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## G. Ross Roy: A Tribute

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This article was first published in the volume *Robert Burns & Friends, Essays by W. Ormiston Roy Fellows* (2012), a festschrift presented to G. Ross Roy on his 88th birthday.

## G. Ross Roy: A Tribute

*Kenneth Simpson*

Spanning six decades, Ross Roy's career is suffused with a love of Scotland which has its roots in his ancestry and a visit to the country at the age of eight with his grandfather, W. Ormiston Roy. As scholar, editor, teacher, and collector, Ross Roy has long been recognised as one of the foremost authorities on Scotland's literary culture. His generosity in sharing this knowledge and inspiring others is legendary.

Born and educated in Montreal, Ross Roy is of Scots-Canadian heritage, with family roots in Quebec stretching back to the British conquest in the mid-eighteenth century, and with an ancestor who fought both on the losing side at Culloden and on the winning side on the Heights of Abraham. He graduated B.A. from Concordia University and M.A. from the University of Montreal, followed by the *maîtrise* from the University of Strasbourg and doctorates from the Universities of Paris and Montreal. In 2002 he received an honorary D.Litt. from the University of Edinburgh, and in 2009 the University of Glasgow conferred a similar honour.

Like many of his contemporaries, Ross Roy had his studies interrupted. Four years as a navigator in the Royal Canadian Air Force and with the R.A.F. honed precision skills that would serve him well as a textual editor. The values which Ross and his generation had then defended, they later brought with them into academe – intellectual freedom, responsibility, dedication, fairness, and a very real *esprit de corps*. To enter the profession in the next generation was a privilege: the collegial spirit and work-ethic then prevalent surely owed much to the shared endeavours and hardships of those who had seen war service.

Professor Roy's teaching career has taken him to Strasbourg, the Canadian Royal Military College in Quebec, Montreal, Alabama, Texas Technological College at Lubbock, and as visiting professor to the University of Metz. For twenty-five years, from 1965, he taught at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, serving for many years as chair of the Comparative Literature Program, winning the University's Research Award, and retiring in 1990 as Distinguished Professor Emeritus. Many are the testimonies to his inspirational teaching. As we know, Burns could be sceptical about the benefits of higher education, but his line in "Epistle to John Lapraik, an Old Scotch Bard" requires this qualification: "They gang in stirks and come out asses,/ But no frae G. Ross Roy's classes."

As the checklist of his publications indicates, Ross Roy's scholarship embraces Scottish, English, and comparative literatures, but it is particularly his Burns scholarship that has won him international renown. His two-volume Clarendon edition of *The Letters of Robert Burns* (1985), revising J. DeLancey Ferguson's edition of 1931, is a model of empirical textual scholarship. For this editor, Burns's dictum, "Facts are cheels that winna ding" (Kinsley I: 266) holds good: every letter was checked at source (where available); important letters were added; significant emendations were made. The method and the result are exemplary. This precedent is essential for Burns scholarship since the richness and diversity of Burns, the remarkable range of voices in poems and letters alike, can all too readily be used to support partial or subjective readings. Burns can so engender enthusiasm that it distorts judgement; not so in the work of Ross Roy.

Nowhere are these qualities of balanced enthusiasm, range, and perspective more evident than in his forty-five year editorship of *Studies in Scottish Literature*. When Professor Roy conceived of the journal in the early 'sixties it was almost impossible to find university teaching of Scottish literature even in Scotland. When Ross sought advice on founding a journal from his Scottish contacts, the response was less than encouraging. Fortunately, he was not deterred, and almost half a century later all with an interest in Scottish literature are the beneficiaries of one man's vision and his

determination to make it a reality. Name those scholars of Scottish literature whom he has published? It's easier to list those whom he has not. Nowadays academics are encouraged to 'network'. Ross Roy has never needed to put this concept into practice. Yet in a' the airts and every branch of the arts he has established his own clan, an extended family of fellow-enthusiasts; and this has been achieved by love of his subject and breadth and depth of knowledge of it. When tribute was paid to him at a symposium at USC in 1999, Ross, characteristically, more than repaid the compliment: "The great thing about Scottish literature," he said, "is that you get to meet so many nice people."

Professor Roy's qualities as editor are many, but three warrant particular mention: an insatiable appetite for the creative imagination in its many manifestations (how many scholarly editors can number writers from MacDiarmid to Spark, McIlvanney, Leonard, and Gray among their friends and contributors?); a readiness to extend to all the possibility of submitting material for consideration (to how many young researchers has he offered that crucial break, their first publication?); and the judicious nature of that consideration, be it guidance as to matters of scholarly convention or rigorous engagement with the quality of argument. Scholarship would be the poorer without the scrupulous editorial surveillance of Ross and of his wife Lucie as associate editor. *Studies in Scottish Literature* has set editorial standards which those who follow must strive to maintain, difficult though that will be.

Ross Roy's generosity finds many modes of expression. Bibliophile and Scotophile in equal measure, he has greatly enlarged the collection begun by his grandfather, which he inherited in 1959. In the Roy Collection in the University of South Carolina's new Ernest F. Hollings Library are books and manuscripts that would be sought in vain in such major holdings as those of the National Library of Scotland or the Mitchell Library, Glasgow. These are treasures that Ross has gone out of his way to share by donating the bulk of his collection to the University and by being unsparing in affording access to both the collection and his expertise. The collection, and the conferences which it has engendered, have made the University of South Carolina the centre of

Scottish literary study in North America. The W. Ormiston Roy Memorial Visiting Research Fellowship in Scottish Poetry, established in 1990 by Lucie and Ross Roy in memory of his grandfather, has enabled scholars to research across a wide range of topics in Scottish literature. After visiting the Roys, all of them have come to know what “hospitality” really means. Burns’s lines, “the social, friendly, honest man,/ Whate’er he be,/ ‘Tis he fulfils great Nature’s plan,/ And none but he,” (Kinsley I:91) assume a new dimension.

The Scotland of 2012 is one which few would have envisaged in 1963 when Ross established *Studies in Scottish Literature*. Arguably it is the Scottish nation which is the greatest beneficiary of Ross’s endeavours. It is appropriate that on his eightieth birthday in 2004 tribute was paid to him by the First Minister, Jack McConnell. The provision of a platform for Scottish scholarship and Scottish writing has contributed much to the Scottish cultural flowering in recent decades. Ross Roy has played a major part by taking Scottish scholarship to far corners of the world and by befriending and encouraging so many writers and artists. And he has projects lined up for years to come: as he wrote in what was his final (double!) volume of *Studies in Scottish Literature*, “I know when to walk away, but I don’t have to run.” We are all the beneficiaries of his learning, enthusiasm, and generosity. This volume is a modest tribute of gratitude for his continuing friendship and inspiration.