

## Negotiating Cultural Memory: James Currie's *Works of Robert Burns*

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In his 'Essay on Robert Burns,' the Victorian pundit Thomas Carlyle expressed his sense, in typically excessive style, of the difficulty involved in reaching an adequate assessment of his countryman in 1838, arguing that:

till the companions of his pilgrimage, the Honorable Excise Commissioners, and the Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt, and the Dumfries aristocracy, and all the Squires and Earls, equally with Ayr Writers, and the New and Old Light Clergy, whom he had to do with, shall have become invisible in the darkness of the Past, or visible only by light borrowed from *his* juxtaposition, it will be difficult to measure him by any true standard, or to estimate what he really was and did, in the eighteenth century, for his country and the world.<sup>[1]</sup>

For Carlyle, the business of estimating Burns cannot begin until all who knew the poet have passed away. Carlyle's articulation of the difference between the estimate of Burns that can be gleaned during the lifetime of the people who knew him and that which is arrived at after those people die finds an unlikely echo in the distinction that twentieth-century theorists, Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, identify between 'communicative memory' and 'cultural memory.' 'Communicative memory,' they suggest, is 'based exclusively on everyday [oral] communications' and is 'characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization.'<sup>[2]</sup> In contrast, 'cultural memory' is 'characterized by its distance from the everyday'; it is created when 'living communication crystalliz[es] in the forms of objectivized culture – whether in texts, images, rites, buildings, monuments, cities or even landscapes.'<sup>[3]</sup> In 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory,' Ann Rigney considers the difference between these two modes of memory in terms of mediation: 'communicative memory,' she observes, is oral, characterized by 'multiple narratives by

participants and eyewitnesses [which] circulate and compete with one another.'<sup>[4]</sup> 'Cultural memory,' on the other hand, refers to the time when all involved have passed away and 'a society has only relics and stories left as a reminder of past experience.'<sup>[5]</sup> This essay will draw on the theories of Assmann, Czaplicka and Rigney in order to provide a new perspective through which to understand the complex processes through which Robert Burns has been consumed at home and abroad over the last two and a half centuries. In the wake of the multitude of celebrations in honour of the 250th anniversary of Burns's birth, it is difficult to imagine a time when he wasn't such a global celebrity and to evaluate the circumstances that facilitated his rise to fame. An important starting point can be found in the complicated negotiations that ensued as 'communicative memory' of the poet became 'objectivized' into 'cultural memory' in the early years after his death.<sup>[6]</sup> In particular, as I shall suggest, James Currie's monumental *The Works of Robert Burns* effected a crucial transformation of Burns that prepared the way for his reception as an iconic figure of Scottish cultural memory.

Robert Burns died on July 21, 1796 and was given a military funeral in his hometown of Dumfries five days later. The earliest account of Burns's life to appear after his death was the 'Obituary' published anonymously by George Thomson in the *Edinburgh Advertiser* for July 26. As well as eliciting the sympathy and the 'contributions' of 'the public' by suggesting that Burns's 'extraordinary endowments were accompanied with frailties which rendered them useless to himself and his family,' Thomson, who had never met Burns, took the first step toward turning face-to-face memories of Burns into cultural memories, calling for 'friends and acquaintances' 'to transmit such poems and letters as happen to be in their possession' to Alexander Cunningham or John Syme for use in 'a posthumous volume of the poetical remains of Robert Burns.'<sup>[7]</sup> The unfortunate emphasis on the poet's 'frailties' prompted such a flurry of debate that the poet's friend Maria Riddell felt obliged to step into the fray with a 'Character Sketch' published anonymously in the *Dumfries Journal*. In this work, Riddell fights the aspersions against Burns. Appealing to the aura of authenticity surrounding communicative memory, she suggests that 'the intimacy of my acquaintance [with Burns] for several years' past may 'perhaps justify my offering to the public a few of those ideas and observations I have had the opportunity of forming.'<sup>[8]</sup> At the same time as she attempts to depict for the general public her own personal memories of the poet, she also suggests the irredeemable loss that the translation of Burns from communicative into cultural memory actually involves. She suggests that Burns can never be fully appreciated by those who have not met him in person, indicating that the thing that really distinguished Burns was not his poetic work but his face-to-face conversation: 'Poetry was actually not his *forte*. If others have climbed more successfully the heights of Parnassus, none certainly ever out-shone Burns in the charms—the sorcery I would call it—of fascinating conversation.'<sup>[9]</sup> For Riddell, unlike Carlyle, a 'true estimate' of Burns can never be reached by those who have not heard him speak; cultural memory is a pale imitation of actual experience.

