Robert Burns
1759 - 1796

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Biography:

Robert Burns; (1759-96) Born 25 Jan 59 in Alloway, Ayrshire. At Alloway Mill School, he was influenced by literature, while his father instilled religious belief, and his mother made him familiar with folk tradition at an early age. His education suffered some interruptions caused by moving house. In 1781 Burns became a freemason and after his father’s death in 1784, he and his brother rented Mossgiel, a farm near Mauchline. Burns’ relationship with Jean Armour, who bore him four children before he married her, nearly forced him to emigrate. Of course his marriage did not stop him from having affairs with other women, such as “Highland Mary” Campbell.

He started writing in 1783, and some of his greatest satirical poems date from that early phase. In 1786, his first collection, Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect appeared. An immediate success, it got him the epithet of the “heaven-taught ploughman”. That same year, he came to Edinburgh, where he was greatly admired and embarked on affair with Agnes McElhoe.

In 1788, he returned to his family and farm life, and worked as an excise officer from 1789 until his death from rheumatic fever in 1796. His birthday is, to this day, celebrated all over the world. Burns’ work covers a wide range of topics, from idylls, biting satire, Jacobitism, love and passion, to carousing, friendship and nationalism. Of course, he had a sure ear for music and his songs are among the most popular works, as is his long narrative poem Tam O’Shanter.
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Contexts:

The National Bard. The Ploughman Poet. Symbol of the nation. Socialist. Nationalist. Sexist. He is the man responsible for the enduring popularity of the haggis, and progenitor of a couple of centuries of dreadful imitative verse. Burns is a difficult poet for us to think clearly about, or to read without prejudice.

His achievements were significant, his skill unquestionable. But he's buried deep below several strata of cultural debris and too often this can get in the way of his work. One way to begin is to look at him, not in isolation as he often is – no other poet in any country, at any time in history occupies such a dominating role as Burns in Scotland – but in the context of Scotland and the poetry of his times.

Burns can be regarded as an early Romantic poet. This has got nothing to do with his notorious adventures with the ladies and more to with the major themes in his work and his influence on later poets like John Keats.

The Romantic poets were tragic and gloomy and introspective. They dwelled on the Self a lot and placed a high value on individual experience. The Romantic Movement, which flourished from around Burns's time until the late 19th century, produced the popular notion of the Poet or Artist as an individual with tragically heightened powers of self-awareness and sensitivity to his (they tended to be men) environment. The Romantics are responsible for the way we see poets and artists today: beings possessed of an 'inner eye', somehow touched by a 'gift' (with words or music or paint) that the rest of us can't have; we can only watch and admire them.

Burns gives the lie to this. He was a gifted linguist, certainly, but he knew a day's hard graft. He read a lot, he studied and worked hard at his craft, and he had to make ends meet. He did as all but the most economically privileged of writers still do: he worked for a living and wrote the poetry in his spare time. Even the great success of Poems: Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect – printed first in Kilmarnock, then as his fame grew, in Edinburgh, then eventually in London – didn’t bring in enough money for him ever to give up his day job.

Burns's work concerns itself with a number of main themes but principally he deals with social equality and justice. Unlike the Romantics, who saw in every flower, leaf and cloud a chance to magnify their suffering, Burns found a way to connect the universal through the commonplace, a way to distil profound human truths from seemingly insignificant events.

His environment was the countryside; as a farmer, Nature was his business. Nowadays we might think of the countryside as a place for quiet contemplation away from the hectic bustle and business of city life, and Nature as generally something we ought to have more of. We think of a house in the country as something desirable – trees and grass, good; cities, bad. But this is a relatively modern idea for which we have to thank Romantics like
Wordsworth and Shelley and Keats. In Burns’s time – as it still is, despite all the poetry – the countryside was a brutal place where it was hard to make a living, where life and death were an intrinsic part of daily life, and where polite society folks had no wish to take themselves.

I’m truly sorry man’s dominion
Has broken Nature’s social union,
An’ justifies that ill opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,
An’ fellow-mortal

In To a Mouse he reflects deeply on the suffering he has accidentally caused his “fellow mortal”. The sentimental association we now have with animals would not have been at all common in Burns’s time. A mouse would have been a pest, unworthy of a farmer’s sympathy. Burns isn’t being sentimental though. He’s making a point. He talks about breaking nature’s social union. He thinks, why should that mouse be afraid of me – it has as much right to be here as I do. This is his land too. They are united in the struggle to survive; both of them have the hard winters to endure. Ultimately, the mouse (or the muse, perhaps) leads him to consider that for all our plans, for all our “promised joy”, the slightest thing can come along, right out of the blue, and send us all “agley”. Bottom line: we cannot expect permanence, we must embrace change and be adaptable. It was a revolutionary idea.

Clearly, Burns was no ignorant country bumpkin. He was a deeply philosophical poet, well-versed in Shakespeare and Milton and all the major writers of the time. He was also a freemason, and kept himself aware of the political situations at home and abroad, especially America and, later, France where the rights of the common man were being aggressively reclaimed from the ruling classes.

