

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

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BURNS AGAIN



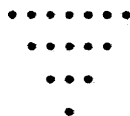
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An essay on Burns by a student of the University of Saskatchewan would not be complete without an acknowledgment of indebtedness to Dr. Wilson who has given to the members of his classes an enthusiasm for and understanding of the poetry of Robert Burns. One of his students takes this opportunity to express her thanks.

BURNS AGAIN

I

One hundred and forty-three years ago Robert Burns died and was buried, yet today he is more alive than are a great many people who are walking about and talking. Hear a group of Burnsites discussing their poet. Is not Burns living to them? The drouthy soul speaks of him as though they two had recently sat "bousing at the nappy"; the "radical" calls on Burns as a fellow-rebel; the zealous Scot defends the poet's reputation as warmly as if he were talking about his own third cousin. All of them think of Burns as a friend. What other great poet is familiarly addressed with a nickname by men who live four or five generations after him? They mention Spenser, or Milton, or even Shakespeare with respect, with admiration, or with worship, but they speak of "oor Rabbie" with affection.

It is not hard to become a friend of Burns. True, one cannot present to him a letter of introduction

from Gavin Hamilton or William Nicol, but the poet does not stand upon ceremony. He is accessible to anyone who will read his poems. Hazlitt, who was one of those who loved the poet as well as the poetry, said, "He has made us as well acquainted with himself as it is possible to be-----He had a real heart of flesh and blood beating in his bosom--You can almost hear it throb." ¹. The life and works of no other poet are so closely related; in his poetry Burns painted his environment, his home, his work, his emotions with almost physical verisimilitude. He had no hypocrisy or reserve. "We can see horribly clear in the works of such a man his whole life, as if we were God's spies," wrote Keats. ². It is true, also, that a knowledge of the life of Burns is an aid to the understanding of his poetry. The condition of his country, the nature of his people, the events of his life all influenced the development of the genius of Burns. Before we begin, it is as well to shake off prejudices and to decide to ignore the comments of biographers, for Burns himself can tell us much more than can they. A study of Burns undertaken sincerely will give one a new insight into human nature and a wider tolerance for human failings. Anyone who does succeed in making a friend of Burns is well repaid

1. Lectures on the English Poets, p. 127.

2. Letters, V. i, p. 183.

for hours of careful study. His contemporaries could not praise enough the charm of his personality. "None certainly ever outshone Burns in the charms--the sorcery I would almost call it--of fascinating conversationsuch was the irresistible power of attraction that encircled him--though his appearance and manner were always peculiar, he never failed to delight and to excel." ¹. That was the opinion of Maria Riddel. Fortunately a good measure of Burns's "irresistible power of attraction" was woven into those poems in which we see nature and men in the light of his personality. In addition, we will see a powerful intellect and an honest judgment trained on the problem of the relation of the individual to his environment, a problem which is as pressing today as when Burns wrote. In all, an acquaintance with Burns is a sufficient reward for going back to the Scotland of the Eighteenth Century to trace from the beginning the growth of her greatest poet.

The long Wars of Independence, the stormy days of Knox, the confusion of the Revolution had been succeeded by a half-century of peace, almost of lethargy; but beneath the apparent quiet forces were working that were to create the wealth of modern Scotland. In 1707, by the Act of Union, Scotland had lost the status of an independent kingdom which

1. Life and Work of Robert Burns,
Chambers-Wallace, V. iv, p. 521.

she had enjoyed since March 1, 1428. Her situation after the Union was very much like that in which Canada would find herself should she be persuaded to unite with her more powerful neighbor. By the removal of protective duties many industries were ruined. Men of talent swarmed down the high road that led to the capital of the larger country, much to the dismay of the English who saw the success of Lord Bute in politics, of Pitcairn in medicine, or Smollett in letters, and of scores of less distinguished men who as clerks patiently worked themselves into business. When a literary group did grow up in Edinburgh, its members modelled themselves on men of letters in London and in France, and were proud of their avoidance of Scotticisms. Scottish national pride, which had been unconquered since the days of Bruce, now seemed entirely lost through a mere Act of Parliament. Naturally, in some quarters there was a strong resentment against the Union, and this usually took the form of Jacobitism. Three risings were crushed in the first half of the century and after Culloden the government set a hard hand on anything that suggested a sympathy for the old regime. The suppression of the Gaelic, of Highland dress, of even the bagpipes was regarded as another attack on national feeling.

But by the middle of the century Scotland was beginning to recover from the Union. The landlords who had followed the Parliament to London came back with ideas for improving farming and soon potatoes and turnips were staple crops and cattle and sheep were improved. New industries were developed and the modern industrial era was begun. Luxuries were introduced, the nature of which appear in an amusing account of one of their opponents: "Tea," she said, "would be the ruin of the nation; sugar was a sore evil; wheaten bread was only fit for babes; earthenware was a pick-pocket; wooden floors were but fit for threshing upon; slated roofs cold; feathers good enough for fowls." More significant than these innovations of material comforts was the beginning of an interest in old Scottish literature which suggested the first re-awakening of a national consciousness. Allan Ramsay brought to Edinburgh the necessary stimulus of English books. Milton, Shakespeare, the Spectator, Pope, and others were introduced to Scotland in the first circulating library which he opened in 1725, as well as what a disapproving clergyman called "villainous, profane, and obscene books of plays." More important was the work which Ramsay ^{1.} and Watson ^{2.}

1. The Evergreen. (1724).

The Tea-Table Miscellany. (1724-40).

2. Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots poems both ancient and modern. (1706-11).

did in reviving the vernacular. They republished most of the old poems of James I, Dunbar, Henryson, Lyndsay and others, and thus closed the break which had been made in the Seventeenth Century between the earlier Scottish school and the poets of the Eighteenth Century. Not only were the spirit and peculiar attitudes of the old poetry revived, but a wealth of verse forms practically unknown in English were brought out and refurbished. Ramsay wrote original work in which he tried to recapture the realism and naturalism of the old school in the old metres. Ramsay died in 1758. Four years before, a young man died in a madhouse who had already shown more genius in the vernacular than had Ramsay. "He had intelligence and an eye, a slight touch of humour, the gifts of invention and observation and style, together with a true feeling for country and city alike,"¹ said Henley. Ramsay and Fergusson showed the possibilities of the native poetry and it needed only a poet of genius to bring back to Scottish literature the glory of the age of the "makars."

Since the chief characteristic of the vernacular poetry is realism of description, we might glance at the environment of which an Eighteenth Century poet of Scotland would have to write.

1. The Poetry of Burns, p. 261.

Matthew Arnold made a sweeping condemnation of the Eighteenth Century world of Scotch drink and Scotch manners. While expressing no personal partiality for "Scotch drink," one may be allowed to summon for its defense another sturdy Englishman who tasted the national beverage on his journey to the Western Islands and preferred it to "any English malt brandy," though he deprecated "the art of making poison pleasant." Or, if Arnold referred not to the whiskey but to its effect, one may retort that Dr. Johnson recalled a time when all the respectable people of Lichfield got drunk every night. The sneer at "Scotch manners" was equally unwarranted. It is true that grinding poverty made the life of the peasant hard. Even in the more fortunate classes, wealth of mind and soundness of heart were out of all proportion to material wealth or comfort. Principal Robertson had to take in boarders to eke out a living, yet his Charles V was praised by Voltaire and Catherine II of Russia sent him a gold snuffbox. John Skinner, father of the primus of Scotland, lived "in a cottage--with earthen floors and grateless fireplaces, with less than the income of a foreman mechanic, yet happy, cheerful, and the centre of a cultured and accomplished family circle."¹ Even though the Scots peasant was poor and hard-worked he was as independent in mind as was his social equal

1. Chambers-Wallace, V. ii, p. 174.

in any other country at the time. The last record of a Scot being claimed as a serf is dated 1364; the last record of the same nature in England is dated almost two hundred years later. Snyder writes, "It is notable that the Seventeenth Century provided Scotland with an admirable plan for popular education, a plan superior to anything then in existence elsewhere in Europe." ¹. When a peasant poet appeared his fellows could and did read his works and many of them were no mean judges of his talents.

The Kirk was still the most important institution in Eighteenth Century Scotland and Calvinism was still the most important intellectual influence. Against Matthew Arnold's arbitrary judgment of "Scotch religion" one may set Snyder's discriminating opinion:

It was a creed which brought home to every man the eternal distinction between sin and righteousness, and which placed every man face to face with his Creator and Judge. It bade each person search the Scriptures for revelations of God's will, and scrutinize his own heart for signs of his future condition. It opened the gates of Heaven to the regenerate, and held up before the sinner the certainty of a Hell with which there was no temporizing. There was nothing equivocal about this creed, nothing sentimental. And it was essentially a democratic creed, admitting no ranks or order, either among clergy or laity. A man might be duke or cotter, laird or ploughman, during the week; but on the Sabbath he took his place in the Kirk as a freeman of a state that looked to no earthly potentate as sovereign. ².

1. The Life of Robert Burns, p. 29.

2. Ibid., p. 28.

Even the rigid and thorough discipline of the Church was not so much tyranny as self-discipline. Of course there were abuses in the Kirk, but unless one understands the strength of the influence of Scotland's faith on her sons one can never understand fully her great men.

By the middle of the century orthodox beliefs were being undermined. Hume had written his Essay on Miracles (1748); Hutcheson had preached a liberal creed to which more and more ministers adhered. In 1790, a minister was not censured for binding a presentee for ordination to the Confession of Faith, "so far as it is agreeable to reason and the Word of God."

The weakening of the orthodox faith was accompanied by a lowering of the prestige of its ministers which made possible certain scandalous satires on clergymen which we shall consider in their place. Ostensibly the power of the Kirk session was as great as ever, but actually there was a growing disregard for the laws against Sabbath-breaking and other offences and the church was becoming less interested in private affairs.

At the end of the first half of the Eighteenth Century then, the time was ripe for the coming of a national poet. Scots were reconciled to the

Union; their society was stimulated by the development of industry. National song and legend were being revived and national pride was beginning to awaken from the slumber into which it had fallen at the Union. Old ideas were making way for new; personal and political liberty was preached. All is prepared, when, in the words of Leslie Stephen, "a man of true genius rises to utter the emotions of a people in their most natural form without bothering about canons of literary criticism." ¹.

1. English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century.

II

1759 - 1777

Among those second-hand acting figures, mimes for most part, of the Eighteenth Century, once more a giant Original man; one of those men who reach down to the perennial deeps, who take rank with the Heroic among men: and he was born in a poor Ayrshire hut.

Carlyle, The Hero as Man of Letters.

Anyone acquainted with the Scottish passion for genealogy will understand that a study of Robert Burns must begin with his ancestry. However, we shall refrain from tracing his pedigree back to the traditional Campbell who settled in Glenbervie, and we may begin with the story of William Burnes the father of Robert. Carlyle has pronounced a remarkable eulogy of William Burnes:

He was a man of thoughtful, intense, earnest character, as the best of our peasants are; valuing knowledge, possessing some, and what is far better and rarer, open-minded for more: a man with a keen insight and devout heart; reverent towards God, friendly therefore at once, and fearless to all that God has made: in one word, though but a hard-handed peasant, a complete and fully unfolded man.

He was not a native of Ayrshire but had come from Kincardineshire on the East Coast of Scotland. In the story of his migration there was a touch of romance which his eldest son treasured in after years. The

Burnes family had been thriving and well-to-do about 1700 and until "the troubles." William's father had been a tenant of Stuart of Inchbreck who with the Earl Marischal had raised a regiment for the Chevalier. That is all that is definitely known, but Robert must have heard something from his father to warrant the statement he made to Ramsay of Ochtertyre that his grandfather had been driven out in the year 1715. In 1748, William obtained a certificate which is believed to clear him of any suspicion of having been out in the '45. In the same year, his father having become bankrupt, William Burnes left his home to look for work in the South. His unhappy situation at that time was later described by his second son:

I have often heard my father describe the anguish of mind he felt when he parted with his elder brother, Robert, on the top of a hill on the confines of their native place, each going his several way in search of new adventures, and scarcely knowing whither he went.

William Burnes found work at his trade of gardening in Edinburgh and then moved on to Ayrshire where he became gardener for a Dr. Ferguson. To augment his wages he rented seven acres of land near the Brig of Doon, on which he intended to set up as a market gardener. He built a snug clay cottage supported with stone and timber and neatly whitewashed outside

and in. There in 1757 he brought his bride, Agnes Broun, and there on January 25, 1759, their first son, Robert, was born.

In Wood's Songs of Scotland Mrs. Burnes is described according to her daughter's account as "a well-made, sonsie figure, with a beautiful red and white complexion; a skin the most transparent Mrs. Begg ever saw, red hair, dark eyes and eyebrows, with a fine square forehead." What was more important, she was "a very sagacious woman, without any appearance of forwardness, or awkwardness of manner." If through his father Robert inherited a devotion to the Stewarts, through the Brouns he was connected with the second great cause of Scotland, for his mother's people had been stout Covenanters. Ramsay said that Robert Burns told him "that his grandfather by the mother (was) shot at Aird's Moss while out with the Covenanters." This statement was probably based on oral tradition but there is direct evidence that another member of the family was "John Brown, the Christian Carrier, a Presbyterian and Covenanter, who was shot, by Claverhouse's orders, in the presence of his family, on the 1st May, 1685."

The influence of his early knowledge of both Jacobites and Covenanters must have been to stimulate

Robert's love of the country for which his ancestors had suffered. In spite of his common sense he always felt the glamour of the vanished regime, although he was satisfied with celebrating it in verse. "When political combustion ceases to be the object of princes and patriots," he explained, "it then, you know, becomes the lawful prey of historians and poets." He must have felt, also, an attachment to the religious traditions of his country, for though he gave the final blow to one of the most cherished doctrines of his martyred forefathers, yet when he read an unfeeling comment on the Covenanters he wrote:

The Solemn League and Covenant
Now brings a smile, now brings a tear;
But sacred freedom too was theirs;
If thou'rt a slave, indulge thy sneer.

It is a pity that we do not know more about the childhood of Burns. Was he just like other little Scottish boys, or did he have even then more than his share of the winning manner of his mother and the sombre tenacity of his father? How, if at all, did his genius appear? We can only surmise the answers to these questions, but there must have been some early sign of the quick mind and ardent feelings that later distinguished Robert Burns. "Whoever may live to see it," said the observant father, "something extraordinary will come from that boy."

Before the child could walk or speak he must have learned that every evening his father would open the "big ha' Bible" and say reverently, "Let us worship God." The sincerity and solemnity of that nightly service must have made a deep impression on the mind of the child. William Burnes was a devout man whose prayers and praise were addressed to a God of whom he was directly aware. Speculative theology was a perennial topic of discussion in Scotland, and Robert must have heard many stirring intellectual battles whenever his father found a worthy opponent. One can imagine the boy as he listened, trying to stretch his young mind to follow the subtle metaphysics, sometimes arriving directly at a conclusion which his elders would reach by tedious circumlocutions. The doctrines taught in the Burnes household were liberal, "tinged with Arminianism," as a disapproving Calvinist might say. The Manual of Religious Worship, which William Burnes probably prepared and which he certainly used in the instruction of his children, emphasizes the milder side of Presbyterianism. One passage will convey the character of the whole Manual:

We ought to serve (God) out of Love, for His perfections give us delightful prospects of His favour and friendship, for if we serve Him out of Love, we will endeavour to be like Him, and God will love His own image, and if God love us, He will rejoice over us to do us good.

Stopford Brooke states:

(Burns) adopted the old simple view of God as the Creator and sustainer of the universe that the stern religion of Scotland had taught his fathers. But the poet's love of all things was so strong in him that he added to that idea the thought of God as the lover of the universe he had made and supported.

It appears that Brooke had not read the Manual of Religious Worship, for there he would have found the source of the poet's belief in a God of love.

William Burnes was more rigid in matters of conduct than in doctrine and this fact may partly explain his son's later impatience with persons who trusted that whatever their sins they would be justified by faith. Though his standards were somewhat narrow, the father tried to lead his children into the path of virtue, and he found fault with them but seldom. He afforded them the example of one who "carefully practised every known duty and avoided everything that was criminal."

By his thirty-seventh year Robert Burns was an educated man. Indeed, one Burns editor states emphatically:

By the time he was sixteen, Burns had an infinitely better furnished literary consciousness than all his gerund-ground contemporaries of Eton and Winchester; and when he was five-and-twenty, he had more literary skill than a century of Oxford Prize Poem-makers rolled into one. ¹

1. Chambers-Wallace, Life and Works of Robert Burns, V. iv, p. 456.

That is not to deprecate the value of a classical education; how much Burns would have profited from the Greek and Latin authors! But he got more out of his fairly meagre store of books and learned more from his father than most men learn with the advantages of tutors and libraries; for, after all, it is not what the mind is offered but what it receives that constitutes education.

To appreciate fully the quality of the unusually powerful and receptive brain of Robert Burns, one need only consider the fact that in all he had less than four years schooling and less than one year after he was nine years old. Beginning at the age of six, he spent three years at Alloway School. When he was thirteen, in the slack time before the harvest, for three months he and Gilbert went alternate weeks to the Dalrymple school. It is clear that already the boys were doing their share of the farm work since only one of them could be spared at a time. When he was fourteen, Robert spent three weeks with Murdock at Ayr. For one week he studied English but in the next fortnight he learned enough French to enable him to read books in that language. Three years later he spent two and a half months studying land surveying at Kirkoswald School and this was his last period of formal education. When one considers the kind of schooling

he received and remembers that it was supplemented by home influences, one will agree that Burns's education was not to be despised, chiefly because Robert and Gilbert Burns went to school not to be taught but to learn. Their first teacher, Campbell, changed his occupation after the boys had been in his charge only a few months, and Mr. Burnes with some of his neighbors hired John Murdock, a native of Ayr, as a tutor for their children. Murdock taught his pupils to read and write English and he gave them the elements of English grammar. Their textbooks were a Spelling Book, Fisher's English Grammar, the New Testament, the Bible, and Masson's Collection of Prose and Verse, which included selections from Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Addison, Thomson, Gray, Akenside, and Shenstone--somewhat solid reading for a laddie of six or seven years. Murdock had his students commit to memory verses from this collection, and also "taught them to turn verse into its natural prose order; sometimes to substitute synonymous expressions for poetical words, and to supply all the ellipses." He insisted that the boys must understand all the poetry that they memorized. Robert read voraciously everything that he could get. The Vision of Mirza with its rhythmic prose and attractive melancholy was his favorite reading, and The Life of Hannibal and a Life of Wallace awakened all

the enthusiasm of his ardent nature and gave glorious dreams to the little patriot.

If he remained at Alloway, William Burnes would have a secure income from his wages as a gardener, but he would not be able to support his children who, as soon as they were old enough, would be compelled to hire themselves to neighboring farmers. In order to prevent this he decided to set up as an independent farmer, and to this end in 1766 he leased Mt. Oliphant, a farm two miles from Alloway in a somewhat secluded neighborhood. There he could keep his children under his instruction until their characters were formed. A recent biographer¹. has suggested that the father's motives were narrow and selfish, and that the advantages of the plan did not compensate for the hardships it entailed. It is true that few parents today would think it worthwhile to forgo economic security so that they might be able to train their children in sober habits and virtuous ways. But many parents willingly face hardships in order to give their children the advantages of a semblance of wealth and position. One can estimate the strength of the motives of William Burnes only when one understands that a sound Christian foundation for a virtuous life was just as important to him as is a belief in the necessity of keeping up appearances to most parents

1. 1. Lindsay, The Ranting Dog.

of today. It is hardly fair to interpret his concern for his children as a jealous wish to sever them from all chances for amusement or sociability. At first the venture seemed sound, and Dr. Ferguson, his employer, thought well enough of it to advance Burnes the necessary hundred pounds to stock the farm. The boys were able to continue their attendance at the Alloway School, their father was able to instruct them as well, and his instruction was of more value than many country frolics.

Gilbert and Robert stopped school when Murdock moved away. The story of the teacher's last visit to their home before leaving the district gives us some interesting information about the Burnes family. Murdock brought with him a copy of Titus Andronicus which he read aloud to the company until Robert became so distressed by the woes of Lavinia that he told Murdock that if the play was left in the house he would burn it. "Murdock--declared that he liked to see so much sensibility; and he left the School for Love, a comedy, --in its place." If Mr. Burnes had been as rigid a moralist as some critics would have us believe he would hardly have countenanced the reading of plays in a country and in an age when even the Spectator was denounced as being not sufficiently serious.

William Burnes obtained for his children a number of instructive books, such as Salmon's

Geographical Grammar, Derhams' Physico and Astro-Theology, Ray's Wisdom of God in the Creation and Stackhouse's History of the Bible. Robert devoured these in his hunger for knowledge, and having mastered their contents he had at his command a store of information on geography, astronomy, natural history, and ancient history. A collection of letters by the best of the Augustan writers was an inspiration to him. Later he read some of Smollett, a history of England, the works of Pope, and possibly Ramsay. He was also familiar with works on theology and contemporary philosophy, including Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding. In his three weeks at Ayr School he had read Fénelon's Adventures of Telemachus, and he knew his way through a Latin Grammar. This was the reading of an "unlettered plow-boy"!

Then and during the rest of his life Robert Burns learned much from books, but probably his most powerful educative influence was the instruction of his father. When we read some of Robert Burns's finest poems we may wonder how he learned so much of men and life. The answer may be found in his own remark on his father:

After many years' wandering and sojourning he picked up a pretty large quantity of observation and experiences, to which I am indebted for most of my pretensions to wisdom. I have met with few who understood men, their manners and their ways, equal to him.

Taine made the remark: "Burns a Scottish villager, avoided, in speaking, all Scottish village expressions; he was pleased to show himself as well bred as fashionable folks." But Burns spoke English when he wished, not from affectation, but because from childhood he had learned to use both languages, Scottish and English, according to the occasion. Murdock said of William Burnes, "He spoke the English language with more propriety--both with respect to diction and pronunciation--than any man I ever knew with no greater advantages." Obviously he would insist that his sons speak English as well as did he. In spite of his austerity William Burnes was by no means a "dull old man." It is true that his conversation was completely free from any double entendre, yet it was not less interesting on that account. Murdock said of a visit to Mt. Oliphant, "The father and the son sat down with us, when we enjoyed a conversation, wherein solid reasoning, sensible remark, and a moderate seasoning of jocularities, were so nicely blended as to render it palatable to all parties."¹ Ferguson, the editor of the letters of Burns, has this to say of William Burnes:

To the father's Scottish hunger for education, the poet owed much of the preparation which made him a great and conscious artist, and from the father came also the poet's fierce pride and independent spirit.²

1. Quoted in Chambers-Wallace, V. i, p. 40.
 2. Letters, V. ii, p. 342.

Murdock was more specific regarding the independence of William Burnes:

As he was at no time overbearing to inferiors, he was equally incapable of that passive, pitiful, paltry spirit, that induces some people to keep booing and booing in the presence of a great man. He always treated his superiors with a becoming respect; but he never gave the smallest encouragement to aristocratical arrogance.¹

It is not hard to guess where Robert got the ideas that he voiced in For a' That and a' That.

Many of the most important lessons Robert Burns learned in his home were picked up unconsciously. Mrs. Burnes had a very good voice and an inexhaustible store of old songs. Robert may not have been able to carry a tune when he was seven or eight but yet he must have been as familiar with the old airs as with his mother's voice. The "auld Scots sangs" became a part of him and, though he studied them carefully when he grew up, he probably never learned more about them than he had learned when a child in the cradle or a "stacherin' wean" he had heard his mother singing about her work.