The next individual to attempt an assessment of Burns was Robert Heron in *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns*, initially issued in two parts in the liberal *Monthly Magazine* then republished separately in 1797.<sup>[10]</sup> Riddell had made the fact that she was an acquaintance of Burns the key attribute of her 'Character Sketch,' but Heron, although he had visited Burns at Ellisland and in fact been lampooned by Burns for failing to deliver a letter to Thomas Blacklock,<sup>[11]</sup> conveys no personal knowledge of the poet in his account. He does include one gesture toward communicative memory as he describes his own memory of the popularity of Burns's first edition of the *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*: 'I was at that time resident in Galloway, contiguous to Ayrshire: and I can well remember, how even plough-boys and maid-servants would have gladly bestowed the wages they earned the most hardly . . . if they might but procure the works of BURNS.'<sup>[12]</sup> He continues to use the first-person perspective to convey the 'extraordinary' effect that Burns's work has on him as he stays up all night reading it. Heron also includes memory of a memory of Burns, as he quotes William Robertson's reminiscences of Burns: 'I remember, that the late DR. ROBERTSON once observed to me, that he had scarcely ever met with any man whose conversation discovered greater vigour and activity of mind than did that of BURNS' (25). For the most part, however, Heron eschews personal memories, basing his work rather upon what he calls 'the proper business of the biographer':

TO TRACE THE GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHARACTER AND TALENTS OF HIS HERO, WITH ALL THE CHANGES WHICH THESE UNDERGO FROM THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES, BETWEEN THE CRADLE AND THE GRAVE; AND AT THE SAME TIME, TO RECORD ALL THE EMINENT EFFECTS WHICH THE DISPLAY OF THAT CHARACTER, AND THE EXERCISE OF THOSE TALENTS, HAVE PRODUCED UPON NATURE AND HUMAN SOCIETY, IN THE SPHERE WITHIN WHICH THEY WERE EXHIBITED AND EMPLOYED. (2)

Heron's objective is to distill the life of the poet into an essence or 'critical principle' (2). The son of a weaver who was subsequently educated at the University of Edinburgh and spent his life battling drink and debt, Heron uses Burns as an example of what happens when a simple 'ploughman' is 'exalted into a man of letters' and 'seduced' into the dissolute 'habits of life' of the wealthy (33). In Heron's hands, Burns's life enters cultural memory as a morality tale about the consequences of overstepping class boundaries.

Heron's *Memoir* sowed the seeds for many tales of Burns's profligacy, although it was itself short-lived in the marketplace. By far the most influential postmortem textual packaging of Burns appeared four years after the poet's death with the first official biography and collected works of the poet: Dr. James Currie's *The Works of Robert Burns; with an Account of his Life and a Criticism on his Writings*, published in 1800 in Liverpool and London by Cadell and Davies.<sup>[13]</sup>

Currie's *Works* provided the raw materials concerning Burns – the poems, songs, letters – that were read and reproduced throughout the nineteenth century. He also wrote a narrative of the poet that became the prototype for all later biographical sketches. Where Heron had used Burns to suggest the negative effects of attempting to rise beyond class boundaries, Currie depicted Burns as a victim of his own heightened passions who despite the failings of his own life could serve nevertheless as a potent symbol of Scottish cultural memory at home and abroad.

Currie himself was a diasporic figure who maintained close links to Scotland, a factor that undoubtedly influenced his subsequent shaping of the memory of Robert Burns. Born in Dumfriesshire, in 1771 he began an apprenticeship in Virginia as a factor for William Cunninghame and Company, tobacco merchants from Glasgow. When the outbreak of the American troubles began, he found himself caught in an uncomfortable position as a citizen of Britain and an associate of the hated Scottish merchants. In March, 1775, he published a letter in Pinckney's *Virginia Gazette* defending the Scottish tobacco merchants in the American colonies. After a great deal of difficulty, he returned to Britain and enrolled in medical school at Edinburgh University. He was in London during the time of the Gordon Riots and wrote letters to the *Public Advertiser* (Tues, 15 August 1780 and Monday, 28 August 1780) advocating tolerance for all, but in particular for Scots who were being vilified by the enemies of Lord Bute. His plans to become a medical officer for a battalion in Jamaica failed, so he took up an appointment instead in Liverpool in 1780, where, as well as continuing his medical practice, he established a literary reputation for himself and worked for the cause of abolition alongside William Roscoe. He purchased an estate in his native Dumfries in 1792. It was on a visit back to the estate in 1792 that he briefly met with Robert Burns.<sup>[14]</sup>

When no one came forward to publish Burns's collected works after his death, Currie approached John Syme and Gilbert Burns, Robert's brother, volunteering to undertake the task. Currie raised subscriptions and made 'the necessary arrangements with the booksellers and printer' in addition to performing the editing of Burns's works. Currie appears to have been motivated partly by admiration for Burns's poetry and partly by humanitarian reasons, attentive to the fact that the proceeds of his volume would be used to 'raise [Burns's] Widow and children from penury' (1:1). As an ex-patriot Scot who had already written in the cause of his countrymen, he also demonstrated not a little concern for the negative manner in which Scotland was being represented after Burns's death; Scots were criticized for not providing adequately for the poet during his lifetime. In fact, Currie's letters indicate that his emphasis on Burns's faults is directly related to his concern for the public perception of Scotland. After receiving Burns's letters from John Syme he writes, 'To speak my mind to you freely, it appears to me that his misfortunes arose chiefly from his errors . . . his biographer must keep it in mind, to prevent him from running into those bitter invectives against Scotland, &c. which the extraordinary attractions and

melancholy fate of the poet naturally provoke. 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.'<sup>[15]</sup> For Currie, the unfolding of 'the errors and faults, as well as the excellences, of Burns's life and character' consisted of a balancing act of garnering sympathy for the poet and vindicating the Scottish reading public.

