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THE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE BURNS MYTH

ON JANUARY 25, 1959, we arrived at the two hundredth birthday of Robert Burns, whose literary life-span has far exceeded his own modest expectations. In his own time he sought fame as a poet and writer of Scottish songs for reasons partly personal and partly patriotic, and the story of his brief appearance in the Edinburgh limelight is well-known. In our own age the name of Burns is still a familiar one throughout the civilized world, and his songs have been rendered into more than a score of foreign languages, including Afrikaans, Hebrew, Hindustani and, let it be added, English. We occasionally hear of an unrewarding comparison being made between Burns and Shakespeare, sometimes to the disadvantage of the latter, and making the point that Burns is supreme among the poets as a symbol of national character. In the words of the late Edwin Muir, Burns "is a myth evolved by the popular imagination, a communal poetic creation. He is a Protean figure; we can all shape him to our own likeness, for a myth is endlessly adaptable."¹ This is why people all over the world celebrate "Burns Nacht" on January 25 and not "Byron Night" on January 22, "Poe Nite" on January 19 or "Schiller Nacht" (in 1959 another two-hundredth anniversary) on November 10. I think that Burns himself would be surprised to know that his name is still a familiar one, even though the reasons for this survival have generally but a remote connection with poetry as artifact. Moreover, he would certainly be delighted to discover that people were celebrating Burns the Myth rather than Burns the poet.

The phenomenon that we call the Burns Myth has, nevertheless, a literary origin, and the circumstances of its foundation can be fully appreciated only with reference to the Scots literary tradition and more especially to the psychological conditions prevailing in Scotland during the poet's own lifetime. No poet, least of all Burns, may be adequately evaluated in a vacuum, and yet of all poets Burns provides the outstanding example of how this kind of deliberate insulation may pervert and distort literary judgements. On the popular level, there has always been a great

deal of prejudice in favour of the Bard as a convivial patriot in whose person the international brotherhood of man is symbolized. On the literary level, other prejudices have contributed to his success. In fact, it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that Burns's poetic personality is grounded in the prejudices of the literary critics who first welcomed him as a "*rusticus abnormis sapiens*" and doffed their hats to "a native genius" fit to rank with the great ones of European literature.

In order to understand the precise nature of their enthusiasm for Burns, we must first set the literary scene. In 1603, after the Union of the Crowns, the Scots Court moved to London; a little over a century later, the Scots Parliament followed suit. Scotland ceased to be culturally and politically independent of England and, since she was by comparison a poor country economically, there seemed to be no active way in which the trend towards Anglicization could be halted. The removal of the centre of government to London meant that the official language of the United Kingdoms would be English. In any case, the influence of the Reformation and the Authorized Version of the Bible had been working against the Scots language long before the Union of Parliaments. By the time the eighteenth century commenced, Scots was a spoken dialect, diluted with English, and, in its current condition, inadequate for either poetry or prose. As English gained ground as the accepted medium of communication in Scotland, Scots developed a class-consciousness, and educated men sought to eliminate it from their speech and certainly from their writing.

One diehard reaction to all this was a deliberate cultivation of native traditions in literature and language. Jacobite poets such as Allan Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield wrote poetry in Scots and collected older Scots literature, on which they set a patriotic value. After 1750, antiquarian research lost its blatantly national impetus and became more scholarly, but the production of poetry in the native language was rarely taken seriously. The sole exception was the poetry of Robert Fergusson, who in his own lifetime was never heard of in official literary circles and who died in obscurity when Burns was fifteen. Burns made no secret of his admiration for Ramsay and Fergusson and early resolved to follow in their footsteps as a poet in the Scots language.

