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Robert Crawford: The Bard

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Introduction

No writer is more charismatic than Robert Burns. Passionate, intelligent, and a consummate wordsmith, he is the world's most popular love poet. He sought to become, and became, the archetypal national bard. Though it was dangerous to be so in his age and place, he also made himself through tone and temperament the master poet of democracy. All this makes Burns one of the most important authors of modernity, but also one of the hardest to write about. He will not be pigeonholed. His life and work resist the imposition of grandeur.

In that lies at least part of his dignity and international appeal. Loved today from New Zealand to New York and from Beijing to Berlin, Burns achieved his successes not with transcendental illumination but with daftness, deftness, warmth, humour, and a sometimes painful sense of his own vulnerability. No poet has been at once so brilliant and so down-to-earth. A celebrity who could mock his public status, Burns was ambitious and sometimes exploitative but almost never pompous. As soon as he had established himself as 'bard', he began making fun of the title; but the term 'bard' also denoted his commitment to his poetic vocation and his sense of a vital poetic relationship with his community – matters strengthened, not diminished, by his instinct for fun and self-mockery. Shakespeare never called himself a bard, and hardly ever used the word in his work; he came to be called 'bard' partly as a result of an anxious English response to Burns and Scots' pride in finding a great national poet.¹ Burns, an admirer of Shakespeare and English literature as well as a patriotic lover of Scotland and Scottish literature, delighted in being hailed as Scotland's bard.

In writing this biography I have tried wherever possible to give readers direct contact with Burns's own words – in poems, letters

and conversations – as well as with the comments of his contemporaries. In that way, through quotation as well as through narration people can sense just how *reachable* this poet remains. His fun, intelligence, radicalism, seductive allure and suffering can still be ours, for all that he lived in the now distant eighteenth century.

Born into obscurity, Burns became the first poet in the English-speaking world to be treated in his lifetime as a national celebrity. At times his life is about celebrity and how to cope with it. He lived that life with a performative intensity which is also part of his poetry. Burns's performances – poetic, political, sexual, religious – are searches for individual liberty, but a liberty to be achieved without sacrificing the bond of community.

Sex, class, gender and politics offered him virulent excitement at the same time as threatening to trap him in narrow roles he didn't want. His life and poetry confront such threats with irony, vigour and protean guile. His poetry is frequently bound up with his biography, but his deep-rooted Scottish song-making is also so universally beguiling that songs like 'Auld Lang Syne' are not just relished but used in cultures very different from his own. As the first modern writer to be hailed as a national bard, he was soon an internationally recognised icon. Though he sometimes self-protectively concealed it, the modernity of his democratic radicalism did not compromise his artistic gift; today it presses the case that contemporary egalitarian societies around the world should regard him as both ancestral and familiar – should recognise him as 'the bard'.

Few poets' biographies are more striking or more heartbreakingly remarkable. Burns's often sly resistance to authority enlivens all his negotiations with it. Peasant and dandy, he fused in his work popular and high culture, loving both throughout his short, packed, unrepeatably intense existence. If at the bicentenary of Burns's birth his countryman Hugh MacDiarmid maintained that thanks to the 'Industrial Revolution . . . Everything in Scotland has changed out of all recognition since his time', then our own anxieties about global environmental damage and a demeaning separation of people from other creatures and their habitats makes Burns more vitally important than he may have seemed fifty years ago.² In his articulation of how human domination has destroyed the ecology of 'Nature's social union', or in his uneasy engagement with his society's darkest secret – slavery – and with other issues of inequality, his attitudes and expression are more disturbingly urgent than ever.³ Yet when I

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was first considering writing this biography, the gifted Scottish poet Don Paterson, whose brilliantly written 2001 essay on Burns is the most insightful and provocative of all short overviews of the poet's work, suggested to me there were so many existing accounts that a new biography of Burns would be 'the world's least necessary book'.⁴

