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Donald A. Low

1786 and 1996: Ideals, Prejudices and Burns the Writer

Burns is a person of the late eighteenth century who challenges his own time and also ours. The ideals of friendship and love are as central to his writings and daily living as is prejudice, both political and religious. In an age when political opinions mattered, Burns radically blew apart the shallowness of the political correctness of his time. His views were not limited by current preferences but revealed insights that would otherwise have been overlooked or even ignored. Today, as in Burns's time, too many are held prisoner by current political fashion to achieve what they want. One set of idealistic concerns alike in 1796 and 1996 has to do with nature and the environment. Burns as person and poet is of his age, but forward looking in his sympathy for the natural world and his opposition to the mindless slaughter of birds and animals as in "Now westlin Winds, and slaught'ring guns." At times of political correctness there is much to be said for the subversive. I believe that the next phase of subversive Burns criticism is going to have to challenge feminist priorities as of less than permanent value. The fashionable does not endure. Burns knew this. We have two centuries of male chauvinism to set aside but let not women's ideology and secondary issues obscure Burns's art as a writer. Whichever view you hold depends not only on gender assessment but also on how much attention you pay to the beauty of the songs and poems and how much to scandal and political disgrace. His views on women need to be reconsidered as do many of the earlier uncritically accepted views of Burns. Remember the age in which Burns wrote and the negative filter which has since

been applied to many of his songs. The time has come to return to detailed study and analysis of Burns's poems and songs.

If the range and beauty of Burns's art come first we have lots of examples of his lyrical enthusiasm. His songs have taken his poetry round the world. He shows his flair as a lyricist at his best in his love songs. Think of the first song he wrote to the fourteen-year-old Nelly with which most readers will be familiar. Burns was not only impressed with her looks—she was “a bonie, sweet lass” and a “bewitching creature”—he was also impressed with her signing. Other women inspired other songs. “Young Peggy blooms our boniest lass” to the tune *Loch Eroch Side* was written as a result of his meeting with Margaret Kennedy at Gavin Hamilton's house in 1785. When Burns sent her the song he explained:

Poets, Madam, of all Mankind, feel most forcibly the powers of BEAUTY; as, if they are really Poets of Nature's making, their feelings must be finer, and their taste more delicate than most of the world...the company of a fine Woman...has sensations for the Poetic heart that the HERD of Man are strangers to.¹

Recollect the tenderness and wistfulness of “Mary Morison” and the haunting line “Ye are na Mary Morison” which MacDiarmid calls “The most powerful line Burns ever wrote.” As I see it, literary art is what matters first of all with regard to any writer, whatever misgivings may exist about negative personal habits. A. L. Kennedy, the much respected feminist writer, comments in a Valentine's Day article in *The Scotsman* in 1996:

As part of a general intellectual devaluation, we now live in a country where the writer is reviewed instead of the writing... The tenderness of [Burns's] love lyrics, his liking of, reliance on and passion for women are apparently forgotten. As a writer I can admire Burns the poet, above all for his ability to make passion articulate, to let love speak. His sins were largely those of a writer and for those I can only forgive him. I have writer's sins of my own.

Friendship was all important to Burns and in this he was a man of his age. Think of the names of some of the gifted friends he valued most highly. Francis Grose reveals his European outlook, Allan Masterton a musician whose flair for song-writing complemented his own skill with words and Matthew Henderson who shared an Ayrshire background with Burns. These friends of Burns in different ways provided him with poetic inspiration. Burns often made friends with people older than himself. Henderson was fifty, Burns twenty-eight when they met. Despite their age difference the two men found each other's company stimulating. Henderson's untimely death eighteen

¹Letter to Miss Margaret Kennedy [early Oct. 1785], *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 26-7. Henceforth *Letters*.

months later in 1788 so shocked Burns that he wrote of his distress to Cleghorn, Dugald Stewart and to Mrs. Dunlop making mention of an elegy he had written in memory of Henderson. From the correspondence it is clear that Burns completed the poem in stages. His letter of 23 July 1790 from Ellisland to Robert Cleghorn begins:

Do not ask me, my dear Sir, why I have neglected so long to write you.—Accuse me of indolence, my line of life of hurry, my stars of perverseness—in short, accuse anything, but me of forgetfulness.—You knew Matthew Henderson. At the time of his death, I composed an elegiac Stanza or two, as he was a man I much regarded; but something came in my way so that the design of an Elegy to his memory gave up.—Meeting with the fragment the other day among some old waste papers, I tried to finish the Piece, & have this moment put the last hand to it.—This I am going to write you is the first fair Copy of it (*Letters*, II, 39-40).

