Robert Burns:
His Life, His Poetry, and His Effect on Scottish Culture

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He has been deemed the National Poet of Scotland by scholars and civilians alike. His birth is celebrated each year, not only in Scotland, but in festivals and observances around the world. His works are world-renown and locally rejoiced. Robert Burns is truly an important figure in Scottish society and in societies around the world because of his poetic talents, his romanticized view of Scotland, and his highly evolved level of writing.

Robert Burns was truly a master of words and could create beautiful compositions at the drop of a pin. However, when looking at the accomplishments that this great man has made, one may wonder how his passion for prose began and why his works have come to stand for so much in Scotland and to all of humanity. The best way to begin to understand the importance of his works is to look at the man himself: his presence, his passions, and his poetry.

His Life

William Burnes (or Burness, as he wrote it), was the son of a poor farmer and had to work diligently his entire life to provide for his wife and children. He was a religious man and “adopted more of the Arminian than of the Calvinistic doctrine” for his community was not located in a region of Presbyterian power. William married Agnes Brown in December of 1757 and they lived together for two years before giving birth to their first born son, Robert.

Robert Burns, or Rabbie as he was often called, was born on the date of January 25, 1759. At this time, William and his wife were living two miles south of the town of

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2 Lockhart, Life of Robert Burns, 2.
Ayrshire, Scotland. Perhaps it was partially because of his mother that Robert’s passion for literature began. According to Lockhart, Agnes “had an inexhaustible store of ballads and traditionary tales, and appears to have nourished [Robert’s] infant imagination by this means.”

She would often recite stories to Robert or sing him songs of Scottish history.

In the year 1766, the family moved to a small farm with financial assistance from Mr. Provost Ferguson, who had previously owned the land in which William tended, but found the land to be unfertile and unsuitable. Six years later the family moved again; this time to a larger and more appropriate farm. However, the rejoicing was short-lived due to complications with the lease.

During his life William managed to raise Robert, his brother Gilbert, and his other five children in good health and took pleasure in leading them in the paths of virtue, and not driving them like many parents of the time. He educated them in the area of religion and was a man of “strict, even stubborn integrity, and of strong temper” which acted in a very positive way towards his children.

Off and on throughout his youth, Robert received the essentials of his education from a man by the name of John Murdoch. Robert, along with his younger brother Gilbert, was instructed on reading, writing, and memorization and read books such as the Spelling Book, the New Testament, Mason’s Collection of Prose and Verse, and of

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4 Lockhart, Life of Robert Burns, 3.


course, the Bible.\textsuperscript{7}

Murdoch, and other observers as he thought, did not see the immense talent which would one day emerge out of Rabbie, for at the time of his education, his talents were not made apparent:

Gilbert always appeared to me to possess a more lively imagination and to be more of the wit, than Robert…

Robert’s ear, in particular, was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. Robert’s countenance was generally grave, and expressive of a serious, contemplative, and thoughtful mind. And certainly, if any person who knew the two boys, had been asked which of them was most likely to court the muses, he would surely never have guessed that Robert had a propensity of that kind.\textsuperscript{8}

However, thinking back on many of the great minds in history, I have concluded that it is not uncommon for a brilliant and creative mind to stay dormant in the younger years of one’s life and a person can not predict how intelligent or luminous a child will be in the later year of one’s existence. It becomes obvious later in Robert’s life that he was destined for great things and although he did not show his potential at a young age, it would eventually spring forth into being.

As Robert’s passion for literature and education continued to grow and he

\textsuperscript{7} Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 42.
\textsuperscript{8} Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 43.
continued to improve in his studies, Murdoch decided that the time was appropriate for Rabbie to learn the French and Latin languages. Although his Latin did not flourish, Robert excelled in French and could “read and understand any French author in prose.”  