The prevailing literary standards of the time were, however, in violent conflict with such an ambition. Scottish critics such as Hume, Kames, Blair, and Beattie believed the native language, or vernacular (as it had now become), to be a barrier to an international reputation and continually attacked "the vulgar Scottish tongue." Would-be poets in Scots were either derided or ignored altogether, for the literary ideal of Hume and his circle was Anglo-Scots—Anglo in form,

sentiment, and language, Scots only by birth. If a man were born and lived in Scotland and had literary pretensions in the eighteenth-century tradition of Thomson, Shenstone, and Gray, he was likely to gain extravagant praise from Scottish critics. A number of unworthy, or at best, second-rate poets had greatness thrust upon them in this way, mainly because the critics were looking for an example of what they called "natural genius", home-grown, to crown in poetry the undoubtedly great Scottish achievements in philosophy and speculative prose. Thomas Blacklock, Michael Bruce, John Home, and William Wilkie—all of whom wrote in English—had failed to attract more than passing attention outside Scotland in spite of the efforts of Hume, Blair, and others to promote their success. Macpherson, whose Ossian poems made him a more formidable figure than the others, was prevented from attaining a long-term respectability as a poet in his own right because of the false representations by which he attracted critical attention. In any case, there was nothing Scottish about the so-called "Ossianic" style.

It is therefore all the more remarkable that Burns was welcomed in 1786 by the same critics who had condemned Scots as a corrupt dialect that ought to be left to die out in favour of standard English. Yet he was received as an original, native genius, much as his predecessors had been, on the publication of a volume entitled *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, printed at Kilmarnock in July, 1789. On the face of things, this production was so obviously out of line with contemporary tastes as to have no chance of pleasing the all-important Edinburgh "literati", as they called themselves.

We may ask how Burns managed to overcome the prejudice against poems in Scots and to establish himself as Scotland's first poet. He realised only too well that the critics would have to be carefully wooed in accordance with their doctrinaire theories of what poetry ought to be like, and the *Preface* to the Kilmarnock edition was a calculated appeal to their principles. In it, Burns struck a pose—that of "an obscure, nameless Bard" with no confidence in his own talent and sadly lacking in "the advantages of learned art," whose inspiration came from nature and who had been inspired by Ramsay and Fergusson to follow in their wake as a poet in a rustic language. The *Preface*, like Burns's private correspondence, is couched in elegant English which ought to have given the lie to any pretence on his part to a lack of formal education, but this was never remarked upon by any member of the clique that he wished to impress. By drawing attention to his admiration of Ramsay and Fergusson and admitting his inferiority to them, Burns forestalled any possible comparisons between himself and them. His application of the adjectives "poor" and "unfortunate" to Fergusson's name was almost certainly in-

tended to invite sympathy for another poet who, like Michael Bruce, had died young.

Burns's first reviewer was James Sibbald, the editor of the *Edinburgh Magazine or Literary Miscellany*, whose literary interests were antiquarian rather than critical. Like other antiquarians of the time, he admired the early Scots poets because they seemed to him to reflect a glorious era in his country's history and were sufficiently remote to have the attractions of museum-pieces. Sibbald professed contempt for the modern Scots dialect and for its practitioners, but dealt sympathetically with Burns, whom he hailed as "a striking example of native genius, bursting through the obscurity of poverty and the obstruction of laborious life."² Sibbald's attitude was governed, not only by Burns's *Preface*, but also by Sibbald's own experiences as a farm-servant. As the lessee of the circulating library originally started by Allan Ramsay, Sibbald enjoyed close contact with the literary lights of Edinburgh, by whom he was greatly respected, so that his favourable estimate of Burns carried considerable weight. Even so, the reviewer betrays little or no evidence of critical acumen, a shortcoming which he was to share with his successors Henry Mackenzie and Hugh Blair, who were equally willing to let themselves be mesmerized by the personal statements made by Burns in the *Preface*.

Mackenzie, who succeeded Hume as the leading figure in Edinburgh literary circles, wrote the best-known of the early reviews of the Kilmarnock volume. Because of a dearth of new material, his magazine, *The Lounger*, was not, as it happened, meeting with success, so that he was glad to seize the opportunity to remedy the plight of his paper and to add to his own prestige by welcoming a son of his own soil—a "*rusticus abnormis sapiens*" as he called him—who could be passed off as a living example of Scottish genius. Accordingly, the issue of December 9, 1786, carried Mackenzie's critique of the Kilmarnock volume under the title "Surprising Effects of Original Genius, exemplified in the poetical productions of Robert Burns, an Ayreshire Ploughman."

