

Memorialising Burns: Dundee and Montrose compared

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Introduction

This short paper is intended to provide an indication of the kinds of issues that are being explored by the Dundee-led component of the 'Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory: Robert Burns, 1796-1909' project. It is a case study. It outlines the story of the campaign for a statue of Robert Burns in Dundee which was waged between 1877 and 1880. It looks at the public reception of the statue when it was unveiled. Was there a tension, a disjunction even, between the statue as designed and in respect of its semiotic function, and the 'meaning' of Burns for those who had led the campaign for, contributed to and celebrated the unveiling of, the statue? Which of Burns' poems and songs were the most influential? Unfortunately little if any of the correspondence surrounding the commissioning and unveiling of the Dundee statue has survived. There is however a fairly rich cache of such materials for Montrose. This is used later in the essay in part to reinforce some of the points made earlier about Dundee, but also to highlight differences in the commissioning processes and progress of the campaigns for the statues in the two Tayside towns. Occasionally, material relating to statues of Burns elsewhere has been included, where this adds something to the analysis. More comprehensive studies will appear in due course. Included too is some information on how statues of Burns were received, both by the public and contemporary art critics. Examined briefly is the subsequent impact of the more critical comments that were made about the Dundee statue. Neither those who commissioned the statues in focus here, nor the sculptors who created them, were operating in a cultural vacuum.

What should also become apparent is the range of approaches, skills and knowledge being applied for this pioneering project, with those of the social and economic historian being complemented by with those of the historian of art and architecture as well as literary scholars. The essay is exploratory. Comment and suggestions on what's been said and on what further questions might be asked, are welcome.

Background

Unlike Burns and Ayr, Burns and Dumfries, Burns and Edinburgh even, Burns and Dundee don't resonate in the way the other pairings do. Robert Burns' father's family hailed from the Mearns, the expanse of farmland that straddles Kincardineshire and north Angus, the county of which Dundee was the premier town - but that is stretching the connection. Burns, however, did once stop over in Dundee, during his tour of the Highlands in 1787. The city, then only a town, albeit one of Scotland's ancient royal burghs, he described as a pleasant, low-lying place. Other than that, silence. While Burns' stay in Montrose was equally brief, his links with Montrose were stronger. Indeed the 'moving sentiment' for the proposal in 1882 that a statue of Burns be erected in Montrose was said to have been his father's connection with the district and that his cousins had been employed in the burgh. As will be seen however, even these memories were insufficient to instil in the town's population at the end of

the nineteenth century the kind of civic pride of association that were evident in places like Dumfries and Kilmarnock.

But if Dundee left only a fleeting impression on Burns – albeit a more favourable one than others who visited the town towards the end of the eighteenth-century – Burns made a lasting mark on Dundee. The most visible sign of this is the squat-looking but imposing and bigger than life-sized bronze statue of Burns that since October 1880 has sat on a pedestal of Peterhead granite in Albert Square. Necessarily invisible however, is the determination there was amongst its proponents to have a statue of Burns erected in Dundee. Statues in Ayr, Dumfries, Kilmarnock, Paisley and even Glasgow make more immediate sense, given Burns's associations with south-west Scotland. But Dundee? What at first sight seems puzzling is in fact rather unexceptional in that the Dundee Burns statue was simply one of several Burns statues that were erected in Lowland Scottish towns between 1877 and 1896, after which the flood became a trickle. In places other than Dundee – Leith for example, in 1898 – Burns statues were erected even though their connections with Burns were tenuous. Burns was always more than a local hero; the nation claimed him. Over a longer time, even more statues than stood in Scotland were commissioned and inaugurated far from Burns' homeland; most numerous in North America, and Australia and New Zealand.² But large-scale statues didn't simply appear from nowhere. Someone had to propose one, and to find allies and sponsors. Statues and their pedestals and site preparation had to be paid for, usually by public subscriptions. Costs varied, but they were never less than several hundred pounds. Raising funds demanded considerable time and effort on the part of the organisers. Sculptors had to be found, briefed and then commissioned. Suitable locations for the statues had to be identified, and allocated, usually after negotiation between the committee formed to campaign for the statue in question, and the local authorities. By describing and analysing the means by which all this was accomplished in Dundee we will of course learn much about the campaign in Dundee (and its counterpart in Montrose). But we will also begin to understand better than we do at present the factors that lay behind the remarkable urge there was to memorialise Burns in the final third of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century.

Several memorials to Burns were erected in the first half-century following his death, notably the monuments in Dumfries (1818), Alloway (1820) and Edinburgh (1831): securing memory. It appears that much, but by no means all of the inspiration – and money – for the early memorials came from Scotland's social elite, led by aristocrats and the landed gentry. Three of the five men who in 1814 headed the campaign for the Burns monument at Alloway were of landed stock: Alexander Boswell of Auchinleck, Sir David Hunter Blair of Blairquhan and Hugh Hamilton of Pinmore. The original committee was soon supplemented by the earl of Eglinton and other representatives of Ayrshire's titled elite, along with others of substance, such as William Cowan, a banker from Ayr.³ The committee established in 1819 for a national memorial to Burns in Edinburgh was chaired by the duke of Atholl, whilst amongst the other 'noblemen and gentlemen' present were lord Keith, and Charles Forbes, MP, sometime head of Forbes & Co, of Bombay. Playing their part too were members of the mercantile classes and prominent townsmen. Motives were various, and included a profound sense of guilt – that Burns had been allowed to die in poverty – that had to be assuaged; patriotic regard for Burns as a Scottish poet who could compare with the best English and Irish writers; the opportunity Burns' fame provided

