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THE REPUTATION OF DAVID GRAY

David McVey

David Gray (1838-1861) remains a stubborn footnote in Scottish literary history. He died of tuberculosis in December 1861, not long before his twenty-fourth birthday, and his first collection of poetry, published the following year, drew warm, even extravagant, praise.¹ However, his stock fell, not least owing to the deepening suspicion, the subject of this paper, that his earlier fame had been founded more on the tragic circumstances of his life and death than on his poetic achievements. Yet the balance of critical comment remained positive until well into the twentieth century. Recent discussion has centred on Gray's own role in constructing the romantic image of a Keats-like consumptive poet, to which contemporaries would respond, and this too warrants further consideration.

The wide divergence in critical attitudes to Gray's work can be seen in in extracts such as these:

At a time when we celebrate the genius of Robert Burns it is appropriate, perhaps, to honour the memory of another Scottish poet, almost as gifted...²

This is poetry of no common order, and yet the book seems to promise that had the poet lived he might have given us much of a higher order still...³

... the boy was a poet; and though his work is a bud rather than a blown flower, the bud in itself is lovely and interesting.⁴

¹ David Gray, *The Luggie and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1862). Cited below in text as "L" with page number.

² John L. Hardie, "David Gray—the Poet of the Luggie," *Scottish Educational Journal*, 37.4 (January 28, 1955): 55-56

³ Review of Gray's *The Luggie and other Poems*, *The Spectator*, May 17, 1862; copies of this and other sources marked "NLS" are preserved in the National Library of Scotland, in MS 8478 and MS 8478B.

⁴ "A Correspondent," "David Gray, Born 1938," *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 January 1938 (NLS).

[he] did not write a single line that is truly memorable... At no point in his literary life did he show any sign of ability to sense the drift of literary movements.⁵

not a particularly able poet... [an] obscure Keats impersonator... [whose] name is lost to us today⁶

All five comments were, of course, about Gray. By no means all of the praise came early, and by no means all of the criticism came late, but the spread of views is worth examining. The intention here is to look again at David Gray and his work, tracing the course of his fame and reputation.⁷

The poem for which Gray had the greatest hopes was *The Luggie* (1862), which, in over sixty pages and more than a thousand lines, celebrated the river that ran past his childhood home at Merkland, now subsumed into the town of Kirkintilloch;

... fairer stream
 Rolled never golden sand unto the sea,
 Made sweeter music than the Luggie, gloom'd
 By glens whose melody mingles with her own (*L*, 3).

Like many ambitious young writers, Gray planned to travel to London to seek his fortune. In 1859, he had begun writing letters to prominent literary figures, including G.H. Lewes, Disraeli, W.E. Aytoun, and David Masson, seeking advice, support and patronage. Among them was the poet and politician Richard Monckton Milnes (1809-1885), who in 1848 had published Keats's letters.⁸ In his introductory notice to Gray's book, Milnes recalled:

in the Spring of 1860 I received a letter signed DAVID GRAY, enclosing some manuscript verses.... I was struck with the superiority of the verses to almost all the productions of self-taught men that had been brought under my observation (*L*, vii).

Milnes warned Gray against a descent on London, encouraging him instead to pursue his poetry in parallel with his planned career as a Free Kirk minister.

⁵ William Jeffrey, "The Poet of the Luggie: a Centenary Estimate of David Gray," *Glasgow Herald*, January 29, 1938 (NLS).

⁶ Clark Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 172, 179

⁷ For information on Gray's life, see e.g. James Hedderwick's memoir in *The Luggie and Other Poems*, as in n. 1 above; A.V. Stuart, *David Gray, the Poet of the Luggie: a centenary booklet* (Kirkintilloch: Burgh of Kirkintilloch, 1961); the Gray entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Biography* (2004): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/11331>; and David McVey, "David Gray: Poet or Paradigm?," *Scotia*, 34 (2012): 1-10.

⁸ Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*, Edward Moxon (London, 1848).