With the coming of the fall of Robert’s fifteenth year, also came the grand inspiration for the writing of his first poem—his fascination with a fourteen year old girl by the name of Nelly Kilpatrick:

My scarcity of English denies me the power of doing her justice
in that language… She altogether unwittingly to herself,
initiated me into a certain delicious passion, which, in spite
of acid disappointment, gin-horse prudence, and bookworm
Philosophy, I hold to be the first of human joys, our
chiefest pleasure here below… Thus with me began
love and poesy.  

This excerpt came from the mouth and heart of Robert and not only shows the initial inspiration for his poetry but also begins his “wild enthusiasms for passion,” his adoration of women and his need for love. Eventually a song emerged from his passion for this “bewitching creature,” as he called her, to which he gave the title of “Handsome Nell.”

“With Nelly he had discovered ‘the highest, and indeed the only enjoyment of life’—that is to say, love and poetry, which for him sprang from a single root, and must be forever

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9 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 52.
10 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 54.
11 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 54.
Burns discovered that he had a talent for writing about love and passion, and for the remainder of his life, Burns continued to write with passion about the wonders of love.

The time encircling his 16th birthday was a trying time in Robert’s life. Not only was he plunged into melancholy because of the lack of human interaction but also with the loss of his longtime teacher, Murdoch, who was removed from his position because of matters of the church and was forced to leave Scotland for England.

Nevertheless, this period in Robert’s life was one of independence; he no longer wished to be under the control of his father but insisted upon meeting his passions head-on. He had the need to interact with people and found it necessary to experience the wonderful things that the world had to offer. In order to satisfy some of his zeal, he began to attend a dancing school in a nearby town at which he met cohorts of both the male and female genders.

His fervors continued to be perused in his nineteenth year when he decided to study the fields of mensuration (geographic measurement) and surveying in the town of Kirkoswald. However, it was because of the variety and amount of people and the potential for socialization that he loved his current situation. Also, it was at this point in time when Robert began to really realize the marvel that is woman and was enthusiastic to partake in all that the sex had to offer. In fact, his mind seemed to think only of women and it seemed as if “love-making was his chief amusement.”

In the summer of 1781, Robert and Gilbert decided to take their familiarity with

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13 Shairp, Robert Burns, 10.
flax a little further and became interested in the process of dressing flax; the pair set off to pursue a career in the field. However, this was also a time of great depression and melancholy for Robert which only ceased when he was surrounded by women or men of intellect matching or superior to his. Additionally, it did not help when Robert was robbed and his shop was burned down which forced him to return home to his family and exile himself from society.

After the death of William Burnes on February 13, 1784 (due to extreme overwork and stress), Rabbie and Gilbert moved their mother and their siblings to another farm in which Robert and Gilbert tended. Regardless of how much time the brothers spent educating themselves on the topic of farming, the results still ended in failure. Overall, three things occurred in the years spent at the farm: “the wreck of his hopes as a farmer, the revelation of his genius as a poet, and the frailty of his character as a man” (Shairp 15).

**Progression In To Poetry**

Robert Burns, having failed in farming, acknowledged the fact that farming would not be his life-long career. He would have to do some other occupation in which “was much more to his mind.” That career, he came to find, was writing poetry. It was at this time during his life in which Rabbie’s creative genius began to “pour forth” into a sea of song and prose. From the fall of 1784 until May of 1786 all Robert could think about was writing poetry and he did so with passion and truth:

That period, so prolific of poetry that none like it ever

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14 Shairp, Robert Burns, 15.
15 Shairp, Robert Burns, 16.
afterwards visited him, saw the production not only of the satirical poems already noticed…, but also of those characteristic epistles in which he reveals so much about his own character, and of those other descriptive poems in which he so wonderfully delineates the habits of the Scottish peasantry.\textsuperscript{16}