to extol the virtues of Scotland's educational system, and the values of its Presbyterianism; a desire to exploit the growing band of literary tourists and thereby enhance the fortunes of those towns that could claim a link with Burns. The term 'Burnomania' was coined as early as 1811⁴, although the phenomenon the term describes had become apparent even in Burns' own lifetime. In the later years of his life a stream of visitors made their way to Dumfries to see and if possible meet Scotland's humbly-born poetic genius, not a few from Ulster where Burns' radical politics may have had a particular resonance, although less than has sometimes been suggested.⁵ Not long after Burns died flocks of admirers and enthusiasts - many with a voyeuristic bent - began to make pilgrimages to his birthplace cottage as well as the Kirk at Alloway and the Ayrshire countryside associated with his poems and songs.⁶ Although not unique to literary visitors paying homage at sites associated with Burns, not a few were intent on leaving their mark with initials carved in wood or stone, whilst others departed with hastily removed relics which, recycled, fed a growing market for Burns memorabilia.⁷ As the reference above to Bombay suggests, Scots abroad - not only in India, but also the Caribbean, North American and England - contributed to the early efforts to celebrate Burns; nostalgia and longing were prominent amongst the motives that induced this response to his death.

From the outset there was a competitive edge to the business of celebrating Burns. The gentlemen of the counties of Ayr and Dumfries were both keen to have the first major memorial to the poet, a rivalry that stimulated both into action.⁸ There was a similar race to form Burns clubs and societies and to hold regular Burns dinners or suppers but by the final third of the nineteenth century Scotland's towns were vying with each other to declare in more permanent form their association with Scotland's bard. They vied with each other for critical acclaim, with most aspiring to have their own specially commissioned statue. Indeed Glasgow's leading campaigner for a statue had to fend off a proposal from Kilmarnock that the Ayrshire town should have a copy of the (as yet un-commissioned) Glasgow statue with the advice that to have 'any attraction of value', Kilmarnock should look for a statue that was 'original'; if Glasgow was to assist, it would be by offering Kilmarnock one of the models they rejected.⁹ Earlier in the century statues had been raised in some Scottish cities to commemorate more traditional 'great men' - establishment figures such as generals, politicians and inventors - and Sir Walter Scott. But while poets had been accorded heroic status in the setting of London's Westminster Abbey as early as the mid-sixteenth century, it was in the post-Romantic era that the fashion grew for erecting public monuments to writers.¹⁰ The new-found enthusiasm to build permanent memorials to Burns came in the wake of what for many was the unexpected, nationwide efflorescence of centenary celebrations marking Burns' birth in 1859.¹¹ Like the Ayr Burns Festival of 1844, the extent to which people in Scotland but also overseas organised and then participated in processions, meetings, concerts, soirees, dinners and dances in January 1859 stunned and perplexed London journalists and commentators who sought to account for the literally hundreds of such events.¹² *The Illustrated London News* for example, whose editor had travelled to Ayr to cover the Ayr Festival in 1844, ran an extensive feature entitled, 'The Burns Centenary, and its Meaning'.¹³ Hardly a town or village in Lowland Scotland failed to hold some kind of function to mark the occasion.¹⁴ Not dissimilar in terms of large-scale participation was the centenary of Burns' death, in 1896. Burns, it seems, had in the century following his death, acted as a prompt to intensify the expression of a series of shared

values and convictions within Scottish society, even if at times that consensus had been exposed as illusory.¹⁵

Arguably the most significant impact of the 1859 celebrations was the implementation of a proposal that Burns' achievements and what he represented should be marked in a more permanent fashion. The idea of memorials to Burns was not new. As we have seen, long before 1859 steps had been taken to secure the poet's memory. John Flaxman's statue of Burns had been completed in the 1820s and was put on public view in the Burns monument on Edinburgh's Calton Hill in 1839.¹⁶ It is at present unclear what precisely lay behind the resurgence of enthusiasm for permanent memorials of Burns from 1859. However, one aspect of the wave of post-1859 statue construction that appears to have been different from what had happened during the first three decades of the nineteenth century is the degree to which there was popular engagement with the process. Part of the thinking may have been that those thousands of Scots who had celebrated 'the centenary of 'their' poet in 1859 should have the opportunity to register their ownership both publicly and permanently – through statue building. This can be inferred from several of the campaigns that were mobilised to raise funds for Burns statues, in which appeals for subscriptions were aimed at ordinary people; in this Glasgow led the way (and directly inspired a similar movement in Kilmarnock¹⁷), by appealing to the public for a 'popular contribution, limited to one shilling from each contributor'.¹⁸ But even this may not have been entirely unprecedented, in theory at least. As early as 1814 the Burns monument committee in Ayr had recognised the existence of 'an anxiety of all ranks to offer tribute to the Memory of Burns', and employed parish schoolmasters to raise subscriptions in their localities. What is not clear from the evidence currently available is how successful such early efforts were.

Dundee: the campaign for a statue

It is in this context of a broadening of the social base of interest in and enthusiasm for Burns, and the subsequent campaign to erect statues of Burns that what happened in Dundee should be understood. There are other contexts too, which enhance our understanding of how Burns was remembered in the last four decades of the nineteenth century. The period from the later eighteenth century and through to 1914 was an age of commemoration, of the 'discovery' of the centenary – and its multipliers, the bicentenary, tercentenary and so on.¹⁹ In many parts of Europe too, as nationalist fervour grew, it became increasingly common for statues of literary figures to be commissioned and unveiled. The celebration of cultural heroes through commemorative events and by statue- and monument-building – both heavily orchestrated activities - helped to construct and reinforce in very public ways, collective identities. Indeed in June 1880, four months before Dundee's statue of Burns was inaugurated, there had been three days of unprecedented celebration in Russia's Moscow, for the unveiling of a statue of Alexander Pushkin, the first in the city to commemorate a national cultural hero.²⁰

Scottish nationalism in the period was directed not at independence from the Union and empire, but rather at parity within these frameworks.²¹ However in its chronology and cultural force it had much in common with nationalist movements elsewhere. Amongst the panoply of cultural icons upon which nationalists in Scotland drew for inspiration were Sir Walter Scott, William Wallace and Robert Bruce.²² Above them

all however, as measured by the sheer number of life-sized statues and substantial memorials erected in the second half of the nineteenth century, stood Robert Burns. That most of the Scottish statues and memorials to Burns were constructed between 1877 and 1896, within the period which was also the high water mark of Scottish nationalism in the nineteenth century – from the 1850s through to the 1890s, is unlikely to have been simply coincidental.²³

