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ENCOUNTERING ROBERT BURNS: AN ORAL HISTORY¹

It was through my grandfather, W. Ormiston Roy (1874-1958), a landscape gardener, horticulturalist, and book collector, that I first became acquainted with Robert Burns. In 1932, when I was eight years old, my grandfather asked my parents if they would allow him to take me along with him, just the two of us, to Scotland. They agreed, and this trip started a relationship which lasted until his death in 1958.

He had a driver and a car so he didn't have to drive, which was a pretty good thing because he was one of the more erratic drivers I've ever known. But we drove around; we spent about two months, as I remember. I had a birthday on the boat, my eighth birthday. We toured mostly Scotland, but we also went to England. We went around to a number of the places that tourists see, but we also went to places that were more out-of-the-way. My maternal grandmother was born in a little place called Beauly, north of Inverness, and she had been orphaned at age twelve and sent to Canada, and we visited there. We went to the battlefield of Culloden where Bonnie Prince Charlie was defeated by the English. We visited the Wallace monument near Stirling, and one of the highlights of the trip for a boy of eight was being allowed to hold in his hand William Wallace's sword—it was much too heavy for me to brandish. It was on this trip that my grandfather purchased Robert Burns's wooden porridge bowl, now in the Roy Collection.

¹ As indicated in the preface, this introduction brings together passages from Ross Roy's memoirs, recorded by Andrea L'Hommedieu in 2012, and also draws from the article about his grandfather that he wrote for Frank Shaw's *Robert Burns Lives!*, and in the conclusion from other scattered sources. References for these materials are given in Sources & Acknowledgements, p. 201 below. All the words are Ross Roy's own, but the texts have been edited for continuity. Eds.

When I returned to university, after war service, I moved in with my grandfather, who lived within walking distance. One could not be with Willie without some of his infectious enthusiasm rubbing off, and before long I became interested in Robert Burns. Two-thirds of a century have elapsed but the interest has not waned.

Soon after I moved in, the topic turned to Robert Burns and as long as I was with W.O.R. the topic constantly turned to quotations from or references to the poet. My grandfather knew Burns and could quote him at will. He once told me that he had never had an experience in life for which he was unable to find an appropriate quotation from Burns. He liked (affectionately) to quote Burns on a college education when the bard said of those who went to “college-classes” that they “gang in stirks—bullocks—and come out asses.” Lucie and I have a lovely letter that he wrote when our only child was born, where he mentions Burns’s poem to *his* first child and says that if I knew Burns as well as he did that I would be able to recite it:

Lord, grant that thou may ay inherit
Thy Mither’s looks and gracefu’ merit,
And thy poor worthless Daddie’s spirit
Without his failins!

My grandfather had a considerable library which reflected his interests. It was from him and a couple of other people that I learned how to collect as well as the joy of the chase. He not only collected books, he read them. At mealtime and when I was driving him we very frequently discussed literature. This was a new experience to me. Both my parents read and my maternal grandmother had quite a large library, but to them reading was a personal activity, not discussed with others. And so when I moved in with my grandfather, I entered a whole new world.

He collected books on a variety of topics, and naturally Burns played a major role in the collection, but he also collected the poetry of Walt Whitman. He preferred poetry to prose, and this was reflected in his collecting. By the time I moved in with him, he was elderly, so I visited the bookshops on my own, buying both for his collection and myself, but I was happy to have him pay for the Burns books I found.

I suppose he inspired me, or guided me, I don’t know what word to use, but he was without doubt the biggest intellectual influence in my life, and I dedicated the edition of the Burns letters to him. But it’s hard to tell whether I naturally had the kind of interests that he had, or if he sort of planted them in me.

When he died in 1958, my grandfather left a considerable estate which went to his two living children—my uncle William Wallace Roy and my father Archibald Carlyle Roy. The one element treated differently from the general estate was his library, which he left to me. Several packages containing books he had purchased when he was in Europe four years earlier for my wedding had not even been opened. What interested me most in what I had inherited was the Scottish literature, particularly the Burns books. One could say that the Roy Collection began in 1958, with that inheritance. Even though I had helped my grandfather build it, I was astonished by the collection of which I had become the proud owner.