Astonished by a 'furious shapeshifting' which makes Burns the energetic precursor of his admirer Keats's 'chameleon poet', Paterson argues that 'Burns was born in a lean time for verse. He was unfortunate not to have been born twenty years later, when, with far more stimulating company and better drugs, he would have made a fine Romantic.'⁵ Yet, for all he was clearly nourished by that fountainhead of modernity, the Scottish Enlightenment, Burns *was* in several ways the first of the English-speaking world's great Romantic poets. Paterson, whose essay even gets the year of Burns's death wrong, is not to be trusted on dates: it was his 1770s and subsequent experience of the era of the American and French Revolutions which set Burns in the vanguard of Romanticism in the English-speaking world where Romantic tonalities had earlier been essayed by his countrymen James Thomson and James 'Ossian' Macpherson. Presenting a doctrinaire purist's selection of Burns's verse that omits not only 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'O my Luve's like a red, red rose' but also the famous songs beginning 'Scots, wha hae' and 'Is there for honest poverty', Paterson has effectively attempted to neuter Burns's political, and even some of his erotic, power. This biography presents those fascinating aspects of Burns in full, and shows how they fuelled some of his finest and best-known poetry.

If, for a moment, I may slip into the tones of a professor of literary history, let me point out that the admiration for democratic, revolutionary America in Burns's subversive earliest political poetry predates that of William Blake, as does Burns's admiration for the English republican poet John Milton's arch-rebel, Satan. It was the erotically intense Burns who showed the schoolboy Wordsworth what it might mean to write in a selection of the language really used by men, but, writing in standard English, Wordsworth cast off Burns's vital synthesis of tangy vernacular, his potent humour, and most of his eroticism. The spectator Wordsworth's ultimate love was grand scenery. Burns's was lovingly, flyingly, and democratically engaging with his fellow creatures. This is as evident in the Scottish poet's life as in his writing. If Burns's poetry's democratic tone

alienated the Oxonian Matthew Arnold, it was treasured elsewhere, and attracted the great poets of democratic America from Whitman, Poe, Dickinson and Longfellow to Whittier and Robert Frost. There are more statues of Burns in the United States than there are of any American poet, and his present-day US admirers range from Maya Angelou to several ex-presidents.⁶ Growing up mute, poor and black in the American South, Angelou developed a lifelong and deep conviction that ‘Robert Burns belonged to me’.⁷ For all the unfamiliarity of some of his Scots language many readers and listeners in very different societies have come to feel this. I remember similar sentiments being voiced by Yuan Kejia of the People’s Republic of China when he proudly signed himself ‘the translator of Burns’ in a copy of his *Poems of Robert Burns* in 1986, and I have even seen Burns drawn in Chinese costume by the artist Chiang Yee, who felt so strongly a connection between Burns’s songs and traditional Chinese lyrics that he suggested the bard was ‘perhaps . . . brought back as a baby from China by some Scottish missionary named Burns’.⁸

A warm sense of vitality, engrafted by remarkable skill into his best work, comes from what was most vital in Burns’s life, so that some knowledge of his biography and situation are particularly, enjoyably important. As the Scottish poet Norman MacCaig noted, ‘What is surprising is that the man who emerges from the poems and the man who emerges from the documents are one and the same person. We find nothing in the life that contradicts the poetry and nothing in the poetry that is not paralleled [*sic*] in the life.’⁹ Burns’s life has many clearly dramatic elements – struggle against ‘obscurity’, mental illness, political persecution and ruin, in addition to the upheavals of many love affairs, marriage and adultery. His personality, mixing warmth with humour and shrewdness, but also an attraction to excess and self-recrimination, compelled and still compels worldwide attention.