In the new wave of Burns memorialisation, Glasgow (1877) was followed by Kilmarnock (1879), where the movement for a statue was begun days after the Glasgow campaign was launched in 1872, and was so successful financially that a great monument was also built – a shrine to Burns – into the front portico of which W G Stevenson's statue of Burns was placed at an elevated level.²⁴ The day of the unveiling was described as 'the most memorable' in the modern annals of Kilmarnock and, perhaps the most joyful ever for the burgh.²⁵ Dundee, which was next, went for broke (although not quite), and employed the pre-eminent Scottish sculptor Sir John Steell, whose links with Dundee included previously commissioned public works, notably a full-size statue of the town's Radical MP, George Kinloch. Cannily, however, the statue committee were able to use the model Steell had designed for a Burns statue to be erected in New York's Central Park, so what Dundee got was a cheaper version at the cost of 1000 guineas plus £250 for the pedestal; in all some £1,700 was required to complete the project. Concern with cost was not confined to Dundee. Ironically given what was accomplished in Kilmarnock, the originator of the movement for the Burns statue in Kilmarnock, James M'Kie, had investigated the prospect of securing a duplicate, at a lower price, of the statue eventually chosen by the Glasgow committee – even though at this stage the artist had not yet been chosen.²⁶

In Dundee's case, initially at least, serendipity played its part, with a chance visit of two Dundonians – Baillie Alexander Drummond, proprietor of a painting firm, and James Sturrock, a builder who had had known Steel previously through his work on the Kinloch statue - to the sculptor's Edinburgh studio in February 1877. This, however, was within days of the unveiling of the Glasgow statue, and the influence of civic emulation cannot be discounted; Drummond and Sturrock were committed urban improvers as indeed were several of those who joined the campaign for a statue in Dundee. Indeed at a large public meeting in Dundee in the autumn of 1877 one speaker conceded that 'there were not many beautiful things' in Dundee, and argued that a statue of Burns would add taste and refinement to a town that had hitherto been focussed on 'traffic and trade'.²⁷ The site allocated by the town council for the statue, in the open square alongside the grand Albert Institute, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott and in the heart of the town's principal commercial district, and at the top of two important streets, further emphasises the status attached to the statue of the national poet and hero. Hitherto the honour of permanent commemoration had been accorded only to local men – Kinloch and the engineer James Carmichael. What is clear is that on their return to Dundee, Drummond and Sturrock instigated a series of meetings - the first of which, held before the end of February, had raised an initial £300 - for the purpose of erecting a Burns statue.²⁸

As in most places, the impetus for the statue came from prominent citizens who were also Burns enthusiasts. In the Rev George Gilfillan, Dundee could boast one of the country's most ardent Burnsians. A campaigning, anti-aristocratic, democratically-

inclined, hypocrisy-hating United Presbyterian divine, Gilfillan published several editions and studies of Burns' work, the best-known being his posthumously published *National Burns*, in 1879, when arrangements for the statue in Dundee were well advanced. Gilfillan spoke and lectured eloquently on Burns' behalf.²⁹ And in his defence, preaching the case for Christian forgiveness against those moralising mid-Victorian kirk-men who condemned Burns-worship as sinful, an exoneration of the lax morals and drunkenness which they associated with the poet and his works. The organising committee included men who had been associated with the Radical movement in Dundee earlier in the century and who were Liberal in their politics in the 1870s. Also active was A C Lamb, proprietor of a temperance hotel in Dundee's Reform St, and an avid antiquarian who amassed a major collection of Burns' works and ephemera. But amongst relatively ordinary people too, there was backing for the efforts of the organising committee of town councillors, lawyers, employers and other local leaders.

One such body of support was Dundee's Burns Club, founded in 1860 in the aftermath of the 1859 centenary. It was later alleged to have 'the atmosphere of a working men's club', a factor, apparently, that led to the formation of the more genteel, teetotal and female-friendly Dundee Burns Society, in 1896. But from 1877 the Burns Club put its weight behind the campaign for a statue; it may have been where the idea originated or at least found strong encouragement.³⁰ Certainly the Club's president in the mid-1870s, Charles Chalmers Maxwell, 'an ardent politician of strongly Radical type' and 'tower of strength' for the city's Radicals, was in the forefront of the public appeal for funds for the statue.³¹ What mattered was not so much numbers. Club membership was small, with attendance at meetings of what was in effect an artisans', clerks', works overseers and managers' and small employers' mutual improvement society averaging no more than ten in the early 1860s.³² Even in the Club's heyday towards the end of the 1870s it was difficult to muster more than twenty members for meetings at which current political and philosophical questions were debated and members' efforts at creative writing was read and discussed; total membership was below fifty.³³ More important was the financial and morale boost which the Club gave to the statue committee, not least by putting on in 1878 a locally-acclaimed entertainment in the town's Theatre Royal as well as in a hall in the textile manufacturing suburb of Lochee. Performed mainly by Club members the production in question, played to packed houses, was 'Lights and Shadows, Or Episodes in the Life of Robert Burns'; after costs the Club's theatrical efforts contributed around £100 to the subscription fund.

