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Twentieth-Century Burns Scholars: Robert Donald Thornton

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Twentieth Century Burns Scholars

Robert Donald Thornton

Robert Donald Thornton (1917-2007) is known to most Burnsians as the man who defended James Currie. His landmark biography of Currie, *The Entire Stranger* (1963), gave a fascinating and well-documented account of Currie's whole career, but what drew startled attention was Thornton's conclusion that Currie's long-disparaged edition of Burns can be "a reliable guide in the pursuit of further truth." Yet Thornton's challenging reappraisal of Currie was only one in a whole series of contributions that he made to Burns studies between the 1930s and the 1990s. Thornton's own research archive, with several unpublished works, is now in the G. Ross Roy collection at the University of South Carolina, together with parallel archives of his correspondence with J. deLancey Ferguson and Prof. Roy. It is perhaps time to reappraise Thornton himself.

Early Life and first Burns studies

Bob Thornton was a New Englander, born in 1917 in West Somerville, and educated in the local public schools. He went to Wesleyan University in Connecticut, graduating BA in 1939 with honours. He wrote his first piece of Burns scholarship as an undergraduate, a remarkable 96-page thesis on Burns's reading, using Ferguson's recent new edition of the *Letters* alongside allusions in the poems to tabulate the range of Burns's Biblical and literary references—not just which works Burns quoted or mentioned, but how often. Completed when Thornton was just twenty-one, and never published, it remains a valuable piece of work.

For the next step, he approached two possible mentors, the biographer F. B. Snyder at Northwestern in Chicago, and the editor J. deLancey Ferguson, at what was then Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. He chose Ferguson, who became a lifelong friend. In addition to teaching freshman English at nearby Fenn College, Thornton sang semi-professionally throughout graduate school, in church choirs and for two summers with a Gilbert & Sullivan company. Ferguson encouraged him to work with one of the music professors, Melville Smith, at a time when few Burnsians had much technical knowledge of eighteenth-century music. He finished the MA in 1940 (ten graduate courses in a year), and after a year of high school teaching Ferguson sent him on to Harvard, where he earned an MA in 1942 and his PhD in 1949. Harvard's program, though prestigious, was even then oldfashioned: a marginal note on one of Thornton's letters to Ferguson records the great Harvard professor G.L. Kittredge (who died that year) approving an entering graduate student's choice of coursework: "Fine, fine—*Beowulf* and Shakespeare—the old and the new." The only Scottish course we know Thornton took at Harvard was in Middle Scots poetry.

World War II and Okinawa

As for so many of his generation, Thornton's graduate study was overshadowed and interrupted by war. Congress had passed a Selective Service bill even before Pearl Harbor (1941), and Thornton's number came up early. At first he was encouraged to go on teaching,

and then he was rejected on his first physical. However, in the fall of 1942, he was recruited for a special program in the US Navy, first going to the University of Colorado for intensive Japanese language study, an entry-level commission as Ensign, and the start of his long and happy marriage. He moved to New York for advanced training in naval intelligence, before posting as a Lieutenant (j.g.) to Hawaii and Guam with JICPOA (Joint Intelligence Center, Pacific Ocean Area). In May 1945, he was seconded to the Tenth Army, on Okinawa, during the last weeks of intense Japanese resistance, to work for General Simon Bolivar Buckner, who was killed under fire on June 18. One of Thornton's earliest publications was his translation of a dead Japanese soldier's war-diary from Okinawa. In July 1945, he contracted acute hepatitis, spending seven days in a tent before evacuation to a Hawaii hospital, and even after he was discharged early in 1946, he suffered further health problems. His experience when reactivated in the naval reserve in the late 1940s coincided with the first anti-communist investigations, perhaps influencing his perspective later in writing about the Scottish sedition trials of the 1790s. In retirement, he wrote a history of the American Legion in South Carolina (1989), notable for his strongly-stated sympathy with the often-disregarded veterans of the Vietnam war.

