Chambers, Robert. *The Life and Works of Robert Burns, Volume 2*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1852. 234.

sentences in his 1980 edition of Burns' letters, adding a footnote that explains the origin of Burns' unsavory boast.

Cunningham, Chambers, and Currie all played a role in defining Burns as a "moral" figure when it came to his relationship with women, though each would glancingly touch upon his failings in their biographies. However, his relationship with Jean remained above reproach, and it appears that early biographers took steps to conceal Robert's unsympathetic behavior. Currie claims that Burns was "anxious to shield his partner by every means in his power from the consequences of their imprudence."<sup>101</sup> This contrasts quite sharply with Burns' claim that he made Jean swear that she would not press him to marry. One of the more enduring anecdotes about Jean concerns her acceptance of one of Burns's illegitimate children by Anna Park with the declaration, "our Robbie should have had twa wives."<sup>102</sup> Her acknowledgement of Burns's affairs did not prevent Thomas Carlyle from emphasizing the poet's propriety when he claimed, "[Burns] met Miss Armour by appointment, and gave into her hands a written acknowledgement of marriage, which, when produced by a person in her situation, is, according to the Scots' law, to be accepted as legal evidence of an irregular marriage."<sup>103</sup> Carlyle chooses to dwell on the damage done to Burns' psyche, claiming "Burns, thus wounded [following James Armour's dissolution of Burns' marriage to his daughter] in the two most powerful feelings of his mind, his love and pride, was driven almost to

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<sup>101</sup> Currie, *Life of Robert Burns*, 38.

<sup>102</sup> "Burns, Jean Armour." *Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>103</sup> Carlyle, *Life of Robert Burns*, 41.

insanity.”<sup>104</sup> By making Burns the victim, Carlyle turns the philandering poet into a sympathetic figure. Biographers took care to distance his relationship with Jean from his other romantic entanglements, creating a timeline that ensured their relationship was monogamous. However, recent evidence suggests that Burns carried on at least one other relationship concurrent with his first “marriage” to Jean, further complicating the reader’s understanding of his love poetry.<sup>105</sup>

Burn’s romantic life was inextricably tied to his poetry. Some of his most popular early poems, including “My Love is like a Red, Red Rose,” “My Heart’s in the Highlands,” and “Farewell to Eliza” concern love, making his audience’s understanding of his romantic entanglements essential to their comprehension of the work’s meaning. At the time, poetry was read as the product of the poet’s life story and circumstances, a phenomenon which partially explains why almost every edition of Burns’s poetry also contained a biographical sketch. Currie’s formative biography was initially only supposed to be appended onto a definitive edition of Burns’s work: the poetry was to be the main selling point. Burns’s love poetry easily fit into a myth of origin, which was favored by eighteenth and early nineteenth-century readers.

These readings were fueled by Burns’s own admissions in his personal correspondence. He described the formative role that romance played in his poetry in his autobiographical letter, focusing particular attention on his early relationship with a country girl: “it was to her favorite reel to which I attempted giving an embodied vehicle

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<sup>104</sup> Carlyle, *Life of Robert Burns*, 41.

<sup>105</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 196.



in rhyme. Thus with me began love and poetry, which at times have been my only, and, till within the last twelve months have been my highest enjoyment.”<sup>106</sup> Robert’s first attempt to create poetry was thereafter canonically linked to the pursuit of a woman, a theme which Currie and others would attempt to exploit to the fullest extent. Burns’s vivid use of a country girl, a “reel” (a uniquely Scottish form of dancing), and the explicit link between “love and poetry” was thought to express his priorities and sentiments exactly, and influenced readers’ understanding of Burns and his work throughout the nineteenth century.

Leith Davis suggests that there are two primary ways in which Burns is remembered: through communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory is based on everyday communication, such as Burns’s conversations and letters, and is experienced by those who had direct contact with the poet. Cultural memory is created when all parties directly involved have passed away and “a society has only relics and stories left as a reminder of past experience.”<sup>107</sup> The communicative memory associated with Burns emphasized his romantic entanglements, calcifying into a cultural memory which encouraged individuals to read his poetry as an undistilled expression of his life story.

Jean lacks the poetic tradition of her two main competitors in the canonically acknowledged troika of “Burns women.” While Mary Campbell’s cult had “The Highland Lassie O” to point at as evidence of Burns’s fidelity, and Agnes McLehose’s

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<sup>106</sup> Autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore

<sup>107</sup> Davis, Leith. “Negotiating Cultural Memory: James Currie’s Works of Robert Burns.” *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 6 (2010): 2.

champions could point to a voluminous collection of passionate love letters, the matter of memorializing his spouse is much more troublesome. No portrait of Jean is known until she became a grandmother, and only three known paintings of her likeness currently exist.<sup>108</sup> In many ways, Burns's only "legitimate" lover is among the least memorialized. Currie and others writing in the immediate aftermath of Burns's death did so to secure her financial security but rarely consulted Jean for information on her husband. More often, Gilbert, Burns's brother, provided the source of biographical information, especially on Robert's character. Certainly, Burns's relationship with his wife has not inspired the reams of speculation, both academic and biographical, that accompanied his relationships with Mary Campbell and Agnes McLehose. While both of those lovers retain an element of mystery, the accessibility of his relationship with Jean prevented the rise of similar frenzied speculation.

Early biographers had to walk a thin line between glorifying Burns' "loving" nature and the inspiration which resulted from his entanglement and endorsing his extramarital pursuits. Often, they had to fall back upon innuendo, as Currie did with his claim that Robert and Jean were shielded from the "consequences of their imprudence."

### **Highland Mary**

Burn's song, "The Highland Lassie, O," has received particular attention for its treatment of one of his early paramours. The figure of Mary Campbell, the subject of the poem, would be mythologized by generations of his biographers. Various

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<sup>108</sup> "Burns, Jean Armour," Burns Encyclopedia. Online.

misapprehensions circulated throughout the nineteenth century, creating a “cult” around “Highland Mary,” as she would become known. The mythological figure appears to have been at least partially an invention of Robert Cromek, who claimed Burns described the poem as

a composition of mine in very early life... my Highland lassie was a warm-hearted, charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love. After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment, we met by appointment on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the banks of Ayr, where we spent the day in taking farewell, before she should embark for the West Highlands to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change of life. At the close of Autumn following she crossed the sea to meet me at Greenock, where she had scarce landed when she was seized with a malignant fever, which hurried my dear girl to the grave in a few days”<sup>109</sup>

Cromek allegedly transcribed the passage from a copy of *The Scots Musical Museum*, which Burns had prepared for his friend Robert Riddell. However, when James Dick, another Burns scholar, rediscovered the manuscript in 1903, it was found that the page which had supposedly borne the text that Cromek quoted had been removed. Therefore, Cromek was suspected of having fabricated the entire affair, a supposition given weight by the now commonly accepted skepticism which his *Reliques* inspires.<sup>110</sup> Nonetheless, the damage was done. Statues of “Highland Mary” have been erected in cities including Dunoon, Liverpool, and New York, and “her ethereal quality... intrigued and then captured the imagination of Burns worshippers.”<sup>111,112</sup> One particularly notable example

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<sup>109</sup> Cromek, *Reliques*, 237.

<sup>110</sup> MacKay, *Burns*, 197.

<sup>111</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 196.

<sup>112</sup> James Mackay is credited with performing some of the most influential research concerning Burns’ relationship with “Highland Mary,” including one of the first comprehensive (and comprehensible) breakdowns of the evolution of her mythologization. Robert Crawford claims Mackay is responsible for contributing greatly to scholastic understandings of Mary’s significance.

of statuary featured a figure labelled “Grief” weeping at the base of Mary’s feet, rendering her premature death a classical tragedy.

The early nineteenth century saw a massive increase in the romanticization of the Scottish Highlands, and Campbell stood as a figure who bridged the divide between eighteenth and nineteenth-century depictions of Scotland’s remote population. Most eighteenth-century writing was stridently negative, while nineteenth-century authors glorified life in the Highlands, partially as a result of the calm which followed the final armed Jacobite insurrections. Juliet Shields suggests that the integration of Highlanders into narratives of cultural unification, as occurred in the case of “Highland” Mary and Robert Burns, served to draw a marginalized cultural group into the embrace of the emergent British culture.<sup>113</sup> Both Mary and Robert actually belonged to “Lowland” culture, which was much more tightly bound with extant British identity and narratives. However, because of the relationship between the Highlands, the Lowlands, and the British Empire, her colloquial renaming likely served a pedagogical goal in asserting Burns’s identity as uniquely “Scottish.” Indicatively, Leslie Stephen, who wrote the entry on Burns in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, alluded to Burns’s relationship with Highland Mary by stating that criticism of Burns “is only permitted to Scotchmen of pure blood,”<sup>114</sup> demonstrating the tie between her legend, Burns, and the nature of “Scottishness.”

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<sup>113</sup> Shields, Juliet. “From Family Roots to the Routes of Empire: National Tales and the Domestication of the Scottish Highlands.” *ELH* 72 (2005): 919-940. 924.

<sup>114</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt & Deity*, 72.

As with many other subjects in the Burns mythology, the veracity of Highland Mary's importance to Robert became increasingly controversial as time passed. William Ernest Henley, writing in the centenary year of Burns's death, dismissed his affair with her as merely "an episode," taking particular issue with what he saw as a "cult" devoted to a dishonorable woman. Antiquary Joseph Train, who wrote at length about Burns's love life, described Mary's character as "loose in the extreme" and emphasized her "infidelity," demonstrating that conceptions of her role in Burns's life and poetry were continually evolving.<sup>115</sup> These claims were reprinted in Lockhart's influential essay, entering the historical record as fact, before Robert Fitzhugh partially resuscitated her reputation in a 1937 article devoted to the relationship between Burns and Mary in *PMLA*, the academic journal of the Modern Language Association.<sup>116</sup> Fitzhugh was writing in direct response to Hans Hecht, who claimed that the stories told about Highland Mary lacked "that documentary basis which is necessary if the incident is to have the importance traditionally ascribed to it."<sup>117</sup>

Despite James Mackay's exhaustive attempts to identify the "actual" Highland Mary in the early 1990s, historians remain uncertain of her actual identity, once again showcasing the shadowy nature of a central part of the Burns canon.<sup>118</sup> No fewer than fifteen works on Highland Mary's relationship with him were cited in the Mitchell

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<sup>115</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 214.

<sup>116</sup> Fitzhugh, Robert. "Burns' Highland Mary." *PMLA* 52, 829-834.

<sup>117</sup> Hecht, Hans. *Robert Burns, The Man and His Work*. London: W. Hodge & Company, 1936. 87.

<sup>118</sup> Both Robert Crawford and Ian McIntyre, who published biographies of Burns after Mackay, emphasized the uncertain nature of Mary's true identity.

