

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON - SCOTTISH LITERARY ICON OR BOYS' AUTHOR?

In trying to select a Scottish writer whose life and works I might delve into as my next project for the Carnie group, I immediately thought of Robert Louis Stevenson. I was surprised to receive some reservations from the other members of the Carnie group.

A main comment was that Stevenson was not a contemporary of Burns. My colleagues regarded him as a more “modern” author, or at least “Victorian”, and therefore not really a contributor to Scottish literary history; at least not in the context of our “Bardian” Carnie goals. After all, he wasn’t even born until 1850!

Upon drilling into what I regarded as curious thinking, I learned that most Scottish school boys regarded Robert Louis Stevenson as a child’s author. If they studied him at all at school, it was as a result of having to prepare a book report for a sixth grade teacher.

Every boy read “*Treasure Island*” and imagined himself sailing the seas in search of adventure and pirate treasure, black eye patch in place, saying things like “Avast, ye maties!” and “Yo, ho, ho! And a bottle o’ rum!” In fact, when current respected mystery writer Ian Rankin unveiled a statue of Stevenson last October in Edinburgh, he spoke of his first introduction to Robert Louis as a boy, through reading a comic book version of *Treasure Island*.

My own introduction to Stevenson was through my Auntie Margaret, who gave me *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, as a gift when I was 8 or 10. This book of poetry, published in 1885, Stevenson dedicated to his childhood nurse, Alison Cunningham. It was she who cared for the young R.L. through much childhood sickliness, and it was she who read to him *Pilgrim’s Progress* and many other works and is said to have inspired him to become a writer. Thus from his dedication:

“To Alison Cunningham From Her Boy

...

For all you pitied, all you bore,
In sad and happy days of yore:--
My second Mother, my first Wife,
The angel of my infant life--
From the sick child, now well and old,
Take, nurse, the little book you hold!

And grant it, Heaven, that all who read
May find as dear a nurse at need,
And every child who lists my rhyme,
In the bright, fireside, nursery clime,
May hear it in as kind a voice
As made my childish days rejoice!”

The poems in this volume are mostly flights of fancy. They express a young lad’s imagination for life and adventure. Titles like: *Escape at Bedtime*, *The Land of Nod*, and *My Bed is a Boat*. With verses like:

From breakfast on through all the day
At home among my friends I stay,
But every night I go abroad
Afar into the land of Nod.

All by myself I have to go,
With none to tell me what to do--
All alone beside the streams
And up the mountain-sides of dreams.

The strangest things are these for me,
Both things to eat and things to see,
And many frightening sights abroad
Till morning in the land of Nod.

Reading these now, I still respect the imagery, but I regret that the writing does seem a touch simple; written for a child. It's clearly not of the depth or scope of Burns, of even his simpler works. But is it as bad as all that? I'd like to think not. But then I compare Stevenson's poem *The Cow* with a work of the same name by another Scottish poet:

Stevenson:

The friendly cow all red and white,
I love with all my heart:
She gives me cream with all her might,
To eat with apple-tart.

And blown by all the winds that pass
And wet with all the showers,
She walks among the meadow grass
And eats the meadow flowers.

And the other one?

**"The chicken is a noble beast,
The cow is much forlorn,
Standing in the pouring rain,
With a leg on every corner."**

**You'll recognize the "genius" of William McGonagall.
Same rhyme scheme, same meter.**

So, perhaps, Stevenson should not be hailed for his poetry.

But the premise that Stevenson stands among the greats of Scottish literature is not, I submit, without merit. He is featured along-side Burns and Sir Walter Scott in Edinburgh's Writers' Museum, just off High Street. Further down the street at Canongate Kirkyard, it was Stevenson who paid for the repair and refurbishment of the head stone Robert Burns had had erected to the memory of Burn's muse, Robert Fergusson.

In addition to those well-known and well-loved books such as *Treasure Island* (1883) and *Kidnapped* (1886), Stevenson produced several short stories and other novels, including *The Wrecker* and *Catriona*, and, of course, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. These later works were decidedly **not written for children.**

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were (was?) drawn from the dual personalities of Deacon Brodie, a pious and talented Edinburgh furniture maker by day and a heinous and ruthless burglar by night, who was ultimately hanged for his crimes. It was also based upon the two sides of Edinburgh society, which Stevenson knew well: The proud and worthy establishment society portrayed to the world versus the seamy underside of poverty and desperation.

Quote:

“Jekyll had more than a father's interest; Hyde had more than a son's indifference.”

And: “I sat in the sun on a bench; the animal within me licking the chops of memory; the spiritual side a little drowsed, promising subsequent penitence, but not yet moved to begin.”

Futher: “O God!’ I screamed, and ‘O God!’ again and again; for there before my eyes--pale and shaken, and half fainting, and groping before him with his hands, like a man restored from death--there stood Henry Jekyll!”

The chilling imagery is quite wonderful. It tends to persuade me towards a verdict of “greatness” in Stevenson’s writing.

Of particular interest to us is an article Stevenson wrote about Robert Burns for Cornhill magazine in October 1879, entitled “*Some Aspects of Robert Burns*”. I want so badly to provide you with quotations from that essay. I shall append it to the on-line version of this paper because it would be a shame if every one of you does not read it. My purpose in having you do so is two-fold: First, the article puts forth in an insightful manner an in-depth record and analysis of the life of Robert Burns. If nothing else, quotes taken from it and duly acknowledged would enhance any immortal memory you might deliver. Second, the writing style is captivating and sure proof of the training and education and passion of its author, Robert Louis. Here are but two examples:

“Robert steps before us, almost from the first, in his complete character—a proud, headstrong, impetuous lad, greedy of pleasure, greedy of notice ; in his own phrase ‘panting after distinction,’ and in his brother’s ‘cherishing a particular jealousy of people who were richer or of more consequence than himself;’ with all this, he was emphatically of the artist nature. Already he made a conspicuous figure in Tarbolton church, with the only tied hair in the parish, ° and his plaid, which was of a particular colour, wrapped in a particular manner round his shoulders.’ Ten years later, when a married man, the father of a family, a farmer, and an officer of Excise, we shall find him out fishing in masquerade, with fox-skin cap, belted greatcoat, and great Highland broadsword. He liked dressing up, in fact, for its own sake. This is the spirit which leads to the extravagant array of Latin Quarter students, and the proverbial velvetreen of the English landscape-painter ; and, though the pleasure derived is in itself merely personal, it shows a man who is, to say the least of it, not pained by general attention and remark. His father wrote the family name *Burnes*; Robert early adopted the orthography *Burness* from his cousin in the Mearns; and in his twenty-eighth year changed it once more to *Burns*. It is plain that the last transformation was not made without some qualm ; for in addressing his cousin he adheres, in at least one more letter, to spelling number two. And this, again, shows a man pre-occupied about the manner of his appearance even down to the name, and little willing to follow custom.”

And:

“On the night of Mauchline races, 1785, the young men and women of the place joined in a penny ball, according to their custom. ‘In the same set danced Jean Armour, the master-mason’s daughter, and our dark-eyed Don Juan. His dog (not the immortal Luath, but a successor unknown to fame, *caret quia vate sacro*), apparently sensible of some neglect, followed his master to and fro, to the confusion of the dancers. Some mirthful comments followed; and Jean heard the poet say to his partner—or, as I should imagine, laughingly launch the remark to the company at large—that ‘he wished he could get any of the lassies to like him as well as his dog.’ Some time after, as the girl was bleaching clothes on Mauchline green, Robert chanced to go by, still accompanied by his dog; and the dog, ‘scouring in long excursion,’ scampered with four black paws across the linen. This brought the two into

conversation; when Jean, with a somewhat hoydenish advance, inquired if he had yet got any of the lassies to like him as well as his dog.”

So to conclude the prosaic analysis I undertook in this project, I can do no better than to return to quote Ian Rankin at the unveiling of Stevenson’s statue last fall: (Quote)

“From Jekyll and Hyde I went back to all the other stuff that Stevenson had written and the thing that I like about him is that he’s a writer for all ages. As a child you can read Stevenson. As a teenager you can read him. As an adult you can read him. He wrote different books for different people, and you get something out of them every time you go back and re-read them you get something out of them you didn’t get the previous time you read them.”