Burns told Dr. Moore about another woman, a Betty Davidson, to whom he was indebted for poetic material:

In my infant and boyish days, too, I owed much to an old maid of my mother's, remarkable for her ignorance, credulity, and superstition. She had, I suppose, the largest

1. Quoted in Chambers-Wallace, V. i, p. 41.

collection in the country of tales and songs concerning devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, enchanted towers, giants, dragons, and other trumpery. This cultivated the latent seeds of Poesy; but had so strong an effect on my imagination, that to this hour, in my nocturnal rambles I sometimes keep a sharp look-out in suspicious places; and though nobody can be more sceptical in these matters than I, yet it often takes an effort of philosophy to shake off these idle terrors.¹

Though nature was not the only teacher of Burns there is much truth in Wordsworth's stanza:

Proud thoughts that Image overawes,
Before it humbly let us pause,
And ask of Nature, from what cause
And by what rules
She trained her Burns to win applause
That shames the Schools.²

It is, of course, impossible to know exactly how much Burns was influenced by nature in his early life, but we know that the patriotism aroused in the boy by the stories of his ancestors and by his reading of the heroes was increased by his love of the countryside around his home. Unusually receptive to beauty, sensitive and impressionable, even though he could not yet express his feeling Burns felt the power of nature:

I saw thee seek the sounding shore,
Delighted with the dashing roar;
Or when the north his fleecy store
Drove through the sky
I saw grim nature's visage hoar
Struck thy young eye.

1. Quoted by Chambers-Wallace, V. i, p. 11.

2. Thoughts .

Or when the deep green-mantled earth
 Warm cherish'd every floweret's birth,
 And joy and music pouring forth
 In every grove,
 I saw thee eye the general mirth
 With boundless love.

When ripen'd fields, and azure skies,
 Call'd forth the reaper's rustling noise,
 I saw thee leave their evening joys,
 And lonely stalk,
 To vent thy bosom's swelling rise,
 In pensive walk. 1.

Burns tells in the Epistle To the Goodwife of Wauchope House that his love for his countryside had become a love for all Scotland, so that he wished to celebrate her in poetry:

Even then, a wish, (I mind its power,)
 A wish that to my latest hour
 Shall strongly heave my breast--
 That I, for poor auld Scotland's sake,
 Some usefu' plan or beuk could make,
 Or sing a sang at least.
 The rough burr--thistle, spreading wide
 Amang the bearded bear,
 I turn'd the weeder-clips aside,
 And spared the symbol dear:
 No nation, no station,
 My envy e'er could raise,
 A Scot still, but blot still,
 I knew nae higher praise.

But patriotism and love of nature could not alone supply the stimulus necessary for Burns to begin poetry in earnest. He had still one more lesson to learn before he could "sing a sang" of his own making. He tells the story in the next verse:

1. Burns, The Vision.

But still the elements o' sang,
 In formless jumble, right and wrang,
 Wild floated in my brain:
 Till on that hairst I said before,
 My partner in the merry core,
 She roused the forming strain:
 I see her yet, the sonsie quean,
 That lighted up my jingle,
 Her witching smile, her pauky een,
 That gart my heart-strings tingle!
 I fired, inspired,
 At every kindling keek,
 But bashing, and dashing,
 I feared aye to speak.

Handsome Nell, the poem that Burns composed on this occasion in his "fifteenth autumn," deserves attention because in it we may find some suggestion of his greater songs. Because the "intuitive veracity" that made Burns ever a realist prevented him from using fancied beauties or fictitious incidents, the song was based on a definite occasion and a genuine emotion. The words were composed to fit a particular tune, and they show that the poetic novice had a natural sense for rhyme and metre. Snyder says:

Thus at the very beginning of Burns's poetical career, the combination of love, hard labor, and a scrap of music, resulted in a song. If the poetry was to be of a different and more memorable sort later on, this basic formula for Burns's lyrical composition was not to be greatly altered to the end of his writing days.¹

Burns was learning another lesson at this time, a lesson few have to spell as thoroughly as he did or as early in life, and of which the meaning was toil and bitter poverty. Eleven years of his boyhood and

1. The Life of Robert Burns, p. 54.

youth were spent at Mt. Oliphant under conditions that held out no hope of improvement. William Burnes was one of those unfortunate men whose footsteps are dogged by hard luck in every venture. The farm was a bad bargain: the soil was poor, the rent was too high and the cattle died by disease or accident. Snyder has a pithy comment on the situation:

By 1775, when Robert was sixteen years old, there were nine mouths to be fed from the yield of seventy stony acres tilled by one adult invalid and two immature boys.¹

Gilbert's plain narrative makes clear the inevitable hardships of the family:

We lived very sparingly. For several years butcher's meat was a stranger in the house, while all the members of the family exerted themselves to the utmost of their strength, and rather beyond it in the labours of the farm. My brother, at the age of thirteen, assisted in thrashing the crop of corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm for we had no hired servants, male or female. The anguish of mind we felt at our tender years under these straits and difficulties was very great. To think of our father growing old (for he was now above fifty), broken down with the long-continued fatigues of his life, with a wife and other children, and in a declining state of circumstances, these reflections produced in my brother's mind and mine sensations of the deepest distress. I doubt not but the hard labour and sorrow of this period of his life was in a great measure the cause of that depression of spirits with which Robert was so often afflicted through his whole life afterwards. At this time he was almost constantly afflicted in the evenings with a dull headache, which at a

1. The Life of Robert Burns, p. 55.

future period of his life, was exchanged for a palpitation of the heart and a threatening of fainting and suffocation in his bed in the night time. ¹.

An alert twentieth century practitioner would have detected in these symptoms the onset of "endocarditis, a disease of the substance and living membranes of the heart," an insidious, but fatal condition for which the palliative treatment is "well-ordered rest and quiet." One may judge of the effect upon Robert's health of "the unceasing toil of a galley-slave" which was his lot. Christopher North said of these early years of Burns, "How few of those who afterwards traduced his character had passed through such a pure and heroic youth!"

Robert in his letter to Dr. Moore likened the conditions of his life at Mt. Oliphant to the "cheerless gloom of a Hermit." Possibly the father became more silent and austere as the hopelessness of his position gripped him, and also the mother's hasty temper may have been sorely tried. But it is significant that Mrs. Begg who remembered her father only as he was in his later years stated that

broken down as he was in constitution, he sustained his natural and habitual cheerfulness. He was always endeavouring to make his children happy by the promotion of innocent mirth, never letting slip, at the same time, any opportunity

1. Quoted in Chambers-Wallace, V. 1, p. 35.

that occurred of awakening reflection and fostering habits of self culture.¹

Neither son blamed his father for their misfortunes. Robert, with his unique sympathy for the feelings of others, felt keenly his father's distress and described it in a dreary poem with the refrain:

"And it's O, fickle fortune, O."

There was little a penniless farmer might do to enable his sons to enter another trade, but the Burrs family twice made the attempt to give Robert a chance to make a living by something other than farming. It must have been a hardship for his father to send Robert to Kirkoswald to learn land-surveying even though the boy was to board with an uncle. To Robert, the chief benefit he received from his visit was the chance it gave him to meet boys outside the family circle and to see, even from afar, the "swaggering riots" of a smuggling town; it is not likely that the impecunious boy shared in much of the "rioting." The walks and friendly debates with his friends stimulated Robert's mind and his victory over his school-master in argument gave him some necessary encouragement. He also gained correspondents on whom he could practise his letter-writing when he returned home. The charming fillette who dazzled the young mathematician in the kail-yard does not seem to have inspired any poetry until some years afterwards. We have two poems that

1. Quoted in Chambers-Wallace, V. i, p. 35.

Burns probably wrote at this period of his life, one in English and the other in Scots. I Dream'd I Lay shows that the writer had a command of poetic technique. The rhymes are somewhat hackneyed, but the syntax is simple and straightforward and the expression is characteristically definite and vigorous. In the other poem, Tibbie, I Hae Seen the Day, Burns has better rhymes and swifter verse and a command of the dialect for poetical uses. The assertion of personal independence is a little too acrid for art.

III

1777 - 1784

Do we not see a strong incipient spirit
oppressed and over-loaded from without and from within;
the fire of genius struggling up among fuel-wood
of the greenest, and as yet with more of bitter vapour
than clear flame!

Carlyle, Sartor Resartus.

Robert Burns was eighteen when the family moved from Mt. Oliphant to Lochlea, a farm in the uplands, north of Ayr and north-west of Mauchline. For an unlucky farmer a move is always accompanied by great hopes, and in spite of high rent and a cold, sour soil, the Burnses were fairly successful for the first four years at the new farm. The neighbors, appraising the newcomers, would be attracted by the frank and approachable younger son, but they would be rather wary of Robert. A dark, quiet youth with a face that was sullen in repose and with a manner backward and reserved, he did not attract strangers. His reserve may have been caused in part by his being unused to the company of people of his own age. Life on the isolated farm at Mt. Oliphant was good for his character and his mind but it did not give him the social graces. Books and learning have always been respected in Post-Reformation Scotland, and so the Mauchline neighborhood would

think well of the Burns family for their erudition. There is little reason to doubt the statement of Davie Sillars that on a visit to Lochlea he found Robert at supper with Tristram Shandy in one hand and a spoon in the other. We know better than did the people of the district that Burns was even then the best read man of his station in Scotland. As yet, however, he was hardly conscious of his mental powers. He had matched his wits with those of his school fellows at Kirkoswald, but he did not know that he had not met, and would probably never meet, his intellectual equal. His admiration for his father may have blinded Burns to his own power; I wonder if ever in his life Robert thought that he was a greater man than his father. When two men with strong minds and personalities live and work together the younger usually gives way. At the age of eighteen Robert had not yet formally questioned his father's authority, but the old man, his intuition sharpened by physical weakness, had watched with uneasiness the growth of the mind of his eldest son. Gilbert, looking back at this time, said many years later, "I believe that (my father) about this time, began to see the dangerous impetuosity of my brother's passions, as well as his not being amenable to counsel, which often irritated my father;----But he was proud of Robert's genius."

In Mauchline Robert found an opportunity to gain some knowledge of society from experience instead of from books and paternal counsels. He had the first serious disagreement with his father in the winter of 1779, when in defiance of paternal disapproval he attended a dancing school to brush up his manners. In his autobiographical letter, Burns gave the incident an importance that Gilbert thought was exaggerated, "From that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe was one cause of that dissipation which marked my future years." One can only pity the father who has realized that he can no longer keep his son on the sober paths he himself has trod, but one feels more pity for the son who is driven to realize the demands of his nature in a way that he knows will give pain to his father. Had either been a weaker man the situation might have been easier.

In the next five years Robert Burns tried to find self-realization in his limited environment. One of his attempts to find some relief from the exacting life of the farm was the founding of the Bachelors Club, a debating society the aim of which was to furnish occasions for "innocent enjoyment." Robert enjoyed the verbal battles, the impact of mind upon mind, and we may believe that he took them seriously for among

his papers he left notes he had made in preparation for the debates. David Sillar, John Rankine, and Alexander Tait were some of the friends he made in Mauchline who have been immortalized by their acquaintance with the poet.

"Vive l'Amour, et vive la bagatelle were my sole principles of action," said Burns of his early years at Lochlea. L'Amour, Scottice "courtin'," occupied many of his evenings, and he is said to have written a song on "almost every tolerable looking lass in the parish, and finally one in which they were all included." In 1781, he wished to marry Ellison Begbie to whom he wrote letters of excellent prose and sound good sense. Probably he regarded Ellison as an anchor. Safely married at twenty-two to an amiable, intelligent woman for whom he felt "a well-grounded affection," he would be safe from the stormy passions he condemned in his letters to her. Unfortunately, Ellison refused his offer.

His study of "mensuration" at Kirkoswald had been an attempt to escape from the penurious life of a farmer, but it had come to nothing and Burns had returned to the plough. When he was contemplating marriage, he decided to go to Irvine to learn the trade of flax-dressing in the hope of setting up a business in which

he could use the flax raised on his father's farm. The end of his hopes for marriage had lessened his interest in the venture, luck seemed against him, and far from his family and friends he experienced his first serious nervous breakdown. This illness was probably caused by his heart disease, aggravated by disappointment and over-work. There may be some significance in the fact that the attack came on the first occasion when Robert was "on his own". He may have begun to realize that he was not like other men. His proposed marriage had been a bid for a normal life, but that had come to nothing. The prospect of perpetual labour stretched before him as far as he could see, and his father's fate may have seemed to foreshadow his own. His powerful mind, his imagination, his sensibility, his passions required even demanded a freer environment, but he was confined inescapably to the narrow life of a ploughman. Small wonder that with his physical weakness he became the prey of a dejection so terrible that he could not think of his suffering afterwards without a shudder. Though as his health mended he became more cheerful, his depression never left him entirely. Melancholy was the reigning expression of his face, said those who had known him all his life. The destruction of his shop by fire marked the end of

the flax-dressing business.

Burns made new friends among the people of Irvine, for all whom he met were impressed by his conversation and his argumentative powers. The most important of these friends was Richard Brown, a young man who had the assurance and knowledge of the world that Burns coveted. He was also what Henley calls, "a practical amorist." Burns admired him, and, what was more important, Brown admired Burns and declared that his verses might well be published. The approval of one who represented the larger world was one of the most important influences in the life of Burns, and the thought of Brown's words of encouragement may have helped his friend to recover from his depression.

In 1781, just before going to Irvine, Burns had been "entered apprentice" in the St. David Masonic Lodge. The companionship in the circle thus opened to him fed what he called "a strong appetite for sociability (as well from native hilarity as from a pride of observation and remark)" and relieved "a constitutional hypochondriac taint which made (him) fly solitude." In the face of disappointment and penury and in spite of the distractions of love and good fellowship, Robert Burns continued to educate himself. In 1783, he wrote to Murdock that his favorite authors

were Shenstone, Thomson, Mackenzie--The Man of Feeling, Man of the World, Sterne, Ossian, Richardson, and Smollett. These authors inspired him with the ideal of "a man whose heart distends with benevolence to the whole human race--who can 'soar above this little scene of things'." He was trying to escape in his reading from his dull and hopeless life.

In Eighteenth Century Scotland Burns could not help being interested in theological disputes. Although their minister was somewhat liberal, the folk of the country round were strictly orthodox. In the discussions in the kirkyard before service, the young farmer with his tied hair and unusual plaid annoyed his elders by his keenness in debate and shocked them by his unorthodox opinions on original sin. It is said that they "couldna tell what to mak' o' Burns o' Loch-lea."

We cannot hear Burns in argument but we can read a letter he wrote to his cousin James Burnes in June, 1783, in which he describes the state of the country with remarkable precision, compression, and lucidity. The letter is evidence that the writer had intelligence equal to his excellent powers of expression.

Another evidence of Robert's good sense is the fact that after recovering from his nervous breakdown

he had estimated his situation and decided to make the best of it. Until the end he retained a strain of melancholy, but along with it he had a determination to face out the worst. In two letters, one written to Thomas Orr in 1782, and another to Murdock in the next year, he explained his attitude:

The man whose only wish is to become great
and rich, whatever he may appear to be,
whatever he may pretend to be; at the bottom
he is but a miserable wretch.

Even the last, worst shift of the unfortunate
and the wretched does not much terrify me.

The best poetic expression of his resolution is found in a poem, which Burns wrote shortly after leaving Irvine, My Father Was a Farmer. The verse is rough but it moves along at a good speed. Burns refers in the poem to his early training and to his unlucky attempts to change his occupation, and ends with a cheerful acceptance of the present:

Then sore harass'd and tired at last,
With Fortune's vain delusion, O,
I dropt my schemes, like idle dreams,
And came to this conclusion, O:
The past was bad, and the future hid;
Its good or ill untried, O;
But the present hour was in my power,
And so I would enjoy it, D.

In his autobiographical letter, Burns told Moore that even when he was at Lochlea poetry was a release for his emotions:

Poesy was still a darling walk for my mind, but 'twas only the humour of the hour. I had usually half a dozen or more pieces on hand; I look up one or another as it suited the momentary tone of the mind, and dismissed it as it bordered on fatigue. My passions when once they were lighted up, raged like so many devils till they got vent in rhyme; and then conning over my verses like a spell, soothed all into quiet.

He gave up rhyme for a time, he said, "but meeting with Fergusson's Scotch poems, I strung anew my wildly sounding rustic lyre, with emulating vigour."

As one might expect, of the seventeen poems that Chambers-Wallace ascribes to this period nine were written by Burns to young ladies, or rather, to lasses. The first of these poems, The Tarbolton Lasses, might have been written by almost any one of their admirers who had a little wit, but Mary Morrison shows remarkable maturity of technique, and in the Rigs o' Barley and My Nannie, the lyric note is struck at once and sustained throughout the song. At the time of his illness, Burns wrote two poems which reveal that the storms within his mind gave the writer an understanding of the stormy aspects of nature. In his Commonplace Book the poet remarked that the more awful appearances of nature "raise the mind to a serious sublimity, favorable to everything great and noble." On a winter day of cloud and wind he composed Winter, a Dirge, in which he identified his unhappy state with the howl of the tempest.

Another poem, A Prayer, Written under the Pressure of Violent Anguish shows the same distress of mind. The poet tries to find comfort in the belief that his affliction has some place in the eternal scheme of things.

In 1782 Burns wrote the first of his poems that spring from a unique sympathy with the "creatures," mice, hares, partridges, and domestic animals. The attitude of the poet to his subject is a blend of humor, pity, and sympathy. Even if it were not a good poem we should value The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie for the proof it gives of the fact that while at Lochlea Robert was not always concerned with love, or melancholy, or argument, but that he got much enjoyment from the life of the farm. Gilbert tells how his brother enlivened their toil with his wit and geniality, and how he bought a ewe and two lambs by way of frolic. Perhaps the countenance of the ewe may have reminded Burns of the expression of the face of some douce matron of Mauchline. Simple Hughoc's story of the ewe's plight "tickled" Robert so much that he celebrated the incident in a poem which "tickles" the reader.

Some time in 1781, his landlord had entered suit against William Burnes for unpaid rent and he further humiliated his tenant by a public proclamation of the attachment of his chattels. Thus Burnes was

not prepared to meet the bad year of 1783. The American war had damaged the trade of the country, crops were ruined by frost and snow, and those people who escaped starvation had "a dull and melancholy look which continued for several years after." William Burnes settled into a fatal consumption and he died on February 13, 1784. In spite of Robert's definite statement that his father entertained a dislike of him, there is much evidence that they were on good terms in the last years at Lochlea. Chambers-Wallace tells us that when the father waited up one night to admonish his son on his return from a nocturnal escapade, he was so entertained by Robert's account of imaginary adventures that he sat up talking comfortably with him for an hour or two longer. Also, William Burnes lived long enough to realize the extent of Robert's poetic gifts. Probably, what Robert thought dislike was really concern. The old man, who had, we are told, an unequalled knowledge of men, must have seen his son's danger. He knew that the boy was bound to the farm and he knew that unless he could master his passions and accept the limitations of his life Robert would certainly come into conflict with his surroundings. There was no harshness in the father's last words to Robert. The dying man was too honest to conceal the fact that he feared for his son's future and the son was too honest to deny the implication.

IV

1784 - 1786

Two men I honour and no third. First, the toilworn craftsman that with earth-made implement laboriously conquers the Earth---A second man I honour, and still more highly: Him who is seen toiling for the spiritually indispensable-----Unspeakably touching is it, however, when I find both dignities united; and he that must toil outwardly for the lowest of man's wants, as also toiling inwardly for the highest.

Carlyle, Sartor Resartus.

The move to Mossgiel in the spring of 1784 gave the Burnes family another short season of hope in spite of their grief at the death of their father and the unremitting labor and frugality they found necessary. None of the family knew better than the eldest son that the change might mark the turning point in their fortunes, and so he made fine resolutions to devote himself to farming, not realizing that the chief fruit of his sojourn at Mossgiel would be not barley or rye but verses. The years 1784, '85, and '86, were to be the flood tide of Burns's and, indeed, of Scottish poetry. A review of the events of the period will be justified if it gives a background for the most important of the poetical works of Burns.

We know little of the life of the family

during the remaining months of 1784. Robert and Gilbert with two laborers and a boy attended to the heavy farm work, while the work of the dairy and the other tasks usually given to female servants were performed by Mrs. Burnes and her two grown-up daughters. As always Robert worked to the limit of his strength, and the strain of overwork and the responsibility of the management of the farm may have helped to bring on the first physical breakdown which was an ominous sign of the progress of his disease. It seems that he was ill through the spring and the summer, but he recovered in spite of his hard work and the harmful treatments prescribed by his doctor. A mental conflict may have aggravated his physical weakness, for shortly after his father's death Burns formed a liason with his mother's servant Elizabeth Paton. In spite of the genuine Rabelaisian spirit that appears in his writings, Burns never became a thorough libertine and this, his first affair, must have given him remorse even before the matter had become country-gossip by the autumn of 1784. Robert had little peace of mind then or later when after the birth of Elizabeth's child in May, 1785, he had to undergo ecclesiastical discipline.

These unpleasant experiences were offset somewhat by the friendships that Burns made in the new

neighborhood. The meetings of his Masonic circle he enjoyed as before, and he met men who were representatives of the clergy, both orthodox and liberal, the lawyers and physicians, the independent merchants and storekeepers, the clerks. Among these were Gavin Hamilton, Robert Aiken, Dr. Mackenzie, and the Rev. John M'Math, who were men of education and some social position who welcomed the young farmer as an equal.

The harvest of 1784 was a failure because of bad seed; the ill luck of the Burnses had caught up with them at Mossgiel. In 1785 the harvest was delayed and finally ruined by bad weather. Robert Burns must have realized that he was not to succeed at farming. By the spring of 1786 Burns realized that he would have to face ecclesiastical discipline again, for Jean Armour, daughter of a respectable citizen of Mauchline, was in the same situation as the unfortunate Elizabeth Paton had been. Burns gave her a paper which was either a promise of marriage or an acknowledgment of a private marriage, but the girl's parents destroyed the document in the mistaken belief that by doing so they were annulling the connection. We learn that on April 2, 1786, Jean had been sent to an uncle in Paisley and Robert was furious with her and humiliated by the contempt of her parents. He

may have realized that he still had a legal responsibility in the matter, and his mind was not made any more calm by the knowledge that he was under the same obligation to another girl, a Mary Campbell, immortalized as Highland Mary. After Jean's desertion of him, he promised to marry Highland Mary and when they parted in May she went to her home to prepare for the marriage. His personal troubles and failure of the farm probably made him decide to emigrate to Jamaica, at that time a common refuge for desperate Scots. His mind, at this time, was ruled alternately by desperation and bravado.

In April Burns had circulated a subscription paper for a volume of poems in the Scottish dialect, and the response warranted the printing which was begun in the latter part of June. In the meantime he had been further harrassed by the news that Jean was to marry a Paisley weaver, and by his summons before the Kirk Session to admit responsibility for her condition. Armour, having heard that Burns might profit by the sale of his book, forced his daughter to swear out a warrant to make him give security for the support of the expected child, but Burns who had cannily foreseen this development had given Gilbert a deed to all his property to be held in trust for his daughter

Elizabeth. To avoid arrest, Burns took refuge at Old Rome Forest, near enough to Kilmarnoch to enable him to oversee the printing of his book which appeared on July 3, 1786. What other author has published his first volume in such distressing circumstances! During August he was busy superintending the sale of his poems. On August 14, he was ready to leave for Jamaica but he decided to wait for the sailing of another vessel that would take him as near as possible to his destination. Jean Armour gave birth to twins on September 3, 1786, and Burns's situation was complicated by his feeling of parental responsibility. On September 4, Blacklock an Edinburgh critic who had heard some of Burns's poems, wrote a letter to a mutual friend in which he advised that the poet should come to Edinburgh and issue a second edition. Though Burns saw this letter in about a fortnight, he still intended to sail for the West Indies and only a delay in the ship's sailing prevented his departure. Snyder suggests that although the Armours had called off their warrant as soon as Burns became famous, and although the success of his volume relieved him from financial worry, he was still concerned about Mary Campbell. That worry ended in October. Burns's sister has told how her brother received a letter which he read with a look of anguish. It has

been suggested that the letter told of the death of Mary Campbell and her child. We do know that Burns never after referred to Highland Mary except in expressions which show remorse. However, the unhappy ending of her story probably left Burns free from obligation. He gave up his plan of leaving Scotland and thought of looking for a position in the Excise. The appearance of a review of his poems in the November issue of the Edinburgh Magazine gave him the necessary encouragement, and before the end of the month he was in the city.