Burns’s spectacular career and intense love affairs make him the ideal biographical subject. Still, some of the most important experiences for any poet are moments of reading and listening. It is hard to combine convincingly an account of a writer’s subtle internal acoustic and intellectual education with tales of more obviously dramatic external events, and Burns’s biographers have often failed in this regard. In the eighteenth century the first of them, Robert Heron, hastily produced a piece of hack-work, ignoring the nature

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of the poet's linguistic gifts and censuring him for 'the evils of drunkenness and licentious love'.¹⁰ Thereafter, Burns's first, now often maligned, nineteenth-century biographer and editor, James Currie, was concerned to sanitise those and other aspects of the poet while generously making available private information all later scholars have quarried. Though Currie has been the subject of recent academic interest, Burns's most generally influential biographer in the nineteenth century was Walter Scott's ambitious Tory lawyer son-in-law John Gibson Lockhart whose 1828 *Life of Robert Burns* was 'for a century and more the standard account of the poet and his work'.¹¹ For much of the twentieth century Lockhart's *Life* was reprinted in Everyman's Library, confirming its long-lasting 'classic' status. In the last two centuries probably Lockhart's has been read by more people than any other Burns biography.

This is unfortunate. For all his literary style, Lockhart furthered the 'gentlemanly' agenda which so conditioned biography throughout the Victorian era and shaped misleading nineteenth-century presentations of Burns, making him safe for many an imperialists' dinner or parlour ornament. Thomas Carlyle, who discussed Burns with men who had known him well, saw the poet as 'the most gifted British soul' of the eighteenth century, and made him a heroic 'Man of Letters' in his 1841 lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*.¹² Later the Victorian Robert Chambers, born less of a gentleman than Lockhart but grown more of a scholar, wrote more fairly and carefully about Burns, who was worshipped by then internationally as a hero. Like that of Currie, Chambers's work combined biographical material with an edition of the poems. It was expertly updated in 1896, by which time it ran to over two thousand pages – impossibly long for anyone wanting a manageable biography. In the twentieth century, when Lytton Strachey stylishly debunked the Victorians' eminent, amplitudinously written-up heroes, and when D. H. Lawrence considered Burns as the protagonist for a projected novel of sexual liberation, Lawrence's friend the Scottish novelist Catherine Carswell authored a highly controversial, novelistic biography. Carswell inventively debunked aspects of Burns's reputation, introducing a much-needed note of feminist critique. For this she famously received a bullet in the post, and was asked to shoot herself, leaving 'the world a better and cleaner place'.¹³

If other twentieth-century biographies, most notably that of the sympathetic American scholar Franklyn Bliss Snyder, manoeuvred

more successfully between hero-worship and brass tacks, they also veered way off course: Snyder in 1932 condemned Burns's supposed part in capturing a smugglers' ship as a mere 'picturesque legend' fit for 'Gilbert and Sullivan'.¹⁴ Today we can be sure this incident happened. For a biographer there are not only many problems in ascertaining details of Burns's life and milieu; there is also the way Burns presents an extreme example of the tensions between the 'laundering process' of hero-worship and the less elevated recording of sometimes awkward facts, blemishes, gossip, censored opinions – tensions in the art-form of biography that go back at least as far as Plutarch. Still fascinating critics, historians and professors of biography, such torsions are probably as old as the biographical form itself.¹⁵

Sadly, though revealingly, by the late twentieth century, for all his continuing international popularity, Burns was generally out of favour with the academic world's critics, professors and historians. This tells us more about conformist pedagogy than it tells us about the nimble-witted bard. Insightful literary critics from the magisterial David Daiches and Thomas Crawford to the shrewd Raymond Bentman and the subtly astute Carol McQuirk published and re-published monographs on him, but the steady trajectory of Burns's decline in the research culture of modern academia has been expertly traced by Murray Pittock.¹⁶ Most recent books on Burns, including biographies, have emanated from outside the universities.

