

# Poems And Letters Of Robert Burns

Read By Max Dunbar - Folkways Records FL 9877



LE STREET, GLASGOW, SCOTLAND

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PR  
4300  
1960  
N5

MUSIC LP

The Simple Bard  
To A Mouse  
Is There For Honest Poverty  
The Selkirk Grace  
To A Haggis  
To A Louse  
The Rigs O' Barley  
Address To An Illegitimate Child  
Letter: To Mrs. Riddel  
Letter: To Miss Kennedy  
Letter: To Mrs. Dunlop  
On John Bushby  
There's Nought But Care  
First When Maggy Was My Care  
Tibbie Dunbar  
Ae Fond Kiss  
Highland Mary  
Such A Parcel Of Rogues In A Nation  
Address To The Unco Guid  
Bruce To His Men At Bannockburn  
Tam O' Shanter

*Poems And Letters Of  
Robert Burns*

Descriptive Notes are inside pocket

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# Poems and Letters of ROBERT BURNS

on the Bicentenary of his Birth

Notes by MAX DUNBAR



Maxwell John Dunbar was born in Edinburgh in 1914. As a boy he lived in various parts of Scotland, including the Outer Hebrides, Ross and Cromarty, Ayrshire and Edinburgh. He came to Yale University on a fellowship in 1937, from Oxford University, and is now Associate Professor of Zoology at McGill University in Montreal. He is an expert on arctic marine biology with twenty years of work in the arctic behind him, from Alaska to Greenland. Folklore and folk music have been one of his keenest interest for many years, and he has made a special study of the songs and ballads of Scotland and Ireland.

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Robert Burns was born in 1759 and died in 1796, not quite 37 years old. In that short span of years he had achieved more than most men could do in twice the time -- earned the undying love and admiration of his countrymen, generation after generation, and the respect of the world in general for a great poet of his native soil. He is difficult to translate, but he has been translated into many tongues, most successfully perhaps into the west Jutland dialect of Danish, a language to begin with not far removed from the original. He translates worst of all into English, which may account for the jolly patronage he usually receives from the Sassenach.

Although Burns's father, William Burns was "suspected" of Jacobite leanings, at a time when there was danger attached to such suspicion, there is no real evidence that Burns was Jacobite more than in the occasional word. And in the word, which was his medium, he could be Jacobite and not. Compare, for instance, his "Such a parcel of rogues in a nation" (this record), which is highly nationalistic (and therefore for that century, Jacobite) with "Ye Jacobites by name" (Songs and Ballads of the Scottish Wars; Folkways 3006) which is frankly cynical towards revolution in general and Jacobitism in particular.

Burns stood for something far more enduring than the politics of his day, or any day. He tells of the worth of man ("man differs from man only in the polish, not in the grain"), he stands for forthright dealing, the exposure of cant and hypocrisy, for good whisky and plenty of it, and for the appreciation of beautiful women.

He is described by one of his early biographers, Allan Cunningham (who knew him in life) as "tall and sinewy, and of such strength and activity, that Scott alone, of all the poets I have seen, seemed his equal: his forehead was broad, his hair black, with an inclination to curl, his visage uncommonly swarthy, his eyes large, dark, and lustrous, and his voice deep and manly. His sensibility was strong, his passions full to overflowing, and he loved, nay, adored, whatever was gentle and beautiful."

Burns's outstanding characteristic, that which stamps his life and works, is simplicity, real and honest simplicity. Simplicity is a rare priceless quality.

Burns's father died when Burns was young, and he was left with the farm and the family. As a farmer he did not flourish, more by misfortune than by lack of ability or application. Moreover, his attention was more and more diverted to other things, especially to the writing of verses, many to the ladies, one of whom is quoted as saying that an hour with Robbie Burns in the dark was worth a life-time of light with any other body, and many to local friends and about the everyday things of farm life. Although he did not, perhaps, know it at the time, he was with these humble themes writing the book which would forever stand as successor in the great lineage of Scottish poets from Dunbar and Douglas, through Lyndsey and James the Fifth; and he was also making the southwest of Scotland, the region of the exploits of the great Wallace, as well known as others had made the border country, the eastern lowlands and the country north and west of the Highland line.

The poet rose as the farmer sank. His first edition appeared in 1786, and it was an immediate success. All over the west his songs were sung; one of the Auld Licht ministers lent a copy of it to Allan Cunningham's father, with the word: "Keep it out of

the way of your children, lest ye find them, as I found mine, reading it on the Sabbath." It was a success, but the edition was small and when sold out it was not then reprinted. Burns's efforts to find wealthy patrons failed, and he was about to sail, in despair and gloom, for Jamaica, a low point in his life which is recorded in these two unhappy verses:

The gloomy night is gath'ring fast,  
Loud roars the wild inconstant blast;  
Yon murky cloud is foul with rain,  
I see it driving o'er the plain;  
The hunter now has left the moor,  
The scatter'd coveys meet secure;  
While hear I wander, prest with care,  
Along the lonely banks of Ayr.