Currie attempts to include traces of the face-to-face Burns in his work. He even includes Burns's own perspective in writing the 'Life of Burns' as he incorporates some letters by the poet into the narrative. Apart from a brief sketch by Currie outlining the bare details of Burns's life and death, the first impression of Burns that the reader is given comes from Burns's autobiographical letter to John Moore. Currie suggests that the letter will convey an immediate sense of Burns and notes that the errors of composition in the letter, 'will be compensated by the opportunity of seeing our poet, as he gives the incidents of his life, unfold the peculiarities of his character with all the careless vigour and open sincerity of his mind' (1:34). 'The Life of Burns' also transcribes sections from the Commonplace book and the tours of the Borders and the Highlands, while Volume 2 of the *Works* presents the rest of Burns's letters.

In addition to featuring Burns's own words, the *Works* also includes accounts by those who knew Burns. Gilbert Burns's reminiscences appear directly after Burns's autobiographical letter as 'a commentary on the preceding sketch of our poet's life by himself' (1:78). An account by Mr. Murdoch, Burns's tutor, and letters sent to Currie by Dugald Stewart and James Adair are also included. The various narratives, indicates Currie, serve 'not merely to illustrate, but to authenticate each other' (1:96), and he notes that he has chosen to present them in their entirety so 'that the intelligent reader will be far more gratified by a sight of these original documents themselves' (1:96). Currie also features Maria Riddell's 'Character Sketch' and letters from the poet's brother in the Appendices to the *Works*. Such a scheme appears to attempt to approximate the 'multiple narratives by participants and eyewitnesses [which] circulate and compete with one another' that characterize communicative memory.

But instead of conveying a sense of the communicative memory of Burns, Currie's *Works* actually works to call into question the basis on which that communicative memory is established.

Although he includes first-person accounts from Burns, Currie also suggests the gap between Burns's actual conversation and the words he wrote. In his Dedication, Currie notes that he 'had an opportunity of seeing and conversing with Burns' in the summer of 1792, adding: 'It has been my fortune to know some men of high reputation in literature, as well as in public life; but never to meet any one who, in the course of a single interview, communicated to me so strong an impression of the force and versatility of his talents' (1:v-vi). He reiterates Riddell's suggestion

regarding the excellence of Burns's conversation, noting that the poems 'afford but an inadequate proof of the powers of their unfortunate author' (1:vi). If the poems provide 'but an inadequate proof of the powers of their unfortunate author,' so, it would follow, do the letters. Rather than giving the reader some idea of the 'careless vigour and open sincerity of [Burns's] mind', the letters point to the inadequacy of print in capturing the 'impressions' of face-to-face communication, particularly when it comes to Burns.

The accounts by people who knew Burns suggest similar limitations. While Gilbert's account dominates over fifteen pages of the narrative at one point, Currie also exercises his editorial authority over it, indicating that the excerpt is actually taken from a printed source. A footnote draws attention to the fact that the narrative is from a 'Letter from Gilbert Burns to Mrs. Dunlop' (1:60 fn.). Another footnote intrudes on the narration to point out the specific scene from *Titus Andronicus* to which Gilbert alludes. Currie adds his own opinion to that of 'all the best critics' that this 'silly play' is not Shakespeare's (1:63; fn). On one occasion, Currie does include perspectives that comment on each other and create a layered narrative of competing representations, noting for example that Gilbert Burns wished to have omitted the paragraph in Burns's letter to Murdoch where he describes his ancestors as 'renting lands of the noble Keiths of Marichal, and as having had the honour of sharing their fate' (1:80). Where Gilbert suggests that their father had in his possession a letter stating that he had 'no concern in the *late wicked rebellion*' (1:81), Currie also includes 'the information of one who knew William Burnes soon after he arrived in the county of Ayr' (1:81). But Currie himself rushes in to mediate the controversy, offering the suggestion that the rumour about Burns's father was a consequence of his having come as a stranger from the North and that Burns himself favoured the connection with Charles Edward Stuart because the heroic and unfortunate story of the House of Stuart appealed to his sensibilities. Absorbed within Currie's editorial apparatuses, the immediate memories of 'the companions of [Burns's] pilgrimage' as Carlyle termed them are converted into mediated 'relics and stories.' Currie's narrative thus embodies the process by which communicative memory becomes objectified into the printed medium of cultural memory.

