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Alasdair Gray

On Neglect of Burns by Schools
and His Disparagement by Moralists and Whitewashers
With Some Critical Remarks

There was no Bible among the many books in my earliest home, and only one volume of poetry: a stout maroon edition of Burns's poems published in 1938 by the *Scottish Daily Express*. Since there was an identical copy in my uncle and aunt's home (the only other home we much visited), I thought it could be found in every Scottish house. My mother had been a member of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir and had a book of Scottish songs from which she sang while accompanying herself on the piano. Burns's was the only name attached to many of these so I assumed he had written them all. Since I also heard these tunes on the Scottish Home Service (the only local radio station in that pre-television era), Burns seemed a familiar and pleasant part of the air we breathed.

In Scottish schools Burns was only taught in the least valued part of the curriculum—the singing lessons: and now that music has been abolished in most Scottish schools because of cuts in spending we can be sure he is hardly taught at all. The English department of Whitehill senior secondary school taught me Chaucer, Shakespeare, Pope, Keats, and Wordsworth. The Scottish educational system had been created to turn most children into tradesmen and factory workers and the rest into auxiliary Englishmen attached to the highest levels of Britain's industrial and financial empire—which the English controlled. But there was a more important reason why the greatest part of Burns's verses was not and cannot be taught in respectable state-supported schools or to any children whose parents take any sect of the Christian faith very seriously.

A fig for those by LAW protected,
 LIBERTY's a glorious feast!
 COURTS for Cowards were erected,
 CHURCHES built to please the Priest.¹

In some of his poems and songs Burns asserts that most folk were more harmed than helped by churches, governments and legal codes which mainly profited those who managed them. Worse still he believed that sexual love was not only the most essential human activity (which is true of all life forms more complex than the amoeba); he believed it was the greatest of human pleasures, and that pleasure is good.

What is TITLE, what is TREASURE,
 What is REPUTATION's care?
 If we lead a life of pleasure,
 'Tis no matter HOW or WHERE.

With the ready trick and fable
 Round we wander all the day;
 And at night, in barn or stable,
 Hug our doxies on the hay.

Does the train-attended CARRIAGE
 Thro' the country lighter rove?
 Does the sober bed of MARRIAGE
 Witness brighter scenes of love? (*Poems*, I, 208).

These quotations are from the last song of his cantata *The Jolly Beggars*, where this faith is most nakedly asserted. And his poems which do not assert it take it for granted. All children find authority oppressive and think pleasure is the best thing they can get, and of course adults instinctively believe that too, a fact which the fathers of all Christian churches from St. Augustine to Calvin used to justify the doctrine of original sin. Almost all educational systems are deliberately devised to destroy or divert or pervert that faith, which explains why Burns has been largely ignored by schools and universities and stayed popular with folk who had nothing to do with these—another reason for academia to neglect him in days before popular cultures became the material of academic discourse.

Yet Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron and Keats took his greatness for granted. In Matthew Arnold's "The Study of Poetry," Burns's writings are put second only to those of Chaucer, though Arnold regrets the ugliness of Burns's Scottish subject matter because, "no one can deny that it is of advantage to a

¹"Love and Liberty," *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 209. Henceforth *Poems*.

poet to deal with a beautiful world.”² T. S. Eliot’s essay on Arnold mainly approves his high estimate of Burns and defends the subject matter because a poet should, “be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory.”³ But with sinister dexterity, Eliot first condescends to Burns as “a decadent representative of a great alien tradition”—by which he likely meant that most great Scots pre-Reformation poets were courtiers, that Burns (like Herman Melville) never rose above the rank of exciseman, and that his poetic vocabulary was not used by royalty. But since a German dynasty was popped onto the British throne who but Eliot has thought royalty a source or defense of profound speech?

In a recent biography of Burns the author says that too many other biographies of Burns have described legends and that the two-hundredth anniversary of his death seems a good time to “look again at the facts.”⁴ But Ian McIntyre’s book is no hammer smashing a popular icon. All important facts of Burns’s life were available when he died because in poetry, diary and verse he was his own most truthful biographer, telling his contemporaries the best and worst about himself. Nineteenth-century biographers could turn Wordsworth and Dickens into icons of national respectability because their unsanctified love-lives were only brought to light long afterward. This could not be done with the author of a poem welcoming the birth of his bastard daughter.

Throughout the nineteenth century biographers deplored, regretted or made excuses for Burns’s plentiful love-life and occasional drunkenness. Scandal might add Satanic splendor to Lord Byron, but hardly anybody wrote at length about Burns without giving a grotesque self-portrait of their own prejudices. One of the earliest biographers, a reformed alcoholic, turned Burns’s life into a road-to-ruin sermon on the evils of drink and self-indulgence. Carlyle liked Burns’s poetry but thought his achievement a fragment of what it should have been because (1) his father could not afford to send him to university, and (2) he did not work hard enough at writing. Stevenson said Burns wasted his life and talent by marrying Jean Armour who (though conceiving two sets of twins by him before marriage) did not really love him, and whom (though he fathered five children on her after it) he never truly loved.⁵ In the early twentieth century Scottish literary life sank into stagnation from

²Matthew Arnold, “The Study of Poetry,” in *Essays in Criticism Second Series* (London, 1888), p. 44.

