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Selected Poems and Songs



ROBERT BURNS

Selected Poems  
and Songs



*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*  
ROBERT P. IRVINE

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## INTRODUCTION

FEW poets are held in such reverence by so many as Robert Burns, both in his homeland and around the world. The vernacular energy of his verse, the simple beauty of his songs, his anger at injustice and hypocrisy; and, framing these, the story of his life, of a man of humble origins rising to fame in defiance of prejudice and persecution; these have won him a following since his death so consistent that it is sometimes referred to as a 'cult'. What follows is a brief survey of that life. Burns's own account of the early part of it can be found in his 1787 letter to John Moore included in Appendix 1 of this volume. Where relevant, the notes to individual poems also refer to the poet's biography. The purpose of this introduction, however, is not to ask how the life finds expression in the poetry: the poems themselves are sufficiently eloquent in that regard. Instead, it will outline the role of the poetry in the life: how his writing allowed Burns to build a certain kind of career out of the resources available to him. Burns was not a prodigy, spontaneously moved to song by untutored feeling; nor was he the passive victim of social and economic circumstance. His poetry does not only reflect his society, but was also his way of acting within it: building friendships, courting lovers, cultivating patrons, and cheering those who, in the dangerous days of the mid-1790s, dared to hope for a better one.

### 1. *Early life*

Robert Burns was born on 25 January 1759 in Alloway, a small village near the river Doon just south of the town of Ayr in south-west Scotland (see Map, p. 280). He was the first child of Agnes Broun, a local girl, and William Burnes, originally from Kincardineshire in north-east Scotland who had moved south to find work as a gardener after the failure of his father's farm there ('Burness' is the north-east version of the name). The two-room cottage in which Robert was born was built by William himself from stone, clay, and thatch, on his own smallholding. Literate and devout, but theologically liberal by the standards of his adopted county, William decided not to send his sons to the parish school, but with a group of neighbouring families to hire a young teacher, John Murdoch. Under Murdoch Burns was introduced to English verse and prose from an anthology that included extracts from Shakespeare, Milton, Thomson, and *The Spectator*, to add to the prose

of the King James Bible familiar from home. He was also taught how to write and speak in English, as opposed to the Scots used in everyday life. Later, Murdoch would give the Burns boys a volume of Pope's poetry, and get Robert started in French.

In 1766, at the age of 45, William left his cottage and his gardening work for a rented farm further inland called Mount Oliphant. Robert and his brother Gilbert continued to attend school for another two years, until Murdoch moved to take a job elsewhere. At that point the boys were put to work on the farm, although William continued to teach them in the evenings. The farm supported a large family (two daughters born in Alloway were followed by another three children at Mount Oliphant) but did not generate the cash that could have paid for hired labour to help work it. At the expiry of the lease in 1777 the family moved to a new farm, Lochlie (now Lochlea), further east again in the parish of Tarbolton, and William died here in 1784.

On these farms the Burns family did not suffer terrible poverty by the standard of the times. But the life was characterized by hard, unremitting labour for the ageing William and his teenage boys, and by chronic economic insecurity. The Ayrshire economy had suffered lasting damage from the collapse, in 1772–3, of the Ayr bank of Douglas, Heron and Co., in which a high proportion of the county's property-owning families had invested. The struggle to rebuild their capital base put pressure on tenant farmers like William Burns. To encourage agricultural improvement (enclosure, drainage, fertilization, the introduction of new crops and breeds of stock), rents were set at a high level, proportionate to the income the land could generate once improved. But improvement took time to produce results, and the risk of borrowing money to carry it out usually fell on the tenant, not the landowner. At both Mount Oliphant and Lochlie, the ground proved very poor; William spent his last years in a protracted legal battle with his landlord and his landlord's creditors, which he won just weeks before he died. Robert and Gilbert then moved the family to a third farm, Mossgiel, near the small town of Mauchline.