Library's *Catalogue of the Robert Burns Collection*, an array that can be best ascribed to wide public interest in the couple.<sup>119</sup>

Burns himself complicated our understanding of his relationship by refusing to explicitly discuss any details of the pair's relationship, relying instead upon innuendo in his letters. However, a considerable body of artistic work (including a number of poems and songs dedicated to his "Highland Lass") exists, supporting claims that he was deeply attached to Mary. In 1786, shortly before the publication of the first edition of his poetry, Burns wrote to his friend John Arnot, describing his intentions regarding Mary. Burns claimed, "the houghmagandie [hunting] pack begin to snuff the scent; & I expect every moment to see them cast off & hear them after me in full cry: but as I am an old fox... I intend to earth among the mountains of Jamaica."<sup>120</sup> Burns chose instead to remain in Scotland and travel to Edinburgh. This change of plans has been ascribed by some to his acquaintance with Highland Mary, furthering the impression that she was vitally important to the publication of his poetry.<sup>121</sup>

In addition to his letters, Burns's creative output, including his famous poem *My Highland Lassie, O* was also read as an autobiographical confession concurrent with his supposed entanglement:

Nae gentle dames, tho' e'er sae fair,  
Shall ever be my muse's care:  
Their titles a' arc empty show;

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<sup>119</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 212.

<sup>120</sup> Roy, *Letters*, 37.

<sup>121</sup> Snyder, *Life of Robert Burns*, 142.

Gie me my Highland lassie, O.<sup>122</sup>

Burns's explicit link between his "highland lassie" and his muse proved an important legitimizing tool. Throughout the eighteenth century, the use of an artistic muse was viewed as an essential prerequisite for almost any form of extended poetry. Thus, Burns elevates Mary to an exalted position, personifying what was usually an abstract figure. Additionally, the line "their titles a' are empty show" served as justification for those that viewed Burns as a champion of democracy. Mary became a vehicle for Burns's expression of subversive (and nationalist) political sentiments. Mary's origin was vital to the identity that readers created for her. By the early 1800s, peasants, particularly those of the Highlands, had acquired a moral image in Scotland's conservative political circles.<sup>123</sup> Burns concludes:

She has my heart, she has my hand,  
By secret troth and honour's band!  
Till the mortal stroke shall lay me low,  
I'm thine, my Highland lassie, O.  
Farewell the glen sae bushy, O!  
Farewell the plain sae rashy, O!  
To other lands I now must go,  
To sing my Highland lassie, O.<sup>124</sup>

These lines lent Mary apologists considerable ammunition, especially with the incendiary (if read as a truly autobiographical poem) claim that she possessed Robert's hand, as well as his secret vow and honor. The uncertain nature of Robert's relationship with Mary allowed her reputation to remain above reproach for many of Burns's most ardent

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<sup>122</sup> Burns, Robert. "My Highland Lassie, O." *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns: Volume I*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968.

<sup>123</sup> Whatley, Christopher. "It Is Said Burns Was a Radical:" Contest, Concession, and the Political Legacy of Robert Burns ca 1796-1859." *Journal of British Studies* 50 (2011): 639-666.

<sup>124</sup> Burns, "My Highland Lassie Oh," ll. 25-32.

admirers, allowing them to read this particular poem as the production of “[a] spiritual nature... had it not been blighted by Mary’s early death, [the love] might well have led Burns to heights which he never attained.”<sup>125</sup> Lines twenty-nine and thirty use rural imagery when Burns bids farewell to the glen and the plain, connecting his parting from Scotland’s natural beauty to his departure from Mary. In this narrative, Mary becomes the encapsulation of Burns’s potential, linking his attachment to the rural, definitively Scottish, figure to the production of his “best” poetry.

Demonstratively, Allan Bayne, an early twentieth-century Burns enthusiast who wrote on the subject of his relationship to Mary, claimed that the pair had been “solemnly betrothed,” elevating her status to an equal plane with his actual wife, Jean Armour.<sup>126</sup> Bayne’s article in the 1904 *Burns Chronicle* sought to directly confront and reproach scholars who were attempting to uncover the nature of her relationship with him. He concluded by stating “Highland Mary forever remains as the inspirer of Burns at his best, and so is linked to him eternally; and whoever seeks to defile this ideal maiden deserves the reprobation of all pure-minded men and women.”<sup>127</sup> This kind of moralist rhetoric was typical of Burns enthusiasts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who had built the poet into both a moral and moralizing figure, demonstrating once again the divide between amateur and professional scholarship and receptions of Burns’s life story. The source of Bayne’s defense is an account given by his aunt, who claimed to have

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<sup>125</sup> Snyder, *Life*, 140.

<sup>126</sup> Bayne, Allan. *Annual Burns Chronicle and Club Director, Issues 13-16 Ed. D. McNaught*. Glasgow: The Burns Federation, 1904. 102.

<sup>127</sup> Bayne, *Ibid*, 108.



known Highland Mary's sister.<sup>128</sup> Informal and oral transmissions of "knowledge" became keystones of the Burns mythos, allowing audiences to build a picture of the man and poet that they wished to see. It is notable that these portraits of an ideal "bard" rarely lined up with Burns's own account of his life, which ensured that his legacy and life story shifted over time to suit the needs of a moralizing audience.

### **Clarinda**

Burn's romantic entanglements did not end with Mary Campbell's death. When he travelled to Edinburgh in 1786, his book of poems was a runaway success, inspiring admiration from Scotland's literati. One ardent admirer was Agnes McLehose, the married daughter of a Glasgow surgeon who would come to be known as Clarinda. Unlike the case of Highland Mary, considerable epistolary evidence exists, which helps illuminate the relationship between Burns and McLehose, ensuring that biographers could not sweep its existence under the rug. In total, there are 52 extant letters from Burns to McLehose, a considerable volume that has inspired both academic and popular responses. Most were written during the winter of 1786-1787, while Burns was in Edinburgh. Francis Jeffrey, an early nineteenth-century Burns critic, claimed that the Clarinda letters demonstrated Burns' letters were "nearly all composed as exercises, and for display," while J. Delancey Ferguson, responsible for the first comprehensive collection of Burns' letters in 1930, dismisses the affair as a "somewhat preposterous

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<sup>128</sup> Bayne, *Ibid*, 107.

episode.”<sup>129</sup> However, Clarinda has assumed a legendary stature in Burns circles, serving as a figure of chaste admiration and evidence of the poet’s romantic sensibilities.

McLehose had endured a difficult life by the time that she met Burns in 1787. Born in 1758 to a prominent surgeon, “Nancy,” as she was known to her friends, was married to an abusive husband at the age of eighteen. James McLehose was a Glaswegian lawyer whose prolificacy eventually led him to debtor’s prison. After only four years of marriage, Nancy had four children, and she eventually separated from her husband, though she remained legally married to James. McLehose’s social position was precarious, due to her parlous financial situation and the unusual circumstances of her marriage. However, she managed to survive on an allowance of ten shillings a week, afforded to her by a bequest granted by her deceased father. In 1787, she had established herself in Edinburgh’s social world. Contemporaries described her as “of a somewhat voluptuous style of beauty, of lively and easy manners, of a poetical case of mind, with some wit, and not too high a degree of refinement or delicacy.”<sup>130</sup>

Burns, with his amorous past, was not above pursuing an attractive, married woman who expressed admiration for his poetry. On December 4, 1787, the pair met for the first time at an evening gathering held by Nancy’s cousin, William Craig, a prominent member of the Edinburgh literati. Though Craig himself did not hold a high opinion of

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<sup>129</sup> Simpson, Kenneth. “A Highly Textual Affair: The Sylvander-Clarinda Correspondance.” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 35 (2007): 259-269. 259.

<sup>130</sup> Chambers, *Life and Times of Robert Burns*, 211.

Burns, claiming that Robert was merely “a ploughman with pretensions to poetry,”<sup>131</sup> Nancy and Robert were immediately attracted to one another. A mere four days after their initial meeting, Robert was writing to Nancy, “I cannot bear the idea of leaving Edinburgh without seeing you...you are a stranger to me, but I am an odd being, some yet unnamed feelings, things not principles, but better than whims, carry me farther than boasted reason ever did a Philosopher.”<sup>132</sup> The rapid escalation of the relationship between Burns and McLehose was enabled by Edinburgh’s “penny post” system, which delivered letters hourly within the city. Robert Crawford compares the relationship to contemporary electronic romances, as the service enabled communication between the pair to assume a sense of immediacy and intimacy that would have been impossible in previous centuries.<sup>133</sup>

Burns and McLehose originally planned to meet again on Saturday, the 9<sup>th</sup>, but Burns met with a carriage accident, which meant that his visit had to be postponed. The pair wrote each other constantly over the next week and a half, occasionally exchanging up to four letters daily. The tone of the letters varied wildly, reflecting the awkward courtship process between the philandering Burns and the worried McLehose. To be fair, the latter had far more to lose than Burns, whose social situation was, by this point, relatively secure. Eventually, the pair assumed pseudonyms to shield themselves from the consequences of their imprudent exchanges, should the letters fall into the wrong hands.

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<sup>131</sup> Simpson, *A Highly Textual Affair*, 260.

<sup>132</sup> Burns to McLehose, December 8, 1787.

<sup>133</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 280.

Before the end of the month of December, Nancy became “Clarinda” while Burns now signed each letter as “Sylvander.”<sup>134</sup> The names had clear literary implications for educated eighteenth century audiences. Clarinda was a name commonly used in romantic pastoral poetry (the trend apparently was started by one of Burns’ favorite poets, Edmund Spenser) while Sylvander was a character in a popular romance novel published the previous year in Edinburgh.<sup>135</sup> The high-flown literary exchanges between the pair have proved troublesome for Burns scholars. Some choose to believe that the Sylvander-Clarinda correspondence represents the “true” Burns, that the feelings expressed in the letters, while dramatic, accurately reflect the man’s emotions and desires. Others believe that “Sylvander” is little more than a convenient fiction, established by a convalescing Burns while in the pursuit of yet another feminine conquest.<sup>136</sup> Each interpretation complicates contemporary understandings of the letters, which collectively function as yet another “text” that can be used to understand Burns’s work.

Kenneth Simpson, who wrote an article on the letters exchanged by Burns and McLehose, explains that “given [Burns’] iconic status and popular appeal, it is crucial to distinguish sincerity of text from truth in terms of the lived reality.”<sup>137</sup> The situation is unfortunately complicated by the actions of early Burns trustees, John Syme and William Maxwell, who burned hundreds of Burns’s letters after his death, in an attempt to protect both the poet and his correspondents from their own indiscretions. Syme detailed in a

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<sup>134</sup> “McLehose, Agnes.” *Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>135</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 374.

