

Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People

By Christopher A Whatley

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Writing and A' That

Historians have a special way of making literature speak. By putting poetry and novels into an historical context, not only do they make those works seem more pressing and relevant to the societies they reflect, they can show them to be prescient, too, of a sort of future national 'self'. We need only look, for example, at recent publications around the centenary of the First World War with their examination of the lives and work of poets of that era to understand better the effect upon the psyche of wars now, from PTSD to jihadism. And any account of social change – from the outcome of the suffragette movement to the dismantling of municipal Britain – illustrated with a novel by Virginia Woolf, say, or our contemporary James Kelman, shows us much more clearly the kind of Britain we inhabit today: as gender-riven and economically divided as before the introduction of the welfare state.

So then to this timely and *rousing Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People* in which one of our most important historians takes on what may be described as the 'afterlife' of a poet who seems to speak for the nation as fulsomely now as then. 'Living in Scotland, it is virtually impossible to be unaware of Robert Burns' writes Christopher Whatley in his opening pages, setting the tone for the project. The past is in the present indeed.

That word 'seems' holds the key, though. For this sophisticated record of a writer whose work was at all times managed by the authorities and overriding politics of the age is at once imaginative and inspirational in the way it shows how poetry and culture are in flux, with mixed motives and beginnings, and not to be tied to fixed national aims. 'The point in relation to Burns is this' writes Whatley, 'He represented certain fundamental principles and ideals that had...stirred tens of thousands of his countrymen (and women). But his was a quest for liberty and a vision of greater social equality, not a party political manifesto.'

So the historian goes on to show the influence of the poet - across society engendering reading groups, self publishing initiatives, workers' politicisation and more - a story as fractured and various as Burns' own output. 'If, after 1707, the grand narrative of Scottish history was harder to tell as it had been enmeshed with England's' writes the author of *The Scots and the Union*, republished just prior to the 2014 Referendum, 'it was in the localities that Scotland's history was to be found, recorded and resumed.'

In finely graded and textured prose, Whatley follows that local story as much as a larger one as he grafts the poet's legacy onto a country riven by disagreement, massive industrial and economic change, along with growing awareness of its nationhood – showing how Burns was used to shore up one belief system or other in turn. There are the autodidacts, the law lords and businessmen who together and individually, in Scotland as well as South of the Border, furnished their own ambitions at Burns Supper tables. There are the councils and town planners planning extravaganzas to raise money for the great spate of Burns statue building to promote their own corners of the kingdom; there, the editors and writers, the churchmen, who created intellectual contexts in which their own interests could shine. And there too, Whatley shows us, are the weaver poets – in particular a whole group of women writers and thinkers - who would make Burns the basis of their own creative practice: First learning poems by heart that could be sung and recited to illiterate communities around them, then going on to write their own richly engaged and emotive verse. For writers, as well as readers and scholars, learning about poets like Jeannie Paterson and Janet Hamilton, Isobel Pagan and Janet Little in a narrative of a poet all too often thought of as a man's man, belonging to another time and sensibility, is another way of bringing the Burns of 'Auld Lang Syne' bang up to date.

In all, this complex and fascinating history that 'looks' and 'listens', as its writer says, more than it ever just records and researches, asks us: 'What messages would the statues silent voices convey?' and suggests there might be a range of answers. As we search our national psyche for signs of identity and meaning the publication of *Immortal Memory* could not be more timely. Beware the simple cries of 'Scots Wha Hae' that have been commandeered by the politicians and the nationalists, Whatley seems to be reminding us. Literature and its legacies - our imagination, after all - is far more sophisticated and multifaceted than can be summed up in the simple cry of 'Yes'.