Three of the most popular poems that emerged from Robert Burns in this period of greatness are entitled \textit{The Cotter’s Saturday Night}, \textit{Halloween}, and \textit{The Twa Dogs}. Each one is very different in theme and each tells a different story. “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” is of all Burns’s pieces the one whose exclusion from the collection would be most injurious, if not to the genius of the poet, at least to the character of the man.” This poem is very similar to the life of Robert Burns, for it tells the story of a poor farmer and his family. Several stanzas refer to religion and comments are also made about Robert’s idol, William Wallace, as well as having pride in the few things that man can possess. Burns once commented that “the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins,” which he carried with him his entire life; he wrote about Wallace on more than one occasion.\textsuperscript{17}

It was also during this time, however, that Burns wrote several epistles (formal letters) to a few of his good friends. These were perchance the compositions of which portrayed who Robert Burns really was for they were sent to his friends and peers, with

\textsuperscript{16} Shairp, Robert Burns, 22.

\textsuperscript{17} Sarah Knowles, Famous English Authors of the Nineteenth Century (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1890), 68.
whom he shared common feelings and beliefs. These letters were written in a poetic style and revealed the true Rabbie Burns. This quote goes on to explain how the true Burns is one of happiness and a love for the world through which he expresses through his epistles - a side of Robert Burns that has not previously been looked upon in this essay:

They flow on in an easy stream of genial, happy spirits, in which kindly humour, wit, love of the outward world, knowledge of men, are all beautifully intertwined into one strand of poetry, unlike anything else that has been seen before or since.\textsuperscript{18}

It is crucial that one sees and understands how the true Burns is portrayed through the use of these letters to his friends. They truly give an accurate presentation of Burns the young man once he discovered his love and passion for poetry instead of the melancholy and depressed man who was simply trying to make a living doing something that he despised. Shairp quotes a few lines from one of Robert’s epistles which show how truly happy poetry makes him and how special it is to him:

“Leeze me on rhyme! It’s aye a treasure,
My chief, amaist my only pleasure,
At hame, a-fiel’, at wark, at leisure.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet, with his love and passion for poetry, women were still on the top of Robert’s mind. He secretly courted and married a young and wealthy woman by the name of Jean Armour. Although her father destroyed their marriage by destroying their certificate of

\textsuperscript{18} Shairp, Robert Burns, 23.
\textsuperscript{19} Shairp, Robert Burns, 24.
wedlock and tearing them apart, one last piece of their lives together existed—twin children (only one survived). However, this relationship, or lack there of, provided Burns with the pivotal change which he needed to get on with his life—it made Robert realize that he needed to get out of the country. Burns resolved on sailing to the West Indies, but how would he do so without the appropriate funds?²⁰

In order to solve this dilemma, Robert Burns, with the help of a few of his closest friends published the first of his poems which they titled “The Kilmarnock Volume.” It was at this time that Burns put on paper his darkest and saddest feelings. His loss of his short lived marriage brought Burns into a deep and depressed slump which also produced some of his most truthful and saddening poetry which included *The Lament*, and *The Mountain Daisy.*²¹

**His Popularity**

Although Burns also wrote these depressing pieces, throughout my research I discovered that he was an extremely dynamic bard and continued to produce pieces about Scottish common folk, daily life, and extraordinary loves. As Burns continued to write these grand pieces, his popularity and fame began to spread across the country. “His fame was rapidly widening in his own country, and his powers were finding a response in minds superior to any which he had hitherto known.” Robert had never socialized with anyone above the rank of a local layer, but now people from all over the country were anxious to meet the “Aryshire Ploughman” (as he came to be known).²²

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²⁰ Shairp, Robert Burns, 26.  
²¹ Shairp, Robert Burns, 30.  
²² Shairp, Robert Burns, 33.
It is only natural since this first compilation of books was such a success that Burns could not wait to begin a second edition; however, funds were not available and the collection of poems would have to wait to be published.

In November of 1786, Burns decided to try his luck in the Scottish city of Edinburgh. There was no one reason why he was inspired to go, however I believe that once Robert had received a taste of fame, he began to long for it and believed that he could find it in Edinburgh. When he reached the city, he had found that his reputation, to a certain extent, had already arrived.