Funds too were sought directly from working people, although just how successful mill managers and foremen were in eliciting subscriptions from Dundee's mill and factory workers is impossible to say. At least one broadsheet, 'A New Song on the Proposed Burns Statue in Dundee' was distributed in the hope of raising money from this source: mentioned explicitly were the 'bonny lassies in the mills' who would (it was anticipated) 'gea [sic] what they can'. The indications are, however, that proportionately, rather less was raised from poorly-paid textile workers in Dundee than from the many thousands of mechanics, craftsmen and others who in Glasgow and the west of Scotland had contributed their single 'democratic shilling' for the statue in George Square. In Kilmarnock too, some 78 per cent of the monies for the monument and statue there came from 'Individual', 'Trade' and 'Masonic' subscriptions.³⁴ Ironically, in Dundee, it required the opening of a great bazaar by the

earl of Strathmore in October 1878 to raise the largest proportion of the money needed to proceed with the project (in Kilmarnock too a bazaar was held, but its role in fund-raising was proportionately far less significant).³⁵ Just short of one year later, in August 1879, the giant 20-ton pedestal of polished granite from Peterhead was set in place, resting on foundations 22-feet deep. The statue itself was some nine feet in height. Dimensions and weight were reported in great detail, reflecting as they did something of the cultural value attached to the figure the monument in question celebrated.³⁶

Even if throughout much of Europe in the nineteenth century huge gatherings of various kinds, facilitated by the railway and steamship were commonplace, it was the unveiling ceremony on Saturday 16 October 1880 however that revealed just how important Burns had become for Dundee's inhabitants. But it was the working classes who on this occasion as at Ayr in 1844 who were especially enthusiastic – notwithstanding the holiday atmosphere generated by many of the towns' employers' decision to close their works an hour earlier than usual.³⁷ Assembled in Albert Square were between 25,000 and 40,000 people. Although some of these were visitors for the occasion, brought from nearby towns such as Arbroath, Forfar and Perth by cheap excursion trains put on by the Caledonian Railway Company, this was equivalent to as much as one-third of the town's population and in proportion is on a par with the 100,000 who may have crushed into Glasgow's George Square for the unveiling of the Burns statue there (it was claimed that one way or other, half a million people in the west of Scotland were involved in or at least touched by the ceremony). In Dundee another half of the town's people lined the gaily decorated streets or hung from windows or stood on roof tops to watch the spectacular procession of 7,000 or 8,000 which included not only civic dignitaries but also, and mainly, the massed ranks of Dundee's trades and societies – many of whose members sported Tam o' Shanter as a mark of respect for one of Burns' best-known poems. But tying down what Burns meant to those present is an exercise fraught with difficulty: as one notable Moscow newspaper commentator observed of the massive celebrations that had accompanied the unveiling of the Pushkin statue, what was more important even than Pushkin or the speeches of the major literary figures such as Dostoevsky who extolled his virtues, was 'the *idea* whose expression and personification they became in the eyes of the public'. In Moscow, semiotic function trumped the written or the spoken word.

Yet in Dundee the meaning of Burns for the marchers seems more transparent. Accompanied by several music bands – most of which comprised army volunteers - they proudly displayed the tools of their trades, the products they made and sometimes the name of the firm for which they worked. The values of Scotland's employing classes – hard work and laissez-faire individualism to name but two - were often shared by their workers, and both could call upon Burns as their champion.³⁸ On display too, strongly coloured and resonant with symbolism were trade emblems, banners and flags, many adorned with mottoes proclaiming their function as trade unions, as for example the Dundee branch of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, with the motto, 'Be united and industrious', or the bakers with their banner inscribed in gilt lettering, 'Let unity dwell amongst us'. But amongst all this were also lines taken from Burns, sentiments that reflected the understanding of those who displayed them what Burns stood for: independence, the dignity of man, and universal brotherhood.

The public, popular display of ardour for Burns in Dundee was certainly not unprecedented. Much earlier - even at the time of his funeral, in Dumfries on 25 May 1796, it was clear that Burns was perceived to have been an extraordinary Scot, even if in the last years of his life he had been spurned by the establishment in Scottish society that had hailed him in Edinburgh as the 'heaven-taught' ploughman. In this guise he was safe, compared to the republican close to his deathbed he was apparently anxious to be remembered as - although not beyond the walls of home and his favoured hostilities. Regardless (and anyway Burns had latterly joined the loyalist volunteers as the threat of invasion from France loomed larger), Dumfries was besieged for the occasion of his funeral, indicative perhaps of the recognition that with Burns' death, something of the 'ancient and once [independent] Scottish nation' had died too.

This is important, as, locked into the political union of 1707 that had created the British state it was largely through its oral and written culture that *Scotland* survived into the early nineteenth century. But getting to this point had been difficult, as elements of Scotland's identity - including the country's history, language and literature - had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries been eroded by the process of Anglicisation and the centralising tendencies of London government. It was against these formerly subtle but after 1815 increasingly visible forces - although probably not the union itself - that Sir Walter Scott railed in his *Letters of Malachi Malagrowth* (1826). Tangible was a 'heightened sense of Scottishness', manifested in the visit of King George IV to Edinburgh in 1822, the visual arts and a growing interest in Scotland's history.³⁹ Recognising that the Scots' language and dialect were the genetic markers of Scottish-ness, without which, according to Henry Cockburn, we 'lose *ourselves*', Burns was marshalled by patriotic Scots in the nineteenth century in the cause of cultural resistance.

In this regard Burns' appeal was broad and deep; in the words of the leading late Victorian Liberal, Lord Rosebery, Scotland's 'uncrowned king' from the 1880s who was at the forefront of the Scottish nationalist movement, it was Burns who, at a time when Scotland was losing respect and identity, seemed 'to start to his feet and reassert Scotland's claim to national existence; his notes rang through the world, and he preserved the Scottish language forever.'⁴⁰ In Dundee, Gilfillan was of the same mind, although like many nineteenth-century Scots for whom Burns was the pre-eminent carrier of Scottish culture, he saw no contradiction between the assertion of Scotland's distinctiveness, the demand for national dignity, and support for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and empire - a position that falls within the compass of what has been called 'unionist-nationalism'. In Dundee, with its dependence upon India for the raw material of its staple industry, jute, and empire markets for at least part of its sale, it could hardly be otherwise. Little wonder then that for the unveiling of the Burns statue, the Harbour and Cowgate Porters carried aloft a banner printed with the words, 'Rule Britannia for the interest of thy people'.