* * *

It is often said that the Romantic period began in 1798 when Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads*, and certainly that is a landmark in British poetry, no doubt about that. But they're wrong, I'm convinced, by saying that the Romantic period began with him. The Romantic period began with Burns in 1786, twelve years earlier, when he published *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*. I mean, there can be no doubt that Burns was a Romantic poet and songwriter. The best known non-political or religious song in the world is "Auld Lang Syne," and that's certainly a romantic song.

It's interesting to see how Burns would take a traditional song and make it into a great song from being just a traditional song. One of the greatest songs in the English-speaking world, in my opinion, is "O, my luv'e's like a red, red, rose." There's almost not a phrase there that some earlier song did not use. Burns just took dross and made gold out of it. His song is absolutely astonishing—sixteen lines, with only one three-syllable word, the word "melody," and I think seven two-syllable words. All the other words are a single syllable, and yet it's a glory when you sing it.

There are those who are dismissive of Burns's legendary love affair with "Highland Mary," but any poet who could write "Flow Gently Sweet Afton" and "Thou Lingerin Star" had very certainly not taken the event lightly. Burns would certainly not have proposed emigration to Jamaica with a woman who was just a passing fancy. "Thou Lingerin Star," the third of the Highland Mary poems, was written about three years after Mary's death, at a time when Burns was happily established with Jean. One may be permitted to wonder if Burns ever showed the

poem to his wife. The poem certainly underlines the fact that Burns was genuinely in love with Mary and had been heart-broken at her loss. It is one of the most beautiful poems of loss and longing that Burns wrote. I don't think there's any doubt that really the Romantic period began with Burns, not with Wordsworth. This is not to denigrate Wordsworth in any way, but he wasn't the first Romantic poet.

Each generation brings with it its own prejudices and its own strengths, and so each generation has to reinterpret Burns, as we have to reinterpret so many things. Burns wrote so many great pieces that very few people would come up with the same best ten or twenty. What I consider I suppose the ten greatest poems by Burns, a scholar age thirty most likely would not choose the same; he might choose one or two that would overlap but they probably would not be the same.

It's also interesting to see selections of Burns made over the years, to see what poems a particular editor thinks are worth including, because in the end any selection obviously means choice, and why do editors choose one thing and not choose another? "John Anderson, My Jo" was very popular. "The Cotter's Saturday Night" was enormously popular in the nineteenth century, and I disagree with most Burns scholars but it's not a very Scottish poem. That may have been why it was so often used in American textbooks, school books, because it didn't pose a language problem. If you read "Address to a Haggis" for example, which is done to death at Burns Suppers, when they march in with a haggis and then somebody recites it, but every third or fourth line there's a word that has to be glossed because people don't know what it means. So every generation will reinterpret Burns, just as every generation reinterprets Shakespeare and other great writers. He's in good company, let's say.

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When I was accepted at the University of Paris, at the Sorbonne, I proposed a thesis on Burns but was told that there was already one—Auguste Angellier's.² So my academic interest in Burns was put on hold. I wanted to do my doctorate on translations of Burns, and when I did get to Burns, my first publications were on the French translations of Burns's poetry, in a French journal, the *Revue de Littérature Comparée*. There is

² Auguste Angellier, *Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1893).

still work to be done on Burns's reception and influence abroad. Burns had never been translated into Portuguese until a student of mine here, Luiza Lobo, produced a translation with commentary on Burns, an anthology of his poetry translated into Portuguese. There was another person, a Japanese man, Toshio Namba, and he translated not the first, but he translated the first large, collection of Burns's work into Japanese, and in fact, I published an article by him on Burns in Japan. Who knows, without studying each literature, how much Burns influenced the writing of poetry, romantic poetry, by foreign translators and readers, scholars.

I soon dropped into the editing of the letters. I was doing some research in New York and decided that I was going to do a variorum edition, that is to say, showing all the variations in various manuscript texts of the poetry. And it came to my attention that a man by the name of Kinsley, who was at that time in Wales, a Scot, was working on that, and it didn't seem it would be useful for the two of us to compete.