Burns may be relished by readers, leaders, singers and listeners from Moscow in Ayrshire to Moscow in Russia, but globally classroom taste for his work is limited. The problem lies with institutional academia, rather than with the poet who gleefully cocked a snook at '*Colledge-classes!*'¹⁷ Even in Scotland, traditional headquarters of an impressively active worldwide federation of popular Burns Clubs, and where the poet's work is studied in schools and universities, it has fallen as much to writers as to scholars to say just why Robert Burns matters. In 1996, speaking in the Scottish capital two hundred years after Burns's death, Seamus Heaney mounted a spirited, loving defence of Burns's 'art speech', while in St Andrews Douglas Dunn examined Burns's metrical craftsmanship and A. L. Kennedy spoke incisively about the creative impulses that warred within this poet of love, and sometimes also affected his spouse whose 'passivity' (Kennedy reflected memorably, if harshly) 'seems occasionally to border on the cataleptic'.¹⁸

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The twenty-first-century Burns biographer requires an instinct for self-defence, and, ideally, a Kevlar vest. Yet there is an evident need for a fresh, lucid, sensibly proportioned biography of Robert Burns. Though I tracked down several mid-twentieth-century biographies in my local learned library, in bookshops in 2006 when I started writing this book I could find no biographies of Scotland's most dearly loved poet. Eventually I was able to buy an Ayrshire reprint of a translation of Hans Hecht's clear and short account, first published in German in 1919 and considerably dated in its scholarship.

The 1990s, though, had seen two fresh full-scale biographies. Ian McIntyre's 1995 account of the poet was eminently readable, but added nothing to the sum of human knowledge. James Mackay's prizewinning 750-page Burns tome of 1992 was clogged with facts and stodgily scripted. Accusations of plagiarism levelled against Mackay's prodigious biographical output by Niall Ferguson (now Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University), Catherine Lockerbie (now Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival) and other sceptics, combined with his 'outing' for an earlier criminal indiscretion, had cast a shadow over his work.¹⁹ In the case of Mackay's Burns biography, to an extent this was unfair; though his quotations could be inaccurate and (as modern Burns biographers must) he relied on earlier writings, his genealogical investigations in particular, some drawing on the work of the Mormon Church and conducted while he edited the *Burns Chronicle*, were thorough and sometimes pioneeringly productive. Those charges of plagiarism, however, had severely damaged his reputation as a biographer before his death in 2007. Professor Carol McQuirk called Mackay's work 'indispensable'; also 'unreadable'.²⁰ In *The Bard* I have not sought to match Mackay's vast, formidable amassing of information.

Question marks surrounding Mackay's scholarship were nothing compared with those overshadowing the 1997 study by Patrick Scott Hogg. Going far beyond the shrewd 1960s speculations of Lucyle Werkmeister, Hogg claimed to have discovered a host of 'lost poems' by Burns.²¹ Many of these were soon republished in the now notorious *Canongate Burns* edition which Hogg edited in 2001 with academic Dr Andrew Noble. The furore over the 'radical' Noble-Hogg edition, which was riddled with textual errors (I counted ten in just a few stanzas of a single poem), inaccuracies and splenetic

outbursts, became a *cause célèbre* of modern Scottish publishing. It made working on Burns confusing and sometimes perilous.

Sadly this row and its aftermath have obscured perceptive essays on Burns and politics by Marilyn Butler and by W. J. Murray, as well as N. R. Paton's populist book *Song o' Liberty: The Politics of Robert Burns* (1994) and Liam McIlvanney's more scholarly *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (2002).²² If Hogg and Noble's hearts were in the right place, their heads were most definitely not. The impact of their questionable scholarship and its turbulent reception has threatened to ruin efforts to build a nuanced case for Burns's radicalism which rescues him from those many monarchists, imperialists, staunch British Unionist supperers, and others who over the centuries have controlled – and sometimes still seek to control – his posthumous reputation.