.....

With the events of the Mossgiel period before us, we are in a better position to trace the poetic development of Burns. His reputation as a poet depends chiefly on the productions of the years 1784, '85, '86. Until he went to Mossgiel, Burns had written verses to soothe his passions, to entertain his friends, or just for the fun of rhyming, but when he left Lochlea he had little thought of becoming a poet. His first definite reference to his hopes for poetry is in an entry in the Commonplace Book, which Chambers-Wallace dates in 1784. Burns lamented the fact that his own district had not been celebrated in verse but he mistrusted his own power to supply the deficiency:

This is a complaint I would gladly remedy, but alas! I am far unequal to the task both in native genius and education.¹.

In another entry, dated September, 1784, he addresses the old forgotten poets:

A poor rustic bard unknown pays this sympathetic pang to your memory.².

At this time Gilbert Burns gave his brother decisive encouragement:

It was, I think, in the summer, 1784, when in the interval of harder labour, he and I were weeding in the garden (kailyard) that he repeated to me the principal part of this epistle (to Davie). I believe the first idea of Robert's becoming an author was started on this occasion. I was much pleased with the epistle, and said to him I was of the opinion it would bear being printed. Robert seemed very well pleased with my criticism and we talked of sending it to some magazine; but as this plan afforded no opportunity of learning how it would take, the idea was dropped.³.

It was with the opening of 1785, however, that Burns's talent suddenly ripened and his great poetry began. The Epistle to Davie, as we have it, must have been a revision of the first draft of August, 1784, referred to above, for it is dated January, 1785. It is the first of his great Epistles, and of his great poetry. It was an auspicious beginning for the new year, that was to turn out so memorable for both Burns and Scotland. Burns had displayed some technical skill in his earlier poems but they had nothing of the speed and ease and sustained perfection of the Epistle to Davie.

1. Quoted in Chambers-Wallace, V. i, p. 140.

2. Ibid., p. 141.

3. Ibid., p. 144.

Even his description of the process of poetic composition, in the closing stanza, is sheer poetry, and at the same time the most memorable expression we have of the spontaneity and inevitableness which constitutes the life of poetry.

Some time between January and April Burns wrote Death and Doctor Hornbook, a humorous-satirical poem of the first quality. On April first he wrote the Epistle to John Lapraik. Here he definitely speaks as one poet to another, defending himself and his verses with unusual literary acumen against possible criticism, in a tone at once modest and confident.

Three weeks later, April 21, he wrote the Second Epistle to John Lapraik, which closes with the memorable prayer for that gift which he prized first among nature's bounties:

O Thou wha gies us each guid gift!
 Gie me o' wit an' sense a lift,
 Then turn me, if thou please, adrift,
 Thro' Scotland wide;
 Wi' cits nor Lairds I wadna shift,
 In a' their pride!

About the same time, most probably in the same month of April, he wrote the first of his great ecclesiastical satires, The Twa Herds, which was received "with a roar of applause" by his circle of acquaintances, and which placed him at a stroke in the ranks of the great satirical poets. But while

clearly conscious of the merits of this performance Burns was not deceived regarding the limits of poetic satire. In the Postscript to his Epistle to William Simpson in May he burlesques the whole theological controversy of the time in a clever allegory from which he deduces, in the closing stanza as is his wont, the sapient judgment that satire and the subject-matter of satire, while of seeming-great concern to the contemporary controversialist, are of only passing interest, and for that reason are in no sense a chief concern of the 'bard':

Sae, ye observe that a'this clatter
Is naething but a 'moonshine matter';
But tho' dull prose-folk Latin splatter
In logic tulzie,
I hope we Bardies ken some better
Than mind sic frulzie.

In July he wrote Holy Willie's Prayer, the most philosophical, penetrating and severe of all his satires. This satire is directed, not against individual persons, but against an old and august and, to Burns, irrational theological creed. He attacks the creed through one of its false adherents and in this way gains dramatic concreteness and vividness. It is a devastating attack, characterized by a compressed energy from beginning to end. In the opening stanza Burns, as a student once expressed it on an examination

paper, "in six swift lines sent into oblivion a creed which had occupied the serious minds of Europe for two hundred years."

O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell,
 Wha, as it pleases best thyself,
 Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,
 A' for thy glory,
 And no for onie guid or ill
 They've done afore thee!

In August or early September of the same year he wrote The Holy Fair, the most enlivening and genial of his satires. The poem is lightened with flashes of brilliant wit and diffused with humour which takes the edge from the satire.

On September 17 he wrote the Epistle to the Rev. James M'Math in which he exonerates himself by pointing out that his satires are not directed against religion but against its defamers.

All hail, Religion! maid divine!
 Pardon a muse sae mean as mine,
 Who in her rough imperfect line
 Thus daurs to name thee;
 To stigmatize false friends of thine
 Can ne'er defame thee.

Though Burns had realized by this time that some day he might be a professional poet, many of his poems were written, not for future publication, but for the amusement of the moderate clergy and the professional men of the district. Even though his first satire has been applauded Burns is not sure of himself

when writing the Epistle to William Simpson. As yet he hardly dares to venture up the mount of fame, where he thinks Ramsay, Hamilton, and Fergusson safely rest, but love, patriotism, or a good tale inspire him to try his powers.

In the autumn of 1785, Burns must have felt that he had at least a foothold on the "braes of fame," The whole country laughed at his satires, and he himself rejoiced as his lines fell, rapid and smooth, from his pen. Some time after the disappointing harvest Gilbert heard Robert repeat his Cotter's Saturday Night, and "the fifth, sixth, and eighteenth stanzas thrilled with ecstasy through his soul." His brother's delight must have convinced Robert of the quality of his verses. To a Mouse was composed in November, 1785, and Hallowe'en followed soon after. By the time he wrote the second Epistle to Davie, which may have been in late October or early November, 1785, he had found himself. The exuberance of the epistle would be sufficient evidence of the writer's assurance had we not his description of his state of mind. The Address to the Devil, The Jolly Beggars, as well as the Cotter's Saturday Night which was completed in November, 1785, were probably written before the Epistle to James Smith in which Burns first announced his intention

to print and disclosed that for him rhyming was a substitute for other worldly joys. The poem contains an especially vivid description of the creative process. Burns specifically announced his dedication to poetry in The Vision which was written at about the same time. The Vision is an imaginative but entirely serious interpretation of a real crisis and a real resolution.

The Winter Night, an ode in the manner of Gray or Collins, and the two poems on whisky, Scotch Drink and The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, complete the list of the major productions of 1785.

The flow of poetry did not end with the year. Early in January, 1786, Burns wrote the Farmer's Salutation to his Auld Mare, Maggie, and before April 17 he had written The Twa Dogs, To a Louse, The Ordination, and To the Unco Guid followed soon after. Gilbert said that The Twa Dogs was written when the resolution for printing was nearly taken. Tradition says that at the table of John Goldie a group of Kilmarnock men discussed with Burns the possible publication of his poems, but nothing came of the conversation, if, indeed, it ever took place. It will be recalled that in April, 1786, the poet's situation had become so desperate that he had decided to emigrate; Gavin Hamilton suggested

that Burns should publish a volume of his poems by subscription in order to pay his passage. Although the summer was a period of worry and depression Burns was strong enough to see his poems through the press and to write several new pieces. Many of these refer to the poet's gloomy prospects, some tell of the break with Jean, and others were written to Highland Mary. To the Mountain Daisy, A Bard's Epitaph, Farewell, the Bonnie Banks of Ayr, and Afton Water were the best of these personal utterances. It is surprising to find, among these, other poems that show no signs of depression, of which the best are The Holy Fair, and the Brigs of Ayr, both written in May when Burns was smarting from the contempt of Jean's father, and worried about Mary Campbell.

The Kilmarnock edition which contained forty-five poems was printed in six hundred copies. It contained all the important poems I have mentioned with the exception of The Jolly Beggars, Holy Willie's Prayer, The Twa Herds, The Ordination, Address to the Unco Guid, Death and Dr. Hornbook and several epistles which were either on subjects not of general interest or on controversial matters. The preface to the Kilmarnock volume opens with the poet's disavowal of any knowledge of composition. But in the third paragraph

Burns "gets into his stride," and dropping his prudent display of diffidence he asserts:

It is an observation of that celebrated Poet, whose divine Elegies do honour to our language, our nation, and our species, that 'Humility has depressed many a genius to a hermit, but never raised one to fame!' If any critic catches at the word genius the author tells him, once for all that he certainly looks upon himself as possesst of some poetic abilities, otherwise his publishing, in the manner he has done, would be a manoeuvre below the worst character which, he hopes, his worst enemy will ever give him.

The immediate success of the volume justified the confidence of its author.

.....

It was at Mossgiel that the enormous possibilities in Burns were revealed to Burns himself; and it was at Mossgiel that he did nearly all his best and strongest work. The revelation once made, he stayed not in his course, but wrote masterpiece after masterpiece with a rapidity, an assurance, a command of means, a brilliance of effect, which makes his achievement one of the most remarkable in English letters-----the level of excellence is one that none but the born great writer can maintain.¹.

The poetic work of Robert Burns in the short time centring about the year 1785 is one of the phenomena of literary history. When, if ever before, did a poet come so quickly to his full maturity and maintain the pitch of creative energy so evenly? One

1. Henley, The Poetry of Burns, V. iv, p. 273.

must remember, too, that Burns's poetry was composed only when he could snatch time from the demands of the farm. On days too inclement for outside work, or in evenings after the horses and cattle were cared for, he sat down at the deal table before the window in his attic room and traced out with a goose quill pen the stanzas that he had been turning over in his head during the day, when he was not thinking of markets, or politics, or theology, or lasses. The best comment on the achievement of that period, covering hardly two years, would be a recital of the poems themselves.

What were the reasons for this sudden outburst of creative energy?

When Burns came to Mossgiel at the age of twenty-five, he had reached physical and mental maturity. The death of William Burnes had left Robert with the responsibility for the welfare of a large family. Now he had to act and think for himself, since he could no longer fall back on the advice of his father. His intellect, sharpened by his father's conversation, by debates, and by reading, was stimulated by his acquaintance with the leading men of the district. The impatience of shams which had been developed in Burns along with the belief in personal integrity, was to find expression in poetry when he became aware of

ecclesiastical hypocrisy and political trickery. Until his father's influence was removed Robert had restrained those tumultuous passions which the old man had seen and feared, but shortly after the death of William Burnes his son had broken the moral code. In 1785, then, Burns's energy, physical and emotional, demanded expression in poetry. But love, satire, and convivial celebrations were not the only poetic themes of 1785. Beneath his cheerfulness, his sociability, his defiance of conventions, Burns had a permanent vein of melancholy. His physical sufferings, his unusually acute sensitivity, and his strong intellect had revealed to him the darker side of living which is happily hidden from most men. From the darkness at the edge of the abyss he brought an insight and understanding that he could have gained in no other way. The tenderness he felt for all created things sprang from his realization of their frailty and their mortality. His humanity and sympathy were based on a knowledge of the dark places in men's hearts.

The farm of Mossgiel was situated in the midst of natural beauties that would impress anyone and could not but inspire Burns to poetry. Snyder describes the prospect from Mossgiel which Wordsworth once admired and which is today very much as it was in 1785:

Virtually all the southern half of Ayrshire lies before one. In the foreground the gently sloping countryside slopes down towards the river Ayr, the course of which can be traced through the centre of the picture, and rises again, beyond, to a height considerably greater than that of Mossgiel. To the left, or east, the hills attain almost to the dignity of mountains, though there are no sharp peaks or deep-cut valleys. It is a quiet, friendly landscape, composed for the most part of tilled fields, and pastures where cattle graze in the soft warmth of an Ayrshire summer. If the day is clear there will be a glint of light in the south-west, where the waters of the Firth of Clyde reflect the afternoon sunshine; and still farther to the west the rugged outlines of the mountain peaks of Arran will form a somewhat sterner background for the picture.¹

The encouragement which Burns received from his family and friends no doubt spurred him to write more poetry. Some of the men he met around Mossgiel were able critics whose judgment would not be prejudiced by their partiality for the writer, and these men gave him their approval. Robert Aiken, he said, "read him into fame" by reciting his poems. The applause given to his first ecclesiastical satires incited him to further efforts, and the hope of publishing his poems was another inducement to write.

It is possible to analyze some of the influences that may have helped to kindle the poetic fire in Burns, but it is impossible to analyze that fire. Robert Burns must have been possessed by some inexorable force which compelled him to write and

1. The Life of Robert Burns, p. 97.

which gave life to what he wrote. Without this force, he might have been a sociable good fellow, a sensible farmer, a very clever rhymster, but he would not have written poetry that will endure as long as the human heart knows love, or sorrow, or despair.

It is clearly written in his poems that in the months he spent at Mossgiel Burns attacked the problem of adjusting himself to his environment. He had a profound conviction that social inequality is wrong, and his conviction was sharpened by his own experience of the disadvantages of the poor. He resented a system that made a lord, who might be a fool, the superior of a ploughman who was a gifted and educated man. If he had contented himself with battling ineffectually against the impregnable class system of his day, he would have written very little poetry that would last. Actually, though preserving a proper "conceit o' himsel," he learned to accept what he could not change, and to make the best of his position. The process of adjustment may be traced in his verses.

In the Epistle to Davie of January, 1785, we find some resentment of inequality:

It's hardly in a body's power
To keep at times frae being sour,
To see how things are shared;
How best o' chiels are whiles in want,
While coofs on countless thousands rant,
And ken na how to wear't;

Yet the writer can face poverty without too much bitterness:

But, Davie, lad, ne'er fash your head,
 Though we hae little gear,
 We're fit to win our daily bread,
 As lang's we're hale and fier:
 Mair spier na, nor fear na,
 Auld age ne'er mind a feg,
 The last o't, the warst o't,
 Is only but to beg.

The most remarkable idea in the poem is the assertion that even adversity has its value because it helps one to see through shows into things as they are.

Burns is thankful for misfortunes:

They gie the wit of age to youth;
 They let us ken oursel:
 They make us see the naked truth,
 The real guid and ill.

The next stage of Burns's journey towards contentment was the identification of riches with coldness and selfishness and the exaggeration of the merits of the poor man who has a warm heart. In April, 1785, we find Burns writing to Lapraik:

Awa' ye selfish war'ly race,
 Wha think that havins, sense, and grace,
 E'en love and friendship, should give place
 To catch-the-plack!
 I dinna like to see your face,
 Nor hear your crack.

In the second Epistle to Lapraik there is a harsher condemnation of the sons of Mammon, along with a warmer eulogy of "the honest, social, friendly man."

When he wrote the second Epistle to Davie,

Burns felt that the joy of rhyming was sufficient compensation for poverty. The rapid, light-hearted movement of the poem bears out the words in which the poet expresses his independence of material comforts:

Nae thought, nae view, nae scheme o' livin',
 Nae cares to gie us joy or grievin';
 But just the pouchie put the nieve in,
 And while aught's there,
 Then hiltie skiltie, we gae scrievin',
 And fash nae mair.

A more sober but equally convincing statement of the same truth is found in the Epistle to James Smith, which shows that by November, 1785, Burns had realized that he had in his "countra wit" a sufficient compensation for the lack of riches.

When he wrote The Twa Dogs Burns had attained a philosophic detachment. He was able to estimate the relative happiness of rich and poor without prejudice or bitterness. He saw that not even security and comfort can give peace of mind. One need not envy the rich, he says, for:

-----when nae real ill's perplex them,
 They mak enow themsels to vex them;
 And aye the less they hae to sturt them,
 In like proportion less will hurt them.

Luath points out that the poor may have content. It is true that they live on the "verge of ruin":

And when they meet wi' sair disasters,
 Like loss o' health or want o' masters,
 Ye maist wad think, a wee touch langer,
 And they maun starve o' cauld and hunger:

But how it comes I never kenn'd yet,
 They're maistly wonderfu' contented:
 And buirdly chiels, and clever hizzies,
 Are bred in sic a way as this is.

To complete the account of Burns's development, let us consider a prose statement made in a letter written to Aiken in October, 1786, when Burns was feeling the "stabs of remorse" which he knew he deserved:

-----the world, in general, has been kind to me fully up to my deserts. I was, for some time past, fast getting into the pining, distrustful snarl of the misanthrope. I saw myself alone, unfit for the struggle of life, shrinking at every rising cloud in the chance-directed atmosphere of fortune, while, all defenseless, I looked about in vain for a cover. It never occurred to me, at least, never with the force it deserved, that this world is a busy scene, and man, a creature destined for a progressive struggle; and that, however I might possess a warm heart and inoffensive manners---still, more than these passing qualities, there was something to be done.

Burns recognized and accepted the "progressive struggle," and that in the face of circumstances that would have defeated a weaker man. Above all, he avoided the bitterness and fury in which he might easily have been lost.

Perhaps the thing that was dearest to Burns was his personal integrity. "He was an honest man and an honest writer," said Carlyle. He hated shams of all kinds and attacked them wherever he found them, whether in individuals, in the Kirk, or even in the state.

He was passionately determined that there

would be no hypocrisy in his own life:

God knows, I'm no the thing I shou'd be,
 Nor am I even the thing I cou'd be,
 But twenty times I rather wou'd be
 An atheist clean,
 Than under gospel cōlors hid be,
 Just for a screen.

Because of Burns's honesty we find in much of his early poetry traces of personal qualities that have perplexed and confounded his worshippers. Most men try to suppress any suggestion of qualities that are inconsistent with the impression they wish to make on the world, but Burns revealed everything. In his early poetry he writes much about his faults that were rooted in passion. He wrote sincerely in A Prayer in the Prospect of Death:

Thou know'st that Thou hast formed me,
 With passions wild and strong;
 And listening to their witching voice,
 Has often led me wrong.

More impassioned is the appeal in Stanzas on the Same Occasion:

O Thou great Governor of all below!
 If I may dare a lifted eye at Thee,
 Thy nod can make the tempest cease to blow,
 Or still the tumult of the raging sea:
 With that controlling pow'r assist ev'n me,
 For all unfit I feel my pow'rs to be,
 To rule their torrent in the allowed line:
 O, aid me with thy help, Omnipotence Divine!

If Burns had been consistent in his attitude of apology and repentance, the Unco Guid would not have had much reason to blame him. But he ventured at times to

suggest that the power that enabled him to write as no Scot had ever written before was from the same source as were the impulses that involved him in disgrace with the Kirk session, and that both were of Divine origin. Even this daring could be tolerated, but it was clear to the horrified moralist that in many of his poems Burns adopted an attitude that was far from being submissive or decorous. The Epistle to Rankine is quite sincere, and Green Grow the Rashes, written at the same time is a lyrical celebration of a way of life that in other poems the writer dephores. Rantin' Robin was just as honest as The Bard's Epitaph. One who sheds a tear over the self-reproach in some of the early poems is brought up sharply if he looks at The Court of Equity, or even at some of the songs in The Jolly Beggars.

Several of the Mossgiel poems were written in honour of whiskey.

An honest man may like a glass,
An honest man may like a lass,

and the poems show that Burns, honest man, liked both. But in spite of his Scotch Drink and Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer Burns could not have been much of a toper, for his expense accounts for his sojourn at Mossgiel give no evidence that he squandered money on

whiskey. Yet he had an appreciation of the "big-bellied bottle."

Burns was not only honest himself: he demanded a like honesty from other men. His hatred of hypocrisy and falseness was based on his conviction of the importance of personal integrity. In his Epistle to the Rev. John M'Math he explained his attacks on certain people:

But I gae mad at their grimaces,
 Their sighin', cantin', grace-proud faces,
 Their three-mile prayers, and half-mile graces,
 Their raxin' conscience,
 Whase greed, revenge, and pride disgraces
 Waur nor their nonsense.

He had a keen eye for the failings of the Unco Guid and he mercilessly exposed their frailties. How many "whited sepulchres" trembled to read:

Discount what scant occasion gave
 That purity ye pride in,
 And (what's aft mair than a' the lave)
 Your better art o' hiding.

Holy Willie was, in part, an attack on the hypocrisy of an individual.

Burns wanted the Church, as well as its members, to be free from folly, superstition, and hypocrisy. In Holy Willie's Prayer he exposed what he considered to be an outworn and unreasonable doctrine in lines barbed with wit and wighted with purpose. The vain theological disputes of the time he thought were just a "moonshine matter," and he exposed to ridicule all

the abuses of the church in the Holy Fair.

Burns searched out falseness and insincerity in the larger affairs of the kingdom. He saw through the pretensions of a parliamentary representative:

For Britain's guid! guid faith, I doubt it.
Say rather, gaun as Premiers lead him:
And saying Ay or No's they bid him:¹.

The empty flattery of a conventional Birthday Ode inspired Burns to write his version of a Birthday Ode, in which he exposed not only the servility of court poets, but also the incompetence of ministers, the weaknesses of their policy, and the indiscretion of the royal princes. The comments on the American Revolution in The Address to Beelzebub show that the author's knowledge of contemporary events was as great as his daring.

If a sensitive, imaginative poet is placed in a situation which he does not like, he may escape from his harsh surroundings to a dream world. He may paint exquisite word-pictures of fanciful scenes, or he may write of a foreign land or of the dim past.

Carlyle says derisively:

Hence our innumerable host of rose-colored novels and iron-mailed Epics with their locality not on the Earth but somewhere nearer to the moon. Hence our Virgins of the Sun, and our Knights of the Cross, malicious Saracens in turbans, and copper-colored chiefs in wampum, and so many other truculent figures from the heroic times, or the heroic climates, who on all hands swarm in our poetry.².

1. The Twa Dogs.

2. Essay on Burns.

We are more grateful for "rose-colored" poems than was Carlyle, for they offer a refuge from the workaday world. But the poet who is a Romantic in the best sense of the word is he who reveals the beauty in humble things. Carlyle, again, has an apt comment:

The poet, we imagine, can never have far to seek for a subject; the elements of his art are in him, and around him on every hand; for him the Ideal world is not remote from the Actual, but under it and within it: nay, he is a poet, precisely because he can discern it there.

Burns was a complete realist. Not for him were the refuges of poets who are not strong enough, or honest enough to face things as they are. He did not drug his mind by dreaming of the happiness he might have in a different world. His "America (was) here or nowhere." There were unavoidable limitations in his attitude. Several of his countrymen have succeeded in imaginative fields which Burns could never have entered. If he had written of Kilmeny, the reader would guess quite easily where she had been: not in a land

-----where the cock never crew,
Where the rain never fell, and the wind
 never blew;

but rather at some assignation among the corn rigs where a real moon shone, and a real lad "kissed her owre and owre again." And if he had written of Peter

Pan, Burns would probably have had a Witches' Sabbath in Kensington Gardens.

"A Scottish peasant's life was the meanest and rudest of all lives, till Burns became a poet in it and a poet of it." ¹. The harsh and sordid details of his everyday life are made beautiful by the poetic imagination. Burns does not gloss over its unattractive features. He writes of houses that are bare and uncomfortable, yet what poetic description of luxury can one set beside the third stanza of The Vision:

There, lanely, by the ingle-cheek,
I sat and eyed the spewing reek,
That fill'd, wi' hoast-provoking smeeke,
 The auld clay biggin';
And heard the restless rattons squeak
 About the riggin'.