At the same time as he contains communicative memory of Burns, Currie's own commentary on the poet in his 'Prefatory Remarks' and 'Life of Burns' stages Burns in cultural memory in a manner that proves remarkably durable for the rest of the nineteenth century. In Currie's narrative, Burns serves to embody a Scottish identity that is rapidly disappearing and to represent that identity to the rest of the English-speaking world. Currie notes that by the time he is compiling Burns's work, the poet's 'reputation has extended itself beyond the limits of [Scotland], and his poetry has been admired as the offspring of original genius, by persons of taste in every part of the sister islands' (1:1). For this reason, Currie suggests, he directs his 'Prefatory Remarks' not only to Scots but to readers beyond Scotland's border: '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' (1:2). Accordingly, he begins his discussion of Burns with a description of the cultural milieu in which he flourished: the world of the Scottish peasantry. As his description unfolds, however, it becomes clear that this identity is already under threat, indeed has been so since well before Burns's time. Currie begins by praising the Scottish peasants for possessing a 'degree of intelligence not generally found among the same class of men in the other countries of Europe' (1:2). In particular, he notes, 'every one can read, and most persons are more or less skilled in writing and arithmetic' (1:3) due to the establishment of parish schools in the previous century. Currie also suggests that Scots are distinguished for their 'spirit of emigration and adventure' (1:6), and it is their education that has in fact contributed to this. The attainment of knowledge raises 'desires or ambitions' which are 'stimulated' by imagination, and 'distant and uncertain objects, giving freer scope to the operation of this faculty, often acquire, in the mind of the youthful adventurer, an attraction from their very distance and uncertainty' (1:6-7). Currie maintains that emigration from a poorer country to a more wealthy one by those who have been given a 'greater degree of instruction' is as certain as a natural law of physics – providing the 'barriers' that kept them separate are removed: '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 its level when left to its natural course' (1:7). It is this law which has been responsible for the diffusion of the Scots into England and abroad, as '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' (1:7). Currie's justification for his personal circumstances as a Scot residing in England is visible in his naturalized representation of emigration. Once more he addresses negative preconceptions of Scots in England, arguing that a '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' (1:7). Currie also suggests that the 'marriage-laws of Scotland' which legitimize children born out of wedlock once their parents do get married are partly responsible for producing 'that habit of emigration, and spirit of adventure, for which the people are so remarkable' (1:22). 'Irregular marriages' are often 'improvident' and the children consequently seek elsewhere for 'the comforts of life, and the gratification of ambition' (1:22). With this emphasis on explaining and justifying emigration, the narrative underlying the 'Prefatory Remarks' depicts a nation that is gradually diffusing throughout the globe. Currie suggests that Scottish dances and tunes have now 'penetrated into England' and will 'in another generation' be 'naturalized in every part of the island' (1:14). The Scottish people, he implies, are following a similar trajectory.

Currie's discourse about the Scottish peasantry also outlines the changes that are affecting those who choose to stay in their country. The Union, which has had the positive effect of making the

nation secure, is also effecting other changes: 'property, as well as population, is accumulating rapidly on the Scottish soil, and the nation, enjoying a great part of the blessings of Englishmen . . . might be considered . . . to be as yet only in an early stage of their progress' (1:24). While Scotland maintains several of its 'own happy institutions,' it is also becoming more like England: 'Since the Union, the manners and language of the people of Scotland have no longer a standard among themselves, but are tried by the standard of the nation to which they are united—Though their habits are far from being flexible, yet it is evident that their manners and dialect are undergoing a rapid change' (1:25). This change has trickled down even to the farmers 'of the present day' who 'appear to have less of the peculiarities of their country in their speech, than the men of letters of the last generation' (1:25). Burns, suggests Currie, is in fact less Scottish than his more illustrious predecessors: 'Burns, who never left the island, nor penetrated farther into England than Carlisle on the one hand, or Newcastle on the other, had less of the Scottish dialect than Hume, who lived for many years in the best society of England and France; or perhaps than Robertson, who wrote the English language in a style of such purity' (1:26).

In the midst of these representations of social changes, Burns's poetry plays an important role. Currie devotes a lengthy section of his 'Prefatory Remarks' to describing the patriotic feeling of the Scottish people. A 'partiality' for their native country is 'a very strong and general sentiment among the natives of Scotland' (1:27). While 'an attachment to the land of their birth' is a common among all human societies, suggests Currie, it is strongest where 'comforts, and even necessities of life' must be 'purchased by patient toil' (1:28) such as in Scotland. In such situations, people must 'combine' for defense as well as for 'common wants,' and the 'social affections' so developed 'extend from the men with whom we live, to the soil on which we tread' (1:28). Love for one's country, then, develops as love for one's fellows is 'expanded by the powers of the imagination' to 'those inanimate parts of creation, which form the theatre on which we have first felt the alternations of joy and sorrow, and first tasted the sweets of sympathy and regard' (1:28). This patriotic feeling is further developed in 'free countries,' where each individual is of consequence in his community, in small states where the independence of the nation is frequently threatened and in mountainous countries where 'social affections' are called forth and concentrated 'amidst scenery that acts most powerfully on the sight, and makes a lasting impression on the memory' and where 'the tide of invasion' by more powerful nations is often turned back (1:28). Another feature strengthening 'the ties that attach men to the land of their birth' is the existence of national songs, a feature that Currie associated with Scotland earlier in his narrative. In short, Scotland provides an example of a nation in which for all these reasons 'we so generally find a partial attachment to the land of their birth' (1:31).

