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## Burns in Limbo

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HERSCHEL GOWER

### Burns in Limbo

There is sufficient evidence that Burns, from the time of his first visit to Edinburgh in 1786, was regarded a curious plaything by the genteel society of the Scottish capital. They entertained him with meat and drink, supported the publication of the Edinburgh Edition, and tended in many respects to go about their own affairs. His personal and poetic powers exerted no revolutionary waves of change among the literati of the city. Certainly none of the barristers, ministers, or professors who received him went forth straightway to follow the furrow of the Ayrshire farmer's plow. Yet after his death, unable as they were to lay hold on the living man, they resurrected him in biographies and memoirs. In recovering stray scraps of his verse and passing anecdotes about him from mouth to mouth, they began their gestures of post-mortem homage. However ill-begot and compensatory, some of the anecdotes have since acquired a sanctity in oral tradition.

All accounts of Burns *in vita* attest, as Lockhart points out, that "it was the extraordinary resources he displayed in conversation, the strong sagacity of his observations on life and manners, the splendour of his wit, and the glowing energy of his eloquence when his feelings were stirred, that made him the object of serious admiration among those practised masters of the art of *talk* . . . everyone of them, whose impressions on the subject have been recorded, agrees in pronouncing his conversation to have been the most remarkable thing about him."<sup>1</sup> This mounting approval by members of bench and bar, themselves notorious for jovial talk and anecdote, firmly established Burns's reputation as a man of wit. Thereby he became fresh game for the wily anecdotist.

It is obvious from the correspondence that Burns himself was not deceived by his reception in Edinburgh; he was aware of all the superficial claims that society in the capital could make on soul and body. "Indeed," as Ferguson has put it, "he had either to bristle or surrender."<sup>2</sup> So his tongue seldom failed to speak his reactions, whatever the com-

<sup>1</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *The Life of Robert Burns*. Enlarged Edition (London, 1892), pp. 118-119. Hereafter cited as Lockhart.

<sup>2</sup> J. DeLancey Ferguson, Introduction, *The Letters of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1931) I, xxxv. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

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pany; to find relief he stole away from the Georgian drawingrooms to roister with the Croachallans, tavernkeepers, and brothel mistresses below stairs. On March 22, 1787, he wrote from Edinburgh to Mrs. Dunlop: "I have the advice of some very judicious friends among the Literati here, but with them I sometimes find it necessary to claim the privilege of thinking for myself."<sup>3</sup> Then in couplets and quatrains he continued to mock pretense and arrogance. For a while he thought to confine his sarcasm to a notebook, a private record of reaction, but he was not able, finally, to hide wonted outbreaks under cover. Wherever he went, Lockhart insists, his tongue "startled polite ears with the utterance of audacious epigrams, far too witty not to obtain general circulation in so small a society as that of the Northern capital, far too bitter not to produce deep resentment, far too numerous not to spread fear almost as widely as admiration. Even when nothing was farther from his thoughts than to inflict pain, his ardour often carried him headlong into sad scrapes."<sup>4</sup> Here is a mild example in currency during Lockhart's time:

Even to the ladies, when he suspected them of wishing to make a show of him, he could not help administering a little of his village discipline. A certain stately peeress sent to invite him without, as he fancied, having sufficiently cultivated his acquaintance beforehand, to her assembly. "Mr. Burns," answered the bard, "will do himself the honour of waiting on the——of——, provided her ladyship will invite also the learned pig."—Such an animal was then exhibiting in the Grass-market.<sup>5</sup>

Lockhart hints that by his time scores of anecdotes were floating in the oral tradition, but most were too indelicate to be committed to print.

As scrupulous later biographers like Franklin Bliss Snyder have pointed out, there is not only the problem of decorum. There is the more troublesome matter of authenticity and verification. In a few recorded instances Burns himself denied authorship of a poem or tried to refute a story. "How difficult then to ascertain the truth respecting our Poesy & Music! I myself have lately seen a couple of Ballads sung through the streets of Dumfries, with my name at the head of them as the Author, though it was the first time ever I had seen them."<sup>6</sup> Once in circulation, the "biographical facts" were productive of great variation and elaboration. Conditioned by retrospect, idle gossip, and doubtful

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, I, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Lockhart, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> Lockhart, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> *Letters*, II, 274.