Farewell, old Coila's hills and dales,  
Her healthy moors and winding vales;  
The scenes where wretched fancy roves,  
Pursuing past unhappy loves.  
Farewell my friends, farewell my foes;  
My peace with these, my love with those.  
The bursting tears my heart declare  
Farewell the bonie banks of Ayr.

He was stopped from his Jamaica venture by a letter, arriving in the nick of time, from Professor Blacklock of Edinburgh, who suggested that he should come to the capital and publish another edition. In Edinburgh he spent a little less than a year, at first lionized and then gradually forgotten. His forthright manner and lack of rustic shyness or bashfulness surprised the lords and ladies of Edinburgh society. The ladies he charmed, as usual, and the gentlemen he treated as he treated all men. "He felt neither eclipsed by the titled nor struck dumb before the learned or the eloquent....In the society of men alone he spoke out: he spared neither his wit, his humour, nor his sarcasm -- he seemed to say to all .. 'I am a man, and you are no more; and why should I not act and speak like one?'" (Cunningham).

The public patronage which he might have expected, and which he surely deserved, did not come. He soon found himself neglected, as a wonder that had palled. No doubt he had offended many who might have helped him, by the bite of his wit. He bade farewell to Edinburgh and went back, for a time, to the plough, this time at Ellisland, on the Nith, together with a job as exciseman, procured for him by one of his few steadfast friends in Edinburgh. He stayed there only three years before he moved to Dumfries, with the excise job alone to support him and his family (he had married Jean Armour for the second time, this time in church).

In this post-Edinburgh period of his life he produced many of his most important poems, including Tam o' Shanter, and most of his best known songs. His wife records seeing him in the throes of composition, walking on the river bank oblivious of her presence, and muttering as he passed:

"Now Tam! O, Tam! had they been queans,  
A' plump and strapping in their teens...."

But in spite of this productivity, or perhaps because of it, he was failing, especially after he moved from Ellisland to Dumfries. He had been cold-shouldered by his country, or at least by the powerful of that country, and he felt neglected and cast off. He died on July 21st, 1796. The academics, who were largely responsible for his neglect during his lifetime, chased him even in the grave. In 1834 a group of craniologists dug him up to measure his



skull, to make sure that he had really been capable of writing "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "To Mary in Heaven".

Burns was a prophet of gentleness and compassion, for all he could be so biting satirical. He understood human frailties and gave them understanding expression. Even his sarcasm was tinged with humour:

"Here lies John Bushby, honest man!  
Cheat him, Devil, gin ye can."

And on pomp and posing:

"O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see ourself as others see us!"

And, perhaps best of all:

"Then gently scan your brother man,  
Still gentler sister woman;  
Though they may gang a kennin' wrang,  
To step aside is human:"

He was, and is, a bulwark against the creeping and sapping corrosion of the Englishman, the Sassenach. To the great surprise of many Scots, such a bulwark appears to be necessary. Only two hundred years after all highland dress was proscribed by the Westminster Government, we find a renewed attack on the kilt in the British army. Burns gives a reminder of what Scotland is, of the richness of the Scottish heritage, and its wide difference from the English heritage; of the richness of the very language he used, the rolling Lallans, or Lowland tongue, which has taken so much strength and variety from the French and the Scandinavian languages.

Burns stands up and says exactly what he thinks, which may be a way of ensuring a short and unhappy life but nevertheless gives deep and abiding satisfaction also, both to the perpetrator and to his readers and aficionados; in this he echoes the memorable question put by Buccleugh, the Keeper of the Scottish Border in the time of Queen Elizabeth Tudor. Buccleugh, when taken to task by the English Queen for having taken her prisoner, Kinmont Willie,

from the Keep of Carlisle, in such terms as "How dare you, sir?" hotly came back with "What is it that a man dares not do?" By the same token, Burns reminds us of the great democratic tradition in Scotland, which has a length of history that would surprise the American and the Canadian, schooled in the standard texts which make no mention of it. It is for such reasons as these that the toast "to the immortal memory" is drunk with thoughtful sobriety by Scots the world over, on the night of the twenty-fifth of January, the birthday of Robbie Burns.