But Gray's mind was made up. As he wrote to Sydney Dobell, another London man of letters whose help he sought: "I am a poet. Let that... be understood distinctly" (*L*, xxiv). In May 1860 he set out for London, intending to travel with his friend Robert Buchanan (1841-1901), also intent on a literary career, who in the following years established himself as a critic, poet, novelist and playwright. As Buchanan later told it, he and Gray had arranged to meet in Glasgow and travel down to London together, but they arrived in Glasgow at different railway stations and ended up going on independently.⁹ Gray had no lodgings for his first night in the capital and spent a chilly, sleepless night on a Hyde Park bench. For the rest of his stay in the city he was never entirely well; perhaps his exposed night in Hyde Park exacerbated the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him. In a poem about Gray, Buchanan called London "the city that slew you, David" (*ibid.*, 161).

At first, *The Luggie* was rejected until Dobell, whom Gray apparently never met, persuaded Macmillan, Scottish-born publishers who had recently moved operations from Cambridge to London, to take it on. Gray returned home to Merkland, and during the summer of 1861, while close to death, he composed a sequence of thirty sonnets which he called *In the Shadows*. Its introductory verse gloomily invites the reader;

Enter, scared mortal! and in awe behold
The chancel of a dying poet's mind (*L*, 65).

It is said that, on December 2, 1861, the day before he died, Gray received a single proof page of *The Luggie* from Macmillan. It is a story with a suspicious sentimental roundness about it. However, the Glasgow journalist James Hedderwick, in his *Memoir* introducing Gray's book, prints a letter, dated November 29, from Marian James, a novelist and journalist, forwarding the proof-sheet to Gray, and commenting "I think it will give you so much pleasure to see even this small portion of your work already in the form in which... we may see it published" (*L*, xlv).¹⁰ So the story appears to be true, and it was often cited, to the benefit of Gray's posthumous fame.

When *The Luggie and Other Poems* was published, the reviewer in *The Glasgow Herald* judged Gray's work "the genuine offspring of the muse."¹¹ *The Scotsman* remarked that Gray had "not only melody but harmony," and the reviewer was particularly taken with *In the Shadows*:

⁹ Robert Buchanan, *David Gray and other essays, chiefly on poetry*, (London: Sampson Low, 1868), 85.

¹⁰ See also "The Editor" [Matthew Russell, S.J.], "David Gray's First Proof-Sheet," *The Irish Monthly*, 15 (August 1887): 421-431.

¹¹ *Glasgow Herald*, June 21, 1862 (NLS).

Our whole literature contains no more touching and beautiful revelation concerning the most awful and most interesting of human conditions—a soul in the presence of death—than this series of sonnets.¹²

Even at this early stage, the praise was not unstinting. In particular, the reviewers recognised Gray's questionable personal qualities. The *Glasgow Herald* contributor went on to remark that Gray "was lamentably deficient in modesty and prudence.... His conceit or vanity were as overweening as his aspirations were unbounded" (*ibid.*). Only the *Morning Journal*, however, expressed disappointment with the poems themselves,¹³ remarking (like later critics) "He is nothing if not imitative.... nowhere ... do we catch a tone clearly and trenchantly individual."¹³

On the whole, though, the tone was strikingly positive, and Robert Buchanan hinted at how far, and how high, word of Gray's writing had spread. By 1864, Gray's father, the sole breadwinner for the surviving family, had become ill, and Buchanan recounted how he had struck upon an idea, a kind of literary Band Aid, for raising funds to support the Grays:

a book to be entitled "Memorials of David Gray"... to contain contributions from all the writers of eminence whom I could enlist in the grand cause. Such a thing would *sell*... I mention some names that they may gain honour. Tennyson promised a poem; Browning another; George Eliot agreed to contribute; Dickens... offered me an equivalent in money.¹⁴

This was an impressive line-up to support the working-class family of a deceased young Scottish poet. How much better would Gray be remembered had this anthology surfaced? Would his posthumous fame have been longer lasting? In the event, his family objected to what they perceived as charity, and Buchanan dropped the project. It is not really possible to verify how far the proposed anthology went; Buchanan's surviving letters are widely dispersed and none seem to relate to the anthology.¹⁵ In any case, Buchanan remained very much the keeper of Gray's flame.

