

Steve Newman

Why We Still Read (and Sing!) Robert Burns

Winter 2024

Online on Zoom, Tuesdays 6:00-7:30 pm ET

Feb 20, Feb 27, Mar 19, Mar 26

Optional in-person Burns Seminar at the Rosenbach Museum & Library on Sunday, March 10, 11:00am-3:00pm ET



**Course Description:** On the evening of January 25<sup>th</sup>, people from Edinburgh to Shanghai to Philadelphia gather to toast “the immortal memory” of Robert Burns. For he is not only Scotland’s national poet; his work has been translated into Hebrew, Russian, Chinese, Esperanto, and a host of other languages. To discover the range and depth of the work that has established Burns as a poet of global significance, we will dive into a great deal of his poetry and a bit of his prose, drawing significantly on one of the world’s finest collection of his works--the Rosenbach’s.

We will begin with Burns’ spectacular burst on to the scene in 1786, investigating the literary and political matrices that made it possible for this son of a short-lease farmer to become so celebrated so quickly, though not entirely on his own terms. We will then focus on his love and bawdy songs, considering how Burns draws on and transforms tradition in lyrics on affection and lust, and the codes of gender and sexuality that inform them. Next come his interventions in the politics of the nation, as he

presents himself as a “Bardie” licensed to comment on a range of state and religious matters and navigates the electrified disputes of his time. We will conclude with some of his masterpieces— including *Tam O’Shanter* and *Love and Liberty*— and the ways his work is circulated, celebrated, and critiqued by readers ranging from Walt Whitman to Frederick Douglass to Abraham Lincoln to Maya Angelou and has recently become part of Scotland’s reckoning with its role in the slave trade. Along the way, we will take time to *enjoy* Burns, paying attention to his remarkable craft, the keen edge of his wit, and the wide range of his sympathy. So don’t “gang a’gley”; join us!

(Note: There are a fair number of poems each week, especially the first three, and some of them are in Scots. But they are mostly quite short, and the notes and glossary in Carol McGuirk’s edition are excellent.)

**Required Text:**

Robert Burns, *Selected Poems*, ed. Carol McGuirk (Penguin, 1994) ISBN 0140423826

Other texts will be made available as .pdf scans.

We will also be listening to various recordings of Burns’ songs.

\*indicates a manuscript or rare printed text at the Rosenbach we may take a look at

**Week 1/February 20: Introducing Burns—Sensibility, Scottishness, and Song Collection**

We will begin with Burns’ career- and epoch-making *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock, 1786). In addition to gaining a sense of Burns’ biography, we will attend to three key strains that shape his life and work:

- Sensibility, the ability to feel for others (including animals) that emerges as a key virtue in mid- century Great Britain
- Scottishness, a complex conjuncture of language, history, and religion, all contested, seeking a place within a United Kingdom dominated by England
- Song collection, part of an emergent interest in ballads and other popular songs.

In addition to the texts listed below, we’ll look at one of the most important copies of the Kilmarnock volume, the one presented to Margaret Dunlop of Dunlop, including many manuscripts Burns sent to her; Burns’ copy of Joseph Ritson’s *Scottish [sic] Songs*; and Thomas Percy’s annotated copy of his own *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.

**Required Reading:**

In Penguin/McGuirk edition:

“O Once I loved”\*; “It Was Upon a Lammas Night” (Corn Rigs Are Bonnie)”; “Address to the Unco Guid”\*; “To a Mouse”; “To a Louse”; “The Author’s Earnest Cry and Prayer”; “To a Mountain Daisy”

Scans available online:

“To A Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies”\*;  
“Robert Burns,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

**Optional Reading (all scans)**

Preface to Kilmarnock volume

David Allan, “Nation” and “Ideas,” from *Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*

Carol McGuirk, from *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*

Davis, “At Sang About”

## **Week 2/February 27: Love Songs and Bawdy Songs**

Here, we plunge into some of the texts Burns is most famous for, his love songs. Building on the prior week's discussion of sensibility and Scottishness, we'll discuss how he address and constructs the feminine objects of his desire, a desire that ranges from the tenderest and most exalted (and sometimes most mannered) to the bluntest—and the desires that these women may also have. These songs also put us into touch with the question of Burns' relationship to tradition—how he preserves, transforms or even deforms it and how his individual genius interacts with the collective and commonplace.

### **Required Reading**

#### **In Penguin/McGuirk**

"Mary Morison"; "A Poet's Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter"\*; "The Fornicator"; "Ay Waukin O"\*; "Ae Fond Kiss"; "The Gallant Weaver"; "A Red Red Rose"; "When Princes and Prelates";

#### **Scans**

"Thou Lingering Star"\*; "Brose and Butter"\*; Letters From Sylvander (Burns) to 'Clarinda' (Agnes McLehose)\*

### **Optional Reading (Scan)**

Dunnigan, "Burns and Women"

## **Week 3/March 19: Bard(ie)—Burns, Politics and the Nation**

As Robert Crawford notes in his excellent recent biography of Burns, he referred to himself at one point as a "bardie." On one hand, this is a self-deprecating, diminutive term for a bard, as Burns plays up the humble role of the "heav'n-taught ploughman" as an influential review names him. But "bardie" is also Scots for pugnacious and bold. So Burns' forays into taking on the role of national poet and into political verse are marked both by a courageous willingness to speak truth to power and a concern about the effects given his vulnerability and the strength of the backlash against radicalism at this time. We'll begin with the link between the erotic and the political in Jacobite verse and Burns' self-presentation as the bard of the local and national in "The Vision." And then we'll consider some of his most famous poems attacking the powers of the Kirk (i. e., Church) and State—among them, "Holy Willie's Prayer," "Scots Wha Hae," and "A Man's A Man for a' That."

### **Required Reading:**

#### **In Penguin/McGuirk ed.**

"Holy Willie's Prayer"; "The Vision"; "Address of Beelzebub"; "Scots Wha Hae"\*; 'Is There For Honest Poverty' (A Man's a Man for a' That)\*; "Charlie He's My Darling";

#### **Scans**

"Ode to General Washington's Birthday"\*; "The Rights of Woman"\*; Letter to H. M. Williams on 'The Slave Trade'\*; "The Slave's Lament"; "The Dumfries Volunteers"\*

#### **Week 4/March 26: Masterpieces and Myths and Burns in “The New World”**

We conclude our time together looking at two of Burns’ greatest works—*Love and Liberty* and *Tam O’Shanter*—and considering how they cast light on Burns’ canonization as a national and world poet. We will take a look at some important editions of Burns held by The Rosenbach, such as the first printing of Burns in the United States, as well as other texts and artifacts attesting to his reputation and the disputes over it, including the new and ongoing Oxford University Press edition. We will consider clues how he was loved and criticized by American readers, including Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and, more recently, Maya Angelou. More recent still is *No Ruined Stone*, in which Shara McCallum’s *No Ruined Stone*, which imagines that Burns did indeed go to the West Indies and fathered a daughter with an enslaved woman (the Nancy of “Ae Fond Kiss”).

#### **Required Reading:**

##### **In Penguin/McGuirk**

“Love and Liberty”; “Tam O’Shanter”

##### **Scans**

Mackenzie, review in *The Lounger*

Wordsworth, “Address to the Sons of Burns”; “At the Grave of Burns”

Hazlitt, from “On Burns, and the Old English Ballads”

Selections from Whitman, Lincoln, Douglass, Angelou

From McCallum, *No Ruined Stone*