

Robert Burns as Poet and Person

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Source: *The North American Review*, Vol. 143, No. 360 (Nov., 1886), pp. 427-435

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25101126>

Accessed: 23-03-2020 17:30 UTC

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ROBERT BURNS AS POET AND PERSON.

WHAT the future will decide about Robert Burns and his works—what place will be assigned them on that great roster of geniuses and genius which can only be finished by the slow but sure balancing of the centuries with their ample average—I of course cannot tell. But as we know him, from his recorded utterances, and after nearly one century, and its diligence of collections, personal songs, letters, anecdotes, presenting the figure of the canny Scotchman in a fullness and detail wonderfully complete, and the lines mainly by his own hand, he forms to-day, in some respects, the most interesting personality among singers. Then there are many things in Burns's poems and character that specially endear him to America. He was essentially a republican—would have been at home in the Western United States, and probably become eminent there. He was an average sample of the good-natured, warm-blooded, proud-spirited, amative, alimentive, convivial, young and early-middle-aged man of the decent-born middle classes everywhere and any how. Without the race of which he is a distinct specimen, (and perhaps his poems), America and her powerful democracy could not exist to-day—could not project with unparalleled historic sway into the future.

Perhaps the peculiar coloring of the era of Burns, in the world's history, biography and civilization, needs always first to be considered. It included the times of the '76-'83 Revolution in America, of the French Revolution, and the unparalleled chaos-development in Europe and elsewhere. In every department, shining and strange names, like stars, some rising, some in meridian, some declining—Voltaire, Franklin, Washington, Kant, Goethe, Fulton, Napoleon, mark the era. And while so much, and of moment, fit for the trumpet of the world's fame, was being

transacted—that little tragi-comedy of R. B.'s life and death was going on in a country by-place in Scotland!

Burns's correspondence, generally collected and published since his death, gives wonderful glints into both the amiable and weak (and worse than weak) parts of his portraiture, habits, good and bad luck, ambition and associations. His letters to Mrs. Dunlop, Mrs. McLehose, (Clarinda,) Mr. Thompson, Dr. Moore, Robert Muir, Mr. Cunningham, Miss Margaret Chalmers, Peter Hill, Richard Brown, Mrs. Riddel, Robert Ainslie, and Robert Graham, afford valuable lights and shades to the outline, and with numerous others, help to a touch here, and fill-in there, of poet and poems. There are suspicions, it is true, of "the Genteel Letter-Writer," with scraps and words from "the Manual of French Quotations," and, in the love-letters, some hollow mouthings. Yet we wouldn't on any account lack the letters. A full and true portrait is always what is wanted; veracity at every hazard. Besides, do not we all see by this time that the story of Burns, even for its own sake, requires the record of the whole and several, with nothing left out? Completely and minutely told, it fullest explains and justifies itself—as perhaps almost any life does). He is very close to the earth. He picked up his best words and tunes directly from the Scotch home-singers, but tells Thompson they would not please his, (T's). "learned lugs," adding, "I call them simple—you would pronounce them silly." As before said, the Scotch idiom was undoubtedly his happiest hit. (Yet Dr. Moore, in 1789, writes to Burns, "If I were to offer an opinion, it would be that in your future productions you should abandon the Scotch stanza and dialect, and adopt the measure and language of modern English poetry"!)

As the 128th birth-anniversary of the poet draws on, (January, 1887), with its increasing club-suppers, vehement celebrations, letters, speeches, and so on—(mostly, as William O'Connor says, from people who would not have noticed R. B. at all during his actual life, nor kept his company, or read his verses, on any account)—it may be opportune to print some leisurely-jotted notes I find in my budget. I take my observation of the Scottish bard by considering him as an individual amid the crowded clusters, galaxies, of the old world—and fairly inquiring and suggesting what out of those myriads he too may be to us, to the Western Republic. In the first place no poet on record so fully bequeaths

his own personal magnetism,* nor illustrates more pointedly how one's verses, by time and reading, can so curiously fuse with the versifier's own life and death, and give light and shade to all.