Though British writers were not protected under American copyright law, an American edition of Gray's poems appeared in 1864, and the publisher promised that "A proportion of any profits will go to Gray's family."¹⁶ Any payment would have been welcome since Gray's father

¹² *The Scotsman* August 23 1862 (NLS).

¹³ *Morning Journal* May 12 1862 (NLS).

¹⁴ Buchanan, as in n. 9, 136

¹⁵ On the Buchanan MSS, see "Robert Williams Buchanan (1841-1901)": <http://www.robertbuchanan.co.uk/html/letterlist.html>.

¹⁶ *Poems by David Gray with Memoirs of his Life*, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1864), iv.

died late that year. There was renewed interest in Gray in 1865, when a monument was raised over Gray's grave in Kirkintilloch's Auld Aisle burying ground. The place had itself been the subject of a poem by Gray;

The wreck of centuries is buried here;
The very monuments are hoar with age;
The empty tower that sentinels them all
Wails when the gusts wild wander o'er the earth,
And creaks the rusty gate with careless Time.¹⁷

Over 200 people attended the ceremony, including Milnes, already becoming a major figure in promoting both the poetry and the tragic back-story of his latter-day Keats. Among other London literary figures who turned up was the then editor of *The Spectator*, Richard Holt Hutton. Some of the dignitaries visited Gray's mother before the main proceedings, but she was not, it seems, invited to the ceremony itself.¹⁸

The Gray monument became a place of literary pilgrimage for those captured by the spirit of Gray's poetry, or, at least, by his poignant legend. As early as 1865, the *Glasgow Herald* featured an article explicitly titled "A Pilgrimage to Merkland and the 'Auld Aisle'" by "Arthur."¹⁹ By 1874, an expanded, and better-organised, collection of Gray's work included an account of the monument ceremony.²⁰ In the early 20th century, the local paper for Gray's home town, the *Kirkintilloch Herald*, featured a poem by a John E Stewart with the title "Lines Written on the Occasion of a Pilgrimage to the Tomb of David Gray."²¹ The paper printed a number of other, similar efforts over the years, among them one by a Gray fan who had traveled from Detroit to see the Auld Aisle.²²

1938, the centenary of Gray's birth, saw a new sprouting of tributes and criticism and celebration. Much remained glowing in tone, including the appreciation in the *Times Literary Supplement* quoted above, and a report in the *Evening Citizen* on a teetotal commemorative supper in Kirkintilloch on the 100th anniversary of the poet's birth.²³ The one critic who broke ranks, the poet William Jeffrey, was quoted earlier in this essay. Jeffrey's 1938 article in the *Glasgow Herald* pulled no punches. Jeffrey concluded that Gray's celebrity developed almost entirely owing to his working class

¹⁷ "The 'Auld Aisle'—A Burying Ground," *Poetical Works of David Gray*, ed. Henry Glassford Bell (London: Macmillan, 1874), 112.

¹⁸ "Monument to David Gray, Kirkintilloch," *Glasgow Daily Herald*, August 3, 1865 (NLS).

¹⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, October 25, 1865 (NLS).

²⁰ Bell, 203-212.

²¹ *Kirkintilloch Herald*, July 15, 1908

²² John Kinniburgh, "The Poet of the Luggie—Lines Written at the Grave of David Gray," *Kirkintilloch Herald*, December 17, 1902.