Against any one of the luscious verses of the Eve of St. Agnes, "how salutary, how very salutary" in the phrase of Arnold, to place a line like this:

Fortune! if thou'll but gie me still
Hale breeks, a scone, and whisky gill.²

When he writes of the work of the farm, Burns is equally direct, giving in words the effect of a Dutch genre picture. Several poetic epistles open with a description of some scene in harvest or sowing time. Any one of them may be chosen to show Burns's power.

Forjesket sair, wi' weary legs,
Rattlin' the corn out-owre the rigs,
Or dealing through amang the naigs
 Their ten-hours' bite,

1. Carlyle, Essay on Burns.

2. Scotch Drink.

My awkward Muse sair pleads and begs
I wouldna write. 1.

Matthew Arnold did not mention the weather in his comprehensive denunciation of things Scottish, but no doubt he thought of it. Even loyal Scots admit that their weather, at least, might be improved. But see what Burns does with the most depressing and uncomfortable days. He imagines the collapse of the New Brig on a day of rain and flood:

When heavy, dark, continued, a'-day rains,
Wi' deepening deluges o'erflow the plains;
When from the hills where springs the brawling Coil,
Or stately Lugar's mossy fountains boil,
Or where the Greenock winds his moorland course,
Or haunted Garpal draws his feeble source,
Aroused by blustering winds and spotting thowes,
In mony a torrent down his snaw-broo rowes:
While crashing ice, borne on the roaring spate,
Sweeps dams, and mills, and brigs, a' to the gate;
And from Glenbuck, down to the Ratton-Key,
Auld Ayr is just one lengthen'd tumbling sea--
Then down ye'll hurl, deil nor ye never rise!
And dash the gumlie jaups up to the pouring skies. 2.

Carlyle comments, "the welkin has, as it were, bent down with its weight: the 'gumlie jaups' and the 'pouring skies' are mingled together in a world of rain and ruin." 3. One more picture insists on inclusion:

November chill blows loud wi' angry sugh:
The short'ning winter-day is near a close:
The miry beasts retreating frae the pleugh:
The black'ning trains o' craws to their repose;⁴

The effect of these descriptive passages is the result of the author's technical skill. The artful changes of rhythm, the sound value of appropriate vowels and

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1. Second Epistle to John Lapraik.
 2. The Brigs of Ayr.
 3. Essay on Burns.
 4. The Cotter's Saturday Night.

consonants might be noted, but these details of form were the poet's instinctive response to his vision, heightened by imagination.

As a nature poet, Burns stands between the Augustans and the Romanticists. He laughed at the artificial pastorals of the school of Pope and painted nature honestly as it appeared to him. Yet he could not put the emphasis on nature as did Wordsworth, for he thought of man and nature together. In his poetry natural scenes find a response in the human heart. The fate of the daisy suggests the fate of man. A poet must seek the influence of nature:

The Muse, nae poet ever fand her,
Till by himsel he learn'd to wander,
Adown some trotting burn's meander,
And no think lang: 1.

The enjoyment of the charms of nature is a compensation for poverty:

Yet Nature's charms, the hills and woods,
The sweeping vales, and foaming floods,--
Are free alike to all. 2.

When he describes natural scenes, Burns shows unerring taste in his choice of detail. The Epistle to John Lapraik begins with a picture of spring in which the essence of the season is conveyed by only three lines:

While briars and woodbines budding green,
And paitricks scraichin' loud at e'en,
And morning poussie whiddin seen,
Inspire my Muse.

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1. Epistle to William Simpson.
 2. Epistle to Davie.

The warmth and brightness of summer shine in the first lines of The Holy Fair:

Upon a simmer Sunday morn,
 When Nature's face is fair,
 I walked forth to view the corn,
 And snuff the caller air.
 The rising sun owre Galston muirs,
 Wi' glorious light was glintin':
 The hares were hirplin down the furs,
 The lav'rocks they were chantin'
 Fu' sweet that day.

Burns was original in his treatment of the less gentle aspects of nature, and he makes poetry from forbidding material:

Ev'n winter bleak has charms to me
 When winds rave through the naked tree:
 Or frosts on hills of Ochiltree
 Are hoary gray:
 Or blinding drifts wild-furious flee,
 Dark'ning the day!

Burns did not hesitate to write of the less pleasant aspects of mankind as well as of nature. The Jolly Beggars deals with the most harsh, the most sordid, the most repulsive side of Scottish life, yet even Matthew Arnold declares that it is "a superb poetic success." A huge canvas is filled with wild and ragged figures that seem more grotesque than they are, in the shadows only fitfully dispelled by the light of the fire. Arnold wrote of the poem, "It has a breadth, truth, and power which make the famous scene in Auerback's cellar of Goethe's Faust seem artificial and tame beside it, and which are only matched by

Shakespeare and Aristophanes." 1.

The sensitivity of Burns, increased by depressions and illness, caused him to suffer keenly from his own troubles. Despondency is one expression of this suffering. But he did not remain sorry for himself for very long. His misfortunes never conquered him:

To tell the truth, they seldom fash'd him,
Except the moment that they crush'd him;
For sure as chance or fate had hush'd 'em,
Tho'e'er sae short,
Then wi' a rhyme or sang he lash'd 'em,
And thought it spört. 2.

He rarely wasted his sympathy on himself; most of it was spent for others. The humanity and tenderness of Burns strike a new note in poetry. Other poets had written of the poor but only Burns could describe as sympathetically the life of the cotter. The Poet's Welcome to his Love Begotten Daughter is full of a unique tenderness. However, the love poems written by Burns in the Mossgiel period of his life have not the sympathetic appeal of many of the later songs, although they are lyrical and warm.

In the Mossgiel poems, Burns's sympathy is given particularly to animals. To a Mouse was written with a surprising understanding of and pity for the subject. The dialect is an advantage in a poem of this kind because of the suggestion of tenderness in the

1. On the Study of Poetry.

2. Elegy on the Death of Robert Ruisseaux.

use of a diminutive. The poem is perfect in form, developing from the plight of the mouse to the misery of all life, and ending with a poignant personal cry.

Snyder comments:

One ploughman, driving his share through the cunningly built nest, stamps with a heavy boot, and moves on to the end of the furrow. Another, looking down on the mouse tangled in the debris of leaves and stubble, seizes a clod and hurls it. Only to Burns was the power given to discover in the mouse his own earth-born companion and fellow-mortal, and to see in her fate a symbol of his own. ¹.

Put that way, the story sounds like a version of a well-known parable.

Indeed, Burns extends his sympathy to all wild things, to the hare that must have been a pest in the kailyard, to the grouse and partridges brought down by "thundering guns." He was even closer to the domestic animals; no one has expressed better than he the relationship between the farmer and his dumb servants. The felicity of The Auld Farmer's New Year's Morning Salutation to his Auld Mear, Maggie is so great that it is worthwhile to learn Scots in order to understand it. The Twa Dogs was written with an uncanny insight into "dog psychology." Is it heresy to say that in several stanzas it approaches the animal characterization of the Nun's Priest's Tale? The final expression of Burns's pity for animals and birds

1. Robert Burns, His Personality, His Reputation, and His Art.

is in the poem, Winter. In his essay Sheep-Shearing, Galsworthy suggests that when man has become sufficiently sensitive he may pity the apples, cruelly wrenched from their parent tree in the autumn. Burns anticipated this refinement of sympathy in To a Mountain Daisy. Wordsworth could not feel with his daisy. I forget who discovered that the Devil is a gentleman, but I think that, after Uncle Toby, Burns was the first to be sorry for his Satanic Majesty:

I'm wae to think upo' yon den,
Ev'n for your sake!

It is interesting to note how often Death and the Devil appear in Burns's poems: he must have had no other mythology. One must remember that Auld Cloutie lingered on in Scotland to a late date. The last witch was burned there as late as 1727, and when Captain Burt refused to believe in a Highlander's story of a witch in his wine-cellar the host pacified the outraged narrator by saying, "Sir, you must not mind him, he is an atheist." Burns was as much an atheist as Captain Burt where witches were concerned, but he felt that they and their master were good poetic material.

An examination of the sources of Burns's poetry is outside the scope of this essay which is

concerned with relations between his life and his work. It will suffice to say that from the English Eighteenth Century poets he got his care for accuracy and precision, and that through Fergusson and Ramsay he derived from the old national poets their stanzas, their energy, their detailed treatment of nature, and many of their themes. It has been said that Burns was an imitative poet. Certainly, almost all his best poems can be traced to some unsuccessful model, but wherever he borrowed he improved. His own statement in the preface to the Kilmarnock Volume shows that he was not ashamed of his poetic debts to Ramsay and Fergusson:

These two justly admired Scotch Poets he has often had in his eye in the following pieces: but rather with a view to kindle at their flame than for servile imitation.

V

1786-1788

We become men-----after we have ascertained, in any way, what impassable barriers hem us in through this life.

Carlyle, Essay on Burns.

When Burns set out for Edinburgh on November 27, 1786, in spite of his twenty-seven years he was a young man, still "without an aim." Under a cloud for his intrigue with Jean Armour, unsuccessful as a farmer, even yet with some intention of retreating to Jamaica, he was a youth, rebellious, uncertain of the future. The Burns who took possession of Ellisland on June 13, 1788, was a sobered, steadied man. "Manhood begins when we have in any way made truce with necessity," says Carlyle. The story of Burns from Mossgiel to Ellisland is the story of his spiritual "coming of age."

The events of the time may be reviewed briefly. Burns left Mossgiel "fired" with hope, and encouraged by the approval of his family and friends who had urged him to go to Edinburgh. On the first stage of his journey, his heart must have been warmed by the acclamation of the farmers of Covington Mains who held a reception for him.

Burns did not at once burst on the capital in a blaze of glory, but arriving simply and unannounced he went to the lodgings of a friend from Mauchline, John Richmond. Burns had some means of introduction to the Earl of Glencairn who sponsored the poet in Edinburgh Society, and so at tea parties and assemblies he met the members of the aristocracy and the literati, at the Kilwinning Cannongate Masonic Lodge he met professional men as well, and in clubs such as the Crochallan Fencibles he met men of other classes. He soon knew intimately what Henley calls, "the old Scots capital: gay, squalid, drunken, dirty, lettered, venerable." One of his first public acts in the city was his asking permission of the "Bailies of the Cannongate" to erect a stone to the memory of Robert Fergusson, his poetic ancestor.

The ostensible purpose of Burns's visit to Edinburgh was the printing of a second edition of his poems which was completed in April, 1787. From the profits of the sale of his books and the disposal of the copyright of the poems to William Creech, his agent, Burns, according to his own statement, cleared 440 to 450 pounds but the difficulty of extracting money from Creech kept Burns in suspense for the next year and it was not until March 20, 1788, that the account was finally settled. The new volume contained

108 more pages of poetry than the Kilmarnock Volume, for along with several new productions Burns had included some early poems as Death and Dr. Hornbook and The Ordination. The fame of Robert Burns was spread far by this publication.. Snyder has learned that, "It was published in London by Cadell and Davies at the same time as in Edinburgh; pirated editions appeared in Dublin and Belfast before the year was out; Philadelphia saw a similar reprint in 1788, and New York in 1789." 1.

On May 5, 1787, Burns left Edinburgh for a tour of the Border country to the South and West, which brought him on June 9 to Mossgiel. The Armours, pacified by his success, made him welcome in Mauchline and Burns soon resumed his former relations with Jean but this time with no thought of marriage. Some time during the summer he made a short trip to the Highlands of which there is little record. On August 7 he was again in Edinburgh, but on August 23 he left to make a more extended tour of the Highlands, in the course of which he met many of his father's relatives. He arrived in Edinburgh on September 16. He was no longer the lion of the season but he still had many friends in the city. At the house of one of these he met Mrs. M'Lehose, an attractive young "grass widow" whose

1. Robert Burns, his Personality, his Reputation, and his Art.

husband was in the West Indies. For some time Burns was prevented from seeing her again because he was kept at home by an injury to his knee, but the two began a correspondence which grew warmer until by the time they met again they were exchanging expressions of devotion. The details of the affair are shrouded in time and romantic fictions but it seems that Mrs. M'Lehose would have compromised her reputation had not Burns been more prudent than she. The best comment on the affair that I have seen is Ferguson's:

Despite most of the biographers, the affair cannot be dignified into a tragedy. It is rather an ironic comedy--a full length study of the mess into which two sentimentalist with a gift for words can get themselves. ¹.

Burns returned home on February 23, 1788. Jean Armour had been cast out by her enraged parents for a second time and so Burns took a room for her in Mauchline, where on March 3, 1788, she again gave birth to twins, both of whom died before they could be baptized. On March 13 Burns took a lease of Ellisland. Ferguson has this comment:

Surveying his prospects in 1787, Burns concluded that an Excise appointment offered him the best chance of an independent livelihood, but Glencairn, Mrs. Dunlop, and most of his other friends among the gentry vigorously disapproved, and it was largely through their urging that he undertook the Ellisland venture in which he sank the profits of his Edinburgh edition. ².

1. Notes on Letters, V. ii, p. 359.

2. Introduction to Letters, V. i, p. xxxvi.

Burns was too shrewd to depend entirely on the farm. He had returned to Edinburgh to conclude his business with Creech. On March 17, 1788, a week before he left the city, he wrote to Clarinda, Mrs. M'Lehose, that he had been accepted as a candidate for the Excise. About the same time that he had settled on his life's work he came to a decision regarding Jean Armour. He had known other women who might have been more congenial in mind but none of them would have made a suitable wife for a struggling farmer. Then, too, Jean's welfare was in his hands. In a letter of April 28 Burns made his first acknowledgment of Jean as his wife, and on August 5, before the Kirk session, Jean Armour and Robert Burns were married for the third time.

.....

His letters and his Commonplace Book reveal the mental struggle of Burns during the period. We recall that his watchword was, "Independence of spirit and integrity of soul!" How was he to maintain his integrity and yet make the necessary "truce with necessity"? Anyone who may think that it is possible to exaggerate the fight Burns made to keep his integrity, should consider the life of Gilbert Burns, an honest man, who, as Ferguson points out, "never was

able to shake off the mental attitude of the tenant and the factor, whose ruling purpose in life is to do nothing that will offend 'the gentry'.¹ Gilbert never dared to publish a spirited defence of his brother's character for fear of offending Dr. Currie.

In his relations with his social superiors in Edinburgh, Burns was fortified by his knowledge of his own worth. He explained to Clarinda in a letter of March 7, 1784:

We ought in the first place to fix the standard of our own character; and when on full examination, we know where we stand, and how much ground we occupy, let us contend for it as property; and those who seem to doubt or deny us what is justly ours, let us either pity their prejudices or despise their judgment. I know, my dear, you will say this is self-conceit; but I call it self-knowledge: the one is the overweening opinion of a fool who fancies himself what he wishes to be thought; the other is the honest justice that a man of sense, who has thoroughly examined the subject, owes to himself.

Armed with such an estimate of his worth, Burns could not be harmed by the adulation he received in Edinburgh. Indeed, everyone praised his conduct in his unaccustomed surroundings. Shortly after his arrival in Edinburgh he wrote to Gavin Hamilton, humourously referring to his popularity, "By all probability, I shall soon be the tenth worthy and the eighth wise man of the world." To Mr. Greenfield he wrote, with rather more rhetoric, in the same month, "You may bear me witness, when my bubble of fame was at the highest, I stood unintoxiated with the inebriating

1. Notes on Letters, V. ii, p. 342.

cup in my hand, looking forward with rueful resolve to the hastening time when the stroke of envious calumny, with all the eagerness of vengeful triumph, should dash it to the ground." Others than Mr. Greenfield could bear witness that Burns was not dazzled by fame. Dugald Stewart, who knew Burns well, testified:

The attention he received during his stay in town from all ranks and description of persons, was such as would have turned any head but his own. I cannot say that I could perceive any unfavorable effect which they left on his mind. He retained the same simplicity of manners and appearance which had struck me so forcibly when I first saw him in the country, nor did he seem to feel any additional self-importance from the number and rank of his new acquaintance.

One recalls with pleasure the story to the effect that Burns told a lion-hunting peeress that he would appear at her "show" if she would invite the Learned Pig from the Grassmarket as well.

Nowhere is Burns's sturdy independence more evident than in his acute and daring estimates of the great men of Edinburgh. He took his own advice:

Keek through every other man,
Wi' sharpen'd, sly inspection.

He had an unerring eye for significant traits. His judgment of Dr. Blair will illustrate his ability to "hit off" a character:

It is not easy forming an exact judgment of anyone, but, in my opinion, Dr. Blair is merely an astonishing proof of what industry and

application can do. Natural parts like his are frequently to be met with; his vanity is proverbially known among his acquaintances, but he is justly at the head of what may be called fine writing; and a critic of the first, the very first rank in prose; even in Poesy a good Bard of Nature's making can only take the pas of him. He has a heart not of the first water, but far from being an ordinary one. In short, he is a truly worthy and respectable character.

Burns was able to defend his personal integrity against the condescension of snobs; he had also to defend his poetry from the strictures of pedants. On March 22, 1787, he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop, "I have the advice of some very judicious friends among the literati here, but with them I sometimes find it necessary to claim the privilege of thinking for myself." There is further evidence of his impatience of poetic tyranny in a letter written to Dr. Currie by Ramsay of Ochtertyre who said of Burns:

When I asked him whether the Edinburgh Literati had mended his poems by their criticisms, 'Sir', said he, 'these gentlemen remind me of some spinsters in my country, who spin their thread so fine, that it is neither fit for weft nor woof.' He said he had not changed a word except one, to please Dr. Blair.

It must not be thought that Burns did not rebel against many of the circumstances of his Edinburgh visit. Even though he sensibly accepted social distinctions, he felt at times a secret resentment against them. In April, 1787, when he was being praised for knowing his place, he wrote bitterly:

There are few sore evils under the sun give me more uneasiness and chagrin than the comparison how a man of genius, nay avowed worth, is everywhere received with the reception which a mere ordinary character, decorated with the trappings and futile distinctions of Fortune meets.

He had many other warring tendencies. Burns the philanthropist was opposed to Burns the realist and humanitarian. He felt that a flirtation with a lady gave that relish to friendship that "cream gives to strawberries," and he wrote to the same lady, "Are your heart and affections bound to one who gives not the least return of either to you?" But his sober commonsense made him respect the civil rights of Mr. M'Lehose. He entered into less delicate entanglements, yet he was beset with an honest conviction that a callous entering on a liaison was villainy, and he could not willingly cause anyone to suffer. He wanted complete personal freedom, yet he was conscious of his duties as a son, brother, and father. He had to face the reality of his poverty. He was not very hopeful about the prospects of farming; he knew that his wild lampoons against the king and his espousal of the party of Fox might hinder his rising in the Excise.

One must not forget that during much of this time Burns was ill with headaches, fevers, "miserable colds," and stomach ailments. His dislocated knee-cap caused him intense pain and kept him within doors from

December 8, to January 12. In a few letters, especially in those to a Miss Chalmers, Burns confessed that he was fighting against depression:

I am here under the care of a surgeon (December 12, 1787) with a bruised limb extended on a cushion; and the tints of my mind vying with the livid horror preceding a midnight thunderstorm. A drunken coachman was the cause of the first and incomparably the lightest evil; misfortune, bodily constitution, hell and myself have formed a 'quadruple alliance' to guarantee the other.

More than a month later he was still writing in the same strain:

God have mercy on me! a poor, damned incautious, duped, unfortunate fool! The sport, the miserable victim, of rebellious pride, hypochondriac imagination, agonizing sensibility, and heedless passion.

It is not surprising that, during his stay in Edinburgh, for almost the only time in his life Burns nearly gave up the fight. "There are two creatures I would envy, a horse in his wild state, traversing the forests of Asia, or an oyster on some desert shores of Europe," he exclaimed in a moment of defeat. "The one has not a wish without enjoyment, the other has neither wish nor fear." Even more indicative of defeat is a passage from a letter to Clarinda, which was nearer the idea of escape from the facts of existence than anything Burns ever wrote:

Suppose you and I just as we are at present; the same reasoning powers, sentiments, and even desires; the same fond curiosity for knowledge

and remarking observation in our minds; and imagine our bodies free from pain, and the necessary supplies for the wants of nature within our reach! Imagine further, that we were set free from the laws of gravitation, which bind us to this globe, and could at pleasure fly without inconvenience through all the yet un conjectured bounds of creation; what a life of bliss we should lead in our mutual pursuit of virtue and knowledge, and our mutual enjoyment of friendship and love! 1.

A copy of Milton's Paradise Lost was Burns's support. Again and again he mentions in his letters his admiration for the character of Satan. The following is a typical remark:

My favorite feature in Milton's Satan is his manly fortitude in supporting what cannot be remedied--in short, the wild broken fragments of a mind in ruins. 2.

But Burns did not reach the extremity of a mind in ruins. He pocketed his pride and the profits from the Edinburgh edition and became a farmer and a gauger. His second concession to reality was his decision to marry Jean Armour. The marriage was not at all romantic. Burns writes of his bride in the most prosaic terms, "I have got the handsomest figure, the sweetest temper, the soundest constitution, and the kindest heart in the country." But Burns was not choosing a companion for an excursion through space, freed "from the laws of gravitation." He was choosing a helpmate who could undertake the management of a

1. 1. Letters, V. ii, p. 263.
2. Ibid., p. 241.

house and a dairy, and who would meet the wishes of her husband with unquestioning loyalty and understanding. Stevenson to the contrary, Burns made a sensible choice and he knew it. Also, by marrying Jean he not only accepted his responsibilities to her but he undertook to live soberly. His obligations to his family he discharged by his loan to Gilbert, and so when he went to Ellisland, Burns was "square with the world." He had, at last, arrived at maturity.

VI

1788 - 1796

Conditions being what they are, the wonder is that the end did not come sooner, and that Burns was able to live out his brief span of life, in such joyous enthusiasm.

Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns.

Burns took up his residence at Ellisland in June, 1788. The farm that he had taken was one that might be profitable when it was drained, fenced, and fertilized, but for a number of years it could not show much gain. There was not even a dwelling house on the property, and so while his house was being built Burns had to live a mile down the river, Mrs. Burns and their son remaining in Mauchline. The builders were so slow that Burns could not move into his own house until late summer, 1789. His first few months at his new home were not encouraging, then, and the first harvest must have demonstrated that the farm would not make its owner's fortune; indeed, he could not even keep going, unless he had some other source of income. This time Burns's foresight was not proved vain. He had received his Excise Commission on July 14, 1788, in September he asked to be assigned to the district in which he lived, in August of the next year he re-

ceived the appointment he wished, and by October 10, 1789 he was an active officer. Two autumns had passed since he took Ellisland, and they had convinced Burns that his farm was not a good bargain.

He spent much of the winter of 1789-90 in mental and physical misery, which, although it lightened with the coming of spring, recurred almost every winter until his death. His illness was due to the progress of his heart disease, aggravated by the work of the farm and of the Excise.

In July, 1790, Burns was given the best assignment in the Dumfries territory, the Dumfries 3rd division, and on September 4 he expressed in a letter his intention of leaving the farm. In October, 1790, the poetic flame burned for a time as it had in 1785, for in that month Burns wrote what many consider to be his masterpiece, the poem, Tam O'Shanter.

The coming of winter brought on sickness and low spirits. The death of Glencairn in January, 1791, deprived Burns not only of a valuable patron but also of a friend, on whom he wrote his feeling Lament. A series of accidents added to Burns's misery. On February 7 he was injured by falling with his horse. He broke his arm in March and then he suffered a painful injury to a leg. Remorse added to his unhappiness for he had engaged in an affair with Anna Park, Anna

with the "gowden locks," who on March 31, 1791, gave birth to his child.

By this time Burns realized that he could not wait until his farm should be self-supporting, and since his name had been put on the list of "Persons Recommended for Examiner and Supervisor" in January, 1791, he felt that he might trust to the Excise for his whole income. Fortunately, a neighboring landowner had offered to buy Ellisland from Patrick Miller and so Burns was released from his agreement. On September 25, 1791, he sold out and moved to Dumfries.

