

The Genius of Scotland: Robert Burns and His Critics, 1796-1828

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Of all people to comment publicly on the death of Robert Burns in 1796, perhaps the least-qualified made the most lasting impression. J. DeLancey Fergusson has claimed that the obituary of the poet that appeared in *The London Chronicle* (28-30 July 1796), written by George Thomson (Burns' collaborator in the *Select Songs* project), 'set the tone, long before the appearance of even Robert Heron's biography, for all the public comment on Burns's life and character'.^[1] Although Thomson corresponded frequently with the poet, the two never met and frequently did not see eye to eye. This fact shows in the overall tone and character of Thomson's obituary, which blends approbation of the poet's talents with thinly-veiled disapproval of Burns' lifestyle.

On the surface, Thomson's obituary is largely admiring, with clear approval of Burns' distinctive national character. For example, Thomson remarks that although the poet 'was literally a ploughman', he was 'neither in that state of servile dependence or degrading ignorance which the situation might bespeak in this country'.^[2] Instead, Burns 'had the common education of a Scottish peasant, perhaps something more, and that spirit of independence, which, though banished in that country from the scenes of aristocratic influence, is sometimes to be found to a high degree in the humblest classes of society'.^[3] Along with such marks of distinction, Burns' singular difference from other Scottish peasants is emphasised by Thomson: Burns was 'a man who was the pupil of nature, the poet of inspiration, and who possessed in an extraordinary degree the powers and failings of genius'.^[4]

Thomson's critical vocabulary echoes many previous eighteenth-century formulations of genius, though his stress on the 'failings' of genius becomes a constant refrain in the nineteenth-century critical reception of Burns. It is genius alone that individuates and validates Burns and his works, though at a considerable cost. Thomson remarks that Burns' genius was the undeniable and primary source of his appeal: 'proofs of such uncommon genius in a situation so humble, made

the acquaintance of the author eagerly sought after'.^[5] However, this genius also conveyed a fatal weakness: 'his nights were devoted to books and the muse, except when they were wasted in those haunts of village festivity, to which the Poet was but too immoderately attached in every period of his life'.^[6] Along with such behavior, Burns' posthumous reputation gains further notoriety by references to his eventual profession as an excise collector and his unseemly conduct among the gentry. Although the poet was 'everywhere invited and caressed', Thomson bluntly states that 'probably [Burns] was not qualified to fill a superior station to that which was assigned him. We know that his manners refused to partake the polish of genteel society'.^[7]

In Thomson's eyes Burns appears as a driven, untoward prodigy whose demise was largely self-inflicted: 'his talents were often obscured and finally impaired by excess Such, we believe, is the character of a man, who in his compositions had discovered the force of native humour, the warmth and tenderness of passion, and the glowing touches of a descriptive pencil'.^[8] Despite the bitter ending of such talent, Thomson asks readers to pay 'a tribute of respect to the genius of a Poet'.^[9] The initial cast of Burns' posthumous reputation can be found within this obituary; following Thomson's lead, many later critics regarded Burns' 'genius' as a source of both power and weakness. That such views of the poet had little correspondence with his actual life and character is worth noting. As Ferguson indignantly remarks of this obituary, the view of Burns as a 'dissipated' character 'was first given publicity by a man who had never met Burns, who had never been in Dumfries, and whose statements were hotly resented by some Dumfriesians who knew Burns best'.^[10]

Despite its lack of biographical veracity, Thomson's testimony of Burns' 'genius' set the standard for critical responses to the poet and his works beginning immediately after his death. This essay provides a survey of these responses from 1796 to 1828, revealing a consistent pattern of critical reception. The primary critical approach to Burns and his work involved the application of 'genius' theory; the continuum of critical responses demonstrates the fluid nature of this concept throughout the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries. As Ronnie Young has noted, 'the genius myth itself can help us understand something of Scottish criticism in the late eighteenth century and the crucial role this tradition played in facilitating Burns's rise to fame'.^[11] However, attention to the poet's reception history also shows that while the concept underwent significant moderation as an aesthetic category, its association with moral failings was almost uniformly expressed by Burns' critics. The ties between genius and biography, particularly in Burns' case, became increasingly knotted as later commentators attempted to understand the poet's life and works. Young is certainly correct to assert that Burns' early reviews were 'a damaging blend of myth-building and moralising'.^[12] This essay will demonstrate that the process of 'myth-building and moralising' surrounding Burns continued unabated during this period, particularly as critics assayed the poet's nationalist iconicity while attempting to diminish the relevance of moral failings

wrought by his 'genius'. Burns' fame still highlights this tension between his undeniable poetic gifts and his messy personal life, between his poetic aspirations and his complicated desires.