On July 30 he expands on his affectionate feelings for Henderson to Dugald Stewart:

He was an intimate acquaintance of mine; & of all Mankind I ever knew, he was one of the first, for a nice sense of honor, a generous contempt of the adventitious distinctions of Men, and sterling tho' sometimes outré Wit.—The inclosed Elegy has pleased me beyond any of my late poetic efforts.—Perhaps 'tis "the memory of joys that are past," and a friend who is no more, that biasses my criticism... I regret much that I cannot have an opportunity of waiting on you to have your strictures on this Poem—How I have succeeded on the whole—if there is any incongruity in the imagery—or whether I have not omitted some apt rural paintings altogether (*Letters*, II, 42).

"Elegy on Cap^l[ain] M[atthew] H[enderson], A Gentleman who held the Patent for his Honours immediately from Almighty God!" which so pleased Burns "beyond any of my late poetic efforts" begins with a conventional first line but then the "meikle devil" hauls Death to the smiddie and there subjects him to a beating like an old "stock-fish." The second stanza in contrast is a tribute to Henderson:

He's gane! he's gane! he's frae us torn,
The ae best fellow e'er was born!
Thee, Matthew, Nature's sel shall mourn
By wood and wild,
Where, haply, Pity strays forlorn,
Frae man exil'd.²

²*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 438. Henceforth *Poems*.

Then in a well ordered and beautifully detailed sequence of natural scenes which must be among the most moving in Scots pastoral elegy, Burns shows his regard for his friend Henderson. Hills, cliffs, groves, burns and rivers, in fact all Nature are invoked to mourn his passing. Let me quote two further stanzas:

Mourn, ilka grove the cushat kens;
 Ye hazly shaws and briery dens;
 Ye burnies, wimplin down your glens,
 Wi' toddlin din,
 Or foaming, strang, wi' hasty stens
 Frae lin to lin (*Poems*, I, 439).

The description and details of the birds in stanza seven are outstanding as is the Scots in which the lines are written:

Mourn, ye wee songsters o' the wood;
 Ye grouss that crap the heather bud;
 Ye curlews calling thro' a clud;
 Ye whistling plover;
 And mourn, ye whirring paitrick brood;
 He's gane for ever! (*Poems*, I, 439).

The Epitaph which concludes the elegy is in marked contrast to the preceding stanzas. Each verse of the Epitaph highlights a quality of Henderson's which Burns recalls with warmth and affection. No one could have a finer memorial to friendship than the line in the last stanza "Matthew was a rare man" (*Poems*, I, 442).

The "Elegy" is in direct contrast to the verses written for another antiquarian, Captain Grose. In an age when one of the fashions was for collecting antiquities, Francis Grose came to hunt for material for a series of volumes on *The Antiquities of Scotland* to follow on from his six-volume *Antiquities of England* published between 1773 and 1787. In 1789 Burns met Grose who was staying with Burns's neighbor Captain Robert Riddell. Grose's larger-than-life personality appealed to Burns. In a letter to Mrs. Dunlop dated July 1789 Burns states:

I have never seen a man of more original observation, anecdote & remark...he has mingled in all societies, & knows every body.—His delight is to steal thro' the country almost unknown, both as most favorable to his humour & his business.—I have to the best of my recollection of the old buildings, &c. in the County, given him an Itinerary thro' Ayrshire (*Letters*, I, 423).