<sup>136</sup> Kenneth Simpson delves into the different ways that individuals have read the exchanges between McLehose and Burns in his article, “A Highly Textual Affair: The Sylvander-Clarinda Correspondence.”

<sup>137</sup> Simpson, *A Highly Textual Affair*, 269.

letter to Alan Cunningham that Burns's estate included "letters from a female, who must have felt the genuine passion of love...the person, if alive, must have an anxious distracted heart."<sup>138</sup> The letters likely contained further evidence of the affair between him and McLehose, but reveal important gaps in our knowledge of the poet's life. Partially as a result of this calamitous destruction, no authority has been able to satisfactorily resolve this fundamental question of identity and "truth" when it comes to a foundational chapter in the Burns mythos.

Though it is uncertain if Burns and McLehose ever physically consummated their affection,<sup>139</sup> one of his most significant poetic works "Ae Fond Kiss" was a direct result of their relationship. Commonly cited as the most popular piece of Burns's love poetry, its enduring place in the Burns canon is made even more remarkable by its relatively late composition. While most of Burns's most famous works had been completed by the end of 1787 and published in the Kilmarnock or Edinburgh editions of his poetry, "Ae Fond Kiss" was recorded for the first time in a letter to McLehose written in 1791. Arrestingly, Burns memorialized his relationship with Nancy:

I'll never blame my partial fancy  
 Naething could resist my Nancy:  
 But to see her, was to love her;  
 Love but her, and love for ever.-

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,  
 Had we never lov'd sae blindly!  
 Never met-or never parted,

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<sup>138</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 647.

<sup>139</sup> General biographical opinion seems to suggest that they did not, see Crawford, MacKay, Burns Encyclopedia, and Simpson. Some letters, particularly from Clarinda, who speaks of her guilt for actions on certain nights, seem to suggest that something untoward occurred between the two, but it seems reasonable to suggest that the pair's physical relationship did not progress to sexual intercourse.

We had ne'er been broken hearted.<sup>140</sup>

Sir Walter Scott, who could be brutally critical of Burns on both a literary and personal level when he felt the occasion demanded such treatment, claimed that “Ae Fond Kiss” contained “the essence of a thousand love tales.”<sup>141</sup> Praise surrounding the poem generally focuses upon the authenticity of Burns’s writing and makes the depth of his feelings for Clarinda a central aspect of understanding the song as a piece of art. Crawford’s interpretation of the song rests entirely upon understanding it as an expression of Burns’s artistry and emotion, claiming that “the bard takes leave of his Nancy in a song whose publication he already anticipates, allowing him to perform his intense, private erotic sadness before a public audience.”<sup>142</sup>

The success of “Ae Fond Kiss” must be accounted for, and different audiences choose to do so in different ways. Some Burns scholars, such as Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, trivialize the McLehose-Burns relationship as superficial, and therefore neglect the poem entirely in their analysis of the Burns canon.<sup>143,144</sup> On the other hand, Crawford ascribes the poem with great personal significance, and chooses to include “Ae Fond Kiss” in its entirety, with two pages of analysis surrounding its history

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<sup>140</sup>Burns, Robert. “Ae Fond Kiss.” *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Volume II*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968. 592.

<sup>141</sup> “Ae Fond Kiss.” *Burns Encyclopedia*. Online.

<sup>142</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 344.

<sup>143</sup> Though the work of Noble and Hogg is, at the very least, extremely controversial in its academic value, it serves as a valuable tool to understand contemporary responses and attempts to integrate Burns’ artistry into his life story. This example of artistry does not fit the life story the pair constructed: therefore, they neglect it.

<sup>144</sup> Noble, Andrew and Hogg, Patrick Scott, *Canongate*, 375-76.

and importance to Burns's life story.<sup>145</sup> These divergent approaches to the same poem reflect the differing understandings of his life which bedevil the poet's legacy and complicate understandings of his work.

Much as there is a tendency to associate Mary Campbell with Scottish nationalism and rural purity, McLehose often stands as shorthand for Edinburgh and Britishness. As a member of the upper-middle class, her education and reputation as Burns's unconsummated partner lends itself to partisan readings of her letters and his poetry. It is notable that there is a tendency to neglect one party or the other in nineteenth-century biographies of Burns, which often had political overtones. Just as "Highland" Mary's name carries undertones of Scottish political affiliation, McLehose is often called "Clarinda" by those who wish to portray Burns as a loyal British subject, since the name carries classical connotations which were often used by those who wished to link the ascendant British state to Roman achievements. Thus, Clarinda "elevated" Burns to a socially respectable [read: British] position, while Mary grounded him as the heaven-taught ploughman, a condition associated with Scottishness. Amelia Burr, writing the introduction for a 1917 edition of Burns and McLehose's letters, claims that their story began "with the birth of this man and this woman who came toward each other from such different social spheres, trailing not clouds of glory but the rags of sordid experience and ruined hope."<sup>146</sup> Burns's romance with McLehose serves as an elevating mechanism in these narratives, drawing him further into accepted British society from the depths of his

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<sup>145</sup> Crawford, *The Bard*, 343-345.

<sup>146</sup> Burr, Aemelia. *Sylvander and Clarinda: The Love Letters of Robert Burns and Agnes M'Lehose*. Ed. Amelia Josephine Burr. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917. 11.

rural upbringing. There is a clear prioritization of qualities, and McLehose serves as convenient shorthand for both urban and upper class life.

Each of Burns's relationships served a distinct rhetorical purpose for biographers and critics. Jean's role was as a figure of married love, not poetic inspiration. Her relationship with Burns was meant to serve as an indicator of the poet's respectability (or lack thereof, depending upon who was describing their marriage). Highland Mary functioned as poetic inspiration, concretely linking Burns to the nationalism of the Highlands. Clarinda represented Edinburgh and Britishness, enabling Burns to be portrayed as a different model of poet, fitting into the pastoral tradition of the traditional eighteenth-century British poetic model.



## Burns and Politics

In Scotland, Robert Burns has entered a pantheon of national heroes that includes William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, and John Knox, three figures whose main importance derives from their rejection of England's dominant cultural and political influence. In 2009, Burns was chosen as the "Greatest Scot" in a public poll taken by Scotland Television, narrowly beating William Wallace. Significantly, the results of the poll were announced on St. Andrew's Day, a holiday traditionally associated with Scottish independence.<sup>147</sup> The announcement of Burns's victory proclaimed, "not everyone who will sing the words of Auld Lang Syne at New Year will fully understand this hymn to friendship and good cheer, but many millions will sing it none the less."<sup>148</sup> The claim that those who sing Burns's work do not fully understand his meaning reflects a larger issue within Burns studies and debates surrounding his legacy.

The nature of Burns's political legacy has been discussed and dissected since the year of his death, resulting in dozens of competing narratives which claim him as the representative of either an independent Scottish culture or as an advocate for a successfully integrated "British" Scotland. Over the course of two hundred years, this legacy has been defined and redefined by each successive generation in a tortured attempt to claim his poetry for polemic ends. The persistence of the contentious debate between British unionists and Scottish nationalists demonstrates the importance that is placed upon interpretations of Burns's political leanings. The poet's appeal permeated all rungs of society, including Scotland's manufacturing elite, skilled members of the working

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<sup>147</sup> STV. "Robert Burns voted Greatest Scot," *Scotland TV*. Online. <http://scotland.stv.tv/greatest-scot>. Accessed 3/3/14.

<sup>148</sup> STV, *Greatest Scot*, 1.

class, and both rural and urban populations.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, explanations of Burns were developed in both formal settings, including sanctioned Burns Federations which attracted admirers and amateur publications (comparable to the phenomenon of fanzines which developed in the twentieth century) and informal settings, particularly with the development of “Burns Night” celebrations, which reached a peak of popularity in the century following Burns’s death. Apocryphally, 1801 marked the first celebration of a Burns Supper, as nine of Burns’s acquaintances gathered in Alloway to celebrate his life and works on the fifth anniversary of his death. By 1859, the centenary of the poet’s birth, the custom has spread worldwide. Sixty Burns Suppers were held in the United States with seventy-six meetings taking place in England, forty-eight dinners being held in overseas colonies, and Scotland marked the occasion with six hundred and seventy-six events.<sup>150</sup> According to James Ballantine, an Edinburgh artist who recorded the details of the centenary celebrations, “the utmost enthusiasm pervaded all ranks and classes... city vied with clachan, peer with peasant, philanthropist with patriot, philosopher with statesman, orator with poet, in honouring the memory of the Ploughman Bard.”<sup>151</sup> The universality of Burns’s appeal is the focus of Ballantine’s description, and Burns serves as a unifying figure for all social, professional, and political affiliations. At a time when such distinctions served as insurmountable obstacles between individuals, the mythologization of Burns as a transcendent social character, whose birthday serves as a de-facto national holiday, was a politically charged affair. His poetry and his biography

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<sup>149</sup> Whatley, *Burns Was a Radical*, 639-666.

<sup>150</sup> McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity*, 422.

<sup>151</sup> Ballantine, James. *Chronicle of the Hundredth Birthday of Robert Burns*. Edinburgh: A Fullerton and Company, 1859. 440-443.

became a proxy battleground, reflecting once more the complications of his existence as the “Ploughman Bard” and “Scotland’s National Poet.”

### **Political Background**

Great Britain was barely more than a half-century old at the time of Burns’s birth in 1759. The relationship between Scotland and England had been fraught for centuries before the passage of the Act of Union in 1706. A century earlier, King James VI approved a commission to investigate the possibility of arranging a political union between Scotland and England.<sup>152</sup> In 1604, the monarch approved the *Proclamation of the Union of England and Scotland*: “we have thought good to discontinue the names of England and Scotland out of our regal style and intend and resolve to take and assume unto us in manner and form hereafter expressed the name and style of Great Britain.”<sup>153</sup> James hoped that the formal union of crowns would lead quickly to the parliamentary and cultural unification of his dominion. Instead, it would take a further century for his dream of a single nation to become a reality, and when the two disparate cultures united politically in 1707, they struggled to create a cohesive cultural identity.

For forty years, an uneasy status quo existed. While attempts were made to create a unified British identity, the Whitehall government was content to allow Highland Scottish clans to continue to operate as semi-autonomous political units. Unionist propaganda circulated and met with limited success. Songs and poems such as James Thomson’s “Rule Britannia”<sup>154</sup> served partially as an attempt to bridge the divide

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<sup>152</sup> Prothero, George Walter. *Select Statutes and Other Constitutional Documents Illustrative of the Reigns of Elizabeth and James I.* New York: Clarendon Press, 1894. 251.

<sup>153</sup> Prothero, *Select Statutes*, 392.

