"The mair they talk, I'm kend the better": Poems about Robert Burns to 1859

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Any student of Robert Burns will know that the writing about the poet seems to be without end: scholarly books and articles, entries in magazines, guidebooks to the poet’s haunts, newspaper accounts, novels, plays, radio and television scripts, movies—and of course poems. They all bear witness to the enduring fame of the Bard. I have chosen to discuss some of the poems which have been written to honor him. Not all of them are good, few are memorable, but they all bear witness to the fact that Burns is a poet who has attracted other poets’ attention.

Even before his death there were poems about Burns; in a fashion the rhyming epistles which he received from Thomas Blacklock, Janet Little, David Sillar and others are poems about him. Some of these we know were actually sent to the poet, probably they all were. During his lifetime, too, there were poems about Burns in chapbooks. James Maxwell’s Animadversions on Some Poets and Poetasters of the Present Age Especially R-t B-s, and J-n L-k (for John Lapraik), which was published in Paisley in 1788, with a poem entitled “On the Ayrshire Ploughman Poet, or Poetaster, R. B.,” as well as Alexander Tait’s Poems and Songs of 1790, with three scurrilous poems about Burns, are instances of early chapbook literature about him—all four of these poems, one may note, are unfavourable to Burns. He ignored most of these attacks, but his fame was such that poems attributed to him began to appear. He complained about these bogus works in a letter to John Francis Erskine in 1793 and also to an unnamed correspondent in 1795 concerning the Patrick Heron election campaign.

Selections from Burns’s poetry appeared in one of the most successful collections, Poetry: Original and Selected, published by the Glasgow firm Brash & Reid. One of the earliest of these chapbooks was devoted to “Tam o’ Shanter,” published in 1795. The next number contained “The
“Soldier’s Return” which was a perennial favorite during and shortly after the Napoleonic Wars. By the time the series was into its second volume (there were 24 chapbooks per volume) Burns had died. The first seven chapbooks of Volume II are devoted in whole or in part to eulogies in prose or verse to Burns, and to selections of his poems and songs. As I have examined this material elsewhere, I shall not repeat it here. The whole question of Burns and chapbook literature would certainly repay attention, but would be far too lengthy for a paper such as this one.

The next event which requires our notice was the publication in 1800 of James Currie’s four-volume *Works of Robert Burns; With an Account of his Life*, an edition of such importance that every one since it owes a major debt to Currie’s efforts. With the good there also came some bad, for in his enthusiasm to promote the edition for the benefit of Jean Armour Burns and her children, Currie suppressed and altered documents, giving rise to misconceptions about Burns’s life which were not corrected until this century. What is important for this paper is that a minor writer of historical works and children’s literature, William Roscoe, had his poem “On the Death of Burns” appear in Currie. Also included in subsequent editions of Currie, the poem was later reprinted in dozens of editions of the poet; I would venture that Roscoe’s elegy is the most frequently published poem about Burns, so often that I do not intend to spend time on it here. There are other poets whom I shall exclude because their work is too well known to require attention in a paper such as this one. Among them are Thomas Campbell, Wordsworth, Coleridge, James Montgomery, James Hogg, Longfellow, and several others.

To show how far afield such poems can go, the University of South Carolina has in its library an untitled 39-line poem addressed to James Currie, congratulating him upon the publication of his edition of Burns, signed Willie Pender Porcupine (probably William Shepherd, 1768-1847). Equally idiosyncratic is a MS poem in my collection entitled “Australia’s Memorial to Robert Burns” with the dedication “To the Canberra Burns Memorial Fund…for the erection at the Federal Capital of a worthy memorial to the Poet.”

I shall concentrate in this paper on early nineteenth-century poems about Burns because these, like early criticism of the poet, give us an

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instructive insight into what early authors thought were Burns’s strengths and weaknesses, what events in his life were important. These writers set the tone for what was to come.