In "On the Late Captain Grose's Peregrinations thro' Scotland, collecting the Antiquities of that Kingdom" Burns makes fun both of Grose's size—"a fine, fat, fodgel wight, / O' stature short"—and of his interests in "auld nick-

nackets: / Rusty airn caps and jinglin jackets” (*Poems*, I, 494, 495). Grose was also an accomplished artist, and Burns urged him to draw Alloway Kirk for his second volume of *Antiquities*. Grose’s reply was an instant yes—but on one condition. Burns must provide a tale of witchcraft to accompany the picture. Burns duly obliged. In June 1790 Burns gave three traditional stories in prose associated with Alloway Kirk to Grose. The second of these was “Tam o’ Shanter” and the rest, as they say, is history. Burns wrote to Grose on 1 December 1790:

Inclosed is one of the Alloway-kirk Stories, done in Scots verse.—Should you think it worthy a place in your Scots Antiquities, it will lengthen not a little the altitude of my Muse’s pride....print my piece or not as you think proper.—Authors have too often very little to say in the disposal of this world’s affairs, but it would be very hard if they should not be absolute in their own Works (*Letters*, II, 62-3).

The poem however first appeared in *The Edinburgh Herald* of March 18, 1791, and somewhat later in Grose’s *Antiquities* where it was published as a footnote—probably the most famous of all literary footnotes—with the following comment:

This church [Alloway] is also famous for being the place wherein witches and warlocks used to hold their infernal meetings.... Diverse stories of these horrid rites are still current; one of which my worthy friend Mr. Burns has here favoured me with in verse.³

“Tam o’ Shanter” is a teasing, playful, comic story—the perfect antiquarian joke for a middle-aged man with a keen interest in language and local history, the conventions of which Burns sends up in a light-hearted manner. A comic tale for a friend has become a comic tale for the world.

Allan Masterton was described by Burns as “one of the worthiest men in the world, and a man of real genius” (*Letters*, I, 444). For the first time Burns had the opportunity to collaborate with a live composer and it inspired him. Together the “sprouts of Jacobitism” agreed to dedicate the words and air of “Strathallan’s Lament” to the cause even though Burns admitted that his Jacobitism was by way of “Vive la bagatelle.” There is a sense in which this song and “The Braes o’ Ballochmyle” as well as “Beware o’ bonie Ann” (Ye gallants bright I red you right) could be overlooked, but “Willie Brew’d a Peck o’ Maut” never could be. In the interleaved *Museum* in Alloway, Burns comments:

This air is Masterton’s; the song mine. The occasion of it was this.—M^r W^m Nicol, of the High School, Edin^f, during the autumn vacation being at Moffat, honest Allan,

³Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, Vol. II (London, 1791), p. 199.

who was at that time on a visit to Dalswinton, and I went to pay Nicol a visit. We had such a joyous meeting that M^r Masterton and I [decided] each in our own way should celebrate the business.⁴

Words and melody fit together easily and naturally: the entire song, and above all the repetition of the chorus, conveys a mood of convivial friendship and enjoyment of the malt. The rhythm of the music and simple happiness of the occasion are unmistakable:

Here are we met, three merry boys,
Three merry boys I trow are we;
And mony a night we've merry been,
And mony mae we hope to be!
Chorus
We are na fou, we're nae that fou,
But just a drappie in our e'e;
The cock may crawl, the day may daw,
And ay we'll taste the barley bree (*Poems*, I, 477).

What of the future of Burns studies? Someone recently said to me that Burns would have been at home with e-mail as he was a natural communicator. Burns is a poet and song writer whose words have gone round the world and will continue to do so via the Internet, Web pages and CD ROM. I noted with keen interest Jerome McGann's decision to focus on Burns in "The Rationale of Hypertext."⁵ McGann is right to highlight the potential now before us. Having edited and seen published *The Songs of Robert Burns*, and being drawn instinctively by computing possibilities, I share McGann's recognition that we are now in a new world of interrelated documents. Technology is constantly changing but the excellence of the best writers like Burns does not diminish.

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⁴Notes on *Scottish Song by Robert Burns*, ed. James C. Dick (London, 1908), p. 52.

⁵Jerome McGann, "The Rationale of Hypertext," *The European English Messenger* 4.2 (Autumn 1995), 35-6.