Burns had become instantly admired and accepted among all different types of people including “celebrities” of the time.23 Previously, his only acquaintances had been very similar to Robert in that they were mostly poor farmers who shared similar interests and histories with Burns. Nevertheless, as his popularity grew, so did the amount and variety of people that he socialized with. He was even admitted to The Canongate Kilwinning Lodge, “the most influential Masonic group in Edinburgh… Burns was recognized as ‘poet laureate’ of this Lodge… after his death.”24

Upon seeing the reaction of the public- from aristocrat to commoner- he decided that the time had come to publish his second volume of poetry, his 1787 edition of poems. Included in this collection is a poem to be later discussed entitled “Address to a Haggis.” This edition:

- made him known to a large and influential reading public,
- and extended his fame far beyond the limits of Scotland…
- The man who had ridden into Edinburgh on that November

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23 Shairp, Robert Burns, 48.
afternoon of 1786 was unknown outside a few parishes; by the first of May, 1787, he was well on his way to becoming a personage of more than national importance.\textsuperscript{25}

Upon the publishing of his book, Robert left Edinburgh for the opportunity to see areas of the world in which he had never known, except for through the use of books. Upon his return to Edinburgh in the following year, things had greatly changed in many ways: “the letters he wrote at this time are those of a man depressed and restless,” explains Snyder. First of all, he had been physically ill, and then turned mentally unwell. He had an “attack of hypochondria… which threw him into a state of body and mind quite different from that” which he had been before. To top it off, he had lost most of the special attention which he had received throughout the previous year.\textsuperscript{26}

It was \textit{The Scots Musical Museum} which renewed Burns’s passion for writing poetry after his depressing slum. The purpose of the collection was to assemble all Scottish songs which were made available into one convenient group; and in 1787, Burns becomes the literary editor of the \textit{Museum}. Some of the works were Burns own creation while others were “adaptations of old and ineffective lyrics; still others were mosaics of fragments lifted from many different sources.” According to Snyder, “the \textit{Museum} became at once, and still remains, the standard collection of Scottish songs and music.”\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{A Change of Pace}

However, after his great contributions to the \textit{Museum} were completed, he felt destined to leave the city after a friend of his had discussed the possible leasing of

\textsuperscript{25} Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 231.
\textsuperscript{26} Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 256.
\textsuperscript{27} Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 262.
farmland near Dumfries. On Monday, March 24, he “left Edinburgh to return to his old way of living, and, as he probably knew, to marry the woman who was already the mother of his four children—”

In June of 1787, Burns discovered that his old love, Jean Armour and her parents had “entirely forgotten their wrath of the year before. Where once they had forbidden him the house, they now made him welcome not only to their house, but to Jean.” There is no information telling exactly when, where, or by whom the wedding ceremony was performed, but the couple were wed by the end of March 1788.

After inspecting the land that Burns had leased, he was greatly dissatisfied with the current condition of the farm. Not only was the soil poor and not the best for farming, but the buildings were small, dim-lit, and poorly built. It was not until late 1788 that the house was in a decent shape to live in (Robert hired a contractor so that he could concentrate on farming) and that Robert, Jean, and their son took up residence in their new home. It was around this time at which Robert (who had two farm hands) began seriously farming the new land. His wife, Jean, took over making the butter and cream as well as the rest of the dairy, their home, and their children.

Burns took his fathering position seriously and believed that his children should get every opportunity in life that he was blessed to receive. Robert bought many books (ranging from Shakespeare to Guthrie’s Geographical Grammar) in order to provide his children with the necessities to grow intellectually. Later, he would hire Latin tutors for his children and attempt to provide them with the proper and formal education which they deserved.

