

Dr. James Currie FRS (1756 — 1805)

Introduction:

This paper provides an overview of the life of Dr. James Currie FRS, perhaps the best known of the many Burns' biographers and who wrote the four volume biography 'Works of Robert Burns' in 1800. Currie's biography of Burns may be the most well-known, but it wasn't the first. The first biographer is accepted to be Robert Heron, (1764-1807) who wrote a short version of Burns' life and whose volume definitely influenced Currie's somewhat negative aspects of Burns private life contained in Heron's 'Works of Robert Burns' biography.

Early Life of Currie:

Dr. James Currie FRS was born on 31st May 1756 at Kirkpatrick Fleming, Annandale in Dumfriesshire, where his father, the Reverend James Currie was a minister, and he died in 1805 at age 49. When James was thirteen his mother died of consumption, and he received his early training at the hands of his father and of a Dr. Chapman, who conducted the grammar school at Dumfries. Throughout his life he was dogged by illness and as a child suffered from rheumatic endemic fever. At the age of fifteen Currie had the desire like most young boys, to go to sea and have strange adventures in far-off lands. His youthful dreams were soon to become a reality as his father had a merchant friend who urged him to allow James to enter his service and go to America. In 1771 Currie therefore sailed for Virginia, settling as a merchant on the James River, where he spent five hard years. As with any new frontier in those days it was a land filled with dangers and hardships, but the rigours of the new land had a very early detrimental effect on young Currie and soon after his arrival the rheumatic fever returned to plague him throughout his stay in America, and which several times brought him close to death.

Unfortunately, for much of the time when he was ill his business interests suffered, but he also realized that work in commerce was not fully to his liking and he soon found that the political events, which began to erupt around him in Virginia, captured his full attention. Soon Currie was able to demonstrate his ability as a political commentator and started to dabble in politics. These latter activities also adversely affected his ability to make a profit from his business interests as he decided he felt strongly enough to publish a series of articles in defence of the right of the mother country, England, to tax her colonies, which included Virginia, which at that time was a British colony. For some reason Currie chose to write these articles under the somewhat misleading pseudonym of '**An Old Man**' and so began first exposure to the world of literature.

Thus, at age twenty in 1776, given his many setbacks, he left America to return to Britain having gone through disease, personal misfortune, and political persecution during his years there. However, several aspects of his future life were already determined. His personal experience with disease combined with the influence of his cousin had led him into the field of medicine. It is probable that the many bouts of fever that he suffered and that he watched others suffer prompted him to concentrate on fever in his future medical life; a life in which he was to become a pioneer in the development of the clinical thermometer and a major figure in the history of hydrotherapy.

Currie therefore decided to return to Scotland and he sailed for Greenock, intending to study medicine at Edinburgh and then returning to practise medicine in America.

His return trip however hardly went smoothly and his life took a turn for the worse as his ship was captured by the US revolutionary army and he was made to serve in the Colonial Army. Somehow he was able to buy his freedom and made a second attempt to sail to Scotland, but was captured again, this time resulting in him having to sail 150 miles in an open boat to gain his freedom. He was finally able to reach Deptford, England, on 2 May 1777 and eventually Edinburgh, where he was able to enrol at Edinburgh University as a medical student. His illness bouts continued however, for in his first year at Edinburgh University, after a 32 mile walk, he decided as a potential remedy for his fever to bathe in the local river. This exposure to the cold river water as a potential remedy for a fever is perhaps a precursor of what was to be one of his claims to fame as a physician.

Having completed his medical education at Edinburgh he decided to take a medical appointment in the army, and accordingly obtained an introduction to General Sir William Erskine, who nominated him for the position of Surgeon's Mate in his own Regiment. Before joining the Regiment, Currie heard that the government was planning to form a medical staff in Jamaica, and he became interested in joining this expedition as a physician. Unfortunately, the position he desired had already been filled by another physician. Despite this disappointment, he continued in his resolve to go to Jamaica, but friends and relatives pressed him to remain in Britain, and after visiting several cities in search of a favourable place in which to settle, Currie chose Liverpool, where he arrived in October 1780. It says something for Currie's personality as he was soon rapidly accepted into the cultural and social life of Liverpool, despite the fact that he arrived there as a complete stranger.

