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Reviews


This book is primarily a biographical study of the Liverpool physician Dr. James Currie, the "entire stranger" who became the official biographer of Burns and the editor of *The Works of Robert Burns* (Liverpool, 1800), the first comprehensive collection of Burns’s poems, songs, and letters. Additionally, Professor Thornton includes a fresh interpretation of the last eight years of Burns's life which will be of interest to all serious students of the poet.

Looked at simply as a biography of Currie this is an admirable piece of work, showing the results of a great deal of careful research. Thornton gives us vivid and interesting pictures of Currie’s childhood as a poor Scots lad in Dumfriesshire, of his five years in Virginia as an apprentice to a Glasgow tobacco firm, of the medical fraternity in Edinburgh and then in Liverpool, of Currie’s rise to the top of his profession in Liverpool, and of his achievements as a writer of treatises on medicine and politics. The amazingly popular biography and edition of Burns, undertaken by Currie without pay in the last decade of his life, was the capstone of a distinguished career. And throughout this career, the author makes abundantly clear, Currie was plagued by chronic illness, the lingering and debilitating consumption which finally killed him at the age of forty-nine. The portrait which Professor Thornton draws is an enthusiastic, but on whole a convincing one, of James Currie as a basically good and courageous man of exceptional abilities.

In style, the book is generally vigorous and readable, but it suffers from occasional lack of clarity. Though I read the opening chapters with more than usual care, I found myself quite confused by Thornton's account of Currie's welter of family connections in Dumfriesshire. These relationships, it is true, are clarified by a set of genealogical tables in an appendix, but the description in the text could, I think, be clearer than it is. Here and there are heavy-footed passages like the following comment on the conflict in Currie between desire to serve humanity and need to conserve his waning strength: "An unkept promise became a hope defeated; a passing remark on indolence, inner recognition of lethargy out
of sickness; procrastination, an hour gained for treatment. Every denial made further volition more insistent, but also more hazardous.” But such labored sentences are exceptional; for the most part the book is well and interestingly written.

Readers will, I think, find little to quibble with and much to be thankful for in Dr. Thornton’s portrait of Currie as a man. But the long chapter on Burns is quite another matter and is certain to arouse heated controversy. Here, it seems to me, the author goes overboard in an attempt to justify Currie. It would appear that Thornton has become a devoted admirer of his man to such an extent that he feels obliged to defend Currie’s views at every point, and does so at the expense of Burns. Currie, in his biography of Burns, interpreted the last years of the poet’s life in Dumfries as a period of pathetic decadence in which Burns’s creative powers declined sharply and he gradually sank into the grave as a hopeless drunkard. This view of Burns’s Dumfries years was fixed in the public mind by Currie’s account for over a century. Not until 1932 was this idea effectively challenged, by Franklin B. Snyder in his admirable Life of Robert Burns, still the best biography of the poet. Snyder convincingly rejected Currie’s assertion that Burns drank himself to death, arguing that Currie was biased by fanatically anti-alcohol views, and concluding on the basis of modern medical diagnoses that the poet died of rheumatic heart trouble reaching back into his teens. Furthermore, Snyder interpreted Burns’s last years not as a decadent phase, but rather as one of steady creativity and relative happiness. Since Snyder’s book, modern Burns scholars have generally accepted his view of the poet’s last years. Now Dr. Thornton wishes to reverse this trend and wants us to believe, despite the findings of twentieth-century scholarship, that Currie was right after all.

In one way Thornton’s treatment of this subject is salutary since the generally accepted view of Burns’s Dumfries period needs some modification. At least his book will reopen the whole question for further study. But most Burns students will feel that he has gone much too far. Let us look briefly at two or three of the main issues.