The year 1801 saw the appearance in print of several poems about Burns, quite possibly a spin-off of James Currie’s 1800 edition of the poet’s works. One of these was the re-appearance of Elizabeth Scot’s 1787 poem to Burns and his answer, which had, in fact, first appeared in Currie. The two poems were re-published in Scot’s *Alonzo and Cora*, where there was joined to them a third rhyming epistle by Thomas Blacklock, who had died in 1791. Oddly Blacklock addressed Scot as though she had been critical of Burns, although her epistle to him had been most cordial. Blacklock’s poem opens:

Dear Madam, hear a suppliant’s pray’r,
And on our bard your censure spare,
Whase bluntness slights ilk trivial care
Of mock decorum:²

Blacklock’s epistle must have been written between February 1787, when Scot sent her epistle to Burns, and 1789, when she died; the poem was first published in *Alonzo and Cora*. It is interesting to find a reference during this time frame to a perceived decline in Burns’s poetic abilities. Blacklock writes: “This by-past time, as fame reports, / The author’s Muse was out of sorts” (p. 162). On 24 August 1789, Blacklock, in a rhyming epistle to Burns, hints at this problem when he mentions that he would “…wish to know…Whether the Muse persists to smile, / And all thy anxious cares beguile?”³ In his rhymed reply written two months later, Burns did admit to being “scant o’ verse and scant o’ time” (*Poems*, I:491), and indeed Kinsley ascribes only 33 Burns poems and songs to that year.

Currie’s edition of 1800 with its 2,000 copies, and reprints in each of the three successive years (in addition to an American edition in 1801), meant that the poet’s work was very well known throughout Great Britain and America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. We are not, therefore, surprised to find a poem entitled “Addressed to Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop: On Reading Burns’s Letters to that Lady” in a book of Mrs. Ann

Grant’s poems published in 1803. Mrs. Dunlop is, of course, the friend and confidante of Burns, and Currie had been given access to both portions of their numerous correspondence while preparing his edition. True to the tone of the letters, in which Mrs. Dunlop frequently received confessions from the poet, and answered as would a mother to her erring son, Mrs. Grant’s poem stresses this quality in the correspondence. Whenever Burns needed it, Frances Dunlop:

Consol’d him with the name of Friend:
That name, his best and dearest boast,
Where’er his erring steps would stray,
Rever’d, belov’d, and honour’d most,
Recall’d him back to wisdom’s way.

And when the wounds of Anguish bled,
Thy kindness dropt the healing balm;
And when the storm of Passion fled,
Thy counsel breath’d the sacred calm.4

Mrs. Grant devotes more than half of the 84-line poem to singing the praises of the Dunlop family, with its connections to Wallace, Mrs. Dunlop’s maiden name. It will be recalled that Burns named his second son (1789-1803) Francis Wallace in honor of Frances Dunlop:

And while, through all her winding vales
Sad SCOTIA for her poet mourns,
And far as Britain’s conquering sails
Extends the deathless name of BURNS: (Grant, p. 270)

A further poem, “On the Death of Burns,” is to be found in the collection. The author nods to the poets Collins and Shenstone, but not Pope, as influences on Burns, but she astutely recognizes where the major influence lies:

And RAMSAY, once the HORACE of the North,
Who charm’d with varied strains the listening Forth,
Bequeath’d to him the shrewd peculiar art
To Satire nameless graces to impart.
To wield her weapons with such sportive ease,
That, while they wound, they dazzle and they please: (pp. 262-3)

The poetess perceives Burns’s later life as one of licentiousness and debauchery, with the result that

The blushing Muse indignant scorns his lays,
And fortune frowns, and honest fame decays,

Till low on earth he lays his sorrowing head,
And sinks untimely 'midst the vulgar dead! (p. 264)

Jean is mentioned first as victim of the poet’s folly and then the poem ends with the plea to
... let the stream of bounty flow for JEAN!
The mourning matron and her infant train,
Will own you did not love the Muse in vain,
While Sympathy with liberal hand appears,
To aid the Orphan’s wants, and dry the Widow’s tears! (p. 265)

In addition to these two poems, Mrs. Grant included five pages of “Remarks on the Character of Burns” which may be summed up in her words: “I do not know whether most to pity or admire BURNS. Why were such people made?” (p. 259).

A year before Mrs. Grant’s poems appeared, John Gerrond produced a small volume entitled Poems on Several Occasions with the subtitle, yet again, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect. Born in 1765, the author was a blacksmith in Leith, but he had obviously travelled because his epistle “to Robert Burns” bears a note that it was “written in the State of Pennsylvania, in…1797.” According to Gerrond, inhabitants were amazed that such a one as Burns could have written the poetry ascribed to him: “They asked me whiles if it was true,/That you were bred up to the plough” (p.49). The author vouches for the fact:
But I maintain’d ’twas true ye said,
In youth ye were to ploughing bred,
An’ now ye’ve taen the gaging trade,
Altho’ sae bitter (p. 49)
even though Burns does not enjoy the employment according to Gerrond. The poem is addressed to Burns as though he were alive and the author admits, “Your footsteps here, you see, I trace” (p. 48). He mentions that Burns’s poems are well known in America, but complains:
Yet some forget their mother tongue,
Can read it but unco hum-drum,
But when ever I alang-side come,
I rattle’t o’er. (p. 49)

According to Gerrond, he is particularly suited to such recitation because he hails from the town where the poet lives—Dumfries, we may assume. The poem ends with the author’s fondest wish—to be acknowledged “A brither Poet” by Burns.