It is unclear as to how or why he settled in Liverpool, but obviously he still retained a love for Scotland for after a few years of working in Liverpool in 1792 he was able to purchase a small estate in Dumfriesshire. There is no record of how often he visited his estate, but there is a record of him meeting Burns briefly, once on the street in Dumfries, but unfortunately, there is no record of the circumstances of the meeting.

Currie the Physician:

As mentioned previously, Currie's interest in the use of cold water as a successful treatment for contagious fever continued at the Liverpool infirmary and in 1797 he made public his views and experiences, with a list of cures effected by his cold water measures. His pamphlet, ***Medical Reports on the Effects of Water, Cold and Warm, as a Remedy in Fevers and Other Diseases (1797)***, had some influence in promoting the use of cold water affusion, and contains the first systematic record, in English, of clinical observations with the thermometer. A fourth edition of his works was published in July 1805, the month before his death.

It would appear that Currie did not achieve the full recognition he deserved when it came to the use of cold water cures or hydrotherapy. In the 1840s, there was a strong revival of interest in hydrotherapy cures, following the promotion of Vincent Priessnitz's methods by Captain R. T. Claridge and others. It was Claridge who noted that '***After all, the merit of settling the use of cold water on just a principle, belongs incontestably to our own countryman, Currie, whose work, published in 1797, upon the efficacy of water, may be considered the scientific base of Hydropathy***'.

It was during his hydrotherapy treatments that Currie recognized there were certain shortcomings around the measurement of a patient's temperature. Throughout his medical career Currie subjected his theories to carefully controlled experiments and accurately and

systematically recorded the results of those experiments. It was through his insistence on the use of a scientific method that Currie came to use the thermometer as an essential instrument in the field of medical treatment.

Thus, the practice of placing a thermometer under a patient's tongue was established by Currie. It is characteristic of Currie's medical work that this method was based not only on theoretical conjecture, but also on exhaustive practical experience.

However, despite his revolutionary introduction of the clinical use of the thermometer, Currie's main interest was not in this instrument. From his earliest days in medical school, Currie had been fascinated by fever, perhaps because of his personal experience with this malady when he was in the American colonies. Liverpool, it would appear was an ideal city for continuing this interest. Liverpool as a seaport was often subjected to many fever epidemics brought in on the many ships.

Throughout his working life as a physician, Currie continued his involvement in politics and became an early advocate of the abolition of slavery, writing several political letters and pamphlets on the subject. Then in 1793 under the pseudonym 'John Wilson', Currie published a letter to William Pitt, the Prime Minister, urging him not to go to war with France.

He soon became a close friend of **William Roscoe** (8 March 1753 – 30 June 1831) who was an English banker, lawyer, and briefly a Member of Parliament. Together with Roscoe, Currie established the Liverpool Literary Society, which soon included in its membership most of the culturally prominent people of Liverpool. Currie was elected President of the Society and, during the nine years of its existence, delivered papers on such topics as 'The Division of Legislative Powers', 'On Eloquence', 'On Physiognomy', and 'Effects of the Different Branches of Cultivation of Mind on the Individual'.

Like Roscoe, Currie was an avid correspondent, and his letters kept him in touch with such men as William Wilberforce, Sir Walter Scott, and Gilbert Burns. As a physician, Currie soon won an outstanding place for himself in Liverpool and in 1786 he was appointed physician to the Liverpool Infirmary; in 1790 he was elected to the Medical Society of London; in 1792 he became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh; and in 1793 a Fellow of the Royal Society.

