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Joys o'er dear

by [Barton Swaim](#)

There has long been a vast gulf between the Robert Burns of popular lore—the untaught farmer’s son who penned touching love songs and a variety of quaint poems about homely things like mice—and the Burns known to scholars and biographers: the intermittently radical, psychologically unstable sexual libertine. In the preface to the 1960 edition of his work on Burns, the late David Daiches complained that “in spite of advances in scholarship and criticism, the same sentimental rubbish about Burns tends to be spouted forth each year by hundreds of Burns Night orators.” For generations, Burns scholars have scorned Henry Mackenzie’s description of Burns as a “heaven-taught ploughman.” He wasn’t taught by heaven or any other supernal force, but by his excellent young tutor, John Murdoch, who taught him English poetry and French instead of Greek.

And yet, there’s something to Mackenzie’s phrase. For one thing, Burns *was* a ploughman. By the age of fifteen, as his brother Gilbert recalled, Robert was the principal laborer of the family farm, since their father had deteriorated too much to carry out the most demanding tasks. And no regime of high-quality tutoring could explain why a teenager from rural Ayrshire could compose verses whose rhymes and diction strike the ear as utterly natural:

Not vernal showers to budding flow’rs,
Not Autumn to the Farmer,
So dear can be, as thou to me,
My fair, my lovely Charmer!

As a young man, he began writing verses to friends and acquaintances around Ayrshire. Some of these were verse epistles written in Standard Habbie (or what’s now called Burns stanza though he didn’t invent it), a meter that allowed Burns to imitate his beloved Pope—polished, self-contained, droll—while still sounding fresh and original. In the lovely epistle to John Lapraik, for example, he defended the use of Scots vernacular:

Your Critic-folk may cock their nose,
And say, “How can you e’er propose,
You wha ken hardly verse frae prose
 To mak a sang?
But by your leaves, my learned foes,
 Ye’re maybe wrang.

.....

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,
That's a' the learning I desire;
Then tho' I drudge thro' dub and mire
 At pleugh or cart,
My Muse, tho' hamely in attire,
 May touch the heart.

What his modern admirers most appreciate about Burns is the relish with which he ridiculed and scandalized the wealthy and powerful. His brother recalled that Robert “had always a particular jealousy of people who were richer than himself, or who had more consequence in life.” Foremost among those who kindled Burns’s wrath were kirk ministers who not only objected to, but sought to redress, his conduct. In 1785 and 1786, he impregnated two young women, neither of whom he expressed any intention to marry, with the consequence that on both occasions he was summoned to undergo public chastisement during Sunday services. Burns hit back with “Address to the Unco Guid” and “Holy Willie’s Prayer”—send-ups of religious hypocrisy as potent in their way as *Tartuffe* or *Elmer Gantry*. In 1786 Burns determined, as he put it in a verse epistle, “To try my fate in guid, black *prent*.” In April of the following year, when *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish dialect* appeared in Edinburgh, Burns became a celebrity.

To write and publish Scots poetry took some daring. Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson had used Scots vernacular in their poetry, but by the 1780s it was thought crude and passé; indeed Burns included a glossary in the first edition, so unlikely were even his Scottish readers to know Scots words. But Burns knew instinctively how to use only enough Scots to give the poems the feeling of rugged, earthy simplicity without befuddling his readers or making them work too hard. And those readers knew well-crafted poetry when they saw it. Nothing in these poems resembled the lifeless, rarefied doggerel of so much English poetry of that era. Even to the modern reader, hardly a single rhyme sounds forced.

Burns came to Edinburgh in triumph. Aristocrats entertained him, literary men championed him, and women of class fawned on him (including one, Mrs. McLehose, with whom he carried on an affair—though it was her maidservant whom Burns impregnated). He returned to the family farm a celebrated author, and, although he would never feel at home among the well-bred literati of Edinburgh, he henceforth felt equally foreign among the common folk of Ayrshire. He married Jean Armour, whom by this time he had twice gotten pregnant, and landed a respectable position with the Excise office.

Burns never wrote second-rate poetry, but after 1787, with the exceptions of “Tam o’ Shanter” and a few others, his best works—“The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” “To a Mouse,” “To a Louse”—were behind him. During the last decade of his life he wrote hundreds of songs, some of them bawdy, many of them piercingly beautiful, such as “O were I on Parnassus Hill”:

I see thee dancing o’er the green,
Thy waist sae jimp, thy limbs sae clean,
Thy tempting lips, thy roguish een—
 By Heaven and Earth I love thee.

.....

Tho’ I were doom’d to wander on,
Beyond the sea, beyond the sun,

Till my last weary sand was run;
Till then—and then I love thee.

But Burns never approached the literary preeminence it was in his power to achieve: he simply lacked the discipline. “The greatest misfortune of my life,” he recorded, “was, never to have AN AIM.— I had felt some early stirrings of Ambition, but they were the blind gropin[g]s of Homer’s Cyclops round the walls of his cave.”

His last years were marked by ill health and intense periods of depression—the “blue devils,” as he called it. He died in 1796, aged thirty-seven, almost certainly from heart disease rather than syphilis or alcoholism, as was thought for many years.

Robert Crawford’s new biography of Burns, published to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the poet’s birth, brings together the best scholarship available on “The Bard,” as he was known before Shakespeare acquired the term.

Alas, Crawford’s prose is dreadful. He is one of those writers for whom every noun deserves its own adjective, and every adjective deserves its own modifier, whether the consequent combinations make sense or not. We read about “disturbingly urgent” attitudes, “dangerously important” ideals, “tellingly accurate” lines, a “relatively recent, protestingly elegiac” poem, and many other such oddities. Some of Crawford’s sentences are so appalling, you think he’s making some ironic joke—only he isn’t. For instance: “Championing the cause of sex, he also committed himself to the art of poetry.”

Still, the book deserves much of the praise it has received in early reviews. Crawford’s treatment of Burns’s political allegiances is especially admirable, contrasting as it does with the tendency in recent years—especially among Scottish biographers, of whom Crawford is one—to overemphasize Burns’s radical affiliations and force contrary evidence into line. It’s true that Burns, especially toward the end of his life, expressed warm sympathies with French-inspired radicalism. In 1792, he purchased a confiscated ship’s four carronades and sent them to revolutionaries in France—a stunt that nearly cost him his job. Yet Burns was, as Crawford puts it, “an artist, not a sloganeer,” and his radical posturing was attitudinal rather than philosophical: which is another way of saying that he enjoyed—to use an anachronistic but, in this case, appropriately infantile term—pissing off his elders. He was in any case more of a Jacobite than a Jacobin. He boasted of ancestral connections with men who had fought for Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745 and felt deeply the romantic sway of the Stuart cause—an awkward fit with French republicanism.

Crawford also deserves credit for treating the rather unsavory side of Burns’s character straightforwardly and, for the most part, without apology. “His presentation of himself as an ‘honest man’ could go hand in hand with deep duplicity and sometimes with disgraceful conduct.” That, it seems to me, is a sympathetic biographer’s way of saying he was a cad. Having impregnated Jean Armour for the second time—resulting in her parents ejecting her from home—he wrote to a friend, “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”—and then boasted of using the occasion to give her a “thundering scalade” on a pile of dry horse litter. For my own part, I could live without knowing much more about the man. Those Burns Night orators may be wiser than we thought.

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