The Declaration of Independence of the thirteen United States of America signed July 4 1776 has these words:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789, begins in a similar way: Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.

This spirit informed his writing:
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For a’ that, an a’ that, It’s coming yet for a’ that, That man to man, the world, o’er
Shall brethren be for a’ that.

*Is There For Honest Poverty* is very much in the spirit which the French Revolutionaries and the American Independence movement were trying to establish, but Burns’s ideas flew in the face of conservative, middle class thinking in Britain – which resisted change and demanded permanence – and cost him friends and influence.

Remember too that Scotland was a country uncomfortable with its new way of government. The Union of the Parliaments of Scotland and England happened in 1707. But even 52 years later, when Burns was born, still not everybody was happy, nor even comfortable with the idea. There was a determined resistance among some writers, philosophers and scientists who were afraid that Scotland’s distinctive culture and language would be lost, submerged by the dominant English culture. They struggled to keep Scotland’s cultural and national identity distinct from their more powerful neighbours. Burns belonged with this group.

Indeed, 300 years later, the people of Scotland still weren’t entirely comfortable with the idea of being ruled by a power many felt was foreign and at times hostile to the Scots. In 1999 when Scotland won a measure of freedom from English government, the song *Is There For Honest Poverty* was sung at the opening of the newly devolved Scottish Parliament – ironically with many “birkies”, lords and “belted knights” in attendance.

Burns played his part in the fight to keep Scotland’s culture distinct. Scotland has always been a nation of many languages – it still is – and the poetry of Burns demonstrates his facility in two of them. One was Lowland Scots: the language he grew up speaking, the language of farmers and labourers and craftsmen. The other was the dialect of the Establishment, the Law Courts, the ruling classes, the polite way of speaking often referred to now as the Queen’s English. Until Burns, poets had tended to write in one form or the other; Burns used both, with great skill, and frequently within the same poem.

This was no accident. It was a strategy he used deliberately to show that one form of language was no better, or was as equal, as another. Just as “man to man the world over” are ultimately made of the same stuff, regardless of rank or privilege, so too with language. One way of speaking is as effective as the next. Lowland Scots can be as poetic, as beautiful, as the language of South Britain. Burns could write as brilliantly in the dialect of the courts and the establishment as he could in the dialect of the ploughman, and this made him the toast of the whole of Britain, and eventually the world. Burns used a local dialect – but the truths his poetry illuminated transcended the local and found the universal.

The fact about poetry is: if you say something extraordinary in your own voice, it will resonate in the hearts and minds of others, a lesson many Scottish writers have learned. The voice of Burns continues to resonate.
To A Mouse

Wee, sleeket, cowrin, tim’rous beastie,
Oh, what a panic’s in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty
Wi’ bickerin brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee
Wi’ murd’ring pattle!

I’m truly sorry man’s dominion
Has broken Nature’s social union,
An’ justifies that ill opinion
Which makes thee startle
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,
An’ fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve:
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
’S a sma’ request;
I’ll get a blessin wi’ the lave,
An’ never miss ‘t!

Thy wee bit housie, too, in ruin!
Its silly wa’s the win’s are strewin!
An’ naething, now, to big a new ane,
O’ foggage green!
An’ bleak December’s winds ensuin
Baith snell an’ keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an’ wast,
An’ weary winter comin fast,
An’ cozie here beneath the blast
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro’ thy cell.

That wee bit heap o’ leaves an’ stibble
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou’s turn’d out for a’ thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter’s sleety dribble
An’ cranreuch cauld!
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But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain
For promis'd joy.

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

A Man’s a Man for a’ that

Is there, for honest poverty,
That hings his head, an’ a’ that?
The coward slave, we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a’ that!
For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
Our toils obscure, an’ a’ that;
The rank is but the guinea’s stamp;
The man’s the gowd for a’ that,

What tho’ on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin-gray, an’ a’ that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,
A man’s a man for a’ that.
For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
Their tinsel show an’ a’ that;
The honest man, tho’ e’er sae poor,
Is king o’ men for a’ that.

Ye see yon birkie, ca’d a lord
Wha struts, an’ stares, an’ a’ that;
Tho’ hundreds worship at his word,
He’s but a coof for a’ that:
For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
His riband, star, an’ a’ that,
The man o’ independent mind,
He looks and laughs at a’ that.

No thy lane: not alone
Gang aft agley: often go wrong
E’e: eye
Obscure: recognised
Gowd: gold
Hoddin-gray: cheap clothes
Knaves: unscrupulous men
Birkie: smart-arse
Coof: half-wit
A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an’ a’ that;
But an honest man’s aboon his might,
Guid faith he mauna fa’ that!
For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
Their dignities, an’ a’ that,
The pith o’ sense, an’ pride o’ worth,
Are higher rank than a’ that.

Then let us pray that come it may,
As come it will for a’ that,
That sense and worth, o’er a’ the earth,
May bear the gree, an’ a’ that.
For a’ that, an’ a’ that,
It’s coming yet, for a’ that,
That man to man, the warld o’er,
Shall brithers be for a’ that.