The Biography:

So how did Currie come to write the biography and edit the poet's work? Mostly the document is referred to as **'The Works of Robert Burns'**, but the full title of the of the document is: **'The Works of Robert Burns, with an Account of his Life, Criticism on his Writing, to which are prefixed, some observations on the character and condition of the Scottish peasantry.'**

It's unclear how Currie was actually *'chosen'* to write the biography and by whom. What is known is that Currie was an admirer of the poet's work, and that other people were considered, including Maria Riddell, John Syme, John Maxwell, and Dugald Stewart. None of these persons were able to write such a document, for whatever reasons, and so it was left to Currie to pursue the project, even though it could be argued that he was ill equipped for such a task given his lack of editorial training and experience and lack of first-hand knowledge of Burns. Currie himself remarking to Captain Graham Moore who, twelve years before, had recommended to

him the poems of the Ayrshire ploughman "***The task was beset with considerable difficulties***", surely quite a notable understatement.

To give Currie full credit for undertaking the project, it should be recognized his primary aim was to help raise money in support of the Burns' family, a task for which he proved very successful as a total of 1200 pounds was raised. Currie recognized that the death of the poet left his widow and children destitute and wished to come to their aid. It could also be said that Currie saw how the Burns' reputation could be in a precarious position, as there were many people out there to whom the poet's political opinions had given offence.

James Currie's biography consisted of a four-volume edition of The Works of Robert Burns, with an Account of his Life (published in 1800). It should also be pointed out that Currie provided a dual role in this undertaking, as editor and as biographer, the former perhaps proving to be the more controversial and difficult role for him to undertake due to his '**conservative and somewhat straitlaced upbringing**'.

So how was Currie able to write a biography about a man who he had only briefly met for 20 minutes on a street in Dumfries, and who was now dead? Although inexperienced in such a task as editing and writing a biography, he had certain advantages, namely access through Mrs. Dunlop, to original Burns manuscripts, poems and letters forwarded to him whilst in Liverpool. As we know Mrs. Dunlop was a close friend of the poet with Burns actually visiting Mrs. Dunlop at her home on five occasions and over a period of ten years they exchanged a great number of letters, 186 of which survive to this day.

Further information on Burns and explanations of the various documents were obtained from Gilbert Burns and John Syme, who visited him in Liverpool in the autumn of 1797;. **John Syme (1755 – 1831)** being a Scottish lawyer and one of the Robert Burns' closest friends during his time in Dumfries. Syme and Gilbert Burns remained in Liverpool for three weeks, arranging the many documents forwarded to Currie and explaining and supplementing them to facilitate his labours as editor and biographer. Notwithstanding their assistance, Currie was well aware that his job would be difficult, but he had not expected to encounter the many obstacles which were placed in the way of publication. He had believed that the Burns' papers would be in some kind of order, but when Syme sent these papers to him Currie was overwhelmed by the chaotic condition in which he found them.

One of the questions that comes to mind about the results of Syme's and Gilbert's input as well as Mrs. Dunlop is why there were no proofs of a draft document submitted to any of them for their review and comments. Ultimately therefore, James Currie was solely responsible for the publication's content and what eventually showed up in print, although it should also be recognized the publishers, Cadell and Davies did provide external influences.

In writing the biography and editing his document, Currie was to approach his task with his mind firmly made up on two important points. First, as he puts it in the '**prefatory remarks**,' the '**use of spirituous liquors was a detestable practice, which includes in its consequences almost every evil, physical and moral**'; and second, '**Burns' moral failings were so gross as to necessitate great charity on the part of his biographer: 'In relating the incidents of his life, candour will prevent us from dwelling invidiously on those faults and failings which justice forbids us to conceal; we will tread lightly over his yet warm ashes, and respect the laurels that shelter his untimely grave.'** Notwithstanding, Currie's somewhat staid and conservative upbringing and within the limits of the edition, he kept to his aim of doing

honour to the poet and of providing a work that would be interesting and useful to the world at large.

