

## Robert Burns - Farmer and Poet of Nature

Robert Burns is a poet who touches on virtually every aspects of life: on nature and love, on friendship and hypocrisy, on hope and despair, on kindness and cruelty. His mood ranges from jocular to profound, from complimentary to mockingly satirical, from trivial to deeply philosophical. He expresses almost every emotion that either warms or wounds the human heart, and every strength and weakness that defines our spirit. He triumphs in our compassion and our goodness and rails against our cruelties and inhumanity. No stone of life or the human condition is left unturned.

Any attempt to categorize him as *this* kind of poet or *that*, or favouring one subject over another, or exhibiting a preference for one particular poetical style over some other will surely fail. He is a poet for all seasons, and for that we can be grateful. No matter our mood or point of view, whatever aesthetic we favour in our enjoyment of the muses, we will find it in Burns. Even those who are unfamiliar with the old Scottish vernacular will discover plenty of gems to delight in standard English.

My objective in this paper is to focus on the Robert Burns who delighted in the beauties and bounties of nature. He was a farmer almost as much as he was a poet, Ayrshire's lovely countryside and all that it had to offer in nature's gifts being within his view and instilled into his heart and mind. In his poetry, he displays a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the fauna and flora of Scotland, and treats us to the charms of many of its rivers, mountains and glens.

One could debate at some length what constitutes a nature poem, but I have taken a broad approach and included verses that in some cases have been plucked from poems or songs that deal with many subjects not necessarily 'of nature' (whose main theme might be 'love', for example), but that rely on nature to create mood or some other effect.

Before exploring my theme by reference to the poet's works, I would like briefly to offer some background that I feel is important to an understanding of the natural environment and conditions that prevailed in rural Scotland in the late eighteenth Century, which were considerably different – and in some cases much harsher – than those that we find in modern times. For the long-suffering tenant farmer, climate and weather were critical, while the generally poor quality of the soil, the near absence of labour-saving technology and the primitive farming practices that prevailed at that time all conspired to make farming one of the most physically demanding career choices for any young man aspiring to make his way in the world, and one of the riskiest financially.

From the writings of both Julius Caesar and the great Roman historian Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, we know that the climate of Britain during the period of Rome's colonization was relatively temperate, mild enough to grow grapes from which wine was actually made. And from evidence preserved in peat mosses, the woods and forests were denser, and the trees larger. In contrast, it has been well documented that during the years of Burns' life, Europe was in the grip of a very cool and wet period that has been described as the mini ice-age, exemplified by the almost unprecedented freezing of the river Thames. These climatic conditions were particularly challenging for sons of the soil. Even the best of known farming practices applied at that time often failed to avert poor harvests or complete crop failures, and sometimes the financial ruin that accompanied such events, a fate apparently suffered by the poet's own grandfather. As a northern country, even now Scotland is occasionally subject to long dreary winters, but so much more so in Burns' time when winter brought much deeper falls of snow and the frost typically remained in the ground well into the beginning of the spring ploughing season. These laggard springs were often followed by all-too-brief summers that were wet and cool. The result was harvests that often were both late and poor in yield. Added to this were the challenges of the poor soil conditions that the Burns family and most other tenant farmers in Scotland had to deal with: acidic, stony and inadequately drained.

As if all of that was not enough, in the later eighteenth century farm-gate prices fell considerably from those of mid-century, which helps to explain Robert's lack of success as a farmer, including his ill-considered Ellisland venture.

It is also useful to have a picture of the country setting in which the poet lived and worked. Most of us city-slickers cherish images of pastures green or fields of freshly-mown hay, picturesquely divided one from the other by rustic stone walls or tree-lined wind-breaks. And off in the distance the sylvan beauty of woodland copses merging seamlessly with a welcoming sky! I exaggerate, but only a little.

In Burns' time the landscape would have been a little less country-cottage...still inspiringly bucolic and even beautiful in a rough-hewn way, but certainly no arcadian utopia. Woodlands were sparser than we are accustomed to now; they existed, but mostly along the edges of rivers or on higher ground. And as previously noted, the land itself and the harsh climate were more than just challenging for the 'Heaven-taught ploughman' who is the subject of our theme.

Given the chance, we might welcome the opportunity to commiserate with the poet in posthumous sympathy over the great hardships imposed upon him by these difficult conditions, but we must also recognize that these vicissitudes of country life and farming played their part in shaping the man he became, and may well have helped to

stoke the empathy and the pathos, the passion and the fiery rhetoric, as well as the directed genius that were so richly displayed in his poetical works.

Much more can be said about Burns the farmer, an occupation that consumed more than half his history. I have touched only lightly upon this important aspect of his life, mainly to account for the depth of knowledge of the natural environment instilled in him, and his command of so many touchingly evocative images of nature that inspire and enrich so much of his work; conversely, that enabled him to vividly characterize life's more sombre or distressing adversities by employing metaphors drawn from nature's darker side. A proper study of the role played by farming in his life can better be dealt with in a separate submission.

We see examples of his embrace of nature in **Now Weslin Winds**, just the second recorded poem-song that he attempted at the age of fifteen while attending improving classes in Kirkoswold. As was so often the case, particularly in his younger years, a bonnie lass was the inspiration for his muse on that occasion, a 'charming Fillette' he informs us, whom we know to have been Margaret Thompson, addressed as 'Peggy' in the final two stanzas. Prior to that he refers to a virtual ornithology of nine feathered species, with apt descriptions of their manner of flight or some other characteristic or aspect of their habitat. Six of these are crammed into just one verse:

The paitrick lo'es the fruitfu' fells,	<i>partridge</i>
The plover lo'es the mountains;	
The woodcock haunts the lonely dells,	
The soaring hern the fountains:	<i>heron</i>
The lofty groves the cushat roves,	<i>pigeon</i>
The path o' man to shun it;	
The hazel bush o'erhangs the thrush,	
The spreading thorn the linnet.	

