

Robert Burns Seminar with Steve Newman at the Rosenbach Museum & Library

March 10, 2024

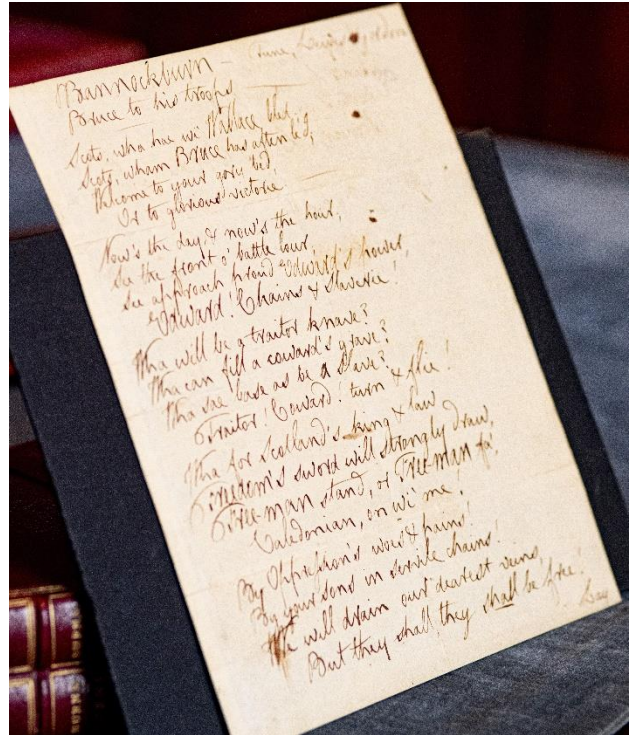
11:00 am – 3:00 pm

Description

Burns' Networks

How did Robert Burns, born into poverty in the rural reaches of southwest Scotland, gain literary renown in his too-short life, the prologue to worldwide fame as Scotland's Bard and a great poet of democracy?

Digging into the riches of one of the world's great Burns collections at the Rosenbach, we will discover that his success, of course, was due in significant part to his own stupendous talent and remarkable drive. But also necessary were the various networks of friends, lovers, patrons, and authors, men and women, who inspired and sponsored his work and also often sought to set limits on it and who revealed the ideological forces structuring the worlds he traveled through.



By looking at the manuscripts of Burns' very first poem and one about his plans to ship off to the West Indies—which also puts him and us into touch with the poisonous network known as the Transatlantic slave trade—we'll gain an understanding of the desires firing and the challenges facing Burns as he commenced his poetic career. Then, we'll look into the overlapping networks that at once helped him realize these desires and overcome these challenges but also set the terms by which his work circulated and was received, terms largely beyond his control. For instance, his masterpiece, "Tam O'Shanter," was initially produced for Francis Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland*, part of an antiquarian network that both celebrated Scottish folkways but threatened to render them merely quaint. His exchange with the writer Helen Maria Williams on her poem on slavery brings him into context with the literary world of his time and reformist/radical networks. That same radical network takes in "For a' that & a' that," Burns' great anthem of democracy, points to the radical network that Burns, like many others, chose to participate in anonymously for fear of losing his job, his liberty, and even his life. His "Epistle to Robert Graham of Fintry" highlights the patronage he sought to get and keep his job with the Excise, and the humbling modes of address that come with it, in tension with the sentiments of "For a' that" and many other works. But our attention will focus most on one of the other gems in the Rosenbach's collection, the copy of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* presented to Mrs. Frances Dunlop of Dunlop, including the manuscript poems and letters found in it, which gives us a unique view on how Burns' epoch-making volume came to be and how his poetic production was shaped by friendship, patronage, and the forces of gender and class bound up in it.

Our schedule for the seminar. Activities will begin at 11:00 am and end at 3:00 pm.

10:45am Check-in

11:00am Talk by Steve Newman

11:30am Discussion

12:00pm Collections presentation

1:00pm Light lunch with conversation

1:30pm Library Tour and overview of Burns Collection

2:00pm Discussion

3:00pm end