Like Sibbald, Mackenzie accepted Burns's own account of himself as presented in the *Preface*, and introduced him as "the Heav'n-taught Ploughman." The review opens with some well-worn remarks on the rarity of genius in modern life, and the observation that it "is best arrayed in the darkness of distant and remote periods." The writer expresses regret for its neglect, and then announces that he himself had been fortunate in the discovery of "a genius of no ordinary rank" whose skill was "not less admirable in tracing the manners than in painting the passions or in drawing the scenery of nature." Casting about for a parallel, Mackenzie suggests Shakespeare, who, along with Homer, Virgil, and Milton, was frequently

mentioned in the same breath with local geniuses. This was nevertheless the first time that a poet writing "chiefly in a Scottish dialect" had been so complimented. Indeed, although Mackenzie was bound by convention to defer to the current prejudice against Scots, he softened the blow as much as he could by relating Burns's use of Scottish dialect to his humble origins:

One bar, indeed, his birth and education have opposed to his fame—the language in which most of his poems are written. Even in Scotland the provincial dialect which Ramsay and he have used is now read with a difficulty which greatly damps the pleasure of the reader; in England it cannot be read at all, without such a reference to a glossary as nearly to destroy the pleasure.³

However, he goes on to point out in Burns's favour that "some of his productions, especially in the grave style, are almost English," and quotes a stanza from "The Vision," with the following commentary:

Of strains like the above . . . the poems entitled 'Despondency', 'The Lament', 'Winter, a Dirge', and 'The Invocation To Ruin' afford no less striking examples. Of the tender and the moral, specimens equally advantageous might be drawn from the elegiac verses entitled 'Man Was Made To Mourn', from 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', the stanzas 'To A Mouse', or those 'To a Daisy' . . . this last poem I shall insert entire, not from its superior merit, but because its length suits the bounds of my paper.⁴

These references concern poems either written in English or containing relatively few Scotticisms; the reviewer is nowhere interested in the language used by Burns in his Scots poems, which he dismisses as an unwelcome intrusion. Sixteen years previously, he had himself written two stanzas indicative of his faith in unknown poets, lines composed shortly after his discovery of Michael Bruce. The verses were inserted in a letter to his cousin Mrs. Elizabeth Rose of Kilravock, Nairn, and run as follows:

Could this be mine, a Poet's decent Pride?
To scorn the meanness of a titled name?
To cast the Pageant of the World aside,
And lead the blushing virtues up to fame.

Alas to me hath Heav'n denied the Power
Their drooping worth with bounteous hand to cheer,
Yet may I give them from my little store,
A verse to Honour, to imbalm, a Tear.⁵

His assessments of Bruce's poems, both in private letters and in a review contributed to an issue of his first journal *The Mirror* dated May 29, 1779, and written

in collaboration with Lord Craig, indicate just those qualities that his circle would look for in any other poet who might chance to come under their scrutiny.⁶ A poem was perforce subject to interpretation with reference to the critical standards of "truth to nature" and "virtuous sentiment," and if its author appeared to display characteristics that could be declared natural, spontaneous, or original, the critics were ready to admit him to the ranks of genius. Mackenzie regarded Burns exactly as he had regarded Bruce, and the poems quoted from or mentioned by name in *The Lounger* review were all squarely in the tradition of sentimental elegance which contemporary taste admired. They might almost have been written by an English imitator of Shenstone, Thomson, Gray, Beattie, or any one of the better-known poets of the later eighteenth century. Mackenzie is regarding Burns's diction only so far as it was elegant and his sentiment only so far as it seemed spontaneous, and this led to a concentration upon the more artificially-sentimental poems. He avoided direct praise of Burns as a facile imitator of the eighteenth-century English poetic style because such an observation would have undermined his own judgment on Burns as "Heav'n-taught," but in terms of critical history, this is what his appreciation amounted to. Such a preference for the more derivative and less original side of Burns's *Muse* ignored its significant feature and, historically speaking, placed a limited value on the pronouncements of the poet's early supporters. Having created an ideal poet in theory, they welcomed Burns as one who supported that theory and proceeded to ignore those qualities in him for which they could not account. Thus they placed themselves in the untenable position of having to praise a poet who wrote mainly in Scots and who, far from lending support to their notion that literature ought to have a "moral" basis and reflect "virtuous sensibility," had vigorously undermined it. The effect of all this was a one-sided, narrow judgement of Burns that took into consideration only those poems of his which were written in standard English.

