James Currie’s *Works of Robert Burns*: The Politics of Hypochondriasis

“My nerves are in a damnable State.—I feel that horrid hypochondria pervading every atom of both body & Soul.”

Dr. James Currie’s four-volume *Works of Robert Burns*, published by request of family and friends four years after the poet’s death, was the most important work determining Burns’s cultural currency during the romantic era. In this discussion I want to explore the implications of Currie’s medical analysis of Burns. I will investigate the connections between Currie’s concern regarding what he called “national prejudice” and his presentation in the *Works* of Burns as a hypochondriac. Anthony Synnott has observed in his recent work, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*, that “[t]he body is not a ‘given,’ but a social category with different meanings imposed and developed by every age, and by different sectors of the population. As such it is therefore sponge-like in its ability to absorb meanings, but also highly political.” I will argue that Currie’s analysis of the “damnable State” of Burns’s nerves must be seen in connection with Currie’s attitude to the political “State” of Great Britain, in particular, with his desire to promote a unified British state in which Scottish people could participate fully. I will first examine Currie’s concern with the body politic, as he represents national feeling or “prejudice” as a disease. This will lead to a consideration of Currie’s representation of the relationship between Burns’s own national prejudice and his disease. I will conclude by suggesting that Currie emphasizes Burns’s medical condition as a way of distracting his readers from Burns’s politics which might have

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threatened the advancement of Scottish people within Britain in the years shortly after the French Revolution. Burns's hypochondriasis in the *Works of Burns*, then, comes to represent Currie's own dis-ease with the promotion of Scottish political difference within Britain.

To begin with I want to consider the parallel Currie draws in his other writing between nationalism, or "national prejudice," and medical disorders. Most of his earlier published work, including journalism, letters written to papers and political pamphlets, indicates his concern with how national prejudice, first in America and then in Britain, was affecting attitudes towards the Scots. Currie's literary career was launched in the tumult of the American Revolution. Born and educated in Scotland, he served as a youth as bookkeeper to a Glaswegian tobacco company in Virginia. He soon found himself embroiled in the complications of the Revolution, as the Americans identified the Scots in their midst with the English oppressors. Currie's letter defending the Scots traders was published in the Thursday, 23 March 1775 edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, signed simply by "A Scotchman." In this letter, Currie assumes the character of "an old gray headed fellow" who has been living in Virginia for twenty years. He says that while the newspaper up to this point has "teemed with abuse" against the Scots, he wants to investigate the real causes of such attitudes, which, in his assessment, are economic: "Enquire into the circumstances of these men who are most violent in invectives against the Scotch, and you will find that many of them have got more in debt to them than they know how to pay." He suggests that the debtors' resentment of the Scots trickles down to the lower orders who, aping their superiors, abuse the Scots because to do so is "fashionable." Much of the animosity towards the Scots in Virginia derives from people "blinded by selfish passions," Currie suggests. The burden of the letter is to show national prejudice as a symptom of underlying causes and to suggest that national prejudice is detrimental to trade. Although in this case he is concerned to point out the differences between Scotland and England, we will see how in his later work he problematizes those differences.

Currie returned to Scotland in 1777 after a series of misadventures and began to study medicine at Edinburgh. His next work, a four-part commentary on Thomas Reid's *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* published in the *Analytical Review* for 1778, is another attack on national prejudice, this time in the intellectual realm. The review is signed "S.", perhaps an echo of Currie's earlier literary effort as "A Scotchman." He puts his defense of

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3. Quotations are taken from the *Virginia Gazette* (Thursday, 23 March 1775) 1. The charges against the Scots are twofold: 1) that they are unfair traders and 2) that they are enemies of American freedom. Currie argues that the only thing that the Scots are guilty of is offering better terms than the English for trade and credit.
Reid in terms of national affiliation: “A philosopher of the first order [Joseph Priestley] has attacked the doctrines of our author with a vehemence approaching to personal hostility, and Dr. Reid stands foremost in the list of the three Scotch Doctors who are arraigned for bold and insolent innovation, by the greatest and most successful innovator of the present age.”

Currie emphasizes the social and political causes behind the literary engagement: “This matter may in some degree be explained. The sceptical doctrines of Mr. Hume had spread a general alarm in the northern division of the island, which had communicated itself to the south. Pious men, firm themselves in the belief of revelation, were under apprehension for the rising generation” (Analytical Review 2 [1778]: 555). According to Currie, Reid and the other Scots maligned by Priestley, Oswald and Beattie, were attempting to combat Hume’s skepticism by arguing for a direct and immediate connection between mind and matter which privileges the senses. But Priestley neglected all this, carried away by his “personal hostility.” Currie’s defense of Reid is also a defense of Scottish participation in the English republic of letters and a dig at English national prejudice that excludes Scots. Currie suggests that prejudice against Scots is disenfranchising Scottish philosophers and also interfering with the intellectual economy.