I am cognizant that in presenting a biographical sketch of someone you are supposed to provide the life story of the individual. But I’ve found that if you start off by giving the person’s statistical information, there is a tendency for the audience to quickly tune out and relegate your presentation to the same bin where grade 10 history essays belong. So I’ll give you Stevenson’s facts thusly:

Robert Lewis Balfour Stevenson was born on 13 November 1850, the only child of Margaret Isabella Balfour (1829 – 1897) and Thomas Stevenson (1818 – 1887). He later changed his given name “Lewis” to Louis, although throughout his life it was still pronounced “Lewis”. He attended Edinburgh Academy with the intention that he would follow in his grandfather’s and father’s careers as civil engineers, but preferred to write (some would say “dream”) and so he studied law to satisfy his father’s concern that he at least be educated in something. Stevenson spent time in Belgium and France. While there, he met Fanny Osborne (sans her husband) with her two children, Lloyd and Isobel. In 1879, he sailed to America where, after an arduous trip across the continent, he caught up to the newly divorced fair Fanny. They were married the next Spring. He was actually corresponding from the U.S. when he wrote the piece about Burns for the Cornhill Magazine, which I referred to earlier. They returned to Britain the following year and remained at various abodes until 1888, when Louis’s failing health led them to set sail for Samoa. He bought a 400 acre estate on a hill and engrossed himself in the native culture and social scene. He charmed the locals with his stories and wrote prolifically. The locals dubbed him Tusitala, meaning “Teller of Tales”. He died of a brain hemorrhage on December 3, 1894, at the age of 44.

He is buried on a hill on the estate overlooking the sea. The inscription on his tomb stone reads:

“Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig my grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me,
Here he lies where he longed to be.
Home is the sailor home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

Perhaps a little better attempt at poetry.

Prepared for and Presented to The Calgary Burns Club on February 10, 2014 by Jim Hope-Ross

RLS said it:

- Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you sow.
- That man is a success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much.
- You think dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you, they will be there long before any of us.
- Marriage is like life - it is a field of battle, not a bed of roses.
- Compromise is the best and cheapest lawyer.

Please note attached: [Robert Louis Stevenson's Article on Robert Burns](#)

**Robert Louis Stevenson's Article on Robert Burns
For Cornhill Magazine in October 1879**

SOME ASPECTS OF ROBERT BURNS

To write with authority about another man we must have fellow-feeling and some common ground of experience with our subject. We may praise or blame according as we find him related to us by the best or worst in ourselves ; but it is only in virtue of some relationship that we can be his judges, even to condemn Feelings which we share and understand enter for us into the tissue of the man's character; those to which we are strangers in our own experience we are inclined to regard as blots, exceptions, inconsistencies, and excursions of the diabolic; we conceive them with repugnance, explain them with difficulty, and raise our hands to heaven in wonder when we find them in conjunction with talents that we respect or virtues that we admire. David, king of Israel, would pass a sounder judgment on a man than either Nathanael or David Hume. Now, Principal Shairp's recent volume, although I believe no one will read it without respect and interest, has this one capital defect—that there is imperfect sympathy between the author and the subject, between the critic and the personality under criticism. Hence an inorganic, if not an incoherent, presentation of both the poems and the man. Of *Holy Willies Prayer*, Principal Shairp remarks that 'those who have loved most what was best in Burns's poetry must have regretted that it was ever written.' To the *Jolly Beggars*, so far as my memory serves me, he refers but once ; and then only to remark on the ' strange, not to say painful,' circumstance that the same hand which wrote the *Cotters Saturday Night* should have stooped to write the *Jolly Beggars*. The *Saturday Night* may or may not be an admirable poem ; but its significance is trebled, and the power and range of the poet first appears, when it is set beside the *Jolly Beggars*. To take a man's work piecemeal, except with the design of elegant extracts, is the way to avoid, and not to perform, the critic's duty. The same defect is displayed in the treatment of Burns as a man, which is broken, apologetical, and confused. The man here presented to us is not that Burns, *teres atque rotundus*—a burly figure in literature, as, from our present vantage of time, we have begun to see him. This, on the other hand, is Burns as he may have appeared to a contemporary clergyman, whom we shall conceive to have been a kind and indulgent but orderly and orthodox person, anxious to be pleased, but too often hurt and disappointed by the behaviour of his red-hot *protege*, and solacing himself with the explanation that the poet was ' the most inconsistent of men.' If you are so sensibly pained by the misconduct of your subject, and so paternally delighted with his virtues, you will always be an excellent gentleman, but a somewhat questionable biographer. Indeed, we can only be sorry and surprised that Principal Shairp should have chosen a theme so uncongenial. When we find a man writing on Burns, who likes neither *Holy Willie*, nor the *Beggars*, nor the *Ordination*, nothing is adequate to the situation but the old cry of Geronte: ' Que diable allait-il faire dans cette galere ?' And every merit we find in the book, which is sober and candid in a degree unusual with biographies of Burns, only leads us to regret more heartily that good work should be so greatly thrown

away.

It is far from my intention to tell over again a story that has been so often told; but there are certainly some points in the character of Burns that will bear to be brought out, and some chapters in his life that demand a brief rehearsal. The unity of the man's nature, for all its richness, has fallen somewhat out of sight in the pressure of new information and the apologetical ceremony of biographers. Mr. Carlyle made an inimitable bust of the poet's head of gold ; may I not be forgiven if my business should have more to do with the feet, which were of clay?

YOUTH

Any view of Burns would be misleading which passed over in silence the influences of his home and his father. That father, William Burnes, after having been for many years a gardener, took a farm, married, and, like an emigrant in a new country, built himself a house with his own hands. Poverty of the most distressing sort, with sometimes the near prospect of a gaol, embittered the remainder of his life. Chill, backward, and austere with strangers, grave and imperious in his family, he was yet a man of very unusual parts and of an affectionate nature. On his way through life he had remarked much upon other men, with more result in theory than practice ; and he had reflected upon many subjects as he delved the garden. His great delight was in solid conversation ; he would leave his work to talk with the schoolmaster Murdoch ; and Robert, when he came home late at night, not only turned aside rebuke but kept his father two hours beside the fire by the charm of his merry and vigorous talk.

Nothing is more characteristic of the class in general, and William Burnes in particular, than the pains he took to get proper schooling for his boys, and, when that was no longer possible, the sense and resolution with which he set himself to supply the deficiency by his own influence. For many years he was their chief companion ; he spoke with them seriously on all subjects as if they had been grown men ; at night, when work was over, he taught them arithmetic ; he borrowed books for them on history, science, and theology ; and he felt it his duty to supplement this last—the trait is laughably Scottish —by a dialogue of his own composition, where his own private shade of orthodoxy was exactly represented. He would go to his daughter as she stayed afield herding cattle, to teach her the names of grasses and wild-flowers, or to sit by her side when it thundered. Distance to strangers, deep family tenderness, love of knowledge, a narrow, precise, and formal reading of theology—everything we learn of him hangs well together, and builds up a popular Scottish type. If I mention the name of Andrew Fairservice, it is only as I might couple for an instant Dugald Dalgetty with old Marshal Loudon, to help out the reader's comprehension by a popular but unworthy instance of a class.

Such was the influence of this good and wise man that his household became a school to itself, and neighbours who came into the farm at meal-time would find the whole family, father, brothers, and sisters, helping themselves with one hand and

holding a book in the other. We are surprised at the prose style of Robert; that of Gilbert need surprise us no less ; even William writes a remarkable letter for a young man of such slender opportunities. One anecdote marks the taste of the family. Murdoch brought *Titus Andronicus*, and, with such dominie elocution as we may suppose, began to read it aloud before this rustic audience ; but when he had reached the passage where Tamora insults Lavinia, with one voice and ‘ in an agony of distress ’ they refused to hear it to an end. In such a father, and with such a home, Robert had already the making of an excellent education ; and what Murdoch added, although it may not have been much in amount, was in character the very essence of a literary training. Schools and colleges, for one great man whom they complete, perhaps unmake a dozen ; the strong spirit can do well upon more scanty fare.

