

Robert Burns and his 19th century biographers

The question I wish to address in this brief paper is apparently a simple one. Do the editions and biographies of Robert Burns which appeared in the period 1800 - 1896 throw any light on where 20th century study of Robert Burns should go. I chose 1896 as the closing date because of its importance as the bi-centenary date of Burns's death, and because it is the central year of the period called 'The Nineties', famed in cultural history for major changes away from the standard moral and societal values of earlier decades of Victoria's reign, particularly among the literary and intellectual elite. I want to ask whether the history of the Romantic and Victorian experience of Burns and his work, contains any lessons for twentieth century Burnsians rapidly heading towards 1996. I believe that great authors live not only in new editions of their work, but also in the fresh perceptions that each generation can give to their poetic achievements.

Those of you who have read Jim Mackay's chapter 18 in his new biography, the chapter entitled 'Post-Mortem', may well feel that you already know all you need to know -and you *want* to know - about 19th century editions and memoirs of the poet, but I would like now to consider again, very briefly, from my viewpoint as a student of Victorian attitudes towards the eighteenth century, some of the major trends in Burnsian biography & editing in the period 1800 to 1896. The overwhelmingly dominant element was the work of Dr. James Currie, the Anglo-Scot, whose edition and memoir first appeared in 1800, and of his great admirer, R.H. Cromek, whose *Reliques of Robert Burns* first appeared in 1808. Cromek asserts in his Preface that Currie was a superb biographer. Very few Burnsians since have agreed with him:

'Whatever unhappiness the Poet was in his lifetime doomed to experience, few persons have been so fortunate in a biographer as Burns. A strong feeling for his excellencies, a perfect discrimination of his character, and a just allowance for his errors, are the distinguishing features in the work of Dr. Currie'. Cromek also enthuses about the tact and delicacy of Currie's editing procedures: 'Nothing is there inserted which can render his works unworthy of the approbation of manly taste, or inconsistent with the delicacy of female virtue'. Cromek also sees his own role in editing as

one of judge and arbiter of what readers might be permitted to read; I quote Cromek:

‘Whatever was the object, or the idea, of the moment, he [Burns] has delineated or expressed it, with a force and a veracity that brings it before us in all its beauty, or all its deformity. But the subjects of his pen were almost as various as nature herself; and hence it follows, that some of his compositions must be discarded, as inconsistent with that decorum which is due to the public at large.’ Cromek goes on to suggest that it was his editorial duty to censor Burns’s political and sexual views. To Cromek, Burns was ‘an extraordinary but eccentric genius’. He goes on to say: “I have been actuated only by an earnest desire of preserving such of the writings of Burns, *and such only*, [my underlining] as do honour to the poet’s head, or to his heart”. But this is to play hagiographer, not biographer. He also insists that he does not bowdlerise where he finds ‘indelicate sentiments’ or ‘unguarded expressions’, and ‘that he has most religiously abstained from such a presumption as the substituting a word of my own in the place of that of the poet, saying loftily that he prefers to omit the passage, or even sacrifice the piece altogether, rather than attempt to remove its blemishes. But this is to play censor, not editor. One of the worst examples of his editorial technique is that passage [Cromek, 451-2] where Cromek lessens the effectiveness of the whole poem called ‘The Bonnie Moorhen’ by substituting a row of asterisks for the final stanza - a stanza in which the images of the hunter and his gun, and the leather-bag or budget for holding the prize, are clearly sexual. The Bonnie Moorhen, incidentally, was the poem written at the end of 1787, which Clarinda, in a letter dated 6 February, 1788, urged Burns not to publish on the ground of its indelicacy. As far as I know the stanza has never appeared in any edition of Burns’s *Poems*. I have laboured this point as a major example of the undesirable defensive postures which both Currie & Cromek adopted with respect to those elements in both Burns’s life and his writings which offended their early 19th century sensibilities, and thus decreased the value of their otherwise centrally important work on their favourite author. On the face of it Currie had most of the qualifications needed to be an exemplary biographer and editor of Burns. He was an enthusiastic exiled Scot; the Dumfries committee gave him access to an unparalleled array of primary manuscript material. His friendship with Dr. John Moore, the recipient of Burns’s autobiographical letter of 2 August, 1787, and subsequent correspondence, gave him direct access to people and material central to his work. As his later friendships with Thomas Campbell and Hector MacNeill confirmed, he was an enthusiastic lover of Scottish poetry in particular, and Scottish culture in general. His political leanings were similar to those of Burns in later life, and his professional studies of