Currie chose the topic “A Discourse on National Prejudice” to present to the Speculative Society of Edinburgh on March 14, 1780. He had an opportunity later that year to observe national prejudice firsthand in the Gordon Riots when he went to London to look for work. His reaction again was to pick up a pen, and his recently delivered paper no doubt provided a basis for the new text. Again, his special concern is the persecution of the Scottish people. In a series of three letters published in the Public Advertiser and addressed “To the Magistrates and Livery of the City of London,” Currie observes how the passions of the magistrates have infected the lower orders, so that London has become the scene of a “Civil War.” Currie ties the riots in with the prejudices against the Scottish Lord Bute, who served as a close advisor to George III. As before, he shows national prejudices to be spread by a trickle-down effect. According to

5. The riots were prompted by the Roman Catholic Relief Bill of 1778, which had been passed for England. When a similar bill for Scotland was suggested, rioting ensued in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and a Protestant Association was formed. A similar association was formed in London by Lord George Gordon with the design of petitioning for the repeal of the bill. On June 2, 1780, the petition was presented to the Commons and 60,000 people assembled in St. George’s Fields, Southwark. Most of the attacks in the riots were against propertied Roman Catholics. The main cause of the outrage at the riots was that the authorities did very little to stop the looting. See Christopher Hibbert, King Mob: the Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780 (London: Longman’s, 1938).
Currie, in order to encourage the alignment of the common people with Pitt and against Lord Bute, the Magistrates convinced the people that the Scots were threatening the integrity of the English nation. Currie comments that the Magistrates “poured forth nothing but the most virulent Abuse against one Half of the Island.”6 As a result, “The Abuse with which Lord Bute had been loaded, was soon extended to his Countrymen at large. The deluded Populace were taught to believe, that the Scotch had engrossed all Places of Profit and Power, and that new Swarms were daily crossing the Tweed to fatten on the Spoils of the South, and like an Army of Locusts, ‘to devour every green Thing’” (Public Advertiser, Aug. 15). The hatred of Bute was transferred “to his Country” and, accordingly, “the Hatred of Scotland enlisted Thousands under the Banners” of the party of Pitt. According to Currie, the Gordon riots and their aftermath have had a detrimental effect on the relations between Scotland and England: the “almost extinguished Flame of National Enmity has again kindled into Life, and produced all the Effects of Envy, Hatred, and Malice—” (Public Advertiser, Aug. 15).

What runs through all of these pieces of writing is the motif of national prejudice as a disease. As early as in his letter to the Virginia Gazette, Currie described it as an external substance that can make its way from one body into the next: “In vulgar and uncultivated minds nothing is more prevalent than national prejudice; they imbibe it, as it were, with their mother’s milk, and it generally sticks by them to the end of their lives” (Virginia Gazette [Thursday, 23 March 1775] 1). Even in the review of Reid, Currie manages to present the national prejudice that had resulted in the exclusion of Reid as a form of physical disorder. He concludes the review by warning readers that it is impossible to pass judgment on anything unless “the passions, as well as the imagination, be silent and still”: “The materials on which we reflect, are so minute, so mixed, and so volatile, that it is only the strongest minds that can in any degree arrange them even in their quietest state; the last breath of passion throws them into confusion, and every thing appears distorted and deformed” (Analytical Review 2 [1788]: 554).

Developing lines of thought from both these previous pieces, in his observations on the Gordon riots, Currie describes “National Enmity” as a passion gone to excess, a kind of temporary madness begun in the upper orders and transferred to the lower orders. The Magistrates and Livery of London became “drunk with the worst of Passions under the Mask of Patriotism” and, correspondingly, the “‘maddening Croud’ became furious” and subject to “wild Outrages”: “there are honest emotions of Approbation

which may produce temporary Excesses in such Men as the Mob and Magistrates of London, but to give Duration to their Outrages, it is necessary that the worst of Passions should be excited” (*Public Advertiser*, Aug. 28). Currie denies that “all those whom national Enmity united in the Excesses . . . were Men in whose general Character Envy or Malice reigned triumphant!” Rather, “their Judgment is perverted by prejudice, their Passions determine their Conduct before Reason has Time to operate.” Supporting this idea, says Currie, is the fact that it is possible to find “Men who, while they avow their Hatred of the Inhabitants of a Country at large, will yet make Exceptions in Favour of every one of them with whom they have been acquainted” (*Public Advertiser*, Aug. 28). Again, national prejudice or “enmity” for Currie is a passion out of control which takes over the senses.