So after some consultation around it, he suggested: why don't you edit the letters, the correspondence of Burns? Now, Burns in his lifetime wrote about seven hundred known letters. Most of these had been published with Oxford University Press by DeLancey Ferguson, an American, but that edition had come out in 1931, and it seemed probably appropriate in modern times that another edition should come out.

I got in touch with Professor Ferguson, and he agreed to help me in any way possible. And so began almost a twenty-year effort, because I was teaching of course. And I did some other publishing during the period, because in those days the saying was "publish or perish," and if you told your department head that you were working on a long-range project he might say, "that's all very well but you need to publish this year."

The decision was that I would need to re-collate, that is to say reexamine, every known letter where a manuscript existed and collate them again. Nobody's perfect, and in the Ferguson edition there were a few, very few, but a few mistakes that had crept into his 1931 edition. This was before the days of Xerox so I had actually to go and examine personally almost every letter that appears in the edition. This meant going to New York, it meant going to Los Angeles, it meant going to London, it meant going to Edinburgh. In all, I don't think there are probably more than perhaps a dozen or so manuscripts that I've not actually seen.

The greatest collection of manuscripts, both poetic and prose, is at Alloway, near Ayr, in the Birthplace Museum, the little cottage in which

Burns was born. There is now a tourist and research center on the grounds near to Burns's cottage. The cottage remains pretty much in the state that it would have been when Burns lived in it; they had a couple of cows at one end of the building, and the people lived in the other end. There was a thatched roof, and one of the curators in the museum told me that some years ago when they had to re-thatch the roof they had great difficulty finding, in the whole of Great Britain, people who could thatch with straw. But they have amassed a very significant collection. The Birthplace Museum doesn't buy very much now. The National Library of Scotland, of course, in Edinburgh, being the national library, they still buy manuscripts.

Back in those days they did microfilm for me of every letter that was available. The problem is, of course, that over the years letters have disappeared into private hands. There was a collection in the Burns field of manuscript material owned by a man by the name of Law, and since the time Ferguson was working on these in the early nineteen thirties nobody knew where they were. The original man, Law, had died, and you know these are private things, they get passed on to somebody, or he might even have given them away before he died.³ I tried through his lawyers and the firm that he owned, and no trace of it. They still haven't turned up. They will, because material like that doesn't get destroyed, but it can disappear.

The work of course took quite a number of years, because for example, when I went to London to work in the British Museum, now the British Library, there was a great deal of stuff there, and Edinburgh and Ayr had large numbers of manuscripts, and my time was limited because I would have a summer semester off to go and do this research. It had its very pleasant aspect, of course, and I guess I began collecting Burns myself at that time.

Anyway, after a number of years of collating this material, I was ready to go to press and got in touch with the then-editor of Oxford University Press in Oxford, a guy by the name of Davin, who was very helpful, and the process of seeing the material through the press began. It took about two years for it to get done. I was sent proofs, and I had a semester of leave and Lucie took all the leave she had from where she

³ [This passage refers to the seventeen manuscript letters owned by Sir Alfred Law of Honresfield, Lancashire, that Ferguson had collated for the 1931 edition, but which were unlocated for the new edition: *Letters* (1985), I, lxiii. Cf. also *Burns Chronicle for 2016* [vol. 125] (2015): 34-49. Eds.]

worked and we just sat down and proofread, and anybody who's done any proofreading knows it's not one of the most exciting things in the world. I suppose you could say in a way it's boring, but I think, I *think*, we got a pretty accurate reading. I'm not going to say, in the two volumes that the published letters occupy, that there wouldn't be perhaps a typo here or there, but I hope there aren't very many.