Burns's life had been made more interesting early in 1791 by his acquaintance with Mrs. Walter Riddel, sister-in-law of his neighbor of Glenniddel. Also, Clarinda, Mrs. M'Lehose, who had been silent since Burns's marriage, wrote to him on November 23, 1791, ostensibly to tell him of the destitution of a Jenny Clow who had been his mistress in Edinburgh. Burns accepted the bait and resumed his old friendship with Mrs. M'Lehose.

The year 1792 was an anxious and unhappy time for Burns. With his democratic sympathies he could not but favor the French Revolutionary party, and he could not conceal his opinions. Feeling ran very high in Scotland and suspicious "loyal natives"

felt that Burns and some of his like-minded friends were enemies of the state. It is said that many of the Tories of the neighborhood "cut" Burns because of his opinions. Cunningham told a thrilling story of how on February 27, 1792, Burns headed the capture of a smuggling brig whose guns he presented to the French Assembly. Snyder disproves the whole story yet the fact that it could be told indicates that Burns was believed to be an active supporter of the revolutionaries. He did, indeed, subscribe to the Gazetteer, a radical paper, the readers of which were suspected by the government. Late in 1792 Burns wrote "Here's to Them that's Awa", a rousing song in praise of Fox, which was not likely to appease the party in power. As a result of his indiscretions an inquiry was made into Burns's conduct by the Excise Board. He was in great fear of dismissal but he escaped with only a reprimand.

Early in 1793, before Clarinda sailed to join her husband in the West Indies, Burns had written to her letters expressing strong feeling, but there is no evidence that he passed what the lady would have called the bounds of decorum.

Late in 1793 he offended a Mrs. Riddel, probably the wife of Robert of Glenniddel and as a result he was estranged from the whole family. The thought

of the quarrel rankled in his mind and increased the suffering winter had brought. It seems that he had a severe nervous breakdown in which, as he wrote to Cunningham on February 25, 1794, his only supports were:

kn A certain noble, stubborn something in man,
 known by the names of courage, fortitude,
 magnanimity---and---those senses of the
 mind--which connect us with and link us to,
 those awful, obscure realities of an all
 powerful and equally beneficent God, and
 a world to come beyond death and the grave.

But Burns had not lost his resiliency; not a week later he wrote to Cunningham again:

Since I wrote you the last lugubrious sheet I
 have not had time to write you further--
 Thank heaven I fell my spirits buoying upward
 with the renovating year.

Not only was Burns's health improved, but also his position was becoming easier. Many of the people who had sheered off from his company in the first scare of the revolution were friendly again. Chambers-Wallace offers some definite evidence of the fact that, according to material standards, Burns's life was comfortable:

(The Burnses) always had a maid-servant and sat in their parlour. That room and the two principal bed-rooms were carpeted and otherwise well-furnished. The Poet possessed a mahogany dining-table and good company often put their legs under it. ¹.

Jessie Lewars recollected that Burns "was always

1. The Life and Works of Robert Burns, V. iv, p.119.

anxious that his wife should be well and neatly dressed, and did his utmost to counteract any tendency to carelessness----by buying her the best clothes he could afford.----She was , for instance, the first person in Dumfries to wear Gingham."¹ One hears an echo of the song that Burns had written a long time before:

She dresses aye sae clean and neat,
Baith decent and genteel,
And then there's something in her gait,
Gars ony dress look well.

The only disadvantage in this way of living was the insecurity. Burns depended entirely on his pay as an officer, and illness or dismissal would mean ruin. It was necessary that he should keep strictly free of debt and he and Jean performed wonders of economy. When for a time he was in debt for his rent, he suffered mental tortures.

By November, 1794, the Riddels, were becoming reconciled with Burns but his happiness was marred by the fact that Glenniddel had died before the quarrel had been ended. Another source of satisfaction for Burns lay in his belief that he was on the way to promotion, for he had been given a temporary appointment as supervisor.

After January 12, 1795, Mrs. Dunlop, who had been one of his most devoted friends, ceased to write to him, probably, as Ferguson believes, because she

1. The Life and Works of Robert Burns, V. iv, p.119.

had been offended by the poet's warm defence of the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Early in the same year, Burns joined a Volunteer corps which had been formed in anticipation of an invasion. He was not the only man who joined the organization to show his disapproval of the excesses of the French Revolution and his adherence to the Constitution.

In the autumn, Burns was deeply affected by the death of his daughter. A propitiatory letter to Mrs. Dunlop, January 31, 1796, gives a sombre picture of the writer's condition:

The autumn robbed me of my only daughter and darling child and that at a distance and so rapidly, as to put it out of my power to pay the last duties to her. I had scarcely begun to recover from that shock when I became myself the victim of a most severe rheumatic fever and long the die spun doubtful; until after many weeks of a sick-bed, it seems to have turned up life, and I am beginning to crawl across my room, and once, indeed, have been before my own door in the street.

The rheumatic infection had been a sign that his disease was gaining in the fight Burns had waged against it for twelve or fifteen years. Dr. Harry B. Anderson has given as his opinion that:

The case was an ordinary one of rheumatism with heart complications, shortness of breath, faintness, weakness, rapid irregular pulse (auricular fibrillation) and towards the end, fever, parched tongue, delirium, presumably due to a bacteriological endocarditis which developed as terminal infection. ¹.

1. Quoted by Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns, p.435.

His physicians were not aware of the prognosis of his disease, but early in 1796 Burns realized that he was seriously ill. On June 16, 1796, on the advice of his doctors, he went to Brow to try the effect of sea-bathing. While he was there he received a letter in which a solicitor asked on behalf of his client for the payment of an account of seven pounds, four shillings. Burns had been worried enough by the possibility that in his illness his salary would be reduced, and the letter brought him to frantic despair. In letters that reflect his state of mind he asked his cousin James Burness and George Thomson for assistance. Both responded to the appeal immediately.

On the 18th, Burns returned home to await the end, and on July 21, he made his last surrender to reality.

VII

"Never tried; a poet, turns out well,"
(from an official entry in the records of the Board
of Excise).

Snyder, The Life of Robert Burns.

Burns's early biographers stated, and their
readers were only too ready to believe, as Wallace
says:

That he had entirely failed through abandoning
himself to alcoholic dissipation and its asso-
ciated and resulting vices; that for its sake,
he had outraged his home, wrecked his business
career, neglected poetry, and brought himself
to indigence and an early death. ¹.

Those with a more colorful imagination and a taste for
figurative speech have declared that the poet was
"burned out"; even Carlyle let himself go in depicting
the ruin of Burns. ². Careful research has shown that
this idea is unfounded, but the tradition is not yet
dead. The most powerful argument that one can use
against it is a summary of all that Burns accomplished
after he turned his face from Edinburgh and took a
farm and a wife.

The first erroneous idea one must expose is
the belief that Burns failed as a farmer because of
extravagance or carelessness. In 1812 Patrick Miller,
recalling his purchase of Ellisland, wrote:

1. Chambers-Wallace, The Life and Works of
Robert Burns, V. iv, p. 426.

2. The Hero as Men of Letters.

----when I purchased this estate about five and twenty years ago, I had not seen it. It was in the most miserable state of exhaustion, and all the tenants in poverty---when I went to view my purchase, I was so much disgusted for eight or ten days that I then meant never to return to this country.

It is not surprising that in spite of his efforts and Jean's Burns could not make the farm pay. On September 10, 1788, he wrote to Robert Graham of Fintry:

My farm does by no means promise to be such a pennyworth as I was taught to expect---It is in the last stages of worn out poverty and it will be some time before it pays the rent.

A certain William Clark, who had been a ploughman to Burns, in evidence given in 1838 disproved the notion that his former employer had neglected the farm:

Clark thought he was as good a manager of land as the generality of farmers in the neighborhood.--During the winter and spring time when he was not engaged with the Excise business, he occasionally held the plough for an hour or so for him and was a fair workman.--During seed-time, Burns might be frequently seen, at an early hour in the fields with his sowing sheet--Clark, during the six months he spent at Ellisland, never once saw his master intoxicated or incapable of managing his own business. ¹.

By the beginning of 1791, Burns was hard-pressed for cash, and he told Lady Elizabeth Cunningham in the spring that his farm would have ruined him had he not had his income as an Excise officer. When he was offered the post at Dumfries with an increase of twenty pounds in salary, he was glad to leave the

1. Chambers-Wallace, The Life and Works of Robert Burns, V. iii, p. 197.

farm as a bad bargain. It must have taken some courage to make the decision. In a letter to Robert Graham, July 31, 1789, Burns had written:

I know there are some respectable characters who do me the honour to interest themselves in my welfare and behavior, and as leaving the farm may have an unsteady, giddy appearance, I had perhaps better lose a little money than hazard such people's esteem.

It is to his credit that when the time came Burns defied the opinion of the "respectable characters"; no doubt he winced at the thought of being called a failure but he did not let his pride keep him in a ruinous situation.

While he was supervising his farm and helping as much as possible with the work, Burns had been riding an average of two hundred miles a week on the business of the Excise. His work did not consist merely in "searching auld wives' barrels." Snyder mentions thirty-two articles on which the Excise man had to collect the duty. The reports were involved and the supervision close. Burns carried out his arduous duties to the satisfaction of the Board. Snyder remarks on Burns's record in the Excise before he left Ellisland:

By the end of October, 1791, when Burns had been on active duty for little more than two year, he had served creditably enough to have won one promotion, to have hopes of rising in the not distant future; and to have the

encouragement of Findlater, his supervisor, in applying for a Port Division while waiting for the Supervisorship. All this, while actively engaged in farming his hundred and seventy acres--and finding time for no inconsiderable amount of poetry. Clearly he had 'turned out well'.¹

When he became an Excise man, Burns was well aware of the popular dislike of gaugers. On February 3, 1789, he told the Reverend Mr. Geddes:

There is a certain stigma attached to the character of an Excise Officer, but I do not intend to borrow honour from any profession.

Before he left Ellisland he had become assured that he did not have to compromise his personal integrity in order to make a living. He told Cleghorn in a letter:

The Excise is the business for me ----I find no difficulty in being an honest man in it.

As we know, for a time Burns was under suspicion because of his liberal opinions but by December 29, 1794, he could write to Mrs. Dunlop:

Since I began this letter, I have been appointed to act in the capacity of supervisor here, and I assure you, what with the load of business, and what with that business being new to me, I could scarcely have commanded ten minutes to have spoken to you had you been in town, much less to have written you an epistle. This appointment is only temporary and during the illness of the present incumbent; but I look forward to an early period when I shall be appointed in full form; a consummation devoutly to be wished! My political sins seem to be forgiven me.

A final testimony to his success in the Ex-

1. The Life of Robert Burns, p. 320.

cise lies in the conduct of the Excise Board when Burns was ill. Usually, when an exciseman was off duty because of illness, his income was decreased by the amount of fifteen pounds. Currie stated of Burns that "his full emoluments were----continued to him by the kindness of Mr. Stobbie, a young expectant in the Excise, who performed the duties of his office without fee or reward." ¹. It is not likely that the Excise Board did this kindness to Burns the poet; their admiration was for Burns the valuable Excise officer.

The work he did to earn a living would have filled the day of almost any man, yet Burns found time to do much more. One of his most useful activities was his work with the Monkland Friendly Society, a club formed in 1788 for the purpose of establishing a circulating library. Burns first mentions the society in a letter of April 2, 1788, to his friend Peter Hill, the bookseller:

The Library scheme that I mentioned to you is already begun, under the direction of Captain Riddel and ME! ---Captain Riddel gave his infant society a great many of his old books, else I had written you on that subject; but one of these days I shall trouble you with a commission.

In 1791 Captain Riddel persuaded Burns to write an account of the society for Sir John Sinclair's

¹. Chambers-Wallace, Life and Works of Robert Burns.

Statistical Account of Scotland. In a letter accompanying Burns's article, Riddel wrote:

Mr. Burns was so good as to take the whole charge of this small concern. He was treasurer, librarian, and censor to this little society, who will long have a grateful sense of his public spirit and exertion for their improvement and information. ¹.

Burns's account shows his conviction that education should be accessible to all; we also gain from it a respect for the intelligence of the subscribers:

To store the minds of the lower classes with useful knowledge is certainly of very great importance, both to them as individuals and to society at large. Giving them a turn for reading and reflection is giving them a source of innocent and laudable amusement, and besides, raises them to a more dignified degree in the scale of rationality-----Among the books---- of this little library were---Blair's Sermons, Robertson's History of Scotland, Hume's History of the Stewarts, The Spectator, Idler, Adventurer, Mirror, Lounger, Observer, Man of Feeling, Man of the World, Chrysal, Don Quixote, Joseph Andrews, etc. A peasant who can read and enjoy such books is certainly a much superior being to his neighbor who, perhaps, stalks beside his team, very little removed, except in shape, from the brutes he drives. ².

The Election Ballads were the result of Burns's interest in two political contests. In the first he championed Sir James Johnstone against the Duke of Queensberry's candidate, Captain Miller. In 1795 he took sides with a Whig candidate. The election poems are not readable today but they show that, although he denied that he was interested in politics,

1. Chambers-Wallace, Life and Works of Robert Burns, V. iii, p. 290.

2. Ibid., p. 291.

Burns had a knowledge of the political situation.

Another of Burns's interests was the education of his children. With his conviction of the necessity for learning, and with his strongly developed sense of paternal responsibility he could not but be anxious to give his sons the best education possible. For a time he tried to teach them himself, but he wanted them to attend a good school. He had been made an honorary Burgess of Dumfries and now he asked that he be given the privileges of a real bur-gess, one of which was the right to send his children to school without paying fees. His request was granted. In that admirable letter written by James Gray, rector of Dumfries Academy, to an editor of Burns's works, there is a reference to the poet's share in the education of his sons:

It came under my own view professionally, that he superintended the education of his children with a degree of care that I have never seen surpassed by any parent in any rank of life whatever. In the bosom of his family, he spent many a delightful hour in directing the studies of his eldest son, a boy of uncommon talents. I have frequently found him explaining to this youth, then not more than nine years of age, the English poets, from Shakespeare to Gray or storing his mind with examples of heroic virtue as they live in the pages of our most celebrated English historians.

Somehow, Burns found time to visit and to correspond with his friends. A great many persons

whom he had never seen claimed some of his attention. His success had encouraged a great many incompetent versifiers to court fame, and most of them plagued Burns by sending him their manuscripts to be criticized, gratis of course.

And always Burns was reading, patiently continuing his education begun in the school at Allô-way. From Jessie Lewars we learn that when he ate alone he had always a book by him, and he spent many evenings in his study or by the family fireside reading and thinking about what he read. "I have never known any man so intimately acquainted with the elegant English authors," said Gray. We learn that Burns read Shakespeare and other dramatists, French and English, Smollett, Cowper, Fielding, Ossian. He read critically, too, as one may learn from a remark he made to Dr. Moore on the relative merits of Fielding and Richardson:

Original strokes that strongly depict the human heart is your and Fielding's province, beyond any other novelist I have ever perused. Richardson, indeed, might perhaps be excepted; but unhappily his dramatis personae are beings of some other world; and however they may captivate the inexperienced, romantic fancy of a boy or a girl, they will ever, in proportion as we have made human nature our study, dissatisfy our riper years. 1.

But Burns did not confine his reading to literature only. In the midst of farming and gauging

1. February 28, 1791.

he found time to read political economy. On May 13, 1789, he wrote to Robert Graham:

Marshall in his Yorkshire, and particularly that extraordinary man, Smith, in his Wealth of Nations, find me employment enough.

To the surprise of the author, Burns could also write to the Rev. Archibald Alison, author of Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste, commenting on the book in terms that show that he had grasped the principles of aesthetics. It is hard to believe that the Burns who did all this was one man only.

VIII

"Haud tae the Muse."

Robert Burns, Second Epistle to Davie.

Professor Stewart once said:

All the faculties of Burns's mind were, as far as I could judge, equally vigorous; and his predilection for poetry was rather the result of his own enthusiastic and impassioned temper, than of a genius exclusively adapted to that species of composition. From his conversation I should have pronounced him to be fitted to excel in whatever walk of ambition he had chosen to exert his abilities.¹

But Burns, although he devoted his abilities to farming and gauging and to numerous other incidental activities, never forgot that he was above all else

"Robert Burns, Poet." He had to earn his living as best he could but in the back of his mind was the determination that some day he would devote himself to his real work.

"A life of literary leisure with a decent competence is the summit of my wishes," he wrote to Mr. Heron of Heron early in 1795, the year before his death. It is a general belief that Burns gave up poetry in his last years and that ~~he~~ he felt that he had been untrue to his own genius. There is just as much evidence to prove that he was using the time,

1. Chambers-Wallace, Life and Works of Robert Burns, V. ii, p. 78.

which must intervene, as a period of preparation, so that when he could devote himself entirely to literature he would be ready.

In a letter to Dr. Moore, January 4, 1789, Burns stated definitely that he intended to continue his poetic work and that he would study to discipline and improve his gifts:

The character and employment of a poet were formerly my pleasure but are now my pride. I know that a very great deal of my late eclat was owing to the singularity of my situation and the honest prejudice of Scotsmen; but still as I said in the preface to my first edition, I do look upon myself as having some pretensions from Nature to the poetic character. I have not a doubt but the knack, the aptitude to learn the Muses' trade, is a gift bestowed by Him 'who forms the secret bias of the soul'----but I firmly believe that excellence in the profession is the fruit of industry, labour, attention, and pains. At least I am resolved to try my doctrine by the test of experience. Another appearance from the press I put off to a very distant day, a day that may never arrive----but Poesy I am determined to prosecute with all my vigour. Nature has given very few, if any, of the profession the talent of shining in every species of composition. I shall try (for until trial it is impossible to know) whether she has qualified me to shine in any one. The worst of it is, by the time one has finished a piece it has so often been viewed and reviewed before the mental eye, that one loses in a good measure, the powers of critical discrimination. Here the best criterion I know is a friend--not only of abilities to judge, but with good-nature enough, like a prudent teacher with a young learner, to praise perhaps a little more than is actually just, lest the thin-skinned animal fall into that most deplorable of all poetic diseases--heart-breaking despondency of himself.

There Burns certainly announced his self-dedication to poetry.

In a letter written on the 22nd of the same month to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham, Burns again declared his determination to be a "professed poet":

From a dabbler in rhymes, I am become a professed Poet--whether I may ever make my footing good, on any considerable height of Parnassus is what I do not know: but I am determined to strain every nerve in the trial. Though the rough material of fine writing is undoubtedly the gift of Genius, the workmanship is certainly the united effort of labour, attention, and pains. Nature has qualified few, if any, to shine in every walk of the muses. I shall put it to the test of repeated trial whether she has found me capable of distinguishing myself in any one.-----I muse and rhyme, morning, noon, and night; and have a hundred different poetic plans, pastorals, georgics, dramatics etc., floating in the region of fancy, somewhere between purpose and resolve.

Further proof that Burns was meditating new ventures in poetry lies in another letter of January, this to Professor Dugald Stewart. Burns enclosed the verses sent to Graham of Fintry and commented:

This poem is a species of Composition new to me; but I do not intend it shall be my last essay of the kind, as you will see by the Poet's Progress. These fragments, if my design succeeds, are but a small part of the intended whole. I propose it shall be the work of my utmost exertions refined by years.

By collating the Third Epistle to Graham of Fintry with The Poet's Progress, "poem in embryo," one may get some idea of the nature of the proposed composition. The fragments which deal with the unhappy fate of a

poet include an apostrophe to Dullness and character sketches of Creech and Smellie. The poem is written in closed couplets, in obvious imitation of the epigrammatic and antithetical manner of the Augustans:

Bloody dissectors, worse than ten Munroes!
He hacks to teach, they mangle to expose.

In equanimity they never dwell,
By turns in soaring heaven or vaulted hell!

The passage on Dullness cannot be compared to Pope's flawless and merciless lines and the "characters" cannot but suffer if placed beside any of Pope's skillful dissections. Burns had intelligence and energy enough but he had not the refined cruelty that made Pope's satiric couplets as sharp and complete as the flick of a whiplash. Fortunately, Burns did not repeat the attempt.

There is good reason to suppose that Burns was also thinking seriously of attempting the writing of dramatic works. Writing to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham, December 23, 1789, he says:

Another advantage I have in this business, (the Excise) is the knowledge it gives of the various shades of Human Character; and consequently assisting me in my trade as a poet. Not that I am in haste for the press, as my Lord has been told----but still to be a poet is my highest ambition, my dearest wish, and my unwearied study. I am aware that although I were to give to the world performances superior to my former works, if they were productions of the same kind, the comparative reception they would meet with

would mortify me. For this reason, I wish still to secure my old friend, novelty, on my side, by the kind of my performances; I have some thoughts of the drama. Considering the favorite things of the day, the two and three act pieces of O'Keefe, Mrs. Inchbald, etc., does not your Ladyship think that a Scottish audience would be better pleased with the Affectation (sic), Whim, and Folly of their own native growth, than with manners which to by far the greatest of them can be only second-hand?

No man knows what Nature has fitted him for until he try; and if after a preparatory course of some years study of Men and Books, I should find myself unequal to the task, there is no great harm done--Virtue and study are their own reward. I have got Shakespeare, and begun with him; and I shall stretch a point and make myself master of all the Dramatic Authors of any repute in both English and French, the only languages which I know.

Burns wrote a prologue for Mr. Sutherland's benefit night in which the speaker is made to suggest a number of subjects for a national drama and to ask:

Is there nae poet, burning keen for fame,
Will try to give us songs and plays at hame?

Ramsay of Ochtertyre said that Burns told him "he had now gotten a story for a drama, which he was to call Rob. Maquechan's Elshon," based on the legend of a cobbler who ran his awl nine inches in the heel of Bruce. Anyone who is familiar with the nature of Burns's humour will suspect that Ramsay "had his leg pulled." It is curious that George Thomson said in a letter he wrote to Burns in 1794:

Here let me ask you whether you never seriously turned your thought to dramatic writing? That

is a field worthy of your genius, in which it ought to shine forth in all its splendour-----I think that you might produce a comic opera in three acts, which would live by the poetry.

Then follows business-like advice on how to produce a play.

It was to poetry not to letters in general that Burns had devoted himself. Several times he refused to turn to prose. This was the age when Scots journalists had invaded London along with Scots bankers, doctors, and politicians, and Burns might have become one of their number. Early in 1789 Peter Stuart, one of these expatriates, invited Burns to contribute to his Star and Evening Advertiser, a London paper which he had just begun to issue. He offered Burns "for communications to the paper, a small salary quite as large as his Excise office embursements" but Burns refused although he agreed to send in occasional contributions. In September, 1790, Burns pleaded his excise duties as an excuse for refusing to contribute to The Bee, a periodical undertaken by Dr. James Anderson. Burns once again in May, 1794, refused to write regularly for a newspaper, this time for the Morning Chronicle. Perry, the editor, is said to have made his offer after hearing of Burns's financial difficulties, but it is likely that Perry expected that he would get his money's worth. Burns said in reply

to the offer that he had prospects of rising in the Excise, and that his political opinions were so radical that he could not risk publishing them.

Whatever he might have done had he lived longer, it is clear that before his death Burns did no work that justified his self-imposed study of poetry and poetic expression. In fact there is reason to believe that his natural powers were fettered by his deliberate apprenticeship to English models. Various reasons have been given for the fact that Burns did not repeat his triumph of the year 1785. It was not that he was too busy at Ellisland and Dumfries, for he could not work harder than he had worked at Mossgiel when he was pouring out that marvellous flood of verse. It was not, as Ainslie hinted, because he was more Exciseman than poet, for at Mossgiel Burns had successfully combined the ploughman and the poet. It seems that he had become unduly self-conscious. We have noted that he appealed to Dr. Moore and other for advice. He knew that much of the criticism he received was nonsense, and yet it bothered him. Dr. Gregory's comments on The Hare are the height of pedantry, yet of them Burns said, "Dr. Gregory is a good man, but he crucifies me." Then there was Dr. Moore's well meant but misplaced advice:

If I were to offer an opinion, it would be that in your future productions you should abandon the Scottish stanza and dialect and adopt the measure and language of modern English poetry.

