

A Biography of Robert Burns by James Mackay – A brief review

Prepared and presented by Jim McLaughlin at the club meeting of March 8, 2011 in connection with the work of the Bob Carnie Group.

Gentlemen, this is one of a series of papers being presented on behalf of the Bob Carnie Group, and this evening's topic is James Alexander Mackay's life of Burns entitled: A biography of Robert Burns, published by Mainstream Publishing in 1992.

My assignment was to prepare and deliver a brief review of the biography, but while doing the research I found that the life and achievements of the author himself are deserving of at least some comment, and so I'd like to begin with that. In any case, I think any discussion of an author's work is better appreciated by understanding the background and qualifications of the author himself.

Many of you will have had the privilege of meeting James Mackay when he attended the 1993 Burns World Federation conference in Calgary, which was very successfully hosted by the Calgary Burns Club; dare I say the best ever? He was born in Inverness in November 1936, and died in August 2007 in Glasgow at the relatively young age of 70. He earned a degree in history from Glasgow University, but much later was awarded an honorary D.Litt by the University of Glasgow for his work on Burns, hence his being known latterly as Dr Mackay. Mackay was an amazingly prolific writer. He has been credited with authoring an astonishing 200 books, and 10,000 articles on a great variety of subjects, although most of his published works were about stamps and postmarks. We know him as a scholar and writer on Burns, but the larger world recognized him as one of the world's leading philatelists. But he was also recognized as an expert on many other diverse topics, including rare coins, books and sculpture, to name but a few. He was an amazing individual, embracing a mind-spinning eclectic range of interests, with voluminous publications on all of them; he was a true renaissance man. In addition, from 1976-1992 he served as the editor of the Burns Chronicle, and is credited with greatly improving its quality and diversity.

Unfortunately, in 1972 he was relieved from his post as an assistant keeper at the British Museum in London for appropriating some proofs of valuable stamps, for which he received a criminal conviction. He expressed great shame and remorse throughout the rest of his life for this youthful indiscretion. He wrote several biographies, including of course the one of Burns I will be reviewing today, but in the case of two of his other biographies - one of Alexander Graham Bell and the other of John Paul Jones – he was accused of serious plagiarism. Surprisingly for such a renowned scholar, the accusations seem to have had at least some basis, and in the case of the Bell biography it resulted in Mackay paying his publisher to discontinue publication in order to avoid being sued by the putative offended author. These accusations were a serious setback to his literary reputation and legacy, but none of his works on Burns have been questioned to my knowledge. Speaking for myself at least, I still hold him in high esteem as an author and historian, particularly regarding his work on Burns.

Moving on to his biography of Burns, despite some 900 previous attempts at portraying the life of Scotland's Bard, I believe Mackay's opus is regarded as one of the most scholarly, authoritative and comprehensive so far written. Excluding a very useful index and quite copious

references to sources, it runs to over 670 pages, and in my view is eminently readable and compelling. It was first published in 1992 in hardback by Mainstream Press. It seems to be out of print in Hardback at least, but as always used copies can be ordered through Amazon from about \$16. And to my great surprise, I discovered that Mackay published another biography of Burns as late as 2004. This may be more a revision and update of his 1992 work, but I intend to follow up and try to find out more about it.

Mackay begins by exploring Burns' antecedents, and tracing his male lineage with some certainty from Kincardineshire, but possibly also from Ayrshire from an earlier date. He details the odyssey of the Bard's father William Burness from Kincardineshire through Edinburgh, and finally to the wee clay biggin in Alloway where the real story of Robert Burns begins. From there, and for the next nearly 700 pages, Mackay leads us through all of the known events of Burns' life and works to his untimely death in Dumfries 37½ years later. The treatment is thorough, and Mackay references original sources throughout both to verify the accuracy of the events described, but also to cast doubt or refute outright many of the canards and distortions that many of the early biographers introduced into Burns early history and which persisted for nearly 200 years. Indeed, some of those calumnies persist to this day, most notably that Robert was a dissolute drunkard and a careless and irresponsible fornicator. Mackay takes great pains to examine each of these slanders and subjects them to the test of reason and the known facts. He doesn't attempt to whitewash, but relies on available documents, reliable contemporary accounts and verifiable facts to arrive at the truth, or at least more reasonable and realistic surmise. His methodical and scholarly approach inspire confidence in the reader, albeit we must keep open the possibility that later research and evidence can always change those conclusions. And so, we become convinced that Burns was more workaholic than alcoholic, and while he did indeed love many a lass and had more than his share of illegitimate weans, unlike many of his contemporaries he accepted and even trumpeted his responsibility to both the children and their unfortunate mothers, and supported them as best he could with his limited means. He had the passion of a true poet, but he was a man of integrity and compassion, and held bravely to political and social principles that often compromised his own best interests. And while Burns was accused by many of his early critics and biographers of displaying symptoms of irreligion in later life, Mackay makes a good case that Burns likely remained a convinced Christian to the end, despite often being at odds with a harsh and hypocritical church establishment. Of course, most of these interpretations and insights are now largely well accepted by modern Burnsians, but Mackay backs them up with sound reasoning and rational discussion.

Aside from challenging the outright lies and misconceptions that many of the early biographers repeated and helped to perpetuate up until recent times, Mackay also corrects many inaccuracies of fact, or sheds new light on shadowy and indistinct aspects of Burns' life. For example, through his careful study and detective work on parish and church records as well as other sources, he offers proof that Highland Mary Campbell was really named Margaret, and he devotes a good deal of print to an interesting debate about the long-held belief that she died carrying his unborn child; this, he concludes, is doubtful at best. Also that Allison Begbie – who mortified the poet by turning down flat his proposal of marriage - was really named Elison Gebbie. And there are many other instances where Mackay sets the record straight.

The final chapter of the book – titled Post Mortem – runs to 56 pages, and I find it particularly

interesting and informative. It treats us to a number of topical discussions, including the question of his undeserved reputation as a drinker, sundry other perceived 'frailties' that were offhandedly seen as inevitable and unfortunate companions of greatness, and other scurrilous attributions later shown to be unfounded. These are largely discussed as part of Mackay reviewing the efforts of several of the early biographies, particularly those of James Currie and Robert Herron, but of others such as Robert Chambers and Allen Cunningham. Information is also given about the efforts to provide financially for Jean Armour, and we learn a little about the Bards children and other family members and how they fared in later life.

One very useful feature of this biography that adds much to the attraction and convenience of this biography over most others is Mackay's references to specific poems and songs, as well as the letters. The reader will be rewarded by keeping at hand copies of two of Mackay's other works published more or less contemporaneously with the biography. These are the bicentenary edition of the Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns and The Complete Letters of Robert Burns. Throughout the book he gives page references to these two volumes, allowing you to read the actual poem or letter Mackay is referring to if you are so inclined.

Personally, I've relied on Mackay's biography for most of my information on Burns ever since it was published...it's my Burns bible. It's a heavy tome which I've read cover to cover probably 3 or 4 times as well as selectively, but I've never been bored, and generally when I do crack open the pages, I find it hard to put down. There are other biographies that have considerable merit, and we hope to be able to review a couple of so of those at future meetings. But for those of you who do not have a copy of Mackay's version, I would highly recommend that you acquire one. And if you have a copy stashed away 'somewhere', I encourage you to dig it out, blow off the dust and make it your bedside companion...given that most of you are now past the point of getting excited over that faithful companion who occupies the other half of your mattress!