The Royal Society of Edinburgh

Robert Burns in Global Culture Lecture

The Royalty of the Man: How the Globe read Burns

Report by Jennifer Trueland

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The RSE organised a series of events to mark the 250th anniversary of the birth of Scotland's foremost poet, Robert Burns. As well as the lecture from the distinguished author and journalist Neal Ascherson, there was a concert; a Burns Supper; and, a major one-day conference on Robert Burns in Global Culture (see report elsewhere on the RSE website). In placing Burns in a global context, Mr Ascherson set the tone for the events – and, indeed, more broadly, for Scotland's Year of Homecoming.

Views about the literary influence of Robert Burns diverge widely – and Neal Ascherson said he could 'snowball-fight with contrary verdicts all night'. For example, while Christopher Grieve – better known as the poet Hugh MacDiarmid – contended in 1928 that Burns had '*no living literary influence whatever*', biographer James Mackay said in 1992 that he was '*universally recognised as one of the greatest poets of all time'*. In his wide-ranging talk,
Mr Ascherson discussed the difference between the influence of Burns and of his literary influence, which he contended were two different things. It is hard to think of another poet who has achieved such a colossal, global readership, yet had so little perceptible influence on how subsequent writers wrote.

He quoted Murray Pittock in 2002 saying that Burns has 1,030 clubs and societies with 80,000 members in 18 countries and statues standing across at least three continents. His books have been translated 3,000 times into 51 languages, but since the Second World War Burns has '*almost vanished from the canon of what the critical academies choose to define as Romanticism'*.

Burns, then, is hugely popular but has become '*British literature's invisible man'*, Professor Pittock said. Mr Ascherson agreed with this – as far as the late 20th century English-speaking literary criticism industry is concerned. But he said that even a hundred years before, Burns' impact on how world writers wrote was strikingly hard to trace. Although a number of would-be 'Burnses' sprang up after his death, they weren't very good and, possibly, got in the way of Scotland's literary development. Indeed, it might be that Burns – writing as he was at the cusp of industrialisation – was at the end of a tradition given life by poets such as Dunbar and Fergusson.

Overseas, it's a similar story. While Burns has been popular, it has been argued that his influence on literature is limited. Mr Ascherson quoted Robert Crawford saying that Ossian and Walter Scott are more influential. Mr Ascherson discussed possible reasons for the paradox of readership versus influence – for example, could dialect and metre have got in the way, particularly for English-speakers (translators wouldn't have these issues with vocabulary). Mr Ascherson believes that Burns translates with varying success – awful in French, 'pretty good' in Slav languages. Russia, in particular, is the greatest success story in reuniting Burnsian form and content, he said.

Burns' importance abroad was highlighted by the worldwide celebrations of the first century of his birth. He was also written about in other countries, particularly in the French writer Auguste Angellier's 1893 Life and Works, which argued that he should be seen as a European poet.

He was celebrated in Germany also, but the literati were unsure about whether he was an 'artless child of nature' or a patriot or any one of a number of labels. Germany's foremost poet Goethe was an admirer of Burns; in particular, he envied the popularity and currency of his work with his own people. While Goethe's own songs were sung by pretty girls at pianos, Burns' were sung by the 'people', in the fields and in the pub. In Germany, as elsewhere, Burns was admired for being a conduit for old folksongs and the rural tradition, but then was welcomed as a political ally in the liberal struggle for democracy. In particular, *A Man's a Man for a' That,* translated by Frederick Freiligrath in the run-up to the 1848 revolutions, caught on to such an extent that it is quoted to this day on a plaque off Berlin's Friedrichstrasse.

In Germanic lands, he was also recognised as an apostle of localism – a preacher of healthy, rural farming values and thus helping to preserve people in their natural virtue. Burns was particularly popular in areas which had maintained their own dialect and, indeed, was claimed as their ally and translated into, for example, Schweizerdeutsch Zurich dialect.

Burns's popularity was slower to take off in Russia, but again he was claimed as an ally by different groups. Translations of his work tended to be 'adapted' to fit political or other sensibilities – mentions of royalty and patriotism were fudged or removed, for example.

