

1986

The Influence of Burns and Fergusson on the War Poetry of Robert Service

Edwina Burness

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burness, Edwina (1986) "The Influence of Burns and Fergusson on the War Poetry of Robert Service," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol21/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Edwina Burness

The Influence of Burns and Fergusson on the War Poetry of Robert Service



When Robert Service's *Rhymes of a Red-Cross Man* appeared in 1916, reviewers were at pains to re-emphasize the poet's debt to Kipling. The anonymous critic in *The Bookman* noted: "There is a virility, a robust humour, a picturesqueness of phrase and a catchy, lilting metrical swing . . . that justify whoever was responsible for labelling him 'The Canadian Kipling.'"¹ Florence Finch Kelly in the American *Bookman* was more lyrical, asserting that Service was "known for a certain Kiplingesque flavour, as of free winds and wide horizons and untrammelled, divining spirit."² It was left to Witter Bynner in *The Dial* to give the most reasoned analysis of the connection between the two writers:

Here, as in the earlier poems, is an implicit acknowledgement of the debt to Kipling. It reaches even to free use of the phrase, "thin red line of 'eroes" or to the refrain, "For I'm goin' 'ome to Blighty in the mawnin'" This latest book confirms Service not as Kipling's imitator only but as his successor It is what Kipling might have made of the War, had his genius still been

young. Though the master would have written with surer artistry and less sentiment, the pupil has an advantage or two. Kipling showed what discernment genius could give an imperialist; Service shows what discernment sympathy can give a democrat. And where the Englishman used technical terms with an impressive proficiency sometimes confusing to the layman, the Scotsman uses the slang of the trench so casually and fitly that the picture and the action is on the instant clear-cut and unmistakable.³

The view of Bynner and his fellow reviewers is borne out by Service's own testimony: in the first volume of his autobiography, he admits to having been introduced to Kipling in his teens⁴ and to having been "inspired" by him, as by other writers like Robert Louis Stevenson and Jack London.⁵ In the second volume of his autobiography he claims that shortly before the First World War he was a "cross between Kipling and G.R. Sims,"⁶ a somewhat unfair assessment of his work.

Although the influence of Kipling can be detected in some of the *Rhymes of a Red-Cross Man* (notably "Going Home," "The Volunteer," "The Fool" and "The Red Retreat") there is evidence in some of the most successful pieces of the influence of earlier, specifically Scottish models. When Kipling wrote poems with overtly Scots subject-matter, in "McAndrew's Hymn" and "The Fall of Jock Gillespie," for example, his intention was to use the Scottish idiom merely to lend added color and quaintness. For Service to turn to his native literary roots, particularly at this point in his career, was a matter of deeper significance.

One of the strongest influences on Service's early poetic development, by his own admission, was Robert Burns. There was a familial connection:

My great-grandfather had been a crony of Robert Burns and claimed him as a second cousin. One of our parlour chairs had often been warmed by the rump of the Bard To my folks anything that rhymed was poetry, and Robbie Burns was their idol.⁷

More importantly he himself felt an affinity with Burns's style and attitudes:

. . . I felt a spiritual kinship with him . . . I would try to convince Pat [a friend] that Burns was greater than Shakespeare. He liked the Anglicized verse, while I preferred the Doric. It was the tongue of our town and every word was vital. But I savoured him at his saltiest, and read with gusto about *The Lass that made the bed for* [misquotation for "to"] *me* and the *Louse in the lady's Bonnet* ["To a Louse, On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church"]. I preferred humour to sentiment and liked it racy.⁸

These comments deserve greater critical attention than they have hitherto been accorded. Carl F. Klinck, for one, is content merely to comment that in Service's poetry written during the First World War the "mood" is like that of Burns,⁹ but he fails to specify what the "mood" is. In this paper I shall trace the influence Burns, and through him Fergusson, had on certain of Service's war poems, and shall try to suggest why he turned to these eighteenth-century models at this particular time.

The poem in *The Rhymes of a Red-Cross Man* which most clearly draws on Burns's work as a poetic model is "The Haggis of Private McPhee." Probably he was initially prompted to link Burns with the war because he had attended a "Burns Banquet" with John Buchan at the start of the war, but without a haggis. Of this omission Buchan had commented: "A Burns Banquet without the haggis is like *Hamlet* without the Prince."¹⁰ Prior to the "Banquet" Service had been rejected because of a varicose vein (not his age, as should have been the case) by the Seaforth Highlanders.¹¹ Eventually, he was accepted by the American Ambulance corps as a driver.¹² Having been deemed "unfit" by a regiment of his own country, Service could be expected to entertain ambivalent feelings towards Scotland, and even perhaps its emblematic dish, but not, I would argue, to its most famous poet.