* * *

The work that I did in collecting this material put me in touch with, I suppose, most of the Burns scholars. One was not a professional scholar, but William Dunlop, who owned the *Ayr Advertiser* newspaper and lived across the Brig o' Doon, famous in Burns's poem, "Tam O' Shanter," who was a man of considerable means, and was honorary curator, I guess, of the Burns collection there. He knew Burns well, although like my grandfather, he was not an academic. We shared a love of fly fishing and he owned—in Scotland pieces of river are, I don't know if it's rented out or sold, but he owned a chunk of a river where he was the only one who could fish legally. My father had belonged to a fishing club in Canada where you weren't allowed to use bait, you had to fly fish; what we caught was trout. Billy Dunlop was always going to take me salmon fishing, but unfortunately it never happened. Anyway, he and I became very good friends.

Whenever I would turn up for the first time at the Museum, Billy Dunlop would have me to dinner, and I saw his house where he had Burns relics and so on. And he's one of three people to whom I dedicated the edition of the letters, and he was most helpful. He arranged for me to have microfilms of all the material they had on hand without ever charging me, which was obviously an expense on their part to produce this material.

Willy Dunlop used to go down to bid, himself, in London when Burns manuscripts came up. And a dealer whom I got to know quite well said that they knew immediately when Dunlop would come into the room, they knew what he was going to bid on. And Dunlop himself told me he had a formula for bidding on material, so much a line for poetry and less per line for prose. But the dealers also knew his formula, and they resented that he bid for himself, and by bidding for himself he didn't have to pay an agent's fee, which used to be 10 percent. So the dealers bid against him deliberately, but they knew exactly where he was going to

end so they stopped one bid below that. Poor chap, something that he should have paid £100 might get bid up to £150. As I say, he never knew this, but he paid more than he needed to for Burns material.

Ferguson was a delightful person. He acted as a kind of father to me. He's another of the people to whom I dedicated the Burns letters. And he made available to me all of the material that he had. He taught at Case Western and then Brooklyn. I think he may have been from upstate New York, but when I knew him he had retired and was living in Connecticut. But when I spent a summer semester working on Burns material in New York, in the Burns collections in the New York, Public Library and in the Morgan Library in New York, my wife and I drove up and spent a day with him up in Connecticut. He was a delightful person, and very, very helpful.

He had run a bit afoul of the Burns Federation because there are a few pretty explicit letters, sexually explicit letters, in Burns's correspondence, and probably the then editor of the *Burns Chronicle*, he doesn't need to be named, but he wanted Ferguson not to publish those letters. And Ferguson said, "well, you know, letters are letters no matter what they say," so he went ahead and published them. And the Burns Federation, I think, were quite angry at him because we're talking the 1920s and '30s, when the Burns Federation was almost in denial that Burns had ever written anything bawdy. Anyway, they just didn't like it.

Another student of Burns was Robert Fitzhugh, who had edited some of the Burns biographical sources, and he and I became friends. Another was Robert Thornton, Bob Thornton to us, who had been a student of Ferguson. When I taught at Alabama he was teaching at the University of South Carolina, and we met for the first time at a regional conference in Atlanta and spent a few hours together. And then he moved to Kansas State and then New Paltz, and eventually I moved to South Carolina. He was given the first Russell Award awarded by the University of South Carolina for research, and a few years later I was awarded it, so two of the university's research award holders have been Burns scholars. He retired to Cheraw, South Carolina, and we kept in touch. Bob Thornton was involved when I was founding the journal *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

I'd forgotten about James Kinsley. He was the person who was editing the poems of Burns when I withdrew from the idea of doing that and concentrated on the letters. At the time that I knew him, he was teaching in Wales, and he later moved to Nottingham. I visited him two or three times, and he came down and visited me in London. We tried to

hire him here, but he was already a professor at Nottingham, and he didn't feel he wanted to leave England, although he was a Scot. He was a really first-rate scholar and produced what is still the standard edition of the poems.

* * *

Burns was a great poet and a great song writer; but above all he was a great and tender man, filled with a sense of humour and *joie de vivre* which no amount of adversity could dampen.

* * *

In my lifetime Robert Burns has brought me into contact with an extraordinary array of people whom I could not have met other than through our mutual admiration for and love of the man and the poet Robert Burns. I have led a full life with much to be thankful for and some things to regret, but that life would have been immeasurably poorer without the contacts I have enjoyed with other Burnsians. All of this I owe to the Immortal Memory of Robert Burns.