<sup>154</sup> Written in 1740.

between the previously independent nations. Though Thomson was a native Scot, his most famous work is an obvious attempt to create a unified sense of British identity. “Rule Britannia” begins in dramatic fashion by appealing to Britain’s sense of religious identification: “Britain first at Heaven’s command / arose from out the azure main.”<sup>155</sup> This appeal to religious authority represents an attempt to remove British identity from temporal concerns. Thompson elevated the creation of Britain from a political act, accomplished through complex and controversial Parliamentary maneuvering, to an act of divine inspiration. A British citizen could question the motives of members of Parliament, but questioning the motives of “Heaven” was an entirely different (and more complicated) matter. While elevating the act of creation accomplishes its rhetorical goal, it also reveals Thompson’s insecurities. There are elements of revisionism present; instead of admitting that England and Scotland ever existed as independent entities, Thompson would have the reader believe that Britain was a natural creation, rather than an artificial construction. He furthers the sense of inherent naturalism by writing, “this was the charter of the land.”<sup>156</sup> Thompson attempts to create a sense of inherited identification through the usage of a charter. A charter is a founding document, and this represents an additional attempt to link the foundation of Britain to Heaven’s command. The charter derives from a religious authority, implying that those who oppose Britain oppose God.

Scots were not convinced. The Jacobite uprising of 1745, which represented an attempt by Charles Stuart to reclaim the British throne by raising a Scottish army, fundamentally transformed the relationship between England and Scotland. Following his

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<sup>155</sup> Thomson, James. “Rule Britannia,” ll. 1-2.

<sup>156</sup> *Rule Britannia*, l. 3.

defeat at the Battle of Culloden, Charles fled to France, and reprisals began as Parliament took steps to actively assimilate Scotland into the new “British” culture.<sup>157</sup> The conciliatory attitude of Thomson and other propagandists quickly became a thing of the past. Though the government had previously tolerated a level of cultural autonomy, the British Parliament passed the Heritable Jurisdictions Act in 1746, which decimated Scottish traditions. Scottish clan chieftains had been allowed to continue to adjudicate civil and criminal cases (the heritable jurisdictions of the Act’s title) among their subjects; the Act stripped these rights from the clans.<sup>158</sup> In addition, the chieftains were now unable to call upon their tenants to provide military services, a dynamic which fatally undermined the Scots’ ability to maintain an autonomous defense force. After 1746, all military forces in Scotland would be exclusively recruited and maintained by the British state, ensuring that power flowed from London, rather than from the clans. Furthermore, Parliament granted £152,000 for the purchase of heritable jurisdictions and the transfer of those jurisdictions to the High Court of the Justiciary.

Opponents of the Act pointed out that the jurisdictions had been guaranteed to Scotland by the articles of the Act of Union, but the act was considered “necessary to improve the system of domestic government; for in Scotland, the administration of justice was not, as in England, regulated by the supreme authority of the Crown... the various

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<sup>157</sup> Britain from 1742-1854 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Online. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/615557/United-Kingdom/44893/Britain-from-1742-to-1754?anchor=ref483261>. Accessed March 13, 2014.

<sup>158</sup> Chambers, Robert. *History of the Rebellion of 1745-46*. Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1869. 475.

denominations of these Heritable Jurisdictions manifest the extent of evil.”<sup>159</sup> The Bill passed with 137 members of Parliament voting in favor and 53 members dissenting.<sup>160</sup>

Parliament was not finished with their attempts to wipe away the last vestiges of Scotland’s independence. The Act of Proscription was a deliberate attempt on the part of the British government to eliminate Scottish cultural traditions. One of the most notorious sections, which dealt with the wearing of “Highland Dress,” prescribed, “no man or boy within that part of Britain called Scotland, other than such as shall be employed as Officers and Soldiers in His Majesty’s Forces, shall, on any pretext whatever, wear or put on the clothes commonly called Highland clothes (that is to say) the Plaid, Philabeg, or little Kilt, Trowse, Shoulder-belts, or any part whatever of what peculiarly belongs to the Highland garb.”<sup>161</sup> Crucially, the Act included onerous punishments, ranging from imprisonment to transport to penal colonies, ensuring that the provisions were widely followed.

Samuel Johnson would testify to the Act’s effectiveness during his famous visit to Scotland:

In the islands the plaid is rarely worn. The law by which the Highlanders have been obliged to change their form of their dress, has, in all the places that we have visited, been universally obeyed...their attire is such as produces, in a sufficient degree, the effect intended by the law, of abolishing the dissimilitude of appearance between the Highlanders and the other inhabitants of Britain.<sup>162</sup>

The objective of the “Dress Act” had been achieved, eliminating a foundational component of the cultural differences between England and Scotland. Johnson’s use of the phrase, “other inhabitants of Britain,” further evokes a unified nation during a

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<sup>159</sup> Coxe, William. *Memoirs of the Administration of the Right Honourable Henry Pelham, Collected from the Family Papers, and Other Authentic Documents*. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1829. 351.

<sup>160</sup> Coxe, *Memoirs*, 353.

<sup>161</sup> Text of the Act of Proscription.

<sup>162</sup> Johnson, Samuel. *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*. London: W. Strahan, 1775. 176-177.

particularly fraught passage. Though he was more than content to describe his visit to “Scotland,” the people that he met along the way were now considered other Britons, rather than Scots, a crucial distinction. Johnson continued, observing that the judicial components of the Act had also been completely successful:

Their chiefs being now deprived of their jurisdiction, have already lost much of their influence; and as they have gradually denigrated from patriarchal rulers to rapacious landlords, they will divest themselves of the little that remains... The last law, by which the Highlanders are deprived of their arms has operated with efficacy beyond expectation.<sup>163</sup>

The complete breakdown of clan-based social and judicial systems allowed room for British identity to take hold in mid and late-eighteenth century Scotland. During Burns’s early life, dominant political issues included the spread of democracy and humanitarianism, which held particular sway in Scotland’s politically liberal circles in the wake of their cultural disenfranchisement.<sup>164</sup> It was into this reconfigured national and political environment that Burns was born and would leave his mark.

### **Burns and America**

Burns did not shy away from directly addressing contemporary political concerns. This candor would create problems for the poet in later life, when he would be accused of sedition while depending upon his income as a government employee. However, Burns’s willingness to discuss controversial issues led directly to some of his most fascinating poetry. Burns repeatedly demonstrated an intimate familiarity with the political concerns of eighteenth-century Britain, writing on the American Revolution, Parliamentary politics and elections, and eventually by writing loyalist poetry in the post-revolutionary period.

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<sup>163</sup> Johnson, *Journey*, 332-333.

<sup>164</sup> Butler, Marilyn. “Burns and Politics.” *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*. Ed. Robert Crawford. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997. 89.

Burns's political affiliation remains a deeply contested issue, but the material which he provided in his poems, "When Guilford Guid" and "Ode [for General Washington's Birthday]," leave little doubt about his sympathies in the decade-long conflict between the American colonies and their British overseers. Burns's treatments of the American Revolution demonstrate Burns's deep sympathy towards the rebels. He wrote in a manner which directly compared the plight of the American colonists to their Scottish brethren, intentionally (and dangerously) positioning himself as an ally.

"When Guilford Guid" is generally accepted as the first of Burns's political poems. The poet did not publish it in the 1786 Kilmarnock edition of his work; instead, the song made an appearance in the 1787 Edinburgh reprinting, which included a number of new works.<sup>165</sup> Written in 1784, the song takes readers through the course of the American Revolution in nine stanzas that are blatantly sympathetic to the colonial cause. Burns was conscious of the danger presented by the poem's political sentiments, writing in a letter to Henry Erskine:

I showed the enclosed political ballad to my Lord Glencairn, to have his opinion on whether I should publish it; as I suspect my political tenets, such as they are, may be rather heretical in the opinion of some of my best friends. I have a few first principles in Religion and Politics, which, I believe, I would not easily part with; but for the etiquette of, by whom, in what manners &c. I would not have a dissocial word about it with any one of God's creatures, particularly an honoured patron, or a respected friend.

Burns's reluctance stemmed from his satirical treatment of almost every major British general and politician involved in the perpetuation of the American War. Both Whigs and Tories were explicitly criticized, in lines such as "Then Clubs an' Hearts were Charlie's cartes / He swept the stakes awa' man / Till the Diamond's Ace, of Indian Race, / Led

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<sup>165</sup> Noble and Hogg, *Canongate*, 223.



him a sair faux pas man.”<sup>166</sup> The “Diamond’s Ace of Indian Race” is a reference to the stinging defeat of the East India Bill proposed by the Fox-North coalition government that ruled for a brief time in 1783. Though the Bill passed the House of Commons, King George III made it known in the House of Lords (who still approved all legislation that did not involve taxation) that any Peer who voted for the Bill would incur his displeasure. Subsequently, William Pitt the Younger rose to power.<sup>167</sup> Burn’s poem would serve as a humiliating reminder to any supporters of Fox and North that their leaders had lost power in spectacular fashion. Fox was particularly beloved by Whigs, one of the two primary party affiliations of the late eighteenth century in British Parliamentary politics.<sup>168</sup>

Burns was an equal opportunity offender. He claimed that “word and blow, North, Fox, and Co. / Gowff’d Willie like a ba’, man; / Till Suthron raise, an’ coost their claise / Behind him in a raw, man.”<sup>169</sup> These lines were meant to insinuate that the new Prime Minister’s position was thanks to the “Suthron” or Southern (English) interests and that he did not represent Scotland. The insulting insinuation that North and Fox would be able to “gowff” (golf) Willie like a ball was meant to belittle Pitt and the Tories. Pitt succeeded to the position of Prime Minister at the tender age of twenty-four, and the diminutive “Willie” evokes his inexperience, particularly in the political arena. Burns goes a step further, concluding, “An’ Caledon [Scotland] threw by the drone / An’ did her whittle [knife] draw, man; / An’ swoor fu’ rude, thro’ dirt an’ bluid [blood] / To mak it

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<sup>166</sup> Robert Burns, “When Guilford Guid,” ll. 49-53.

<sup>167</sup> “India Bill.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.  
[http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285603/India-Bill.](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285603/India-Bill)

<sup>168</sup> “Charles James Fox.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 18 Mar. 2014.  
[http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215350/Charles-James-Fox.](http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/215350/Charles-James-Fox)

<sup>169</sup> Burns, “When Guilford Guid” ll. 65-69.

guid in law, man.”<sup>170</sup> Here, the poet threatens armed revolt from the Scots, who will make their independence “good in law,” just as the Americans had done through the Treaty of Paris. Burns uses the newly formed United States as an aspirational model for the Scots, a hugely threatening image. Thus, in his depiction, Scotland passes from a passive observer of political intrigue to a transformative force that cannot be ignored.