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28 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 271
29 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 282
30 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 294.
31 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 298-301.
To say that things were settling down for Burns would be a lie. Granted, Robert was now married and had a family, but this did not stop him from being promiscuous with other women. Throughout his marriage to Jean, Burns had several affairs that have come out over the years. One such affair was with Ms. Anne Park around 1790, with whom he had a daughter who he eventually took in as part of his family. In addition to new flings, he had affairs with several women which he had previously been romantically involved with such as his long relationship with a woman he called Clarinda (she was also married).  

Beginning in 1789, Burns took on the duties of an exciseman (gauger) because of his need for money; he was sworn into the service and began to cover his 200 miles of territory for which he gained a meager £50. In July of the next year, his salary was raised to £70 per year and a share of the fines collected. Since Burns took up this occupation, he had not had the time or inspiration to create much poetry; he did, however, manage to continue reading a wide variety of books and became more “vividly aware of what was happening in the ever more and more fascinating arena of national and international politics.”

Overall, the period of life spent at Ellisland was extremely difficult and physically demanding. The farm work was tedious and drawn-out and his new career as an exciseman added much un-needed pressure. It was around the year 1791 when Robert’s health began to deteriorate from a mixture of over-work as a child on the farm and the demanding career of excising. In the late autumn of 1791, the family moved into

32 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 263.
33 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 319.
34 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 342.
35 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 348.
Dumfries, which in certain ways, to his pleasing, reminded him of Edinburgh.

In 1793, the family moved again into a larger house in the same city. Perhaps it was because of the comfortable housing, the excess leisure time he received from his career as an exciseman, and the admiration he received from the townspeople that Burns had a sudden re-inspiration to write again. “Not since before the appearance of the Kilmarnock volume had there been such a flood of poetry as he poured out at this time for the benefit of Thomson’s Select Scotish Airs. In Burns’s own phrase, he was ‘in song’ again.”

Around the year 1795, Burns was promoted to supervisor in his excise career, which was even more demanding than that of his previous job as a mere gauger. In the early months of 1796, however, Burns found it nearly impossible to perform the easiest aspects of the job and took sick leave. As of January of 1796, Burns would write no more poetic works nor do much of anything else. On the date of July 21, 1796 Robert Burns died from heart complications due to overwork and stress. His wife followed him to the grave many years later on March 26, 1834.

**His Effect on Scottish Culture**

Throughout his 37 years of life, Burns truly became an iconic figure for the Scottish populace. He had the ability and creativity to take the smallest things in life and make them seem monstrous. Since Burns was born the son of a poor farmer and lived many of his years as a poor farmer himself, Burns knew that simple things were great and realized that everyday life was miraculous. By far, the best quote that I have found that

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36 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 365.
37 Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, 426.
shows the importance of Burns to the Scottish culture was written by a man by the name of Robert Green Ingersoll. He writes:

Robert Burns was a peasant – a ploughman – a poet. Why is it that millions and millions of men and women love this man? He was a Scotchman, and all the tendrils of his heart struck deep in Scotland’s soil. He voiced the ideals of the best and greatest of his race and blood…

All great poetry has a national flavor. It tastes of the soil.

No matter how great it is, how wide, how universal, the flavor of locality is never lost.  

Robert Burns truly was a Scotsman who believed that Scotland was great and that it had much to offer. In this excerpt, Ingersoll goes on to comment that although the poetry of Burns is world-renowned and has been read by people all across the earth, that there is something about his poetry that makes it special to the people and country of Scotland. Not only is the language in which his poetry is written unique to Scotland, but the images that Burns portrays represent a major way of life for most people whose blood pours fourth from the land.