²³ *Evening Citizen*, 29 January 1938 (NLS).

origins, his tragic early death and Scottish literature's need for heroes during a lean period, and that it was only "Accidents of birth and circumstance" that "have won for David Gray ... a place in the roll of the poets of the nineteenth century."²⁴ Jeffrey made several powerful points. It is hard to argue with his observation that "as one reads the memoirs, a great deal of one's sympathy shifts to his poor, laborious parents." Subsequent correspondence to the *Herald* letters page stung him to make a rejoinder in which he explicitly rejected "the convention that since 1861 in literary histories of Scotland and in occasional articles has overrated Gray's achievements."²⁵

If Jeffrey thought that flouting this convention and breaking the taboo would stop Gray's work being praised, he was mistaken, as was seen in 1955, in the hyperbole of John L Hardie's comments quoted at the beginning of this essay. On the centenary of Gray's death, in 1961, the tone of most contributions was also positive. The *Glasgow Herald* played safe this time, publishing a reverent, conservative piece that closely followed A.V. Stuart's recent pamphlet.²⁶

It is difficult to counter Jeffrey's suggestion that Gray had been consistently and deliberately overpraised. Whether the blame lies in wha's like us Scottish parochialism, as he suggested, may be debated, but Jeffrey also raised another important factor in the poet's fame: Gray's exploitation of his own mortality. Jeffrey's article anticipated Gray's pivotal place in Clark Lawlor's fascinating work on the romantic mythology of consumption and dying young poets. For Lawlor, David Gray was not just a passive victim of consumption, but someone who actively created and developed the myth of the consumptive writer through his poetry:

the now-unknown Scottish poet David Gray modelled his life and writing on Keats, even to the extent of finding a patron in Keats' own biographer, Richard Monckton Milnes. Gray continues, constructs and indeed epitomises, the tradition of consumptive dialogue built up by poets in the preceding century. Gray's sonnet cycle *In the Shadows* was written while he was dying of the disease himself and includes other consumptive poets—including Keats—in a statement of generic solidarity.²⁷

Here, Lawlor recognises the importance of Milnes in the maintenance of Gray's reputation and refers specifically to the third of the *In the Shadows* sonnets, in which Gray attempted to fashion his own place in a grisly poetic tradition, citing four other poets who had, earlier in the century,

²⁴ Jeffrey, as in n. 5 above.

²⁵ William Jeffrey, letter to *Glasgow Herald*, February 3 1938 (NLS).

²⁶ Matthew Brown, "David Gray, Poet of the Luggie," *Glasgow Herald*, December 2, 1961.

²⁷ Lawlor, as in n. 6 above, 10.

succumbed to consumption in their youth. Three of them—Michael Bruce, Henry Kirke White and Robert Pollock—are now at least as unknown as Gray, while the fourth is Keats himself.

With Pollock, in the voiceless solitude
 Finding his holiest rapture, happiest mood;
 Poor White for ever poring o'er the tomb;
 With Keats, whose lucid fancy mounting far
 Saw heaven as an intenser, a more keen
 Redintegration of the Beauty seen
 And felt by all the breathers on this star;
 With gentle Bruce, flinging melodious blame
 On the Future for an uncompleted name (*In the Shadows*, II, L 68).

Few would argue with Lawlor's central thesis that Gray consciously bought into and helped to develop the romantic mythology of the "consumed," dying young poet, and Lawlor hardly overstates things when suggesting that Gray "wanted to *be* Keats" (Lawlor, 179). Gray even began his poem "My Epitaph," quoted below, with a line that nods unambiguously towards Keats' own epitaph. Perhaps Jeffrey was right in suggesting that Gray's lasting fame, such as it was, was based more on his sad biography than on his poetic talent; but Gray himself was adroit or culpable in consciously positioning himself for just such grisly fame. Gray was not only a stereotypical doomed young consumptive poet; he helped to create and popularise the stereotype, and such a basis for fame left Gray's reputation vulnerable when attitudes changed.