Although the traditional Burns Night address "To a Haggis" is once alluded to (the phrase "'gushin' wi' juice'" recalls "gushing entrails bright"¹³), the main source for "The Haggis of Private McPhee" is "Tam o' Shanter." Service's subject matter is very much his own: the poem relates how McPhee receives a haggis from home to enable him to celebrate the Immortal Memory, even in the trenches—a neatly executed piece of satire on home

front insularity.¹⁴ While the soldier discusses with McPhun the haggis dinner they are about to have on their return to their billet, they are bombed by the Germans, and one loses a leg and the other his eyesight. It is only the thought of the haggis that drives them back to their trench, the blinded McPhun carrying his maimed comrade, who acts as guide. Tragically, they discover that the enemy has destroyed the haggis in their absence; but their countrymen are quick to avenge its demise. In structure, Service's piece has similarities with that of Burns: a journey is described through a terror-ridden area. Although the later poem is set in a realistic battle landscape, there are specific visual echoes of the earlier poem; Service's lines:

My! but it wis waesome on Naebuddy's land,
 And the deid they were rottin' on every hand.
 And the rockets like corpse candles hauntit the sky,
(p. 306)

are strangely reminiscent of Burns's picture of the dead brought to life by "auld Nick's" piping in Kirk Alloway: "Each in its cauld hand held a light" (p. 446). The submerged allusion reinforces the unearthly—and devilish—quality of modern warfare which Service is attempting to convey.

The verse form of the two poems is similar, too. The tetrameter couplet is used in both, although Service's eleven-syllable line replaces Burns's octosyllabic one. As a result the jaunty, sing-song effect underlines the humor of the modern poem, and sets up a daring contrast with the seriousness of the war setting. Like Burns, Service employs the couplet to point up the incongruity—and foolishness—of pursuing a sensory goal amid grave dangers; the lines:

And while the twa cracked o' the feast they would hae,
 The fuse it wis burnin' and burnin' away.
 Then sudden a roar like the thunner o' doom,
 A hell-leap o' flame . . . then the wheesht o' the tomb.
(p. 307)

imitate, in their blend of cosy comedy and mounting terror, the movement of Burns's climax:

And roars out, 'Weel done, Cutty-sark!
And in an instant all was dark:
And scarcely had he Maggie rallied,
When out the hellish legion sallied.
(p. 448)

Both poets also in key couplets combine conventional poetic diction with homely detail to convey an underlying meaning. Service on one occasion depicts the lure of the haggis in the language of love poetry:

For sweeter than honey and bricht as a gem
Wis the thocht o' the haggis that waitit for them.
(p. 307)

The absurdly inappropriate comparison underlines the fact that in war only a localized passion has any validity; the promise of food has more driving power than the promise of glory. Burns in his poem turns a rhetorical address into a joke:

Ah, *Tam!* Ah, *Tam!* thou'll get thy fairin!
In hell they'll roast thee like a herrin!
(p. 448)

The bathetic simile ridicules the traditional picture of divine punishment especially favored by Scottish Calvinism.

The mock-moralizing of Burns's narrator is also imitated in the later poem; Service's lines:

Yet alas! in oor moments o' sunniest cheer
Calamity's aften maist cruelly near.
(p. 307)

with their clichéed portentousness recall Burns's digression:

But pleasures are like poppies spread,
You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;
(p. 444)

In both works the ostensible moral is intentionally unsuited to the context. Burns, far from censuring Tam for his drunkenness and

licentiousness, holds up Maggie's innocent suffering as a warning to the tempted:

Think, ye may buy the joys o'er dear,
Remember Tam o' Shanter's mare.
(p. 449)

Service similarly undercuts, in his case, the claims of patriotism with the unexpected second line of his final couplet:

And there wisna a man but had death in his ee,
For he thocht o' the haggis o' Private McPhee.
(p. 309)

Localized revenge (for the Germans' bombing of the haggis) is a stronger motivating force than any objective martial code. By presenting courage in a ludicrous context like this, the poet is making a general comment about the absurd nature of warfare as a whole.