The first stanzas of the poem deftly portray the military situation in America, referencing the Boston Tea Party in addition to Britain’s losses at the Battles of Saratoga and Yorktown, intensely embarrassing events that caused the resignation of Lord North, who had served as Prime Minister.<sup>171</sup> Though the main importance of the poem derives from its contemptuous treatment of the London political establishment, it also serves to demonstrate that Burns had a keen grasp of the political implications of the Revolutionary War. Though he would often be portrayed in later life as a “heaven taught ploughman,” three years before his poems were first published, he was writing insightful critiques of British foreign policy, showcasing his connection with the world beyond Scotland. Burns’s intense interest in contemporary politics contrasts dramatically with biographers’ portrayals in later years.

John Wilson, who wrote an early character sketch of Burns, claimed that his political poems were inspired mainly by a desire to “astonish dull people by daring things, to see how they looked with their hair on end.”<sup>172</sup> This description undermined the notion that Burns possessed any deeply held political convictions that were carefully developed through a thorough study of contemporary issues, instead reducing his role to

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<sup>170</sup> Burns, “When Guilford Guid,” ll. 69-72.

<sup>171</sup> Mackay, James. “Analysis of the Ballad on the American War.” World Burns Club, [http://www.cobbler.plus.com/wbc/expert/expert\\_ballad\\_on\\_the\\_american\\_war.htm](http://www.cobbler.plus.com/wbc/expert/expert_ballad_on_the_american_war.htm). Accessed March 17, 2014.

<sup>172</sup> Wilson, John. *The Genius and Character of Burns*. New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845. 172.

that of a dilettante. In addition to these dismissive descriptions of Burns's political poetry, the persistent image of Burns as an "unlettered ploughman" was a damaging influence. If Burns only possessed a rudimentary education, it would follow that he was not able to perceptively critique government policy. Through such maneuvers, his political squibs became less troublesome for the Tory unionists who wished to claim Burns as a British nationalist.

"When Guilford Guid" was not Burns's only critical work on Britain's pursuit of the war in the colonies. His "Ode to General Washington's Birthday," written in 1794, also sounded a note of support for the rebels. Vitally, he directly attacked England and linked parliamentary movements to English identity, distancing himself from claims that the government represented the entirety of Britain. In a stirring stanza, Burns claimed that Washington was

Surrounded by the tuneful choir,  
The bards that erst have struck the patriot lyre,  
And rous'd the freeborn Briton's soul of fire,  
No more thy England own!  
Dare injured nations form the great design,  
To make detested tyrants bleed?  
Thy England execrates the glorious deed!  
Beneath her hostile banners waving,  
Every pang of honour braving,  
England in thunder calls, "The tyrant's cause is mine!"<sup>173</sup>

The ode is normally associated with the glorification of an individual. However, in his antistrophe, Burns delivered a damning indictment of England's participation in the American Revolution. The thirty-second through thirty-fourth lines condemn Washington's opponents through an artistic lens, when Burns writes that "the bards that

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<sup>173</sup> Burns, Robert. "Ode for General Washington's Birthday." ll. 31-39.

erst have struck the patriot lyre / And rous'd the freeborn Briton's soul of fire, / No more thy England own!"

The intentional use of the word "patriot" serves a number of rhetorical purposes in a variety of readings. It could grant legitimacy to the American nation, as the bards are inspired to sing for the fledgling state. Burns's conscious invocation of patriotism sharply diverges from the typical treatment of the American general as a rebel. However, nowhere within Burns's ode is rebellion mentioned, inferring that the colonists' insurrection was something else entirely. The invocation of the bards links the Americans' cause to artistic expression. The lines, "dare injured nations form the great design / To make detested tyrants bleed," are inclusive, suggesting that more than one nation suffers under the yoke of tyrannical oppression. Given Burns's treatment of the English in the second stanza, it is implied that Scotland is another nation that might rebel, making the ode to General Washington an impassioned plea for freedom from their southern neighbors. England is explicitly portrayed as a "hostile" force, fighting against liberty and claiming "the tyrant's cause." While the American rebels enjoyed considerable support from political liberals throughout the British Isles, this support rarely took such a directly confrontational tone.<sup>174</sup>

Notably, the poem was not published and instead circulated among Burns's friends, including Mrs. Frances Dunlop, a political conservative.<sup>175</sup> When the poem first appeared in Cromek's *Reliques*, the editor excised the entire first and second stanzas, which praised American independence and condemned England's intervention respectively. Instead, Cromek allowed the final stanza, which serves as a relatively

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<sup>174</sup> Butler, *Burns and Politics*, 89.

<sup>175</sup> Butler, *Burns and Politics*, 90.

innocuous glorification of Scotland's military history, to serve as the entirety of the poem, which was retitled "An Ode to Liberty."<sup>176</sup> Edward Pinnington, a Scottish art historian, biographer, and journalist, traced the publication history of the poem, including a facsimile of the original manuscript poem, which contained the first two stanzas as they are commonly printed today.<sup>177</sup> Currie excluded the "Ode" entirely, despite his apparent knowledge of the poem.<sup>178</sup> Later academics attempted to link the manuscript which contained the "Ode" to another of Burns's famous poems, "The Vision," in what became known as the Philadelphian theory. Pinnington, writing in 1900, ended with the withering assessment, "to sum up, none of the leading editions of Burns contains an accurate rendering of the text of the Washington Ode...the Philadelphian theory adopted by Mr. Wallace is both absolutely baseless and intrinsically unreasonable."<sup>179</sup>

The contentious dispute surrounding the origin and form of the "Ode" demonstrates the ability that editorial decisions had to wreak havoc upon how Burns's political poetry was understood. In isolation, the third stanza was deemed politically palatable enough to be published in the early nineteenth century. However, it took until 1873 for the work to be published in its entirety, an examples of the political censorship, which often occurred with Burns's poetry in the earliest collected editions of his poetry.

Burns used America as an emblematic promised land and a point of anti-landlord, anti-aristocratic sentiment in his poem, "Address of Beelzebub," written in 1786.<sup>180</sup> As a preface to the poem testified, he was inspired by the actions of Scottish landholders who

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<sup>176</sup> Pinnington, Edward. "Burns's Ode for Washington's Birthday." *Burns Chronicle and Club Directory, Volumes 6-9*. Kilmarnock: Burns Federation, 1902. 52.

<sup>177</sup> Pinnington, *Burns's Ode*, 52.

<sup>178</sup> Pinnington, *Burns's Ode*, 56.

<sup>179</sup> Pinnington, *Burns's Ode*, 65.

<sup>180</sup> Butler, *Burns and Politics*, 91.

were attempting to prevent their tenants from immigrating to North America.<sup>181</sup> In addition to Washington, Burns invoked Hancock and Franklin, suggesting that a Scottish version of both was soon to appear on the political scene:

Some daring Hancocke, or a Franklin,  
 May set their Highland bluid a-ranklin;  
 Some Washington again may head them,  
 Or some Montgomery, fearless, lead them,  
 Till God knows what may be effected  
 When by such heads and hearts directed,  
 Poor dunghill sons of dirt and mire  
 May to Patrician rights aspire!  
 Nae sage North now, nor sager Sackville,  
 To watch and premier o'er the pack vile, -  
 An' whare will ye get Howes and Clintons  
 To bring them to a right repentance-  
 To cowe the rebel generation,  
 An' save the honour o' the nation?  
 They, an' be d-d! what right hae they  
 To meat, or sleep, or light o' day?  
 Far less-to riches, pow'r, or freedom,  
 But what your lordship likes to gie them?<sup>182</sup>

Unsurprisingly, a poem with such dramatic democratic sentiments was not published until 1818.<sup>183</sup> The address' political points were particularly sensitive, as they seemed to undermine the portrait that Burns painted of an idealized village world in some of his most beloved works, especially "The Cotter's Saturday Night." As Marilyn Butler notes, Burns's persona is notably harsh in this particular poem, a tone which confers more risk than a humorous satire of the sensitive subject matter.<sup>184</sup>

The political poems that were published in Burns's lifetime tended to have a redeeming comedic quality. For instance, "The Twa Dogs," which opened both the 1786

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<sup>181</sup> Burns, Robert. "Address of Beelzebub." *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Volume I*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968.

<sup>182</sup> Burns, "Address to Beelzebub," ll. 13-30.

<sup>183</sup> Whatley, *Politics*, 650.

<sup>184</sup> Butler, *Burns and Politics*, 93.

Kilmarnock and 1787 Edinburgh editions, expressed many of the same sentiments concerning landowners and their relationship to their tenants as the “Address to Beelzebub.” Burns was able to publish it because he took a much gentler approach, delivering its critique through the satirical perspective of two animals. The relationship between authorial tone and political palatability was thus established early in his publication history.

Burns’s invocation of the “honour of the nation” infers that the immigrants are saving Britain’s metaphorical soul, once more explicitly linking an act of rebellion against the political status quo to a morally desirable state. The mention of Clinton and Howe is meant to ironically underscore the impossibility of the patrician’s task. Both generals failed to ensure that the colonies maintained their allegiance to Britain, representing a failure to “cove the rebel generation.” Thus, the landholder’s legal pursuit of their tenants would bring them even less success than the British military’s attempt to maintain their hold on their American assets.<sup>185</sup> The censure of Lord North, who was in charge of the “vile pack” is the kind of direct denunciation that would have made the poem impossible to publish. The political references would have been so apparent to an eighteenth-century audience that they would have been unable to escape their rhetorical intention; he was writing about the most pressing political matters of the period.

“Address to Beelzebub” reflects one of Burns’s most oft-repeated political sentiments; that America is a land of freedom that Scots should emulate. The suggestion that a “Hancocke or Franklin” will appear to set “Highland bluid (blood) a’ranklin” confronts the deepest fears of many parliamentary observers in the wake of the Jacobite rebellions. The debasement of peasant life in the first stanza departs sharply from the

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<sup>185</sup> Crawford, *Burns*, 163.

accepted view of rural life as a moral holdfast and implies that the peasantry deserves not only a better life but also the same quality of life and the “rights” that their Patrician overlords possess. All of this takes on religious significance when Burns invokes God, a blatant attempt to align the immigrants with divine authority. In another life, Burns may have been an effective propagandist. His restatement of the patrician’s position in the last four lines of the stanza: “what right hae they / To meat, or sleep, or light o’ day? / Far less to riches, pow’r or freedom, / But what your lordship likes to gie them?” masterfully undermines the nobility’s claim to their tenants. Thomas Crawford, writing in 1960, expressed the opinion that “there are few lines in English poetry which express so violent a hatred of a ruling class as [those] four.”<sup>186</sup> These lines are delivered by Beelzebub, lending religious authority to their condemnation and aligning the upper classes directly with the powers of Hell.