'hypochondriac disorders' should have given him special insights into the highs and lows of Burns's mood swings. But Currie's dedication of his edition to Graham Moore, John Moore's son, [Currie, I, i-ix] reveals clearly again the unfortunate adoption of defensive postures. Currie stresses that his edition had a charitable purpose. The poems and letters were 'the remains of an unfortunate man of genius, published for the benefit of his family - as the stay of the widow and the hope of the fatherless'. Because of this he was determined not to give offence. 'All topics are omitted in the writings, and avoided in the life of Burns, that have a tendency to awake the animosity of party'. Currie was also in the grip of his theories about 'the character and condition of the Scottish peasantry' a group he chose to admire for their intelligence, their love of education, their success as emigrants, their fondness for song and dance, and the strength of their domestic attachments, and their patriotism. He also stigmatises their lack of industry, their irregular marriages, and [I quote] "the rapidly increasing use of spirituous liquors, a detestable practice, which includes in its consequences almost every evil, physical and moral". I am not concerned here with the truth or falsity of these social generalisations, but with the naivete of Currie's assumption that they can be applied *holus-bolus* to explain the complexities of the personalities of talented individuals such as Robert Burns and his father.

I need not repeat here the excellent work of James Mackay in showing how a whole group of 19th century writers (biographers and critics alike) enhanced the Heron/Currie myth of Robert Burns the debauchee, degrading his noble talents in alcohol and undesirable company, to the status of undeniable biographical fact. David Irving, Francis Jeffrey, Josiah Walker, even Sir Walter Scott, all added their contribution to the notion that alcoholism and licentious living were responsible for Burns's early death, and an alleged falling-of in his intellect and talent. The evidence of Burns's published work in the last period of his life, and the testimony of contemporary, more neutral observers, such as James Gray and Alexander Findlater, tell a very different story. Burns's correspondent in 1793, Anna Benson, who had met Burns in the house of the family of Craik of Arbigland, was highly indignant when Allan Cunningham, another of Burns's biographers who preferred fantasy to fact, ascribed to her the statement that Burns drank 'as other men drank' [Letters, 541]. She wrote to Jane Welsh in 1834 stressing 'that even during the meeting of The Caledonian Hunt she never saw Burns once intoxicated, though the worthy member for Dumfries, and the good Laird of Arbigland, and twenty more... were brought home in a state of glorious insensibility'.

The process of destroying the Currie myths was begun by Alexander Peterkin in his 1815 edition of Burns [Egerer 170], and in the passionate

indictment of Currie and defence of Burns in the London edition of 1821 [Egerer 251] continued it. But Currie's pre-eminence as a Burns biographer meant that his views, and their influence, were around right through the 19th century and well into the 20th. The disappearance in 1836 of the publishing house of Cadell & Davies, Burns's official London publisher, created an 'open house' for cheap Victorian editions of the poet, many of which took the easy way out, by furnishing introductory memoirs of Burns which were Currie all over again, made even less reliable by the distorting processes of summarising and abbreviating. The infamous and hard-to-read *Diamond* editions issued by a group of British publishers in tiny type, and on dreadful paper, are a case in point, as are the remarkable series of editions of Burns published by Milner of Halifax, from 1837 onwards, and aimed specifically at working-class readers in Scotland and the industrial North of England. A copy of one of these Milner editions was the favoured text of my father - a Burns enthusiast - until he acquired in 1935, the Scottish Daily Express reprint of William Scott Douglas's two volume edition of 1877 [Egerer 783]. I wish he had had access to a better one.

That doughty, but rather lonely, defender of the value of Currie's biographical and editorial work, Robert Thornton, pointed out [Thornton 384-5] that the severity of the attacks on Currie's work increased substantially after 1896. Currie was accused of credulity, of suffering from the *cacoethes scribendi* bacillus, of being a fanatical teetotaler, although I think it was his son, Wallace, who was the total abstainer. Even as recently as 1959 it was suggested that Currie's addiction to temperance was stronger than his addiction to the truth. All this is a 'back-handed' tribute to the power and permanence of his work. But it says little for the understanding of historical perspective in his many 20th century attackers. I agree with Thornton that in the period immediately after Burns's death, Currie was probably as good a biographer and editor as Burns was going to get. We may regret his defensive postures, his facile acceptance of the integrity of some of his sources of information, his eagerness to label the last five years of Burns's life a moral and ethical tragedy, as opposed to the tragedy of physical illness, over-work and intellectual frustration that it really was. It cannot really be said that any one of Currie's numerous Victorian successors in the field of Burns scholarship was individually a great improvement on him. Some of them, and one thinks chiefly of Robert Chambers the scholar/publisher; William Scott Douglas, and Dr. William Wallace made great strides in recovering and publishing lost and missing documents, particularly correspondence. But all that is handled very expertly in Ross Roy's paper, so I need not belabour it here. The cumulative effect of the scholarly work was much more important. As the century wore on, 'would-be' biographers of Burns had a sounder and more