After the 1917 revolution, his status grew rapidly – he was already in the canon of socialist song and poetry for the masses, said Mr Ascherson. In the Soviet Union the chief translator of Burns was Samuil Marshak (1887-1964) who made him what Mr Ascherson called a '*not simply popular but integral part of Soviet mass culture'*. Burns became a hero of Soviet culture and even Shostakovich set Marshak's translations to music. Again, however, Marshak (as befits someone wanting to survive under Stalin) censored his translations, removing references to royalty, and, for example, not translating Burns' (referring to Catherine the Great) mention of 'Auld Kate's arse'. Marshak's monopoly over Burns set up a reaction after his death and following the fall of the Soviet Union, as his works were seen as part of the Communist culture apparatus. Burns is still one of Russia's best-loved and best-known poets, however.

Burns' reception in the United States was similar: '*high appreciation by 19th century writers and critics, enormous popular readership and no perceptible effect on the evolution of American verse, Romantic or otherwise'*. Burns was seen as a poet of liberty, but also as an ignorant poet of the poor, with self-inflicted (booze and sex) miseries. Walt Whitman, like Goethe, appreciated Burns' appeal to his own community, but deplored his lack of spirituality and his backward-looking fondness for Scotland's past.

Burns is very popular, however, particularly among the Scottish diaspora, with the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, for example, '*scattering 3,460 sculptures of Robert Burns across the United States'*. His songs – or about a dozen of them – became popular in the US although most people didn't even know who had written them.

Mr Ascherson concluded that Burns scarcely ever has been successfully imitated. This is not, however, because he is necessarily 'inimitable' – more like 'unrepeatable', he said.

His environment – poor, but with a wide appreciation of literature; a rebel at home, a studier of liberty as it formulated across the world – was unlikely to be repeated. His passions – sex, for example – and his dignity in the face of poverty are also combinations hard to reproduce. He also never went away – as well as in the English-speaking world and Scottish diaspora he remains dear and familiar to older generations in many cultures, including Russia, Germany and Scandinavia. '*untold millions sing Auld Lang Syne, who know at most two or three of his other songs and few lines of the poetry*,' said Mr Ascherson.

Burns's poetry is popular, not because it is necessarily profound or even always good, but because in it, people recognise themselves and their own feelings and even feel honoured. '*Who else can do that, and with an air you want to whistle?*' said Mr Ascherson. Burns's take on equality was the thing that mattered most, said Mr Ascherson, saying that the poet believed that ordinary folk shouldn't be patronised nor oppressed but treated with the '*royal respect due to all human beings'.* He concluded: '*The Royalty he meant was not really about Man, but about men and women, Rob and Jean, you and me.*'

Questions

Questions ranged over a wide area, from whether Burns – a lowland Scot – had been appropriated by the vision of the Highlands, to how 'liberal' he actually was given he planned to go to Jamaica, possibly to become a slave-driver.

On the latter, Mr Ascherson pointed out that Burns had written beautifully about the plight of the slave but admitted that the man was 'flawed and contradictory', as well as living in an era where 'everyone was doing it'.

He was asked about whether classical music settings of Burns songs had helped to make them popular. Mr Ascherson said that they were popular to this day.

Asked about Burns' contribution to parochial ideas of Scotland of the hills and haggis, when he was writing about equality and social development, Mr Ascherson said that Burns would have, for example enjoyed Burns suppers up to a point, but wouldn't have wanted them confined to institutionalise 'bardolotry'. '*He would say equality is the chance to be equally fou,*' he said.

Just how much of the songs attributed to Burns, were actually written by Burns, was also raised. How many were folk songs he had 'tarted up a bit', the questioner asked. Mr Ascherson said that while scholars argued about it, he felt it was missing the point. Burns wouldn't have really cared whether people thought he wrote them; the important thing was that they were out there and being sung.

The vote of thanks was delivered by Professor Murray Pittock of the University of Glasgow.

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