A self-consciously modernizing society like eighteenth-century Scotland presented opportunities as well as pitfalls for men from this background. There were economic opportunities, and Burns was on the lookout for career-paths that could take him away from, or at least reduce his dependence on, the toil and anxiety of farming. In 1775 he had spent a happy summer studying surveying in his mother's home village of Kirkoswald, and in 1782 there was an ultimately disastrous foray into the flax industry of Irvine, Ayrshire's largest town, which

precipitated the first of the depressive episodes that would recur throughout his life. The search for economic security eventually led to his obtaining, through local contacts, an offer of work as overseer on one of the many Scottish-owned slave-plantations in Jamaica, to which Burns planned to emigrate in 1786. There were also opportunities for personal improvement, for the cultivation of the self, rather than the soil, and Burns grasped most eagerly at these. At Tarbolton in 1780, he and his friends founded a 'Batchelor's Club' which was at once a social organization and a debating society, a means of facilitating mutual social and intellectual self-improvement independently of church or college. The following year Burns joined the local Masonic Lodge, which fulfilled a similar function and extended his range of acquaintance into more privileged classes than his own. And above all there was reading and writing. Burns read widely in modern English prose and verse: John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the novels of Richardson, Smollett, Sterne, and Mackenzie, as well as Dryden, Pope, Thomson, Shenstone, Gray, Collins, and Macpherson's 'Works of Ossian'. Crucially, probably in 1783, Burns discovered poetry in Scots by Robert Fergusson. Burns had been writing poems and songs in English, the language of the library and the debating society, since his late teens. He had known Allan Ramsay's work in Scots, but the near-contemporary Fergusson demonstrated how Ramsay's language and verse-forms could be brought to bear on the modern Scottish scene. This sparked the astonishing creativity of the Mossgiel years, as Burns's poetry vivified an informed, Enlightenment sensibility with the language of the community in which he lived.

In the same period Burns was pursuing sexual experience with similar enthusiasm. It worried his father in his final years, and it continued to worry his family at Mossgiel, but his pleasure in sex was unabashed. Eventually, inevitably, one of his girlfriends got pregnant: Elizabeth Paton, who had worked for the family at Lochlie. This brought Burns before the church authorities who were responsible for the enforcement of sexual discipline at the parish level. Burns had to pay a fine, and sit with Elizabeth in the 'stool of repentance' to be publicly admonished by the minister back in Tarbolton parish church. By the time the child was born in May 1785, the relationship had ended, and Burns had become engaged to Jean Armour, the daughter of a Mauchline stonemason. Jean was pregnant by March 1786. Hoping to avoid scandal, her parents hurried her out of the parish to relatives in Paisley, away from the prying eyes of the Kirk Session and, most importantly, away



from Burns, with whom she was denied contact. In the eyes of Burns, Jean's apparent acquiescence in her parents' tactics looked like the breaking-off of their engagement. In the eyes of the respectable Armour, Robert Burns had no means of supporting their daughter and her child, with little money and no apparent prospects.

## 2. *The Kilmarnock edition*

Yet Burns did have prospects. His poems had been circulating in manuscript among his friends, and among his friends' friends. That he was widely known as a poet through this local network put him in a position to do something he could not otherwise have risked: publish a book. Rather than pay a printer to produce a volume in the hope that it would at least recoup its costs in the marketplace, Burns could invite 'subscriptions' which amounted to promises to buy the book in advance. And so he had a prospectus printed, dated 14 April 1786, and headed,

PROPOSALS,  
FOR PUBLISHING BY SUBSCRIPTION,  
SCOTCH POEMS,  
BY ROBERT BURNS.

The Work to be elegantly Printed in One Volume, Octavo.  
Price Stitched *Three Shillings*.

As the Author has not the most distant Mercenary view in Publishing,  
as soon as so many Subscribers appear as will defray the necessary Expence,  
the Work will be sent to the Press.

Three shillings, though still more than most people could afford, was relatively cheap for a new book in this format. The records of the printer, John Wilson of Kilmarnock, show that at least 400 copies were ordered in this way, justifying a print-run of 612 in total. Of those subscriptions, 145 were collected by Burns's friend in Ayr, the lawyer Robert Aiken; 72 by Kilmarnock wine merchant Robert Muir; 70 by Burns's brother Gilbert; 41 by Mauchline draper James Smith; and 40 by Mauchline lawyer Gavin Hamilton. *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was published at Kilmarnock at the end of July, 1786.