Burns realized that he should not regret or be ashamed of being poor and that although money was nice to have, it was not everything in the world. He admired and appreciated all of the things that he knew, each in a unique way. Ingersoll continues

describing the importance of Burns’s poetry to the Scottish culture:

Burns made common life beautiful. He idealized the sun-burnt girls who worked in the fields. He put honest labor above titled idleness. He made a cottage far more poetic than a palace. He painted the simple joys and ecstasies and raptures of sincere love. He put native sense above the polish of schools.\(^40\)

Each of these comments exemplify different poems which Burns has written and the life that Burns had lived and loved. In the poems “To a Mouse,” and “To a Louse,” Burns reflects on small creatures which were common in his way of life. Likewise, in one of Burns’s more popular poems, “A Red, Red Rose,” Burns uses a common term but “a lyric of genius” to compare his love for a woman to a rose through the use of a, and also speaks of the seas and the land which represents the respect that Burns had for nature.\(^41\)

In the poem “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” Burns writes of a man who after returning from a long day of toiling in the fields, forgets all of his pains and intense labor at the sight of his welcoming family and his home. This image was sure to be a common one in Burns’s day and time, for many Scottish men were farmers who worked long hard hours and were sure to be relieved at the sight of loved ones and the idea of relaxation.

\(^{40}\) Ingersoll, On Robert Burns

Because of the representation of actual life in Scotland, this poem probably meant very much to the people who read it.

In addition, Robert Burns wrote several poems dealing with alcohol and drinking for both were, and are, very popular in Scotland. The poem “Willie Brewed a Peck O’ Malt” portrayed the importance of alcohol (and drinking games) in the Scottish society, which of course many people could relate to and thus find enjoyment in reading the poetry of Burns.

Robert Burns also wrote on topics such as friendship, and, of course, women. In “Auld Lang Syne,” Burns reflects on the importance of friendship and togetherness and how they should not fail over time; in this poem he presents vivid images of acts shared between friends and stresses the importance of memories in friendships. In addition to being a popular poem in Scotland, the United States and countries all over the world use the words of “Auld Lang Syne” (it is sung to a different melody than Burns intended) to ring in the New Year. As far as his poems to women go, there are many different poems which express his passion and love for many different women. In fact, his very first poem, “Handsome Nell”, is a poem based on love and women.

In his life, Burns “wrote, patched or transmitted some of the most personal lyrics in the language,” which are not written down for all of the nation, and the world, to read and enjoy.42

**Burns Suppers**

Throughout the years, many things have been done to celebrate the life of the bard Robert Burns. Numerous lectures and conferences have been held in his honor, but

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42 Crawford, Poems and Songs, XI.
by far, the Burns Night Suppers are the most popular way to celebrate Robert Burns and his poetry. Burns suppers do not have extremely particular guidelines, however they are typically held around the bard’s birthday (January 25) and generally follow a pattern. The suppers can either be formal or casual, depending on the preferences of the guests and hosts.

According to website on Robert Burns, the menu for a Burns supper usually consists of Cock-a-leekie soup (which consists of fowl, vegetables, prunes), Haggis warm reeking rich wi’ Champit Tatitties and Bashed Neeps (a Scottish favorite), Tyspy Laird (sherry trifle) and a Tassie o’ coffee. A typical Burns Supper may follow this itinerary: an opening address, the saying of grace, the procession of the haggis as lead by a piper and carried by the chef, and the recitation of “Address to a Haggis.”

After the meal is over, a short speech on Burns is given (called the Immortal Memory), followed by a good-humored speech addressed to the women in the crowd (a toast to the lassies for Burns was very fond of the women) and a response from the lassies to the ladies (humorous in nature). Next, poems and songs of Burns of generally recited or sung (there should be a good variety to express the full range of Burns’ talents). The night is concluded with closing remarks by the guest speaker and the singing of “Auld Lang Syne,” which is a very appropriate ending to a meeting of friends.

Robert Burns was truly a most talented bard. He led a very difficult and strenuous life but still managed to become a man of great importance to Scotland and cultures all over the world. He was blessed with the miraculous flair for writing poetry and although his life was filled with difficulties, still found his grand inspiration in

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everything that he knew. Burns wrote about women, nature, honest labor, family, and the love that Scots had for alcohol. He was a true Scotsman who loved the little things in life, which are in the end, the things that make life worth living.
Bibliography