The humor of "The Haggis of Private McPhee" is necessarily blacker than that of "Tam o' Shanter," given its more realistic setting—the enemy is the Hun, not the Devil. The two soldiers are shown talking about the haggis to keep up their spirits while they cower down in a "Jack Johnson hole," while Tam sings to himself as he rides through the haunted countryside. In both cases, the victims court disaster through their foolish unpreparedness, but the extent of the damage is different in scale. The only casualty in the eighteenth-century piece is Maggie whose tail is torn off by a pursuing witch, whereas in the later work both the men are seriously wounded. Burns does not allow for much pity for the animal's injury:

The carlin claut her by the rump,
And left poor Maggie scarce a stump.
(p.448)

The indecorous rhyming "rump"/"stump" retains the comic tone of the whole. In the war-poem, on the other hand, Service stretches the limits of humor almost to breaking-point when he makes the newly blinded McPhun insist:

"Oh I ken it's a terrible thing tae be blind;
And yet it's no that that embitters ma lot—
It's missin' that braw muckle haggis ye've got."
(p. 307)

and "For the sake o' that haggis I'll gang till I drap" (p. 309). Although it is evident that Service is intending a daring parody of the selfless ideal of endurance, he still lays himself open to the charge of tastelessness. One reason for this apparent insensitivity is given in the notes to "Book Four" (the war section) of his subsequent *Ballads of a Bohemian* (1921):

It is odd how one gets callous to death, a mediaeval callousness. When we hear that the best of our friends have gone West, we have a moment of the keenest regret; but how soon again we find the heart to laugh! (p. 572)

In a soldier this kind of hard-heartedness might be excuseable, as being a form of self-preservation emotionally; but in a Red-Cross worker like Service it might seem more reprehensible. Significantly, in his autobiography he uses that same word "callous" when describing the attitude he and his fellow workers had to casualties like McPhun and McPhee:

We would laugh a lot, mostly about nothing, and we became very callous, grumbling if brains or guts soiled the car. We were sorry for the poor devils but saw so many they were like shadows.¹⁵

Familiarity with suffering produced in Service and his like a protective layer of hardness, and it is this hardness which he cannot (or will not) remove from the humor of his poem.

This harshness which informs much of the humor of "The Haggis of Private McPhee" is not typical of Service's war poetry as a whole. A piece like "A Pot of Tea," for example, reveals a lighter side of his comic talent. Although it is composed in Cockney slang, it also appears to have been influenced by eighteenth-century Scottish literature. At first sight the subject—the celebration of a humble national beverage—and the verse form might be thought to have been modelled on Burns's

"Scotch Drink." Just as Burns's speaker dismisses the claims of foreign liquor:

Let other Poets raise a fracas
 'Bout vines, an' wines, an' druken *Bacchus*,
 (p. 139)

so does Service's "Tommy" decry "All kinds of fancy foreign dope, from caffy and doo lay,/To rum" (p. 369). In both cases the outlandishness of the foreign drinks is further emphasized by the British speakers' use of French words. In Burns's poem, however, whisky is being vaunted as the ideal drink for poets:

When wanting thee, what tuneless cranks
 Are my poor Verses!
 Thou comes—they rattle i' their ranks
 At ither's arses!
 (p. 142)

and an attack is made, with equal robustness, on those who would outlaw illicit stills. Service's piece lacks Burns's fire, and has more in common with the poem on which "Scotch Drink" is based, Robert Fergusson's "Caller Water." Unlike the Burns counterpart, the speaker eulogizes a non-alcoholic drink. As a result the juxtaposition of colloquial and rhetorical diction heightens the contrast between a simple beverage and a sophisticated one. A comic naïveté and cosy familiarity are more evident in Fergusson and Service. Fergusson, for example, gives Adam the nick-name "*Adie*" at the start of his poem, and asserts that the domestic harmony in Eden was entirely due to teetotalism:

His amry had nae liquor laid in
 To fire his mou',
 Nor did he thole his wife's upbradin'
 For being fou.¹⁶

The easy colloquialism ("fou") in a solemn frame of reference also provides the humor in Service's lines:

I think them lazy lumps o' gods wot kips on asphodel

Swigs nectar that's a flavour of Oolong;
(p. 369)

with the same celebration of a non-alcoholic paradise, but in this case a pagan one. By contrast, Burns's allusion to whisky clearing the head "o' doited Lear" (p. 140) is altogether more literary, in keeping with the more sophisticated tone of the poem where a line like "When Vulcan gies his bellys breath" (p. 140) does not sound inappropriate.

In both "Caller Water" and "A Pot of Tea" the speakers connect their chosen drink with an aspect of nationalism in a more complex way than their counterpart in "Scotch Drink." By Burns's poet, whisky is recommended as a restorative to "Ye Scots wha wish auld Scotland well"—that is "Poor, plackless devils like *mysel*"—in preference to wines or "*foreign gill*" (p. 141). With Fergusson wine is to be abhorred because it symbolizes Augustan verse, based on heady classical models:

The fuddlin' Bardies now-a-days
Rin *maukin*-mad in Bacchus' praise,
And limp and stoiter thro' their lays
Anacreontic,
While each his sea of wine displays
As big's the Pontic.
(p. 106)

His own poetic muse, on the other hand, will "no gang far frae hame" (p. 106) and will drink from purer streams of inspiration. In Service's poem, tea is associated with a brand of unaffected yet invigorating Britishness—"It bucks you up like anythink, just seems to touch the spot" (p. 369)—and is immensely superior to the liquor and, by inference, the patriotism of the French allies.