complete text to work with. But Burns was not fortunate up to the 1890's as far as individual biographers were concerned. The mass of cheap reprints, as I have already said, continued to use Currie as the staple of their biographical accounts. Other and better editions, issued by major British and American publishing houses, usually claimed improved texts and 'new' memoirs. These editions very often appeared in series such as Nimmo's "Popular Poets", Warne's "Chandos" and "Albion" series; Moxon's "Popular Poets", Nichol's "British Poets", Routledge's "British Poets", Ward Lock's "The People's Standard Library". The list goes on and on. As Lord Rosebery puts it in his 1896 Dumfries address: "The editions of Burns are as the sands of the sea". The editors and biographers are not quite so numerous but they are certainly diverse. Their suitability as 'series editors' by no means insured their suitability as commentators on Burns. Let me comment on a few examples: William Michael Rossetti, editor of *Moxon's Poets* in 21 volumes, became increasingly prominent as a critic and editor in the 1860's but his areas of special expertise were art criticism and contemporary poetry, particularly the Pre-Raphaelite movement of which he was a member. He knew Burns well enough to quote him in his letters, but does not strike me as being close enough to Burns and Scotland to do the job well. The team of Roberts and Gunnyon who did the editorial and biographical work for *Nimmo's Popular Poets* were more efficient, but Roberts' claims for completeness in his text are not borne out by an examination of the text itself. He says of Burns that he found 'The Scottish Muse a dirty ribald bawd, and he made her presentable everywhere'. Gunning's biographical sketch is a good one, for its time and place, and also has the merit of separating the biographer's analysis from the original major documents that lie behind it. R.A. Willmott, the English divine who edited Routledge's series is an excellent editor of George Herbert, but he is hopelessly at sea with Robbie Burns and is antagonistic to the Scottish tradition. 'The poems of Burns have been edited, and his Life written by eminent country men with a copiousness of illustration, and a minuteness of inquiry altogether beyond my abilities any my limits. Perhaps an English reader sometimes thinks the work slightly overdone, and even feels a very languid curiosity about the character of "Poosie Nansie", or the politics of Dumfries'. George Gilfillan, the Dundee divine, and famous 1850's poetry critic, was at least better informed about Scottish culture than Willmott. His first attempt at a Life of Burns was in the *British Poets* series which he edited for Nichol of Edinburgh. It is a poor, glib and facile piece of work. Although he ranks Burns as 'The greatest poet, save Shakespeare, who has yet sprung from the humbler ranks of society', his disapproval of Burns's personality and way of life comes through loud and clear. He refers to Burns's relationships with women as 'a vortex of new love-

agitations', and he is scathing about the Sylvander/Clarinda affair. He claimed to have a considerable contempt for both parties in the affair, and characterises the letters as 'the silliest and most ridiculous which two intelligent persons... ever addressed to one another... their perpetuation and popularity disgrace the age. He asserts, to give a further example, that Burns came back from Irvine in March, 1782 'penniless, chagrined and corrupted.' Gilfillan claims to take 'a middle of the road' view of Burns's character and history [*British Poets*, I, xxvii]; 'He was not a disbeliever in Christianity; and he was, in many points, a brave, honest, highminded, and benevolent man. But there were elements of folly, levity, coarseness, inconsistency and weakness almost incredible in so strong a man, mingled in his composition.' But Gilfillan's final summing up is dreadfully one-sided. He echoes Byron's opinion that Burns was a mixture of "dirt and deity", paints Burns as a creature of impulse, lacking sound solid Christian principle, and allowing his uncontrolled impulses to 'infuriate his passions and degrade his genius'. Gilfillan's later biography of Burns, published in the four-volume *National Burns* after Gilfillan's death, is a less flamboyant, more considered and sympathetic piece of work, but still flawed by the evangelical tendency: [to quote James Mackay, 672] 'to exhibit Burns to the public as a horrible example and a warning'.

My final example is the 1896 memoir by W.E. Henley, clubman, critic, poet and friend and defender of Robert Louis Stevenson. It is witty, learned, and entertaining, and managed to offend a large number of Burnsians. There is a clear division, particularly after 1885 and the founding of the Burns Federation, between some Burnsians (verging on bardolaters) who wished to defend their own traditional perceptions of Burns against new approaches and insights, and that other group on both sides of the Atlantic who believed that their love and understanding of their favourite poet could only be extended and enhanced by the discovery of fresh data, and the development of contemporary critical techniques. I belong to the second group. If I may borrow a phrase from Anne McWhir, our 20th century time, place, taste, moral values and cultural context differ from that of the Victorian and we will find our own reasons and techniques for accusing or defending Burns.

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