I would say a large part of the fascination of Burns's homely, simple, dialect-melodies is due, for all current and future readers, to the poet's personal "errors," the general bleakness of his lot, his ingrained pensiveness, his brief dash into dazzling, tantalizing, evanescent sunshine; finally culminating in those last years of his life, his being tabooed and in debt, sick and sore, yawed as by contending gales, deeply dissatisfied with everything, most of all with himself—high-spirited too—(no man ever really higher-spirited than Robert Burns). I think it a perfectly legitimate part too. At any rate it has come to be an impalpable aroma through which only both the songs and their singer must henceforth be received. Through that view-medium of misfortune—of a noble spirit in low environments, and of a squalid and premature death—we view the undoubted facts, (giving, as we read them now, a sad kind of pungency,) that Burns's were, before all else, the lyrics of illicit loves and carousing intoxication. Perhaps even it is this strange, impalpable *post-mortem* comment and influence referred to, that gives them their contrast, attraction, the zest of their author's after fame. If he had lived steady, fat, moral, comfortable, well-to-do years, on his own grade, (let alone, what of course was out of the question, the ease and velvet and rosewood and copious royalties of Tennyson or Victor Hugo or Longfellow), and died well-ripened and respectable, where could have come in

* Probably no man that ever lived—a friend has made the statement—was so fondly loved, both by men and women, as Robert Burns. The reason is not hard to find: he had a real heart of flesh and blood beating in his bosom; you could almost hear it throb. "Some one said, that if you had shaken hands with him his hand would have burnt yours. The gods, indeed, made him poetical, but nature had a hand in him first. His heart was in the right place; he did not pile up cantos of poetic diction; he plucked the mountain daisy under his feet; he wrote of field-mouse hurrying from its ruined dwelling. He held the plough or the pen with the same firm, manly grasp." And he was loved. The simple roll of the women who gave him their affection and their sympathy would make a long manuscript; and most of these were of such noble worth that, as Robert Chambers says, "their character may stand as a testimony in favor of that of Burns." [As I understand, the foregoing is from an extremely rare book published by M'Kie, in Kilmarnock. I find the whole beautiful paragraph in a capital paper on Burns, by Amelia Barr.]

that burst of passionate sobbing and remorse which welled forth instantly and generally in Scotland, and soon followed everywhere among English-speaking races, on the announcement of his death, and which, with no sign of stopping, only regulated and veined with fitting appreciation, flows deeply, widely yet ?

Dear Rob ! manly, witty, fond, friendly, full of weak spots as well as strong ones—essential type of so many thousands—perhaps the average, as just said, of the decent-born young men and the early mid-aged, not only of the British Isles, but America too, North and South, just the same. I think indeed one best part of Burns is the unquestionable proof he presents of the perennial existence among the laboring classes, especially farmers, of the finest latent poetic elements in their blood. (How clear it is to me that the common soil has always been, and is now, thickly strewn with just such gems.) He is well called *the Ploughman*. “ Holding the plough,” said his brother Gilbert, “ was the favorite situation with Robert for poetic compositions, and some of his best verses were produced while he was at that exercise.” “ I must return to my humble station, and woo my rustic muse in my wonted way, at the plough-tail.”—1787, to the Earl of Buchan. He has no high ideal of the poet or the poet’s office ; indeed quite a low and contracted notion of both :

“ Fortune! if thou’l but gie me still
Hale breeks, a scone, an’ whiskey gill,
An’ rowth o’ rhyme to rave at will,
Tak’ a’ the rest.”

See also his rhymed letters to Robert Graham, invoking patronage ; “ one stronghold,” Lord Glencairn, being dead, now these appeals to “ Fintra, my other stay,” (with, in one letter, a copious shower of vituperation generally). In his collected poems there is no particular unity, nothing that can be called a leading theory, no unmistakable spine or skeleton. Perhaps, indeed, their very desultoriness is one charm of his songs : “ I take up one or another,” he says in a letter to Thompson, “ just as the bee of the moment buzzes in my bonnet-lug.”

Consonantly with the customs of the time—yet markedly inconsistent in spirit with Burns’s own case, (and not a little painful as it remains on record, as depicting some features of the bard himself), the relation called *patronage* existed between the nobility

and gentry on one side, and literary people on the other, and gives one of the strongest side-lights to the general coloring of poems and poet. It crops out a good deal in Burns's Letters, and even necessitated a certain flunkeyism on occasions, through life. It probably, with its requirements, (while it helped in money and countenance), did as much as any one cause in making that life a chafed and unhappy one, ended by a premature and miserable death.

Yes, there is something about Burns peculiarly acceptable to the concrete, human points of view. He poetizes work-a-day agricultural labor and life, (whose spirit and sympathies, as well as practicalities, are much the same everywhere,) and treats fresh, often coarse, natural occurrences, loves, persons, not like many new and some old poets in a genteel style of gilt and china, or at second or third removes, but in their own born atmosphere, laughter, sweat, unction. Perhaps no one ever sang "lads and lasses"—that universal race, mainly the same, too, all ages, all lands—down on their own plane, as he has. He exhibits no philosophy worth mentioning; his morality is hardly more than parrot-talk—not bad or deficient, but cheap, shop-worn, the platitudes of old aunts and uncles to the youngsters (be good boys and keep your noses clean). Only when he gets at Poosie Nansie's, celebrating the "barley bree," or among tramps, or democratic bouts and drinking generally,

("Freedom and whiskey gang thegither,")

we have, in his own unmistakable color and warmth, those interiors of rake-helly life and tavern fun—the cantabile of jolly beggars in highest jinks—lights and groupings of rank glee and brawny amorousness, outvying the best painted pictures of the Dutch school, or any school.