Robert steps before us, almost from the first, in his complete character—a proud, headstrong, impetuous lad, greedy of pleasure, greedy of notice ; in his own phrase ‘panting after distinction,’ and in his brother’s ‘ cherishing a particular jealousy of people who were richer or of more consequence than himself; ’ with all this, he was emphatically of the artist nature. Already he made a conspicuous figure in Tarbolton church, with the only tied hair in the parish, ^e and his plaid, which was of a particular colour, wrapped in a particular manner round his shoulders.’ Ten years later, when a married man, the father of a family, a farmer, and an officer of Excise, we shall find him out fishing in masquerade, with fox-skin cap, belted greatcoat, and great Highland broadsword. He liked dressing up, in fact, for its own sake. This is the spirit which leads to the extravagant array of Latin Quarter students, and the proverbial velvetreen of the English landscape-painter ; and, though the pleasure derived is in itself merely personal, it shows a man who is, to say the least of it, not pained by general attention and remark. His father wrote the family name *Burnes*; Robert early adopted the orthography *Burness* from his cousin in the Mearns; and in his twenty-eighth year changed it once more to *Burns*. It is plain that the last transformation was not made without some qualm ; for in addressing his cousin he adheres, in at least one more letter, to spelling number two. And this, again, shows a man pre-occupied about the manner of his appearance even down to the name, and little willing to follow custom. Again, he was proud, and justly proud, of his powers in conversation. To no other man’s have we the same conclusive testimony from different sources and from every rank of life. It is almost a commonplace that the best of his works was what he said in talk. Robertson the historian ‘ scarcely ever met any man whose conversation displayed greater vigour;’ the Duchess of Gordon declared that he ‘ carried her off her feet; ’ and, when he came late to an inn, the servants would get out of bed to hear him talk. But, in these early days at least, he was determined to shine by any means. He made himself feared in the village for his tongue. He would crush weaker men to their faces, or even perhaps—for the statement of Sillar is not absolute —say cutting things of his acquaintances behind their back. At the church door, between sermons, he would parade his religious views amid hisses. These details stamp the man. He had no genteel timidities in the conduct of his life. He loved to force his personality upon the world. He would please himself, and shine. Had he lived in the Paris of 1830, and joined his lot with the Romantics, we can conceive him writing *Jehan* for *Jean*, swaggering in Gautier’s red

waistcoat, and horrifying Bourgeois in a public cafe with paradox and gasconade.

A leading trait throughout his whole career was his desire to be in love. *Ne fait pas ce tour qui veut*. His affections were often enough touched, but perhaps never engaged. He was all his life on a voyage of discovery, but it does not appear conclusively that he ever touched the happy isle. A man brings to love a deal of ready-made sentiment, and even from childhood obscurely prognosticates the symptoms of this vital malady. Burns was formed for love ; he had passion, tenderness, and a singular bent in the direction ; he could foresee, with the intuition of an artist, what love ought to be ; and he could not conceive a worthy life without it. But he had ill-fortune, and was besides so greedy after every shadow of the true divinity, and so much the slave of a strong temperament, that perhaps his nerve was relaxed and his heart had lost the power of self-devotion before an opportunity occurred. The circumstances of his youth doubtless counted for something in the result. For the lads of Ayrshire, as soon as the day's work was over and the beasts were stabled, would take the road, it might be in a winter tempest, and travel perhaps miles by moss and moorland to spend an hour or two in courtship. Rule 10 of the Bachelors' Club at Tarbolton provides that ⁴ every man proper for a member of this Society must be a professed lover of *one or more* of the female sex.' The rich, as Burns himself points out, may have a choice of pleasurable 56 occupations, but these lads had nothing but their ⁴ cannie hour at e'en.' It was upon love and flirtation that this rustic society was built; gallantry was the essence of life among the Ayrshire hills as well as in the Court of Versailles ; and the days were distinguished from each other by love-letters, meetings, tiffs, reconciliations, and expansions to the chosen confidant, as in a comedy of Marivaux.

Here was a field for a man of Burns's indiscriminate personal ambition, where he might pursue his voyage of discovery in quest of true love, and enjoy temporary triumphs by the way. He was 'constantly the victim of some fair enslaver'—at least, when it was not the other way about; and there were often underplots and secondary fair enslavers in the background. Many—or may we not say most?—of these affairs were entirely artificial. One, he tells us, he began out of ⁴ a vanity of showing his parts in courtship,' for he piqued himself on his ability at a love-letter. But, however they began, these flames of his were fanned into a passion ere the end ; and he stands unsurpassed in his power of self-deception, and positively without a competitor in the art, to use his own words, of ⁴ battering himself into a warm affection,'—a debilitating and futile exercise. Once he had worked himself into the vein, ⁴ the agitations of his mind and body ' were an astonishment to all who knew him. Such a course as this, however pleasant to a thirsty vanity, was lowering to his nature. He sank more and more towards the professional Don Juan. With a leer of what the French call fatuity, he bids the belles of Mauchline beware of his seductions ; and the same cheap self-satisfaction finds a yet uglier vent when he plumes himself on the scandal at the birth of his first bastard. We can well believe what we hear of his facility in striking up an acquaintance with women : he would have conquering manners; he would bear down upon his rustic game with the grace that comes of absolute assurance—the Richelieu of Lochlea or Mossgiel. In yet another manner

did these quaint ways of courtship help him into fame. If he were great as principal, he was unrivalled as confidant. He could enter into a passion ; he could counsel wary moves, being, in his own phrase, so old a hawk; nay, he could turn a letter for some unlucky swain, or even string a few lines of verse that should clinch the business and fetch the hesitating fair one to the ground. Nor, perhaps, was it only his ' curiosity, zeal, and intrepid dexterity ' that recommended him for a second in such affairs; it must have been a distinction to have the assistance and advice of *Rab the Ranter*, and one who was in no way formidable by himself might grow dangerous and attractive through the fame of his associate.

I think we can conceive him, in these early years, in that rough moorland country, poor among the poor with his seven pounds a year, looked upon with doubt by respectable elders, but for all that the best talker, the best letter-writer, the most famous lover and confidant, the laureate poet, and the only man who wore his hair tied in the parish.

He says he had then as high a notion of himself as ever after ; and I can well believe it. Among the youth he walked *facile pjiniceps*, an apparent god; and even if, from time to time, the Reverend Mr. Auld should swoop upon him with the thunders of the Church, and, in company with seven others, Rab the Ranter must figure some fine Sunday on the stool of repentance, would there not be a sort of glory, an infernal apotheosis, in so conspicuous a shame? Was not Richelieu in disgrace more idolised than ever by the dames of Paris ? and when was the highwayman most acclaimed but on his way to Tyburn? Or, to take a simile from nearer home, and still more exactly to the point, what could even corporal punishment avail, administered by a cold, abstract, unearthly schoolmaster, against the influence and fame of the school's hero?

And now we come to the culminating point of Burns's early period. He began to be received into the unknown upper world. His fame soon spread from among his fellow-rebels on the benches, and began to reach the ushers and monitors of this great Ayrshire academy. This arose in part from his lax views about religion ; for at this time that old war of the creeds and confessors, which is always grumbling from end to end of our poor Scotland, brisked up in these parts into a hot and virulent skirmish; and Burns found himself identified with the opposition party,—a clique of roaring lawyers and half-heretical divines, with wit enough to appreciate the value of the poet's help, and not sufficient taste to moderate his grossness and personality. We may judge of their surprise when *Holy Willie* was put into their hand; like the amorous lads of Tarbolton, they recognised in him the best of seconds. His satires began to go the round in manuscript; Mr. Aiken, one of the lawyers, 'read him into fame;' he himself was soon welcome in many houses of a better sort, where his admirable talk, and his maimers, which he had direct from his Maker, except for a brush he gave them at a country dancing-school, completed what his poems had begun. We have a sight of him at his first visit to Adamhill, in his ploughman's shoes, coasting around the carpet as though that were sacred ground. But he soon grew used to carpets and their owners; and he was still the superior of all whom he

encountered, and ruled the roost in conversation. Such was the impression made, that a young clergyman, himself a man of ability, trembled and became confused when he saw . Robert enter the church in which he was to preach. It is not surprising that the poet determined to publish : he had now stood the test of some publicity, and under this hopeful impulse he composed in six winter months the bulk of his more important poems. Here was a young man who, from a very humble place, was mounting rapidly ; from the cynosure of a parish he had become the talk of a county ; once the bard of rural courtships, he was now about to appear as a bound and printed poet in the world s bookshops.