The GI Bill, Harvard, and *The Merry Muses*

Back at Harvard in 1946 on the GI Bill, Thornton worked again as a teaching fellow while finishing his PhD. The overstretched postwar Harvard department wisely recruited Ferguson as one of his examiners. Thornton's Harvard dissertation falls into three parts. The first (pp. 1-40) is a brisk survey of twentieth-century Burns scholarship, praising the achievements of American, German, and French scholars, while denouncing (with names named) the "vicious chain of command" through which influential Scottish Burnsians had tried to suppress inconvenient information. The second and longest section (pp. 40-217) works through Burns's songs, song by song, to correct and supplement the work of J. C. Dick (whom Thornton much admired). The third section (pp. 218-297) reveals the impatience of the returning veteran with the fudging and timidity of his elders. Here, Thornton provided the first detailed song-by-song commentary on the Burns songs in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, including full texts, spiced up with prefatory quotation from a similar (and now very rare) collection of contemporary songs, *Aloha Jigpoha* (Honolulu, 1945), compiled while he was serving in the Pacific. Later Thornton would pioneer the inclusion in general anthologies and the Burns canon of what he always called Burns's "high-kilted" songs. Thornton drew on this dissertation in a number of articles, but it has never been published as a whole.

Teaching and Family

Married, and soon to have two young sons, Thornton needed to work hard in the next few years to establish a teaching career, at a time when teaching loads were much heavier and salaries much lower than they would later become. Seven years as an assistant professor at the University of Colorado (1949-56) were followed by a year at a private high school in Texas, three years as an assistant professor and then associate at the University of South Carolina (1957-60, on leave for nearly half that time), eight years as a full professor at Kansas State (1960-68), and finally a move back east as professor (and initially chairman) at the small State University campus in New Paltz, New York, where he stayed till retirement in 1982. Despite occasional asperity ("there is a great deal of American higher education I would not

regret seeing washed out to sea”), Thornton was obviously a good teacher, retaining a boyish enthusiasm for a wide range of literature, including current authors. He regularly expanded his entry on Scottish poets for the *Princeton Encyclopaedia* to take account of new writers, and his final version is still in print. He was also enormously energetic: at one stage, he became a published expert on developmental reading theory, he lectured the Association of English Departments on the decline of freshman English, he gave talks to academic and campus and community groups; he even ran a blood bank. In the 1970s he took courses in hand-binding and book conservation. Externally, this career may seem inadequate recognition for Thornton’s abilities and many accomplishments, though recognition there was: he won a Guggenheim Fellowship, South Carolina gave him an award for research (and tried to woo him back as chairman, as at various times Colorado and Skidmore and Wyoming also wooed him), Kansas State gave him a teaching award, the State University of New York honored him as a University Scholar. Through his wife’s family he was able to escape regularly to a summer home on Baker’s Island, off the coast of Massachusetts. After retirement, the Thorntons spent summers there and winters down in the small town of Cheraw, South Carolina. His funeral in Cheraw in 2007 concluded with a (very undoctinaire) hymn for which he had written both words and music.

Thornton and the Burns Songs

Through all the demands of this busy career, Thornton maintained his commitment to original research on Burns, focusing initially on the songs. He contributed the first of many articles to the *Burns Chronicle* in 1950, notable for arguing that the song “Elibanks and Elibraes” was by Burns. With modest research grants, he traveled to Scotland for the first time in 1949 and again in 1956. In 1957, aged forty, he published the first of his Burns books, *The Tuneful Flame* (University of Kansas Press, 1957), a slim volume reproduced from typescript, aiming to present reedited music and text for twenty-five of Burns’s songs “as he sang them.” Burns’s songs, he wrote, “need singers, not explicators.” As early as 1954 he had organized recordings to illustrate a talk at the national MLA convention in New York, and in 1963 he collaborated with Melville Smith on an LP with ten Burns’s songs. Later still, he would become a strong supporter of the American composer Serge Hovey’s solo project to research and arrange the full corpus of songs attributed to Burns. The introduction he wrote for Hovey foreshadows more recent ecological criticism of Burns, and after Hovey’s death he wrote a notable polemic defense of Hovey’s approach (in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 30, 1999), fairer to Hovey perhaps than to other scholars. It is clear Thornton loved the songs, which he praised as “uninhibited and natural, full of ardour, courage, universality, pride, and life-giving joy.”