#### GLOSSARY

Aboon	Above
Aft	Often
Agley	Awry, wrong
Aiblins	Perhaps
Airns	Irons
Ane	One
Asklent	Awry, squint
Ay, aye	Always
Baith	Both
Bane	Bone
Bauld	Bold
Bear	Barley
Big	Build
Billie	Young man, companion
Birk	Birch
Birkie	Clever, conceited man (term of contempt), mischievous fellow
Blastie	
Bleezing	Blazing
Blellum	one that talks idle nonsense
Blether	Talk nonsense
Boddle	Copper coin
Bogle	Ghost, hobgoblin
Bousing	Drinking
Brattle	Hurry, flurry
Brawlie	Very well, finely
Brent	Bright, clear
But	Without
Byke	Bee Hive, nest

Cantrip	Charm, spell	Luggie	Wooden dish
Carlin	Old woman		
Cauld	Cold	Mailen	Farm
Chapman	Fellow	Mair	More
Clatter	Idle story, to tell idle stories	Maun, mauna	must, must not
	Snatched at	Meikle	Much, big
Claught	Snatched, hooked	Melder	Load of grain sent to the mill
Cleekit	Bought	Mishanter	Accident
Coft	Ninny, Sissy,		
Coof	Cast	Naig	Nag, horse
Coost	Ploughshare	Nappy	Ale
Coulter	crouch, duck	Nieve	Fist
Cour	Hoar-frost	Niffer	exchange, barter
Cranreuch	Greasy	Nit	Nut
Creeshie	Crawling	Noddle	Head
Crowlin'	Short staff		
Cummock	Short	Onie	Any
Cutty			
		Painch	Paunch
Daimen	Rare, occasional	Pattle	Small spade
Daunton	terrify, daunt	Plack	Old Scotch coin
Daut	Caress, pet		
Dirl	Thrill, twinge	Rair	Roar
Donsie	Pettish, restive	Reamin'	Brimful, frothing
Douce	Sober, soft, wise	Reekin'	Smoking
Droddum	Breech	Rig	Ridge, stook
Drouthy	Thirsty	Rigwoodie	Wrinkled
Drumlie	Muddy	Rin	Run
Dub	Small pond, puddle	Rozet	Rosin
Duddie	Ragged, ragged garment	Sae	So
		Sark	Shirt
Eldritch	Ghastly, eerie	Sconner	Loathing, Loath
Ettle	Try, attempt	Sic	Such
		Siller	Money, silver
Fa'	fall, lot, fate	Simmer	Summer
Fairin'	Present from the Fair	Skellum	Noisy fellow
Fash	Trouble, care	Skelpit	Striking the ground, walking fast
Faut	Fault		
Ferlie	wonder, marvel	Skinking	Thin, as soup
Fient	Fiend, oath	Slap	Gate, breach in fence
Flainen	Flannel	Sleekit	sleek, sly
Foggage	Grass, forage	Smeddum	Powder, dust
Fou	Drunk, full	Smooored	Smothered
Fyke	Fuss	Snell	Bitter
		Sonsie	Comely, pleasant
		Spier	Ask
Gang	Go	Sprattle	Scramble
Gar	Make, force to	Squattle	Hide, squat
Gaun	Going	Stane	Stone
Gear	Riches, goods	Staw	Surfeit, stole
Ghaist	Ghost	Stibble	Stubble
Glaikit	Foolish	Sticket	Stuck
Gowd	Gold	Strunt	Walk sturdily
Gree	Agree	Swats	Good ale, new ale
Greet	Weep		
Grozet	Gooseberry	Tapselteerie	Head over heels
Guid	Good	Tentless	Heedless, careless
		Thairm	Small-gut
Hae	Have	Thrave	Two shocks (24 sheaves) of corn
Hald	Home, freehold		
Hale	Whole	Tint	Lost
Haffet	Temple (side of the head)	Tippeny	Tuppeny
Happer	Hopper (of a mill)	Towzie	Shaggy, rough
Hoddin-gray	Coarse woolen cloth	Tyke	Dog
Houlet	Owl	Toy	Old-fashioned headress
Hurdies	Hips, buttocks		
		Unco	Very, prodigious
Ilka	Each, every	Usquebae	Whisky
Icker	Ear of grain	Vauntie	Joyous
Jaup	Jerk, as with water shaken	Wad	Would
		Walie	Large, ample
Ken	Know	Wark	Work
Kintrie	Neighbours, country	Warl, Warld	World
		Warly	Worldly
Laith	Loath	Wean	Child
Lave	Rest, remainder	Winnock-bunker	Window seat
Link	Trip along	Wonner	Wonder
Lowpin	Leaping	Wyliecoat	Flannel vest