Today Burns's supposed authorship of all those Canongate 'lost poems' has been disproved or so convincingly contested that none can safely be called his. The most dogged scholarly attacks on the 'appalling' *Canongate Burns* as a 'hugely unreliable product' which is 'a demonstrably inept and shoddy performance, frequent, wilful and purblind in its flaws' and filled with 'a shocking level of inadequate, unlikely and even falsified argumentation' have been mounted by the distinguished Burns textual scholar Dr Gerry Carruthers. Though I have described the *Canongate Burns* elsewhere in terms perhaps more generous than those used by Carruthers, in writing the present biography I have deliberately avoided arguments that depend on its discredited scholarship.²³

This means *The Bard* returns for most of its textual information to the great three-volume edition of *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* edited for the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1968 by the Nottingham-based Scottish literary scholar James Kinsley. At times I have supplemented reference to Kinsley's edition with the publication from manuscript of 'new' poetry by Burns rediscovered during the research for this biography. These fresh attributions are discussed at more length in *The Best Laid Schemes*, the selection of Burns's work which I have edited for the general reader with Dr Christopher MacLachlan. Though the Reverend Professor Kinsley has rightly been regarded as conservative with a small (and perhaps a capital) c, his vast edition remains invaluable for its sure-footedness and sheer erudition. Even though his three volumes may be too extended for most people, it is one of the tragedies of Burns scholarship that

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Kinsley's edition, unsurpassed for four decades, has long been out of print in its full form. Its references keyed to Kinsley's text of the poems, and to the standard edition of Burns's *Letters* edited by the American scholar J. De Lancey Ferguson, then updated by his fellow countryman and distinguished Burnsian G. Ross Roy, *The Bard* acknowledges the most thorough and trustworthy textual work, so I hope that my arguments about Burns's texts may avoid some of the pitfalls that have afflicted several recent writers on Burns.

My aim has been to pay close attention to the poems and letters and to avoid most of the 'Burns lore' which, while it is a legitimate subject for sociological research, often clutters accounts of Burns's life, so that, as even James Mackay (who amassed an almost endless amount of it) admitted, 'it is difficult at this remove in time to distinguish between hard fact and the myths and legends'.²⁴ In his second commonplace book Burns once quoted the English poet Thomas Gray on how 'half a word fixed upon or near the spot, is worth a cart-load of recollection'.²⁵ I agree. This biography almost always relies on accounts given by people who met Burns during his lifetime; it also quotes extensively, though not uncritically, from Burns's own, sometimes self-dramatising writings. In his late teens Burns's son James Glencairn Burns, who admired writing that displayed 'a superior manner', liked his father's 'letters better than his Poetry'.²⁶ Few today would concur, but at times, for all their polished 'superior manner', the letters give an energetic sense of what Burns's conversation and anecdotes, which impressed so many who met him but are now largely buried under a tonnage of 'lore', must have been like. This is not a book of Burns lore; I would not be qualified to write one.

Published two hundred and fifty years after his birth, *The Bard* is the first twenty-first-century biography of Robert Burns. Addressed to an international audience, it does not assume detailed knowledge of his work or circumstances. It aims simply to offer a clear, manageable account of his life which gives some indication of what made him a great poet. In doing this, I have tried to avoid over-aestheticising Burns, aiming instead to show his political as well as his lyric imagination. He was constantly in dialogue with his community and with other voices beyond; his craftsmanship, his literary learning, are as important as any other parts of his experience. At times, I quote some of his poems, both great and minor, hoping to shed light on their value for readers who may or may not be familiar

with the complicated mixtures of vernacular and formal language, English and Scots, which Burns so loved and which give energy to the busy, sculpted interchange that is his verse. There is no point in writing a biography of the bard without outlining what the bard wrote. I want to show why his poetry still matters.

'The Bard' is also the title of a 1757 poem by Thomas Gray about a Welsh poet who commits suicide rather than submitting to English imperialism. Gray's poem helped spur an enthusiasm for bards and for that 'medievalism' which has been the subject of recent renewed scholarly interest.²⁷ Burns was familiar with and hugely admired the Scottish bardic work of Ossian which, I've argued in *The Modern Poet*, helped create a conception of poets as at once primitive and sophisticated, domestic and wild.²⁸ These assumptions about poets continue to this day, and surely fit Robert Burns. Still, having written elsewhere about Burns in several books of literary criticism and literary history, having edited a selection of his work and a collection of essays about him, and having discussed the way the words 'the bard' came to be applied to both Burns and Shakespeare, I am happy to refer readers to these separately published arguments.²⁹ This biography is not about fitting Burns into some extended critical thesis or literary history. It is about painting a credible portrait.