A few more intimate strokes are necessary to complete the sketch. This strong young ploughman, who feared no competitor with the flail, suffered like a fine lady from sleeplessness and vapours; he would fall into the blackest melancholies, and be filled with remorse for the past and terror for the future. He was still not perhaps devoted to religion, but haunted by it; and at a touch of sickness prostrated himself before God in what I can only call unmanly penitence. As he had aspirations beyond his place in the world, so he had tastes, thoughts, and weaknesses to match. He loved to walk under a wood to the sound of a winter tempest; he had a singular tenderness for animals; he carried a book with him in his pocket when he went abroad, and wore out in this service two copies of the *Man of Feeling*. With young people in the field at work he was very long-suffering; and when his brother Gilbert spoke sharply to them—‘ O man, ye are no’ for young folk,’ he would say, and give the defaulter a helping hand and a smile. In the hearts of the men whom he met he read as in a book; and, what is yet more rare, his knowledge of himself equalled his knowledge of others. There are no truer things said of Burns than what is to be found in his own letters. Country Don Juan as he was, he had none of that blind vanity which values itself on what it is not; he knew his own strength and weakness to a hair: he took himself boldly for what he was, and, except in moments of hypochondria, declared himself content.

THE LOVE-STORIES

On the night of Mauchline races, 1785, the young men and women of the place joined in a penny ball, according to their custom. ‘In the same set danced Jean Armour, the master-mason’s daughter, and our dark-eyed Don Juan. His dog (not the immortal Luath, but a successor unknown to fame, *caret quia vate sacro*), apparently sensible of some neglect, followed his master to and fro, to the confusion of the dancers. Some mirthful comments followed; and Jean heard the poet say to his partner—or, as I should imagine, laughingly launch the remark to the company at large—that ‘he wished he could get any of the lassies to like him as well as his dog.’ Some time after, as the girl was bleaching clothes on Mauchline green, Robert chanced to go by, still accompanied by his dog; and the dog, ‘ scouring in long excursion,’ scampered with four black paws across the linen. This brought the two into conversation; when Jean, with a somewhat hoydenish advance, inquired if ^e he had yet got any of the lassies to like him as well as his dog.’

It is one of the misfortunes of the professional Don Juan that his honour forbids him to refuse battle; he is in life like the Roman soldier upon duty, or like the sworn physician who must attend on all diseases. Burns accepted the provocation; hungry hope reawakened in his heart; here was a girl pretty, simple at least, if not honestly stupid, and plainly not averse to his attentions: it seemed to him once more as if love might here be waiting him. Had he but known the truth ! for this facile and empty-headed girl had nothing more in view than a flirtation ; and her heart, from the first and on to the end of her story, was engaged by another man. Burns once more commenced the celebrated process of ' battering himself into a warm affection; ' and the proofs of his success are to be found in many verses of the period. Nor did he succeed with himself only; Jean, with her heart still elsewhere, succumbed to his fascination, and early in the next year the natural consequence became manifest. It was a heavy stroke for this unfortunate couple. They had trifled with life, and were now rudely reminded of life's serious issues. Jean awoke to the ruin of her hopes; the best she had now to expect was marriage with a man who was a stranger to her dearest thoughts; she might now be glad if she could get what she would never have chosen. As for Burns, at the stroke of the calamity he recognised that his voyage of discovery had led him into a wrong hemisphere—that he was not, and never had been, really in love with Jean. Hear him in the pressure of the hour. 'Against two things,' he writes, 'I am as fixed as fate—staying at home, and owning her conjugally. The first, by heaven, I will not do!— the last, by hell, I will never do!' And then he adds, perhaps already in a more relenting temper: ' If you see Jean, tell her I will meet her, so God help me in my hour of need.' They met accordingly; and Burns, touched with her misery, came down from these heights of independence, and gave her a written acknowledgment of marriage.

It is the punishment of Don Juanism to create continually false positions—relations in life which are wrong in themselves, and which it is equally wrong to break or to perpetuate. This was such a case. Worldly Wiseman would have laughed and gone his way; let us be glad that Burns was better counselled by his heart. When we discover that we can be no longer true, the next best is to be kind. I daresay he came away from that interview not very content, but with a glorious conscience; and as he went homeward, he would sing his favourite, ' How are Thy servants blest, O Lord! ' Jean, on the other hand, armed with her ' lines,' confided her position to the master-mason, her father, and his wife. Burns and his brother were then in a fair way to ruin themselves in their farm; the poet was an execrable match for any well-to-do country lass; and perhaps old Armour had an inkling of a previous attachment on his daughter's part. At least, he was not so much incensed by her slip from virtue as by the marriage which had been designed to cover it. Of this he would not hear a word. Jean, who had besought the acknowledgment only to appease her parents, and not at all from any violent inclination to the poet, readily gave up the paper for destruction; and all parties imagined, although wrongly, that the marriage was thus dissolved. To a proud man like Burns here was a crushing blow. The concession which had been wrung from his pity was now publicly thrown back in his teeth. The Armour family preferred disgrace to his connection. Since the promise, besides, he had doubtless been busy 'battering himself' back again into his affection for the girl;

and the blow would not only take him in his vanity, but wound him at the heart.

He relieved himself in verse; but for such a smarting affront manuscript poetry was insufficient to console him. He must find a more powerful remedy in good flesh and blood, and after this discomfiture set forth again at once upon his voyage of discovery in quest of love. It is perhaps one of the most touching things in human nature, as it is a commonplace of psychology, that when a man has just lost hope or confidence in one love, he is then most eager to find and lean upon another. The universe could not be yet exhausted; there must be hope and love waiting for him somewhere; and so, with his head down, this poor, insulted poet ran once more upon his fate. There was an innocent and gentle Highland nursery-maid at service in a neighbouring family ; and he had soon battered himself and her into a warm affection and a secret engagement. Jean's marriage-lines had not been destroyed till March 13, 1786; yet all was settled between Burns and Mary Campbell by Sunday, May 14, when they met for the last time, and said farewell with rustic solemnities upon the banks of Ayr. They each wet their hands in a stream, 5-e 65 and, standing one on either bank, held a Bible between them as they vowed eternal faith. Then they exchanged Bibles, on one of which Burns, for greater security, had inscribed texts as to the binding nature of an oath; and surely, if ceremony can do aught to fix the wandering affections, here were two people united for life. Mary came of a superstitious family, so that she perhaps insisted on these rites; but they must have been eminently to the taste of Burns at this period ; for nothing would seem superfluous, and no oath great enough, to stay his tottering constancy.

Events of consequence now happened thickly in the poet's life. His book was announced; the Armours sought to summon him at law for the aliment of the child; he lay here and there in hiding to correct the sheets; he was under an engagement for Jamaica, where Mary was to join him as his wife; now he had ' orders within three weeks at latest to repair aboard the *Nancy*, Captain Smith;⁵ now his chest was already on the road to Greenock; and now, in the wild autumn weather on the moorland, he measures verses of farewell:—

The bursting tears my heart declare;
Farewell the bonny banks of Ayr! '

But the great Master Dramatist had secretly another intention for the piece; by the most violent and complicated solution, in which death and birth and sudden fame all play a part as interposing deities, the act-drop fell upon a scene of transformation. Jean was brought to bed of twins, and, by an amicable⁶⁶ arrangement, the Burnses took the boy to bring up by hand, while the girl remained with her mother. The success of the book was immediate and emphatic; it put £20 at once into the author's purse; and he was encouraged upon all hands to go to Edinburgh and push his success in a second and larger edition. Third and last in these series of interpositions, a letter came one day to Mossiel farm for Robert. He went to the window to read it; a sudden change came over his face, and he left the room without a word. Years afterwards, when the story began to leak out, his family understood

that he had then learned the death of Highland Mary. Except in a few poems and a few dry indications purposely misleading as to date, Burns himself made no reference to this passage of his life; it was an adventure of which, for I think sufficient reasons, he desired to bury the details. Of one thing we may be glad : in after years he visited the poor girl's mother, and left her with the impression that he was * a real warmhearted chield.'