But this shouldn't detract from the fact that it was in the role of collector and adaptor of older Scottish song that Burns was paramount. It was by his songs that countless Scots stretching back to Burns's own lifetime and certainly shortly afterwards, first encountered, and loved, Burns. Song, declared the *Aberdeen Journal* in 1859, was the 'old art of Scotland', but it was also an art form that was accessible to virtually everyone, simply by being sung, or printed in cheap and therefore affordable

broadsheets and chapbooks. As far as Dundee is concerned, it is worth noting that Alexander Drummond, one of the two men who initiated the campaign for a statue of Burns, was reputed to have been well-known outside of the world of work and politics as a 'capital singer of old Scotch songs'. Song was the sound of everyday life, in the home, on the fields and in the workshop, and for many, an alternative to the sermon. Song lifted spirits. Burns' song had particular resonance for working people, evoking the natural world at a time of rampant urban growth and mechanisation, but also in the sense that in instilling a sense of human self-worth regardless of background or class, several of his songs were lyrical manifestos not only for their own time but which also transcended time. Accordingly, it is striking but not unsurprising, that those parts of speeches delivered at Burns' suppers and other gatherings devoted to Burns's memory that often drew the warmest applause were references to Burns's contribution to Scottish song. In Dumfries in 1882, as in Glasgow fourteen years earlier, the Burns statue was proclaimed as the commemoration of 'our greatest King of Song'.⁴¹

Easily overlooked from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, is how inspirational many of Burns' poems and songs were for his largely vote-less contemporaries and their successors. For Burns' early audiences prior to the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1868, lowly social rank and meagre incomes equated with demeaning social status and formally at least, marginal political influence. Ostensibly, and often in reality, landlords in the countryside and employers in the towns held the whip hand. Portrayed as the ploughman poet, and therefore a man of modest rank himself, Burns - early on in the nineteenth-century accorded the title 'people's poet' - inspired generations of worker-poet-imitators, not a few of whom were either from or lived and worked in Dundee. If much - but by no means all - of their poetry is laboured in style and mawkish in tone, and falls short of the standards set by modern day literary critics, it was also heart-felt and based on real-life experience.

Probably in the 1830s, Dundee's 'Republic of Letters' had been established. This was an informal gathering of literate, politically-active working people, which encouraged the practice, later enhanced by Gilfillan's patronage, of working-class writing, often with a radical, socially-levelling edge. Dundee too was one of a number of Scottish towns with a 'Poet's Box', an institution which offered impecunious writers the opportunity to publish their work - and to read that of others - usually in broadsheet form at the cost of a penny or less. Significantly, it was in December 1880, only a few weeks after the unveiling of the Burns statue that the Dundee-published *People's Journal* declared that the present was 'distinguished above all former ages' for the number of those 'who are, strictly speaking, people's poets'.⁴²

Unhappily for the cultural reputation of Dundee, with whom he has been irrevocably linked, it was this hotbed of aspirant literary genius that gave succour to William McGonagall; indeed Gilfillan was one of his patrons. On the day the Burns statue was unveiled, Dundee's self-styled 'poet and tragedian' - decked in full Highland garb for the occasion - joined in the procession with the few surviving members of the Weavers Lodge of Lochee, of which he was a member. Expecting - apparently - to be invited to join the platform party, 'he proudly strutted along the whole route, as if conscious that the divine afflatus rested upon him as well as it did Robert Burns.' His hopes however were disappointed, and McGonagall cut a lonely and disconsolate figure, denied the opportunity of giving a rendition of his latest poem, in praise of Sir John Steell and the statue. Consequently McGonagall had little difficulty empathising

with the rejection Burns experienced in his last years, and could write, with feeling, in his 1897 'Ode to the Immortal Bard of Ayr, ROBERT BURNS', of the 'sorrows of the poor *poet*/When he's in want of *bread*'. The poem culminated in a personalised appeal for help 'while living', as 'he [the poet] requires no help when he's *dead*.'

Much earlier, but also influenced by Burns was William Thom, the Inverurie-born hand-loom weaver and part-time poet, who also spent time – and was to die – in Dundee. Tellingly, when recalling his indebtedness to the 'Song Spirits' that had had the effect of lifting the heart of the 'fagged weaver', Thom referred specifically to Burns's song, 'A man's a man for a' that'. In similar vein, the 'New Song on the Proposed Burns Statue in Dundee' referred to earlier, called on the working classes to 'agitate ower a' the toun' for the statue, on the grounds of Burns's humanity, his fame (as a Scot), and his capacity to light with 'smiles o' rarest joy the darkness o' despair', but above all because Burns had 'raised the head o' poverty, and lowed the might o' wrong.' It was sentiments of this kind that produced the loudest acclamations during the unveiling ceremony. At this, Dundee's Liberal MP Frank Henderson, a highly-respected employer and parliamentary reformer⁴³, declared to the approving crowd that the 'true secret' of Burns's popularity was that:

He shed a glory round the struggles of honest poverty. He lifted labour from the ditch and set it upon a throne.

The honest man, tho' ne'er so poor,
Is king o' men for a' that. (Cheers)

He showed that the nobility of the soul was confined to no rank in life...that peers were the creation of earthly kings, but that the honest man was the noblest work of God himself. (Cheers)...Under the inspiration of these two ideas with which Burns...furnished him – the essential dignity of his labour and the possible nobility of his life – the Scottish working man became transformed. (Cheers)

'Deafening and protracted' cheering followed Henderson's speech, prior to the unveiling itself. The Union Jack under which shrouded the statue was hoisted away, whilst adding to the aural dimension of the proceedings the twelve guns of Artillery Volunteers fired a sharp salute.