Burns, suggests Currie, like his fellow Scots, was 'strongly tintured' with 'a partiality for his native country, of which many proofs may be found in his writing' (1:27). In fact, his patriotic feeling is



even more intense because of his education and his passionate nature: he 'joined to the higher powers of the understanding the most ardent affections' (1:31). Currie situates his image of Burns's patriotism within a narrative of national dissolution. Because Scots are predisposed to emigrate, many leave their native lands for more profitable parts of the globe, while those who stay are also undergoing transformation as they adjust themselves to 'the standard of the nation to which they are united' (1:25). But Burns's poetry serves to preserve what is left of Scottish culture, as Currie suggests that it, 'displays, and as it were embalms, the peculiar manners of his country'; because of this quality, Burns's poetry 'may be considered as a monument, not to his own name only, but to the expiring genius of an ancient and once independent nation' (1:31). In the midst of this 'expiration,' however, Burns's poetry also becomes the object that can connect the nation's constituent members. Currie had suggested that 'love of country' was a displacement of 'the affections of the mind' from fellow humans to the 'inanimate parts of creation' that constitute the land itself. Burns's poetry becomes a displacement of that earlier displacement, as it is the poetry rather than the land which now serves as a representation of 'the theatre on which we have first felt the alternations of joy and sorrow, and first tasted the sweets of sympathy and regard' (1:28). Burns's representation of 'love of country' becomes a means of connecting all those who share that love.

Appropriately, the Dedication of the *Works of Burns* itself performs the work of connecting two ex-Scots as Currie addresses Captain Graham Moore of the Royal Navy: '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' (1:v). Graham Moore was the son of John Moore, a correspondent of Burns and the author of *Zeluco* and other works. Currie suggests that, 'The works of Burns will be received favourably by one who stands in the foremost rank of this noble service and who deserves his station' (1:ix). More importantly, however, he hopes that the poetry of 'the Ayrshire ploughman' can help remind Moore of his homeland: "These volumes may sometimes engage your attention, while 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" (1:v). Currie shifts from a focus on Burns to the way his poetry creates connections, concluding: 'Suffer me to hope that they may sometimes recall to your mind the friend who addresses you, and who bids you—most affectionately—adieu!' (1:x). In Currie's *Works*, Burns is represented as preserving "the peculiar manners of his country," a Scotland lost in space through emigration and in time through cultural change, but he is also depicted as reuniting members of the Scottish community through memory. By representing the process whereby communicative memory of Burns solidifies into cultural memory and by depicting Burns as the 'embalming' receptacle and connective tissue of Scottishness, Currie's *Works of Burns* made Burns not only a universal symbol of Scottish identity but also a metaphor for cultural memory itself.

Currie's representation proved remarkably popular. Chambers notes that, 'Four editions [of the *Works of Robert Burns*], of 2000 copies each, were disposed of in the first four years' (229). Cadell and Davies churned out eight regular editions between 1800 and 1820, including a vegisemo-quarto (24mo) edition in 1814.<sup>[16]</sup> The *Works of Robert Burns* was pirated numerous times beginning in the United States in 1801 and in Belfast in 1805; the first Canadian edition came out in Halifax in 1842.<sup>[17]</sup> When the British copyright ran out, publishers in Edinburgh, Glasgow London, Montrose and Durham rushed to provide more copies to the marketplace. Four other editions were produced in 1819 alone. Material from Currie's *Works of Robert Burns* was also reproduced in other collections of Burns. Cadell and Davies published the four volumes of Currie's edition in duodecimo with a fifth volume consisting of Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* in 1814. Macredie, Skelly and Muckersy brought out *A New edition of the Life and Works of Robert Burns, as originally edited by James Currie* along with 'a Review of the Life of Burns and various Criticisms on his Character and Writings, by Alexander Peterkin' in 1815.<sup>[18]</sup> *Nineteen Views in North Britain, Illustrative of the Works of Robert Burns* (1805) included a 'Sketch of the Poet's Life' which was abridged from Currie's 'Life.'<sup>[19]</sup> Currie's *The Life of Robert Burns* was also published separately for fourteenpence in 1838 in William and Robert Chambers' *People's Edition* series; the editors note that Currie's account will help 'extend a sympathy for the wondrous and ill-requited poet to quarters where the circumstances of his life have as yet been comparatively little known . . . namely, among the lowly-born and obscurely-toiling.'<sup>[20]</sup>

Currie's 'Life of Burns' also became the standard which all subsequent biographers of Burns cited (either positively or negatively) and against which they measured their achievement. In his *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808) Robert Hartley Cromek writes approvingly of Currie: 'Whatever unhappiness the Poet was in his life-time doomed to experience, few persons have been so fortunate in a biographer as Burns. A strong feeling of his excellencies, a perfect discrimination of his character, and a just allowance for his errors, are the distinguishing features in the work of Dr. Currie.'<sup>[21]</sup> Thomas Carlyle, although somewhat critical of Currie for not entering more strongly into the mindset of his subject, referred to Currie as the 'first and kindest of all our poet's biographers' whose fault was not 'want of love, but weakness of faith.'<sup>[22]</sup> William Wordsworth, on the other hand, excoriated Currie for 'revealing to the world the infirmities' of Burns.<sup>[23]</sup> In his *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* Wordsworth recalls, 'the acute sorrow with which, by my own fire-side, I first perused Dr. Currie's Narrative' (5). Wordsworth urged that any republication of Currie's *Works* include, if not the 'striking out' of 'such passages as the author, if he were now alive, would probably be happy to efface,' then at least the attachment of 'notes . . . to the most obnoxious' passages (3). Other commentators saw no problem with Currie's initial work. Writing in 1828, Lockhart feels obliged to note that the only reason he is attempting to write his own 'Life of Burns' is because, 'Dr. Currie's Memoir cannot be, with propriety, detached from the collection of the Poet's works which it was expressly designed to accompany.'<sup>[24]</sup> In his collection of Burns