We see Currie’s ideas of national prejudice as a “Contagion” further developed in a political pamphlet for which he became infamous. *A Letter Commercial and political Addressed to the Rt. Honble. William Pitt in which the Real interests of Britain in the Present Crisis are considered, and some observations are offered on the General State of Europe*, evolved from an actual letter which Currie had written to Pitt and which was published in pamphlet form in 1793. In the *Letter* Currie argues that Britain should not be involved in the war with France. The reason he offers for this position is economic: he believes that Britain should stay out of the war so it can supply merchandise to the rest of the European nations who are involved. His discussion of the problem, however, uses the metaphor of nationalism as a mental disease which will destroy the patient: “Enthusiasm is, from its very violence, of short continuance. . . . The accounts that we receive of the French shew clearly, that they are at present a nation of enthusiasts: of this their very crimes give the most decided evidence.” He continues, “The more fiercely this national disease rages, the more certainly will it terminate speedily, provided it be left to itself. . . . But, if continued attacks are made from without, this issue will certainly be prolonged, and may perhaps be prevented, till the despotic governments now in arms, every day becoming more poor, and therefore more oppressive, shall be themselves brought to the ground!” (49). The best way to deal with this national distemper is to let it run its course quickly and avoid contact with the sufferers.

For according to Currie, France has already infected Britain with this “national disease.” Britons were suffering from a bloodlust leading them

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7. *A Letter Commercial and political Addressed to the Rt. Honble. William Pitt* (London, 1793) 48. Subsequent references are to this edition. An example of the “disease of mind” under which the nation suffers is when a Sans Culotte presents the head of a murdered Swiss to the National Assembly, while emptying out of his hat the jewels and gold he had found in the “Thuilleries” (49).
into battle against France. Currie notes how, after the French Revolution, “the sympathies of the different parties in England were excited to such a degree by the state of things on the continent, that the dictates of sound reason could no longer be heard . . .” (14). Currie offers hope that Britain will soon recover from its bout of national prejudice: “the friends of peace endured the foulest calamities of the day, but secured to themselves the purest admiration, when passion and prejudice shall be no more” (14–15). The important thing, however, is for Britain to avoid further contact with the source of the “Contagion.” We can see behind the argument of the Letter that what Currie wants to promote is a British nation devoid of contentious political passions.

This desire is understandable, given Currie’s half-way position as a Scot living outside of Scotland. As we have seen, during his time in America and in London, Currie experienced the effects of prejudice against his native country. Currie’s earliest published efforts were directed at promoting the acceptance of Scots who, like himself, had left Scotland. This continued to be a concern when he was establishing his medical practice in Liverpool, another center of tension between Scottish and English people. J. Thornton comments that many Scotsmen at that time were “seeking or massing fortunes from Liverpool commerce.” There was a great deal of resentment of the commercial success of the Scots in Liverpool. As Thornton suggests, this resentment is reflected in works such as William Shepherd’s The True and Wonderful History of Dick Liver (Liverpool, 1824) which pits the main character, Dick Liver, a Liverpool butcher, against a Scottish beggar. Dick’s anti-Scottish statement echoes Currie’s own observation of the attitude of the Londoners to Scots: “the Scotch are like Norway rats, which eat up the aboriginal rats of every character into which they penetrate” (Thornton 113).

In Liverpool, Currie attempted to establish a bridge between English and Scottish acquaintances. He associated with a number of Scots at the Infirmary, both colleagues and patients. His home was open to any Scots visiting Liverpool (Thornton 239). Similarly, he served as a source of advice for English friends wanting to travel up to Scotland (Thornton 244). Currie lived his life promoting a closer bond between the two countries. Editing the works of Burns became one more means of effecting union between the two nations.

At the time Currie took on the gargantuan task of editing Burns’s poems and letters, he was already hard at work at his medical magnum opus,

9. In 1792, he bought the estate of Dumcrieff, although he never lived there. It was while on a trip to secure the property that Currie met Burns.
Medical Reports on the Effect of Water, Cold and Warm, as a Remedy in Fever and Febrile Diseases, published in 1797. Currie had only met Burns once briefly. He appears to have sought the assignment to write Burns’s life out of genuine concern for the poet’s widow, respect for Burns’s poetry, and perhaps a desire to carve out a reputation of his own like that of his friend William Roscoe, but his project soon became another vehicle for the expression of his concerns about the state of the nation. It took Currie four years to sort through the letters and poems which were given him by the poet’s friend, John Syme. Currie’s commentary on the material reveals the peculiar position in which he felt himself in relation to the poet. He draws attention to “—what has, perhaps, not happened before since the beginning of the world—the manuscripts of a man of genius, unarranged by himself, and unexamined by his family or friends, were sent, with all their sins on their heads to meet the eye of an entire stranger” (Thornton 358). The “sins” referred to were not just of a personal but also a political nature, as Burns had exhibited both Jacobite and Jacobinical tendencies in his life.10 What is interesting is how Currie deals with the political Robert Burns in the Works of Robert Burns: he shows Burns’s politics as a kind of national prejudice which is associated with a specific disease, hypochondriasis, a phenomenon about which Currie had written earlier. Currie had described the disease as originating in the imagination but connecting to physical symptoms. It is this hybrid disease of the emotions and of the body which, according to Currie, eventually causes Burns’s early demise and which, as we will see, becomes an appropriate means of deflecting the threat of Burns’s undesirable political notions.11