After Burns' death, the process of interpreting the poet's cultural and national significance began quickly, with certain key features becoming prominent in each account. Assessments of Burns' body of work continued to herald his 'original poetic genius' as an overriding character trait, a source of both power and weakness. This was also prominent in defenses of the poet written in response to misrepresentations of Burns' life and character, such as that seen in George Thomson's obituary. One of the first, written by the poet's friend Maria Riddell (writing under the pseudonym 'Candidor'), was a character sketch of Burns in the *Dumfries Journal* of August 1796. In the estimation of Burns' late nineteenth-century editors W.E. Henley and T.F. Henderson, Riddell's defense of Burns' character was 'the best thing written of him by a contemporary critic'.^[13] Her sketch offers a contrary view that seeks to rebut the 'injustice done to Burns's character' seen in other responses to the poet's life, death, and body of works.^[14] More specifically, Riddell claims that it is an 'injustice' that Burns is 'generally talked of, and considered, with reference to his poetical talent *only*: for the fact is, even allowing his great and original genius its due tribute of admiration, that poetry (I appeal to all who have had the advantage of being personally acquainted with him) was actually not his *forte*'.^[15] This estimation of Burns' talents, so contrary to other discussions of the poet, reveals Riddell's principal motivation to use personal acquaintance as the ultimate source of her critical authority.

Her asides to those 'who have had the advantage of being personally acquainted with [Burns]' form the basis of a retort to those who would impugn Burns' character. The following comment is characteristic of her approach to her subject: 'None certainly ever outshone Burns in the charms—the sorcery, I would almost call it, of fascinating conversation, the spontaneous eloquence of social argument, or the unstudied poignancy of brilliant repartee; nor was any man, I believe, ever gifted with a larger portion of the "vividam vis animi"'.^[16] Personal knowledge of Burns allows Riddell's account to focus on how the poet's character was revealed by and through his person, particularly how the singularity (or strangeness) of his appearance made his differentiating traits manifest to his acquaintances. She writes that 'though his appearance and manners were always *peculiar*, he never failed to delight, and to excel'.^[17] Notwithstanding such abilities, Burns 'seemed rather moulded by nature for the rough exercises of agriculture, than the gentler cultivation of the Belles Lettres'.^[18] In a passage that seems highly influenced by the theory of physiognomy, Riddell further anatomises Burns' character by studying the meanings of his features, his face, and his voice:

His features were stamped with the hardy character of independence, and the firmness of conscious, though not arrogant, pre-eminence; the animated expressions of his

countenance were almost peculiar to himself; the rapid lightnings of his eye were always harbingers of some flash of genius, whether they darted the fiery glances of insulted and indignant superiority, or beamed with the impassioned sentiment of fervent and impetuous affections. His voice alone could improve upon the magic of his eye; sonorous, replete with the finest modulations, it alternately captivated the ear with the melody of poetic numbers, the perspicuity of nervous reasoning, or the ardent sallies of enthusiastic patriotism.[\[19\]](#)

Burns emerges from such a combination of striking traits like a character drawn from a eighteenth-century sentimental novel, attractive yet forbidding, peculiar yet strangely appealing.

Riddell further alludes to Burns' 'dangerous talent' for satire with which nature 'had endowed him with a portion of the most pointed excellence'.[\[20\]](#) Riddell asserts that Burns' 'darts of ridicule were frequently directed as the caprice of the instant suggested, or as the altercations of parties and of persons happened to kindle the restlessness of his spirit into interest or aversion'.[\[21\]](#) Such actions also confirmed Burns' outsider status, based as much upon his self-aware class difference as that of his interlocutors. Burns' ability to cause discomfort in this way is a frequent refrain in remembrances of the poet; Riddell suggests that 'he paid for this mischievous wit as dearly as any one could do'.[\[22\]](#) She also exposes another key element in the mythology surrounding Burns by debunking the poet's 'heaven-taught ploughman' persona as a necessary fiction.[\[23\]](#) Acknowledging that Burns had 'an extreme impetuosity of feeling', Riddell nevertheless insists that 'the history of the Ayshire ploughboy was an ingenious fiction, fabricated for the purposes of obtaining the interests of the great, and enhancing the merits of what in reality required no foil'.[\[24\]](#)

Riddell concludes by examining the poet's 'genius', expounding upon the 'irregularities' that must be accorded, acknowledged, and allowed to men of genius like Burns. Claiming that she is no 'apologist of the irregularities even of a man of genius', Riddell insists that 'it is certain that genius was never free from irregularities'.[\[25\]](#) Though she does not elaborate upon these 'irregularities', it is fairly clear that she is referring to the notoriety surrounding Burns' character that is more explicitly described in Thomson's obituary. Riddell's defense of Burns' genius anticipates the fervor with which Romantic poets were drawn to Burns' posthumous character; she writes that 'the eccentric intuitions of genius too often yield the soul to the wild effervescence of desires, always unbounded, and sometimes equally dangerous to the repose of others as fatal to its own'.[\[26\]](#) Claiming 'a literary critique I do not aim at', Riddell describes her task in her character sketch of Burns as desiring to 'delineate any of those strong traits which distinguished him'.[\[27\]](#) Riddell ends her brief sketch by declaring a hope for the future national fame that will immortalise Burns' genius: Scotland should grant recognition of 'those talents which raised him from the

plough, where he passed the bleak morning of his life, weaving his rude wreaths of poesy with the wild field flowers that sprung around his cottage'.^[28] Such recognition would finally grant Burns the 'enviable eminence of literary fame, where Scotland will long cherish his memory with delight and gratitude; and proudly remember, that beneath her cold sky a genius was ripened, without care of culture, that would have done honor to climes more favorable to those luxuriances'.^[29]