edited with William Motherwell, James Hogg asserts: 'I wish no one had ever meddled with the Life of BURNS, save Dr. Currie and Mr. Lockhart,' and he suggests that 'the work of the latter . . . is rather a Supplement to the former than a Concise History of the Poet's Life from beginning to end.'<sup>[25]</sup> Consumed by readers, reprinted by publishers, and referred to by other biographers, Currie's perspective on Burns dominated representations of the poet in the early to mid years of the nineteenth century.

It also served as a direct and indirect source for another important but not so well documented phenomenon involved in the memorialization of Burns: speeches at Burns suppers. Donald Low suggests that the first Burns Clubs to be 'formally constituted were Greenock (1801), Paisley (1805), Kilmarnock (1808) and Dunfermline (1812).'[26] Celebrations of Burns at these venues initially started as gatherings of his friends. According to the 1881 *Bibliography of Robert Burns* published by James M'Kie, at the first meeting of the Alloway Burns Club in 1801, 'nearly one half of the company were personally known to BURNS, or had their names associated with some particulars of his history.'<sup>[27]</sup> Such gatherings took on a life of their own as social events including those who had no acquaintance with the poet except to be familiar with his poems and songs. Carol McGuirk suggests that these ritualistic suppers worked to sever Burns from the historical contexts in which he wrote and turning him into a 'pleasantly vague and idealized public icon.'<sup>[28]</sup> But they are also essential to consider seriously as they contributed to the received cultural memory of Burns. In particular, the suppers featured a genre of rhetorical effusion that made biography pre-eminent in commemorating the poet: the 'Immortal Memory' speech, which, as it developed, used poetry and songs to illustrate biographical details of his life. And as the Ur-text for biographies of Burns, Currie's work became an important source for such speeches.

There are numerous accounts of Burns suppers in the early nineteenth century. In the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* for 27 January 1816, for example, the writer outlines the celebration held at MacEwan's Tavern in Edinburgh, noting with approval that the, 'feelings of admiration universally entertained for the genius of Burns have at length been exhibited in the metropolis of the country which gave him birth in a manner somewhat worthy of that country and of himself.'<sup>[29]</sup> The toast to 'The Memory of Burns' on that occasion was given by Alexander Boswell, son of the famous biographer of Johnson. The most extensive collection of 'Immortal Memory' speeches is found in a book published for the centenary of the poet's birth, *The Chronicle of the Hundredth Birth Day of Robert Burns* (1859) by James Ballantine. Ballantine was an Edinburgh stained glass artist and writer who embarked on a 'labour of love'<sup>[30]</sup> of editing accounts from 832 Burns celebrations around the world: 676 from Scotland; 76 from England; 10 from Ireland; 48 from the Colonies; 61 from America; and 1 from Copenhagen. The speeches recounted in the Chronicle show their debt to Currie. Lord Neaves, in proposing a toast to 'The Biographers of Burns, and Mr. Robert Chambers' (who was present) at the Edinburgh Music Hall celebration, suggests that Currie was

'the first great biographer of Burns,' whose services were 'nearly as valuable as they were meritorious and disinterested' (10) and credits Currie with interpreting Burns for an audience outside Scotland. Other commentators draw from Currie's 'Life.' Professor Craik, for example, delivering his oratory at the Music Hall in Belfast notes that, 'Burns' biographer, Dr. Currie, remarks of Burns, that, he rose by the strength of his talents, so he fell by the strength of his passions' (497). The Honorable William Young at the North British and Highland Societies' gathering in Halifax, Nova Scotia quotes a whole passage from Currie without attribution (518).

But as well as merely citing Currie, the speeches in Ballantine's *Chronicle* suggest how powerful the structure of feeling that Currie set in motion had become by 1859, as it shows Burns iconized as a receptacle of Scottish cultural memory. At the Corn Exchange celebration, for example, The Lord Provost indicated that, 'the source of the intense admiration cherished towards Burns by his countrymen is to be traced . . . to the vivid delineation given by him in his writings of our national character' (20), echoing Currie's contention that Burns's poetry displays 'the peculiar manners of his country.' Similarly, at the dinner at the Guildhall Coffee-House in Cheapside, London, the Chairman, a Mr. Hannay, indicated that Burns 'embodied in himself knowledge of the late times of Scotland with all the intellect that was necessary for the new period' (428), while Mr. Gorrie at the Queen Street Hall in Edinburgh comes closer to Currie's sense that the genius of the nation is 'expiring,' as he declares that Burns was 'a type' of Scottish nationality, 'a nationality which even now grows dim in the hearts of the people' (29).