Currie’s diagnosis of Burns as a hypochondriac was not original; Burns had in fact identified himself as suffering from the ailment. Currie begins his biographical sketch, “The Life of Robert Burns,” included in the first volume, with Burns’s own references to his condition which appear in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore: “For some months past I have been rambling over the country; but I am now confined with some lingering


complaints, originating, as I take it, in the stomach.” 12 Interestingly enough, in Burns’s account there is a suggestion that the hypochondriasis is what has produced the present narrative, as he continues: “To divert my spirits a little in this miserable fog of ennui, I have taken a whim to give you a history of myself . . .” (35). Later in the same letter, Burns refers to “a constitutional melancholy or hypochondriasm that made me fly solitude . . .” (49). We see him further hint that his writing is connected to his hypochondria when he effuses: “My passions, when once lighted up, raged like so many devils, till they got vent in rhyme: and then the coming over my verses, like a spell, soothed all into quiet!” (49).

Currie’s account develops the relation between Burns’s hypochondriasis and his art. Currie presents the hypochondriasis as the logical extension of Burns’s sensibility and associates this sensibility unequivocally with the poet’s “national prejudice.” Much of Currie’s commentary reads like a description of a typical man of feeling or sensibility. 13 Currie goes out of his way to praise Burns for his natural genius, commenting that Burns was “endowed by nature with great sensibility of nerves” (214). He demonstrates Burns’s sensibility in the description of the poet’s routine on the farm. On Sunday, Currie explains, Burns went walking and liked to listen to the blackbird. However, more to his taste was “walking on the sheltered side of a wood, in a cloudy winter-day, and hearing the storm rave among the trees; and more elevated still his delight, to ascend some eminence during the agitations of nature, to stride along its summit, while the lightning flashed around him, and amidst the howlings of the tempest to apostrophize the spirit of the storm.” Currie comments, “The heart of the poet is peculiarly awake to every impression of beauty and sublimity; but with the higher order of poets, the beautiful is less attractive than the sublime” (93).

But as well as merely praising Burns’s sensibility, Currie’s narrative also creates a direct connection between this natural genius and national sentiments, including a love for a romanticized Scotland. Explaining Burns’s story that his father was involved in the 1745 uprising, Currie says, “It may

12. The Works of Robert Burns, Volume 1 (Edinburgh and London, 1819) 35. All subsequent references are to this volume and this edition unless otherwise noted. Volume One contains Currie’s “Observations on the Scottish Peasantry” and the “Life of Burns”. Volume Two contains Burn’s General Correspondence. Volume Three contains Burns’s “Published and Additional Poems,” while Volume Four includes “Burns’s Letters to George Thomson” and “Additional Songs.”

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easily be conceived, that our poet would cherish this belief” because the “generous attachment, the heroic valour, and the final misfortunes of the adherents of the house of Stuart, touched with sympathy his youthful and ardent mind, and influenced his original political opinions” (81). While ploughing, says Currie, Burns “was humming the songs of his country, musing on the deeds of ancient valour, or rapt in the illusions of Fancy, as her enchantments rose on his view” (97).

When Currie himself is not making a direct connection between Burns’s Scottish prejudice and his sensibility, he enlists the narratives of others, noting how Burns was inspired by places connected with Scotland’s past. The account by Dr. Adair of a trip to the Highlands indicates that: “At Stirling the prospects from the castle strongly interested [Burns]; in a former visit to which, his national feelings had been powerfully excited by the ruinous and roofless state of the hall in which the Scottish Parliaments had frequently been held. His indignation had vented itself in some imprudent, but not unpoetical lines, which had given much offence, and which he took this opportunity of erasing, by breaking the pane of the window at the inn on which they were written” (163–64). According to Adair, “A Visit to Mrs. Bruce of Clamannan, a lady about ninety, the lineal descendent of that race which gave the Scottish throne its brightest ornament, interested his feelings more powerfully” (166). Similar feelings are aroused in the churchyard at Dunfermline by the grave of Robert Bruce, “for whose memory Burns had more than common veneration. He knelt and kissed the stone with sacred fervour, and heartily . . . execrated the worse than Gothic neglect of the first of Scottish heroes” (168). Currie also quotes Syme’s observation about the genesis of one of Burns’s most politically charged poems: “in the midst of the storm, on the wilds of Kenmore, Burns was rapt in meditation. What do you think he was about? He was charging the English army, along with Bruce, at Bannockburn” (206). The result was the poem, “Scots wha hae.” The message that we get from the collection of these anecdotes is that Burns’s sensibility went to work, not just in nature, but particularly in natural scenes that recalled to him something about the Scottish past. His sensibility is indeed presented as a “Scottish prejudice.”