J. G. Lockhart, Scott's biographer, also wrote a *Life of Burns* in which he remarked that in Scotland at that time and with all due respect to other claimants to the poetic throne, "Men must have gone back at least three centuries to find a Scottish poet at all entitled to be considered as of that high order to which the generous criticism of Mackenzie had at once admitted the Ayrshire Ploughman"⁷—a statement that was as much a compliment to Mackenzie as it was to the Bard himself. Four years after Burns's death, Robert Anderson, a minor editor, wrote of the poet:

It was . . . a part of the machinery, as he called it, of his poetical character to pass for an illiterate ploughman who wrote from pure inspiration. When I pointed out

some evident traces of poetical imitation in his verses, privately, he readily acknowledged his obligations . . . but in company he would not suffer his pretensions to pure inspiration to be challenged.⁸

Here, already, is one of the foundations upon which the Burns Myth depends. Burns's early admirers concentrated their attention on the poet rather than on his poems; they preferred to publicize him as an interesting example of "primitive genius" flowering forth in "an age of elegance and refinement" and looked on his poems as evidence that a simple peasant could be possessed of elegant feelings. In fact, Burns was not a ploughman at all, though he said he was, and his knowledge of English literature, as well as of other literatures in translation, was at least as sound as that of many of the reviewers. Moreover, his *Commonplace Book*, in which he recorded his drafts and first attempts at making poems, shows a meticulous concern with the technical side of versifying.

There is no doubt, however, that the legend of his abnormal rustic wisdom, rooted in a Muse which owed nothing to books, has a great deal to do with his survival in the popular mind. What the annual Burns Nighters ignore is the perfection of their idol's art as a poet, but it is difficult for anyone who has not made a special study of this art—and certainly for a patriotic Scotsman—to see Burns simply as a poet. Certainly none of his early followers did. Hugh Blair, first Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres at Edinburgh and therefore the official expert on literary matters during Burns's lifetime, was conspicuously blinkered in this way. He confused literary with moralistic judgments and tried to mould Burns into a shape more in keeping with accepted ideas of linguistic and social refinement. He made a number of proposals concerning changes that he thought Burns ought to make before the second edition of his poems was published. Most of these referred to single words or lines which, in Blair's words, breathed "a spirit of libertinism and irreligion."⁹ For example, referring to the Epistle to John Rankine, Blair makes the following observation:

The description of shooting the hen is understood, I think, to convey an indecent meaning, though, in reading the poem, I took it literally, and the indecency did not strike me. But if the author means to allude to an affair with a woman, as is supposed, the whole poem ought undoubtedly to be left out of the new edition.¹⁰

And of a stanza in the Dedication to Gavin Hamilton, he comments: "This poem will be better without it, and it will give offence by the ludicrous views of the punishments of Hell."¹¹

There were a number of other suggestions of this kind, all but two of which Burns rejected. By this time his cultivation of the literati had all but served its purpose, and the second edition was well received by an eager public. When Burns left Edinburgh he wrote a letter to Blair in which he made it quite plain that his relations with the arbiters of contemporary taste had worked to the advantage of both sides:

. . . However the meteor-like novelty of my appearance in the world might attract notice, and honour me with the acquaintance of the permanent lights of genius and literature, those who are truly benefactors of the immortal nature of man, I knew very well that my utmost merit was far unequal to the task of preserving that character when once the novelty was over; I have made up my mind that abuse, or almost even neglect, will not surprise me in my quarters.¹²