The next major assessment of Burns' posthumous reputation eschews the elliptical niceties of Riddell's account. In his *Memoir of Burns* (1797), Robert Heron directly explores the effects of Burns' genius upon his life, particularly the role it played in leading to his untimely death. Though Heron's memoir has been criticised by almost all subsequent biographers for its many errors and misrepresentations, his analysis of Burns' poetic legacy is actually much more nuanced and subtle than has often been credited.^[30] Like Thomson and Riddell, Heron isolates Burns' genius as the *modus vivendi* of his life; although such genius imbues Burns with exceptional poetic ability, it also makes him prey to considerable moral failings. Heron describes his endeavor in the *Memoir* as 'an honest though humble tribute to the merits of illustrious genius', which seeks 'to recommend that steady VIRTUE, without which even genius in all its omnipotence is soon reduc'd to paralytic imbecility, or to maniac mischievousness'.^[31] Along with examining the 'disadvantages' of genius, Heron also repeatedly stresses Burns' growth as a poet, resisting the impulse to promote him as a fully-formed, untutored poet from the very beginning. Looking at the material conditions of Burns' upbringing in rural Scotland, Heron discusses the influence of the local parish schools upon the young poet: 'The establishment of PARISH-SCHOOLS; but for which, perhaps, the infant energies of this young genius might never have received that first impulse by which alone they were to be excited into action; is one of the most beneficial that have been ever instituted in any country'.^[32] He further claims that

[Burns] returned from labour to learning, and from learning went again to labour; till his mind began to open to the charms of taste and knowledge; till he began to feel a passion for books and for the subjects of books, which was to give a colour to the whole thread of his future life. On nature, he soon began to gaze with new discernment and with new enthusiasm.^[33]

These statements are an accurate account of Burns' early exposure to and 'passion' for books, evidenced in the letters and biography.^[34] Heron also offers a pragmatic estimation of the results of such exposure upon any young person, genius or not: 'It is impossible, that there should not be occasionally some souls among them, awakened to the divine emotions of genius, by that rich assemblage which these books present, of almost all that is interesting in incidents, or picturesque in imagery, or affectingly sublime or tender in sentiments and character'.^[35]

Like Riddell, Heron insists upon the fictitiousness of the 'Ayrshire ploughboy' persona, remarking that '[Burns'] pieces, the true effusions of genius, [were] informed by reading and observation, and [were] promoted by its own native ardour, as well as by friendly applause'.^[36] Further, Heron identifies key texts and authors that contributed to the poet's development, suggesting that such reading was common currency in Burns' birthplace: 'The Seasons of Thomson ... the Grave of Blair, the far-famed Elegy of Gray, the Paradise Lost of Milton, the wild strains of Ossian, perhaps the Minstrel of Beattie were ... commonly read, even among those with whom Burns would naturally associate'.^[37] Accordingly, 'with such means to give his imagination a poetical bias, and to favour the culture of his taste and genius, Burns *gradually* became a poet. ... He slowly and unconsciously acquired a poetical temper of soul, and a poetic cast of thought'.^[38] Besides Burns' solid grounding in literary culture, Heron isolates 'genius' as the poet's key differentiating trait. Alluding to Burns' 'native strength, ARDOUR, and delicacy of FEELINGS, passions, and affections', Heron lists and describes the attributes of the poet's genius: 'it is originality of genius, it is soundness of perception, it is delicacy of passion, it is general vigour and impetuosity of the whole mind'.^[39] Without such a poetic sensibility, Burns would not have been able to provoke such acclaim from his readers:

Never could Burns, without this delicacy, this strength, this vivacity of the powers of bodily sensation, and of mental feeling, which I would here claim as the indispensable native endowments of true genius; without these, never could he have poured forth those sentiments, or portrayed those images, which have so powerfully impressed every imagination, and penetrated every heart.^[40]

Burns' difference resides not only in his extraordinary sensibility but also his skills in execution: 'what with Burns awes or fascinates; in the hands of others, only disgusts by its deformity, or excites contempt by its meanness and uninteresting simplicity'.^[41] In addition, Burns was also furnished with 'extraordinary intelligence, good sense, and penetration', which made him a 'master of powers of language, superior to those of almost any former writer in the Scottish dialect'.^[42] This leads Heron to suggest that 'what appear to me to have been Burns's real merits, as a poet and as a man' were found in his 'enlarged, vigorous, keenly discerning, COMPREHENSION OF MIND'.^[43]