By America and her democracy, such a poet, I cannot too often repeat, must be kept in loving remembrance; but it is best that discriminations be made. His admirers, (as at those anniversary suppers, over the "hot Scotch"), will not accept for their favorite anything less than the highest rank, alongside of Homer, Shakspeare, etc. Such, in candor, are not the true friends of the Ayrshire bard, who really needs a different place quite by himself. The Iliad and the Odyssey express courage, craft, full-grown heroism in situations of danger, the sense of command and leadership, emulation, the last and fullest evolution of self-poise, as in kings, and

god-like even while animal appetites. The Shaksperian compositions, on vertebers and framework of the primary passions, portray, (essentially the same as Homer's), the spirit and letter of the feudal world, the Norman lord, ambitious and arrogant, taller and nobler than common men—with much underplay and gusts of heat and cold, volcanoes and stormy seas. Burns, (and some will say to his credit), attempts none of these themes. He poetizes the humor, riotous blood, sulks, amorous torments, fondness for the tavern and for cheap objective nature, with disgust at the grim and narrow ecclesiasticism of his time and land, of a young farmer on a bleak and hired farm in Scotland, through the years and under the circumstances of the British politics of that time, and of his short personal career as author, from 1783 to 1796. He is intuitive and affectionate, and just emerged or emerging from the shackles of the kirk, from poverty, ignorance, and from his own low appetites—(out of which latter, however, he never extricated himself). It is to be said that amid not a little smoke and gas in his poems, there is in almost every piece a spark of fire, and now and then the real afflatus. He has been applauded as democratic, and with some warrant; while Shakspeare, and with the greatest warrant, has been called monarchical or aristocratic, (which he certainly is). But the splendid personalizations of Shakspeare, formulated on the largest, freest, most heroic, most artistic mould, are to me far dearer as lessons, and more precious even as models for Democracy, than the humdrum samples Burns presents. The motives of some of his effusions are certainly discreditable personally—one or two of them markedly so. He has, moreover, little or no spirituality. This last is his mortal flaw and defect, tried by highest standards. The ideal he never reached, (and yet I think he leads the way to it). He gives melodies, and now and then the simplest and sweetest ones; but harmonies, complications, oratorios in words, never. (I do not speak this in any deprecatory sense. Blessed be the memory of the warm-hearted Scotchman for what he has left us, just as it is!). He likewise did not know himself, in more ways than one. Though so really free and independent, he prided himself in his songs on being a reactionist and a Jacobite—on persistent sentimental adherency to the "cause" of the Stuarts—the weakest, thinnest, most faithless, brainless dynasty that ever held a throne.

Thus, while Burns is not at all great for New-World study, in

the sense that Isaiah and Æschylus and the Book of Job are unquestionably great—is not to be mentioned with Shakspeare—hardly even with current Tennyson or our Emerson—he has a nestling niche of his own, all fragrant, fond, and quaint and homely—a lodge built near but outside the mighty temple of the gods of song and art—those universal strivers, through their works of harmony and melody and power, to ever show or intimate man's crowning, last, victorious fusion in himself of Real and Ideal. Precious, too,—fit and precious beyond all singers, high or low—will Burns ever be to the native Scotch, especially to the working-classes of North Britain ; so intensely one of them, and so racy of the soil, sights, and local customs. He often apostrophizes Scotland, and is, or would be, enthusiastically patriotic. His country has lately commemorated him in a statue.* His aim is declaredly to be 'a Rustic Bard.' His poems were all written in youth or young manhood ; (he was little more than a young man when he died). His collected works, in giving everything, are nearly one half first-drafts. His brightest hit is his use of the Scotch patois, so full of terms flavored like wild fruit or berries. Then I should make an allowance to Burns which cannot be made for any other poet. Curiously, even the frequent crudeness, haste, deficiencies, (flatness and puerilities by no means absent), prove upon the whole not out of keeping in any comprehensive collection of his works, heroically printed, 'following copy,' every piece, every line according to originals. Other poets might tremble for such boldness, such rawness. In 'This odd kind chiel' such points hardly mar the rest. Not only are they in consonance with the underlying spirit of the pieces, but complete the full abandon and veracity of the farm-fields, and the home-brewed flavor of the Scotch vernacu-