Both the prospectus, and the title of the published volume, draw attention to the language in which Burns's poems are written. As the change from simply 'Scotch' to 'Chiefly' Scottish suggests, Burns's language is heterogeneous, shifting from Scots to English not only from one poem to the next but from one stanza or line to the next.

Sometimes, indeed, this shift is invisible on the page: what looks like the same word will require a Scottish vowel in one context, and an English vowel in another, to provide the rhyme. Allan Ramsay, more than anyone responsible for the revival of Scots as a literary language in the years after the Treaty of Union with England in 1707, identified this expanded range as the great advantage of the Scottish poet, in the 'Preface' to his *Poems of 1721*:

[G]ood Poetry may be in any Language. . . . [T]he Pronunciation [of Scots] is liquid and sonorous, and much fuller than the *English*, of which we are Masters, by being taught it in our Schools, and daily reading it; which being added to all our own native Words, of eminent Significancy, makes our Tongue by far the completest. (p. vii)

'Our Tongue', on Ramsay's account, is not one language to be contrasted with English: it is a language which has absorbed English into itself as an additional resource, and this provides a useful way of thinking about the language of Burns's verse. In Burns's case, even more than in Ramsay's, this linguistic range is paralleled by the variety of verse-forms, modes, and literary traditions on which the poetry draws. An effect of this is to put the reader into a succession of different relationships to the poetry's subject matter. For example, one of the verse-forms that Burns inherits from medieval Scotland is the 'Christ's Kirk on the Green' stanza, used for 'brawl' poems celebrating popular festivals and disorder (see headnote to 'The Holy Fair', p. 291). Such poems characteristically invite the reader into the community that is being described by demanding that they suspend their own moral attitudes to appreciate the energies and pleasures of a society in the moment of its recreation. Eighteenth-century examples like 'The Holy Fair' in the Kilmarnock *Poems* make an equivalent demand at the level of language, as the poem is consistently conducted in something like the language of the community it celebrates. The absence of moral distance means that no moral judgement can be drawn to round off the poem, so 'The Holy Fair' just ends with the end of the day that it chronicles. In contrast, 'The Cotter's Saturday night' quite explicitly distinguishes between its intended reader, one from the prosperous 'middling sort' such as its dedicatee Robert Aiken, and the cottar class which is its subject, with the speaker of the poem acting as explicator of the latter to the former. The subject matter is essentially the same as that of 'The Holy Fair': the lives of ordinary people in the Scottish countryside. But this matter is framed in the stanza form of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, promising the educated reader that it will be moralized in a way corresponding to

the literary authority of this source. The language of the poem modulates according to the poet's task of social mediation: the English of the opening address to Aiken is followed by a specifically Scots vocabulary to describe everyday experience, which ebbs in turn as soon as the father pulls out the (English-language) Bible; the poet ends by turning this family into an example of Scotland's moral 'grandeur' (l. 163) and addressing a prayer to the nation and its God, all in English. To say that either 'The Holy Fair' or 'The Cotter's Saturday night' is more successful than the other is perhaps to miss the point: the joy of the Kilmarnock *Poems* lies in Burns's experimentation with the different voices, different genres, different personae and stances towards his material, opened up to him by his literary inheritance and the particular historical moment in which he was writing.