### **Democracy and Liberty**

If America served as an aspirational model for Burns, it was because he saw the nascent nation as the fulfillment of some of his most enduring personal philosophies. Strong veins of democratic sentiment and a devotion to personal liberty stand out among his poetic production, ranging from “The Twa Dogs,” which served as the first poem in both the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions of his poetry, to some of his final published works, including “A Man’s a Man for a’ That,” written a year before his death. In between, songs such as “A Fragment on Glenriddel’s Fox Breaking His Chain” and

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<sup>186</sup> Crawford, Thomas. *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960. 163.



“Lines Written on the Windows of the Globe Tavern, Dumfries” illustrated his continued devotion to points of view that frequently bordered on sedition.

“The Twa Dogs” was innovative in both form and content, and was published as a mock dialogue between two canines, Caesar and Luath. The dogs belong to a Scottish nobleman and farmer respectively and discuss inequality between the classes before coming to the ironic conclusion that nobles are less satisfied with their lives than poor people, who at the very least are able to enjoy the company of their family. Caesar claims that the nobility’s days are “insipid, dull, an’ tasteless; / their nights unquiet, lang, and restless... / there’s sic parade, sic pomp, an’ art, / The joy can scarcely reach their heart.”<sup>187</sup> Luath admits that the poor are “no sae wretched’s ane wad think./ Tho’ constantly on poortith’s brink, / They’re sae accustom’d wi’ the sight,/ The view o’t gives them little fright.”<sup>188</sup> Though comedic on its face (the revelation literally comes from the mouths of dogs), Burns offers a serious point. In a significant fashion, he affirms that the lower classes are morally superior to the nobility. The vivid language used by Caesar, including adjectives such as “insipid,” “dull,” and “tasteless,” serve as an indictment of the extravagant lifestyle of Scotland’s wealthiest residents.

The dog directly assaults the customary European tours taken by British gentry, claiming that such trips lead to “[Britain’s] destruction! / Wi’ dissipation, feud, an’ faction.”<sup>189</sup> This serves as an inversion of the typical portrait of the “Grand Tour,” which was usually seen as a legitimate means for the nobility to acquire sophistication and

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<sup>187</sup> Burns, Robert. “The Twa Dogs.” *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Volume I*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968.

<sup>188</sup> Burns, “Twa Dogs.”

<sup>189</sup> Burns, “Twa Dogs.”

knowledge of the wider world and thus enrich the nation as a whole.<sup>190</sup> E.P. Thompson claims that “ruling class control in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was located primarily in cultural hegemony, and only secondarily in an expression of economic or physical (military) power.” The Grand Tour served as one of the primary means of asserting such hegemony. Thus, by attacking the tour, Burns was undermining the notion that the acquisition of such knowledge by the wealthy was a legitimate means of bolstering the position of Britain as a whole. The poet’s equation of the operas and plays attended by the rich with the destruction of the nation was a powerful assault on such “cultural hegemony.” Luath serves to emphasize the unsubtle critique, when he reminds readers that the money for such tours came directly from poor individuals such as his owner.

This assessment of one of the most treasured conventions of the European gentry had the potential to be inflammatory. Multiple critics have pointed to the playful tone that Burns used as a mediating influence that allowed the poem to remain relatively “safe” by the standards of the time.<sup>191</sup> David Sampson went so far as to suggest that the humor of “‘The Twa Dogs’ emasculates the social criticism.”<sup>192</sup> Certainly, the poem has received less attention than its apparently inflammatory sentiments might have otherwise provoked. James Currie attempted to render the poem completely unproblematic with his claim that Burns was attempting to “incalculate a lesson of contentment on the lower classes of society, by shewing that their superiors are neither much better nor happier

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<sup>190</sup> See EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 43. Thompson claims that “ruling class control in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was located primarily in cultural hegemony, and only secondarily in an expression of economic or physical (military) power.” The Grand Tour served as one of the primary means of asserting such hegemony. Thus, by undermining the tour, Burns undermined this hegemony.

<sup>191</sup> Sampson, David. “Robert Burns: The Revival of Scottish Literature.” *Modern Language Review* 80: January 1985, 16-38.

<sup>192</sup> Sampson, *Burns: Revival*, 30.

than themselves.”<sup>193</sup> Currie continued in this fashion, stating that the two dogs “[gambol], before they sit down to moralize, are described with an equal degree of happiness.”<sup>194</sup> Since the dogs are recognized as representative members of the upper and lower classes, this interpretation suggests that the two are already in fact and by nature of the same disposition, rendering Burns’s more complex commentary moot. Alan Cunningham supported Currie’s point of view, writing that the poem proved that “happiness is not unequally diffused.”<sup>195</sup> Thus, contemporary critics were able to transform Burns’s condemnation of the gentry’s excesses into a defense of their moral and social stature.

“A Man’s a Man for A’ That” provided a similar rebuke to the upper class and advocated for the moral equality of all mankind, a truly hazardous venture in the wake of the panic stirred by the French Revolution. Written in 1795, a year before Burns’s death, the song was selected as a part of the ceremony celebrating the opening of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999, demonstrating the lasting power of the democratic sentiments that Burns expressed. In 2009, the BBC gathered over sixty actors, politicians, and authors to serve as readers for all of Burns 716 poems. The group included His Royal Highness, Charles, Prince of Wales, Robbie Coltrane, best known for playing Hagrid in the “Harry Potter” film series, and Alex Salmond, leader of the Scottish Nationalist Party. Salmond was selected to read “A Man’s a Man for A’ That,” a deliberate choice that acknowledged the particularly inflammatory position the poem holds in discussions of Burns’s work.

The poem was another part of the Burns canon that endured significant tribulations in its publication. Originally appearing in the *Glasgow Magazine* in August

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<sup>193</sup> Currie, James. *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*. London: William Milner 1845. lxxxv.

<sup>194</sup> Currie, *Works*, lxxxv.

<sup>195</sup> Sampson, *Revival*, 30.

1795, “For A’ That” was printed in at least three more publications in the ensuing year, though it appeared without the first verse in the *Glasgow Magazine*, *The Oracle* (June 1796), and the *Scots Magazine* (August 1796).<sup>196</sup> The poem was not published in its entirety until 1822, yet another of Burns’s works to be censored due to its “revolutionary” sentiment.

To be fair to Burns’s publishers, the first verse was certainly inflammatory:

Is there for honest Poverty  
 That Hings his head, an’ a’ that;  
 The coward slave-we pass him by,  
 We dare be poor for a’ that!  
 For a’ that, an a’ that.  
 Our toils obscure an’ a’ that,  
 The rank is but the guinea’s stamp,  
 The Man’s the gowd for a’ that.<sup>197</sup>

Combining a potentially blasphemous invocation, (comparing “Man” with “God”) in an angry tone, the poem was unquestionably radical from the outset. Burns consciously aligned himself with the plight of the poor through his use of the pronoun “we,” though by this point, he had experienced the heady success of Edinburgh. The final line asserts man’s worthiness in the face of social inequality, denouncing the hierarchical structure which places value on men based primarily upon their economic status. The first stanza is defiant, a declaration against the social markers which defined the relationships between Scots throughout the eighteenth century. It is unsurprising that the poem did not make its way into Currie’s “complete” works of Burns, and was excised entirely.

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<sup>196</sup> Robb, David and Eckhard, John, “‘A Man’s a Man for a’ That’ and ‘Trotz Alledem’: Robert Burns, Ferdinand Freiligrath, and Their Reception in the German Folksong Movement.” *Modern Language Review* 106.1: January 2011, 17-46.

<sup>197</sup> Burns, Robert. “A Man’s a Man for A’ That.” *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Volume II*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968. ll. 1-8.

Burns continued to make his disdain for the upper classes clear in the second stanza, when he explicitly set the peasantry and nobility in opposition to one another: “what though on hamely fare we dine, / Wear hoddin grey, an’ a that; / Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine; / A Man’s a Man for a’ that.”<sup>198</sup> In his mind, the acquisition of material wealth was equivalent to foolishness and knavery and completely divorced from the moral stature of an individual. The “homely fare” serves as a moralizing tool, as does the “hoddin grey,” making the lack of possessions into a symbol of worthiness, rather than a mark of shame.

Burns continues to elevate the lower classes when he claims that “the honest man, tho e’er sae poor, / Is king of men for a’ that.”<sup>199</sup> His equation of the king and his subjects was especially dangerous in the wake of Louis’ execution by the French revolutionaries. By claiming that all men were kings, Burns was endorsing one of the most provocative (and potentially treasonous) sentiments of the time. To further the impression that he was criticizing the monarchy, Burns chose the tune, “Lady McIntosh’s Reel,” which was commonly associated with the Jacobitism.<sup>200</sup> In addition, the repeated refrain of “for a’ that” serves a distinct rhetorical purpose; it makes the reader aware of all the difficulties facing the lower classes and their worth in the face of those difficulties.

The final stanza serves as a call to action: “it’s coming yet for a’ that, / That Man to Man, the world o’er / Shall brothers be for a’ that.”<sup>201</sup> Burns’s localized support for American revolutionaries was relatively innocuous, particularly given the widespread sympathy for the colonists among political liberals. However, his invocation of the entire

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<sup>198</sup> Burns, “For a’ That,” 9-12.

<sup>199</sup> Burns, “For a’ That,” 15-16.

<sup>200</sup> Robb and John, *Burns and the German Folksong Movement*, 19.

<sup>201</sup> Burns, “For a’ That,” 37-40.

world, which was clearly intended to include Great Britain, was far more problematic. Throughout 1793 and 1794, an increasingly conservative British judicial system was aggressively prosecuting Scottish “radicals,” and transportation was viewed as a viable method of punishment.<sup>202</sup> In 1793, two of Burns’s acquaintances, James Tytler and Thomas Muir, were prosecuted for sedition. Muir was sentenced to fourteen-years transportation to Botany Bay.<sup>203</sup> Burns was evidently brought before a board that questioned his political allegiances in the aftermath of the French Revolution, an event which produced consternation in the poet.<sup>204</sup> It is unlikely a coincidence that some of Burns’s most unequivocally “unionist” poetry, including “The Dumfries Volunteers,” which threatened death for all those who failed to support Great Britain’s cause, was published in the immediate aftermath of these trials. Through the rest of 1793, Burns steers clear of political affairs in his letters, a marked departure from his approach the previous year.<sup>205</sup> This combination suggests that Burns had at least some concern about his own personal security in the heightened political atmosphere that prevailed in the year of Louis XVI’s execution.

Unionists made concerted attempts to distance Burns from his own democratic poems, suggesting that they were transient expressions of the misguided poet. Sir Archibald Alison, the son of one of Burns’s correspondents, exhibited this view during the centenary celebrations of Burns’s birth:

the few poems of Burns which we now lament have long since passed into oblivion, and those on which his immortal fame is rested are as pure as the driven snow. And, as such, they will form an unseen bond which will for ever unite

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<sup>202</sup> Whatley, “Burns as Radical,” 641.

<sup>203</sup> MacKay, *Burns*, 540.