The celebrations that the *Chronicle* records also recall Currie's positioning of Burns as a symbol who unites Scots around the globe. The Lord Provost of Edinburgh asks rhetorically: 'Who does not know some exile whose fond recollections of country and of home have been soothed and sustained by the songs of Burns, whose works find a place in the library of every Scotchman who leaves his native land?' (21). Drawing on the new technology of the mid-nineteenth century for his analogy, George Hally, Chairman of the gathering at the Masonic Hall in Auchterarder, suggests that Burns's poetry operates as a metaphorical cord across the Atlantic: 'although the Atlantic telegraph cable lately laid by the energy, capital, and skill of two great nations, is now silent and dumb, there is a cable of poetry and song, laid nearly a hundred years ago by a simple ploughman, which neither the length, the depths, nor the storms of the Atlantic can ever sever, and through which this day the electric sparks flow, making hearts in America beat warmly and in unison with those in Scotland.'<sup>[31]</sup> Burns and his works are a conduit which articulate the connection between Scotland and its diaspora.

The *Chronicle* also reveals alterations in the way that Currie positioned Burns. For Currie, Burns's poetry served to articulate the Scottish 'love of country' and to connect those who shared that love. In many speeches in the *Chronicle*, Burns's poetry becomes not a reflection of Scottish

patriotism but in fact its source. Duncan M'Laren at the Corn Exchange suggests, for example that, 'The poetry of Burns has sunk into the character and hearts of the people of Scotland . . . They have, as it were, been woven into the thoughts and feelings of the people' (19). Lord Ardmillan similarly speculates on the 'influence of Burns's poetry upon the people of Scotland': 'it affects them in their homes, it affects them at their social meetings, it affects them in their public convocations,--it affects the heart and mind of Scotchmen not in Scotland only, but throughout the whole world' (12). Mr. A. Denniston, a writer who proposed a toast to 'The Scottish Peasantry' at Glasgow City Hall, remarks on the 'leading characteristics of our peasantry' and concludes, 'Nor is it the least remarkable feature in their character their high appreciation of the character and works of Robert Burns . . . as a poet of the people how deeply has our national mind been impressed with the poetry of Burns! To that feeling I do not hesitate to ascribe much of that lofty spirit of religion and patriotism for which our peasantry are so remarkable' (47). The same Gorrie who laments the 'dimness' of Scottish national feeling also intimates that it may become the only thing keeping Scottish 'nationality' alive: 'in another hundred years [national feeling] may be fed entirely by the songs of Burns' (29). Rather than connecting those who already feel a sense of Scottish patriotism, Burns's poetry impresses Scottish patriotism upon its readers.

Moreover, that poetry impresses others with its imprint. In the pages of the *Chronicle*, Burns emerges as the poet not only of Scottish nationality, but of nationality in general: 'he proclaimed in noble words a catholic patriotism, an intense love for his mother-land, which yet should be compatible with the recognition that men of other lands should also love them with a similar love' (28). Thus his reputation, notes Colonel Mellish at Glasgow City Hall, 'has come to embrace not only his countrymen but all who can admire genius and venerate lofty feelings in every country of the civilised globe' (41): 'Vast as is this assembly which I now address, it is but the representative of millions in the East and in the West, in the North and in the South, who are now found together in the expression of common feeling; and the pulse which now throbs so violently at the very name of Burns under this roof, is beating also at the same moment in the extremities of the earth, afar off in Australian and Transatlantic wilds' (41). By 1859, Burns has become a universal donor inspiring love for one's country.

Much had changed in the world between the initial publication of Currie's *Works of Robert Burns* and the first centenary celebrations – but much had stayed the same. A comparison between the positioning of Burns in Currie's *Works* and in Ballantine's *Chronicle* illustrates the ways in which, according to Ann Rigney, 'sites of [cultural] memory' are 'constantly being reinvested with new meaning': 'Whether they take the material form of actual places and objects, or the immaterial form of stories and pieces of music, "sites of memory" are defined by the fact that they elicit intense attention on the part of those doing the remembering and thereby become a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment.'<sup>[32]</sup> Nevertheless, in considering the various ways in

which 'symbolic investment' accrues, it is important to consider the artifacts involved in the initial mapping of that cultural memory. James Currie's *Works* has often been blamed for its negative impact on Burns's reputation. But it also helped package Burns in such a way as to enable these later reinvestments of meaning. In a toast to 'The Biographers of Burns, and Mr. Robert Chambers' taken down by Ballantine from the Edinburgh Music Hall celebration, Lord Neaves noted, 'It has been said that a hero is nothing without a poet to celebrate his achievements; and it may be added that a poet is not wholly himself without a biographer to commemorate his character and conduct' (10). Currie's *Works* facilitated a shift of Burns from communicative to cultural memory. In so doing, it 'commemorated' Burns's 'character and conduct' in such a way as to make him a symbol of memory that could be resignified as necessary in subsequent chronological and geographical sites.