Burns frames this variety in several ways. For the title page of his book, Burns wrote an epigraph, advertising himself as a 'Simple Bard, unbroke by rules of Art', who, inspired by 'Nature' alone, 'pours the wild effusions of the heart'. The poetry that follows is full of delight in wild creatures and in the woods and rivers of his county. But clearly, Burns did not learn the vocabulary of 'the wild effusions of the heart', of 'Bards' and 'Nature', from nature. He acquired it from a mid-eighteenth-century British literary culture which had given up the previous era's deep investment in classical precedents in search of heightened emotional effects such as the sublime and the sentimental. The latter is a particularly important category for Burns. At just the point in the first 'Epistle to James Lapraik' where Burns claims he needs no learning to write poetry, merely 'ae spark o' Nature's fire', he is quoting from the high-priest of the sentimental, Laurence Sterne. Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) had located the basis of ethics in our capacity to imagine the feelings and perceptions of others, and to imagine how we in turn must appear in their eyes. Some of the poems of the Kilmarnock volume invite us to share in the feelings of another in this way: 'The auld Farmer's . . . Salutation to his auld Mare', for example, or, most famously, 'To a Mouse'. And consistently in these poems and songs, the spontaneous human affections of 'the heart' are defined in opposition to material selfishness taken as the defining feature of a modern commercial society.

Nae treasures, nor pleasures  
 Could make us happy lang;  
 The *heart* ay's the part ay,  
 That makes us right or wrang. ('Epistle to Davie', ll. 67–70)

This opposition is particularly characteristic of the sentimental novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771) by Henry Mackenzie: 'a book I prize next to the Bible' wrote Burns to his old tutor in 1783.

Yet Burns does something very interesting with his sentimental model. *The Man of Feeling* imagines the attachments of 'the heart' as under siege, as eventually defeated, by 'the world' of economic reality, a world of greed and lies: emotional bonds between particular individuals cannot be generalized into an alternative to money as the organizing principle of society. The feelings cultivated by reading such fiction must be their own reward: the fiction itself warns that they cannot constitute a way of life. Burns's verse epistles in the Kilmarnock edition set out to prove otherwise. Ten lines before those quoted above from the 'Epistle to Davie', Burns imagines the flowers and birdsong of spring inspiring poetry:

On braes when we please then,  
We'll sit and *sowth* a tune;  
Syne *rhyme* till't, we'll time till't,  
An' sing't when we hae done.

The first-person *plural* is important here. In offering us this image of creativity as collaboration rather than individual inspiration, Burns also asserts the productivity, rather than the precariousness, of particular sentimental solidarities. This is more than a promise, for we have the poem in front of us as the first fruit of just this collaboration. It is part of the logic of the verse epistle as a genre that it makes the addressee a condition for the existence of the poem. This is obviously true of an epistle to a patron; but also of the Kilmarnock verse epistles, addressed to equals. Even Gavin Hamilton, whose help in getting the Kilmarnock volume published allows Burns to call him 'patron', is addressed *as* an equal ('A Dedication'). For the friendships of the verse epistles are not only literary constructions, offering, like Mackenzie's, an escape from the wider reality of modern society. Rather, they dramatize part of that reality, an already-existing social practice of mutual assistance in the clubs and lodges of Enlightenment Ayrshire; the social practice that, as we have seen, made it possible to publish *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*.

The sentimental sociability of the verse epistles is not the only mode that Burns appropriates from mid-century literary culture and adapts for his own purposes. The Kilmarnock *Poems* use the word 'Bard' (or the diminutive 'Bardie') no fewer than thirty times in the 235 pages between the title and the close of 'A Bard's Epitaph'. The word comes from the Celtic languages, where it just means 'poet'. In English, it had

long been used to name the traditional singer of Scottish, Welsh, and, especially, Irish society, originally a man attached to a tribal chieftain whose virtues and victories he commemorated in song. In the middle of the eighteenth century, as part of the shift away from neo-classical literary values and the discovery or invention of indigenous origins for the 'British' nation, this figure had been reevaluated and celebrated in Thomas Gray's Pindaric ode 'The Bard' (1757) and James Macpherson's prose-poems of 'Ossian', beginning with *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760). Gray's Welsh bard is the last of his kind, and curses the invading army of Edward I which has murdered all his fellow-bards. Macpherson's Ossian too is the last of his kind, and laments the destruction of his tribe, his father and son included, in a third-century war. To be a bard in Gray's and Macpherson's sense is to mourn the destruction of the social context that gave your song its meaning. In appropriating the term, Burns puts this definition into reverse. For Burns, 'Bard' evokes the *possibility* that a delimited social context might provide the poet with his vocation, not the inevitability of that context's destruction. As with sentimentalism, Burns takes a contemporary literary category that assumes its own social impotence and uses it to claim a certain kind of social authority for himself.