It is a positive reflection on Currie's organized mind and commitment to his task that just as in his medical research Currie was able to bring order to a large mass of experimental data through his careful observations and analysis, so in his work on Burns' life he was able to take the chaotic materials which he had at his disposal, and from them form an orderly plan for his work. As an example of his thoroughness in his biography he refused to make statements about Burns' poetical merits and beliefs without supporting them with Burns' own words in his letters.

The first edition of the biography consisted of a four volume edition of two thousand copies and was issued in 1800, and costing one pound eleven and sixpence for the set. A second revised edition was published in 1801, a third in 1802, and a fourth in 1803. Eventually an eighth edition was published in 1820 by Cadell and Davies in London and was intended to have an included an additional section by Gilbert Burns called '**Some Further Particulars of the Author's Life**'. The Publishers however, warned Gilbert not to question or impugn the content of Currie's accuracy in the biography, so it is unfortunate that the legend of Burns being an incurable alcoholic remained unchallenged, as Gilbert for whatever reasons, declined to write this section for unknown reasons. When we, using our modern day standards, look back at Burns' life we should retain a suitably balanced view. Burns was neither an alcoholic in our modern, clinical sense, nor a teetotaler. He was a man of the 18th-century, a period whose values and behaviour were not of our own.

There were other criticisms aimed at Currie with regard to certain liberties taken by him in deliberately falsifying the dates of certain letters in order that his friend Mrs. Dunlop might appear to better advantage. Liberties like these could call into question our confidence in him as a conscientious biographer.

As to the veracity of some of the content, a number of denials and questions raised by Gilbert and Syme also call into question who really were Currie's informants? That Currie took extraordinary liberties with dates and text is undeniable, but it would appear vices of that kind were characteristics of the editors of that day. Considering Currie's professional position, eminent respectability, and reputation amongst his contemporaries, it appears unlikely that he would stoop to deliberate misrepresentation, or go beyond inserting information which he deemed unreliable.

There is no doubt however, that Currie's biography had a major influence on the critical assessment of Burns and his writing for over 120 years. Currie's view of the Bard held sway until 1926, when Sir James Crichton-Browne in his '**Burns from a New Point of View (London, 1926)**' demonstrated that the poet died of sub-acute bacterial endocarditis "**with the origin of which alcohol had nothing to do.**" There were other supporters of Burns, including **Alexander Peterkin, (1708-1846)** who in 1815 issued a reprint of Dr Currie's edition of Burns' works, to which he added a critical preface, which contained the testimony of **Alexander Findlater (Burns' Excise Supervisor)**. Peterkin it can be said struck the first blow against the legend of Burns' perpetual drunkenness which Currie, and others, had deliberately foisted upon the public. **Findlater** defended Burns' loyalty and efficiency at the inquiry into the charges of disloyalty levelled against the poet in December 1792, and also defended the dead poet in **Alexander Peterkin's** volume of 1815 against the false statements of Currie and others who sought to paint Burns in his Dumfries days as a '**hopeless drunkard**'.

Gilbert himself added his plaudits, and wrote to Currie on 24 August 1800, "***I have read over the Life and Correspondence of my brother again and again; and am astonished to find so little to object to. 'On the contrary, I could not have supposed that the materials you were possessed of would have furnished so respectable a work. "The Life", if I am not misled by my connection with the subject, is a singularly pleasing and interesting work.... I have no room, nor am I able to do justice to my feelings, to make acknowledgements to you for the singular obligation I and my brother's family lie under to you.***"

It is also interesting that alongside these compliments, Currie received criticism from some noted poets and writers of his day. In 1816 William Wordsworth published '***A Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns***' in which he violently attacked Currie's "***Life of Robert Burns***". Wordsworth's main claim was that Currie had injured Burns' reputation by including material in his work which defamed the poet's character. Perhaps Wordsworth did not fully appreciate that the greater part of the biography consists of Burns' writings concerning himself, combined with the writings of his brother, Gilbert. It could also be argued in fairness to Wordsworth, that there were two sections in the biography, which indicate some kind of fault in Burns' character i.e. those dealing with the poet's politics and those which refer to his drinking in his later years, but Currie actually went out of his way to excuse these and attempted to make them as favourable to Burns as possible.