When Burns followed this advice he failed as in his Elegy to Miss Burnett, "the weakness of which is due," says Ferguson, "mainly to a sincere effort to conform to poetic standards alien to his genius." ¹.

Ecclesiastical and political abuses had been important themes in Burns's early poetry, but they were now forbidden. Occasionally he broke forth as in A Vision or in The Tree of Liberty, but though he still had some of his old fire these poems have not much genuine poetry. Burns even restrained himself from attacking ecclesiastical folly for fear of offending those to whom he owed his living. When sending a copy of The Kirk's Alarm to Logan, Burns wrote; "Do not on any account give, or permit to be taken, any copy of the ballad--I have enemies enow, God knows, though I do not wantonly add to the number." Also, Burns had begun to doubt the efficacy of his satires in reforming the world. When he was irritated he expressed this doubt very strongly:

Whether in the ^uay of my trade I can be of
any service to the Rev. Doctor is, I fear,
very doubtful-----Ignorance, superstition,
bigotry, stupidity, malevolence, self-conceit,
envy--all strongly bound in a massy frame of
brazen impudence. Good God, Sir! to such a

1. Introduction to Letters, p. xxx.

shield, humour is the pick of a sparrow
 and satire the pop-gun of a school boy.
 -----I feel impotent as a child in the
 ardour of my wishes. 1.

It is likely , too, that Burns had outgrown satire
 as a form of expression for, although he did write
 satires after he left Edinburgh, he never wrote
 another Holy Willie's Prayer. His Ode to Mrs. Oswald
of Auchincruive deserves Carlyle's comment:

A piece that might have been chanted by the
 Furies of Aeschylus. The secrets of the infer-
 nal pit are laid bare: a boundless, baleful
 'darkness visible'; and streaks of hell-fire
 quivering madly in its black, haggard bosom! 2.

However, prompted as it is by personal resentment it
 is not great satire. The Kirk's Alarm is a clever
 poem, but it does not equal The Holy Fair.

The only longer poems of the Ellisland and
 Dumfries period that are sure of immortality are those
 that owe nothing to English models, or to blundering
 critics. The most important production of the period
 was Tam O'Shanter, which rose naturally from the poet's
 memories of his early environment and his legacy of
 folk-tales. Like all Burns's best poems it was
 written for a particular occasion; Grose, the anti-
 quarian, had asked for a story of witches and Burns
 had responded with his inimitable verses. How delight-
 ed the poet must have been to feel his pen move with

1. To Mr. Robert Aiken, August, 1789.
 2. Essay on Burns.

all its former energy and speed! Many critics believe that Tam O'Shanter is Burns's greatest work; it certainly proves that there was no falling off in his genius after 1786.

Those who have claimed that Burns's last years were a time of poetic decadence may be pardoned if they have overlooked the possibility that he was conscientiously preparing to be a "correct" poet; but they should not have ignored the fact that, from the time he left Edinburgh until just a few days before his death, Burns was engaged in a poetic undertaking of remarkable importance, to which he devoted all the resources of his knowledge, his intelligence, and his poetic intuition. As Ferguson says, he was "applying his genius with the zeal of a scholar and the devotion of a lover to the recovery and purification of Scottish songs." 1.

The work is so important that it deserves separate treatment, but we may note here that Burns was fully aware of the magnitude of the task and of the value of his original contributions. In a letter he wrote to Thomson two months before he died, Burns revealed that he knew that his poetic reputation might depend to a great extent on these occasionally hurried and imperfect, but often very beautiful songs.

1. Introduction to Letters.

I have no copies of the songs I have sent you, and I have taken a fancy to review them all, and possibly may mend some of them; so, when you have complete leisure, I will thank you for either the originals or copies.----- I had rather be the author of five well-written songs than of ten otherwise.-----My verses to "Cauld Kail" I will suppress; as also those to "Laddie Lie Near Me." ---They are neither worthy of my name nor of your book.

To the last, Burns was a conscious artist.

IX

It is on his Songs, as we believe, that Burns's chief influence as an author will ultimately be found to depend.

Carlyle, Essay on Burns.

As we have seen, from the time Burns left Edinburgh he had determined that after getting a living, poetry should be his purpose in life, and to this end he was reading, experimenting, and planning. Yet while he was looking forward to a time when he might have a sufficient competence to devote himself to literature, he was really producing what many critics declare to be his most valuable work. "Read the exquisite songs of Burns," Tennyson exclaimed:

--in shape each of them has the perfection of a berry, in light the radiance of a dewdrop. You forget for its sake those stupid things, his serious pièces.

Though few English readers, it is to be hoped, agree with Tennyson's depreciation of the rest of his work, most of them know Burns especially as a song writer. How many people have sung Auld Lang Syne, who never heard of The Epistle to Davie? Pick up any anthology of English lyrical poetry and count the number of writers who have written even one genuine song; then note the number of songs by Burns. The comparison

will convince one that Burns was the greatest song writer of any time in Britain. The mere quantity of his output is amazing, and more especially when one remembers that most of the songs were written when Burns was doing the onerous work of a gauger, for a time riding 200 miles a week, supervising an extensive farm, and fighting against physical pain and mental depression.

Tennyson's comparison of a song of Burns to a berry might seem rather disproportionate, yet it is apt enough. A berry is rounded, complete, self-contained; it has a definite structure, and it is the culmination of complex and long processes. Familiarity may have dulled our eyes to these qualities, yet they are there although we are too apt to take them for granted. In somewhat the same way the songs of Burns are regarded. They are very dear, woven as they are into memories of home and childhood, yet they are accepted without thought. One does not consider that their completeness, and perfection were not the result of chance, but were worked out patiently by one who by long and conscious preparation had made himself a master of his craft. His song writing is one of the most significant parts of Burns's life and work.

Burns first learned his songs by hearing

them sung, not by reading them in a book, and that was probably the reason why he almost always thought of the words and the air together. His first poem of which there is record was composed to a tune in honor of a lass. "Among her other love inspiring qualifications, she sung sweetly; and 'twas her favorite Scotch reel that I attempted to give a vehicle to in rhyme." This continued to be his practice, first the air and then the words. Also the first song he wrote was typical of his future work in that it was an expression of a particular feeling:

I never had the least thought or inclination
of turning poet till I got once heartily in
Love, and then Rhyme and Song were in a
manner the spontaneous language of my heart.

The poem was in its essence a natural ebullition of his feeling, but the expression and language were refined and improved by a workman who even then knew his trade. How could a peasant youth living on an out-of-the-way farm learn the complicated technique of verse making? Murdoch had probably laid the foundation with his insistence on turning verse into prose, which drew the students' attention to the nuances of language.

Later Burns's most important influence was a collection of songs that he got hold of. He explained to Dr. Moore: "The Collection of Songs was my vade

mecum. I pored over them, driving my cart or walking to labor, song by song, verse by verse---carefully noting the tender or sublime from affectation and fustian. I am convinced I owe much to this for my critic-craft such as it is." Provided that one has a native good taste and adequate intelligence, critic-craft could be learned in no better way. Burns's comments on his own first song, Handsome Nell, show that when it was written he knew what a song should be. The whole criticism is interesting but an extract will illustrate its exactitude:

The fourth stanza is a very indifferent one; the first line is indeed all in the strain of the second stanza but the rest is mostly an expletive. The thoughts in the fifth stanza come finely up to my favorite idea, "A sweet Sonsie Lass," the last line however, halts a little. The same sentiments are kept up with equal spirit and tenderness in the sixth stanza, but the second and fourth line ending with short syllables hurts the whole.

The songs written before 1785 show that Burns had very soon brought his own productions up to the standard by which he judged Handsome Nell. Of several of these songs it might be said that technically they could hardly be improved. In this group I would place The Rigs o'Barley, Green Grow the Rashes, and Rantin' Robin. Mary Morrison, too, shows that the writer had learned to replace "Foppery and Conceit"

by "Real Passion and Nature." In August, 1784, in his Commonplace Book he mentions among his joys "a gun, a fiddle, or a song to make or mend." The use of the word "mend" suggests that already he had begun what he was later to do so well, the improving of old Scottish songs and the filling out of fragments. John Barleycorn he had "mended" some time before:

I once heard the old song, that goes by this name, sung; I being very fond of it and remembering only two or three verses of it, viz. 1st, 2nd and 3rd, with some scraps which I have interwoven here and there----

His first critical estimate of the old songs is to be found in Burns's Commonplace Book, the entry dated September, 1784:

There is a certain irregularity in the old Scotch Songs a redundancy of syllables with respect to that exactness of accent and measure that the English poetry requires, but which glides in, most melodiously, with the respective tunes to which they are set--This particularly is the case with all those airs which end with a hypermetrical syllable.

The comment shows that the writer had been thinking critically about the technical side of song writing. The next entry gives further light on his usual method of composing.

The following fragment is done, something in imitation of the manner of a noble old Scottish Piece called "McMillan's Peggy" and sings to the tune of "Galla Water". My Montgomerie's Peggy was my Deity for six or eight months.

With a feminine inspiration, a tune, and an old song

as a "starter," Burns creates something entirely new.

In order to catch the spirit of the air to which he was fitting words, Burns first hummed the tune over and over. Another September entry in the Commonplace Book describes the process:

These old Scottish airs are so nobly sentimental that, when one would compose to them, 'To south the tune', as our Scotch phrase is, over and over, is the readiest way to catch the inspiration and raise the bard into the glorious enthusiasm so strongly characteristic of our old Scotch Poetry."

The procedure is explained in metre in the Epistle to Davie:

On braes when we please then,
We'll sit and sowth a tune,
Syne rhyme till't, we'll time till't,
And sing't when we hae dune.

That is, get the spirit of the air, fit the syllables to the time, and sing the result to detect any roughness or difficulty.

In the Epistle to John Lapraik Burns gave another dictum regarding song writing. The song for which he was complimenting the author:

Thirled the heart strings thro' the breast,
A' to the life.

Unless it has the power of touching the heart as would an actual emotion, the song is mere fustian.

Before he published the Kilmarnock Volume, Burns had written some forty lyrics, only four of

which were included in the book and those as 'stop-gaps'. Since the beginning of 1785 he had written the eight songs of The Jolly Beggars, two others probably meant for but not included in the Cantata, Afton Water, and Highland Lassie as well as a great many others. That they had been spread in manuscript we learn from a letter to Mrs. Stewart of Stair, dated 1786:

I have sent you a parcel of songs, etc.,
which never made their appearance except
to a friend or two at most.

Snyder thinks that Burns was afraid that readers would consider themselves cheated if they paid for formal poetry and were given songs instead.

Dr. Moore in his letter of May 23, 1787, gave Burns's songs the first praise of which we have record, and one should remember that to Dr. Moore's credit. He praised Green Grow the Rashes O and The Gloomy Night is Gathering Fast, then added this comment:

By the way, I imagine you have a peculiar talent for such compositions, which you ought to indulge. No kind of poetry demands more delicacy or higher polishing.

Burns had found that out for himself but he must have been pleased with Dr. Moore's approval. It is interesting that this encouragement should have come at a time when Burns was entering on his long service to Scottish song, for before the close of May 1787,

appeared the first volume of Johnson's Scots Musical Museum in which were two songs by Burns. Johnson had formed a plan of collecting and publishing all available Scottish songs and he had enlisted Burns as a helper. Before long Burns became the actual leader of the enterprise.

Just before the volume was published Burns left Edinburgh on his first tour. He was impelled to this journey by his restless wish for travel and by his interest in men and scenes, but he was also making a pilgrimage to the Holy Places of Scottish song. Chambers-Wallace tells us:

At Innerleithen where he spent the afternoon and night of Monday he saw "The Bush Aboon Traquair." He was similarly interested in Elibank-----mainly because of an old free-spoken song, the burden of which is Elibanks and Elibraes. His reason for a detour by Earlston was doubtless his desire to see the much sung "Cowdenknowes."

Near Perth, he saw the "Birks of Invermay" and he also visited the scene of "Bessy Bell and Mary Gray." By an unfortunate chance, Burns did not know until it was too late that he had been near the neighborhood where lived John Skinner, an old non-juring clergyman, dear to Burns as the author of "Tullochgorum." On October 25, 1787, he wrote to Skinner from Edinburgh. The letter is important for it shows the writer's enthusiasm for the work in which he was engaged and gives

information regarding Johnson's scheme:

I regret and while I live I shall regret that when I was in the north I had not the pleasure of paying a younger brother's dutiful respects to the author of the best Scotch song ever Scotland saw--'Tullochgorum's my delight'. The world may think slightly of the Craft of song-making if they please, but as Job says, 'O, that mine adversary had written a book!'----let them try. There is a certain something in the Old Scotch Songs, a wild happiness of thought and expression, which peculiarly marks them not only from English songs, but also from the modern efforts of song-writers, in our native manner and language. There is a work going on in Edinburgh just now, which claims your best assistance. An engraver in this town has set about collecting and publishing all the Scotch songs, with the music that can be found----I have been absolutely crazed about it, collecting old stanzas and every information remaining respecting their origin, and authors, etc.

In all his song writing, Burns was obliged to various women, not only for inspiration but also for the help they gave him by singing Scottish songs. Margaret Chalmers who inspired several songs, was one of these. Jean, too, had an unusually large fund of Scottish airs and a fine voice which reached to B natural, "a wood note wild." One might also mention here Christina Kirkpatrick, who lived near Ellisland.

When Burns dwelt at Ellisland, he was accustomed after composing any of his beautiful songs, to pay Kirsty a visit, that he might hear them sung by her. He often stopped her in the course of the singing when he found any word harsh and grating to his ear, and substituted one more melodious and pleasing.

From Kirsty's extensive acquaintance with the old Scottish airs she was frequently able to suggest to the poet music more suitable to the song she was singing than that to which he had set it. 1.

While he was in Edinburgh little Janet Cruikshank played and sang for him. A friend said:

About the end of October, I called for him at the house of a friend, Mr. Cruikshank, whose daughter, though not more than twelve, was a considerable proficient in music. I found him seated by the harpsichord of this young lady, listening with the keenest interest to his own verses, which she sung and accompanied, and adjusting them to the music by repeated trials of the effect. In this occupation, he was so totally absorbed that it was difficult to draw his attention from it for a moment. 2.

In a letter of October 29, 1787, Burns wrote to James Hay, Librarian of the Duke of Gordon, asking for the Duke's words to Caule Kail in Aberdeen. In another letter to the same man, Burns refers again to the difficulty of writing songs:

Those who think that composing a Scottish Song is a trifling business, let them try.

The second volume of the Scots Musical Museum appeared on February 14, 1788. It contained 16 pieces by Burns, among them O whistle and I'll come to you my lad, and McPherson's Hant. The Preface was probably written by Burns for in it are expressed many of his sentiments regarding the collection. It is particularly mentioned that, where possible, the

1. Chambers-Wallace, Life and Works of Robert Burns,

2. Ibid.

original words are used:

Wherever the old words could be recovered, they have been preserved; both as generally suiting better the genius of the times and to preserve the production of those earlier sons of the Scottish Muse.

Burns was still enthusiastic; in February, 1788, he had written to James Candlish an eager request for more songs. He described the scheme then added: "This, you will easily guess, is an undertaking exactly to my taste. I have collected, begged, borrowed and stolen all the songs I could meet with." Even in the busy spring of 1788 Burns kept at his song-writing, though otherwise poetry had left him. To Dunbar he wrote on April 2:

I have scarcely made a single distich since I saw you. When I meet with an old Scotch air that has any facetious idea in its name I have a peculiar pleasure in following out that idea for a verse or two.

The songs written to celebrate his marriage with Jean were in his best vein, swift, full of fire, gay.

In November, 1788, when he wrote to Dr. Blacklock, Burns referred to the songs, but mentioned more impressively his unsuccessful Epistle to Robert Graham, Esq., of Fintry: "I have done many little things for Johnson since I had the pleasure of seeing you and I have finished one piece in the way of 'Pope's Moral Epistle'." The depreciation of his songs may

be due to consideration for the taste of Dr. Blacklock, but it is possible that Burns himself valued his imitation of Pope more highly than I hae a Wife o' my Ain. He loved and wrote songs, he studied the old collections, but at this time he regarded song-writing as hobby; a more solid poetry was to be the business of his life.

In December, 1788, he sent a bulky letter to Mrs. Dunlop in which he referred to the lady's meeting with an old friend:

Apropos, is not the Scotch phrase, "Auld lang Syne" exceedingly expressive? There is an old song and tune which has often thrilled through my soul. You know I an enthusiast in old Scotch songs. I shall give you the verses on the other sheet, as I suppose Mr. Kerr will save you the postage.

The packet franked by the obliging postmaster contained the most famous song of the English-speaking world, Auld Lang Syne.

The third volume of the Museum, which appeared in February, 1790, included ten of Burns's songs, among them some of his best, Willie Brewed a Peck o' Maut, To Mary in Heaven, John Anderson, and Tam Glen. Burns tactfully assumed the responsibility for maintaining a high standard in the publication. He was writing superb songs himself and by now was also watching carefully the other songs included in the volumes.

In May, 1792, he wrote to Johnson from Dumfries:

Inclosed is one song out of many I have yet to send you; and likewise I inclose you another, and, I think, a better set of "Craigieburnwood", which you will give to Mr. Clark to compare with the former set, as I am extremely anxious to have that song right.

It is clear that Burns's artistic conscience demanded that the work be done properly.

The year 1792 brought hard work and worry for Burns. He was very busy with the Excise work, and he was very much concerned about the progress of the French Revolution. Yet in that year he consented to help with another collection of Scottish songs which a group of Edinburgh musical amateurs had decided to prepare. Johnson had aimed only at completeness and comprehension in his volumes; these enthusiasts wished to have the old airs set by the best musicians and the old songs brought up to the standard of the most refined taste. Fifty-five years later, George Thomson, who had assumed the responsibility for the collection, described his ambitious undertaking thus:

For composing symphonies and accompaniments to introduce and conclude each melody, 300 in all, I had the good fortune to engage the greatest masters of harmony in Europe, who, to my inexpressible satisfaction, seemed to vie with each other in composing what they severally undertook --the portion of work executed by each composer, particularly Pleyel, Hadyn, and Beethoven, being

original and beautiful in the highest degree -----the work contains much above one hundred songs by Burns alone, such as may possibly be equalled, but are so original and interesting, and beautiful, that they cannot be excelled. I have also to boast of many songs which grace the work from the pens of Joanna Baillie, Thomas Campbell, Sir Walter Scott, Professor Smythe, Hector MacNeill, the Ettrick Shepherd, and others (including Lord Byron).

In September, 1792, George Thomson had appealed to Burns in a letter which shows how highly the writer valued the abilities of the poet:

To render this work perfect, we are desirous to have the poetry improved wherever it seems unworthy of the music; and that it is so, in many instances, is allowed by anyone conversant with our musical collection. The editors of these seem to have depended on the music proving an excuse for the verses, and hence some charming melodies are united to mere nonsense and doggerel, while others are accommodated with rhymes so loose and indelicate as cannot be sung in decent company. To remove this reproach would be an easy task to the author of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'-----

We shall esteem your poetical assistance a particular favour besides paying any reasonable price you shall please, to devote your leisure to writing twenty or twenty-five songs, suitable to the particular melodies which I shall send you. A few songs, exceptionable only in some of their verses, I will likewise submit to your consideration, leaving it to you, either to mend these, or make new Songs in their stead. It's superfluous to assure you that I have no intention to dispute any of the sterling old Songs, those only will be renewed which appear quite silly or absolutely indecent. Even these shall be examined by Mr. Burns, and if he is of opinion that any of them are deserving of the music, in such cases no divorce shall take place.

This was virtually an offer to make Burns the unofficial editor of the collection.

Burns replied at once. He was very enthusiastic about the plan and promised his full co-operation. If Thomson would but send him the first line of each song he would suggest any alterations that occurred to him:

I say the first line of the verse because if they are verses that have appeared in any of our collections of songs, I know them and have recourse to them.

Only one proposal of Thomson was rejected:

As to remuneration, you may think my songs either above or below price; for they shall be absolutely be the one or the other. In the honest enthusiasm with which I embark in your undertaking, to talk of money, wages, fee, hire, etc., would be downright sodomy of soul.

A fourth volume of Johnson's Museum had come out in August, 1792, having among its contents twenty-seven songs by Burns. His engagement with Thomson did not conflict with Burns's interest in the earlier collection. He still gave Johnson his advice, he supplied twenty-seven songs for the fifth volume of the Museum (1796), and twenty-seven of his songs were included in the sixth volume which appeared in 1803. Yet he was fascinated by Thomson's proposed collection. He was no doubt pleased with the confidence Thomson had reposed in him, and he determined that nothing should lessen the value of his contributions to the work.

All his creative ability, all his literary knowledge and his "critic-craft" were employed in the undertaking. He had found a congenial means of expression for his genius and he had been given an opportunity to sustain his poetic reputation.

His suggestions to Thomson were invaluable.

For instance:

Let me remark to you, in the sentiment and style of our Scottish airs there is a pastoral simplicity--a something that one may call the Doric style and dialect of vocal music, to which a dash of our native tongue and manners is particularly, nay peculiarly, apposite.

Burns was ignorant of the technical language of music but he could express himself well enough in plain English. He was peculiarly sensitive to the relationship between words and air. He says:

There is a peculiar rhythmus in many of our airs, a necessity of adapting syllables to the emphasis or what I should call the feature notes of a tune, that cramps the poet and lays him under insuperable difficulties. For instance, in the air 'My Wife's a Wanton Wee Thing' if a few lines, smooth and pretty, can be adapted to it, it is all that you can expect. The following I made extempore to it; and though on further study I might give you something more profound, yet it might not suit the light-horse gallop of the air as well as this random clink.

Burns even makes shift to talk of harmony without using technical terminology:

Let the harmony of the bass at the stops be full; and thin and dropping through the rest of the air, and you will give the tune a noble and striking effect.

The fine songs Burns composed in the next few months went to George Thomson who criticized them freely, but realized their merit. Highland Mary and Duncan Gray were far above his criticism. Burns was not satisfied with writing songs, but wished to undertake the responsibility for the whole work, as he suggested in a letter of January, 1793:

If you are begun with the work, I would like to see one of your proofs, merely from curiosity, and perhaps to try to get you a subscriber or two. I should also like to know what other songs you print to each tune besides the verses to which it is set. In short, I would wish to give you my opinion in all the poetry you publish. You know it is my trade; and a man in the way of his trade may suggest useful hints that escape men of much superior parts and endowments in other things.

In a letter of January 30, Thomson announced that he wished to extend his collection to include "every Scotch air and song worth singing," and he asked Burns to supply him with anecdotes about as many of the songs as possible.

Burns was enjoying his share of the work.

In a letter of April 7, 1793 he tells Thomson:

You cannot imagine how much this business of composing for your publication has added to my enjoyments. What with my early attachment to ballads, your book, etc., ballad-making is now as completely my hobby-horse as ever fortifications was Uncle Toby's, so I'll e'en canter it away till I come to the end of my race.

Though in the first letters Thomson shows some condescension to the poet, and Burns is remarkably modest in his suggestions to Thomson, yet in a letter of April, 1793, Burns speaks in his natural tones as an authority addressing an amateur. He completes a discussion of technical problems with the adjuration:

Your book will be the standard of Scotch songs for the future: Let this idea ever keep your judgment on the alarm.