Along with such impressive powers and 'the studious bent of his genius', Heron adds another demonstrative character trait: 'a lofty-minded CONSCIOUSNESS of his own TALENTS and MERITS'.^[44] This engineers (or underwrites) the powerful impact of Burns' poems upon readers which allows them to witness and experience the operations of 'genius': 'He exalts, for a time, the genius of his reader to the elevation of his own; and, for the moment, confers upon him all the

powers of a poet'.^[45] For such reasons, Heron insists that Burns not be classified as a novel anomaly but as a 'genuine' poet:

Shoemakers, footmen, milk-maids, peers, stay-makers, have all written verses, such as deservedly attracted the notice of the world. But in the poetry of these people, while there was commonly some genuine effusions of the sentiments of agitated nature, some exhibition of such imagery as at once impressed itself upon the heart; there was also ever much to be excused in consideration of their ignorance, their want of taste, their extravagance of fancy, their want or abuse of the advantages of a liberal education. Burns has no pardon to demand for defects of this sort. He might scorn every concession which we are ready to grant to his peculiar circumstances, without being, on this account, reduced to relinquish any part of his claims to the praise of poetical excellence.^[46]

Accordingly, Burns is an exceptional poet among exceptional poets: 'He touches his lyre, at all times, with the hand of a master. He demands to be ranked, not with the Woodhouses, the Ducks, the Ramsays, but with the Miltons, the Popes, the Grays'.^[47] Heron states that Burns is 'not a merry-andrew in a motley coat, sporting before you for your diversion: but a hero, or a philosopher, deigning to admit you to witness his relaxations; still exercising the great energies of his soul: and little caring, at the moment, whether you do, or do not, cordially sympathize with his feelings'.^[48] At the same time, however, Heron describes the practical problems facing Burns: 'It seemed to be forgotten, that a ploughman thus exalted into a man of letters, was unfitted for his former toils, without being regularly qualified to enter the career of any new profession'.^[49] For Heron, the poet's 'CONSCIOUSNESS of his own TALENTS and MERITS' made it impossible for him to live within the confines of his class, and his genius was thus 'reduc'd to paralytic imbecility, or to maniac mischievousness'.^[50] Despite its high praise of the poet's literary accomplishments, Heron's biography is now remembered largely for its inaccurate, negative portrayal of Burns' 'dissipation'.

Though not as notorious as Heron, James Currie occupies a similar position as a promulgator of negative stereotypes of Burns.^[51] However, Currie's 'Criticism of the Works of Burns' from his edition of *The Works of Robert Burns* (1800) offers a complex description and analysis of the poet's 'genius'. Although not as admiring of Burns' poetic talents as Heron, Currie also sees Burns as a poet conscious of the models and methods intrinsic to his craft. He states that Burns had 'a genius which comprehends the human mind', while admitting that 'in approaching him, the first impression is perhaps repulsive: there is an air of coarseness about him, which is difficultly reconciled with our established notions of poetical excellence'.^[52] Such ambivalence about the subject of his study runs throughout Currie's account of Burns, tempering the representation of Burns' 'genius' yet never forsaking it altogether. Currie is also determined to keep Burns within

his class boundaries; Burns may be more than a novelty, but that fact still does not fully legitimise the poet as in Heron's account. Currie writes of Burns that 'his poems, as well as his letters, may be considered as the effusions of his sensibility, and the transcript of his own musings on the *real incidents of his humble life*'.^[53] Expanding upon this point by noting that 'the incidents which form the subjects of his poems, though some of them highly interesting and susceptible of poetical imagery, are incidents in the life of a peasant who takes no pains to disguise the lowliness of his condition', Currie occasionally seems astounded that 'real incidents of humble life' can be transformed into the subject matter of great poetry.^[54] After a discussion of 'To a Mouse' and 'To a Mountain Daisy', he plainly admits that 'to extract out of incidents *so common*, and seemingly *so trivial* as these, so fine a strain of sentiment and imagery, is the surest proof, as well as the most brilliant triumph, of original genius'.^[55] When Burns occasionally transcends his subject matter (the 'real incidents of his humble life'), Currie finds that Burns is 'carried on to exert the higher powers of imagination'.^[56] The wording here is instructive; Burns is passively 'carried on' almost by accident to exert higher reserves of imagination. 'In such instances', Currie writes, '[Burns] leaves the society of Ramsay and of Fergusson, and associates himself with the masters of English poetry, whose language he frequently assumes'.^[57]