The Besterman Papers & James Currie

What changed the direction of Thornton’s research, however, was his selection in 1955 to take over a languishing research project on the publishers’ records for Burns’s posthumous editions. In 1936, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Dr. Theodore Besterman had drawn attention to the importance for Burns of the Cadell and Davies papers, publishers of the 1800 Currie edition. In his book on Cadell and Davies (1938), Besterman excluded consideration of Currie or Burns, promising to treat them in a later volume, but after the war he moved to Switzerland to focus on Voltaire, and turned his Burns research over to Thornton.

At first Thornton planned simply to edit the surviving letters and other documents, including Currie's letters to Cadell, and he was awarded the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship for a year of archival research on the project in Scotland during the Burns bicentenary. Thornton was by now well-known as a Burns scholar, and he gave *Immortal Memories* that year both in Edinburgh and in Currie's home city of Liverpool.

The Currie Biography

He soon decided, however, that the documents could not be properly understood without a better understanding of Currie himself. He put the editorial project on hold and turned instead to writing Currie's biography. *James Currie, The Entire Stranger, and Robert Burns* traces the full story of Currie's life, from his early years near Dumfries, through his years in Virginia during the American Revolution, and his medical training in Enlightenment Edinburgh, to his medical, philanthropic, political and anti-slavery activity in Liverpool in the 1780s and 1790s. Published in 1963 by the Scottish house of Oliver & Boyd, it attracted widespread attention, if also the expected dissent. The *Ayrshire Post* noted it was "highly controversial" but "a shrewd blow ... at Currie's detractors," the *Scotsman* praised Thornton's "impassioned powers of research" and "his restless assiduity" (surely the reviewer had met him in person), and the *Glasgow Herald*, judging the book "a convincing portrait," marveled that "Professor Thornton has clearly read every document and turned every stone." By and large, subsequent decades have confirmed the book's virtues. It is based on an extraordinary range of primary material, and as social history of Burns's time it still makes for wonderful reading. Every Burnsian can still learn much from it. Sometimes Burnsians are set aback by how little of the book is directly about Burns, but it was never intended as Thornton's last word. It is also a very narrowly-crafted defence, of Currie as man and editor, not of all his biographical comments. Within those limits, Thornton more than established his point that Currie was neither the "entire stranger" to Burns's world that he called himself, nor the manipulative editorial villain he had been painted as by others.

The Riverside Burns

Thornton's next book took a fresh look at how to present Burns to modern readers. It was already known that James Kinsley had recently taken over the full-scale Oxford edition begun by Robert Dewar, so when Thornton was commissioned to produce a selected Burns (for a flat \$450) he took a radically different, more evaluative approach. He wrote to Ferguson that he was going to highlight "the exceeding richness of [Burns's] genius before 1786." Echoing Henley and Henderson, and foreshadowing the approach planned for the Glasgow Edition, he printed the Kilmarnock as a unit, in its entirety, juxtaposing it with a second section of pre-1786 poems like *The Jolly Beggars* that Burns had excluded. "What a wonderful Kilmarnock one can put together in 1965," he enthused to Ferguson. "It could have been twice the book it was." By contrast he had found on rereading that many of "the late poems ... are pretty dreadful," and felt free to be correspondingly selective. The songs, he asserted, were "something quite different," to be presented as a flowering of a communal culture, in their full range, without bowdlerization, and with their airs (with Thornton's own simple modal bass, not Stephen Clarke's tonal bass from Johnson, let alone the Thomson arrangements). The volume, published in 1966 in Houghton Mifflin's Riverside series, was rounded out by selections from Burns's letters and other prose, original annotations, and a new glossary. Textbooks of this kind soon pass out of currency, but Thornton's introductory essay still

sparkles, especially when he traces the background and mutations of the song “Duncan Gray.” When, a few years later, Thornton came to review the Kinsley edition in *Studies in Scottish Literature* (1970), he had a basis in experience for his then-unfashionable criticism of Kinsley’s over-reliance on manuscript rather than printed texts.