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memory, the image of Burns as spontaneous poet, purveyor of wit, and epigrammatist took further flights. Even the illiterate, unable to read a scrap of poetry from the book, had their tale to tell and obviously misled early biographers like Allan Cunningham and Lockhart himself. If the verse were not alive on the lips of the peasantry from which Burns sprang, the stories they told kept his memory flourishing. By the middle of the nineteenth century to swap a tale about Burns became an accepted pastime, little matter that the content be free of libel; the carcass of the poet in a rotting coffin in Dumfries kept collecting stories and scraps of verse. The image belonged to a romantic and adoring world; anecdotes clustered onto the bones as surely as the sentimental laurel to the brow.

No matter how seriously challenged for fact or literary merit, some of the stories and a fair amount of the attributed verse gradually found existence in print. Some of these scraps appeared in hastily assembled editions of the poet's "collected" works. Some came off the presses in a variety of chapbooks and anthologies of fireside humor, among which were the popular "Joe Miller" volumes. There is the case of "Johnny Peep," for example, which W. Scott Douglas attributes to "Joe Miller"<sup>7</sup> and which John and Angus MacPherson cite in their edition as "Given on newspaper authority."<sup>8</sup> The MacPhersons provide readers with a headnote:

Burns, one day at a cattle-market in a town in Cumberland, lost sight of some friends who accompanied him. In searching for them he went to a tavern, and looked into every room, till at last he came to one in which three jolly fellows were enjoying themselves. As he withdrew his head, one of them said, "Come in, Johnny Peep." Burns went in and joined the party; and in the course of their merriment, it was proposed that each should write a stanza of poetry, and put it with half-a-crown below the candlestick, with this stipulation, that the best poet was to have his half-crown returned, while the other three were to be expended to treat the party. Burns's verse, which was the best, ran thus:—

Here am I, Johnny Peep,  
I saw three sheep,  
And these three sheep saw me;  
Half-a-crown apiece  
Will pay for their fleece,  
And so Johnny Peep gets free.

<sup>7</sup> *The Kilmarnock Edition of the Poetical Works of Robert Burns*. 2 vols. Ninth Edition. (Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1893), II, 351.

<sup>8</sup> *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*. (London: Hamilton, Adams and Co.; Edinburgh: John Grant, n.d.), p. 369.

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This is obviously a popular image of Burns man and poet. Some editors, along with the compiler of the Burns Concordance, have been so amused and beguiled by it that the lines passed from popular currency into print.<sup>9</sup>

Actually "Johnny Peep" enjoyed a separate career at least a century before his attachment to Burns. Writing of William Drummond of Hawthornden in a *Life* which prefaces the *Works* of the earlier Scottish poet, Bishop Sage reported:

He was very Smart and Witty in his Sayings and Repartees, and had a most excellent Talent in Extemporary Versifying, above the most part of his Contemporaries: For, being at *London*, 'tis very credibly reported of him (tho' by some ascribed to others) that he peep'd into the Room where Sir *William Alexander*, Sir *Robert Carr*, *Michael Drayton*, and *Ben Johnson*, these Famous Poets, were sitting. They desired *Bo peep*, as they called him, to come in, which he did. They fell a Rhyming about paying the Reckoning; and all owned their Verses were not comparable to his, which are still remembered by the Curious.