Currie's descriptions of Burns' 'genius' are frequently conditional, seen as 'marks of uncommon genius' that 'impress' upon various rural subjects 'the stamp of his understanding'.^[58] Occasionally he is absolute in his depiction of Burns as a 'man of genius', whose 'temperament of devotion, and the powers of memory co-operated ... with the sensibility of his heart, and the fervor of his imagination'.^[59] Despite such praise, Currie is resolute in containing Burns' 'genius' within the strict confines of his class, locale, and language. For example, Currie remarks on the difficulty of Burns' Scots usage, claiming that 'the greater part of his earlier poems are written in the dialect of his country, which is obscure, if not unintelligible to Englishmen'.^[60] This invites criticism of Burns' class status, for Currie remarks that although the Scots dialect 'still adheres more or less to the speech of almost every Scotchman, all the polite and ambitious are now endeavouring to banish [it] from their tongues as well as their writings'.^[61] Currie cannot pardon Burns' lack of 'grace', but acquits the poet for other temperamental excellencies: 'if he is deficient in grace, he is distinguished for ease, as well as energy; and these are indications of a higher order of genius'.^[62] This 'higher order of genius' is on display in such poems as 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'; Currie's lavish praise of this work set the critical standard for much later nineteenth-century adulation of the poem.^[63] Currie claims that this poem is 'an original and truly interesting pastoral. It possesses every thing required in this species of composition'.^[64] Remarking upon the lack of other works similar to 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' in Burns' oeuvre, Currie claims that 'it is to be regretted that Burns did not employ his genius on other subjects of the same nature, which the manners and customs of the Scottish peasantry would have amply supplied'.^[65] Remarking that 'out of such materials have been reared the fairest and the most

durable of the monuments of genius', Currie thus promotes a severely circumscribed depiction of Burns' 'genius' by suggesting that it was best expressed in 'appropriate' subjects and styles.[\[66\]](#)

Other nineteenth-century editors and critics employ similar terminology in assessing Burns' posthumous reputation. Francis Jeffrey's influential review of R.H. Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808) in the *Edinburgh Review* of January 1809 blends appreciation with acerbic wit to measure the worth of Burns' poetic achievement, with much attention paid to Burns' place among labouring-class as well as mainstream poets.[\[67\]](#) Noting that 'Burns is certainly by far the greatest of our poetical prodigies – from Stephen Duck down to Thomas Dermody', Jeffrey insists that such judgments diminish the scope of Burns' poetry: 'so much indeed are we impressed with a sense of his merits; that we cannot help thinking it a derogation from them to consider him a prodigy at all; and are convinced he will never be rightly estimated as a poet, till that vulgar wonder be entirely repressed which was raised on his having been a ploughman'.[\[68\]](#) Jeffrey finds the poet to have been neither 'uneducated or illiterate' and compares his learning to that of Shakespeare: 'He had as much scholarship, we imagine, as Shakespeare, and far better models to form his ear to harmony, and train his fancy to graceful invention'.[\[69\]](#) This strain of thought leads to Jeffrey's articulation of a key critical conundrum facing many other critics of Burns: how to gauge his poetic genius despite the glaring presence of the poet's supposed moral weaknesses. Jeffrey recognises those weaknesses and offers a strident judgment that is typical of the critical approach to Burns in the early years of the nineteenth century:

The leading vice in Burns's character, and the cardinal deformity indeed of all his productions, was his contempt, or affectation of contempt, for prudence, decency, and regularity; and his admiration of thoughtlessness, oddity, and vehement sensibility;—his belief, in short, in *the dispensing power* of genius and social feeling, in all matters of morality and common sense.[\[70\]](#)

The notion here of the 'dispensing power' of genius is a fascinating variation on the concept's eighteenth-century connotations; whereas genius had formerly been solely the source of both power and weakness, for Jeffrey it also offers license to offend: 'men of the highest genius have frequently been hurried by their passions into a violation of prudence and duty'.[\[71\]](#) For this reason genius must be simultaneously praised and condemned, forcing critics to fully separate the life from the work. Thus, there is no contradiction in Jeffrey's judgment that Burns is 'entitled to the rank of a great and original genius'.[\[72\]](#)

Such a critical judgment might lead one to suspect that Burns has been validated as a leading British poet. Nothing could be further from the truth; in Jeffrey's review, Burns is venerated only as a Scottish poet writing in Scots. Jeffrey writes of the difficulties facing non-Scottish readers of

Burns' poetry: 'All his best pieces are written in Scotch; and ... it is impossible ... to form any adequate judgment of their merits, without a pretty long residence among those who still use that language'.^[73] Burns is an acquired taste, fully savored only by native Scots. This is nothing for Scottish readers to be ashamed of, Jeffrey insists, but it is nevertheless an 'infantile' taste:

This Scotch is not to be considered as a provincial dialect, the vehicle only of rustic vulgarity and rude local humour. It is the language of a whole country,—long an independent kingdom, and still separate in its laws, character and manners. It is by no means peculiar to the vulgar; but is the common speech of the whole nation *in early life*.^[74]