Reexamining Currie as Editor: Thornton’s Lost Book

In the later 1960s, Thornton wrote a series of articles on Burns and various aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment, but his aim was always to get back to research on the Besterman Papers, interrupted by work on the Riverside selection. He had always envisioned his Currie biography as merely preliminary to writing a detailed publication history of Burns’s works from his death to 1820. Manuscript material was abundant, and he soon decided it would need two volumes, not one. Even refocusing on just the first four years and the story of the original Currie edition, he had a typescript by 1971 of nearly 900 pages, uncommercially titled *James Currie’s Robert Burns: a Publishing History of the First Edition, 1797-1800*. By then, Oliver and Boyd had been taken over, his original editor Robin Lorimer was gone, and Thornton never found a publisher for what should have been the culmination of his Burns research. He placed portions of the book as articles, but it has still never been published as a whole. Undoubtedly, Thornton would have made further refinements to the text if he had had opportunity and reason to do so, but it remains of unique research value. Because it provides transcriptions of so many original documents, as well as a persuasive narrative of the events leading up to the 1800 *Works*, research visitors to the Roy Collection in South Carolina regularly spend much precious time scanning through the surviving typescript. With Mrs. Grace Thornton’s permission, this almost-legendary “lost book” by Thornton is now being prepared for publication in print and digital format.

William Maxwell, Burns, & Scottish Radicalism

Despite this disappointment, Thornton responded with alacrity when he was invited to examine a new archive, the Maxwell family papers at Kirkconnell. What drew his attention was the chance to explore Burns’s Dumfries friend, the elusive Dr. William Maxwell. On the day Burns was buried, Maxwell had delivered Burns’s last child, named Maxwell in gratitude, and he was one of the three trustees who had to settle Burns’s affairs and provide for Jean and the children. He was also one of the most radical of Burns’s Dumfries friends. As the younger son of a Catholic family, and educated in what is now Belgium before taking an Edinburgh M.D., Maxwell set aside his medical career in 1788 to support revolution in Paris; by 1791, he was shuttling between France and Britain to buy weapons for the cause, in December he was denounced in the Commons by Edmund Burke, and by 1792 he was wanted by Pitt’s agents. Thornton speculates that Maxwell was one of the founders of the Corresponding Societies. Back in Paris, he stood guard on the scaffold in January 1793 as Louis XVI was guillotined. Yet amazingly, his brother’s political connections let Maxwell return to Scotland in 1794, escape trial for sedition, and though still much under surveillance settle in medical practice in Dumfries, one of the clearest radical connections in Burns’s last years. Working from very scattered archives, Thornton told this exciting story well, anticipating in some ways more recent debates over Burns’s later political views and activities. It was published in 1979, by John Donald of Edinburgh, seems not to have been widely reviewed, and was soon remaindered. Like much of Thornton’s work, it still repays close attention.

Thornton's Achievement

Following his Maxwell biography, Thornton seems to have contemplated similar work on John Syme, and in a talk for a North American Burns conference in 1979 he described the new biography of Burns he thought was needed. But partly for health reasons he did not undertake any further major Burns project, though he continued to write and review for another twenty years. He recognized that his particular brand of archival research had a special value in Burns studies. As he wrote to Ross Roy while at work on the Besterman Papers: "If there is anything I have learnt, it is to proceed with care. Facts, indeed, are chiefs that winna ding; and facts are what I am interested in." Though kindly in person, he could be impatient in print with other scholars who did not measure up to his standards, but the full range of the facts he uncovered about Burns remains to be exploited.

Yet to see Thornton only as researcher is to mischaracterize him. His gift was not just in finding documents, but in imagining the people who had created them and telling their stories when he had found them. Unlike many archival researchers, he had a disarming zest and enthusiasm as a writer, and an attractively breezy and allusive prose style, especially when painting in social or topographical background. In the Ferguson archive, on the back of a letter dated June 1966, Ferguson jotted down this tribute: "I have always believed—and time has corroborated my conviction—that RDT is a notably creative scholar, not merely in his special field, but as a wide-ranging mental pioneer." Initially surprising to those who know only one or another part of Thornton's specialist work, Ferguson's assessment rings increasingly true when Thornton's work is considered as a whole. Almost anything he wrote about Burns is worth reading or rereading.

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