<sup>204</sup> Carruthers, Gerald. “Robert Burns and the Excise” *Electric Scotland*.

[http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns\\_lives102.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/frank/burns_lives102.htm). Accessed 4/4/14.

<sup>205</sup> Mackay, *Burns*, 541.

Britons and their children in every part of the world- a bond which will survive the maturity of colonies, the severance of empire; and 'Auld Langsyne' will hold together the wide-spread descendants of the British empire when grown into independent states.<sup>206</sup>

This extraordinary speech was an attempt to wipe Burns's radical poetry from his canon. The heightened emotional and political atmosphere surrounding celebrations of Burns's hundredth birthday revealed the political implications of the developing Burns "canon." Alison ties Burns into his narrative of unification by discarding certain works while explicitly using words such as "unite" and expanding the scope of Burns's work to "every part of the world." Alison's address is clearly designed to counter nationalist readings of Burns.

On the same day that Alison delivered his speech "celebrating" the poet's work, a Colonel Shaw delivered a speech at the Working Men's Reform association that celebrated Burns by singing "a man's a man for a' that" and tying Burns explicitly to the cause of universal manhood suffrage. Shaw proclaimed that the gathering was not "for the purpose of doing homage to Burns' private character, no nor even to his genius; we have assembled for the purpose of doing justice to the reformer."<sup>207</sup> Shaw's willingness to distance himself from Burns's morality demonstrates a shift in prioritization for the nationalist readers of the poet's work. Instead of focusing on the intangible artistic merits of Burns, these Scottish partisans turned his poems and songs into political tools. Furthermore, Shaw's claim that he was "doing justice to the reformer" insinuates that Burns's political messages were of paramount importance, a fundamental and vitally important shift in understanding the poet's work.

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<sup>206</sup> Ballantine, *Chronicle*, 43.

<sup>207</sup> Ballantine, *Chronicle*, 117.

## Scottish Nationalism

Shaw and the other “reformers” were enabled by the copious volume of Burns’s poetry that directly addressed the question of royal authority in 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. Burns wrote several poems that were overtly critical of the new Georgian regime, and harkened back to the reign of the Stuarts as an aspirational model. Given the dangerous climate in which he was writing, it was imperative that such poems remained anonymous, and most were circulated amongst friends or as part of the *Scots Musical Museum*, which served as a relatively safe means of transmitting dissent. Burns worked upon *The Museum* between 1787 and his death in 1796. Works that might have otherwise been considered seditious were tolerated in the musical museum, since the magazine was supposedly a collection of past Scottish folk songs and sentiments, and thus did not possess the immediately threatening connotations of contemporary dissident prose and poetry. Notably, Burns was credited as an “editor” rather than as an “author” of the “Scots Musical Museum,” and though the title was technically correct (most, if not all, of the final songs had their basis in previously known songs), his “editing” was so transformative that it often changed the entire meaning of the work.<sup>208</sup>

“Scots Wha Hae” serves as one of Burns’s most enduring works, maintaining a legendary status within Scottish Nationalist circles.<sup>209</sup> In the song, Burns implicitly addressed some of the issues raised by French revolutionaries while explicitly recalling the triumph of Scottish forces against the English at the Battle of Bannockburn.

Unusually for such a politically charged work, the song was published in a London

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<sup>208</sup> Carol McGuirk notes that several songs, such as “Auld Lang Syne” and “A red, red Rose” are often “misjudged” as largely traditional, due in part to their appearance in *The Scots Musical Museum*. McGuirk, “Jacobite History to National Song: Robert Burns and Carolina Oliphant (Baroness Nairne).” *The Eighteenth Century* 47.2/3 (2006), 253-287.

<sup>209</sup> Indeed, the song is the anthem of the current Scottish Nationalist Party.



magazine in 1794. However, for English publication, Burns was forced to add the disclaimer that the poem was “a thing [the editors] have met with by accident, and unknown to me.”<sup>210</sup> Burns’s most directly confrontational song charged directly into nationalist rhetoric, invoking Scottish heroes, William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, in the first stanza and continually referencing English “oppression” and Scotland’s enforced “servitude.” Burns knew exactly what he was doing with his inflammatory language; in fact, he had been warned to tone down some of the more openly rebellious passages by a patron. In a letter to his editor George Thomson, Burns admitted that “I showed the air to Urbani,<sup>211</sup> who was highly pleased with it, and begged me to make soft verses for it; but I had no idea of giving myself any trouble on the subject, till the accidental recollection of that glorious struggle for freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of some other struggles of the same nature, not quite so ancient, roused my rhyming nature.”<sup>212</sup> Burns’s adamant refusal to tone down his fiery rhetoric led to the production of an undiluted patriotic ode, and his explicit connection between the “glorious struggle for freedom” and his own “rhyming nature” invoked a muse far more troublesome than the “poetic genius of [his] country” that inspired the Kilmarnock edition of his poetry. In “Scots Wha Hae,” Burns’s supposed muse was revolution itself:

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,  
 Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
 Welcome to your gory bed,  
 Or to Victorie...

See approach proud Edward's power  
 Chains and Slaverie...

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<sup>210</sup> Quoted in Kinsley, *Volume 3*, 1440.

<sup>211</sup> Urbani was an Italian-born musician who resided in Scotland, teaching and composing operas. Eventually, he moved into music publishing, where he was a rival with George Thomson, Burns’s editor.

<sup>212</sup> Burns letter to George Thomson, September 1, 1793.

Wha, for Scotland's King and Law,  
 Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
 Free-man stand, or Free-man fa',  
 Let him follow me.

By Oppression's woes and pains!  
 By your Sons in servile chains!  
 We will drain our dearest veins,  
 But they shall be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!  
 Tyrants fall in every foe!  
 Liberty's in every blow!  
 Let us Do- or Die!!!<sup>213</sup>

In publication, Burns's rhetoric was tempered by Thomson's suggestion that the song was to be "adapted to modern times" by reading "Gallia" and "Britain" for "Edward" and "Scotland" respectively.<sup>214</sup> This effectively neutered the poem, turning Burns's declarations against English hegemony into support for Britain's conflict with the French revolutionaries.

Burns expresses a number of potentially seditious sentiments, not the least of which is his avowal that Scotland possesses an independent "King and Law." The question of kingship was particularly sensitive in the wake of the failed Jacobite rebellions, which had attempted to place a Stuart back on the throne. Though biographers such as Currie were to later dismiss Burns's support of Jacobitism as a passing fancy, his continued advocacy of Scotland's separate royal line undermined this interpretation. The poem sets forth a desirable past- in which Scotland was independent, in direct opposition to the present situation, where the English have taken over. The use of "usurper" was an intentional gesture in this direction. According to Joshua Donaldson, a scholar who has

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<sup>213</sup> Burns, Robert. "Scots Wha Hae." *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, Volume II*. Ed. James Kinsley. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968. ll. 1-24.

<sup>214</sup> Kinsley, *Volume 3*, 1440.

worked on Jacobite songs, the term “usurper” had “only one connotation, and...directly links the Wars of Independence [of the fourteenth century] with the Jacobite Risings as national struggles.”<sup>215</sup> “Scots Wha Hae” represents a unique political poem for Burns precisely because of its treatment of time. While most of his political squibs dealt directly with contemporary issues through a contemporary lens and were therefore relatively “disposable” (in the same fashion that modern political cartoons have a limited span of relevance, before they become artifacts of the circumstance that produced them), Burns’s invocation of the past in “Scots What Hae” makes the song universal, and makes Scottish “oppression” a shared generational experience.

Writing in *The Scottish Historical Review* in 1917, W.P. Ker attempted to distance Burns from his references to revolution. He claims that “the French Revolution counted for very little in the poetry of Burns, for the good reason that in 1786 the French Revolution was not yet in sight at any rate from the horizon of Mauchline.”<sup>216</sup> Ker’s entire analysis rests upon his complete disavowal of all of Burns’s poetry produced after the Kilmarnock edition, blithely dismissing the rest of his work with the statement “to understand the politics of Burns it is necessary to think of his position with regard to the scene and substance of his poetry- the poetry of 1786 and 1787, to which he never added another volume of the same sort in the ten years remaining, and scarcely a poem except ‘Tam o’Shanter.’”<sup>217</sup> Though the factual errors in Ker’s article are glaring, they are important as representative attempts to de-problematize Burns’s poetry.

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<sup>215</sup> McGuirk, *Jacobite History to National Song*, 261.

<sup>216</sup> Ker, WP. “The Politics of Burns.” *The Scottish Historical Review* 15.57 (1917), 59-72.

<sup>217</sup> Ker, *Politics of Burns*, 61.

Sir Walter Scott similarly dismissed Burns's political views by arguing, "his Jacobitism...belonged rather to the fancy than the reason."<sup>218</sup> The differentiation between "reason" and "feelings" were continually expressed in terms of Burns's political beliefs. Scott excuses Burns by stating that "a youth of his warm imagination and ardent patriotism, brought up in Scotland thirty years ago, could hardly escape this bias. The side of Charles Edward was the party, not surely of sound sense and sober reason, but of romantic gallantry."<sup>219</sup> Scott and Ker's infantilization of Burns delegitimizes his political poetry, and through that poetry his nationalist views.

In addition to "Scots Wha Hae," Burns wrote another poem which celebrated the supremacy of the Stuart reign, preserved as "Lines on a Stirling Window." The description of the poem suggests that it was "written by somebody in the window of an inn at Stirling on seeing the Royal Palace in ruins" and further establishes Burns's support of the deposed Scots:

Here Stewarts once in triumph reign'd,  
And laws for Scotland's weal ordain'd;  
But now unroof'd their Palace stands,  
Their sceptre's fall'n to other hands;  
Fallen indeed, and to the earth,  
Whence grovelling reptiles take their birth.  
The injur'd STEWART-line are gone,  
A Race outlandish fill their throne;  
An idiot race, to honor lost;  
Who know them best despise them most.<sup>220</sup>

These lines contain more contradictions and complications for those who attempted to understand Burns's poetry. Though poems such as "A Man's a Man for a' That" suggest that Burns was in favor of democratic ideals, his acceptance of the Stuarts' line indicates

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<sup>218</sup> Scott, Walter. "From an Unsigned Review in Quarterly Review." *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Donald A. Low. New York: Routledge Press, 1995. 203.

<sup>219</sup> Scott, *Review*, 203.