Although a 'great and original genius', Burns appeals primarily (or perhaps, only) to those Scots who have not progressed beyond 'early life'. Jeffrey's review ends by negating the premise he had established at the opening; although Burns' achievements are diminished by envisioning him as a labouring-class 'prodigy', nonetheless this is the best way to appreciate him. Jeffrey states this quite plainly: 'It is impossible to read the productions of Burns, along with his history, without forming a higher idea of the intelligence, taste, and accomplishments of the peasantry, than most of those in the higher ranks are disposed to entertain'.^[75]

In his unsigned review in the first number of *Quarterly Review* from February 1809, Walter Scott offers another influential interpretation of Burns and his body of work. Unlike Jeffrey, Scott begins with the worst of Burns and describes the effects of the poet's moral failings: 'The extravagance of genius with which this wonderful man was gifted, being in his later and more evil days directed to no fixed or general purpose, was, in the morbid state of his health and feelings, apt to display itself in hasty sallies of virulent and unmerited severity'.^[76] In Scott's view, Burns suffered from the excessive 'dispensing power' of his genius, which led him to injure those around him. Due to such displays of errant temper, Burns needed 'the *pious care* with which the late excellent Dr. Currie had performed the task of editing the works of Burns'.^[77] In Scott's estimation, Currie's editorial emendations and censorship were necessary post-mortem operations that the poet required in order to preserve and present a suitable literary reputation. Owing to the fact that Burns had 'the character of one of the most singular men by whose appearance our age has been distinguished',^[78] he was not an ordinary (or even extraordinary) labouring-class 'prodigy', as Jeffrey had noted. Following this line of thought, Burns was exceptional in a different way: 'Burns was in truth the child of passion and feeling. His character was *not simply* that of a peasant exalted into notice by uncommon literary attainments, but *bore a stamp* which must have distinguished him in the highest as in the lowest situation of life'.^[79] Scott examines the 'lowness' of Burns' origins in order to postulate a transhistorical theory that would accommodate a genius such as the poet. He writes that

The dignity, the spirit, the indignation of Burns was that of a plebeian, of a high-souled plebeian indeed, of a citizen of Rome or Athens, but still of a plebeian untinged with the slightest shade of that spirit of chivalry which since the feudal times has pervaded the higher ranks of European society. ... The lowness of his birth, and habits of society, prevented rules of punctilious delicacy from making any part of his education.[\[80\]](#)

Burns' 'plebeian' status, along with his genius, accounted for his unruly behavior as well as his thoroughly emotional responses to the world around him. Where Heron had praised Burns' 'delicacy' of feeling, Scott finds only excessive, embarrassing, plebeian excess. Of the poet's politics, Scott dismisses them out of hand by noting that 'the political predilections, for they could hardly be termed principles, of Burns, were entirely determined by his feelings'.[\[81\]](#)

As in Jeffrey's review, Scott assesses the poet's language choices and prefers the Scots productions. His view of Burns' verse in English is more nuanced than Jeffrey's, suggesting that there is a paucity in English itself that prevented Burns' genius from being expressed in that language:

There are a few attempts at English verse, in which, as usual, Burns falls beneath himself. ... His use of English was *voluntary*, and for a short time; but when assumed as a primary and indispensable rule of composition, the comparative penury of rhimes, and the want of a thousand emphatic words which his habitual acquaintance with the Scottish supplied, rendered his expression confined and embarrassed.[\[82\]](#)

It is partly his lack of facility that causes Burns' English verse to fall below expected standards, but the verse also fails due to the linguistic inflexibility of the English language.[\[83\]](#) This is a subtle nationalist gesture on Scott's part, where Scots is implicitly promoted as a prime vehicle for poetic expression. Scott does not expand upon this point, but he valorises Burns' facility in Scots by praising 'the character of this wonderful and self-taught genius'.[\[84\]](#) Suggesting that Burns is an autodidact allows Scott to firmly situate Burns within Scottish literary history alone, apart from 'foreign' influences that would allow the poet to be appreciated and understood by those beyond Scotland's borders.[\[85\]](#)

The last major critical examination from this period, Thomas Carlyle's unsigned review of John G. Lockhart's *Life of Burns* in the *Edinburgh Review* from December 1828, takes the representation of Burns' genius in a different direction. Claiming that Burns 'appears not only as a true British poet, but as one of the most considerable British men of the eighteenth century',[\[86\]](#) Carlyle examines the notion of Burns as a poetic prodigy in order to account for his continuing popularity. He writes that

Burns first came upon the world as a prodigy; and was, in that character, entertained by it, in the usual fashion, with loud, vague, tumultuous wonder, speedily subsiding into censure and neglect; till his early and most mournful death again awakened an enthusiasm for him, which, especially as there was now nothing to be done, and much to be spoken, has prolonged itself into our time.^[87]

