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BOOK REVIEWS


Ever since he published his edition of the Train, Grierson, Young, and Hope Manuscripts in 1943 Professor Fitzhugh has been known to be deeply committed to the study of Burns’s biography. Indeed, as that work was based on the doctoral dissertation he wrote some years earlier, it could be said that Fitzhugh has been pursuing Burns from his student days. Now we have the product of his many years of assiduous research in a new biography of the poet. Its publication was a long awaited event in the history of Burns scholarship. And if it does not fulfill all the hopes of those who awaited it, at least it can be said that it possesses significant merits, which should in fairness be mentioned first.

The primary merit of this work lies in its completeness. It shows a wide and deep knowledge of all the relevant sources and draws freely and often pertinently on material some of which has only been discovered fairly recently. Fitzhugh corrects some errors in the standard biography (by Franklin B. Snyder, 1932), clears up several confusions,-dors several i’s and crosses several r’s. When there are problems, such as the identification of Highland Mary, he presents all the evidence and states quite precisely the present state of knowledge. He indulges in no airy conjectures and when in doubt explains clearly the nature of the doubts, putting the reader in possession of all the data so that he can form his own opinion. He understands the world in which Burns moved and in particular he is aware of the class situation which accounts for so much in Burns’s behaviour in later life. It can be confidently said that Fitzhugh here gives the reader all that is necessary to put him in possession of everything of significance now known about Burns’s life and behaviour. In short, as a life of Burns the work is well researched, accurate, full, and on a number of points new and original.

However, as the book is subtitled “the Man and the Poet” it is presumably offered as a study of Burns’s poetry as well as a biography,

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and on the critical side it must be said that Fitzhugh is unoriginal and rather simpleminded. True, his comments on the poems are generally unexceptionable, but they seem to represent a somewhat superficial synthesis of modern Burns criticism and fall well below the standard set by such recent critics as Thomas Crawford and David Craig. Fitzhugh's critical procedure is to make a number of generalizations (often saying how impossible it is to say exactly why a particular poem is good) and then quote a series of poems in extenso. Indeed, we are presented with a fairly large anthology of Burns's poems, and I doubt if a critical biography is the place for this, though I agree that lengthy quotation is justified if it is accompanied by detailed analysis and appraisal. But these massive quotations (which include the whole of "The Jolly Beggars" and "Tam o' Shanter" and more than twenty of the songs, including some bawdy ones from The Merry Muses of Caledonia) are for the most part offered instead of criticism. The tendency to point to what Burns wrote rather than explain it is to be found also in his use of Burns's letters of which he quotes more than thirty pages, including eighteen continuous pages illustrating Burns's life and states of mind from June 1788 to the spring of 1790. Of course any biographer of Burns must make full use of the poet's indispensable letters, but in his way of quoting them, as in his way of quoting the poems, Fitzhugh cannot avoid giving an impression of the biographer's helplessness in face of the facts. To let facts speak for themselves is not always the most illuminating way of putting them at the service of a critical biography.

This helplessness in the face of facts is reflected in Fitzhugh's failure to order his biographical material properly. In Chapter I we are rushed into a general account of Burns's life right up to the Dumfries period; then he pulls back and gives us an account of the poet's affair with Jean Armour followed by an account of his drinking habits. The reader is left puzzled as to why these are brought in at this point, for the whole Armour story is told again later in its proper chronological place (if there can be said to be a proper chronological place in a biography structured in this way). And after this we are given a section on Burns's way of composing songs (we are still in Chapter I), which is the subject of Chapter VI. The opening chapter in general falls between several stools: Fitzhugh picks out a few points only and discusses them at disproportionate length. This is not, as it is presumably intended to be, a preliminary statement of the main features of Burns's life and character, but a premature and to the reader apparently arbitrary selection of certain points all of which are dealt with at greater length.
(with all the same material repeated, together with more) in later chapters.

