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# The Bottle Imp

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**My Bard is in the Highlands: Burns 2009  
and a National Scottish Literature  
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**I**t will be well nigh impossible for anyone with their ear to the Scottish ground in 2009 to miss the fact that it is the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns. Whatever opinion one holds of his life or poetry, and whatever his own original intentions or reservations, Burns has become a Scottish institution with textual, ritual, and culinary components. Not only is he the subject of several academic conferences this year, Burns is one of the five themes chosen for the *Homecoming Scotland 2009* celebrations officially sponsored and promoted by the Scottish Government to attract the descendants of the 'Scottish Diaspora'.

It is commonly observed that what we choose to forget is at least as important as what we commemorate. Reinforcing the claim that Burns is Scotland's national poet as a marketing strategy obscures fundamental distinctions between linguistic and literary traditions in Scotland's past. Just as the iconography of Highlandism has tended to muddy the distinctions between Gaelic and Scots communities in terms of clothing and material culture, the Burns cult has often displaced Gaelic literature in the very places where it was meant to be celebrated. Although protests over the kitsch of Highlandism register clearly in public discourse (the absence of tartan, kilts, and bagpipes in the themes chosen for *Homecoming Scotland 2009* is conspicuous), equivalent charges of Lowlandism tended to be muted or absent altogether.

Admittedly, even during Burns' own lifetime there was a complex relationship between Lowland and Highland culture and literature, with many points of contact and borrowings in both directions. Burns himself made extensive use of Highland airs whose Gaelic titles are scattered throughout his work. Gaelic had only died as a spoken language in Ayrshire shortly before his birth, leaving a trail of words and idioms in Ayrshire Scots that appears in Burns' poetry,

although it is not likely that he was conscious of their origins. Highland people and places appear as subjects of some of his poems. Burns' use of the Gaelic term *duan* (denoting a song-poem in Gaelic) to demarcate sections of his poem 'The Vision' and the choice of the name *Luath* for one of the dogs of 'The Twa Dogs' indicate his familiarity with aspects of Gaelic literature, if only via Macpherson's *Ossian*.

Nonetheless, however much sympathy Burns may have had for Highlanders, and however free he felt in finding amongst them materials to inspire his own work, there is little reason to doubt that he saw them as a people apart from his own. A journal entry during his Highland tour in 1787 states, 'I write this on my tour through a country where savage streams tumble over savage mountains, thinly overspread with savage flocks, which starv'ingly support as savage inhabitants.' In such passages the common perception of the Otherness of the Gaels is stated clearly.

Many mutual distinctions, suspicions, and animosities between Lowlanders and Highlanders in Scotland survived well into the twentieth century. It may be somewhat tautological to observe that Highland immigrant groups in North America maintained distinctions from speakers of Scots for as long as their language and literary traditions endured. Often the very effort to maintain Gaelic against hostile Anglophone institutions in the 'New World' recalled the struggles they had faced in Scotland against the ill-will of the *Goill* ('non-Gaels', Lowlanders in particular). Only late in the nineteenth century did the synthetic pan-Scottish 'identikit' begin to filter through imaginative literature and social organisations, coincident with the weakening of Gaelic traditions.

Scottish societies in North America, especially in urban centres, tended to be connected closely with similar organisations in Scotland and to accept innovations from the 'motherland' without many objections. One of these developments was the rising star of Robert Burns. Themes in the poetry of Burns, especially those of liberty and egalitarianism, had obvious appeal in North America. By reference to them, Scottish immigrants could claim a set of 'primordial ideals' which were in harmony with, and even anticipated, those of their adopted home. Sharing roots with the English language, Burns' Scots was sufficiently intelligible to North American Anglophones, exotic but not entirely alien, 'British' but not English. Such cultural capital was a valuable asset in the quest for mainstream respectability. The Burns' Society of New York was established in

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1871, with Andrew Carnegie as its most famous president. Such advocates helped to spread the Burns cult in North America as it was making similar headway in Scotland.

Highlanders were not immune to these developments and some wished to claim a share in this new-found cachet. Alexander Carmichael, ever the champion of respectability for the Gaels, gleaned Gaelic Argyllshire tradition in order to find (or synthesise) a Gaelic pedigree for Robert Burns in an article in *The Evergreen* in 1895. While such ancestral connections are possible, this tells us more about the desire of urban nineteenth-century Gaeldom's desire to claim some small stake in Burns' fame than it does about genealogy. Gaelic translations of the poetry of Burns began to appear in Scottish periodicals by the beginning of the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Scotland, and, as was often the case with printed texts, these translations appeared with a minimal time lag in North American periodicals catering to an immigrant Scottish audience. Before long, North American Gaels were translating Burns into Gaelic and composing original Gaelic odes of their own. By the 1890s, the accomplished Gaelic scholar of Nova Scotia, Alexander MacLean Sinclair, was engaged in such work. To commemorate Burns' birthday in 1901 Angus MacLeod, the official poet of the Scottish Gaelic Society of New York, recited an original Gaelic poem about Burns to a society gathering.