However, instead of merely recounting the workings of this national sensibility, Currie also provides a commentary which emphasizes the unhealthy side of it. The same sensibility which enabled Burns to act as inspired bard also rendered him “liable to inordinate impressions; to fever of body, as well as of mind” (214). Directly after the passage in which he discusses Burns’s Sunday travels in the storm, Currie recenters our attention on the poet’s hypochondriasis. The gaiety of his writing, says Currie, “may lead some persons to suppose, that the melancholy which hung over him
towards the end of his days, was not an original part of his constitution. It is not to be counted, indeed, that this melancholy acquired a darker hue in the progress of his life; but, independent of his own and of his brother's testimony, evidence is to be found among his papers, that he was subject very early to those depressions of mind, which are perhaps not wholly separable from the sensibility of genius, but which in him rose to an uncommon degree (98–99). Currie gives as an example a letter which Burns had written to his father on Dec. 27, 1781, in which he says: "the weakness of my nerves has so debilitated my mind, that I dare neither review past wants, nor look forward into futurity" (100). Currie analyzes the letter, which was "written several years before the publication of his poems, when his name was as obscure as his condition was humble," suggesting that it displays the "philosophic melancholy which so generally forms the poetical temperament, and that buoyant and ambitious spirit which indicates a mind conscious of its strength" (102).

As the narrative advances, Currie shows the balance of the poet's psychic state tipping in favor of the "philosophic melancholy," the hypochondriasis which eventually kills him. There is also a shift away from connecting the hypochondriasis with sensibility or national sentiment. More and more, the hypochondriasis takes on a life of its own, consuming the poet's will. Currie suggests that earlier Burns might have been able to control the "inordinate impressions" from which he suffered, with "strict temperance in diet, regular exercise, and sound sleep" (218). However, Burns was unable to exercise such control because of his progressive hypochondriasis. His "fatal defect" was the "comparative weakness of his volition" (235–36).

What is notable, however, is that the increasing emphasis on Burns's hypochondriasis serves to deflect the reader's attention from his shift from Jacobite to Jacobin politics. Currie notes vaguely that Burns had supported the "original hopes" of the French Revolution, and that after the Terror had begun was unable to "withdraw his partial gaze from a people who had so lately breathed the sentiments of universal peace and benignity" (208). Under these false impressions, Burns did not "always conduct himself with the circumspection and prudence which his dependent situation seemed to demand" (208). In fact, Burns's republican affiliations appear to have had a devastating impact on the poet's circumstances. According to James Mackay, at a theater in Dumfries on October 28, 1792, Burns sat through the national anthem and participated in the singing of "Ca Ira."14 Because of this indiscretion, Burns found himself the subject of an inquiry carried out by the Excise office for which he worked, and although he was

allowed to maintain his situation, his reputation was ruined, and he was denied any kind of promotion. The rest of his life was spent scrambling to earn enough to support his family and keep the farm. Currie, however, leads the reader away from the actual circumstances leading up to the inquiry. He writes only in general terms: "generous minds will lament that [governmental] measures of precaution should have robbed the imagination of our poet of the last prop on which his hopes of independence rested, and by embittering his peace, have aggravated those excesses which were soon to conduct him to an untimely grave" (211). Ultimately Currie lays the blame for Burns's death on the "excesses" of his imagination, his hypochondriasis. Whereas earlier in the "Life of Burns," the hypochondriasis was associated with national prejudice, the disease now becomes a way of defusing the topic of Burns's republicanism.

Carol McGuirk observes that at the time that the search for an editor of Burns took place, the political reputation of the Scottish poet had made the undertaking risky. She suggests that Currie, however, could assemble the edition "because he already was a marked man politically" as a result of his Letter to Pitt (45). According to McGuirk, Currie downplayed Burns's politics and told his "affluent readers what he imagined they wanted to hear about a peasant poet" (43). McGuirk concludes that "what filled the gap left by the large part politics must have played in Burns's later life—in the life of any Scotsman in the 1790s—was Currie's self-absorbed sensualist, a man whose fullest energies were devoted to deliberate and premeditated self-destruction" (45). But Currie's avoidance of discussing Burns's radical politics also needs to be seen in connection with his desire to encourage a nation devoid of political passion and national prejudice. For Currie, Burns's republicanism was threatening for the promotion of Scottish people within England, as it encouraged a view of the Scots as political troublemakers. Burns's affiliation to the Stuart cause and Scotland's past was acceptable because the threat of Stuart insurrection was long past. However, the French connection with Scotland was still considered dangerous and Scots were again being regarded with suspicion because of their previous alliances with the French. Currie's answer was to redirect his readers' attention away from Burns's vision of the body politic to Burns's own body.