*I Bo Peep  
See you Four Sheep,  
And each of your his Fleece.  
The Reckoning is Five Shilling;  
If each of you be willing,  
It's Fifteen Pence apiece.*

Then Sage gives two further examples of Drummond's extemporaneous verses and concludes:

It would swell his *Life* beyond its true Bounds, and my Design, to tell all his fine Sayings and excellent Extemporary Verses, which are still remembered and repeated with great Applause and Satisfaction: For, like the Sayings of the ancient Druids, they retain an universal Veneration, tho' they are preserved only by Memory.<sup>10</sup>

That William Drummond and Robbie Burns should have much in common as men or poets would strike most readers as far beyond the pale. Drummond as imitator, writer of sonnets and madrigals, frequenter of court and castle, had little in common with the Ayrshire bard—except in the popular treatment accorded them both.

<sup>9</sup>Besides the numerous printings of the "New Joe Miller," see also *The Book of Scottish Anecdote*, ed. Alexander Hislop, Eighth Edition (Glasgow, n.d.). Under "Humorous Anecdotes" the latter gives two stories about Burns; under "Social and Characteristic" there are eighteen. All are tame enough for gentle readers.

<sup>10</sup>*The Works of William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. John Sage and Thomas Ruddiman. (Edinburgh, 1711), pp. ix-x.

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To illustrate how "Johnny Peep" has caught on with farm servants and ploughmen in the Northeast of Scotland—to show as well the vagaries of oral transmission—there is the retelling of the same story by Jimmy MacBeath, as recorded in recent years by Hamish Henderson for the School of Scottish Studies:

Burns and Tom Moore the poet left Leith and went to a pub  
and looked in a windae and heard the others going on about  
Burns selling sheep and buying sheep. When they saw him they  
cried at Burns, "Come in, Bo-Peep." And Burns says:

I'm little Bo-Peep  
And I saw three sheep  
And that three sheep saw me.  
And half-a-croon apiece  
Will pay for the fleece  
And little Boy Peep gets free.<sup>11</sup>

In this and similar cases there is always the question, perhaps never to be resolved, whether the story traveled solely from mouth to mouth or was derived ultimately from the printed page.

Actually MacBeath has kept alive a small cycle of stories about Burns, all of which tend to show the poet as master of the rejoinder:

About Burns and Tom Moore. Burns didn't know who the Irish poet was till he went down to the Pier o' Leith. And of course it happened to be that the poet was a captain—that was Moore himself—and he looked up at the wheelhouse door and he cried:

By the make o' your coat  
And the cut o' your hair,  
I think you're Robbie Burns  
Frae the auld toon o' Ayr.

And Burns said:

I'm on land  
And you're on sea;  
By the cut o' your gob  
You're Barney McGee.

Although the two poets never met and the story can be discredited, the same popular concept of Burns holds true. On the spur of the moment he could mark an Irishman and respond to him in verse without the formalities of an introduction.

In the MacBeath cycle Burns not only wins invariably at flytings; he tops all contenders in poetry. In the following episode the company is again fanciful but distinguished; the verse is characteristic of the kind which we suspect Lockhart and the Victorian biographers had at hand but were reluctant to pass on in print:

<sup>11</sup> Archives, School of Scottish Studies, Edinburgh.

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It was in Dr. Ferguson's house in Edinburgh that Burns and Tannahill and Lady Nairne were invited to have a nice enjoyment. And drinks all round, of course. And they were tryin' to compete with one another's poem. And Tannahill went to the door and he said: "There's no star in a' the carry." And Burns went to the door and come back and said: "Oh, no, Tannie, that's no use. The carry's full o' stars."<sup>12</sup>

So the farmers they were there too in Dr. Ferguson's house—they was competin' too—and doctors and professors—and Burns he gave a toast:

You doctors and you professors all,  
And a' think ye're so clever,  
If you can mak a cock that winna fa',  
Then I'll go on forever.<sup>13</sup>

Granted that both story and verse are apocryphal, the concrete image of the poet is entirely consistent with the Burns who sent bawdy verses by letter to his friends and certainly with the Burns of *The Merry Muses*. We must consider as well such generally credited items as the "extemporaneous" epigrams and "Pinned on a Lady's Coach," "The Toad-Eater," "Epitaph—On a Person Nicknamed the Marquis, who Desired Burns to Write One on Him," and similar short pieces. From the headnotes offered by John and Angus MacPherson and from the accompanying notes of other editors, we deduce that even chance acquaintances begged verses of Burns. As laureate of inn and lodge he was expected by those he met in castle or townhouse to fulfill his role. To oblige admirers he scribbled a critical opinion in verse on a blank leaf in Martial's *Epigrams*, wrote on demand of Mrs. Gordon at Kenmore Castle two quatrains on the death of her lapdog Echo, and scratched verses on goblets and windowpanes to amuse hosts and tavernkeepers.