In a letter written a little later in April, Burns speaks with even more assurance. He declares that the old airs must not be altered to suit the fancy of a modern composer:

Another hint you will forgive: Whatever Mr. Pleyel does, let him not alter one note of the original Scots air--I mean in the song department; our friend Clarke, than whom you know there is not a better judge of the subject, complains that in the air "Lea-rig" the accent is altered. But let our national airs present their native features. They are, I own, frequently wild and irreducible to the modern rule; but on that very eccentricity, perhaps, depends a great part of their effect.

Burns must have possessed a sense of artistic integrity very rare in his generation.

Thomson knew that he could not estimate in money the value of the assistance Burns was giving him, yet like an honest Scot he felt the weight of his obligation and, since he knew that Burns was not rich, he ventured on July 1, 1793, to send the poet

five pounds. Burns was in the need of ready money at that time, but he replied to Thomson in unmistakable terms, forbidding him to repeat the payment:

I assure you, my dear Sir, that you truly hurt me with your pecuniary parcel. It degrades me in my own eyes. However, to return it would savour of a bombast affectation but as to any more traffic of that debtor and creditor kind, I swear by that Honor, which crowns the upright statue of Robert Burns's integrity--on the least motion of it, I will indignantly spurn the by-past transaction and from that moment commence entire stranger to you. Burns's character for generosity of sentiment and independence of mind, will, I trust, long outlive any of his wants which the cold unfeeling ore can supply; at least I shall take care that such a character he shall deserve.

In the face of such an indignant repudiation of payment, Thomson could not offer any direct remuneration to Burns but he did send him presents and when the poet was forced to appeal to him for help he sent the amount requested immediately. He must therefore be acquitted of any charge of meanness or unfairness in his financial relation with Burns. The question has often been asked why Burns refused to accept payment for his songs, although he published his *Kilmarnock* and *Edinburgh* volumes with the primary intention of getting money. The answer is not a matter of reason but of the heart. Burns could not accept pay for work in which he found so much joy and which gave him an opportunity to create. Also

he felt that by doing the work he was justifying himself, making a worthy use of his gifts. Then, too, he was fulfilling a patriotic duty to Scotland, for the emotions of a nation were embodied in the old songs he was bringing to light.

"Peter Pindar", an English versifier who had been engaged to supply English words for the airs, failed Thomson by August, 1793, and on the twenty-fifth of that month Thomson wrote to Burns:

I stand pledged to furnish English verses along with every Scottish song, and I must fulfil what I have promised, but I certainly shall have got into a scrape if you do not stand my friend. A couple of stanzas to each air, will do as well as half a dozen; and to an imagination so infinitely fruitful as yours, this will not be a Herculean labour. The airs too are all so perfectly familiar to you and the original verses so much your favorites, that no poet living is qualified to add congenial stanzas, even in English, so much as you are.

The praise is all very well, but the assumption of the unbounded strength of Burns reminds one of a callous master loading one of those coolies who are said to carry unbelievably heavy burdens. Another few hundred pounds cannot matter if the patient bearer is already carrying twice as much as could any ordinary man. Did Thomson realize what he was asking of Burns? To write Scotch songs, to mend the old ones, to supervise the collection, to add

anecdotes, and, finally, to supply English verses wholesale! Who else could have shouldered the load except Burns? But he accepts without a protest and his letters to Thomson go on, each containing sound advice and songs. In September, 1793, he sent Thomson his comments on seventy-four pieces. Inserted casually in the same letter is an account of the poet's usual method of composition:

My way is: I consider the poetic sentiment corresponding to my idea of the musical expression, then choose my theme; begin one stanza; when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now and then, look out for objects in nature around me that are in unison and harmony with the cogitation of my fancy and workings of my muse, humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed. When I feel my muse beginning to jade I return to the solitary fireside of my study and there commit my effusions to paper, swinging at intervals on the hind legs of my elbow chair by way of calling forth my own critical stricture as my pen goes on.

Could anything be less pretentious! The procedure sounds as simple as "Take two eggs and beat well-----" but Burns omits to mention that almost anyone but himself might swing on the hind legs of an elbow chair forever without writing anything equal to Bruce's Address.

In spite of Thomson's optimism, the English songs gave Burns a great deal of trouble. On October 19,

1794, he told Thomson:

These English songs gravel me to death. I have not that command of the language that I have of my native tongue. In fact, I think, that my ideas are more barren in English than in Scottish. I have been at 'Duncan Gray', to dress it in English, but all I can do is deplorably stupid.

From his letters we learn that Burns ransacked song collections to find English verses which he might adapt to the Scottish airs. He would have been surprised to learn that he was making work for the future scholars who would search out the original of every line that he borrowed.

He had not forgotten Johnson, either. He offered to correct proofs, to index names of authors, and to prepare an interleaved copy of the Museum containing his anecdotes, criticisms and remarks. He spoke of a dozen songs he had ready for the fifth volume of the Museum which was to be published in 1796.

Thomson, in a letter of November 7, 1793, complained that for some time Burns neglected the collection of Scottish Songs. The poetic stream of the summer of 1793, which Snyder likens to the spate of 1785, had receded somewhat.

In March, 1794, Burns said in a letter to Cunningham: "I have received a letter from Thomson which has filled me with self-reproaches, I will directly and in good earnest, set about his work." A letter

of February to James Johnson gives the reason for Burns's comparative inaction, "I have all this winter been plagued with low spirits and blue devils; so that I have almost hung my harp upon the willow trees." Yet, in the same letter, he mentions that he has collected forty-one songs for Johnson's fifth volume. That volume was honored by its inclusion of O, My Luve's Like the Red, Red Rose. For the first half of the year 1794, the Lament for Glenriddel was almost the only poetry Burns wrote. The war had interfered with the collection, for Pleyel was cooped up in France, but in May Burns was optimistic about his own contributions, "Now, and for six or seven months I shall be quite in song as you shall see by and be." In July, 1794, Pleyel was still in France and Burns's political sentiments and poetic concerns are blended curiously in a letter written to Thomson at the time. Burns is still writing, however, and his letters of the next two months are like those of the preceding summer, full of songs and comments on songs. By November, 1794, he had begun to collect his anecdotes. It is no wonder that George Thomson, in his letter of November 28, exclaimed, "I acknowledge, my dear Sir, you are not only the most punctual, but the most delectable correspondent I ever met with."

During the winter of 1794-95 Burns kept in touch with Thomson and in the summer he resumed his usual correspondence and his gifts of songs. He was also assisting James Johnson by combing earlier collections to find any songs that Johnson might have omitted from the Museum.

The last months of 1795 were clouded for Burns by the death of his daughter which helped to bring on his hypochondria, and by the rheumatic fever that hastened the end.

In February, 1796, George Thomson wrote Burns, soliciting his help in setting a dozen Scotch and Irish Airs to verse. Burns replied courageously:

I am much pleased with your idea of publishing a collection of our songs in octavo with etchings. I am extremely willing to lend every assistance in my power. The Irish airs, I shall cheerfully undertake the task of finding verses for.

A letter written to Thomson, (April, 1796) shows that Burns was not very hopeful of carrying out his agreement but he did not yet yield to the inevitable:

Alas, my dear Thomson, I fear it will be some time ere I tune my lyre again! By Babel streams, etc. Almost ever since I wrote you last I have only known existence by the pressure of the heavy hand of sickness, and have counted time by the repercussions of Pain!

A letter of May 18 refers to a collection Burns

proposed to make of all the songs he had written. The plan suggests that he did not feel completely hopeless. He sent Thomson a song Jessie, and, even with the anticipation of death on him, wrote to Johnson giving him what was really his dying blessing on his friend's endeavours:

Your work is a great one; and though now that it is near finished, I see, if we were to begin again, two or three things that might be mended, yet I will venture to prophesy that to future ages your Publication will be the text-book and standard of Scottish song and music.

On the same day Burns left to try the final remedy of sea-bathing at Brow, from whence he wrote to Thomson on July 4:

I am still anxiously willing to serve your work, and if possible shall try. I would not like to see another employed, unless you could lay your hand upon a poet whose productions would be equal to the rest. You will see my alterations and remarks on the margin of each song---Farewell! and God Bless you!

But, though it sounds final, that was not the concluding note. On July 12, Burns wrote Thomson, asking for five pounds. He concluded the letter:

I do not ask this gratuitously; for upon returning health I hereby promise and engage to furnish you with five pounds' worth of the neatest song-genius you have seen. I tried my hand on "Rothiemurchie", this morning. The measure is so difficult that it is impossible to infuse much genius into the lines--they are on the other side. Forgive, forgive me!

What comment can one make on the unconquerable

will that dictated that letter? Nine days later Burns was dead.

The work that Burns did for Scottish song is great because he brought to the task, not only creative genius but also an intimate knowledge of the traditional airs and their words. Even if he had never written a single original song, he would have earned the gratitude of future generations of Scots by his indefatigable efforts to trace down verses and airs and anecdotes regarding their origins and history. Burns's knowledge of Scottish song was equalled only by Sir Walter Scott's knowledge of Border Ballads.

Eckermann quotes Goethe's estimate of the debt of Burns to traditional song:

How is he great, except through the circumstance that the whole songs of his predecessors lived in the mouth of the people--that they were sung at his cradle; that he grew up among them, and the high excellence of these models pervaded him-----.

Henley does not overlook the fact that, without the touch of the genius of Burns, these old songs would now be long dead, but like Goethe he insists on Burns's debt to the past:

The best of many nameless singers lives in Burns's songs, but that Burns lives so intense a lyric life is largely due to the fact that he took to himself and made his own the lyrical experiences, the lyrical longings, the lyrical invention, the lyrical possibilities of many nameless singers. He was the last and the

greatest of them all; but he could not have been the greatest by so very much as he seems had these innominates not been-----¹.

Burns, himself, so revered the songs of his literary forefathers that he would change them only when a change could not be avoided. He makes clear his scrupulous regard for originals in a letter to Tytler, August, 1787:

I invariably hold it sacrilege to add anything of my own to help out with the shattered wrecks of these venerable old compositions, but they have many readings.

When he did make any changes, so complete was his assimilation of both the diction and the spirit of the originals that his patches of old songs are as hard to detect as are Scott's additions to old ballads. It is interesting to note in this connection Scott's comment on Burns as a fellow craftsman:

He entered into the idea of collecting their fragments with all the zeal of an enthusiast; and few whether serious or humorous past (sic) through his hands without receiving some of those magic touches, which, without greatly altering the song, restored its original spirit or gave it more than it had ever possessed. So dexterously are these touches combined with the ancient structure that the riffaciamento, in many instances could scarcely have been detected without the avowal of the bard himself. Neither would it be easy to mark his share in the individual ditties. Some he appears to have rewritten; to other he added supplementary stanzas; in some he retained only the leading lines and the chorus; and others he merely arranged and ornamented. ².

1. The Poetry of Burns, V. iv, p. 323.

2. Quoted by Snyder, Life of Robert Burns, p. 484.

Burns's critical judgment appears in his frequent selection of the only poetic phrase of line in an old stanza as the base of a new song. For instance, one fine song was built around these two good lines to an old air:

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart's not here;
My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer.

But not all of Burns's songs were improvements of older versions. A surprising number were almost entirely original. Under his signature were 102 of the songs in Johnson's collection, and 115 of ~~them~~^{ose} in the Select Scottish Airs. As one might expect, such a large body of work is uneven in quality. The comment Burns made on his work for the Scots Musical Museum shows that he was not satisfied with his contributions:

Here, for once, let me apologize for many silly compositions of mine in this work. Many beautiful airs wanted words; in the hurry of other avocations if I could string a parcel of rhymes together anything near tolerable, I was fain to let them pass.

Judged as poetry a few, a very few, of Burns's songs have, as he realized, little more than smooth metre to recommend them. Others have several good lines or even a fine stanza or two but are marred by some flatness or false rhetoric. Others, of course, are perfect. In spite of the difficulty the English

songs had given him, not all of them are poor. Afton Water is almost completely English, and many others of his best songs have only a few words of Scots. It is only when he writes songs in the manner of English poets that Burns fails.

A collection of the love songs of Burns might well be headed by Green Grow the Rashes, O, a comprehensive statement of one aspect of the writer's philosophy. Burns candidly admitted that most of his love songs were inspired by some particular object of his affections. Making some allowance for his habit of perplexing his correspondent by sly foolery, one may accept Burns's statement in a letter to Thomson of October, 1794:

I have a glorious recipe; the very one that for his own use was invented by the Divinity of Healing and Poesy, when erst he piped to the flocks of Admetus. I put myself in a regimen of admiring a fine woman; and in proportion to the adorability of her charms, in proportion you are delighted with my verses.

There is more mischief but a good deal of truth in another letter of November, 1794:

Conjugal love is a passion which I deeply feel, and highly venerate; but somehow it does not make such a figure in poesy as that other species of the passion.

Yet Burns was the writer of that greatest song of "Conjugal Love", John Anderson, My Jo.

Since they were inspired by various women,

the love songs of Burns may be conveniently grouped under the names of their heroines, from Nelly Kilpatrick to Jessie Lewars. The most sympathetic of these songs is The Rantin' Dog, probably written to Elizabeth Paton. Also tender is the finest song Burns wrote to Jessie Lewars, O Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast for which Mendelssohn composed an air equally touching. Physical passion was rarely better expressed than in the song to Anna Parks, The Gowden Locks of Anna. A milder flame burns in the best song to Chloris, Lassie wi' the Lintwhite Locks. Remorse and love are mingled in the songs written in memory of Highland Mary, songs which contain the essence of anguished longing and regret. Ae Fond Kiss, written to Clarinda, has been acclaimed as the final expression of the kind of attachment that inspired it. It is surprising that Wordsworth, who called Burns's songs "hollow things", should not have felt the truth of the stanza:

Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met----or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken hearted.

In all, the songs he addressed to his "divinities", give a complete history of what some journalists would call Burns's "love life".

Two of the finest love songs of Burns were written to no particular person, O My Love's Like a

Red Red Rose, is, in my opinion, the best love song Burns ever wrote. It is a gem of poetry, compact, clear, yet glowing with the radiance of ecstasy. Yet it was based upon a mediocre street ditty. In The Banks o' Doon (third version) Burns sings, not his own emotions, but the lament of all who suffer as did his heroine. The artistic simplicity of the song is the result of an unerring selection of details. All of the love songs of Burns are remarkable for their sincerity. Burns consciously avoided affectation or bombast:

The whining cant of love, except in real passion, and by a masterly hand, is to me as insufferable as the preaching cant of old Father Smeaton, Whig Minister at Kilmaurs. Darts, flames, cupids, loves, graces, and all that farrago, are just a Mauchline sacrament-- a senseless rabble.

So said Burns vehemently if irreverently in a letter to Miss Chalmers, September 26, 1787.

Burns excelled in the comic poetic narrative, or the rollicking lyric. To estimate the superiority of the humorous songs of Burns one should compare them with other compositions of the same kind. Jennie's Bawbee tells an amusing story but it cannot be compared with Duncan Gray; Burns excels not only because of this sly wit but also because of his omission of all but the most telling details. Tam Glen is

distinguished by the same artistic selection. There are few better expressions of high spirits than The Deil's Awa' Wi' the Exciseman. Burns was equally successful in the writing of his Bacchanalian songs, an excellent example of which is Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut.

Since the love of liberty was one of the ruling passions of his life, it is natural that Burns should give expression to it in his songs. The bard's song in The Jolly Beggars is perhaps the most open defiance ever hurled against civil or ecclesiastical authorities:

A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.

Burns made poetry of an exposition of the natural "dignity of man" in A Man's a Man for A' That. Snyder traces the development of the poem:

Especially in the first two stanzas, Burns is still thinking as a humble Scot, harassed by poverty though proud of his ability to rise superior to it. But the third and fourth show him extending the scope of his vision, and including in his synthesis the entire European social system, with its oppressive and burdensome aristocracy. And in the concluding stanza, when Burns again widens his horizon till it embraces all humanity, the "Ayrshire Bard" speaks as a veritable citizen of the world.

The most artistic expression of Burns's love of liberty is Bruce's Address. Only Burns could see that in the

air which musical authorities pronounced to be pathetic there were also tones suggesting a solemn dedication to a great cause. The measured air, the resistless onward movement of words and music, are completely expressive of the spirit of burning but controlled determination with which the Scots went into the fight which proved that Scotland was not to be another Ireland. When he composed Bruce's Address Burns was thinking of the fight for freedom being waged openly in France, and obscurely in his own land. As in The Tree of Liberty he expressed the wilder spirit of the French Revolution, so in Bruce's Address he celebrated the more praiseworthy side of the movement. Carlyle praises the words Burns set to the air of McPherson's Rant. There is little doubt that Burns entered into the spirit of the undaunted free-booter who was independent of the usual restraints of law and convention.

Burns's unique ability to paint a complete picture with a few significant strokes is nowhere so well illustrated as in the song John Anderson My Jo. A whole lifetime, and a whole philosophy of living are sketched in eight lines. A novelist might write five volumes to tell the story that Burns packed into two stanzas.

Long usage rules that an appreciation of

the songs of Burns should end with a few words on Auld Lang Syne, one of the most familiar songs of the Anglo-Saxon world. For most of us, I suppose, it is closely bound up with recollections of friendly gatherings, good fellowship, and more or less tuneful voices. There may be more complex associations: regrets for the inexorable movement of time and fear of what is to come. But, regarded apart from its association, Auld Lang Syne is a great song. As in John Anderson here we have the story of a lifetime. It is strange that Burns did not acknowledge his authorship of the song. There were in existence several poems on the same subject but there is little doubt that Burns wrote the only one worth singing. He introduced it to Thomson with a phrase as poetic in its final cadence as is the song itself: "An old song of an olden time," he called it, "I took it down from an old man's singing."

The songs of Burns are very close to the human heart. They are based on elemental feelings and simple emotions. The ardent passion, the keen sensibility, the strength and energy of Burns are brought to bear on the expression of these feelings and the result is a body of song unique in its popular appeal and artistic merit. Henley says of

the songs:

The emotions they deal with are the simplest, the most elemental, in the human list, and are figured in a style so vivid and direct as to be classic in its kind. ¹.

One more thing must be said. We cannot judge a drama fairly until we have seen it performed, we cannot appreciate fully the songs of Burns until we hear them sung. The music and the words are one, and what Burns has joined-----.

1. The Poetry of Burns, V. iv, p. 332.

This basis of mirth, a primal element of sunshine and joyfulness, coupled with his other deep and earnest qualities, is one of the most attractive characteristics of Burns. A large fund of hope dwells in him; in spite of his tragical history, he is not a mourning man.

Carlyle, The Hero as Man of Letters.

After reading of the many unhappy circumstances in the life of Burns, the student is liable to the error of painting a too gloomy picture of the poet. In order to get a more justly balanced view of Burns one should read carefully his lighter works. They reveal that, although Burns often fell a prey to depression and discouragement, yet he was saved from the ultimate fate of a Swift or a Chatterton by his gift of laughter.

This laughter in Burns was, in part, the result of his firm grasp of reality and of his sound common sense. He was ever aware of any discrepancy between profession and practice. When he saw hypocrisy allied to meanness or vice he was moved to indignation that inspired a poem like Holy Willie's Prayer, which has wit and scorn but no humor. But when the hypocrisy he noted was the result of common frailty, Burns wrote of it with a certain sympathy, and called down on it a benign laughter:

Here some are thinkin' on their sins,
 And some upo' their claes;
 Ane curses feet that fyled his shins,
 Anither sighs and prays:
 On this hand sits a chosen swatch,
 Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces;
 On that a set o' chaps at watch,
 Thrang winkin' on the lasses
 To chairs that day. 1.

The most successful of the poems in which Burns exposes the difference between pretensions and reality is To a Louse. The contrast between the gauze and lace of the "fine Lunardi" and the perky "blastit wonner" upon it appeals to a sense of the ridiculous. The poet's unique gift of briefly sketching a situation and of delineating a character in few words adds to the effectiveness of his account of the "louse's progress" to:

The very tapmost towering height
 O Miss's bonnet.

The turn of the idea in the third line, and the felicity of the dramatic touches make the following stanza a triumph of humorous description:

O Jenny, dinna toss your head,
 And set your beauties a' abreadd!
 Ye little ken what cursed speed
 The blastie's makin'!
 Thae winks and finger ends, I dread,
 Are notice takin'.

In the last verse the reader is induced to laugh at all pretense:

1. The Holy Fair.

Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us
 To see oursel's as other see us!
 It wou'd frae mony a blunder free us,
 And foolish notion:
 What airs in dress and gait wad lea'e us,
 And even devotion.

Burns occasionally felt an impatience with fools to which he has given expression in some epigrams, but more often he laughed kindly at folly. Although he was inspired by the disparity between the claims and the actual abilities of the apothecary he was not too hard on "Dr. Hornbook." The opening stanza of Death and Dr. Hornbook has that delicious picture of a be-fuddled homecomer. The description of the encounter with Death is marked by a happy contrast of the ordinary and the awful. The surprise in the discovery of the identity of the apparition is perfectly managed:

'Guid e'en! quo' I, 'friend, hae ye been mawin,
 When ither folk are busy sawin'?'
 It seem'd to mak' a kind of stan'
 But naething spak;
 At length, says I, 'Friend whare ye gaun?
 Will ye go back?'

It spak right howe, -- 'My name is Death,
 'But be na' fley'd.' -- Quoth I, 'Guid faith,
 'Ye may be come to stap my breath;
 'But tent me, billie;
 'I red ye weel, tak care o' skaith,
 'See, there's a gully!

Burns was so well aware of the humorous value of incongruity that he used it often. The effectiveness of The Brigs of Ayr lies chiefly in

the fact that on a magic, moonlit winter-night two stately bridges are made to quarrel in broad Doric. In The Twa Dogs much of the humor is the result of the contrast between the "doggy" nature of the speakers and the ideas they express.

In the poem To the Haggis, Burns uses the form of the mock-panegyric, the effect of which is heightened by the realism of the description of the national dish. He is a true Scot whose mouth waters as he reads:

The groaning trencher there ye fill,
Your hurdies like a distant hill,
Your pin wad help to mend a mill
In time o' need,
While thro' your pores the dews distil
Like amber bead.

Burns uses burlesque for a satiric purpose in the Epistle to William Simpson. The felicity of the comparison of theological disputes to "moonshine matter" is increased by the geniality of the writer. Burns knew the humorous effect of mock sympathy which he uses in several of his religious satires. In the Holy Tulzie under the guise of feigned partisanship he exposes the weakness of the side he pretends to favor. Perhaps his best use of mock sympathy is in the waggish digression in Tam o' Shanter:

Ah gentle dames! it gars me greet
To think how mony councils sweet,
How mony lengthen'd, sage advices,
The husband frae the wife despises.

The poems of Burns were enriched by his remarkable sharpness of wit and fertility of invention. Particularly in his satires he went straight to the point. Consider a less known satire, The Kirk's Alarm:

Orthodox, orthodox,
Wha' believe in John Knox,
Let me sound an alarm to your conscience--
 There's a heretic blast
 Has been blown in the wast,
That what is not sense must be nonsense.

The conflict between common sense and unreasoning faith could not be more clearly expressed than in the last line of that stanza.

Sometimes Burns's wit runs riot in metaphors as in The Calf, or he may call on all his powers of invention to build up a picture as that of the hero's residence in To the Deil.

Often Burns shows his wit in a pungent phrase or in a sharp antithesis as in the description of the "raucle carlin's" surrender to the tinker. The usual sentimental description of the surrender is ridiculed:

The caird prevailed--the unblushing fair
 In his embraces sunk,
Partly wi' love o'ercome sae sair,
 And partly she was drunk. ¹.

Burns was adept in the use of technical devices for humorous effects. He knew the value of alliteration:

1. The Jolly Beggars.

Gaunt, ghastly, ghaist alluring edifices, ^{1.}

or

A blethering, blustering, drunken blellum...^{2.}

He knew the comic effect of appropriate rhymes:

And aft your moss-traversing spunkies
Decoy the wight that late and drunk is;
The bleezin', curst, mischievous monkeys
 Delude his eyes,
Till in some miry slough he sunk is,
 Ne'er mair to rise.