How exactly Burns's social context might be delimited remained an open question at the publication of the *Kilmarnock Poems* in 1786. As we have seen, that volume's enabling condition was a specifically local network of friends and sponsors. When Burns's muse Coila visits him in 'The Vision', her 'mantle' shimmers with the landmarks of Kyle; but her 'robe' is tartan, and she identifies herself as the local agent of a nationwide system of muses overseeing Scottish life. As we have also seen, Burns's language and verse-forms often advertise their origins in a national (that is, Scottish) literary culture. When Ramsay revived the literary use of Scots in the 1720s he had in effect proposed that language, and the history of poetry written in that language, as the vehicle of a Scottish national identity, in the absence of political sovereignty after the Union, and as an alternative to the Presbyterian church, the most powerful national institution left after 1707. To write in the verse forms and modes bequeathed by Ramsay was already to accept a national role. Burns accordingly refers to himself as a 'Scotch Bard', as well as an Ayrshire one, in the *Kilmarnock* volume, and addresses Scottish MPs, for example, as spokesman for the Scottish people ('The Author's earnest cry and prayer'). What happened after the *Kilmarnock* edition confirmed Burns, not just as a 'Scotch Bard', but as *the* 'Scotch Bard', a position he occupies to this day.

### 3. *The Edinburgh edition*

The Kilmarnock edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* probably made Burns the substantial sum of around £50. His genius in verse, and publication by subscription, had allowed him to turn the cultural capital of his education and the social capital of his friendships into actual money. In the summer of 1786 Burns still intended to leave this money for the support of his illegitimate children on his emigration to Jamaica. But the possibility of publishing a second, expanded edition also presented itself. Wilson, his Kilmarnock printer, wanted Burns to advance the cost of the paper for such a volume; Burns, unwilling to do this, planned a trip to Edinburgh, to see if he could make a better deal there. In the meantime, his local fame was beginning to be replicated at a national level. Not all his local contacts, after all, were only local people. Some were wealthy landowners who spent part or most of the year in their townhouses in the capital. Catrine, a few miles from Mauchline, was the summer home of Dugald Stewart, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. He introduced Burns's work to the Edinburgh poet Thomas Blacklock, who got hold of the Kilmarnock book and immediately recommended that a second, larger edition should be arranged. James Cunningham, Earl of Glencairn, who had estates in Ayrshire, acquired a copy through his factor there and was impressed; another local landowner, James Dalrymple of Orangefield, who knew Burns through the Masons, was related to Glencairn by marriage. So when Burns set off for Edinburgh in late November 1786 he carried a letter of introduction from Dalrymple to this influential Scottish nobleman. A review of the Kilmarnock *Poems* had already appeared in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for the previous month (see Appendix 2 of the present volume).

On his arrival, Burns was lionized by literary Edinburgh. Some of the adulation was superficial and condescending. Scottish Enlightenment 'conjectural history' had proposed that poetry, rather than being the achievement of advanced civilizations like that of Rome or modern Europe, was rooted in the spontaneous expression of feeling, equated with a timeless 'human nature'. Not only, therefore, could it be found in the earliest, most 'primitive' or 'barbarous' states of human society, it was found there in a purer state, uncorrupted by the constraints imposed by later, more complex, social forms. Thus had Hugh Blair, Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh, argued in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763). In claiming direct inspiration by Nature, and in adopting the

name of Bard, Burns had invited categorization in this way by his genteel readers, with his difference in social class guaranteeing his closeness to nature as Ossian's distance in historical time had guaranteed his. The re-socialization of these ideas by the poems themselves was not what won their author access to Edinburgh 'society'.