Can Jeffrey's and Lawlor's dismissive attitude to Gray's actual *writing* be contested? Lawlor explicitly describes Gray as "the now-forgotten Scottish poet" (Lawlor, 173). And yet, while hardly a household name, Gray's memory and work have never entirely disappeared. We have seen Jeffrey arguing that Gray's memory was kept warm only in Scotland, by misguided patriotism trying to construct a faux tradition of mid-19th century national poetry. In fact, however, much of the continuing memorialisation and celebration of Gray's work came from England and abroad. Robert Buchanan, as we have seen, worked to keep his late friend's reputation alive, and in 1900 Buchanan's writing about Gray would even be republished in Portland, Maine, for American collectors, in a limited edition of 400 copies, on handmade paper.²⁸ One might recall also that, according to Buchanan, Tennyson and Browning and Dickens were happy to be linked with a project to support Gray's family and that the editor of *The Spectator* turned up to the unveiling of Gray's memorial.

Some of Gray's verses got into such late Victorian catch-all anthologies as James Grant Wilson's *Poets & Poetry of Scotland*, and some were

²⁸ Robert Buchanan, *The Story of David Gray* (Portland, ME: Thomas B Mosher 1900)

included more ambiguously in the *Cambridge Book of Lesser Poets*.²⁹ As noted above, there was renewed English interest during the anniversaries of 1938, when the *TLS* published a positive appraisal of Gray's work, and 1961, while the *In the Shadows* sonnet sequence was republished in full, by a small English press, in 1991.³⁰ Jeffrey was wrong on this point at least; it is arguable that without supporters and publishers in England and America, Gray would have been remembered only as a poet of very local interest.

It is, of course, true that there has been continuing Scottish interest in Gray and his work. One sonnet from *In the Shadows* was included in R.L. Mackie's and Maurice Lindsay's often-reprinted *A Book of Scottish Verse*, and one in Douglas Young's *Scottish Verse 1851-1951*.³¹ In 1988, in the *Aberdeen History of Scottish Literature*, Edwin Morgan offered brief praise of Gray's sonnets as "delicate and moving within their limitations," echoing some of Gray's earliest critics in noting *The Luggie's* "rather formal, latinated, and by Victorian times distinctly old-fashioned descriptive diction," and concluding that Gray "did not live long enough to write underderivatively."³² Valentina Bold, noting not only the many flaws in *The Luggie* but its "heartfelt energy," presents Gray, despite his university education, within a tradition of autodidact labouring-class poets that, she asserts, "had an enduring effect on Scottish literature."³³ It is an interesting line of reasoning and places Gray in a more wholesome tradition than that of willing consumptives.

Gray is still remembered in Kirkintilloch as the poetic chronicler of the local community and, especially, its river. *The Luggie* remains his best-known work. I went to school in the town and recall a primary teacher reading us some verses from *The Luggie*, when we expressed disbelief that our then-industrial river could ever have been the subject of literature. However, when Gray's poems were first published, it was not the title-poem that was most praised, but his sonnet sequence *In the Shadows*, and

²⁹ James Grant Wilson, ed., *The Poets & Poetry of Scotland* (London etc. Blackie, 1876, and reprints), IV: 485-488; J.C. Squire, ed., *The Cambridge Book of Lesser Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927, and reprints).

³⁰ David Gray, *In the Shadows*, (London: Hearing Eye, 1991).

³¹ R. L. Mackie and Maurice Lindsay, eds., *A Book of Scottish Verse* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960; 2nd ed., 1967, corr. ed, 1968); most recently, 4th ed. London: Robert Hale, 2001), 343-344; preceded by R.L. Mackie, *A Book of Scottish Verse*, in OUP's World Classics series, 1934, repr. 1956; Douglas Young, ed., *Scottish Verse 1851-1951* (London: Nelson, 1952), 65-66.

³² Edwin Morgan, "Scottish Poetry in the Nineteenth Century," in Douglas Gifford ed., *The History of Scottish Literature, Vol.3: Nineteenth Century* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 337, 340, 269.

³³ Valentina Bold, *James Hogg: a Bard of Nature's Making* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 269, 23

technically, perhaps, *In the Shadows* is Gray's best achievement. Many readers have found it egotistical and morbidly exploitative of the author's own demise, and today, it reads perhaps rather like someone posting daily blog or Facebook updates about their decline:

Last night, on coughing slightly with sharp pain,
 There came arterial blood, and with a sigh
 Of absolute grief I cried in bitter vein,
 That drop is my death-warrant: I must die ("Sonnet V," *L* 70).