5 John Gerrond, Poems on Several Occasions, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect (Glasgow, 1802), p. 48.
James Thomson, a weaver in Kenleith, published in 1801 a poem in the Habbie Simson stanza which shows the author’s familiarity with Ramsay as well as Burns:

Come, hing your heads, ye poets a’,
An’ let the tears in plenty fa’,
Since death has ta’en Rob Burns awa,
That canty callan;
O! sic a loss we never saw,
Sin we lost Allan.6

Born in 1763, Thomson grew up knowing the works of Ramsay over whose songs he would “pour with delight…and on his Gentle Shepherd (…most of which he…could repeat from memory) he would dwell with rapture…” (p. iv). Although Thomson does not mention Fergusson in the introduction to his Poems in the Scottish Dialect, he includes a poem on meeting a gentleman at the gravestone of the poet. It is an irony, of which Thomson was probably unaware, that it was Burns who had ordered and eventually paid for the stone.

David Bruce in that same year also borrowed the title of his book from Burns for a volume issued in Washington, Pennsylvania. A native of Caithness, Bruce included some interesting poems on that still largely unsettled part of the state as well as satires on its few inhabitants. The collection contains two poems on Burns: the first, “Verses to the Memory of Robert Burns,” can be passed over. The second, “Verses on Reading the Poems of Robert Burns,” in broad Scots, humorously catalogues what the poet would find in Bruce’s corner of America, while at the same time making references to Burns’s own works. Three lines are devoted to Jean:

Just like your ain bra’ bonny Jean,
Sae gracefu’, simple, tight and clean,
Clad in her ilk-day claiths.7

Given the broad humor of many of his poems, it is perhaps not a coincidence that Bruce’s two poems on Burns immediately follow three poems devoted to whisky.

The Selector; Consisting of Pieces Moral, Literary, and Humorous, Extracted from Publications of Merit; Together with Original Essays and Poems appeared in four volumes published in Glasgow during 1805 and 1806. Not surprisingly the collection contains several poems on Burns.

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7 A Native of Scotland [David Bruce], Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect (Washington [PA], 1801), p.30.
There are also to be found poems by Burns, prose accounts of the poet, and the text of a letter from Burns to Peter Hill in Edinburgh, of March 1791, presenting him with a cheese and listing those friends he would have Hill invite to share it. The letter is a nice example of Burns’s sly wit, but as it had already appeared in Currie in 1800, one wonders why the Editor of The Selector bothered to reprint it.\(^8\)

The first volume contains a summons to attend a meeting of the Burns’s Anniversary Society, set up along the lines of Burns’s own “Libel Summons,” and signed by the clerk of the society with the pseudonym Modestus (I, 196). Unfortunately we do not know where the society met. A very interesting poem is entitled “Ode: Written for, and Read at the Celebration of the Birth of Burns, in Paisley, 29th January, 1805.” Although not incorporated into the Burns Federation until 1891, the Paisley Burns Club is credited by the Federation as having been founded at that meeting. The plot of the poem is that Caledonia appears before Jove to “grant my country one true Patriot Bard” (II, 56). The request is approved and Burns is named:

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\begin{align*}
\text{His merit’s proven, Fame her blast hath blown,} \\
\text{Now Scotia’s Bard o’er all the world is known—} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\text{.........} \\
\text{Yet, while revolving Time this day returns,} \\
\text{Let Scotsmen glory in the name of Burns (II, 57).}
\]

The poem was first published there under the initials R. T., which stand for Robert Tannahill, who became quite well known before taking his life in 1810 at thirty-five.

A further “Ode” was written by Tannahill for a similar event two years later. The production consists of a recitative, a song, another recitative and a further song. The second recitative ends:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Our country’s melodies shall perish never,} \\
\text{For, Burns, thy songs shall live for ever.}\end{align*}
\]

Tannahill’s “Ode” had a patriotic theme to it, which brings to mind Burns’s own song “Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?” The final song in Tannahill’s “Ode” would appear to have been based on Burns’s song. One stanza of the younger poet’s work begins: “Haughty Gallia threatens our coast” and it continues that Britons boast “The Patriot, and the Patriot Bard,” and the stanza ends:

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\(^8\) The Selector, III (1805-1806), 40-43.