The statue and its reception

The statue itself owed its inspiration to Burns' short-lived relationship with Mary Campbell, 'Highland Mary'. The first twelve lines of Burns' poem, 'To Mary in Heaven' are carved onto a scroll that lay at the feet of the poet, seated on the stump of an elm tree. Burns gazes heavenwards, apparently at the lingering star which it was reported that Jean Armour, Burns' wife had found him contemplating three years after Mary Campbell's death. If much of this is imagined, Steell was at pains to convey a forensically faithful representation of Burns' head, using for this Nasmyth's portrait as well as a cast of Burns' skull.⁴⁴

It is with difficulty that the values and influences that Frank Henderson attributed to Burns are to be found in Steell's statue, with the sculptor himself having deliberately

created a statue of Burns as a poet inspired by his lost love. It is questionable how far the statue represents the Burns the statue committee in Dundee wished to commemorate – although there is no doubting the hold of the Highland Mary narrative on the Victorians’ imagination. It seems that the statue had been seen and enthusiastically approved of by several thousand Edinburgh artisans whilst it was still in Steell’s studio, although just what they admired, or whether any of this was transmitted to their fellow workers in Dundee, is not known. Gilfillan on the other hand was inclined to make little of the Highland Mary episode in Burns’ life, concluding that had Mary married Burns, ‘probably she would not have been happy’.⁴⁵ The fact is that Steell’s Burns statue was purchased for Dundee ‘off the peg’. Its nature, shape and form were commissioned by the New York Caledonian Club – whose specification for what was a ‘colossal’ figure appears to have been for a representation of Burns of similar size but contrasting with the one of Walter Scott Steell had carved in marble for Edinburgh’s Scott Monument earlier in his career, a bronze version of which he executed for New York’s Central Park. Otherwise Steell seems to have had very much a free hand in terms of what he produced. Key influences behind the commissioning of the Burns statue – apart from a wish to match the Scott statue that had been commissioned by New York’s Walter Scott monument committee - almost certainly included nostalgia and a desire on the part of exiled Scots to remember a lost landscape, including perhaps those associated with Mary Campbell and Burns.⁴⁶ How far this applied in Dundee is less clear, although it is entirely feasible that those responsible for bringing Steell’s Burns statue to the city were at one with their counterparts elsewhere in urban Victorian Scotland who found succour in the myth of a pre-industrial rural idyll; it was this in part that drew urban workers to the countryside when they could get there, and to parks within the town setting if not.⁴⁷ The romance of the short-lived Burns-Mary Campbell relationship tugged hard at Victorian heart strings, with Highland Mary’s monument in Greenock, erected by public subscription in 1842, being another of the places that Burns pilgrims – many of them exiled Scots – included in their itineraries of hallowed places.⁴⁸ Whether this mattered in Dundee however is speculation. All that we know for sure is that the Dundee men agreed a price and, with the town council, determined the statue’s location; otherwise theirs was a duplicate, a representation of Burns with different motives in mind and designed for another place.



The statue clearly had many admirers, including Dundee’s Burns Club, and the *Art Journal*.⁴⁹ For some time following its unveiling, the statue drew crowds of interested

viewers. Yet from the outset, Steell's statue also had its critics. Local opinion is hard to measure, but what has been recorded tends to be negative: the statue lacked dignity; it was too low; Burns' body was twisted; the cravat was too thick. In this vein comes the pawky humour of one un-named Dundonian woman who commented: 'Ay...thae legs could hae made him a grand partner in a fowersome reel'.⁵⁰

From beyond Dundee too, critical voices could be heard, although the *Glasgow Herald's* condemnation in 1889 of Steell's 'monstrosity' was part of a wide-ranging attack on the quality of most public monuments in Scotland and those who commissioned them. Focussing on Burns, the newspaper expressed its disappointment that most statues erected in public places so far were limited adornments for Scotland's cities and towns – although hardly surprisingly this was not a view shared by their sponsors, such as Dundee's Burns Club. On the day of the unveiling of the aforementioned Burns statue in Kilmarnock, the town's local newspaper declared it to be, 'the very finest of the poet in existence' and certain to secure its sculptor's reputation. But it was less the sculptors who were culpable, and rather, according to the *Herald's* patronising art correspondent, the fact that the statues had been commissioned by 'small bodies of irresponsible men who usually know as much about sculpture as they do about the courses of the stars'. But sculptors too had contributed to this civic disfigurement through their willingness to 'repress themselves lest they should rise above the intelligence behind their commissions'. It was hoped therefore that the statues being planned for Ayr, Montrose and Paisley would result in one 'worthy of the poet, and harmonising in artistic merit with his position in Scottish literature'; most of those on display so far were, 'painfully suggestive of incapacity'.⁵¹ The point was put more directly by another critic, who remarked that George E Ewing's Burns in Glasgow was 'not a highly imaginative work'. Representing 'little more than a garbled version of the farmer of Mossgiel and Ellisland' - albeit tolerably accurately - the statue was 'devoid of insight, penetration, or character'. It was Burns without soul or intellect; the poet – it was alleged - was absent.⁵²

Although Ewing's statue in Glasgow, W Grant Stevenson's at Kilmarnock and Mrs D O Hill's in Dumfries had disappointed some commentators, it was Steell and his Dundonian sponsors who were subject to the fiercest criticism. The former was condemned for continuing to hold onto and give credence to the 'old and exploded' myth of Highland Mary and portraying Burns in this setting, thereby obscuring the poet's, 'worth, dignity, power, and greatness'.⁵³ Burns was not a 'model of grace', but there was 'no ground for believing that he was a hunchback'.⁵⁴ Andrew Carnegie, the Scots-born American steel magnate and Burns admirer, was similarly dismissive of the Central Park version with which he was familiar. It has been suggested that Steell may have been aware of the imperfections of his work without such prompting, making adjustments well before 1889 to the version of the seated Burns that was placed on the Thames Embankment in London in 1884 – where Burns's back is straighter and his head looks directly ahead rather than upwards.⁵⁵ Murdo Macdonald however has proposed that Steell's primary concern could have been to avoid repeating himself exactly in the statues for London and, in 1886, for Dunedin in New Zealand. Support for this proposition comes from fact that Steell was also working on a bust of Burns' head for Westminster Abbey, a commission that favoured a more forward looking pose.