* The Dumfries statue of Robert Burns was successfully unveiled April 1881 by Lord Rosebery, the occasion having been made national in its character. Before the ceremony, a large procession paraded the streets of the town, all the trades and societies of that part of Scotland being represented, and at the head of which went dairymen and ploughmen, the former driving their carts and being accompanied by their maids. The statue is of Sicilian marble. It rests on a pedestal of gray stone five feet high. The poet is represented as sitting easily on an old tree root, holding in his left hand a cluster of daisies. His face is turned toward the right shoulder, and the eyes gaze into the distance. Near by lie a collie dog, a broad bonnet half covering a well-thumbed song-book, and a rustic flageolet. The costume is taken from the Nasmyth portrait, which has been followed for the features of the face.

lar. (Is there not often something in the very neglect, unfinished, careless nudity, slovenly hiatus, coming from intrinsic genius, and not 'put on,' that secretly pleases the soul more than the wrought and re-wrought polish of the most perfect verse?) Mark the native spice and untranslatable twang in the very names of his songs—"O for ane and twenty, Tam," "John Barleycorn," "Last May a braw Wooer," "Rattlin roarin Willie," "O wert thou in the cauld, cauld blast," "Gude e'en to you, Kimmer," "Merry hae I been teething a Heckle," "O lay thy loof in mine, lass," and others.

The longer and more elaborated poems of Burns are just such as would please a natural but homely taste, and cute but average intellect, and are inimitable in their way. The "Twa Dogs," (one of the best), with the conversation between Cesar and Luath, the "Brigs of Ayr," "the Cotter's Saturday Night," "Tam O'Shanter"—all will be long read and re-read and admired, and ever deserve to be. With nothing profound in any of them, what there is of moral and plot has an inimitably fresh and racy flavor. If it came to question, Literature could well afford to send adrift many a pretensive poem, and even book of poems, before it could spare these compositions.

Never indeed was there truer utterance in a certain range of idiosyncrasy than by this poet. Hardly a piece of his, large or small, but has "snap" and raciness. He puts in cantering rhyme, (often doggerel), much cutting irony and idiomatic ear-cuffing of the kirk-deacons—dryly good-natured addresses to his cronies, (he certainly would not stop us, if he were here this moment, from classing that "to the De'il" among them)—"to Mailie and her Lambs," "to auld Mare Maggie," "to a Mouse,"

"Wee, sleekit, cowrin, tim'rous beastie:"

"to a Mountain Daisy," "to a Haggis," "to a Louse," "to the Toothache," etc.—and occasionally to his brother bards and lady or gentleman patrons, often with strokes of tenderest sensibility, idiopathic humor, and genuine poetic imagination—still oftener with shrewd, original, sheeny, steel-flashes of wit, home-spun sense, or lance-blade puncturing. Then, strangely, the basis of Burns's character, with all its fun and manliness, was hypochondria, the blues, palpable enough in "Despondency," "Man was made to Mourn," "Address to Ruin," a "Bard's Epitaph," &c.

From such deep-down elements sprout up, in very contrast and paradox, those *riant* utterances of which a superficial reading will not detect the hidden foundation. Yet nothing is clearer to me than the black and desperate background behind those pieces—as I shall now specify them. I find his most characteristic, Nature's masterly touch and luxuriant life-blood, color and heat, not in "Tam O'Shanter," "the Cotter's Saturday Night," "Scots who hae," "Highland Mary," "the T'wa' Dogs," and the like, but in "the Jolly Beggars," "Rigs of Barley," "Scotch Drink," "the Epistle to John Rankine," "Holy Willie's Prayer," and in "Halloween," etc. In these compositions, especially the first, there is much indelicacy, (some editions flatly leave it out), but the composer reigns alone, with handling free and broad and true, and is an artist. You may see and feel the man indirectly in his other verses, all of them, with more or less life-likeness—but these I have named last call out pronouncedly in his own voice,

"I, Rob, am here."

Finally, in any summing-up of Burns, though so much is to be said in the way of fault-finding, drawing black marks, and doubtless severe literary criticism—(in the present outpouring I have 'kept myself in,' rather than allowed any free flow)—after full retrospect of his works and life, the "odd kind chiel" remains to my heart and brain as almost the tenderest, manliest, (even if contradictory), dearest flesh-and-blood figure in all the streams and clusters of by-gone poets.

WALT WHITMAN.