As suggested earlier, such intrusive close-up on the experience of a slow death can seem particularly Victorian, but the Victorians had no monopoly on this kind of grisliness. In relatively recent times, the journalist John Diamond wrote a regular column in *The Times* chronicling his losing battle with cancer, describing himself as having "landed the cancer franchise for the chattering classes."³⁴ Other papers tried to emulate the success of Diamond's column by giving space to columnists with terminal illnesses; for example, until his death in 2002, the Scottish journalist Jonathan Wilson produced the *Dead Man Writing* column in the *Sunday Herald*.³⁵ As with W.E. Henley's great poem-sequence *In Hospital*, new physician focus on the patient experience, and the institutional growth of medical humanities programmes, may cause the Gray sonnets to be viewed more sympathetically. The Victorians had no monopoly on this kind of grisliness.

The Luggie is a more cheerful work, both accessible and warm, especially when celebrating nature;

Between its spotless-clothed banks, in clear
 Pellucid luculence, the Luggie seems
 Charmed in its course, and with deceptive calm
 Flows mazily in unapparent lapse,
 A liquid silence (*L*, 11).

Gray's monument, now 154 years old, survives in Kirkintilloch's Auld Aisle cemetery; in 1961, a plaque bearing the text of *My Epitaph* was added;

Below lies one whose name was traced in sand—
 He died not knowing what it was to live:
 Died while the first sweet consciousness of manhood
 And maiden thought electrified his soul:
 Faint beatings in the calyx of the rose.
 Bewildered reader, pass without a sigh
 In a proud sorrow! There is life with God,

³⁴ Nicci Gerrard, "John Diamond: Topic of Cancer," *The Observer*, May 14, 2000: <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2000/may/14/features.magazine37>.

³⁵ Peter Ross, "A Tribute to Jonathan Wilson, 1970-2002," *The Herald* [Glasgow], February 3, 2002: <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12143731.jonathan-wilson-1970-2002-a-tribute-by-peter-ross/>.

In other kingdom of a sweeter air:
 In Eden every flower is blown: Amen (*L*, xlv).

The Auld Aisle is no longer the open, windy hilltop on which crowds gathered for the unveiling of Gray's monument in 1865; it is now lightly wooded with pine trees, and the memorial, while still in good condition, looks rather forlorn. The same could be said about Gray's poetry; it has been dismissed, neglected, forgotten, yet it has never entirely disappeared. There is *something* there: an apprentice poet, perhaps, struggling to find his voice and suppress his influences, but with potential. One of the wisest contemporary assessments of *The Luggie and Other Poems* appeared in the *Scottish Review*:

Gray... says, "My MSS are mere hints of better things, crude notions harshly languaged." This ... is the veritable truth. Harshness of versification, and crudeness of conception, are the great faults. Along with this, there is the imitative tendency, inseparable from his age, and from the youth of all poets.³⁶

Perhaps, had Gray come of "good family" or a more educated background, he would have received more support and advice to help him overcome the shortcomings of his early work and develop his mature output. But it wasn't to be; he was the son of honest working-class parents, the true heroes of his story, who looked after him throughout his troubled decline, but could not give editorial mentorship. His literary supporters in Glasgow and London merely arranged for the publication of his work as it stood.

Gray's poetry now seems archaic even for its time, yet there is something curiously modern about the man himself, a hunger for fame like that of an *X-Factor* contestant. He told Robert Buchanan that he'd consider himself a failure if he were not eventually buried in Westminster Abbey.³⁷ As noted earlier, Edwin Morgan suggested that Gray simply did not live long enough to fulfil his potential. The irony, the tragedy, of Gray is that he embraced not life, but his own impending death.

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³⁶ "Recent Poetry," *Scottish Review* (July 1862): 250 (NLS).

³⁷ Buchanan, as in n. 9 above, p. 88