But chiefly, Burns, above the rest,
We dedicate this night to thee;
Engraved in every Scotchman’s breast,
Thy name, thy worth shall ever be! (p. 81)

A year later the society met again, and again a poem was forthcoming. The opening lines are not unpromising:

Again we mark the changeful year
Ride forth upon the stormy gale,
While musing Fancy starts to hear
Wild Echo’s wild and weary wail

(The Selector, IV, 185).

Unfortunately there follow seven pages containing a sorry mixture of complaints about the political and moral decay abroad, with a good lacing of temperance indoctrination. Predictably it ends:

Let Reason spread the frugal feast,
And Friendship give the flow of soul;
Benevolence warm every breast,
And healthful Temperance mix the bowl! (IV, 190)

J. Y. of Glasgow also read a poem that day in Paisley. The poet evokes the shade of Burns and moves on “To kindle up old Scotia’s Bards sublime, / Still to survive the ravages of Time” (IV, 193), invoking Freedom through the shades of Douglas, Wallace, and Bruce. But, the poet continues, it will be Burns who, “sailing down the stream of Time,” will “dare the man of blood to place / Slavery’s grim ensign o’er…[Scotia’s] warlike race” (IV, 194). There were other poems, too, including a clever acrostic on the name Robert Burns.

An attractive, but poorly printed, volume of poems by Thomas Donaldson, a weaver of Glanton, was produced at Alnwick in 1809 by William Davison, re-using some of the Thomas Bewick woodcuts which had appeared in the 1808 edition of Burns’s poems. Donaldson’s poem entitled “On Reading Burns’ Works” may have been inspired by a reading of the Alnwick edition. The poem contains but twelve lines praising Burns with such hackneyed phrases as “Thy work abounds with sentiment, / There manly beauties shine,” or again “Thy genius glows in ev’ry page.”

The anonymous author of Tranquility; A Poem, To which are added, Other Original Poems… was not very giving of praise in the title of a poem which we find in the volume: “On Reading Some Trifling Verses,

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10 Thomas Donaldson, Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect; Both Humourous and Entertaining (Alnwick, 1809), p. 82.
By a Scottish Poet, ‘To the Memory of Robert Burns.’” Oddly the author adds as a note to the 72-line poem a quotation from Burns’s Preface to the 1787 Edinburgh edition of his poems, where he says that “poetic genius…bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my natal soil, in my native tongue.” The author assures us that “long to Nature he was true” while he sang “the joys of guileless love” (p. 61) and faithfully traced “wonder-working Nature” (p. 62) recording the cotter’s evening “Where all is love and joy serene” (p. 62) all of which Burns does “With charms beyond the reach of art” (p. 62). Even when the poet was “Debased amid the inglorious throng” he was able to “cheer Misfortune’s darkening day” and to charm us “In plaintive air or mirthful sound” (p. 63). Thus the author of Tranquility drew from the few words that he had quoted from Burns almost the entire subject of his/her poem—an interesting, though by no means great, achievement.

In a poem entitled “On a Black Marble Bowl that Belonged to Burns,” there appears once more the possibility of using the poet’s life as a vehicle for preaching temperance. Although the author, identified only as Braine, never mentions the name Burns except in the title of the poem, we are led through the mixing of alcoholic punch in the bowl to the voice of “A sainted maid serene” who calls upon the revelers to abjure strong drink, offering in its stead health, peace and happiness. The poem ends on her note of warning:

Abstain—for deep beneath,
Though Joys upon the surface swim,
And laughing Loves sport round the brim,
Lurk dire disease and death.12

Peter Forbes of Dalkeith sent an invitation in Standard Habbie to friends to join him at his home on January 25th 1811 to “crack an’ joke,/ O’er Scot’s kail brose,” as well, we are told, as haggis and other country fare.13 What is interesting about this poem is that it points out that it had by this time become a custom for admirers of Burns to forgather in houses in what appear to have been almost spontaneous celebrations

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11 Tranquility; A Poem. To which are added, Other Original Poems, and Translations from the Italian (Dundee, 1810), p. 64.
which were later to become Caledonian Societies, St. Andrew’s Societies and Burns Clubs.