Perhaps a month after he received this intelligence, he set out for Edinburgh on a pony he had borrowed from a friend. The town that winter was 'agog with the ploughman poet.' Robertson, Dugald Stewart, Blair, 'Duchess Gordon and all the gay world,' were of his acquaintance. Such a revolution is not to be found in literary history. He was now, it must be remembered, twenty-seven years of age; he had fought since his early boyhood an obstinate battle against poor soil, bad seed, and . 67 inclement seasons, wading deep in Ayrshire mosses, guiding the plough in the furrow, wielding 'the thresher's weary flingin'-tree; ' and his education, his diet, and his pleasures, had been those of a Scots countryman. Now he stepped forth suddenly among the polite and learned. We can see him as he then was, in his boots and buckskins, his blue coat and waistcoat striped with buff and blue, like a farmer in his Sunday best; the heavy ploughman's figure firmly planted on its burly legs; his face full of sense and shrewdness, and with a somewhat melancholy air of thought, and his large dark eye 'literally glowing ' as he spoke. 'I never saw such another eye in a human head,' says Walter Scott, 'though I have seen the most distinguished men of my time.' With men, whether they were lords or omnipotent critics, his manner was plain, dignified, and free from bashfulness or affectation. If he made a slip, he had the social courage to pass on and refrain from explanation. He was not embarrassed in this society, because he read and judged the men; he could spy snobbery in a titled lord; and, as for the critics, he dismissed their system in an epigram. 'These gentlemen,' said he, 'remind me of some spinsters in my country who spin their thread so fine that it is neither fit for weft nor woof.' Ladies, on the other hand, surprised him; he was scarce commander of himself in their society; he was disqualified by his acquired nature as a Don Juan; and he, who had been so much at his ease with country lasses, treated the town dames to an extreme of deference. One lady, who met him at a ball, gave Chambers a speaking sketch of his demeanour. 'His manner was not prepossessing —scarcely, she thinks, manly or natural. It seemed as if he affected a rusticity or *landertness*, so that when he said the music was "bonnie, bonnie," it was like the expression of a child.' These would be company manners; and doubtless on a slight degree of intimacy the affectation would grow less. And his talk to women had always 'a turn either to the pathetic or humorous, which engaged the attention particularly.'

The Edinburgh magnates (to conclude this episode at once) behaved well to Burns from first to last. Were heaven-born genius to revisit us in similar guise, I am not venturing too far when I say that he need expect neither so warm a welcome nor such solid help. Although Burns was only a peasant, and one of no very elegant reputation as to morals, he was made welcome to their homes. They gave him a great deal of good advice, helped him to some five hundred pounds of ready money,

and got him, as soon as he asked it, a place in the Excise. Burns, on his part, bore the elevation with perfect dignity; and with perfect dignity returned, when the time had come, into a country privacy of life. His powerful sense never deserted him, and from the first he recognised that his Edinburgh popularity was but an ovation and the affair of a day. He wrote a few letters in a high-flown, bombastic vein of gratitude; but in practice he suffered no man to intrude upon his self-respect. On the other hand, he never turned his back, even for a moment, on his old associates; and he was always ready to sacrifice an acquaintance to a friend, although the acquaintance were a duke. He would be a bold man who should promise similar conduct in equally exacting circumstances. It was, in short, an admirable appearance on the stage of life—socially successful, intimately self-respecting, and like a gentleman from first to last.

In the present study this must only be taken by the way, while we return to Burns's love-affairs. Even on the road to Edinburgh he had seized upon the opportunity of a flirtation, and had carried the 'battering' so far that when next he moved from town, it was to steal two days with this anonymous fair one. The exact importance to Burns of this affair may be gathered from the song in which he commemorated its occurrence. 'I love the dear lassie,' he sings, 'because she loves me;' or, in the tongue of prose: 'Finding an opportunity, I did not hesitate to profit by it; and even now, if it returned, I should not hesitate to profit by it again.' A love thus founded has no interest for mortal man. Meantime, early in the winter, and only once, we find him regretting Jean in his correspondence. 'Because'—such is his reason—'because he does not think he will ever meet so delicious an armful again;' and then, after a brief excursion into verse, he goes straight on to describe a new episode in the voyage of discovery with the daughter of a Lothian farmer for a heroine. I must ask the reader to follow all these references to his future wife; they are essential to the comprehension of Burns's character and fate. In June we find him back at Mauchline, a famous man. There, the Armour family greeted him with a 'mean, servile compliance,' which increased his former disgust. Jean was not less compliant; a second time the poor girl submitted to the fascination of the man whom she did not love, and whom she had so cruelly insulted little more than a year ago; and, though Burns took advantage of her weakness, it was in the ugliest and most cynical spirit, and with a heart absolutely indifferent. Judge of this by a letter written some twenty days after his return—a letter to my mind among the most degrading in the whole collection—a letter which seems to have been inspired by a boastful, libertine bagman. 'I am afraid,' it goes, 'I have almost ruined one source, the principal one, indeed, of my former happiness—the eternal propensity I always had to fall in love. My heart no more glows with feverish rapture; I have no paradisiacal evening interviews.' Even the process of 'battering' has failed him, you perceive. Still he had some one in his eye—a lady, if you please, with a fine figure and elegant manners, and who had 'seen the politest quarters in Europe.' 'I frequently visited her,' he writes, 'and after passing regularly the intermediate degrees between the distant formal bow and the familiar grasp round the waist, I ventured, in my careless way, to talk of friendship in rather ambiguous terms; and after her return to--I wrote her in the same terms. Missconstruing my remarks further than even I intended, flew

off in a tangent of female dignity and reserve, like a mountain lark in an April morning; and wrote me an answer which measured out very completely what an immense way I had to travel before I could reach the climate of her favours. But I am an old hawk at the sport, and wrote her such a cool, deliberate, prudent reply, as brought my bird from her aerial towerings, pop, down to my foot, like Corporal Trim's hat.' I avow a carnal longing, after this transcription, to buffet the Old Hawk about the ears. There is little question that to this lady he must have repeated his addresses, and that he was by her (Miss Chalmers) eventually, though not at all unkindly, rejected. One more detail to characterise the period. Six months after the date of this letter, Burns, back in Edinburgh, is served with a writ *in meditatione fugae*, on behalf of some Edinburgh fair one, probably of humble rank, who declared an intention of adding to his family.

About the beginning of December (1787) a new period opens in the story of the poet's random affections. He met at a tea-party one Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose, a married woman of about his own age, who, with her two children, had been deserted by an unworthy husband. She had wit, could use her pen, and had read *Werther* with attention. Sociable, and even somewhat frisky, there was a good, sound, human kernel in the woman; a warmth of love, strong dogmatic religious feeling, and a considerable, but not authoritative, sense of the proprieties. Of what biographers refer to daintily as 'her somewhat voluptuous style of beauty,' judging from the silhouette in Mr. Scott Douglas's invaluable edition, the reader will be fastidious if he does not approve. Take her for all in all, I believe she was the best woman Burns encountered. The pair took a fancy for each other on the spot; Mrs. M'Lehose, in her turn, invited him to tea; but the poet, in his character of the Old Hawk, preferred a *tete-a-tete*, excused himself at the last moment, and offered a visit instead. An accident confined him to his room for nearly a month, and this led to the famous Clarinda and Sylvander correspondence. It was begun in simple sport; they are already at their fifth or sixth exchange, when Clarinda writes: 'It is really curious so much *fun* passing between two persons who saw each other only *once*;' but it is hardly safe for a man and woman in the flower of their years to write almost daily, and sometimes in terms too ambiguous, sometimes in terms too plain, and generally in terms too warm for mere acquaintance. The exercise partakes a little of the nature of battering, and danger may be apprehended when next they meet. It is difficult to give any account of this remarkable correspondence; it is too far away from us, and perhaps not yet far enough, in point of time and manner; the imagination is baffled by these stilted literary utterances, warming, in bravura passages, into downright truculent nonsense.