16. For example, Currie makes a point of stating that: "Though the vehemence of Burns's temper, increased as it often was by stimulating liquors, might lead him into many improper and unguarded expressions, there seems no reason to doubt of his attachment to our mixed form of government" (216).
Instead of dwelling on Burns's violent political demonstrations, Currie uses Burns to represent a vision of Scottishness as it is gently expressed within the all-inclusive British nation. Indeed, he seems equally as eager to discuss the Scottish nation as he is to analyze Burns, as the full title of his text suggests: *The Works of Robert Burns with an account of his life and a Criticism on his writings to which are prefixed some observations on the character and condition of the Scottish Peasantry*. There is even some evidence that Currie took up Burns's cause to rescue the reputation of the Scottish people. In a letter to John Syme dated February 8, 1796, Currie observes the distressing trend of blaming the Scots for Burns's death: “Six Liverpool poets have sung the requiem of our admired Bard; and every one of them has indulged in the most pointed, and in some degree unjust, invectives against the country and the society, in which he lived.” He is no doubt referring to *Liverpool Testimonials to the Departed Genius of Robert Burns the Scottish Bard* (Liverpool, 1796), a collection of verse from the *Liverpool Phoenix* published in book form to raise money for Burns’s family. W. R. (William Roscoe?) chastises “Th’ unfeeling great, / who knew thy worth, but not / To sooth thy fate” (12). Because of their negligence, Burns has become both, “Thy Country’s glory, and her shame!” (15). E. W. laments “. . . oh! would to Heav’n / Thou hadst from that cold spot been driven, / Thou might’st have found some shelt’ring haven / On this side Tweed:—” (18). Such attitudes no doubt recalled for Currie the anti-Scottish sentiments he had encountered at earlier points in his life.

In his collection of Burns's poems Currie presents the Scots in a positive light. The first volume begins with “Prefatory Remarks on the Character and Condition of the Scottish peasantry,” ostensibly in order to help non-Scottish readers “form a more correct notion of the advantages with which [Burns] started, and of the obstacles which he surmounted” (2). Accordingly, he discusses the parochial schools, the absence of poor laws in Scotland, the effect of Scottish music and national songs, and Scottish laws respecting marriage. Regarding Scottish education, he writes that “A slight acquaintance with the peasantry of Scotland, will serve to convince an unprejudiced observer that they possess a degree of intelligence not generally found among the same class of men in the other countries of Europe” (3). For one thing, everyone, even those “in the very humblest condition,” can read. Scotland can prove an example for England in this, suggests Currie. Similarly, Scotland is presented as an example of a country which resisted the idea of poor laws. Says Currie, “it will not appear surprising, if the Scottish peasantry have a more than usual share of

prudence and reflection" (11). Because there is no provision for the poor, people can take care that those in need are not left destitute.

Ultimately, however, Currie is writing for his wider project of increasing the tolerance to Scots within Great Britain. We see then that his comments on the virtues of the Scottish nation are tempered by a concern that the Scots not be seen as threatening. To that effect, Currie combines praise of the Scots with praise of the Union, and implies that the English can benefit from adopting the Scottish ways. Although he says the intelligence of the poor is due to a law which took place because of an act in 1646, there were some complications, namely the repeal of all laws after the Restoration. This law was not put into action again by the Scottish parliament after the revolution until 1696. Thus “Its effects on the national character may be considered to have commenced about the period of the Union; and doubtless it co-operated with the peace and security arising from that happy event, in producing the extraordinary change in favor of industry and good morals, which the character of the common people of Scotland has since undergone” (4–5). As part of his pro-Union project, Currie takes aim in his Appendix at a noted anti-Unionist, Fletcher of Saltoun, who commented on the many lawless poor in Scotland. Currie retorts that, happily, the poor received instruction with political union and “the Union opened new channels of industry, and new fields of action to their view” (347).

Currie’s point in emphasizing the purity and intelligence of the Scottish poor is to ameliorate relations between the English and the Scots who emigrate south. He was no doubt recalling the accusations put forth during the Gordon Riots regarding the “Swarms” of Scots daily crossing the Tweed to “fatten on the Spoils of the South” and the comments like those of Dick Liver equating the Scots with locusts. In the Works, Currie ponders the effects of education on the Scots: “That it is on the whole favorable to industry and morals, though doubtless with some individual exceptions,18 seems to be proved by the most striking and decisive appearance; and it is equally clear, that it is the cause of that spirit of emigration and of adventure so prevalent among the Scotch. Knowledge has, by Lord Verulam, been denominated power; by others it has, with less propriety, been denominated virtue or happiness: we may with confidence consider it as motion” (6). People who have been educated have both their desires and their capacities to achieve those desires enlarged. Currie credits the Union for allowing the Scots to better themselves. Their emigration south is presented as a natural force: “If therefore a greater degree of instruction be given to the peasantry of a country comparatively poor, in the neighbourhood of

18. Burns is of course the unmentioned exception that proves the rule here.
other countries rich in natural and acquired advantages, and if the barriers be removed that kept them separate, emigration from the former to the latter will take place to a certain extent, by laws nearly as uniform as those by which heat diffuses itself among surrounding bodies, or water finds it level when left to its natural course” (7). This activity, however, is presented as at the same time beneficial to the English: “By the articles of the Union the barrier was broken down which divided the two British nations, and knowledge and poverty poured the adventurous natives of the north, over the fertile plains of England, and, more especially, over the colonies which she had settled in the east and in the west. The stream of population continues to flow from the north to the south for the causes that originally impelled it continue to operate; and the richer country is constantly invigorated by the accession of an informed and hardy race of men, educated in poverty, and prepared for hardship and danger, patient of labour, and prodigal of life” (7). Currie’s natives “pour” forth, but they also “invigorate” the receiving nation, and, furthermore, they help populate and claim the colonies for the combined British nation.19