Forbes opens his collection with another poem on the poet: “To the Friends of Burns, or reading the Contents of Burns’ Poems.” It is a clever poem which works a number of Burns’s subjects, and even titles, into the text. For instance one stanza reads:

Your holy fair when on’t I look,
It gars me cour in till a nook,
But death and doctor Hornbook,
    Gars me ay stare;
I leave them baith, an’ turns the stook
    Tae briggs o’Ayr (p. 5).

Another interesting poem is “The Library.” Forbes certainly was a well-educated man if he had read all the authors he mentions as available in the library; he also assumes that his readers will be able to follow. For example, we get two sides of a story in as many lines with “There’s Voltaire, Volney, but beside, / There’s Fuller, wha does trim their hide” (p. 14). There is a work “that does ilk parish tell, / By Sir John Sinclair” (p. 15), and of course there are the Scottish poets:

    Rob Fergusson, auld reikie’s ranter,
    And Jamie Alves’s sweet saunter;
Then next comes up, at a roun canter,
    Blyth Robin Burns (p. 13).

Oddly enough, Forbes nowhere mentions Allan Ramsay.

Another developing custom is noted in Forbes’ volume; a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the poet—in this case his “Lament for Burns, from the Place of his Birth,” which forlornly sings of Scotland’s loss. “Caledonia may sigh,” the Doon dash over its rocks, but the poet asks the river to “Move murmuring slow thro’ the auld brig o’ Doon” (p. 72).

C. Buchanan, about whom little is known, included two poems on Burns in A Walk from the Town of Lanark to the Falls of Clyde, on a Summer Afternoon of 1816. One is undated, entitled “Written for the Anniversary of Robert Burns;” a good deal of the poem is about Jean. What is intriguing is that the author accepts the attribution of Lady Nairne’s “Land of the Leal” to the pen of Robert Burns. As early as c. 1810 it was about in printed form with the opening line altered to “I’m wearin awa, Jean,” a line which Buchanan incorporates into his poem. Another poem to Burns is dated 1812. In it the author celebrates Scotland’s poets past with due respect to Burns, whose mantle the poet says has been picked up by Scott and Campbell.
I noted earlier the developing custom for people to travel to Alloway to visit the home in which Burns was born—a mark of the fame which was expanding around the poet’s life. Wordsworth travelled there and produced a poem, and so did Keats. Amedee Pichot wrote an account of his “Historical and Literary” travels, devoting nearly thirty pages to Burns. Another visitor was Richard Gall, of Dunbar (1776-1801), whose poems were not published until 1819. The anonymous author of the “Memoir of Richard Gall” notes that the poet developed “an almost idolatrous admiration of Burns.” We are not surprised, then, to find three “Burnsian” poems in the volume. One bears the note, “Written on visiting the house in which the celebrated Robert Burns was born, and the surrounding scenery, in autumn 1799” (p. 58). Into the poem Gall worked a direct quote from “The Banks o’ Doon”:

O Doon! aft wad he [Burns] tent thy stream,
Whan roaming near the flowery thorn,
And sweetly sing ’departed joys,
Departed, never to return!’ (p. 59)

Unfortunately our poet got a little carried away, and ended the poem: “While Nature lilt a waefu’ sang, / An’ o’er her Shakespeare Scotia mourns” (p. 60).

Another of Gall’s poems is entitled “On the Death of Burns.” The first stanza (of five) celebrates Ramsay’s The Gentle Shepherd, even mentioning Patie, Peggy and Bauldy by name. The musical reed is then passed to Burns who becomes “Nature’s Minstrel…o’ deathless name” (p. 83). The unidentified person to whom Gall’s poem is addressed, B—–r, is to take over: “Anither Burns kythes on the tilt landwart mead,” the poet wrote with more than a bit of exaggeration (p. 84).

Gall rounded out his trio of poems with “Epistle: Addressed to Robert Burns,” in which he writes that Burns took over after Fergusson’s death when Mirth hung her pipe “In Fingal’s ha’” (p. 47). Like several other authors who addressed poems to Burns, Gall wishes that he could please him with his own songs:

Yet could I think my sangs to thee
Wad pleasure bring,
Gosh, man! I’d gladly sit the lee—
Lang day, an’ sing (p. 50).

15 Richard Gall, Poems and Songs (Edinburgh, 1819), p. xi.
We cannot know if Gall’s songs would have pleased Burns, but they apparently pleased others because two of them were published as Burns’s own. The first, entitled, perhaps by the editor, “Song,” opens with a Burnsian ring:

Now bank an’ brae are clad in green,
An’ scattered cowslips sweetly spring;
By Girvan’s fairy-haunted stream
The birdsie flit on wanton wing; (p. 120)

This song first appeared in R. H. Cromek’s *Reliques of Robert Burns* in 1808.

