

**David Sergeant and Fiona Stafford, eds., *Burns and Other Poets*.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. Pp. 230. £70. ISBN
9780748643578.**

As the title clearly expresses, *Burns and Other Poets* situates itself in the context of Robert Burns scholarship, which in recent years has received a considerable boost in terms of both quantity and quality. This scholarship is cross-referenced throughout by the authors of this collection of essays, thus creating a highly informative framework for the reader, as well as providing a clear sense of the vibrancy and flourishing of the topic. The book in question offers the reader a detailed analysis of Robert Burns as a man and poet in connection with the cultural, social, and literary climate, both of his time and today. The conjunction of the title encompasses complex notions of ‘in his interaction with’, ‘inspired by’, ‘as perceived by’, ‘as an inspiration for’, ‘in the literary framework of’ and the ‘other poets’, particularly Scottish, English, and Irish.

The selection of essays gives a wide spectrum of different perspectives on Burns and his poetry: from the general to the particular; from the better-known names and works to the ones less targeted by academic examination. Mina Gorji gives a critical appraisal of Milton’s and Gray’s inspirations throughout ‘To a Mountain-Daisy’: she takes up McGuirk’s idea that the poem has ‘failed to charm modern critics and readers’ (69) in spite of being a much-appreciated poem when it first appeared, embedded in an articulate framework of contemporaneous authors. Single-poem analyses can be found also in Freya Johnston’s chapter which focuses on the poem ‘To a Mouse’ – both from the point of view of the influences we can find in it of poets such as Alexander Pope and John Ray, and from that of the significance of individual words within the text (such as the function of the term ‘plantations’). David Sergeant’s introductory contribution also focuses on ‘To a Mouse’ – it is a poem which admittedly appears in many – if not most – chapters, to illustrate different concepts, and it serves the purpose in Sergeant’s chapter to explore the performative side of poetry.

Individual words and concepts are closely examined and show different narratives, as is the case for Claire Lamont’s analysis of the notions (and presence in Burns’s texts) of ‘house’ and ‘home’, and Douglas Dunn’s considerations about Burns and loyalty towards nation and class. The specificity of nuance, and detail of meaning of Burns’s word-choice for his poems is explained by Murray Pittock. By examining individual words in ‘To a Louse’ and ‘Halloween’, Pittock focuses on the parallels and discrepancies between Burns’s and Wordsworth’s attitude towards language. Wordsworth and Burns are further analysed in Stephen Gill’s chapter, where he outlines the presence and influence of the Bard throughout Wordsworth’s life and poetry.

Burns’s Scottish literary predecessors, particularly Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, are explored in great detail by Rhona Brown, in the light of their influence on and parallels with Burns, but also of his ‘geographical’ uniqueness (31). But part of Burns’s uniqueness also lies in how he fashioned his persona and his literary context: Gerard Carruthers explains how it may be argued that ‘it is his fictional projection, to some extent, that creates a later reality’ (39). Burns’s appeal as the ‘heaven-taught ploughman’, as Meiko O’Halloran points out, was carefully analysed and reproduced by Hogg to fashion his ‘Shepherd’ poetic guise. In the light of the similarities between the ‘unethical’ (168) characters of Burns and Byron, Brean Hammond invites the readers to view the latter as ‘Scottish’, and to consider the consequences of reading both characters ‘ethically’.

But Burns’s impact also extended to Ireland. Patrick Crotty draws unexpected parallels between ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ and the Irish Gaelic poem *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, and

Michael Griffin notes the similarities and links between the figures of Burns and Thomas Dermody. Bernard O'Donoghue brings us into the twentieth century, as he explains how it came to be that Burns became so popular in Ireland as to be considered a National Bard. Fiona Stafford analyses Seamus Heaney's relation to Burns through his essays, and their interpretations, and Robert Crawford's invitation to modern Burns Clubs to consider a 're-engagement between contemporary poetry and Burns Supperers' (193) gives us an insight into the complex world of Hugh MacDiarmid and his position towards Burns and Burnsians.

The sheer variety and depth of the topics treated shows how much work there is still to be undertaken about Robert Burns, and how studies about him are very much relevant to the twenty-first-century scholar. The range of essays in *Burns and Other Poets* show how the unexhausted topic of the Bard's literary persona provides ever fresh scope for consideration and new interpretations.

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