Blair's immediate reply tells us a good deal more about his critical standards than may be gleaned from reading whole chapters of his published works. The tone of his letter is ponderous and patronizing:

I know no way in which literary persons who are advanced in years can do more service to the world, than in forwarding the efforts of rising genius, or bringing forth unknown merit from obscurity. I was the first person who brought out to the notice of the world the poems of Ossian . . . and I have always considered this as a meritorious action of my life.¹³

Blair's literary eminence depended so much upon Ossian as to make it difficult for him to grasp a more unorthodox originality such as Burns displayed.

Turning to the Dedication to this second edition of Burns's poems, we note a marked change in the tone of the poet's address to his audience. Though he is still posing as the "Heav'n-taught ploughman," Burns's language is much bolder and his approach more confident than it was in the Kilmarnock Preface. This time his benefactors were "The Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt," and his appeal was correspondingly more dignified:

A SCOTTISH BARD, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his Country's service, where shall he so properly look for patronage as to the illustrious Names of his native Land; those who bear the honours and inherit the virtues of their Ancestors?—The Poetic Genius of my Country found me as the prophetic bard Elijah did Elisha—at the *plough*; and threw her inspiring *mantle* over me. She bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my natal Soil, in **my** native tongue: I tuned my wild, artless notes, as she inspired.—She whispered me **to** come to this ancient metropolis of Caledonia, and lay my Songs under your honoured protection: I now obey her dictates Nor do I present this Address with the **venal**

soul of a servile Author, looking for a continuation of those (past) favours: I was bred to the Plough, and am independent. I come to claim the common Scottish name with you, my illustrious Countrymen; and to tell the world that I glory in the title.¹⁴

Here Burns is appealing to patriotic feeling, as his heroes Wallace and Bruce appealed to it, and his sentiments are no longer calculated to please critics—he had served them and they had served him. He now wanted a wider patronage and was therefore less inclined to cast a veil over his true poetic motives. Nevertheless, the Caledonian Hunt had paid for the book and considered its creator as their creature, whose irresponsible tastes, or lack of them, had to be strictly controlled. The contents of the Edinburgh edition fell considerably short of Burns's own ideals, since not only did the names of the fifteen hundred subscribers have to appear within its pages, but also poems such as "Holy Willie's Prayer," "The Jolly Beggars" (condemned by Blair), "The Lass of Ballochmyle," and "Young Peggy" were omitted on grounds of indelicacy. "Edina," "The Calf," "The Ordination," "John Barleycorn," "The Winter Night," and a string of verses produced almost entirely in English helped to make the volume more acceptable to his fastidious supporters.

The resulting reviews were again favourable, apart from one or two complaints about the bawdy and licentious passages which had been allowed to slip through. *The Scots Magazine*, the principal organ of the literati, called Burns "this extraordinary young man" and quoted his Dedication at length. In general, he had made his mark on the Edinburgh gentry and later he had the satisfaction of knowing that the second edition sold over three thousand copies; most of the profit from this venture went into the pocket of William Creech, the publisher. Burns's reputation quickly spread to the American continent, and the *Pennsylvania Packet* reprinted the Edinburgh edition, almost in its entirety, in twenty-five instalments between July, 1787, and June, 1788.¹⁵ Nor was his fame confined to any one level of society—his first biographer, Robert Heron, tells us of the effect Burns's poems had on the people of Scotland:

Old and young, high and low, grave and gay, learned or ignorant, all were alike delighted, agitated, transported. I was at that time resident in Galloway, contiguous to Ayrshire, and I can well remember how that even ploughboys and maidservants would have gladly bestowed the wages which they earned the most hardly, and which they wanted to purchase the necessary clothing, if they might but procure the works of Burns.¹⁶