The story about the other song is a little more involved. Entitled “Farewell to Ayrshire,” the work does not have the quality and power which we associate, with the productions of Burns: “Bowers, adieu! whare love decoying, / First enthralled this heart o’ mine” (p. 146). According to the note in Gall’s volume (pp. 167-8), it was the poet himself who sent the song to James Johnson as the work of Burns, and it was published as such in *The Scots Musical Museum* and was from there picked up by Currie for inclusion in his collection.

Born in 1792, Hew Ainslie was an Ayrshireman who attended Ayr Academy and later worked on the estate of Sir Hew Dalrymple, where he must have grown up hearing stories about Burns, so we are not surprised that in 1820 he led friends from Edinburgh to visit the Burns country. From the experience came a book entitled *A Pilgrimage to the Land of Burns; Containing Anecdotes of the Bard, and of the Characters he Immortalized, with Numerous Pieces of Poetry, Original and Collected*, which Ainslie published in 1822, the same year that he emigrated to America. The book opens with twelve lines obviously in imitation of Burns’s “John Barleycorn.” Ainslie’s poem begins:

There was three carles in the east,
Three carles of credit fair,
And they ha’e vowed a solemn vow,
To see the shire of Ayr.16

As the title suggests, there are references to characters from the Burns story crinkled throughout the book. Ainslie printed, for example, what he called a “modern Scotch composition…supposed by some to refer to Burn’s [sic] unfortunate amour with his dear Highland Mary” (p. 80). He then devotes a page to “Mary, A Sang,” a competent composition which Ainslie probably wrote himself. The poets who wrote earlier about Burns

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16 [Hew Ainslie], *A Pilgrimage to the Land of Burns* (Deptford, 1822), p. 1.
had little to say about Mary; perhaps we hear in Ainslie’s poem the beginnings of the Mary Campbell myth which was to engross readers for a century.

The poet’s “Address to Alloway Kirk” also supposed that readers knew their Burns, whose real-life experience with the cutty stool is transferred to the ruined church, or, as Ainslie puts it, “The bit whare fornicators sat…is now forgotten,” but there is also borrowed from “Tam o’ Shanter” a reference to “Whare Satan blew his bag” (p. 110). The assumed familiarity with Burns extended to events in the poet’s life, friends and the topography of Ayrshire, and snippets quoted from Burns without reference to where they appear, as when Ainslie quotes without further comment, “French ragout, / Or olio that wou’d sta’ a sow” (p. 181), confident that the reader will recognize these few words as borrowed from “Address to a Haggis.” When the travellers were enjoying themselves of an evening they passed the time by singing or reciting poems. One five-stanza song, entitled “Landlady Count your Lawin’”, has a stanza which is an obvious parody of Burns:

Then lady count your lawin’,  
The cock is near the crawin’,  
The day is near the dawin’  
An’ bring us ben mair beer (p. 116).

Although the group left Edinburgh on 23rd June 1820 (p.5), Ainslie works in a poem, ‘On Burns’ Anniversary,’ which ends:

What heart hath ever match’d his flame?  
What spirit match’d his fire?  
Peace, to the prince of Scottish song!  
Lord of the Bosom’s Lyre! (p. 256)

If imitation is the sincerest flattery, then George Beattie must be accounted one of the greatest admirers of Burns. Beattie (c. 1786-1823) was a native of Montrose and contributed “John o’ Arnha’” to The Montrose Review, originally nearly half of it in prose. In the Preface to the book version, Beattie immediately admits his debt to Burns:

It will be pretty evident that, in writing this Tale, ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ was kept in view…. It ran so much in my head, however, that I was more cramped in avoiding palpable imitation, and involuntary plagiarism, than I was benefited in any other respect, by attempting to adopt it as a model…  

17 George Beattie, John o’ Arnha’: To which is added The Murderit Mynstrell, and Other Poems, 5th edn (Montrose, 1826), p. v.
Beattie alerts the reader to a scene in the poem when John is led to Logie Kirk, where there is a graveyard scene, without the comic relief of Burns’s tale:

Nae ‘winsome wench’ was there, I ween,
Like Cutty Sark, to cheer the scene;
But blackest horror reign’d profound,
And threw its veil o’er all around (p. 36).