In **The Humble Petition of Bruar Water** composed many years later, the poet treats us to this delightful description:

The sober laverock, warbling wild,	<i>lark</i>
Shall to the skies aspire;	
The gowdspink, Music's gayest child,	<i>goldfinch</i>
Shall sweetly join the choir;	
The blackbird strong, the lintwhite clear,	<i>linnet</i>
The mavis mild and mellow,	<i>thrush</i>
The robin, pensive Autumn cheer	
In all her locks of yellow.	





But mousie thou art no' thy lane *not alone*  
In proving foresight may be vain:  
The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men  
    Gang aft agley, *often go awry*  
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, *leave*  
    For promised joy.

Still, thou are blest, compared wi' me!  
The present only toucheth thee:  
But och! I backward cast my e'e,  
    On prospects drear! *eye*  
An' forward, tho I canna see,  
    I guess an' fear!

Burns sympathizes with the mouse's loss and trauma and likens its predicament to that of humans. It is a touching sentiment, man and animal equally subject to the vagaries of life that each is too often powerless to anticipate or avoid, and the grief and pain that they both suffer in consequence.

And then we have **To a Louse – On Seeing One on a Ladies Bonnet in Church**. Who but Robert Burns could so artfully employ the antics of such a lowly creature to remind us all of the futility of false pride? And how better to illustrate the point than to observe the progress of a common louse boldly navigating the gauze and lace trimmings of a fashionable Lunardi bonnet as the poet looks on from the pew behind? The wearer was not quite the fine lady that we assume at first, only 'Jeany' – a country lass – doing her best to appear à la mode in her Sunday-best. The creature is no respecter of fashion, or of a young lady's dignity. First the poet admonishes the impudent intruder:

Ye ugly, creepin', blastit wonner,  
Detested, shunned by saunt an' sinner, *saint*  
How daur ye set your fit upon her –  
    Sae fine a lady!

Then he reminds us that we are all too often sad victims of our own vanity. Just when we think we are appearing at our finest, pride takes a fall, as in this lapidary caution:

O wad some Power the giftie gi'e us *gift to give*  
To see oursels as others see us!  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,  
    An' foolish notion.

How very true!

**The Twa Dogs** is a tale of a conversation between two dogs exploring various issues, largely involving the differences between the social classes. The protagonists are Luath, the poet's own ploughman's Collie ('A rhyming, rating, raving tyke') and Caesar, the Laird's Newfoundland dog (His lockèd, letter'd brow brass collar shew'd him the gentleman and scholar'). As close observers of their respective masters, they are well positioned to compare the lifestyles and philosophies that pertain in their very different worlds. They are a lively pair and Caesar is no snob, unlike his master. They debate many topics, but in the end agree that the wealthy are not to be envied:

Their days insipid, dull and tasteless,  
Their nights, unquiet, lang an' restless. *long*

The poorer classes on the other hand enjoy richer, more useful lives, and are happier:

A country fellow at the pleugh, *plough*  
His acre's till'd, he's right eneugh; *enough*  
A country girl at her wheel,  
Her dizzen's done, she's unco weel. *dozen's, very well*

And so, after their long debate, the dogs decide they're better off as they are...just carefree, four-legged minions:

By this, the sun was out o' sight,  
An' darker gloaming brought the night:  
The bum-clock humm'd wi' lazy drone, *humming beetle*  
The kye stood rowten i' the loan; *cattle, bellowing in the lane*  
When up they gat an' shook their lugs,  
Rejoiced they were na men, but dugs.

There are so many other gems to be found in the rich storehouse of poetry and song bequeathed to us by Scotland's Bard that were inspired by nature's diversity and beauty. In concluding, I would like to offer a few final examples:

First, from verses in praise of some of the women he admired:

- Her smile is as the evening mild,  
When feath' red pairs are courting,  
And little lambkins wanton wild,  
In playful bands disporting.

- These wild-wood flowers I've pu'd to deck *pulled*  
 That spotless breast o' thine;  
 The courtier's gems may witness love,  
 But, 'tis na love like mine.
  
- The crimson blossom charms the bee,  
 The summer sun the swallow;  
 So dear this tuneful gift to me,  
 From lovely Isabella.

Next, of Nature fare and sweet:

- The little birdies blithely sing,  
 And o'er their heads the hazels hing, *hang*  
 Or lightly flit on wanton wing  
 In the birks o' Aberfeldie! *birches*

And even lamentations expressive of his melancholia:

- No flow'rs gaily springing, no birds sweetly singing,  
 Can soothe the sad bosom of joyless despair.
  
- I court, I beg thy friendly aid, 'thy' = Death  
 To close this scene of care!  
 When shall my soul, in silent peace,  
 Resign Life's joyless day?

But I would prefer to have us end on a happier note. Nature, after all, gave us life and serves more to enliven the spirit than fuel its distress. Despite his occasional despondency at life's slings and arrows, I believe it was in nature's mellow fruitfulness that Robert Burns – Poet of Nature – most delighted:

Come let us stray our gladsome way,  
 And view the charms of nature;  
 The rustling corn, the fruited thorn,  
 And every happy creature.

Jim McLaughlin  
 August, 2016.