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REVIEWS


Yvonne Helen Stevenson. Burns and his Bonnie Jean. Sidney, B.C. Gray’s Publishing Ltd. 1967. xi + 113 pp. $4.50

There appears to be no abatement of interest in the women who play such an important role in the life of Robert Burns. Something in the myth of the poet seems to drive his admirers and detractors to either totally defend or condemn him for them. In a century when promiscuity was an accepted way of life, Burns’s conduct was certainly no more open to censure than that of most of those, to use his own expression, “Great Folks whom I respect” and “Little Folks whom I love.” In fact Burns was probably rather fastidious about the women with whom he consorted; despite Currie’s inuendo, there is no evidence whatsoever that Burns ever contracted venereal disease, at a time when it was rife. And yet the tradition of the loose life he led remains a stubborn part of the Burns legend.

On the other hand, there are the idolators, who would almost deny that the Bard was a man of flesh and blood, and who enshrine the women Burns knew. To their embarrassment all too many facts are documented incontrovertibly: Jean Armour did bear him twins, not once, but twice, out of wedlock; just as Elizabeth Paton had borne him a daughter in 1785; later there were Jenny Clow and Anne Park, too.

One of the more enigmatic women in Burns’s life is the subject of a short study by Raymond Lamont Brown. Agnes MacLehose, the “Clarinda” of the correspondence, certainly inflamed Burns’s passion in a manner which no other woman ever did. Unlike most of the women whom Burns loved, Clarinda was well educated and fancied herself a poet. The letters which she exchanged with Burns have for the most part survived and form the basis for the fact and conjecture surrounding one of the century’s most famous love affairs. It was known to the gossipy Edinburgh society of 1788, and it became common knowledge with the publication in 1802 of a considerable selection of the letters which Burns wrote to her.

Brown devotes about one quarter of his book to a biography of
Agnes MacLehose (née Craig) in three chapters: 1759-82, at the end
of which time she had separated from her wastrel husband James; 1782-
91, the period during which the affair with Burns took place; and the
long years after she had parted from him for the last time, 1791-1841.
This reader was at first puzzled by the dates 1782-91, but these are the
years Clarinda spent in Edinburgh before and during her intimacy with
Burns. While it is unlikely that the facts will ever be known, Brown
allows his imagination to wander and he concludes that the Clarinda-
Sylvander affair remained chaste. Burns scholars are by no means sure
of this—passages in Clarinda's letters hint that she may have given in
to her own and Burns's ardour. In the final analysis, does it really mat-
ter? Surely the important result of this infatuation is the few deathless
lines to come from the entanglement.

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met—or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted!

This was the real fruit of their love.

The remainder of the book is a sort of appendix. A few pages con-
tain hitherto unpublished letters by, to and about Clarinda, which are
of some small interest. Clarinda's poems, all of which had already been
published in 1929 in a work edited by John D. Ross, certainly add no-
ting to this book, unless they serve to show how good Burns's poems
are by comparison.

The most disappointing section of this book, and the longest, re-
prints the entire 1843 edition of the Clarinda-Sylvander correspondence.
If, as the dust jacket informs us, the author has spent fifteen years of
research on this book, it is inconceivable that he is not familiar with
the 1951 collected edition of Burns's letters. Not only are letters given
in full there which are inaccurately transcribed in the 1843 edition, but
instead of forty-nine letters by Burns, there are fifty-one. Brown even
outdoes the early edition when, for instance, he dates Letter XII (Syl-
vander to Clarinda) "Friday, 4 January, 1788." The 1843 edition makes
no mention of Friday and the January 4th is indicated as conjectural
through the use of brackets. This reviewer has personally collated the
MS of this letter (it is in the Morgan Library, New York) and it bears
no day of the week, and as was indicated in 1843, the date itself is con-
jectural.

There are quite a number of mistakes which would not have been
made had the author been completely familiar with the material avail-

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able. For instance he appears not to recognize the difference between the Stewart (Glasgow, 1802) edition of the Burns-Clarinda correspondence, the first publication of these letters from Burns, and the subject of an important lawsuit, on the one hand, and one of the Belfast piracies of 1806 on the other.

*Burns and his Bonnie Jean* is by a great-great-grandniece of Jean Armour, and the jacket promises us hitherto unknown details about Bonnie Jean in a story "as handed down in the intimate family circle of Armour descendants." The reader will be disappointed if he expects any new information about Jean, for there is none—he will be equally disappointed if he expects new insights into what made Burns an apparently happy husband, despite the several reasons there were why this should not have been a successful marriage, for there are none of these either. The fact is that we do not know much about Jean, apart from gossip and unreliable fragments such as those J. D. Ross collected in his *Bonnie Jean* (New York, 1898). The sub-title of Miss Stevenson's book is "The Romance of Robert Burns and Jean Armour" but it is really about Burns. We follow him to Edinburgh and are taken up with his love affair with Clarinda, meanwhile completely ignoring Jean, only to pick up the thread of her existence when he returns to Mauchline. No doubt this is the only way the book could have been written; therein lies the weakness in attempting a biography for which documentation is fragmentary, just because the subject was intimate with a famous person. (This objection is based on the assumption that the book is meant to be mostly about Jean—as a book on Burns it would be wholly inadequate.)

Miss Stevenson has also erred in fact several times, to the annoyance of this reviewer. It is nonsense to say (p. 41) that Burns's Ayrshire friends urged on him a second edition of poems of at least three thousand copies: the initial printing of the Edinburgh edition was to have been 1,500 copies and it was only when the subscription lists came in that this number was seen to be too small, and a second 1,500 were hastily printed.

Another serious error (p. 60) would have Burns composing "Scots, wha hae" while on his tour of the Highlands with William Nicol (Aug. 25-Sept. 16, 1787). This is pure fantasy: we know that Burns composed this song within a few days of the end of August 1793.

The book abounds in annoying approximations; for instance Henry Mackenzie did not call Burns a "Heaven-inspired Ploughman" in his
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Lounger review (as we are told on p. 50), what he wrote was "heaven-taught ploughman." This phrase has been so often repeated that one would expect an author, no matter how little steeped in Burns lore, to get it right.

The perennial fascination Burns holds for biographers shows no sign of subsiding. Not all the books about him can add substantially to the critical canon. Here are two minor works which will help to keep the Burns legend alive; one wishes they had accomplished more.

G.R.R.