Clarinda has one famous sentence in which she bids Sylvander connect the thought of his mistress with the changing phases of the year; it was enthusiastically admired by the swain, but on the modern mind produces mild amazement and alarm. ⁸ Oh, Clarinda,' writes Burns, ⁸ shall we not meet in a state—some yet unknown state—of being, where the lavish hand of Plenty shall minister to the highest wish of Benevolence, and where the chill north wind of Prudence shall never blow over the flowery field of Enjoyment ? ' The design may be that of an Old Hawk, but the style

is more suggestive of a Bird of Paradise. It is sometimes hard to fancy they are not gravely making fun of each other as they write. Religion, poetry, love, and charming sensibility, are the current topics. 'I am delighted, charming Clarinda, with your honest enthusiasm for religion,' writes Burns; and the pair entertained a fiction that this was their 'favourite subject.' 'This is Sunday,' writes the lady, 'and not a word on our favourite subject. O fy! " divine Clarinda I suspect, although quite unconsciously on the part of the lady, who was bent on his redemption, they but used the favourite subject as a stalking-horse. In the meantime, the sportive acquaintance was ripening steadily into a genuine passion. Visits took place, and then became frequent. Clarinda's friends were hurt and suspicious; her clergyman interfered; she herself had smart attacks of conscience; but her heart had gone from her control; it was altogether his, and she⁸ counted all things but loss—heaven excepted—that she might win and keep him/ Burns himself was transported while in her neighbourhood, but his transports somewhat rapidly declined during an absence. I am tempted to imagine that, womanlike, he took on the colour of his mistress's feeling; that he could not but heat himself at the fire of her unaffected passion; but that, like one who should leave the hearth upon a winter's night, his temperature soon fell when he was out of sight, and in a word, though he could share the symptoms, that he had never shared the disease. At the same time, amid the fustian of the letters there are forcible and true expressions, and the love-verses that he wrote upon Clarinda are among the most moving in the language.

We are approaching the solution. In mid-winter, Jean, once more in the family-way, was turned out of doors by her family ; and Burns had her received and cared 'for in the house of a friend. For he remained to the last imperfect in his character of Don Juan, and lacked the sinister courage to desert his victim. About the middle of February (1788) he had to tear himself from his Clarinda and make a journey into the south-west on business. Clarinda gave him two shirts for his little son. They were daily to meet in prayer at an appointed hour. Burns, too late for the post at Glasgow, sent her a letter by parcel that she might not have to wait. Clarinda on her part writes, this time with a beautiful simplicity: 'I think the streets look deserted-like since Monday; and there's a certain insipidity in good kind folks I once enjoyed not a little. Miss Wardrobe supped here on Monday. She once named you, which kept me from falling asleep. I drank your health in a glass of ale—as the lasses do at Hallowe'en—" in to mysel'." ' Arrived at Mauchline, Burns installed Jean Armour in a lodging, and prevailed on Mrs. Armour to promise her help and countenance in the approaching confinement. This was kind at least; but hear his expressions: 'I have taken her a room; I have taken her to my arms; I have given her a mahogany bed; I have given her a guinea. ... I swore her privately and solemnly never to attempt any claim on me as a husband, even though anybody should persuade her she had such a claim—which she has not, neither during my life nor after my death. She did all this like a good girl.' And then he took advantage of the situation. To Clarinda he wrote: 'I this morning called for a certain woman. I am disgusted with her ; I cannot endure her; ' and he accused her of 'tasteless insipidity, vulgarity of. soul, and mercenary fawning.' This was already in March; by the 13th of that month he was back in Edinburgh. On the 17th he wrote to Clarinda: 'Your hopes, your fears, your cares,

my love, are mine, so don't mind them. I will take you in my hand through the dreary wilds of this world, and scare away the ravening bird or beast that would annoy you.' Again, on the 21st: 'Will you open, with satisfaction and delight, a letter from a man who loves you, who has loved you, and who will love you, to death, through death, and for ever? . . . How rich am I to have such a treasure as you! . . . "The Lord God knoweth," and, perhaps, 'Israel he shall know," my love and your merit. Adieu, Clarinda! I am going to remember you in my prayers.' By the 7th of April, seventeen days later, he had already decided to make Jean Armour publicly his wife.

A more astonishing stage-trick is not to be found. And yet his conduct is seen, upon a nearer examination, to be grounded both in reason and in kindness. He was now about to embark on a solid worldly career; he had taken a farm; the affair with Clarinda, however gratifying to his heart, was too contingent to offer any great consolation to a man like Burns, to whom marriage must have seemed the very dawn of hope and self-respect. This is to regard the question from its lowest aspect; but there is no doubt that he entered on this new period of his life with a sincere determination to do right. He had just helped his brother with a loan of a hundred and eighty pounds; should he do nothing for the poor girl whom he had ruined? It was true he could not do as he did without brutally wounding Clarinda; that was the punishment of his bygone fault; he was, as he truly says, 'damned with a choice only of different species of error and misconduct! To be professional Don Juan, to accept the provocation of any lively lass upon the village green, may thus lead a man through a series of detestable words and actions, and land him at last in an undesired and most unsuitable union for life. If he had been strong enough to refrain or bad enough to persevere in evil; if he had only not been Don Juan at all, or been Don Juan altogether, there had been some possible road for him throughout this troublesome world; but a man, alas! who is equally at the call of his worse and better instincts, stands among changing events without foundation or resource.

DOWNWARD COURSE

It may be questionable whether any marriage could have tamed Burns; but it is at least certain that there was no hope for him in the marriage he contracted. He did right, but then he had done wrong before; it was, as I said, one of those relations in life which it seems equally wrong to break or to perpetuate. He neither loved nor respected his wife. 'God knows,' he writes, 'my choice was as random as blind man's buff.' He consoles himself by the thought that he has acted kindly to her; that she 'has the most sacred enthusiasm of attachment to him;' that she has a good figure; that she has a 'wood-note wild,' 'her voice rising with ease to B natural,' no less. The effect on the reader is one of unmingled pity for both parties concerned. This was not the wife who (in his own words) could 'enter into his favourite studies or relish his favourite authors;' this was not even a wife, after the affair of the marriage-lines, in whom a husband could joy to place his trust. Let her manage a farm with sense, let her voice rise to B natural all day long, she would still be a peasant to her lettered lord, and an object of pity rather than of equal affection. She could now be faithful, she could now be forgiving, she could now be generous even to a pathetic

and touching degree; but coming from one who was unloved, and who had scarce shown herself worthy of the sentiment, these were all virtues thrown away, which could neither change her husband's heart nor affect the inherent destiny of their relation. From the outset, it was a marriage that had no root in nature; and we find him, ere long, lyrically regretting Highland Mary, renewing correspondence with Clarinda in the warmest language, on doubtful terms with Mrs. Riddel, and on terms unfortunately beyond any question with Anne Park.

Alas! this was not the only ill circumstance in his future. He had been idle for some eighteen months, superintending his new edition, hanging on to settle with the publisher, travelling in the Highlands with Willie Nicol, or philandering with Mrs. M'Lehose; and in this period the radical part of the man had suffered irremediable hurt. He had lost his habits of industry, and formed the habit of pleasure. Apologetical biographers assure us of the contrary; but from the first he saw and recognised the danger for himself; his mind, he writes, is ⁴ enervated to an alarming degree 'by idleness and dissipation; and again, 'my mind has been vitiated with idleness.' It never fairly recovered. To business he could bring the required diligence and attention without difficulty; but he was thenceforward incapable, except in rare instances, of that superior effort of concentration which is required for serious literary work. He may be said, indeed, to have worked no more, and only amused himself with letters. The man who had written a volume of masterpieces in six months, during the remainder of his life rarely found courage for any more sustained effort than a song. And the nature of the songs is itself characteristic of these idle later years; for they are often as polished and elaborate as his earlier works were frank, and headlong, and colloquial; and this sort of verbal elaboration in short flights is, for a man of literary turn, simply the most agreeable of pastimes. The change in manner coincides exactly with the Edinburgh visit. In 1786 he had written the *Address to a Louse*, which may be taken as an extreme instance of the first manner; and already, in 1787, we come upon the rosebud pieces to Miss Cruikshank, which are extreme examples of the second. The change was, therefore, the direct and very natural consequence of his great change in life; but it is not the less typical of his loss of moral courage that he should have given up all larger ventures, nor the less melancholy that a man who first attacked literature with a hand that seemed capable of moving mountains, should have spent his later years in whittling cherry-stones.