Still, Burns enjoyed much of what Edinburgh had to offer. He made many lasting friends in the city. He seized the opportunity for sexual adventures, both consummated (with lower-class women) and unconsummated (with the middle-class Mrs McLehose, separated from her husband, with whom Burns entered into a protracted epistolary flirtation, writing to 'Clarinda' and signing himself 'Sylvander'). Most importantly, there was the new edition of his poems, slightly expanded to include some of the work that Burns had held back from the Kilmarnock volume or written subsequently. Glencairn introduced Burns to William Creech, probably the most important 'bookseller' (that is, publisher) of the Scottish Enlightenment. The Edinburgh edition was published, like its predecessor, by subscription, but on a new, national scale: Glencairn's influence helped secure commitments to 2,876 copies at five shillings a copy. Of those among the 1,521 names in the volume's subscription list that have been identified, around 20 per cent come from the (relatively easy to identify) land-owning classes, and the rest from the 'middling sort' of professionals, merchants, and manufacturers. Burns covered the costs of producing the book (to rather higher standards than were possible at Kilmarnock) from the money generated. Three thousand copies were printed and ready for distribution by 17 April 1787. Five hundred of the subscriptions were from Creech himself, who sold them from his shop for six shillings. But Creech's real profit would come from the copyright, which he bought from Burns for 100 guineas, and which secured him a share of the takings from the London reprint of 1,500 copies later in 1787, and from subsequent editions. Burns's profits came to him more slowly than he would have liked, and it was not until February 1789 that his accounts were finally settled with Creech for the Edinburgh edition, but he eventually made about £450 in total.

The plan of slave-driving in Jamaica was finally abandoned after this spectacular success, and Burns took advantage of his immediate freedom by enjoying a series of tours around Scotland, to the Highlands and his father's ancestral north-east, and to the Borders: getting to know the country of which he was now acclaimed the national poet. But Burns does not seem to have considered the possibility of pursuing writing as a career, for example under the permanent patronage of

Glencairn or another nobleman. Instead, he used the access to influential people that his fame had granted him to secure a government job as an exciseman, checking that manufacturers, importers, and retailers of taxable goods were cheating neither the government nor the public. On his Highland tour he met Robert Graham of Fintry, recently appointed a Commissioner to the Scottish Board of Excise: Burns wrote to him asking for his help. In eighteenth-century Britain, securing the influence or 'interest' of a friend in a high place was how you got a job in government service, and how you got promotion once you had the job. As Glencairn's patronage had made the Edinburgh edition possible, so Fintry's patronage got Burns his place in the Excise. Another contact among the gentry, Patrick Miller of Dalswinton, had earlier offered Burns the lease of a farm on his estate in Nithsdale, in Dumfriesshire. Burns inspected the farm, Ellisland, during his Border tour in the summer of 1787. Returning to Edinburgh via Mauchline, he slept with Jean: the Armours had been reconciled to their son-in-law by his new prosperity. Jean again became pregnant, and in February 1788 produced twins (she had one child surviving from the twins she bore in her previous pregnancy). Burns was commissioned into the Excise in July, and moved to Ellisland, to establish a dairy farm, work part-time in his customs job, and build a modern farmhouse to receive his wife and growing family.

#### 4. *The later career*

With the publication of the Edinburgh edition, and his subsequent settling with Jean in Dumfriesshire, the second act of Burns's career comes to an end. It is this period that has given us the popular image of Burns: the ploughman-poet, the sociable man's man, the reckless lover. And yet his subsequent career is just as interesting. At this point, Burns seems to have lost all interest in making money from his poetry. He certainly continued to write and publish poems. He sent 18 new poems to Creech for inclusion in a third edition of his *Poems* in two volumes (1793), which also added the already-published 'Tam o' Shanter'. But as Creech held the copyright on this volume, the poet only received twenty complimentary copies in return. He also published poems in newspapers and magazines, and circulated his work among friends and patrons in manuscript form as he always had done, sometimes assembling collections of his work for this purpose. This type of production could be as substantial as the 'Glenriddell Manuscripts': two bound volumes into which Burns transcribed a wide selection of his



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