<sup>220</sup> Robert Burns, "Lines on a Stirling Window," ll. 1-10.

that he does not necessarily have a conceptual problem with monarchy as a form of governance. There is a gap between Burns's ideological devotion to equality and his support of political causes that undermined those notions. Leith Davis suggests that "Lines Written on a Stirling Window" allowed Burns to offer an "alternative ideology of nation-ness" that defied categorization as a British or Scottish partisan.<sup>221</sup>

Unlike most of Burns's poetry, "Lines Written on a Stirling Window" provoked an immediate response. James Maxwell, a fellow Scot, published "Animadversions on Some Poets" in 1788, which attacked Burns directly. Maxwell's response demonstrates the complexities that attended contemporary understandings of Burns's poetry. The attack began by calling Burns a "wretch... disdaining truth and law... these rash few lines shall damn thy name / and blast thy hopes of future fame."<sup>222</sup> The antipathy expressed by a fellow Scot demonstrates the diversity of public opinion concerning the Stuart line. Hogg and Noble, writing in their *Canongate Burns* attempt to represent Burns as the personification of Scottish public opinion.<sup>223</sup> Eventually, the final two lines of the poem fell out of circulation. In the 1834 edition of Burns's poetry, Alan Cunningham noted that "what was improper in the days of the poet is not proper now."<sup>224</sup> This commentary further supports the notion that Burns was expressing a view that was, if not explicitly forbidden (prior to the Revolution) at least controversial.

Burns's readers have been consumed by the political implications of his poetry and songs since they were first published. The dialogue between publishers, poets, and biographers that occurred over the next two centuries demonstrates the shifting priorities

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<sup>221</sup> Davis, Leith. "Gender and the Nation in the Work of Robert Burns and Janet Little." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 38.4 (1998): 621-645.

<sup>222</sup> Maxwell, James. *Animadversions on Some Poets*. Edinburgh: 1788. ll. 1-13.

<sup>223</sup> Hogg and Noble, *Canongate*, 426.

<sup>224</sup> Cunningham, Alan. *The Works of Robert Burns; With his Life in Eight Volumes Volume III*. London: James Cochrand and Co, 1834. 294.

of audiences in Scotland, England, and Britain. Though almost all of Burns's poetry can be considered "political" in some fashion, it is his explicit addressing of contemporary national issues that most demand attention.

## Conclusion

Burns scholarship can be effectively divided into three eras: the amateur era, lasting from the late eighteenth through the early twentieth century, the fallow period when interest in the poet waned in the early to mid-twentieth century, and the professional era, which has been the predominant model over the past forty years. Each period had its own impact on his legacy. The amateur era, marked by enthusiastic part-timers such as Currie, Cunningham, and Carlyle, attempted to simultaneously glorify and denigrate Burns as an artistic genius, but a flawed man. Though Burns was carefully de-politicized in many early, amateur works, the act of blunting his partisan rhetoric was in itself a political act. By claiming that Burns did not possess any deeply held political convictions, nineteenth century biographers were able to shape a national but not nationalist portrait of the poet. The amateur era was when the conventional portrait of Burns as an alcoholic womanizer coalesced. It is not a coincidence that the most difficult period in Anglo-Scottish relations was the era that had the most difficulty representing him. The amateur era was remarkably successful in their attempt to de-problematize Burns. By 1859, the centenary year of Burns's death, celebrating the poet became a "safe" way of asserting Scotland's unique cultural identity without necessarily supporting political independence.

During the early twentieth century, when the relationship between the two countries was relatively secure, academic and public interest in Burns declined. When Donald Low collected his *Critical Essays on Robert Burns* in 1974, he claimed that it was the first academic publication on Burns in twenty-five years. Following the first vote concerning Scottish independence in 1979, interest in Burns as a public figure was re-

invigorated. Anniversaries have become a particularly popular rallying point, with 1996 serving as the bi-centennial of Burns's death. Alex Salmond invited Barack Obama to join Scotland's Parliament in celebrating Burns's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2009. Burns Suppers, held on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January every year, have once more become a prominent event in the Scottish social calendar.

On September 18, 2014, Scottish voters will go to the polls to decide if they wish to remain a member of the United Kingdom. For more than forty years, the Scottish National Party has attempted to force a vote on the question of Scotland's political independence. They have done so by appealing to Scotland's historical sense of independence, exemplified by the scheduling of the vote in the year of the seven-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, a famous Scottish victory over the English. Alex Salmond, the leader of the Scottish National Party, has been liberal in invoking the spirit of Robert Burns in support of independence's cause. In January of 2014, he used Burns's poem "To a Mouse" to compare British Prime Minister David Cameron as a "cowran tim'rous beastie"<sup>225</sup> with "a panic on thy breastie."<sup>226</sup> Salmond has made Burns a fixture of the independence campaign, but the minister has often twisted the words of the poet to achieve a political effect. The "cowran timr'rous" mouse invoked by Burns is a sympathetic figure who is set upon by an unfair world. The full poem continues by stating "I'm truly sorry man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union," lines which might easily be repurposed as a condemnation of Salmond's attempt to separate Scotland from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

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<sup>225</sup> "Cowering, timorous beast" in contemporary English.

<sup>226</sup> Edward, Debi. "Alex Salmond invokes the spirit of Burns to goad David Cameron as a 'mouse' over independence vote debate" *ITV News*. 24 January, 2014. <http://www.itv.com/news/2014-01-24/salmond-invokes-the-spirit-burns-to-goad-david-cameron-the-mouse>.



Despite his questionable grasp of the Burns's literary intent, Salmond has made him a significant part of the "yes" campaign, along with other deceased Scottish authors, including Sir Walter Scott.<sup>227</sup> In a keynote address delivered in June 2013, Salmond claimed "from tip to toe, Robert Burns was a one hundred percent Scottish patriot. No-one should ever try to pigeon-hole Burns into party politics because he was far too big for that, but it is clear from his private writings... as well as his poetry that he always backed the nation of Scotland."<sup>228</sup> Clearly, Scotland's political elite believe they have something to gain by representing Burns as a nationalist figure.

Unionists are not content to allow the Scottish National Party to take hold of such a hugely important symbolic figure. In a session of the Prime Minister's Questions on January 25, 2012, (the anniversary of Burns's birth) MP Eleanor Laing, a representative of Scotland's Conservative Party, cited "The Dumfries Volunteers" in an attempt to claim Burns as a fellow Unionist.<sup>229</sup> David Cameron leapt on the opportunity to claim Burns as a figure of British unification, stating "Burns Night will be celebrated not just across Scotland but across the whole of the United Kingdom... when I hear the Scottish Nationalists, who are so keen to leave the UK, yet so anxious about having a referendum, I think that perhaps they should remember Burns's words."<sup>230</sup> In direct response to Salmond's attempt in June 2013 to claim that Burns would have supported the "yes" campaign, Labour MSP Richard Baker, the director of the anti-independence campaign,

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<sup>227</sup> Bisset, Alan. "The writers Alex Salmond is courting now will hold him to account" *The Guardian*. 14 July, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/14/writers-alex-salmond-courting-hold-account>.

<sup>228</sup> Whitaker, Andrew. "Scottish independence: Burns would be Yes- Salmond," *The Scotsman*. 23 June, 2013. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-independence-burns-would-be-yes-salmond-1-2973883>.

<sup>229</sup> Maddox, David. "Scottish Independence: MPs Gripped by the question: was Rabbin Burns a Nat or a Unionist?" *The Scotsman*. 26 January, 2012. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scottish-independence-mps-gripped-by-the-question-was-rabbin-burns-a-nat-or-a-unionist-1-2077809>.

<sup>230</sup> Maddox, "MPs."

was moved to issue a statement: “It’s foolish of Alex Salmond to try and appropriate Burns for the SNP. Every Scot can find aspects of his poetry that concurs with their beliefs, and much of his writing was socialist and internationalist. It’s quite wrong to suggest that Burns would have voted one particular way, as Burns spoke for all Scots and all humanity.”<sup>231</sup>

Baker unintentionally exposed the crux of the problem confronting readers who attempt to understand Burns’s writing. The continued war of words between the leaders of the United Kingdom demonstrates that the battle over representation extends far beyond academia. For Scots, Burns is a symbolic figure, rendering any discussion of his biography and poetry a significant political battle. These conflicts did not spring into existence with the independence referendum. Instead, they have evolved over centuries of debate, reaching a point where Burns is universally beloved, but little understood. As a direct result of the vastly different narratives, Burns has become a blank slate, ready to fit into a number of pre-existing narratives, exactly as Baker stated.

Over time, Burns was conflated with Scottishness. The universal appeal of his poetry allowed for readers to project their own view upon the man that would become “Scotland’s National Bard.” Burns’s biographies and collected poetry are never understood on their own terms. Instead, because of his stature as a representative figure, untangling Burns became an inherently political activity. The recent re-appropriation of Burns in the debate surrounding Scotland’s independence referendum is indicative of larger issues within scholarship surrounding the poet. Readers are simply unable to separate Burns, his work, and his politics from one another.

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<sup>231</sup> Whitaker, “*Burns.*”

*Appendix A*

1759: Robert Burns born at Alloway, near Ayr, 25 January.

1766: Burns's father becomes tenant of Mount Oliphant, a farm near Alloway.

1774: Burns writes his first song at harvest-time, "Thus with me began Love and Poesy."

1777: The family move to Lochlea Farm, by Tarbolton.

1780: Burns is active in founding a Bachelor's Debating Club at Tarbolton.

1782-83: Read's Robert Fergusson's *Poems*.

1784: Burns's father dies at Lochlea. Burns and his brother Gilbert move to Mossiel Farm, near Mauchline, leased from Gavin Hamilton.

1785: Meets Jean Armour, begins to "puzzle Calvinism with...heat and indiscretion" and writes poetry.

1786: Runs into trouble with Jean Armour's family, tries to forget her in "all kinds of dissipation and riot" parts from "Highland Mary" and makes plans to emigrate to Jamaica. *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* published in Kilmarnock (July). Burns gives up the idea of emigration, and goes to Edinburgh (November).

1787: First Edinburgh and London editions of *Poems*. Tours the Borders and Highlands of Scotland, begins his sustained contribution to *Scots Musical Museum*, and meets Agnes McLehose, "Clarinda."

1787-88: Winter spent in Edinburgh.

1788: Burns acknowledges Jean Armour as his wife, leases a farm near Dumfries, and is commissioned as an exciseman. From now on, writes more songs than poems.

1789: Begins work in excise at salary of £50.

1790: Writes "Tam o'Shanter."

1791: Gives up farm in favor of full-time excise work, and moves to Dumfries. On a visit to Edinburgh, says farewell to Clarinda.

1792: Burns is asked to contribute to George Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (published 1793-1818). Accused of political disaffection. Charges dropped but, "I have set, henceforth, a seal on my lips, as to these unlucky politics."

1793: Second Edinburgh edition of *Poems* and first set of Thomson's *Select Collection* published.

1794: Appointed Acting Supervisor of Excise.

1795: Joins in organizing the Dumfries Volunteers. Severely ill with rheumatic fever.

1796: Dies at Dumfries, 21 July.

Adapted from *Critical Essays on Robert Burns* ed. Donald Low (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974).

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