The account of Burns's relations with Jean after marriage erupts intermittently throughout the book. There is a brief account on page 8, an illuminating letter from Robert Ainslie to Clarinda describing Burns and his "helpmate" at home on pages 193-4, and sporadic references elsewhere. Chapter III, entitled "Poet", besides containing long quotations of poems not justified by the critical comment, is also chronologically confused. With the introduction of Mrs. Dunlop we are suddenly rushed ahead to Burns's death. Indeed, Burns dies in this book half a dozen times before we come to the formal account of his death and funeral in Chapter VII. The treatment of the Clarinda story is equally puzzling. Fitzhugh plays ducks and drakes with chronology here, and the reader who does not know the facts beforehand might well be left thoroughly confused. On pages 177-8 Burns has married Jean Armour and Clarinda has gone off to Jamaica; half way down page 178 we are back to before Burns's marriage to Jean. On page 180 Burns decides to marry Jean; on page 182 Clarinda hears of the marriage; while the method and details of the marriage are suddenly described, after a section telling of Clarinda's fortunes until her death, on page 188. On page 193 we are at Burns's death and then we are taken back to the middle of the life again. On page 204 we have a discussion of the causes of Burns's death, which surely belongs with the account of his last years in Chapter VII.

Or consider the organization of Chapter V, entitled "Married Man". On page 193 we are given an account of Thompson's treatment of Burns's songs after the poet's death. On page 194 Fitzhugh transcribes Burns's last song. On page 195 we are told of Burns's anger at snobberies and class distinctions. Pages 196-8 provide a discussion of his resentment of wealth and privilege. Pages 199-203 discuss Burns's political attitudes, and the discussion is rounded off, most oddly, with an account of his final illness. We then return at once to the summer of 1788.

This jumping about starts on the very first page of the book where, for no particular reason, there is a reference to William Nicol's letter to Burns of 10 February 1893 beginning "Dear Christless Bobbie" (with the accurate information in a footnote that this is the only known occasion when Burns was called Bobbie by anyone who knew him): the complete letter is quoted on page 229. On pages 7-8 Fitzhugh quotes, for no relevant reason that this reader at least can discover, the most unpleasant and controversial letter that Burns ever wrote,
that to Ainslie of 3 March 1788, "this quite revoltingly caddish letter" as Maurice Lindsay has called it, without the slightest indication of any awareness of its implications. It is not until we get to page 22, after the quotation of Gilbert Burn's account of the Burns family's way of living at Mt. Oliphant, that we are told of the storm that blew in the gable of the cottage where he was born some ten days after his birth. One could go on and on with examples of this kind. On page 374 we are given an account of the estate left by the deceased poet before the account of his death and funeral on pages 385 ff. "For convenience, Burns' two famous statements about his methods of composition are herewith repeated," Finzugh says on page 313, and this gives away at once his helplessness in the face of facts and the consequent lack of proper ordering which led him to give us these statements first in Chapter I. Even reactions to the poet's death are given before we get the details of his last days.

There are some small errors, of which the most irritating to a Scot is the use of the word "ilk" in the quite un-Scottish sense of "sort of people". "With life for his ilk short and bleak . . ." Anyone engaged in Scottish studies should know that such a usage, though common enough in America and not unknown in England, would make a Scotsman wince: for "ilk" is a Scots word and means "same", as in "Iain Moncrieff of that Ilk", which means "Iain Moncrieff of the place of the same name", i.e. Moncrieff of Moncrieff. There are mistakes in the map on page 20. The River Ayr appears as "River Aye". Innerleighen appears as "Innerliething". (Burns called it "Innerlieathing", but the normal eighteenth century spelling is "Innerliehan" - see the old Statistical Account - while the modern spelling is "Innerleighen").

On page 130 we are told that Burns "descried" (for "decried") Fox. But these are the merest trivia. The book as a whole is packed with sound information based on the most rigorous scholarship. It is a pity that it is deficient in its critical analysis of the poems, but critical analysis of his subject's works is no necessary function of a biographer. The greater pity lies in the fact that such a splendid Burns scholar should have presented his valuable material in such an exasperatingly disorganized way. One would have welcomed, too, a more adequate bibliography, which gives only a list of twenty "major sources" together with a "supplementary list" of ten somewhat arbitrarily chosen books on Burns and on Scottish literature.

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