Fortunately for the Burns' family, but unfortunately for Burns' reputation, Currie's four volumes enjoyed an immediate and a phenomenal popularity. Between 1800 and 1820 at least 20 editions appeared in England and Scotland with at least two in the United States, and one in Ireland. In addition to these formal reissues of Currie's entire work, there were many editions of all or part of Burns' poems, each accompanied by some sort of biographical sketch unfortunately usually based upon Currie, and not infrequently exaggerating his excesses. Thus, by the time Currie's work was twenty years old, the public at large was thoroughly familiar with his interpretation of the poet, and the tradition that Burns was unfortunately an alcoholic debauchee was firmly established.

Later Life:

In 1783 James Currie married Lucy Wallace, with whom he had five children. Her father was a prosperous merchant, and a descendant of William Wallace, nicknamed by Sir Walter Scott as the '***The Hero of Scotland.***'

As a young man Currie was ironically intemperate in both drink and speech. The respectability he unexpectedly gained in middle life he felt had to be lived up to. He thus felt he could not publicly condone what seemed to him the drunken bouts of the poetic rake, Burns, even if there was a good and painful reason for Burns' indulgences. He deplored the excessive use of whisky among Scotsmen, and he accepted Dr. Maxwell's diagnosis that heavy drinking undermined Burns' constitution. Consequently, although Currie was never a strict teetotaler himself, except while suffering from his consumptive bouts, he deplored Burns' fondness for drink, and continued with what was to become the accepted legend for more than a century, i.e. that Burns was a confirmed alcoholic. In writing his biography Currie openly stated his intention of avoiding controversial topics and took many liberties with the Burns' documents, and with other facts, to achieve this aim.

One has to wonder how Currie was able to find time to achieve all that he did. In addition to the 4 years it took him to write the biography Currie was a prodigious correspondent. His correspondence ran the gamut, from poets such as Sir Walter Scott and William Wordsworth to political figures such as William Pitt and slave reformers such as William Wilberforce. The

reform interests of William Wilberforce drew Currie into a prodigious correspondence with that political figure, and many letters passed between the two men concerning the best means of achieving the cessation of the slave trade.

Conclusions

So who was James Currie? He was a social reformer, political critic, literary critic, man of letters and not just a biographer. But, above all, he was a physician, and as such devoted to the quest for the improvement of the human condition. His ability to carry on significant work in medicine while attaining prominence in his many other fields of endeavour, is in part due to the fact that he was a man with remarkable talents.

We also realize just how remarkable he was when we remember that he died at the early age of forty-nine, and so ended his career when many men are just beginning to reach their peak. When the life of Currie is reviewed it is ironic that he is mainly regarded as the pre-eminent Burns' biographer and not remembered as a researcher, physician and supporter of human values as in a vocal advocate against slavery.

If it is for any one thing that James Currie should be remembered, notwithstanding the recognition of the genius of Robert Burns, it should be for the following;

- Acceptance of the clinical use of the thermometer,
- Building of fever hospitals,
- The need for social reform, especially when it came to slavery.

To his credit, Currie was also able to recognize the need for the poet's widow, Jean, and his children, for financial help. Currie's concern for their welfare is shown by the fact that he undertook to raise money for the widow and her children even before he was selected as editor and biographer of Burns.

It could also be said that Currie thought it his duty to consolidate Burns' **'good reputation'** before some hack writer could publish unauthorized editions which might hurt the poet's reputation and divert funds from his family.

Currie remained active in all his fields of interest until 1804, when his health became significantly worse. He regretfully left Liverpool in search of a more favourable climate, and settled down at Bath, where he became a great favourite of the people of that town, and where he resolved to resume his practice. Unfortunately, as mentioned previously, throughout his life he was dogged by illness and died on 31 August 1805 in Sidmouth, where he was buried at age 49.