The last section of the prefatory remarks addresses the question of nationalism, particularly Scottish nationalism, which Currie carefully lessens to the status of “domestic attachments.” He writes that Burns, like his “humble compeers,” exhibited “a partiality for his native country,” of which many proofs may be found in his writings. Currie suggests that this partiality may be considered a “selfish prejudice” or a “generous affection” (27), depending on the reader’s predispositions, but whatever the case, the remarks move to contain this partiality in a safe form. In the Works, Currie describes national sentiment as a combination of physical habit and mental adjustment, terms similar to those on which he relied in previous writing. National attachment is particularly strong in places of hardship, suggests Currie, where people rely on each other. It begins, then, with a sense of connection with people, but “once excited, [the sentiments] are strengthened by exercise, they are expanded by the powers of imagination, and seize more especially on those inanimate parts of creation, which form the theatre on which we have first felt the alternations of joy and sorrow” (28). If this is true, says Currie, “the love of our country, although modified, and even extinguished in individuals by the chances and changes of life, may be presumed in our general reasonings to be strong among a people, in proportion to their social, and more especially to their domestic affections” (28–29). Currie suggests that Scotland is an example of this.

19. A similar ambiguity is seen in Currie’s description of Scottish music and dance which have “penetrated into England, and have established themselves even in the circle of royalty. In another generation they will be naturalized in every part of the island” (14). The Scottish arts penetrate England, but only to be assimilated.
Furthermore, he rises to a crescendo in praising countries which sound very much like Scotland:

... in small states it is generally more active than in large ones, for the same reason, and also because the independence of a small community being maintained with difficulty, and frequently endangered, sentiments of patriotism are more frequently excited. ... mountainous countries are often peculiarly calculated to nourish sentiments of national pride and independence, from the influence of history on the affections of the individual. In such countries, from their natural strength, inferior nations have maintained their independence against their more powerful neighbours, and valour, in all ages, has made its most successful efforts against oppression. Such countries present the fields of battle, where the tide of invasion was rolled back, and where the ashes of those rest who have died in defence of their nation! (29–30)

He comments that this nationalism is “doubtless more general and more permanent, where the scenery of a country, the peculiar manners of its inhabitants, and the martial achievements of their ancestors, are embodied in national songs, and united to national music” (30). Currie is presenting a veiled case history of Scotland here, complete with the “national songs” of Burns.

However, what is interesting is that the moment when Currie is most passionate about the national feeling of the Scots is also the moment when he dispels the threat of that passion. Instead of nationalism, he presents nostalgia. He suggests that his reason for dwelling on the national “parti-ality” which seems to distinguish Scots in particular, is to show how “the images of infancy, strongly associating with the generous affections, resist the influence of time, and of new impressions” and “often survive in countries far distant, and amidst far different scenes, to the latest periods of life, to soothe the heart with the pleasures of memory when those of hope die away” (30). Whether the “hope” here is personal or political is not made clear, but what is clear is that it has died. And Currie finishes with a peculiar way of deflating any dangerous nationalism that Burns might inspire. Burns’s poetry, says Currie, “displays, as it were embalms, the peculiar manners of his country; and it may be considered as a monument not to his own name only, but to the expiring genius of an ancient and once independent nation” (30). According to Currie, then, Burns acts as a kind of undertaker, rendering his “expiring” nation as lifelike as possible for the mourning descendants.

And if Burns is the undertaker of an independent Scotland, Currie is the doctor of a united Britain, offering a cure for the kind of “National
Enmity” that continues to erupt. The *Works of Robert Burns* provides a method of bringing the Burns corpus back to life in a safe metamorphosis, by presenting Burns as an image which both nations can share: “Though the dialect in which many of the happiest effusions of Robert Burns are composed, be peculiar to Scotland, yet his reputation has extended itself beyond the limits of that country, and his poetry has been admired as the offspring of original genius, by persons of taste in every part of the sister islands” (1). Currie continues by noting what seems an interesting comment on the material circumstance of the Union: in fact the present edition, though it addresses a Scottish subject, is printed in England: “It seems proper, therefore, to write the Memoirs of his life, not with the view of their being read by Scotchmen only, but also by natives of England, and of other countries where the English language is spoken or understood” (1). Extending Currie’s observation, we can see that the activities of publishing and reading Burns become demonstrations of British nationalism, ironically a British nationalism which promotes a central English government and a peripheral Scotland.