Apparently straightforward matters of Burns portraiture have long been a difficult area. When a late-eighteenth-century portrait miniature of a man with tied hair, inscribed on the back of the frame 'Robert Burns', and with a provenence traceable to the poet's brother, came up for auction at Bonhams in London on 23 May 2007, even as bids were placed scholars were disagreeing on whether or not it was an authentic likeness of the bard.³⁰ Each portrait of a human being, however vouched for, is only a partial likeness, a person seen at best in a revealing slant of light. That is the most I can hope for *The Bard*.

A quarter of a millennium after Robert Burns's birth, it is time for a biography that tries to bridge the gulf between too familiar touristic conceptions of Burns as a brand-name Scottish national icon and those now embattled defences of Burns as a poet whose resilient international popularity seems inversely related to his unfashionable status in academia. *The Bard* depends on new research as well as on the work of earlier generations of investigators. It is the first biography to draw on the Macdonald manuscript, which not only provides unpublished late-eighteenth-century accounts of

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places Burns knew, but also affords the last extended account of Burns's conversation written down in his lifetime and an important insight into his republican Scottish political thought. *The Bard* is, too, the first biography to make use of published materials from the journals of Stebbing Shaw to sermons by William Dalrymple, David Trail and others to show in new ways how Burns was both formed by and shaped the culture around him. As well as drawing on some rediscovered Burns poems and newly located newspaper materials such as the interview with Highland Mary's mother, I have paid a good amount of attention to Burns's reading. I show how this nourished his imagination, and, identifying for the first time, for instance, the book of letters which he pored over in his youth, I suggest how this affected his lifelong desire to assemble around him a group of literary wits.

In writing about Burns's hothouse love affair with Agnes McLehose, I have used familiar letters, and much less familiar correspondence which has lain unpublished since the 1920s and has been ignored by previous editors and biographers. Elsewhere in this book I put forward new interpretations of well-known works such as Alexander Nasmyth's 1787 portrait of Burns or Burns's own 'Tam o' Shanter' – that poem surely connected to his excited awareness of his adultery. No previous biographer has made such detailed use of materials relating to Burns's infant knowledge of song, his youthful awareness of the American War, or his community's 1790s alertness to European political affairs as reflected in the *Dumfries Weekly Journal*. If some of the new material in this book may be controversial, it may also aid future readers. Most of all, I hope *The Bard* offers twenty-first-century audiences a picture of a great poet that is free from excessive bardolatry or verbiage. While drawing on the most admirable scholarship – such as that of Chambers and Wallace in the nineteenth century and Kinsley in the twentieth – I have tried to add some new and worthwhile stones to the big cairn of Burns biography.

My purpose in writing, though, is not primarily to make a memorial, a contribution to cultural tourism, or a treatise, but to present to an international audience a credible, engaging and nuanced likeness of a uniquely talented individual. In so doing I pay proportionately more attention than previous biographers to Burns's formative childhood and youth, to the years when he made his greatest breakthroughs as a poet, and to his political attitudes in

his thirties; this is a portrait of a poet, not a guide to his times, to Enlightenment Edinburgh, or to the literary, cultural and political history of his nation as a whole. Born poor, unable to vote, a villager denied much formal education, in his very tone of address, his attitude to authority, his commitment to common humanity and his consummate, learned skill with the formal and informal music of words, Burns made himself a wonderful love poet and the greatest poet of democracy. More than any other poet he articulated so many of the attitudes of people who now take for granted a democratic accent of the mind. This biography tries simply to sketch the sometimes sly life of that remarkable man who on occasion referred to himself and was known by friends, family, visitors and readers – sometimes with irony, sometimes not – as ‘the bard’.