The claims that water and tea have improving properties are somewhat minimized by the insularity of the two speakers, however. The poet of "Caller Water" closes his address with a reference to

The goddess of the vocal Spray,
The Muse, and me.
(p. 108)

The bathetic final possessive pronoun implicitly mocks the inward-looking nature of nationalistic verse. Similarly, in Service's last lines—

To-night we'll all be tellin' of the Boches that we slew,
As we drink the giddy victory in Tea.

(p. 369)

—the ridiculously inadequate adjective "giddy" turns the defending of one's country into material for boasting at a tea-party. Burns's persona, by contrast, more self-aware than either Fergusson's or Service's speakers, is allowed to mock his own parochialism:

Fortune, if thou'll but gie me still
Hale breeks, a scone, an' *Whisky gill*,
An' roth o' *rhyme* to rave at will,
Tak a' the rest,
An' deal 't about as thy blind skill
Directs thee best.

(p. 142)

The adroitness with which allusion to *fortuna ceca* is set against the mention of his "breeks" indicates that Burns's persona is anything but the "plain man" that Fergusson and Service are gently mocking.

As with "The Haggis of Private McPhee," Service in "A Pot of Tea" borrows not only his subject-matter but his prosody from his eighteenth-century sources, slightly modified. Although his lines and stanzas are longer than those of Burns and Fergusson, he retains their iambs and their use of triple rhymes, near the end of his verses rather than at the beginning. The effect is comparable, and a comically colloquial vigor is added to the meaning of the poem.

It might be asked, in conclusion, why Robert Service should want to return to his Scottish literary roots for inspiration in poems which deal, among other things, with the issue of patriotism. Rejected by a Scottish regiment, but accepted by an independent American ambulance unit, he was in the ambivalent position of being in but not of the war. He could therefore be

assumed to entertain conflicting feelings about nationalism, as, I have suggested, did Burns in "Scotch Drink" and "Tam o' Shanter" and Fergusson in "Caller Water." Yet like his eighteenth-century models, Service's comic treatment of serious themes shows a vitality and originality which is peculiarly Scottish. What has been written about "Tam o' Shanter" could as well be applied to "The Haggis of Private McPhee," namely that "realism . . . humour and symbolism are skilfully intermingled in a work that is typical . . . of the Scottish mind."¹⁷ And what has been written of "Scotch Drink" could be as easily applied to "A Pot of Tea" as to "Caller Water," that the "unity of local and national is realised at the comic level."¹⁸

When first he arrived in the New World from Scotland, Robert Service admitted to wishing he could write "half as well" as Stevenson.¹⁹ By the time he had published his *Rhymes of a Red-Cross Man* he had surely earned a place with Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns, and Robert Louis Stevenson, the other "three Robins" who had "touched the Scots lyre."²⁰

Imperial College, London

NOTES

¹ "Rhymes of a Red Cross [sic] Man," *The Bookman* 51 (1916), Christmas Supplement, 5.

² "The Poets Enlist Under Mars," *The Bookman* 44 (1916-1917), 512.

³ "Poetry From the Trenches," *The Dial* 61 (1916), 531-2.

⁴ *Ploughman of the Moon* (New York, 1945), p. 86.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 102.

⁶ *Harper of Heaven* (London, 1948), p. 42.

⁷ *Ploughman*, p. 15.

⁸ Ibid, p. 25.

⁹ *Robert Service: a Biography* (Toronto, 1976), p. 116.

¹⁰ *Harper*, p. 67.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 67.

¹² Ibid, p. 72.

¹³ *Collected Poems of Robert Service* (London, 1978), p. 308; *Burns. Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford, 1978), p. 251. All further page references in the text to Service's and Burns's poems are to these editions.

¹⁴ Sean O' Casey makes a similar point in *The Silver Tassie* when he has soldiers at the Front receive a prayer-book and a rubber ball from those at home: *The Silver Tassie* (London, 1928), p. 62. (Ironically, the title of the play is taken from another poem by Burns, "My Bony Mary").

¹⁵ *Harper*, p. 73.

¹⁶ *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid (Edinburgh & London, 1956), II, p. 106. All other references in the text to Fergusson's poetry are to this volume and this edition.

¹⁷ Thomas Crawford, *Burns. A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh & London, 1960), p. 222.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 149.

¹⁹ *Ploughman*, p. 140.

²⁰ *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London, 1911), III, 256.