For Carlyle, Burns can only be apprehended fragmentarily, owing to the shortness of his life and the nature of his genius. In highly poetic imagery, Carlyle writes that ‘shrouded in such baleful vapours, the genius of Burns was never seen in clear azure splendour, enlightening the world: but some beams from it did, by fits, pierce through; and it tinted those clouds with rainbow and orient colours, into a glory and stern grandeur, which men silently gazed on with wonder and tears’.^[88]

The emphatic quality of such recognitions of Burns suggests that the poet’s influence results from a complex association of life story, character, and literary accomplishment. Within this representation of Burns, his biography is magnified by reference to tragedy, constructing an image of the poet as doomed, tragic hero: ‘He was often advised to write a tragedy’, Carlyle writes, ‘time and means were not lent him for this; but through life he enacted a tragedy, and one of the deepest’.^[89] No longer solely prodigy or plebeian, Burns becomes (in Carlyle’s view) a flawed yet imposing genius of the first order, one who is accessible only in fragmented glimpses of what might have been: ‘All that remains of Burns, the Writings he has left, seem to us ... no more than a poor mutilated fraction of what was in him; brief, broken glimpses of a genius that could never shew itself complete’.^[90] Carlyle’s assessment – apprehending the ‘genius’ of Burns through ‘incomplete glimpses’ – illuminates the constant and fragmentary process of reputation-building surrounding Burns in the early nineteenth century, a process that closely tied the poet’s life, language, and nation together in a complex bond that shows little sign of breaking.

NOTES

[1] J. DeLancey Ferguson, ‘The Earliest Obituary of Burns: Its Authorship and Influence’, *Modern Philology* 32.2 (1934), 179-84 (p. 184). For a discussion of Thomson’s relationship to Burns, see Carol McGuirk, ‘George Thomson and Robert Burns: With Friends Like These’, *Eighteenth-Century Scotland* 9 (1995), 16-20.

[2] Donald A. Low, ed. *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 99. This edition remains an essential compendium of Burns’ early critical reception.

[3] Low, 1974, p. 99.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

- [5] Ibid.
- [6] Ibid., p. 99.
- [7] Ibid., p. 100.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid., p. 101.
- [10] Ferguson, 1934, p. 184. Ferguson's article persuasively debunks the 'dissipated' character imputed to Burns in Thomson's obituary.
- [11] Ronnie Young, 'Genius, Men, and Manners: Burns and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Criticism', *Scottish Studies Review* 9.2 (2008), 129-147 (p. 129). For further discussion of Burns and 'genius', see Thomas Crawford, 'Burns, Genius, and Major Poetry', in *Love and Liberty: Robert Burns, A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), 341-353. For the relationship between genius theory and class, see Tim Burke, 'Ann Yearsley and the Distribution of Genius in Early Romantic Culture', in *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Woodman (New York: St. Martins Press, 1998), 215-32.
- [12] Young, 2008, p. 129. For further discussion of the 'myth-building' surrounding Burns, see the entry on Burns in *Scottish Literature in English and Scots*, ed. Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dunnigan, and Allan MacGillivray (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2002), 46-169.
- [13] Quoted in Low, 1974, p. 101.
- [14] Low, 1974, p. 102.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Ibid. The phrase translates as 'lively force of mind'.
- [17] Ibid. Emphasis mine.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Ibid., pp. 102-3.
- [20] Ibid., p. 103. Walter Scott also refers to the poet's disarming, often offensive satirical wit in mixed company (see Low, 1974, pp. 261-2).
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Ibid. It seems likely that Riddell is alluding here to the notorious 'Rape of the Sabine Women' incident that occurred at her home with Burns; see Catherine Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns*, 1930 (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990), 328-31.
- [23] This phrase refers to Henry Mackenzie's famous encapsulation of Burns in his *Lounger* review of the poet's works: 'with what uncommon penetration and sagacity *this Heaven-taught ploughman*, from his humble and unlettered station, has looked upon men and manners' (Low, 1974, p. 70. Emphasis mine).
- [24] Low, 1974, pp. 104, 104-5.
- [25] Ibid., p. 106.