There follow three “fatal sisters” brewing up a fiendish mixture which owes a good deal more to Macbeth than to “Tam o’ Shanter.” The poem then takes off in another direction, mocking Scott, and especially Southey for accepting the Poet Laureateship. But can Britain’s “best of kings,” Beattie asks,

…mak’ an Honest Man?
Ah! sorrow fa’ me if he can!
So sang the Bard, now dead and gone—
Poor Burns! Apollo’s dearest son! (pp. 48-9).

The ironic jibes which Beattie made at his contemporaries no longer make their points, but “John o’ Arnha’” (republished in 1883) retains its freshness most where it was most inspired by Burns’s tale of diablerie.

We can move forward now to the celebrations of 1859. To say that there was a deluge of verse produced for the event is to be very conservative indeed. For a celebration at the Crystal Palace a competition was organized to judge the best poem submitted; the only requirement was that the poem be in English and between 100 and 200 lines in length. A selection of the 621 poems submitted was published along with other prize poems from other competitions in The Burns Centenary Poems, edited by George Anderson and John Finlay. The editors do not rank the poems which they include; in fact the order of appearance does not appear to follow any particular plan of arrangement. One of the poems which received quite a bit of attention was, as we should expect, “The Cotter’s Saturday Night.” For example, it was the first of the sumptuously illustrated folios published by the Royal Association for the Promotion of the Fine Arts in Scotland, in 1855. Frederic W. H. Myers contributed an untitled poem with the line “O noblest poem, ‘Let us worship God!’” (p. 3), while an anonymous contributor supplied “The Birth-Day of Burns” in which the penultimate stanza refers to the “Cotter’s Saturday” while the final line of the stanza is “Come, let us

18 George Anderson and John Finlay, eds., The Burns Centenary Poems: A Collection of Fifty of the Best (Glasgow, 1859), p. viii.
“THE MAIR THEY TALK, I’M KEND THE BETTER”:

worship God!” (p. 16). John Hodge Duffy contributed a poem which contained five stanzas on the poem, including this one on the father at evening prayer:

Whilst o’er the Book divine he meekly bends,
    And turns and scans the page with rev’rent eyes,
Whilst up to Mercy’s throne his prayer ascends,—
    A thought of Burns shall with the scene arise (p. 90).

A number of the poems in this collection dwell on the figure of Highland Mary. A.E.G., of London, contributed “Pastoral,” in which he or she devotes about a quarter of this long poem to Mary, including a passage about the pledge the lovers made “Beneath the starry witness of the sky./ The open Bible ratifies the oath” (p. 181). One of few who did so, A.E.G. also celebrates Burns’s use of satire. One stanza opens with the author extolling Burns’s mirth, fun and frolic: “While Laughter shakes his sides with jollity” (p. 183), but it is not all humor; before the end of the stanza “Satire’s biting tongue, with mocking smile, / Tunes her harsh notes” (p. 183).

William Shelley Fisher was another who focused on Mary; almost a quarter of his five-page contribution is devoted to her. Although she is not named, the lines

    Behold within the ‘hallowed grove’
    How Nature weeps the wane of love! (p. 226)

with a phrase borrowed from “Thou Lingering Star” leave no doubt as to the subject of the passage.

V. Y. of Edinburgh also sang the praises (and there were others in the collection too) of Highland Mary, of whom he or she writes, “The peasant sat enfranchised on Love’s throne” (p. 198). V.Y. makes the point that Burns’s audience grew as time went on, using an oblique reference to “Tam o’ Shanter”:

    Instead of peasant-audience, scant at best,
    When market-days called forth his ready jest (p. 198).

Burns did not, though, ignore his origins; he could still carry “grandeur into cottage life” (p. 201). “Had he no faults?” the author asks, and answers that the imperfections of nature are softened in moonlight:

    So with his faults amid the century
    Which he has filled with beauty and delight,—
    Let them apart, in their own shadows lie:
    The scene is not less bright (p. 202).

Several of the poems, indeed most of them, stress the profound influence which nature had upon Burns. William Sawyer drew attention
to the fact that this love recognized not only the beauty of the sunset, but also “the loveliness that lies/ In barren moors and ashen skies” (p. 209).

What is most striking about this collection, with its poems devoted to many aspects of Burns’s life and works, is that not one poet singles out Jean for praise or comment—in fact I do not believe that the name Jean ever appears. Granted that Highland Mary is a more romantic topic, made so by Burns himself, but in a collection in which home life as exemplified in “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” is so admired, it appears odd that the poet’s own domestic life should not have excited the praise of some of the poets whose work found expression in this volume.

