

Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations
by Carol McGuirk

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Carol McGuirk's *Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations* offers a comprehensive reassessment of Burns's written works and, in compliance with recent trends in Burns criticism, seeks to deconstruct some of the myths attached to the famed Scottish icon. In the introduction, McGuirk lays out her intention to provide a fuller reading of Burns's writings by reverting to a more rudimentary approach, rather than focusing on the biographical 'myths' that have previously served to divert 'attention from ambiguous and elusive elements in his writings' (p. 1). In returning to basic matters and materials such as 'early manuscripts, preferred verse-forms, habits of revision and biographical and political/cultural contexts' (p. 2), McGuirk's scope is wide and ambitious yet refrains from being unfocused, with each chapter subtly interlinking with the next.

Chapter 1, 'Bard Interrupted', discusses the issue of when and why Burns changed his signature from 'Robt Burness' to 'Robert Burns'; the latter being the streamlined version of the poet's family name which was used to sign his formally published writings. McGuirk points out that while, from 1786 onwards, Burns's official publications were signed 'Burns', he continued to sign important manuscript collections (such as his first 'Commonplace Book' and the 'Kilmarnock Manuscript') as 'Burness'. What initially appears to be the acknowledgement of a minor textual variant is subsequently scrutinized in great depth by McGuirk, who draws a distinction between work by 'Rob Burness' and 'Poet Burns'; a juxtaposition that frequently informs the remainder of the book. According to McGuirk: 'Rob Burness is a bard whose writings invite readers' full immersion in the here-and-now of the character(s) speaking up. 'Love and Liberty', in which a series of beggars tell their stories, is Burness's masterwork. Poems by the alternate speaker, 'Poet Burns', also often employ dramatic monologue but for a different purpose, as monologue shifts to soliloquy (p. 3).

Thus, poem-by-poem, Chapter 1 sets out to consider the differences between the two handwritten ‘Burnesses’ manuscripts and some of the work in Burns’s first printed volume *Poems, Chiefly In The Scottish Dialect*. McGuirk’s method is original and innovative, offering a fresh perspective on the formation of Burns’s early poetic personae. However, while undoubtedly original, some of the readings appear to be restricted by the compartmentalisation of Burns’s work into two ‘voices’. Rather than writing in two distinct styles or ‘voices’, Burns might well have been simultaneously playing with and adapting multiple protean personae regardless of how he signed his work. While McGuirk acknowledges this to an extent, she does primarily stick to a rather rigid dual approach in articulating Burns’s poetic development.

The following chapter provides interpretations of some of Burns’s more neglected works; namely ‘The Vision’, ‘Despondency, An Ode’ and ‘A Bard’s Epitaph’. Where the first chapter relied on McGuirk’s own ‘Reading’ of Burns’s poetry, the second is primarily concerned with how William Wordsworth read and responded to Burns. Rather surprisingly – given Burns is considered a precursor to the Romantic Movement - there has been relatively little research on this important and extremely interesting subject. Though McGuirk summarises that Wordsworth’s attitude to Burns was often ‘changeable’ (p. 70), her formulaic approach in laying out - in table format - which of the English poet’s works alluded to or quoted Burns reveals the frequency with which the two poet’s works were interlinked. Referring to what she terms a ‘Burnsworthian conjunction’ (p. 107), McGuirk goes onto reinterpret Wordsworth’s ‘Resolution and Independence’ and ‘Immortality’ ode by suggesting, quite convincingly, that Wordsworth recast Burnsian imagery and tropes. In addition to further bridging the gap between Burns and the most prominent Nineteenth century Romantic poets, the chapter successfully highlights the extent to which ‘Poet Burns’ had influenced Wordsworth’s own poetic development.

McGuirk goes onto discuss how ‘the Highlands served Burns’s imagination as a repository (once rich; now depopulated and almost emptied) of national cultural memory’ (p. 115). Deconstructing Burns’s well known ‘Jacobite sympathies’, McGuirk points to the ways in which his revision of Jacobite songs - for James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* - not only reconstructed (or romanticised) Highland culture, but also served as a strong critique of the contemporary late Eighteenth-century political system. While the idea that Burns’s Jacobite anthems may have served to catalyse revolutionary fervour is not a new one, McGuirk, interestingly, also suggests that they could have been taken as ‘warnings against

renewed rebellion' (p. 115). Noting that most of Burns's Jacobite songs take place when 'the revolution is already over' (p. 115), McGuirk refrains from offering a reading of them as being overtly aligned with a specific political cause, asserting that Burns 'crafted his songs in such a way that almost always they remain open to interpretation' (p. 115). It is precisely McGuirk's reluctance to attach 'Poet Burns' and his Jacobite revisions to a specific ideology that makes her criticism more palatable than previous scholarship, which has often been quick to politically 'pigeonhole' the poet.

In Chapter 4, subtitled 'Three Drunk Men', McGuirk goes onto consider the imagery associated with drink in Scottish poetry, particularly in the work of Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns and Hugh MacDiarmid. The jump from comparing the work of two eighteenth-century Scots vernacular poets to a twentieth-century modernist writer initially seems rather drastic, but given the impact and frequency with which MacDiarmid refers to Burns in 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', McGuirk does manage to render the comparison useful and justifiable. Most prominent is her assertion that, in the work of all three writers, the drunk 'speakers' should not be taken as biographical. Referring to, arguably, his most famous poem of all, McGuirk reminds us that 'Burns himself is not Tam' (p. 7). Her further incorporation of Fergusson and MacDiarmid, who have also been mistaken for writing 'drunken' biographical poems, serves to underline the assertion that we must continue to refrain from reading the work of 'Poet Burns' biographically.

Finally, in her 'Epilogue', McGuirk concludes her wide spanning 'Reading' of Robert Burns by discussing how his distinctive poetic language and phrases have become ingrained in general cultural memory. A divergent topic to end a book that focuses primarily on Burns's written work, McGuirk rounds off by discussing the processes by which these writings have been 'spoken and sung, or transplanted into new contexts' (p. 190). The growth of some of these 'new contexts' into the realm of 'myth', of course, provided the starting point for why McGuirk deemed it necessary to go back to 'Reading Robert Burns' in the first place. While the widely differing subject matters of each chapter do, at times, feel slightly disjointed, McGuirk does just enough to link her arguments into a cohesive narrative, and in doing so offers up some fresh and innovative perspectives on many aspects of Burns's creative process.