Burns had a sane and definite perception of the normal in character and conduct. When he felt that deviations from that standard were dictated by self-interest or conceit he usually punished the offender by subjecting him to ridicule. But he enjoyed the peculiarities of those persons who are known as "characters." Hazlitt says of Burns:

The sly jest collected in his laughing eye at the sight of the grotesque and ludicrous in manner. ^{3.}

Burns was ever on the watch for what earlier writers would have called "humours," and he liked to describe odd or unusual persons. A good example of this kind of description is found in the letter in which he tells of his first Edinburgh land-lady. The poetic sketches of Smellie, Grose, or Tam Tamson are similar.

Burns also enjoyed the telling of a humorous anecdote. In Duncan Gray the humorous effect of the

1. The Brigs of Ayr.

2. Tam o' Shanter.

3. Lectures on the English Poets.

incidents is increased by the delightfully arch tone,
and by the element of surprise:

How it cam, let doctors tell,
Ha, ha, the wooing o't.
Meg grew sick as he grew hale,
Ha, ha, the wooing o't.
Something in her bosom wrings,
For relief a sigh she brings:
And oh! her een they spak sic things!
Ha, ha, the wooing o't.

Snyder emphasizes Burns's gift of caricature:

He had the skill of the born cartoonist, who
avoids the gross exaggeration which would
render his cartoon ineffective, and instinctively
singles out the two or three features of his
subject most certain to be recognized--and
laughed at--by the crowd.¹

There are numerous examples of Burns's ability to
sketch a humorous picture of a character. The des-
cription of Captain Grose is typical:

If in your bounds ye chance to light
Upon a fine, fat, fodge wight,
O' stature short, but genius bright,
That's he, mark well--:

It is in some of his humorous pieces that
Burns gave best expression to his rebellion against
laws and convention. In the Jolly Beggars his feeling
of revolt rises until it culminates in the final song
in which the writer challenges all institutions. The
same spirit, with a more personal application, under-
lies the Epistle to John Rankine and appears with
more of humor and less of defiance in I hae a Wife
o' My Ain. His Bacchanalian poems gave Burns further

1. The Life of Robert Burns, p. 471.

opportunity to voice his rebellion. He exaggerated his fondness for whiskey partly for humorous effect but partly in defiance of those who, he knew, would disapprove. No one has portrayed the various stages of intoxication better than has Burns. Here is the assurance peculiar to the first stages:

The clachan yill had made me cantie,
 I wasna' fou, but just had plenty;
 I stachered whiles, but yet took tent aye
 To free the ditches;
 And hillocks, stanes, and bushes kenn'd aye
 Frae ghaists and witches.

The rising moon began to glowre
 The distant Cumnock hills out-owre:
 To count her horns, wi' a' my pow'r,
 I set mysel;
 But whether she had three or four,
 I cou'd na tell. 1.

Tam and Souter Johnnie had reached another phase:

Kings may be blessed, but Tam was glorious,
 O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

The most delightful poem on the subject is Willie Brew'd a Peck o' Maut. Here, the poet can still count, but he has just "courage" enough to wink impudently at Diana:

It is the moon, I ken her horn,
 That's blinkin' in the lift sae hie;
 She shines sae bright to wyle us hame,
 But, by my sooth, she'll wait a weel

If it were still permissible to use classical references, one could paint a lively scene of the consternation on Olympus when Bacchus and Venus

1. Death and Dr. Hornbook.

defend their poet from the wrath of the scandalized goddess of the moon.

It is likely that a good deal of the recklessness that Burns displayed in his poems came from the same source as did his melancholy. A devil-may-care attitude is frequently found with despair.

Burns was often inspired by the spirit of that "hizzie" who came up, "hap-step-an'-lowp
As light as any lambie,"
on the morning of The Holy Fair, and greeted the poet:

My name is fun--your crony dear,
The nearest friend ye hae.

Fun animates scores of passages in the poems and letters, passages that the author surely enjoyed writing as much as we enjoy reading them. One of the best of these is The Deil's Awa' Wi' the Exciseman. The lilt of the words and the light-hearted sentiment are perfectly harmonized and the humor is heightened by the fact that the writer was, himself, an Exciseman.

Burns wrote nothing more merry:

We'll mak our maut, we'll brew our drink,
We'll dance, and sing, and rejoice, man;
And mony braw thanks to the meikle black deil,
That danced awa' wi' the Exciseman.

Carlyle would refuse the name of humor to all poems but those that have a "tender sportfulness"; but even if one accepted that restriction one could still say that Burns's poems are predominantly

humorous. Except when he struck at falsity Burns felt a tenderness for the things he ridiculed. The Farmer's Mare and Elegy on Poor Mailie are the best illustrations of Carlyle's concept of humor. Burns did not hesitate to introduce humor into his more serious poems. Hazlitt calls The Cotter's Saturday Night "a noble and pathetic picture of human manners, mingled with a fine religious awe." ¹. Burns does not detract from the "religious awe" of the piece by smiling when the guidwife brings out the cheese:

The frugal wifie, garraulous will tell,
How 'twas a townond auld, sin lint was in
the bell.

From the testimony of those who knew Burns we learn that although we may enjoy the poems we can not realize fully the wit and humor of the poet, which were best displayed in his conversation. Even when they were boys together Gilbert was delighted by his brother's "rattling fire of witty remarks on men and things." After he had become famous men sought the company of Burns to enjoy his flashes of wit and raillery. Maria Riddel suggests, however, that Burns could not resist the impulse to say a good thing even when by saying it he might make an enemy.

Burns did not attain the humorous detachment of a Chaucer who, whatever his provocation, would not have written a Fourteenth Century equivalent

1. Lectures on the English Poets.

of Holy Willie's Prayer because his geniality would have shone on even the hypocritical elder. We recall, too, Chaucer's rueful chuckle as he glances at his waistline and we admit that Burns could not write of himself in that way, although he did tell of his embarrassment at dining with a lord, and of his suffering from the toothache. He had too often a defensive attitude that Chaucer had not. Except in one letter to Clarinda, Burns is never mocking. But he is not often whimsical. He was conscious of the significance of human life and he was always aware of himself and of his surroundings.

The best humorous poem of Burns is Tam o' Shanter; some insist that it is his best poem of any kind. In it the writer makes use of all his humorous devices, the comic story, the realistic pictures, the mock homilies, the swift turn of the idea, the felicity of rhyme and metre. I do not attempt to quote any part of the poem, being warned by the example of Hazlitt who began at the first line to quote a passage but was unable to stop until Meg had made her heroic leap to safety. Principal Shairp may be forgiven much for his appreciation of Tam o' Shanter.

XI

His virtues belonged to his genius; his vices to his situation, which did not correspond to his genius.

Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Poets.

After one has read carefully the poems and letters of Burns and has become familiar with what is now known of the events of his life, then, and then only, is the time to read what others have said about him. It is obvious that a great deal of what has been written on Burns is remarkable for its inaccuracy and prejudice. Only recently has the complete text of his letters been made available, early editors having rewritten or mutilated some of them and suppressed others, no doubt with the best intentions. The reputation of the poet was not improved by Heron's weakness for telling the worst and Currie's tendency to hint that there was a worst to be concealed. Other biographers could not curb their imaginations and so we find that when Ingram edited Lockhart's Life of Burns, on every other page he had to introduce warning footnotes, as:

.....not a single statement made by.....

about Burns may be accepted as a fact unless fully corroborated by independent witnesses.

Where there is no fabrication or downright lying, there is always the writer's prejudice to reckon with. Even irreproachable commentators read into the character of Burns many of their own tendencies. Keat, fastidious and over-sensitive, exclaimed:

His misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill.he talked, he drank with black-guards; he was miserable.

Burns, himself, said:

I have often coveted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of Blackguards, sometimes farther than was consistent with the safety of my character;I have yet found among them, in not a few instances, some of the noblest virtues--Magnanimity, Generosity, disinterested Friendship, and even Modesty--in the highest perfection.

Carlyle, who wrote the most understanding study of Burns we have, said of him:

How could a man, so falsely placed, by his own or other's fault, even know contentment or peaceable diligence for an hour?

But in November, 1794, the Exciseman-Poet was so far reconciled with his lot as to write:

Contented wi' little, and cantie wi' mair,
When e'er I forgather wi' Sorrow and Care
I gie them a skelp as they're creeping alang,
Wi' a cog o' gudè swats, and an Auld Scotch Sang.

His latest biographer has called his book on Burns The Ranting Dog, thus emphasizing one side of Burns's nature and ignoring the fact that the "ranting dog," who was never accused of hypocrisy, conducted Family

Worship after his father's death and catechised his servants. Hazlitt in his pugnacious essay on Burns took the opportunity to ridicule Wordsworth's letter to Gray; but there was a side of Burns's nature with which Wordsworth could have more sympathy than could Hazlitt. After reading many biographers on Burns, one is left with an irrational wish that it might be possible to hear Burns on his biographers. What would he have said of Heron's indiscretion, of Currie's prudery, or of Cunningham's fables? Nor would his modern biographers escape. Oh, to hear what Burns could say about Mrs. Carswell! But, like Charles Lamb on a certain occasion, one is liable to be reminded that Burns cannot appear.

Until recently, when confronted by accusations against the character of Burns, the faithful had no other alternative than to "take another mournful sip of whisky, shake the head sadly, and go on to talk about Burns's kind heart as shown by his affection for mice and dogs and gangrel bodies." Now, however, one is able to refute some of the most damaging traditions. Two physicians, Sir James Crichton-Browne of Dumfries and Dr. Harry B. Anderson of Toronto, have made the most significant contribution to our knowledge of Burns. Several early biographers seem to have suspected that Burns suffered from an

organic disease that would have brought about his early death even if he had drunk nothing but water and slept ten hours every night. But now we know that Burns died of an infection of the heart lining and his life could have been prolonged only if he had submitted to the inactivity of an invalid. He did not die of alcoholism or of venereal infection.

The charge is often made that Burns was "a drunkard and somewhat miscellaneous lover." William Rossetti says without qualification that Burns became "in undue course, a toper." Fortunately, we have evidence to the contrary from people who knew Burns. Tradition says that Burns was initiated into hard drinking in the Edinburgh days, but Miss Anne Dorothea Benson wrote that during the meeting of the Caledonian Hunt, she "never saw Burns once intoxicated, though the worthy member for Dumfries, and the good Laird of Arbigland and twenty more.....were brought home in a state of glorious insensibility." 1.

Findlater wrote of the last years of Burns's life:

I will avow that I never saw him, which was very frequently while he lived at Ellisland, and still more so after he removed to Dumfries, but in the hours of business he was quite himself, and capable of discharging the duties of his office: nor was he ever known to drink by himself, or seen to indulge in the use of liquor in the forenoon.

1. Quoted by Ferguson, Notes to Letters.

This in a time when the only total abstainers of whom one reads were Dr. Currie and the estimable Dr. Joseph Black who drank warm milk and wore tin shoes and died in his chair so quietly that not a drop was spilled from the bowl of milk he had on his lap at the time. Imagine Burns emulating the good chemist! Our poet liked a glass, no doubt. He liked the impulse it gave to good fellowship. He may have welcomed the respite it gave from worry and responsibility. He certainly was so extravagant in his praise of Scotch drink that the aroma of whiskey has hung about his name ever since. But he was not a drunkard; he could not have been, for he lived on an income of from seventy to ninety pounds a year, kept up decent appearances, maintained his wife and four or five children, assisted his relatives, and died out of debt.

One cannot so easily dispose of Rossetti's second accusation. Snyder says bluntly that of Burns's fourteen children only five were born in wedlock. Commentators find it difficult to find a mean between the complete disapproval of Principal Shairp and the envious approval of Aldous Huxley who writes:

(The life-worshipper's) ideal of completeness, of moderation in terms of balanced excess, is realized by such men as Burns (about whom the respectable and the academic continue to write in the most nauseating tone of condescension and Pecksniffian forgiveness.)¹

1. Essay on Pascal.

But Burns did not forgive himself, nor had he ever thought of "moderation in terms of balanced excess." In fact, with his usual honesty he characterized his own practice as at the most villainy, at the least "a very bad failing" of which he was determined to rid himself.

At times he seems to wish to be thought a cad. This attitude does not appear in the unquotable poems and letters but rather in passages like this one, taken from a letter to George Thomson:

The welfare and happiness of the beloved object is the first and inviolable sentiment that pervades my soul.....

So far so good, but:

As to the herd of the sex, who are good for little or nothing else, I have made no such agreement with myself.

All one can say in extenuation of that declaration is that actually Burns could not disregard the welfare of even May Cameron or Jenny Clow. One may also plead in defence of Burns that he was very attractive to women and that, as his letters to Clarinda show, he understood them thoroughly. It is significant that Burns who wanted to be a Don Juan wrote the best argument against libertinism ever penned;

I waive the quantum o' the sin,
The hazard o' concealing.
But, och, it hardens a' within
And petrifies the feeling.

That is morality reinforced by a knowledge of human nature and by shrewd good sense.

Many readers object to the coarseness of Burns. He has written many poems that, even in our deliberately broad-minded age, few instructors would care to read aloud to an undergraduate class. Until recently, some of Burns's poems could not be printed by a respectable firm, and many of the best-known poems contain objectionable words. One cannot make the usual excuse that Burns was no worse than his age. Mrs. Dunlop disapproved of Burns's vocabulary as much as if she were Queen Victoria. She wrote to him:

There are some words, which, although in themselves perfectly innocent when uttered in the rustic simplicity of a peasant, custom has wholly proscribed in upper life, so that an author should have some very strong temptation before he introduce what would be an insult to his company for a gentleman to read aloud.

No, Burns cannot be excused because he knew no better.

It seems that he used ugly Anglo-Saxon words when he felt that they best expressed what he wanted to say, for he was too honest to use vague euphemisms that would not convey his meaning. His poems gained a strength and directness from the very words that we may deplore. Unless he wishes, the general reader need not look at the "unprintable letters" of Burns that shocked Lord Byron, or at the "Fescennine songs"

that delighted the Crochallan Fencibles, and so the existence of these productions need not affect our estimate of Burns. An element of undoubted coarseness is not incompatible with the most praiseworthy virtues. Burns was completely unashamed of his indecent songs. Mrs. Dunlop had heard rumors of his ability in that kind of composition, and she reproved him for his sins. Burns replied in a letter that shows little repentance:

I am very sorry you should be informed of my supposed guilt in composing, in some midnight frolic, a stanza or two perhaps not quite proper for a clergyman reading to a company of ladies. -----You may guess that the convivial hours of men have their mysteries of wit and mirth; and I hold it a piece of contemptible baseness to detail the sallies of thoughtless merriment, or the orgies of accidental intoxication, to the ear of cool sobriety or female delicacy.

And with that, we, like Mrs. Dunlop, will have to be satisfied.

Yet, as he suggested in his letter to Mrs. Dunlop, Burns had good taste. He knew quite well verses that might amuse Ainslie would not be ~~Ainslie would not be~~ suitable for the perusal of women of refinement. A lady, who had known Burns, wrote in 1834 that he was "incapable of rudeness or vulgarity,.....well bred and gentlemanly in all the courtesies of life." Burns never intended that his

coarser verses should be published. In his last interview with Maria Riddel he expressed a fear "that letters and verses written with unguarded and improper freedom, and which he earnestly wished to have buried in oblivion, would be handed about by idle vanity or malevolence....." Another proof of Burns's taste is the fact that George Thomson was willing to entrust him with the task of expurgating and refining old songs. Burns performed his task well. One of his greatest songs, John Anderson, My Jo, was written for an air the original words of which were hopelessly indecent.

.....

The chief problem of Robert Burns was that of adjustment. In a moment of depression he explained his relation to his environment with a vivid metaphor:

My soul (is) flouncing and fluttering round
her tenement, like a wild finch caught amid
the horrors of winter and newly thrust into
a cage.

What wonder that sometimes he beat against the bars in a frantic effort to escape! But, before we indulge in "vain bewailings" for the narrowness of the cage that imprisoned the great wild soul of Burns, let us remember that he was not alone in his captivity. The

tenement of which Burns complained was not the cottage of a peasant, nor did it represent the restrictions of society. It was the tenement of clay from which there is no escape this side of death; and what other genius, even what man of feeling and intelligence has not at some time felt the same prison walls about him? If Burns had been given a pension and had lived in a fine house, if he had been able to talk with philosophers and peers every day would he have been content? Carlyle reminds us of the life of Byron:

The highest worldly honours, the fairest worldly career, are his by inheritance; the richest harvest of fame he soon reaps in another province by his own hand. And what does this all avail him? Is he happy, is he good, is he true? Alas, he has a poet's soul, and strives towards the Infinite and the Eternal; and soon feels that all this is but mounting to the house-tops to reach the stars!

Burns had this same longing to burst the bonds of flesh, to conquer space and time, to do all and to know all, without bound and without end. "He had an insatiable mental appetite," says Snyder: an appetite that could not be satisfied within the limitations of this existence.

Then, too, Burns was as conscious as was Milton of his responsibility for the use of his talents. He felt that he must realize fully the possibilities of his genius. Perhaps that which his critics have

called his ambition was really his eagerness to reach the limits of his capabilities. It is probable, as Snyder suggests, that in his last years Burns believed that he had failed to make full use of his powers, and his regret for his wasted abilities may have increased his depression. But what poet has ever done all that was possible for him to do?

Burns was prone to errors of conduct by the very nature of the poetic gifts which enabled him to write so well in praise of love or freedom, in indignation against meanness or tyranny. He stated his difficulty succinctly and completely in a letter to Miss Helena Craik:

Take a being of our kind, give him a stronger imagination and a more delicate sensibility (which between them will ever engender a more ungovernable set of passions) than are the usual lot of man;....and you have created a wight nearly as miserable as a poet.

Or, if you prefer a poetic expression of the same truth:

I saw thy pulse's maddening play,
Wild, send thee Pleasure's devious way,
Misled by Fancy's Meteor-ray,
By passion driven;
But yet the light that led astray
Was light from Heaven.

Carlyle, who saw clearly the difficulties of the poet, suggested:

Three gates of deliverance, it seems to us,
were open for Burns: clear poetical activity;
madness; or death.

But Carlyle was deceived by his lack of trustworthy information regarding the last years of Burns.

Modern investigators believe that in addition to his poetic gifts and his rebellious impulse Burns had his share of more sober qualities, especially of common sense. He estimated his position accurately, he was honest with himself in recognizing his limitations, and, except on his gloomy days, he accepted his situation. His good sense appears in his attitude to political reform. He sympathized with the French Revolution, but also he respected the British Constitution. Poetically speaking he was an anarchist (see The Jolly Beggars); actually he was somewhat conservative. I believe that he was sincere when he wrote to Erskine of Mar:

Whatever may be my sentiments of republics,
ancient or modern, I ever abjured the idea
of such changes here. A constitution which,
in its original principles, experience has
proved to be every way fitted for our happiness,
it would be insanity to abandon for an untried
visionary theory.

It is very heroic, no doubt, to die on the barricades or otherwise beat one's brains out against the inevitable, but there is also courage in making one's peace with things as they are:

Fact are chiels that winna ding
And downa be disputed.

Burns's acceptance of facts was made possible by his

"iron resolution," and by his courage.

Another result of his courage was his avoidance of pessimism. A pessimist has the satisfaction of evading the responsibility for his own misery:

It is in truth iniquity on high
To cheat our sentenced souls of aught
 they crave.

Burns bore not only his troubles but also the responsibility for them. He said:

(I believe) that there is a real and eternal
distinction between virtue and vice, and
that consequently I am an accountable
creature.

He did not even have the comfort of believing that his trials were ordained by a Calvinistic God for some obscure purpose, because the "guid auld comfortable doctrines o' election, reprobation, original sin, and faith," were nothing to Burns.

His sympathy for his fellow-creatures was another of his qualities that saved Burns from frenzy or complete despair. One recalls how Swift lashed human weakness with insane fury in the concluding book of Gulliver's Travels. Burns could survey with equanimity even the lowest of mankind. He knew, none better, the sin and crime and sordidness of the lives of his Jolly Beggars and yet he did not shrink from them. He recognized that they were fellow-mortals,

he saw that they had traces of virtues, and over their worst faults he shed a glow of love and understanding.

His sensibility gave him sympathy for all suffering, and saved him from cynicism or callousness. "God knows I am no Saint," he wrote to Peter Hill, "I have a whole host of follies and sins to answer for; but if I could (and I believe I do it as far as I can) I would wipe away all tears from all eyes." As if anticipating the sneer of an amateur psychologist Burns went on to explain that he realized that his motives were not entirely unselfish, "Even the knaves who have injured me, I would oblige them; though to tell the truth, it would be more out of vengeance to show them I was independent of and above them, than out of overflowing of my benevolence." We do not weep as readily as did Burns and his contemporaries, but we need not conclude that they were insincere. His sense of humor, too, and love of fun must have helped to make Burns reconciled with his environment.

Burns was not always able to abide by his truce with things as they are. He resented the condescension of a foolish peer; he took offense at imaginary slights. Yet it is possible that his jealousy of his superiors has been exaggerated. Several of his biographers emphasize the fact that Burns was a peasant. He said as much himself but I

do not think he would have cared to hear it from another, particularly from the lady who never forgets that she is the great-great-grand-daughter of Burns's landlord. In Burns's time class distinctions were not as rigid as one might expect. The Countess of Glencairn was the daughter of a mechanic and two of the sons of the ploughman Burns became gentlemen who rose high in the India Service and died on their own estates at Cheltenham. The best friends of Burns in his later years were gentlemen who regarded him as their equal.

No doubt national pride has some part in the admiration Scotsmen feel for one of the greatest of their countrymen, but they as well as men of all nations pay tribute to Burns for the intrinsic value of his poetry. There has always been, too, much interest in Burns as a man; indeed, his latest biographers occasionally forget that he was a poet. There is little reason why we cannot understand Burns, the man, as well as did his contemporaries. However, we must avoid the tendency to look down upon him from the superior ground of the Twentieth Century. We may be "verra cliver chiels" with our psychology, and our sophistication, and our machine-made comforts; but, if we think that we are therefore entitled to patronize

Robert Burns, we are mistaken. Also, we must hesitate to pass judgment on Burns. However prone we may be to analyze, classify, and label our acquaintances, we do not criticize a friend, nor do we try to remodel him according to our own specifications of a perfect man. We take him as he is, complex, inconsistent, baffling though he may be. And so we must take Burns. If we are to know him, we must accept the whole man and not the burgess, or the rebel, or the boon companion, or the sentimentalist, or the lover, because no one of these is the real Burns.

It may be that a moment of intuition may bring one as close to Burns as will hours of studying his poetry and his life. Once I heard an immigrant girl sing about him. She was a little frightened, and she looked at none of us as she sang without book:

There was a lad was born in Kyle,
 But whatna day o' whatna style,
 I doubt it's hardly worth the while
 To be sae nice wi' Robin.

Robin was a rovin' boy,
 Rantin', rovin', rantin', rovin',
 Robin was a rovin' boy,
 Rantin', rovin', Robin!

Perhaps it was the serious face of the singer, perhaps it was the unusually slow tempo of the song that made me feel that back of the gaiety and boyish

confidence of the words there was an appeal for sympathy and understanding. Whatever the reason, all at once I saw that the writer of the song had been a real boy, who had been born in a clay cottage, who had studied and toiled, and scribbled down rhymes, and made love to lasses, who had never had quite what he wanted, but in spite of misfortunes, had kept a "heart aboon them a'", and who had become such a great poet that every twenty-fifth of January thousands of men and women are proud to recall that their great-great-grandfathers were his countrymen.

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