Not all Gaels were willing to allow the Burns Cult to upstage their own literary traditions without a protest, however. A correspondent to the *Scottish-American Journal* (printed in New York) complained in 1911:

The Burns craze, strange to say, has never caught on to the Highlands, despite the Celtic sympathies of the bard. Except in some of the Highland towns, like Oban, Fort William, and Inverness, where Burns Clubs have been established by aliens, the native population never thinks of the 25th of January. The Gael is not even elated with the attempts to make Burns a Gael. The poet's works are not familiar to the native Gael who does not know the Doric, and so he does not effect to drink to the "Immortal Memory."

Cape Breton contained some of the immigrant communities in North America whose Gaelic cultural traditions remained distinctive and resilient enough to resist being pulled immediately into the Burns cult in the nineteenth century. The American writer Charles Dudley Warner wrote a series of articles about his travels to Cape Breton in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1874 with the condescending tone of the

urban sophisticate typical of the era. As soon as he entered the Gaelic-speaking community of the island, he engaged a local man in conversation which led deliberately towards the subject of literature. (It was also a popular practice to represent the words of any Scotsman in broad Scots, regardless of his actual speech patterns. The Highland immigrants of Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton, certainly did not speak in this manner.)

From life, we diverted the talk to literature. We inquired what books they had.

'Of course you all have the poems of Burns?'

'What's the name o' the mon?'

'Burns, Robert Burns.'

'Never heerd talk of such a mon. Have heard of Robert Bruce. He was a Scotchman.'

This was nothing short of refreshing, to find a Scotchman who had never heard of Robert Burns!

As Rob Dunbar observes in a recent and extensive survey of the literature of Highland immigrants in Nova Scotia, 'The Poetry of the Emigrant Generation' (*Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 64), the 'Otherness' of Burns is explicitly mentioned in at least one nineteenth-century poem from Cape Breton which praises the accomplishments of Gaelic poets:

*Tha Virgil cliùiteach 's a' Ròimh  
'S Burns sònraichte am measg Ghall –  
Ach dh'fhàs an rannta creimneach truagh  
Bhon thog na baird ruadh' an ceann.*

Virgil is famous in Rome  
And Burns is outstanding amongst Lowlanders –  
But their verses became rough and poor  
After the red-headed Gaelic poets appeared.

Burns' poetry was simply not an element in the repertoire of emigrant Highlanders until the late nineteenth century, and it never played a part in the native oral traditions of the Highlands. Emigrants sang and admired the work of Iain Lom, Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir, Màiri nighean Alasdair Ruaidh, and dozens of other Gaelic poets whose verse has been remembered and performed to the present day. It is fraudulent to sell Burns to diasporic audiences as though he is an exemplar of the literature of all their ancestors given how many of those ancestors were emigrant Highlanders. The conceit of a canonical national literature in Scots with Burns at its head is a reminder that all too often 'Scottish' literature is still largely exclusionary of Gaelic tradition, the only literary tradition in Scotland whose history spans that of the nation itself.

It is vexing to me that I can't go into a centre supposedly dedicated to Scottish Highland heritage without seeing a portrait of Burns in

a prominent place. My own academic home, Saint Francis Xavier University of Nova Scotia, boasts the only undergraduate Celtic Studies programme in North America and probably the best collection of Scottish Gaelic texts outside of Scotland. In the centre of the Hall of the Clans in the university library are portraits of Robert Burns and Walter Scott as well as a bust of Scott, but not a single depiction of a Gaelic poet. I could name a half dozen other such places with similar configurations. Burns and Scott are as appropriate to the celebration of Highland heritage as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would be in a hall dedicated to Native American heritage.

It's not that Burns doesn't deserve to be recognised for his literary merits on their own grounds. It's just that time and again his star has eclipsed those that Gaelic poets ought to enjoy in their own places. Why don't Gaelic Scotland's authors and literature deserve their own place at the Scottish table? I don't remember any national recognition of the 300th anniversary of the birth of Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (aka 'Alexander MacDonald'), probably the most important Scottish Gaelic poet of the eighteenth century, in 1998. Will there be celebrations for the 300th birthdays of Dugald Buchanan in 2016 and Donnchadh Bàn in 2024, or the 200th birthday of Màiri Mhór nan Òran in 2021? Seeing the accomplishments of the Gaelic literati acknowledged alongside the likes of Burns would be a real cause of celebration for those at home and abroad.

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