Burns was therefore no longer "a poor insignificant devil, unnoticed [*sic*] and "unknown," as he had said in a letter to his old teacher Murdoch three years

before the appearance of the Kilmarnock edition.¹⁷ After his success in Edinburgh, he could claim that

... The appellation [*sic*] of, a Scotch Bard, is by far my highest pride; to continue to deserve it is my most exalted ambition.—Scottish scenes, and Scottish story are the themes I could wish to sing.¹⁸

We learn a great deal about eighteenth-century Scottish, or, as the literati styled it, "North British" tastes from a study of their reaction to Burns. None of his genteel supporters really saw Burns for what he was—a poet in Scots; instead, they tried to find in him a justification of their own theory of what poetry should be like and were not prepared to admit that Scots, or rather, Burns's carefully developed Anglo-Scots, might have even a restricted use in poetry. Convention has always had a powerful influence on literature, and there is consequently a continual struggle between the language of poetry and that of everyday experience. Long before Arnold ever coined the phrase, the trend of English poetry had been towards "the grand style," so that it came to reflect an idealised life, refined to the utmost and lacking the face of rude health. The Burns tradition, on the other hand, is unsophisticated and pulls away from the self-conscious upper-class tradition that had been so long dominant in English literature. Social, moral, and artistic conventions were swept aside and replaced by the sheer exuberance of his "bletherin bitch," that conveyed force and strength and not the sensuous beauty of form and grace which distinguishes the English poetic tradition. It is pointless, therefore, to condemn Burns for his crudities and to judge him as though he were an English poet taking liberties with the language.

In defence of Mackenzie and Blair, it may be said that they were too close to Burns to see him clearly and that, in any case, they lacked the historical perspective which has enabled more recent critics to place the Bard at the end of a tradition. The practice of criticism in Burns's day was, unfortunately, in the hands of hack reviewers whose qualifications did not appear to extend much beyond the assumption of authority and a certain unenlightened facility in handling a conventional jargon. Their absence of inspiration has been handed down through generations of after-dinner speakers on Burns. Two hundred years after his birth these gentlemen are still enthusiastically celebrating the "Immortal Mummery," uttering their well-worn platitudes, quoting from the Anglicized Burns, inflating his love-life to giant proportions, apologizing for his lack of gentility and, in general, showing themselves to be worthy followers in the footsteps of the Edinburgh literati.

NOTES

1. "The Burns Myth", in *Robert Burns: New Judgments* (Glasgow: Maclellan, 1947), pp. 5-6.
2. *The Edinburgh Magazine or Literary Miscellany*, October, 1786.
3. *Lounger* 97, December 9, 1786.
4. *Ibid.*
5. National Library of Scotland, MS. 647, Mackenzie to Mrs. Elizabeth Rose, October 13, 1770.
6. "Reflections on Genius Unnoticed and Unknown; Anecdotes of Michael Bruce".
7. *Life of Burns* (London: Hutchinson, 1904), p. 85.
8. Letter to Dr. Currie, September 28, 1799; see *Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. J. DeLancey Ferguson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), Vol. I, p. xxxiv.
9. J. DeLancey Ferguson, "Burns and Hugh Blair", *Modern Language Notes*, XLV (1930), pp. 441-443; the text of Blair's notes also appeared in *The Scotsman*, January 22, 1930.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Letter to Blair, May 3, 1787; see *Letters*, ed. Ferguson, Vol. I, p. 88.
13. Letter from Blair to Burns, May 4, 1787; see R. Chambers and W. Wallace, eds., *The Life and Works of Robert Burns* (London, 1896), Vol. II, p. 98.
14. *Poems, Chiefly in a Scottish Dialect*, (Edinburgh, 1787), "Dedication".
15. See J. W. Egerer, "Burns and Guid Black Prent", in *Essays Presented to C. B. Tinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947), p. 278.
16. *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1797).
17. Letter to John Murdoch, January 15, 1783; see *Letters*, ed. Ferguson, Vol. I, p. 14.
18. Letter to Mrs. Dunlop, March 22, 1787; see *Letters*, ed. Ferguson, Vol. I, p. 80.