A 'monument worthy of Scotland'

How much influence on subsequent sculptors and their commissioning committees the negative response to the Dundee statue is hard to say, although the criticism did apparently persuade the Ayr Burns Club to consult with 'a sculptor of good standing' when considering the winner of their competition for the statue to be erected in Ayr.⁵⁶ There is also a direct link between Carnegie's remarks and the ultimate form of the Montrose Burns. Early on – in 1883 - those behind the campaign for a Burns statue were left in no doubt what Carnegie's views were when he responded to their request for assistance. Carnegie was prepared to subscribe £20, but expressed his wish that 'in the interests of art and from a due regard for my favourite poet' the Montrose committee would not think of taking a replica of what he considered to be the 'outrage' committed by Steell, whose portrayal of Burns 'in the form of a hump-backed simpleton' he found 'distressing'.⁵⁷ Presumably it was because he was satisfied with the statue that was commissioned, from the Edinburgh-based sculptor W Birnie Rhind, that Carnegie was prepared, in 1912, to unveil it.

The length of time between 1882 and 1912 – thirty years – is striking, and much longer than the three to five years from conception to implementation of most Burns statue projects elsewhere. Evidently the idea was in part the brainchild of the town's provost and other Burns enthusiasts who commissioned the statue at a cost of around £600 – but not until 1889. The provost's death, however, as well as those of other key individuals like Robert White, 'an Ayrshire man and suggester [sic] of the movement', led to a loss of momentum.⁵⁸ But perhaps campaigning for a Burns statue for Montrose was always going to be an uphill struggle. This is indicated by lord Rosebery's somewhat cool response to an approach for a subscription in 1882, namely that he (Rosebery) was unaware 'of any special circumstances in Burns' career which makes it a matter of public moment that a statue of the poet should be erected in Montrose'.⁵⁹ Although Rosebery appears to have subscribed £5, other likely benefactors declined. A contrast is with Ayr, where around the same time the campaign for a Burns statue was launched, but brought to completion five years later, in 1891. But Ayr was Burns' birthplace. A sense that the town had failed in its 'duty' to have such a public memorial also helped to galvanise support.⁶⁰ Another factor in the minds of the towns' businessmen and civic leaders was their concern to establish Ayr as a premier visitor destination. Almost certainly for maximum effect, to draw visitors as well as to remind them of the town's links with Burns, the statue was located on the public road right in front of the town's South Western Railway Station 'and the main entrance to Ayr'.⁶¹

But not helpful in Montrose was the emergence of opposition (the basis of which is as yet unclear) on the town council to a statue of Burns, nor the rapidly diminishing stock of enthusiasm on the part of the townspeople to subscribe – if indeed it had ever been great. But when the campaign for the statue had got under way the town's staple industry – fishing – was in its hey-day. Depression in both the herring and white fish sectors followed in the second half of the 1880s, along with some contraction in the flax spinning trade, which was another significant employer of labour.⁶² Fewer than 40 inhabitants, out of a population which had fallen from 14,608 in 1871 to just over 13,000 had contributed anything by the end of 1898, a factor which in turn made it more difficult to persuade former inhabitants of the town living in Glasgow, Edinburgh and elsewhere, to supplement the statue fund. 'What are the Montrose

people themselves doing?’ asked the secretary of the Edinburgh Angus Club, who may have identified a recurring pattern of behaviour, with the people of Montrose being ‘very fond of relying on natives living away, to supply the wherewithal for such schemes’.⁶³ By the end of the century the rage for statues and the passion for Burns was less intense than formerly, although the unveiling of the Burns statue in Leith in October 1898 was heralded by a procession which looked much like the others elsewhere on similar occasions that had preceded it. The event, ‘unprecedented in the history of the Burgh’, induced great festivity, and attracted a watching crowd in which the trades and friendly societies were particularly prominent, several thousand strong.⁶⁴ In Montrose it was Birnie Rhind himself, who had bought the stone for the statue almost as soon as he had had the commission and begun work on it, and who therefore had most to lose, who over a period of years drove the fund-raising activities. In this he was assisted in part by members of the town’s recently-established Burns club, a bazaar (in September 1911) and a donation of £100 from the Dundee jute baron and philanthropist, James K Caird.⁶⁵ Compared to Dundee’s, the unveiling ceremony was a relatively tame affair, involving a much smaller crowd which was supplemented, somewhat fortuitously, by Burns lovers from Perth who happened to be on holiday in Montrose.



According to contemporary descriptions, Montrose’s Burns stood erect, ‘simple and dignified, massive in build, yet easy and graceful in pose’ – nine-foot high statue on a twelve-foot high pedestal. On this were four panels, symbolising Burns’ sympathies with the labourer, fair maidens, his love of animal life and Scotia’s muse. Burns held a scroll and pencil whilst also clearly visible were a sheaf of wheat and a plough. Belatedly, Montrose had produced a statue that matched the *Glasgow Herald*’s critic’s specifications of an acceptable portrayal of Burns. Similarly but earlier, Ayr’s statue,