It is therefore hardly surprising to find in this century that the image he took some pains to create "amang his ain folk" is still cherished in anecdote; not only have farmworkers and tinker clans perpetuated the fictions of Burns, schoolboys and Old Age Pensioners will recite a rhyme behind closed doors on a winter's night in urban settings like

<sup>12</sup> MacBeath must have had in mind the first verse of Robert Tannahill's "Oh, Are You Sleeping, Maggie?": "Mirk an' rainy is the nicht,/No a starn in a' the carry . . ." But if Burns replied this time in verse, MacBeath no longer recalls the stanza.

<sup>13</sup> Archives, School of Scottish Studies.



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Edinburgh and Glasgow.<sup>14</sup> A retired schoolmaster, Forbes MacGregor of Corstorphine, himself a poet and satirist, provided the following:

Quite a number of tales and verses about Burns were common when I was a schoolboy (1910-1922) and I can recall one or two which our decorous ancestors never printed:

Burns was entangled with a young woman by the roadside when a boy, passing by, paused to look at this phenomenon. Burns looked round and said:

Pass on, pass on, my bonnie son,  
The wark o' nature maun be done.

At an Old Age Pensioners' Burns Supper at Craigmillar some years ago, where I proposed the Immortal Memory, an elderly woman on being coaxed got up to tell this story:

Robbie Burns, when he was in Edinburgh, was one day crossing The Meadows when he met a young woman carrying a basket of eggs. "Good morning, my dear," says Robbie.

"Good morning," says she. "You're a stranger here. And what's your name, Sir?"

"I'm the famous Ayrshire poet, Robbie Burns, on a visit to Auld Reekie."

"O, is that whae ye are? I've heerd tell o' ye. I suppose I'll jeest hae to lay doon my basket o' eggs, then."<sup>15</sup>

The story of Burns's encounter with "Lady Matilda," however discountable in terms of fact, is told with vigor and credulity by Jeannie Robertson, the tinker folksinger from Aberdeen, whose listeners hear the story and pass it on with uncritical pleasure.

### Burns and Lady Matilda

You see, there was a great lady called Lady Matilda. And as far as I heerd she was a poet too. But she was very wealthy and had a big castle-hoose and plenty o' money and everything. So—the only thing I can't tell in my story is where she come from. But she said that she wad like to have Burns come to her hoose and that she wad send for him. She kenned a lot aboot him. She heerd aboot 'im being a great poet and she also heerd that Burns cuid make up poetry aboot ye by jeest lookin' at ye. Within a few minutes he cuid make up a bit o' poetry aboot ye. Especially if ye did somethin'. So she sent for Burns and Burns

<sup>14</sup> Burns wrote to Robert Cleghorn in October 1793, enclosed "Act Sederunt of the Session," and frankly acknowledged his weakness for lewd stanzas: "Well! the Law is good for Something, since we can make a B—dy-song out of it.—(N.B. I never made anything of it in any other way—) There is, there must be, some truth in original sin.—My violent propensity to B—dy convinces me of it.—Lack a day! if that species of Composition be the Sin against 'the Haly Ghaist,' 'I am the most offending soul alive.'" *Letters*, II, p. 213.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Forbes MacGregor, Edinburgh, September 29, 1967.