## NOTES

[1] Thomas Carlyle, *Burns* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1954), 3. Carlyle's 'Essay on Burns,' a review of John Lockhart's *The Life of Robert Burns*, was first printed in the *Edinburgh Review* of December, 1828 and republished numerous times afterward.

[2] Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,' *New German Critique*, 65 (1995) 125-133; 126.

[3] Ibid, 128-29. Assman and Czaplicka suggest that one characteristic of 'collective memory' is its 'limited temporal horizon' of eighty to one hundred years which 'shifts in direct relation to the passing of time' and which 'offers no fixed point which would bind it to the ever expanding past' (127). Cultural memory, however, has a 'fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time': 'These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation' (129).

[4] Ann Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory,' *Journal of European Studies*, 35:1 (2005), 11-28; 14.

[5] Ibid. Whereas Carlyle longed for the objectivity that he believed could only be achieved through processes involved in what Assmann and Czaplicka refer to as 'cultural memory,' Assman and Czaplicka themselves intimate that 'communicative memory' is more authentic in conveying the essence of the memory. Rigney examines the myth of what she calls plenitude and loss involved in this model. In response, she points out that communicative memory also involves a selection process.

[6] During his lifetime, Burns was well aware of the power of cultural memory in Scotland and used it to his advantage in works such as 'The Vision' and 'Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn.' But he also skillfully resisted being reduced to merely a channel for Scottish

cultural memory.

[7] Quoted in *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers (NY: Harper Brothers, 1854), p. 210 fn.

[8] Donald Low, *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1995), 102.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Low suggests that Heron's *Memoir* was important because it was 'the first book-length biography' of Burns (*Robert Burns*, 22).

[11] T. F. Henderson, 'Heron, Robert (1764–1807)', rev. H. C. G. Matthew, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/13090>, accessed 25 May 2009].

[12] Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: T. Brown, 1797), 17. Subsequent quotations are to this edition.

[13] James Currie, *The Works of Robert Burns; with an Account of his Life and a Criticism on his Writings* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1800). Subsequent references are to this edition. Volume 1 included *The life of Robert Burns; with a criticism on his writings. To which are prefixed, some observations on the Scottish peasantry*; Volume 2 covered *General correspondence; including pieces of miscellaneous poetry*; Volume 3 consisted of *Poems, formerly published, with some additions. To which is added, a history of these poems by Gilbert Burns*; while Volume 4 concentrated on *Correspondence with Mr. George Thomson including poetry, hitherto unpublished or uncollected*.

[14] For more details on Currie's life, see Leith Davis, "James Currie," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 142: *Eighteenth-Century British Literary Biographers*, 61-68.

[15] Quoted in Chambers, *Life and Works*, 225.

[16] The eighth edition was actually produced by Cadell and Davies with additional information from Gilbert Burns, but this was not successful and did not go to a second printing.

[17] See *The Works of Robert Burns* (Philadelphia: Printed by Budd and Bartram, for Thomas Dobson, 1801); *The Works of Robert Burns* (Belfast: Abcher and Ward, and D. Simms, 1805); and *The Complete Works of Robert Burns, with an Account of his Life, and a Criticism of his Writings* (Halifax: William Milner, 1842).

[18] *A New edition of the Life and Works of Robert Burns, as originally edited by James Currie* (Edinburgh: Macredie, Skelly and Muckersy, 1815).

[19] James Storer and John Grieg, *Nineteen Views in North Britain, Illustrative of the Works of Robert Burns* (London: Vernor and Hood, 1805).

[20] James Currie, *The Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1838), ii.

[21] R. H. Cromek, *Reliques of Robert Burns* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1817), iii.

[22] Carlyle, *Burns*, 4.

[23] William Wordsworth, *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees,

Orme and Brown, 1816). 8. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[24] J.G. Lockhart, *The Life of Burns*, ed. William Scott Douglass (London: George Bell and Sons, 1882), xv. In his sketch of Burns for *Lives of the Scottish Poets*, David Irving noted that 'The character of Burns has been drawn with sufficient accuracy by Dr Currie; from whom I shall borrow what appears most material' (*Lives of the Scottish Poets*, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: Alexander Lawrie and Company, 1804], 2:482).

[25] Quoted in Low, *Robert Burns*, 419. See James Hogg and William Motherwell, *The Works of Robert Burns* (Glasgow: Archibald Fullerton, 1836).

[26] Low, *Robert Burns*, xv.

[27] *The Bibliography of Robert Burns with Biographical and Bibliographical Notes, and Sketches of Burns Clubs, Monuments and Statues* (Kilmarnock: James M'Kie, 1881), 310.

[28] Carol McGuirk, 'Introduction: Burns Country—Critics and Cultists' in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 1-12; 2.

[29] See Donald Low, *Robert Burns*, 274.

[30] James Ballantine, ed., *The Chronicle of the Hundredth Birth Day of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh and London: A. Fullerton, 1859), vi. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[31] *Ibid*, 170.

[32] Rigney, 'Plenitude,' 18.