Further Reading

Electric Scotland
There is more information on Burns on the web than any other Scottish writer. This is as good a place as any to begin looking.
http://www.electricscotland.com/burns/

The World of Robert Burns
A wealth of material from a devoted and learned fan of Burns. Ranges from instructions on how to organise your own Burns Supper, facts and myths and FAQ, to close readings of the major poems.
http://www.robertburns.plus.com/launchrb.htm

Representative Poetry Online
23 of Burns’s poems to read online . . .
http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poet42.html

Online Works of Robert Burns
http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Crete/1292/works.htm

The following websites will be of general interest to the student of Scottish literature:

Scottish Literary Tour Trust
Featuring an extensive section on the Makars’ Literary Tour
http://www.scot-lit-tour.co.uk
National Library of Scotland
Homepage of the NLS.
http://www.nls.uk/

Scottish Poetry Library
A very attractively laid out website with information on some of the major poets of the 20th century along with detailed readings of their best-known works.
http://www.spl.org.uk/index.html

SLAINTE
The name stands for Scottish Librarians Across the Internet. This excellent site features brief, well-written biographies of many of the great Scottish writers.
http://www.slainte.org.uk/Scotauth/scauhome.htm

Scots Online
From essays to an online dictionary this is a web-based resource with everything you could possibly need to know about the Scots language and how it is used.
http://www.scots-online.org/

Shudder at the Niffer
An essay in Scots about Scots.
http://www.fleimin.demon.co.uk/Bletherskite/Shudder_At_The_Niffer.htm

Gaelic & Scottish Connections
A resource on Gaelic language and culture, featuring poetry and essays and an online dictionary.
http://www.gaelicscottish.com/

Electric Scotland
Electric Scotland is a real mixed bag of Scottish paraphernalia with nationalist overtones. This page in particular allows you to hear and read complete Scots poems, from MacDiarmid to Dunbar.
http://www.electricscotland.com/si/features/scots/complete.htm

Literature links
An encyclopaedic web of links to Scots magazines, monuments, libraries and languages.
http://www.burryman.com/scotland.html - lit

Project Gutenberg
This is a web-based publisher of copyright expired books.
http://www.ibiblio.org/gutenberg/cgi-bin/sdb/t9.cgi/
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Poetry Archive
A good, user-friendly site, sponsored by a bookseller, which features examples from some of the best poets in the world.
http://www.poetry-archive.com/

Poem Index
Almost 900 poems in the English language from 13th to 19th centuries.
http://tcsu.trin.cam.ac.uk/~john/pgbew/html-interface/full-index.html

Representative Poetry On-line
An enormous and easy to use resource based at the University of Toronto featuring alphabetical and chronological lists of 450 poets with substantial selections of their work.
http://eirlibrary.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poet42.html

Scottish PEN
The name stands for Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists and exists to promote the friendly co-operation between writers in the interests of freedom of expression throughout the world.
http://www.scottishpen.org/

Writers’ Portraits
Photographic and biographical pen portraits of some of Scotland’s greatest contemporary writers.
http://www.nls.uk/writestuff/

Anthologies

The Book of Prefaces
edited and glossed by Alasdair Gray
Bloomsbury (2000)
Every home should have one. Dust jacket contains this advice: "Warning to Parents, Teachers, Librarians, Booksellers. Do not let smart children handle this book. It will help them pass examinations without reading anything else."

The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Scottish Poetry
Edited by Douglas Dunn
Faber & Faber (1992)
A detailed account of the dramatic transformations the Scottish verse underwent in the previous century, with an enlightening introduction by Dunn.

The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse
edited by Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah
Penguin (2000)
Robert Burns
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A beautifully presented chronology of some of the greatest Scottish poetry, from the 6th century to the present.

The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse
edited by Tom Scott
Penguin (1970)
Earlier incarnation of above, edited by Scott – a recent inductee to Makars’ Court. Contains the infamous and controversial rude verse attributed to Burns. Makes for an interesting comparison with Crawford & Imlah’s anthology.

An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets
Edited by Catherine Kerrigan
Edinburgh University Press (1991)
Covers folksong, ballad, Scots and Anglo-Scots, from the middle ages to contemporary poets.

Studies and Criticism

Scottish Literature
eds Douglas Gifford, et al
This is all just about all you need to know about Scottish literature. A comprehensive, and very readable book. Excellent.

The Mainstream Companion to Scottish Literature
Trevor Royle
Mainstream (1993)
Alphabetically arranged standard reference on Scottish literature.

Modern Scottish Literature
Alan Bold
Longman (1983)
Learned, erudite discussion of the major writers and texts of Scottish literature in the 20th century. Brilliant study material for Higher English.

Imagine a City: Glasgow In Fiction
Moira Burgess
Argyll (1998)
The definitive work on Glasgow’s place in Scottish literature, written by the author of the Makars Court Tour script.

A History of Scottish Women’s Writing
edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan
Edinburgh University Press (1997)
This is the best book around for Scottish women’s writing at the moment. Tone can be a bit academic in places.

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