designed by George A Lawson and unveiled in July 1891 was not only commended by the *Herald* but described by Edward Goodwillie in his survey of the world's statues and memorials of Burns as one of the best and probably the best yet erected.⁶⁶ It was Lawson's 'heroic' statue that was most often copied, four of which were erected in Canada alone.⁶⁷ It was about time that a statue appeared that met with a substantial body of critical approval, with the *Scotsman* having concluded after surveying the Burns statues in Dumfries, Dundee, Glasgow and Kilmarnock that even if all their best qualities were extracted, and then 'thrown together in a new statue', the result 'would not be satisfying'.⁶⁸ What impressed the *Herald* was not only that Lawson was 'a Scot among Scotchmen' (although only Scottish sculptors had been eligible to compete for the commission), but that while his statue of Burns resembled Nasmyth's standing portrait, 'it was nobler', and also bettered Flaxman's statue in Edinburgh.⁶⁹ Indeed, the paper's correspondent remarked, 'Nothing could be more Scotch in character or more like Burns than this statue; and nothing that we know in Scotch sculpture is so like the best work of the old Greeks'.⁷⁰ A frieze around the twelve-foot high pedestal of Aberdeen granite – designed by Messrs Morris & Hunter, architects with offices in London and Ayr - took the form of a ribbon emerging from a serpent, a symbol of eternity. A decorative background to the frieze was intended to 'symbolise Burns's power over the English speaking race'. Visible too were the thistle of Scotland, the shamrock of Ireland, England's rose, a palm leaf to represent India and the colonies and for North America, a hawthorn, or mayflower: global Burns.

Sculptors too had their opinions, none more trenchantly held than by J. Pittendrigh MacGillivray. Like Steell before him, MacGillivray had for some time been keen to execute a statue of Burns, of which he was a life-long admirer. MacGillivray had been unsuccessful in the competition for the Ayr statue but was commissioned by John Spiers, an Irvine-born merchant resident in Glasgow, to design a Burns statue for his (Spiers') native burgh, unveiled in 1896. Unusually, as it was Spiers' idea and he funded the project, there was no campaign for the statue, nor the need for a public subscription. MacGillivray was a fervent Scottish nationalist who by 1925 held not only that Burns was 'social revolution incarnate' but also a 'potential MUSSOLINI' who, regrettably in the 'brow-beaten Scotland of his day' had 'little stuff out of which to make BLACK SHIRTS'.⁷¹ MacGillivray rejected all Burns statues sculpted by Englishmen ('Burns by an Englishman is impossible'), accusing Flaxman of having not the 'faintest idea of the man of molten metal' Burns was, and writing off the Paisley Burns by the Londoner F W Pomeroy as 'a Sussex peasant leaning on his plough...on his head a regulation tourist's Tam o' Shanter'. But he had little time either for the efforts of his fellow countrymen. All were wanting, including Steell's at Dundee, where, according to MacGillivray, he had 'found a Methodist like person writhing in the throwes [sic] of an address to Mary in heaven' – 'maudlin sentimentality'. But it was for Ewing's statue of Burns in Glasgow that MacGillivray had the deepest contempt, with its appearance of 'a great heavy innkeeper, publican type of man'. It was, MacGillivray raged, 'an utter libel' on Burns. The city's Burns club members, he urged, should be ostracised by their fellow citizens until they 'take that foggy dolt down from above the name of Burns' and melt the desecration.⁷² MacGillivray had no illusions however about how difficult was the challenge to create a satisfactory statue of Burns, given the multi-faceted nature of Burns' life and character. Somehow the sculptor had to embody the physicality of Burns the ploughman, but also the ideals of a man who was 'the advocate of the rights and

dignity of man', as well as being a passionate lover, tender, a humorist, a master of irony and wielder of 'the flaying knife of satyr [sic]. Not surprisingly therefore, the model that was used for the Irvine statue – amongst the last of the late Victorian wave of Burns statues in Scotland - was different 'in many respects from the representations with which the public are acquainted in the various statues of Burns erected throughout the country'.⁷³ Less regard was had to Nasmyth's likeness of the poet – a radical break with tradition (although MacGillivray had not been entirely able to free himself from Nasmyth's influence); one of the factors that had endeared Ayr's Burns' sculptor George Lawson to the *Glasgow Herald* was that his studio was a 'Burnsiana gallery', the images in which were 'more or less scanned by Mr Lawson in his search for the facts of the portraiture of Burns'.⁷⁴ With his foot raised and resting on a rock, what was emphasised by MacGillivray was less Burns' contemplative side but rather his 'manly and independent spirit'; this after all was the author of 'A man's a man' and 'Scots wha hae'.

Conclusion

This short exploratory paper has attempted to explain, mainly by reference to Dundee, what lay behind the campaigns for statues of Burns that flourished between the early-mid-1870s and the 1890s. The survey is far from exhaustive. Missing are references to the rises in disposable incomes that were required to fund the statues, and other key historical phenomena which include political revolutions, economic transformations, urbanisation and the massive migration from the countryside which fuelled the growth of towns and cities. Only alluded to in passing was the revolution in transport – the appearance of steam railways and steamships - which supported a growing tourist industry and allowed people from different parts of the country to participate not only in the great Burns festival at Ayr in 1844 but also at the numerous ceremonies there were for laying out foundation stones and unveiling the statues of Burns. But what has been shown is that in addition to national and even Europe-wide factors, both political and cultural, which in part account for the urge to commemorate Burns, there were committed – even zealous - individuals who were prepared to devote sizeable amounts of time and energy to fund raising. Their role was critical. It seems too that when accounting for the success of such campaigns attention has to be paid to local circumstances, including the real or imagined strength of a city's or town's association with Burns. What has also become apparent is how intensely interested contemporaries were in the statues themselves, and how Burns was represented in bronze and stone. Much work still requires to be done on understanding better the semiotics of the statues, the pedestals upon which the statues were placed, the panels around the pedestals and indeed where the statues were located. Important too are the relationships between the committees who commissioned the statues and the sculptors they employed. Clearly the opinion of critics – lay and professional – also mattered, and impacted on the form subsequent statues took. Key questions – central to the *Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory* project - are whose Burns are we looking at, which of his poems and songs and characteristics and values were represented in the grand statuary of the period, and how far did this influence viewers' perceptions of the poet?

¹ I am grateful to Professors Murdo Macdonald (University of Dundee) and Murray Pittock (University of Glasgow) for their incisive comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Katherine McBay, Julie Danskin and Laura Paterson who did much of the archival research upon which it is based.

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