³T. S. Eliot, “Matthew Arnold,” in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London, 1933), p. 106.

⁴Ian McIntyre, *Dirt & Deity: A Life of Robert Burns* (London, 1995), p. xv. Henceforth *Dirt & Deity*.

⁵See his essay “Some Aspects of Robert Burns.”

which only the creative violence of Hugh MacDiarmid stirred it. Burns's reputation (like Scotland's) passed into the keeping of respectable, unadventurous professional folk who whitewashed it by telling his life story in a form that would not bring a blush to the face of the most innocent child. It went thus:

A poor farmer's son damages his health between the ages of thirteen and fifteen by doing a man's work as his father's only laborer. While guiding the plough, he discovers his genius for poetry and has some youthful romantic adventures. Smitten by poverty he prepares to emigrate but first arranges his poems for the press and proposes marriage to Jean Armour. Jean rejects him, the book suddenly makes him famous, he gives up the West Indies for Edinburgh and charms lords, ladies and literati with his brilliant conversation. Later, he asserts his manly independence by marrying Jean Armour after all, returning to the plough, later getting work as an exciseman, becoming a hard-working family man who died in poverty and neglect after struggling nobly to support a wife and family. All of which was true but ignored at least a third part of the man—the part still rowdily celebrated at men-only Burns suppers where many respectable folk who whitewashed him in public cheered him as the sort of satyr and lady-killer they would have liked to be.

But in 1930 Catherine Carswell's biography appeared which told Burns's life in a narrative that was honest yet unflustered by his sexuality. It made Victorian moralists and contemporary whitewashers look equally immature and for a while made her the most hated woman in Scotland. Burns once wrote two letters telling how he had met Jean Armour, again pregnant by him, and this time wanting the marriage she had previously rejected. To a man friend, in Rabelaisian speech based on Urquhart's translation of *Gargantua*, he boasts of how he fucked her until she agreed to live with only his affection and financial support. To the married middle-class lady in Edinburgh with whom he was Platonically flirting he uses Jane Austenish language to say that her refining influence had made the vulgarity of his former mistress revolting to him—that he could hardly stand Jean's presence. Catherine Carswell presented this duplicity without surprise, perhaps because she thought many people are capable of it, even intelligent, well-educated folk like you and me. Sixty-five years later Ian McIntyre brings to the same letters a vast surprise: "There is no period in his short life when it is so hard to read Burns as in those early spring months of 1788. Nor is there a time at which it is so difficult to observe his behaviour with any degree of sympathy or understanding" (*Dirt & Deity*, p. 205). In "Some Aspects of Robert Burns" a century earlier, R. L. Stevenson had written that one of Burns's private letters made him want to buffet Burns about the ears.

Such feelings about the poet's character have taken too much attention away from his work. This essay will end in a similar cul-de-sac if I don't attempt at least one piece of critical appreciation.

Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* proposes a new course for English poetry: the lives and emotions of country folk should be written about in the language they used themselves. Wordsworth wanted to do what Burns had done in Scottish vernacular a few years earlier. I'll quote one:

RATTLIN, ROARIN WILLIE

O Rattlin, roarin Willie,
O he held to the fair,
An' for to sell his fiddle
And buy some other ware;
But parting wi' his fiddle,
The saut tear blin't his e'e;
And Rattlin, roarin Willie,
Ye're welcome hame to me.

O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
O, sell your fiddle sae fine;
O Willie, come sell your fiddle,
And buy a pint o' wine;
If I should sell my fiddle,
The warl' would think I was mad,
For mony a rantin day
My fiddle and I hae had.

As I cam by Crochallan
I cannily keekit ben,
Rattlin, roarin Willie
Was sitting at yon boord-en',
Sitting at yon boord-en',
And amang guid companie;
Rattlin, roarin Willie,
Ye're welcome hame to me! (*Poems*, I, 407-408)

Notice the many voices in that. The first six lines are a brisk past-tense, third person account by a neighborly voice who shows the musician stepping out then suddenly presents him in close-up at a moment of sudden grief—at which the voice becomes the present tense of someone welcoming Willie home: probably his wife. The next half stanza is obviously spoken by a cajoling tempter; the second half is Willie's mournfully defensive reply. Finally—and unexpectedly—the voice of the opening describes Willie glimpsed at the head of a table in a happy pub interior. Maybe he sold his fiddle and is treating friends with the gains—maybe they are treating him, but he is in good company and will still be welcomed home. This community of voices linking the fair with the public house and home are none of the voices of Robert Burns. He

has made them in the way described by Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when. . . . the personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. This progress you will see easily in that old English ballad *Turpin Hero*, which begins in the first person and ends in the third person. . . . The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence.⁶

That is how Burns worked: from lyrical beginnings to dramatic monologues, dialogues or narratives presenting himself as a character in a poem, as he does in the lines describing his meeting with Lord Daer (*Poems*, I, 297), or the verse called Rob Mossgiel (*Poems*, I, 58). You should not think the presentation is more like the real Burns than Holy Willie is, or the cocksure young woman who expertly hooks and lands the man she wants in "Last May a Braw Wooer." Dante was Virgil as well as pilgrim of the *Divine Comedy*. Joyce was Bloom as much as Dedalus. Burns was not less myriad-minded.

Glasgow

⁶James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York, 1916), p. 252.