- [26] Ibid. On the appeal of such characterizations of genius to Romantic poets, see Marshall Brown, *Preromanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 82-112.
- [27] Ibid., p. 107.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Ibid.
- [30] Edward Cowan made this point in a keynote lecture entitled 'The Philosopher, The Physician, The Fanatic, The Fraudster, and the First Secretary: the "Doonhame" Creation of Robert Burns' at the Robert Burns at 250: An International Conference at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina on April 2, 2009.
- [31] Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1797), p. 3.
- [32] Ibid., p. 4.
- [33] Ibid., p. 5.
- [34] For analysis of Burns' reading habits, see John Robotham, 'The Reading of Robert Burns', in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Carol McGuirk (London: Prentice Hall, 1998), 281-97.
- [35] Heron, 1797, p. 6.
- [36] Ibid., p. 15.
- [37] Ibid., p. 9.
- [38] Ibid., pp. 9, 10. Emphasis mine.
- [39] Ibid., pp. 47, 50.
- [40] Ibid., p. 49.
- [41] Ibid., p. 50.
- [42] Ibid., p. 10.
- [43] Ibid., p. 45.
- [44] Ibid., pp. 10, 52.
- [45] Ibid., p. 50.
- [46] Ibid., pp. 46-7.
- [47] Ibid., p. 47.
- [48] Ibid., pp. 53-4. This is the earliest mention I have found of Burns as a 'hero' in early criticism of the poet.
- [49] Ibid., p. 33.
- [50] Ibid., p. 3.
- [51] For an extended analysis of Currie's relationship to Burns, see Robert D. Thornton, *James Currie, the Entire Stranger, and Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963). See also Jeffrey Skoblow, 'Dr. Currie, C'est Moi', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 30 (1998), 109-15, Leith Davis, 'James Currie's 'Works of Robert Burns': The Politics of Hypochondriasis', *Studies in Romanticism* 36.1 (1997), 48-66 and Carol McGuirk, 'James Currie and the Making of the Burns Myth', *Selected Essays on Scottish Language and Literature*, ed. Steven R. McKenna (Lewiston:

Edwin Mellen, 1992), 149-62.

[52] Low, 1974, pp. 135, 133.

[53] Ibid., p. 132. Emphasis mine.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid., p. 140. Emphasis mine.

[56] Ibid., p. 135.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., p. 133. The imagery of the 'stamp' or 'impression' of 'genius' is frequently found in the early critical responses to Burns.

[59] Ibid., p. 144.

[60] Ibid., p. 133.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., p. 153.

[63] See Andrew Nash, 'The Cotter's Kailyard', in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 180-97 for a detailed examination of the legacy of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'.

[64] Low, 1974, p. 143.

[65] Ibid., p. 144.

[66] Ibid., p. 153.

[67] Jeffrey's role in constructing and disseminating 'standards of taste' by means of the *Edinburgh Review* has been well-documented; see for instance Philip Flynn, *Francis Jeffrey* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1978), and D. Nichol Smith, ed., *Jeffrey's Literary Criticism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1910). For a more general account of the influence of the Edinburgh periodicals, see Charles A. Knight, 'The Created World of the Edinburgh Periodicals', *Scottish Literary Journal* 6.2 (1979), 20-36.

[68] Low, 1974, p. 178.

[69] Ibid., p. 179.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid. p. 182.

[72] Ibid., pp. 184-5.

[73] Ibid., p. 186.

[74] Ibid. Emphasis mine.

[75] Ibid., p. 194. Burns is frequently praised as an exemplar of 'hardy' Scottish peasants who excel all others. This tendency may owe to the desire to 'naturalise' labouring-class populations as a sentimentalized, non-threatening class.

[76] Ibid., p. 196. Along with Jeffrey's, Scott's review influenced many nineteenth-century perceptions and representations of Burns. For an account of Scott's importance as a critic, see

Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-28.

[77] *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

[78] *Ibid.*, p. 198.

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 199. It is worth again to highlight the use of the metaphors of ‘stamping’ and ‘impressing’.

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 201.

[81] *Ibid.*, p. 203.

[82] *Ibid.*, p. 208.

[83] Scott’s complaint about the English language is a somewhat unique statement in nineteenth-century criticism of Burns. See J. Derrick McLure, *Language, Poetry and Nationhood* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000) for more on Scottish views of English during this time.

[84] Low, 1974, p. 209. For more on Burns as a ‘self-taught’ poet, see Juliet Prandi, *The Poetry of the Self-Taught: An Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 13-38.

[85] In his *Life of Burns* (1828), John G. Lockhart follows his father-in-law Scott’s lead in envisioning Burns as a solely Scottish poet. Writing that ‘the poetry of Burns has had most powerful influence in reviving and strengthening the national feelings of his countrymen’, Lockhart suggests that the poet’s primary role was the promotion of nationalist unity (Low, 1974, p. 345). In Lockhart’s view, following this cause caused Burns to sacrifice himself for his country: ‘Whatever genius has since been devoted to the illustration of the national manners, and sustaining thereby of the national feelings of the people, there can be no doubt that Burns will ever be remembered as the founder, and alas! in his own person as the *martyr*, of this reformation’ (Low, 1974, p. 345). For more on Lockhart’s views of literature and the nation, see Thomas C. Richardson, ‘John Lockhart’s Burns: Stirring “National Enthusiasm”’, *Studies in Scottish Literature* 30 (1998), 157-66. See also Peter F. Morgan, ‘Lockhart’s Literary Personality’, *Scottish Literary Journal* 2.1 (1975), 27-35.

[86] Low, 1974, p. 351.

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

[89] *Ibid.*, p. 353.

[90] *Ibid.*, p. 355.