The dedication of the book to Captain Graham Moore adds to this impression. Moore was a Scot, but had left Scotland to pursue a career in the Royal Navy. Currie mentions Moore as the one who had first given him the poems of Burns to read: “When you were stationed on our coast, about twelve years ago, you first recommended to my particular notice the poems of the Ayrshire ploughman, whose works... I now present to you. In a distant region of the world, whither the service of your country has carried you, you will, I know, receive with kindness this proof of my regard” (v). Currie suggests that although some readers may be offended by some of what the present volumes contain, such readers “will not be found in your service, which, in our own days, emulates on another element the superior fame of the Macedonian phalanx, or of the Roman legion, and which has lately made the shores of Europe and of Africa resound with the shouts of victory, from the Texel to the Tagus, and from the Tagus to the Nile!” (x). In his comments to Moore, Currie subtly emphasizes the role that Scots play in the creation of the British empire. The poems of Burns become a way of acknowledging Scottish national sentiment, but also directing it toward the service of the empire: “These volumes may sometimes engage your attention, where the steady breezes of the tropics swell your sails, and in another quarter of the earth charm you with the strains of nature, or awake in your memory the scenes of your early days” (x). In the interpretation of Currie, Burns’s hypochondria, brought on by the weakening of his powers of “volition,” becomes an appropriate image for killing off the image of the insurgent Scot. The threat the Scots pose is lessened by the fact that their culture is now “embalmed” along with the spirit of their nation and the body of their chief poet.
Instead, the focus shifts to the English readers and the Scots who are out building the empire. Currie’s project was remarkably successful. The *Works* went through four editions within the first four years of publication and five more editions within the next eleven years and were, in addition, subject to numerous piratings. According to G. Ross Roy, Currie’s text, with additions by R. H. Cromek, remained the standard collection of Burns’s work until 1834 (*Letters of Burns* i.lvii). Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Lamb, Francis Jeffrey and Walter Scott all relied on Currie’s text in forming their own assessment of Burns. Currie’s *Works* helped create the image of Burns as tragic genius which made him so appealing to the romantic sensibility. Regardless of, or perhaps because of, the shock the reading public experienced in considering Burns’s sins, the demand for Currie’s story continued. And in the hands of interpreters, Currie’s medical assessment of Burns’s hypochondria quickly became a story of blasted genius, a cautionary tale for poets, with Burns serving as a kind of pre-Byronic Byronic hero. Currie’s *Works* acted as a medium for translating a debate about politics into a debate about lifestyle. Even though Wordsworth was to criticize Currie’s biography of Burns as “revolting account” (Low 281), it clearly affected his impression of the poet. When Wordsworth visited Burns’s grave in 1803, he sketched out a similar account of Burns to that which he disliked in Currie, “of a man of exquisite genius, and confessedly of many high moral qualities, sunk into the lowest depths of vice and misery” (Low 281):

> And have I then thy bones so near,  
> And thou forbidden to appear?  
> As if it were thyself that’s here  
> I shrink with pain;  
> And both my wishes and my fear  
> Alike are vain.21

What is significant here is that Wordsworth shudders not at the idea of Burns’s republicanism or at fear of the “Contagion” of national prejudice, but at the physical presence of Burns’s “bones.” Following in the footsteps of Currie, Wordsworth translates Burns’s body into an emblem of the poet’s failure of will.22

22. Still, Burns’s body remained a site of national interest. A mausoleum was built as a monument to the poet, and his body and those of the two sons who were buried with him were reburied there on 19 September 1815. Before the burial of his wife Jean on 1 April
Currie has not been treated kindly by contemporary Burns scholars, who, while holding diverse opinions of Burns himself, have been almost unanimous in their complaints against Currie. Even one of Currie's kinder critics, Carol McGuirk, comments that "virtually every moralizing posture and mythic obliquity in the critical heritage [of Burns] originated in the earliest edition of the poet's complete works, compiled by Dr. James Currie between 1796 and 1800." However, as I have suggested here, it is important to consider Currie's moralizing in the context of his vision of the British nation. In this interest, I have been following the lead of Marie Mulvey Roberts and Roy Porter, the editors of *Literature and Medicine During the Eighteenth-Century*, who note that there has been a "textual discrimination which has divorced literature from medicine." I suggest that there has been a further "textual discrimination" which has divorced both medicine and literature from political concerns. However, by examining the work of figures like Currie, we can begin to heal that division.

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1834, Burns's remains were exhumed and examined. Doctors present on the two occasions commented on how well preserved the poet's body was. A plaster cast of his skull was taken and a detailed phrenological report was made. See Mackay 681.

23. Thornton is alone in his defense of Currie. In *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), J. W. Egerer comments that Currie was "not fitted to edit" the material he was given and that consequently he "forfeited the best opportunity that any editor has ever had to establish a definitive text" (76). David Daiches' *Robert Burns* (New York: Rinehard, 1950) lists examples of the kinds of emendations Currie made to Burns's letters and poems (311), as does G. Ross Roy in "Editing Burns in the Nineteenth Century" in *Burns Now*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994). For other criticisms of Currie, see Richard Hindle Fowler's *Robert Burns* (London: Routledge, 1988) and James Mackay. Carol McGuirk provides the fullest analysis of Currie's agenda in the above-cited "The Politics of *The Collected Burns,*" but she does not discuss Currie's other work or engage critically with the text of the *Works.*
