James William Barke's Quintet on the life of Robert Burns

Presented by Jim McLaughlin at the Calgary Burns Club meeting of October 14, 2010, in connection with his membership of the Bob Carnie Group.

Gentlemen, as one of hopefully a number of Bob Carnie Group presentations, this evening I would like to review as briefly as I can a quintet of five historical novels by James Barke (1905-58). Because of a restraint of time, I will only touch on the first three, but that should be sufficient to whet your appetite or not as the case may be. The novels - collectively described as the 'Immortal Memory' series - were written between the years 1946 to 1954.

In the prefatory note to the first novel Barke is at pains to emphasize – and I think rightly so – that the series is not biographical, but rather they are historical novels that endeavour to remain faithful to the known facts of Burns' life. But he admits to some artistic liberties with the minor facts of history "in order to achieve a profounder spiritual and artistic truth" (whatever that means), and of course the extensive dialogue and incidental situations are wholly the author's inventions.

I'd like first to summarize the chronological and event scope of each of the novels, then provide some general comments as to style, the use of the Scots vernacular, historical accuracy and a couple of more general observations.

The Wind that Shakes the Barley

The first in the series is The Wind That Shakes the Barley. It begins with the arrival of William and Agnes Burnes in Alloway, and traces the poet's progress from birth and his first 7 years in Alloway through that segment of his young life spent on the 90 acres of Mount Oliphant farm, and his early adulthood at the larger 165 acre Lochlea farm. It covers such important events as the schooling of Robert and brother Gilbert under the young dominie, John Murdoch, his early experiences with the lassies, his few weeks of additional schooling in Kirkoswald, the Tarbolton scene, his almost disastrous attempt to learn flax dressing in Irvine , and ending just before the family moved to Mossgiel. This period included the awful struggle to survive financially at Mount Oliphant, then the agonizing final year at Lochlea taken up with legal wrangles with the wholly unsympathetic factor, which culminated in – and probably hastened - the death of his exhausted father, William.

The Song in the Green Thorn Tree

The second volume begins in March 1784 when Robert was just over 25 years old and now head of the family as it takes up the new tenancy of Mossgiel farm near the town of Mauchline. It ends in November 1786 as Robert rides off on a borrowed pony to begin his momentous 5-month adventure in Edinburgh.

The interval between was a story of how the outgoing, friendly, social Robert and his religiously devout and taciturn brother Gilbert worked to make a success of the new farm. Barke details the story of Robert's embrace of manly adulthood and his exploratory romancing of a couple of the Belles of Mauchline, and his winning of the "jewel o' them a'", his bonnie Jean Armour. But

before that we have the bairning of Lizzie Paton. Their prize was “dear-bought Bess”, which the family at Mossgiel adopted and raised. Robert has his first experience of the Cutty Stool, and he found the whole thing degrading and foolish. But it didn’t slow him down in moving on to his passionate romancing of Jean Armour, who repaid him double with the twins, Robert and Jean (who else?); this gave rise not only to another humiliating turn on the cutty-stool, but that was nothing to the tempestuous confrontation with Jean’s father, James Armour. Armour so detested the thought of the wanton fornicator Burns as a son-in-law that he expunged and nullified a formal certificate of marriage Robert had provided to Jean. This was an informal but perfectly legal contract of marriage under Scots law. And when Jean cowered in the face of her father’s intimidating bullying and declined to oppose her father’s deceit, Robert abandoned her to take up with Highland Mary Campbell. Barke makes more of this romance than it merits – lasting as it did (according to James MacKay) no more than about a month – but the story did have a sad and dramatic ending.

The Wonder of all the Gay World

The Wonder of all the Gay World is the third volume of this quintet. At nearly 700 pages, it’s the lengthiest, and details the events and the intrigues connected with probably the most important and eventful period of his life when Burns virtually exploded from the relative obscurity of his small-town, Kirk-controlled life into the national spotlight as Caledonia’s Bard. It is almost certain that he managed to exceed even his own best expectations in the extent to which almost overnight he became the darling of the nation, although his publication of the Kilmarnock edition did pave the way for this recognition.