Much more fun to read is the small collection put together by Samuel Lover under the pseudonym Ben Trovato, *Rival Rhymes, in Honour of Burns*. An author signing himself A Proverbial Philosopher contributed “A Remonstrance to the Directors of the Crystal Palace,” organizers, it will be recalled, of the above-noted competition. The poem opens, as the author would have it, by quoting himself: “He is a bold man who dareth to tamper with the dead.” Several lines later the statement is repeated, followed by “Wherefore, then, dig up Burns for dignity posthumous?” (p. 15) and goes on to state:

‘That waiting-room for unclad ghosts, before the presence-chamber of their king.’

This matters less for the Scotch than most of the ghosts in waiting; For the kilt is but cool wear, and they’re better prepared to go naked; Nevertheless I say, ‘Tamper not with the dead’ (p. 16).

The scoffing at the high-serious tone of the Crystal Palace competition continued in “Ode by an Amateur, an Ardent Admire of Milton, on the Centennial Birthday of Burns,” a spoof on ‘L’Allegro’:

Hence, chroniclers of Time,
   Makers of almanacs and strange predictions,
   Held by the wise as fictions;
   Begone, and wallow in the river’s slime
   To calculate the tides (p. 45).

After a considerable warm-up, the author comes to Burns. Here we learn of his use of Scots that “Nature in the natal hour, / Denied refined acoustic power” (p. 48). We all know Burns’s own comment about his youthful reading, but the author of this poem reminds us of it after having devoted a stanza about Scotland and oats:

But though oaten stop’s [sic] forbid,
Let no Scottish swain be chid,
Who, while he takes his shepherd’s crook,
Also takes afield his book,
That while his lambs enjoy their feed,
He may enjoy his pastoral read (p. 51).

One entry consists of a letter from “Fergus McFash” to the Directors of the Crystal Palace, describing how he came across what he maintains must be the earliest MS of Burns, written before “he began to intermingle English so extensively in his productions” (p. 56); the letter is followed by verse which resembles a Scottish “Jabberwocky.”

In addition to pseudonymous works, there are parodies, thinly disguised with a mixture of letters and asterisks. For example, in the style of Thomas Campbell, who had published his “Ode to the Memory of Burns” with Gertrude of Wyoming in 1808, we read:

Such joy my own heart knew,
When it dwelt in mortal shrine,
As it interwoven grew
Into brotherhood divine
With the champions and the bards of the free,
And invoked upon my lyre
The succession of their fire,
That their mantle might attire
Even me (p. 30).

Among those parodied are, in order of appearance: Longfellow, with “A Voice from the Far West;” Thomas Hood; Barry Cornwall; Tennyson, with “The Poet’s Birth: A Mystery;” Lord Macaulay (who is “identified” as the author of The Lays of Ancient Rum), with “The Battle of the Lake Glenlivit.” One passage in the poem is about a parade, and includes the following stanza:

The Temperance lodges, two and two,
With fifes and drums and banners,
But not a single man was there
Of the brave guild of Tanners.
For tanners water will keep out
Even in the grave when lying,
And will not choose to rot themselves
With water before dying (p. 107).

In proper academic form, there is a footnote referring the reader to Hamlet’s comment on tanners. The last poet to be parodied is Pope whose spirit recites a quick run-through of Burns’s life, including quotations and references to poems, such as this when we are asked to admire:

The poet’s wit and tenderness and fire,
The comprehensive mind, the varied power;
To see the outstretched ‘front of battle lower,’
And triumph with a hero in the van
Or mourn ‘The Mountain Daisy’s’ shortened span;
Or give his pity to a startled ‘Mouse,’
And read a moral from its ruined house (p. 121).

If it was not so before the centenary celebrations, it certainly became de rigueur after it for Scottish poets to write at least one poem in praise of Burns. From a reasonably extensive reading of nineteenth-century Scots poetry, my guess would be that at least half the collections published until the end of the century contained a poem about the Bard.

This is only a part of the extraordinary outpouring of admiration, respect and love which this man and his poetry have engendered. Annually we usher in the new year to the strains of “Auld Lang Syne,” a song which I believe to be the best-known non-political secular song in the world, not known to have been written by Burns by most of those who sing it. Many toast in a new year with a whisky named after a famous nineteenth-century clipper, but which was itself named after an attractive girl in a short skirt seen by Tam on a midnight ride past Alloway Kirk. There are relics true and false of the man; there are forgeries of his work; as one may gather, there are poems aplenty about him. All bear witness to the man who, two centuries after his death, continues to astonish and delight us.