Meanwhile the farm did not prosper; he had to join to it the salary of an exciseman; at last he had to give it up, and rely altogether on the latter resource. He was an active officer; and, though he sometimes tempered severity with mercy, we have local testimony, oddly representing the public feeling of the period, that, while 'in everything else he was a perfect gentleman, when he met with anything seizable he was no better than any other gauger.'

There is but one manifestation of the man in these last years which need delay us: and that was the sudden interest in politics which arose from his sympathy with the great French Revolution. His only political feeling had been hitherto a sentimental

Jacobitism, not more or less respectable than that of Scott, Aytoun, and the rest of what George Borrow has nicknamed the 'Charlie over the water' Scotsmen. It was a sentiment almost entirely literary and picturesque in its origin, built on ballads and the adventures of the Young Chevalier; and in Burns it is the more excusable, because he lay out of the way of active politics in his youth. With the great French Revolution, something living, practical, and feasible appeared to him for the first time in this realm of human action. The young ploughman who had desired so earnestly to rise, now reached out his sympathies to a whole nation animated with the same desire. Already in 1788 we find the old Jacobitism hand in hand with the new popular doctrine, when, in a letter of indignation against the zeal of a Whig clergyman, he writes: 'I daresay the American Congress in 1776 will be allowed to be as able and as enlightened as the English Convention was in 1688; and that their posterity will celebrate the centenary of their deliverance from us, as duly and sincerely as we do ours from the oppressive measures of the wrongheaded house of Stuart.' As time wore on, his sentiments grew more pronounced, and even violent; but there was a basis of sense and generous feeling to his hottest excess. What he asked was a fair chance for the individual in life; an open road to success and distinction for all classes of men. It was in the same spirit that he had helped to found a public library in the parish where his farm was situated, and that he sang his fervent snatches against tyranny and tyrants. Witness, were it alone, this verse :—

'Here's freedom to him that wad read,
Here's freedom to him that wad write;
There's nane ever feared that the truth should be heard
But them wham the truth wad indite.'

Yet his enthusiasm for the cause was scarce guided by wisdom. Many stories are preserved of the bitter and unwise words he used in country coterie; how he proposed Washington's health as an amendment to Pitt's, gave as a toast 'the last verse of the last chapter of Kings,' and celebrated Dumouriez in a doggerel impromptu full of ridicule and hate.

Now his sympathies would inspire him with *Scots who hae*; now involve him in a drunken broil with a loyal officer, and consequent apologies and explanations, hard to offer for a man of Burns's stomach. Nor was this the front of his offending. On February 27, 1792, he took part in the capture of an armed smuggler, bought at the subsequent sale four carronades, and despatched them with a letter to the French Assembly. Letter and guns were stopped at Dover by the English officials; there was trouble for Burns with his superiors; he was reminded firmly, however delicately, that, as a paid official, it was his duty to obey and to be silent; and all the blood of this poor, proud, and falling man must have rushed to his head at the humiliation. His letter to Mr. Erskine, subsequently Earl of Mar, testifies, in its turgid, turbulent phrases, to a perfect passion of alarmed self-respect and vanity. He had been muzzled, and muzzled, when all was said, by his paltry salary as an exciseman; alas! had he not a family to keep? Already, he wrote, he looked forward to some such judgment from a hackney scribbler as this: 'Burns, notwithstanding

the *fanfai'onnade* of independence to be found in his works, and after having been held forth to public view and to public estimation as a man of some genius, yet, quite destitute of resources within himself to support his borrowed dignity, he dwindled into a paltry exciseman, and slunk out the rest of his insignificant existence in the meanest of pursuits, and among the vilest of mankind.' And then on he goes, in a style of rodomontade, but filled with living indignation, to declare his right to a political opinion, and his willingness to shed his blood for the political birthright of his sons. Poor, perturbed spirit! he was indeed exercised in vain; those who share and those who differ from his sentiments about the Revolution, alike understand and sympathise with him in this painful strait; for poetry and human manhood are lasting like the race, and politics, which are but a wrongful striving after right, pass and change from year to year and age to age. The *Twa Dogs* has already outlasted the constitution of Sieyes and the policy of the Whigs; and Burns is better known among English-speaking races than either Pitt or Fox.

Meanwhile, whether as a man, a husband, or a poet, his steps led downward. He knew, knew bitterly, that the best was out of him : he refused to make another volume, for he felt it would be a disappointment ; he grew petulantly alive to criticism, unless he was sure it reached him from a friend. For his songs, he would take nothing; they were all that he could do; the proposed Scots play, the proposed series of Scots tales in verse, all had gone to water; and in a fling of pain and disappointment, which is surely noble with the nobility of a viking, he would rather stoop to borrow than to accept money for these last and inadequate efforts of his muse. And this desperate abnegation rises at times near to the height of madness; as when he pretended that he had not written, but only found and published, his immortal *Auld Lang Syne*. In the same spirit he became more scrupulous as an artist; he was doing so little he would fain do that little well; and about two months before his death he asked Thomson to send back all his manuscripts for revisal, saying that lie would rather write five songs to his taste than twice that number otherwise. The battle of his life was lost; in forlorn efforts to do well, in desperate submissions to evil, the last years flew by. His temper is dark and explosive, launching epigrams, quarrelling with his friends, jealous of young puppy officers. He tries to be a good father; he boasts himself a libertine. Sick, sad, and jaded, he can refuse no occasion of temporary pleasure, no opportunity to shine ; and he who had once refused the invitations of lords and ladies is now whistled to the inn by any curious stranger. His death (July 21, 1796), in his thirty-seventh year, was indeed a kindly dispensation. It is the fashion to say he died of drink; many a man has drunk more and yet lived with reputation, and reached a good age. That drink and debauchery helped to destroy his constitution, and were the means of his unconscious suicide, is doubtless true; but he had failed in life, had lost his power of work, and was already married to the poor, unworthy, patient Jean, before he had shown his inclination to convivial nights, or at least before that inclination had become dangerous either to his health or his self-respect. He had trifled with life, and must pay the penalty. He had chosen to be Don Juan, he had grasped at temporary pleasures, and substantial happiness and solid industry had passed him by. He died of being Robert Burns, and there is no levity in such a statement of the

case; for shall we not, one and all, deserve a similar epitaph?

WORKS

The somewhat cruel necessity which has lain upon me throughout this paper only to touch upon those points in the life of Burns where correction or amplification seemed desirable, leaves me little opportunity to speak of the works which have made his name so famous. Yet, even here, a few observations seem necessary.