In the period covered by this novel, the poet was certainly a busy man. It starts with his journey to Edinburgh for the first of two extended stays in the capital within a 16-month period from November 27, 1786 to late March 1787. The main purpose of these two visits was to arrange for and promote a second edition of his poems. Secondary purposes included possible fallback arrangements for emigration to Jamaica if his publication plans should fail, and to explore the options of a career in the Excise.

In order to succeed with a second publication he was obliged to gain the support and approval of the capital’s renowned literati. If they had been opposed to his work it would almost certainly have failed to garner the subscriptions necessary to make it a financial success, so to please them he reluctantly agreed to leave out some of his best works such as Bonnie Lass o’ Ballochmyle. These luminaries including such icons as Lord Monboddo of the Court of Sessions, Professor Dougald Stewart, Henry MacKenzie (author of The Man of Feeling that so influenced Burns in his Irvine and Lochlea years) and a number of others. He also attracted the attention of various of Scotland’s aristocratic class. The Earl of Glencairn was his major patron for the publication, but other important supporter/subscribers included the Duke and Duchess of Gordon and the Duke of Argyll, as well as others. On the advice of Glencairn, he chose the slippery William Creech as his publishing agent for the Edinburgh Edition, a decision he may have regretted later. He made a great many friends in the city, including Latin master extraordinaire William Nicol, the poet Dr. Blacklock, the painter Alexander Naismith...and on and on – a veritable who’s who of Scotland at the time and of Burns’ own important history.

I'm running out of time to describe all of his adventures in Edinburgh, particularly during his second stay there, which included his dalliances with Clarinda and his bairning forays with Peggy Cameron and Jenny Clow; also his borders trip of 1787 with Bob Ainslie, and his highland tour in early 1788 with William Nicol. These latter accounts in the book certainly do drag a bit, but are still informative.

One interesting aside I'd make about Barke's story is his fairly detailed references to the buildings and streets of Edinburgh that would be very recognizable to those who have some familiarity with present-day Edinburgh. As one of the singers who spent over 4 weeks in Auld Reekie at the Tattoo, I found I was very well aquent wi' sae mony o' the streets and alleys of the capital described in this volume.

I'll just end now with a brief critique of Barke's treatment of Burns' life in this quintet. First, he does make liberal use of the Scots vernacular in his dialogue...in fact I'd question if he doesn't overdo it a bit sometimes, and I often wondered whether some of the words and expressions really belong in the thrapple of the chiels he attributes them to. But that's probably being picky, and as you read you'll get used to the unfamiliar language. Although Barke clearly undertook monumental research to prepare for this series, up to the time he wrote it the scholarship still had some way to go. This is especially so in the description of some of his romantic affairs. Examples include Barke's tale of Burns' protracted love affair with Highland Mary (or more properly Margaret) Campbell, mentioned earlier. And Barke's account of a Rab's eventual success in consummating his affair with Clarinda is – according to the modern view - also unlikely, as is too his account of Robin losing his cherry to Jean Glover in Irvine...this one almost certainly not true! But in most areas his characters are reasonably believable, and I think he does a good job of capturing the flavour of the times. Having said that, I think a skilful, more modern writer might have infused a little more life into the characters – making some of them more colourful and off-the-wall as I'm sure so many of them were. And I thought the dialogue could have stood being a little more fluid and matter-of-fact rather than a bit starchy in places; all of which would have made the players more human and spontaneous.

In conclusion, despite its warts, the books are well worth a read whether by serious Burns scholars or by anyone just looking to lose themselves in a good yarn. So, the recommendation of the Bob Carnie group is to get your hands on a copy and enjoy. Not only is the series enjoyable, but you will learn a great deal about the life and times of Robert Burns in a relaxing and entertaining way.