When James Currie was selected in 1796 as the official biographer of Burns, he modestly protested that he had been an “entire stranger” to the poet, but accepted anyway. Dr. Thornton attempts to dismiss, or at least to minimize, this plain statement by Currie. He points out that Currie was born in and deeply attached to Dumfriesshire; that he had dozens of relatives and friends there, some of whom had contacts with Burns; that he owned two estates in the shire. But the fact remains, as Thornton’s own book makes clear, that Currie was indeed an “entire
stranger" to Burns. Currie lived all of his adult life in Liverpool, visiting the Dumfries area for brief periods only three times in twenty-five years. He met Burns face to face only once for a few minutes in a casual encounter on the streets of Dumfries. What does it matter that Currie owned land in the shire? He never lived there after childhood days; he did not know Burns personally. His biography was composed chiefly on the basis of the letters and papers of Burns sent to him in Liverpool by John Syme, supplemented by additional personal information from Syme and Gilbert Burns. Through no fault of his own Currie's sources of information were severely limited. The extent to which he was reduced to mere guesswork is shown by his wholly unfounded insinuation that Burns had contracted venereal disease — "He who suffers the pollution of inebriation, how shall he escape other pollution? But let us refrain from the mention of errors over which delicacy and humanity draw the veil." This is an innuendo which Snyder has once and for all time flattened and disproved. Its phrasing suggests that Currie, despite his admirable qualities, was something of a prig.

Once again in support of Currie's view of the Dumfries years Thornton tends to underrate Burns's literary productivity in this final phase of his career. He is of course right in asserting that Burns in this period failed to equal the poetic achievements of 1785 and 1786; Burns never again attained the white heat of creativity of those two wonderful years. But his production in the last years was steady and copious, with no real signs of exhaustion. No doubt he wrote too much, as most established poets are apt to do; yet a man who can compose as superb a lyric as "Oh wert thou in the cauld blast" virtually on his deathbed can hardly be said to be fizzling out as a creative artist.

On the drinking question Thornton dispenses with the notion that Currie was a temperance fanatic by showing that the good doctor himself indulged through most of his adult life. How then are we to explain Currie's seemingly rabid attitude in his biography of Burns where he sounds like a bigoted teetotaler, referring to drinking in such terms as "this detestable habit"? The answer perhaps lies in Thornton's own book. Currie, in the last decade of his life was forced to give up drinking, largely or wholly, because of his tubercular condition. For him any substantial indulgence became suicidal. If, then, Currie jumped to the conclusion that Burns's condition was similar to his own, what would be more natural than for him to assume that Burns's drinking drove him into an early grave? Also, Currie's own experience in the latter part of his life may well have brought about a change in his attitude as a medical man toward the "detestable habit" which he had formerly enjoyed.
At any rate, Professor Thornton sets out to show that Currie was largely right in his treatment of the devastating effects of drink upon the poet. He piles up evidence from the letters to show this. But it should be noted that by careful selection one can prove almost anything from the letters of as complex a personality as Burns. It would be easy to demonstrate from the letters, for instance, that Burns was a religious zealot, or that he was an arch conservative. All one has to do is pick the right passages and ignore all evidence to the contrary. No one doubts that Burns drank more in his last years than earlier in his life, or that he sometimes drank more than was good for him, or that his drinking occasionally got him into trouble; but that the habit was as disastrous to him as Currie and Thornton suggest is dubious indeed. Currie, in his edition, mangled many of Burns's letters, sometimes out of "delicacy," but also sometimes (and less forgivably) in order to support his interpretation of the facts. Dr. Thornton never does this, of course, but many will feel that he too readily ignores or brushes aside evidence on the other side of the question. As a result, his analysis is less than convincing.

On the positive side this book provides useful information, some of it new, on several of Burns's associates in the Dumfries area. Dr. Thornton is especially good on Robert Riddell and Francis Grose, and he throws valuable new lights on the whole provincial world of Dumfriesshire in which Burns lived out the last eight years of his life. He succeeds in creating a more vivid and better documented impression of what it was like to live in that world than has hitherto been available. Thus, whether one agrees or disagrees with Professor Thornton's interpretation of Burns, this challenging biography of James Currie is a major contribution to Burns scholarship.

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