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did come to this big fine castle-hoose and this Lady Matilda had it full o' gentry, you see, and they was all settin' in the big beautiful hall, settin' round it, but the middle o' the floor was empty. So when Burns come in at this door she pit a drink intill his hand and he was nae dressed to come in amangst gentry because at this time he was jeest a poor man, he was jeest a plooman, and he was dressed like a plooman when he did come intill the hoose. He had his auld guttery-sharny boots on—no very weel dressed. But nevertheless it was Robbie Burns. And she pit a drink intill his hand, you see. But all in a sudden Lady Matilda gathered hersel' up and Burns wondered in the name o' God what was wrong wi' 'er, because naebody in a fact kenned in the hoose what she was gaun to dae. She was keepin' it as a kind o' a surprise. And all in a sudden she gathered hersel' up in the front o' Robbie Burns and she gaed flyin' right frae one end o' the hall tae the other end o' the hall, and as she was flyin' she was imitatin' the cock crowin' and flyin'—both at the same time. She imitated the cock cryin' oot "Cock-a-loo-ra-loo" and she was fleein' way up the hall. Now Burns lookit after that a wee bitty surprised, you see, and when she gaes up tae the end o' the hall where there was another door, she flew right up tae the door. Burns lookit at her for a minute or two, and he still had his glass o' whusky and he said:

Matilda tae the door she flew,  
To imitate the cock she crew.  
She cried jeest like the little sinner:  
You wad 'a actually thocht the cock was in 'er.  
So that was Burns's wee bit o' poetry aboot Lady Matilda.<sup>16</sup>

Similar stories, too numerous to discuss here, go on making the rounds as part and parcel of the living folk imagination of Scotland; obviously they serve to dramatize the traits of a national hero and establish his particular powers above those of ordinary men. Such tales gain popular credence and enjoy wide circulation because they reflect, finally, not so much the subject as an individual but the common notion of what a poet's behavior in, and contribution to, society is ideally conceived to be by the community at large. As entertaining and momentarily arresting as the bawdy conceits sometimes are, they tend more often than not to keep the man and his work in a perpetual kind of limbo.

Predictably enough, during the last months of his life Burns confronted his popular image as "Rantin', rovin' Robin" and reflected on his pieces of the "Merry Muses" ilk. His resolves are clear in two separate letters to George Thomson in May 1796:

My verses to "Cauld kail" I will suppress; as also those to

<sup>16</sup> Taped interview with Jeannie Robertson, Edinburgh, September 2, 1967.

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"Laddie lie near me."—They are neither worthy of my name, nor of your book.

When your Publication is finished, I intend publishing a Collection, on a cheap plan, of all the songs I have written for you, the Museum, etc.—at least of all the songs of which I wish to be called the Author.—I do not propose this so much in the way of emolument, as to do justice to my Muse, lest I should be blamed for trash I never saw, or be defrauded by other claimants of what is justly my own.<sup>17</sup>

Did he also pause at this time to calculate—and regret—the wages to be paid for popularity in the oral tradition? Did he foresee, in those last months, how painfully out of hand the stories might one day grow?<sup>18</sup> Nine years before, in the same letter to Mrs. Dunlop quoted earlier, he wrote: "The appellation of a Scottish bard is by far my highest pride; to continue to deserve it is my most exalted ambition."

Today, if his position were exalted in low places only, confined merely to the vagaries of oral tradition, there would be cause for amusement—but also cause for regret. Fortunately the poetry remains popular with scholar, schoolboy, and man of affairs. For the sake of all, Burns has managed to plow a deep, straight furrow and respond to all the demands—some of them mutually exclusive—put upon the reputation of a major poet universally acclaimed. If we are often amused by the man but are obliged to discredit the popular image of him, we can still find in the authentic body of his poetry all the impulses of genuine art.

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<sup>17</sup> *Letters*, II, p. 321.

<sup>18</sup> Without alluding to the anecdotes, many of which he must have known, D. M'Naught attempts an answer as to Burns's attitude toward the ribald songs at the end of his life: see *Burns Chronicle*, III (1894), 24-25; XX (1911), 105-119.