At the time when the poet made his appearance and great first success, his work was remarkable in two ways. For, first, in an age when poetry had become abstract and conventional, instead of continuing to deal with shepherds, thunderstorms, and personifications, he dealt with the actual circumstances of his life, however matter-of-fact and sordid these might be. And, second, in a time when English versification was particularly stiff, lame, and feeble, and words were used with ultra-academical timidity, he wrote verses that were easy, racy, graphic, and forcible, and used language with absolute tact and courage as it seemed most fit to give a clear impression. If you take even those English authors whom we know Burns to have most admired and studied, you will see at once that he owed them nothing but a warning. Take Shenstone, for instance, and watch that elegant author as he tries to grapple with the facts of life. He has a description, I remember, of a gentleman engaged in sliding or walking on thin ice, which is a little miracle of incompetence. You see my memory fails me, and I positively cannot recollect whether his hero was sliding or walking; as though a writer should describe a skirmish, and the reader, at the end, be still uncertain whether it were a charge of cavalry or a slow and stubborn advance of foot. There could be no such ambiguity in Burns; his work is at the opposite pole from such indefinite and stammering performances; and a whole lifetime passed in the study of Shenstone would only lead a man further and further from writing the *Address to a Louse*. Yet Burns, like most great artists, proceeded from a school and continued a tradition; only the school and tradition were Scottish, and not English. While the English language was becoming daily more pedantic and inflexible, and English letters more colourless and slack, there was another dialect in the sister country, and a different school of poetry, tracing its descent, through King James I., from Chaucer. The dialect alone accounts for much; for it was then written colloquially, which kept it fresh and supple; and, although not shaped for heroic flights, it was a direct and vivid medium for all that had to do with social life. Hence, whenever Scottish poets left their laborious imitations of bad English verses, and fell back on their own dialect, their style would kindle, and they would write of their convivial and somewhat gross existences with pith and point. In Ramsay, and far more in the poor lad Fergusson, there was mettle, humour, literary courage, and a power of saying what they wished to say definitely and brightly, which in the latter case should have justified great anticipations. Had Burns died at the same age as Fergusson, he would have left us literally nothing worth remark. To Ramsay and to Fergusson, then, he was indebted in a very uncommon degree, not only following their tradition and using their measures, but directly and avowedly imitating their pieces. The same tendency to borrow a hint, to work on some one else's foundation,

is notable in Burns from first to last, in the period of song-writing as well as in that of the early poems ; and strikes one oddly in a man of such deep originality, who left so strong a print on all he touched, and whose work is so greatly distinguished by that character of 'inevitability' which Wordsworth denied to Goethe.

When we remember Burns's obligations to his predecessors, we must never forget his immense advances on them. They had already 'discovered' nature ; but Burns discovered poetry—a higher and more intense way of thinking of the things that go to make up nature, a higher and more ideal key of words in which to speak of them. Ramsay and Fergusson excelled at making a popular—or shall we say vulgar?—sort of society verses, comical and prosaic, written, you would say, in taverns while a supper-party waited for its laureate's word; but on the appearance of Burns this coarse and laughing literature was touched to finer issues, and learned gravity of thought and natural pathos.

What he had gained from his predecessors was a direct, speaking style, and to walk on his own feet instead of on academical stilts. There was never a man of letters with more absolute command of his means ; and we may say of him, without excess, that his style was his slave. Hence that energy of epithet, so concise and telling, that a foreigner is tempted to explain it by some special richness or aptitude in the dialect he wrote. Hence that Homeric justice and completeness of description which gives us the very physiognomy of nature, in body and detail, as nature is. Hence, too, the unbroken literary quality of his best pieces, which keeps him from any slip into the wearyful trade of word-painting, and presents everything, as everything should be presented by the art of words, in a clear, continuous medium of thought. Principal Shairp, for instance, gives us a paraphrase of one tough verse of the original; and for those who know the Greek poets only by paraphrase, this has the very quality they are accustomed to look for and admire in Greek. The contemporaries of Burns were surprised that he should visit so many celebrated mountains and waterfalls, and not seize the opportunity to make a poem. Indeed, it is not for those who have a true command of the art of words, but for peddling, professional amateurs, that these pointed occasions are most useful and inspiring. As those who speak French imperfectly are glad to dwell on any topic they may have talked upon or heard others talk upon before, because they know appropriate words for it in French, so the dabbler in verse rejoices to behold a waterfall, because he has learned the septiment and knows appropriate words for it in poetry. But the dialect of Burns was fitted to deal with any subject; and whether it was a stormy night, a shepherd's collie, a sheep struggling in the snow, the conduct of cowardly soldiers in the field, the gait and cogitations of a drunken man, or only a village cockcrow in the morning, he could find language to give it freshness, body, and relief. He was always ready to borrow the hint of a design, as though he had a difficulty in commencing—a difficulty, let us say, in choosing a subject out of a world which seemed all equally living and significant to him ; but once he had the subject chosen, he could cope with nature singlehanded, and make every stroke a triumph. Again, his absolute mastery in his art enabled him to express each and all of his different humours, and to pass smoothly and congruously from one to another. Many men invent a dialect for only

one side of their nature—perhaps their pathos or their humour, or the delicacy of their senses—and, for lack of a medium, leave all the others unexpressed. You meet such an one, and find him in conversation full of thought, feeling, and experience, which he has lacked the art to employ in his writings. But Burns was not thus hampered in the practice of the literary art; he could throw the whole weight of his nature into his work, and impregnate it from end to end. If Doctor Johnson, that stilted and accomplished stylist, had lacked the sacred Boswell, what should we have known of him ? and how should we have delighted in his acquaintance as we do? Those who spoke with Burns tell us how much we have lost who did not. But I think they exaggerate their privilege: I think we have the whole Burns in our possession set forth in his consummate verses.

It was by his style, and not by his matter, that he affected Wordsworth and the world. There is, indeed, only one merit worth considering in a man of letters—that he should write well; and only one damning fault—that he should write ill. We are little the better for the reflections of the sailor's parrot in the story. And so, if Burns helped to change the course of literary history, it was by his frank, direct, and masterly utterance, and not by his homely choice of subjects. That was imposed upon him, not chosen upon a principle. He wrote from his own experience, because it was his nature so to do, and the tradition of the school from which he proceeded was fortunately not opposed to homely subjects. But to these homely subjects he communicated the rich commentary of his nature ; they were all steeped in Burns ; and they interest us not in themselves, but because they have been passed through the spirit of so genuine and vigorous a man. Such is the stamp of living literature; and there was never any more alive than that of Burns.

What a gust of sympathy there is in him sometimes flowing out in byways hitherto unused, upon mice, and flowers, and the devil himself; sometimes speaking plainly between human hearts ; sometimes ringing out in exultation like a peal of bells! When we compare the *Farmers Salutation to his Auld Mare Maggie*, with the clever and inhumane production of half a century earlier, *The Auld Mans Mare's Dead*, we see in a nutshell the spirit of the change introduced by Burns. And as to its manner, who that has read it can forget how the collie, Luath, in the *Twa Dogs*, describes and enters into the merry-making in the cottage?

'The hintin' pipe an' sneeshin' mill
Are handed round wi' richt guid will;
The canty auld folks crackin' crouse.
The young anes rantin' through the house—
My heart has been sae fain to see them.
That I for joy hae barkit wi' them.'

It was this ardent power of sympathy that was fatal to so many women, and, through Jean Armour, to himself at last. His humour comes from him in a stream so deep and easy that I will venture to call him the best of humorous poets. He turns about in the midst to utter a noble sentiment or a trenchant remark on human life, and the

style changes and rises to the occasion. I think it is Principal Shairp who says, happily, that Burns would have been no Scotsman if he had not loved to moralise; neither, may we add, would he have been his father's son ; but (what is worthy of note) his moralisings are to a large extent the moral of his own career. He was among the least impersonal of artists. Except in the *Jolly Beggars*, he shows no gleam of dramatic instinct. Mr. Carlyle has complained that *Tam o' Shanter* is, from the absence of this quality, only a picturesque and external piece of work ; and I may add that in the *Twa Dogs* it is precisely in the infringement of dramatic propriety that a great deal of the humour of the speeches depends for its existence and effect. Indeed, Burns was so full of his identity that it breaks forth on every page; and there is scarce an appropriate remark either in praise or blame of his own conduct but he has put it himself into verse. Alas for the tenor of these remarks! They are, indeed, his own pitiful apology for such a marred existence and talents so misused and stunted; and they seem to prove for ever how small a part is played by reason in the conduct of man's affairs. Here was one, at least, who with unflinching judgment predicted his own fate; yet his knowledge could not avail him, and with open eyes he must fulfil his tragic destiny. Ten years before the end he had written his epitaph ; and neither subsequent events, nor the critical eyes of posterity, have shown us a word in it to alter. And, lastly, has he not put in for himself the last unanswerable plea?—

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman ;
Though they may gang a kennin' wrang,
To step aside is human :

One point must still be greatly dark-'One? Alas! I fear every man and woman of us is 'greatly dark ' to all their neighbours, from the day of birth until death removes them, in their greatest virtues as well as in their saddest faults; and we, who have been trying to read the character of Burns, may take home the lesson and be gentle in our thoughts.