(burns)

Biographer and Historian

Robert Chambers wrote two biographies,a major "Life and Work" of Burns and his last book on Smollett. This, because he was frail and ill (it was written in 1867 four years before his death when he was in the grip of his anaemic illness) was a slight work, but nevertheless full of interesting detail. Tobias Smollett was a sharp observer and astringent commentator, and put into the mouths of his characters his own views on society.

Smollett was born in Glasgow, and in due course apprenticed to a London surgeon, and his journey there, on horseback and on foot, is described in "Roderick Random". One of the people he meets on route is a card-sharper "in the form of a young clergyman". Smollett cum Rodercick "did not wonder to find a cheat in canonicals this being a character frequent **in my own country**, but I was scandalised at the oaths which he swore and the indecent songs which he sang." This was mid eighteenth century enlightenment attitude to the church, soon to be more forcefully and riotously expressed by Burns.

The navy is then, in Roderick's disguise, held up for scrutiny. "The admiral allows his men to perish of bilious fever in great multitudes rather than ask any assistance on their behalf." This unpleasant existence is abandoned, and Roderick tries to set up in a medical practice in Downing Street, but cannot get patronage "in that age of corruption when every legisalator bribed his electors and every minister bribed his legislators and no man of influence could be approached without fees to his servants and secretary - which was an age of great general prosperity for England nevertheless." Pope's pen could hardly have improved on this smooth irony.

There is a vivid description of the news of the Battle of Culloden reaching London on April 23rd 1745, a week after it took place. The whole town is in an uproar of joy and relief, but Scotsmen are nervous, put their wigs in their pockets and swords in their hands according to a witness, and are generally careful, among the mobs and bonfires, not to reveal their origins.

Robert included an interesting memoir of Smollett's grandfather. His mother died at his birth, and he was sent away for four years to "ane Highland nurse" until his father remarried. He was apprenticed in Edinburgh to a Writer to the Signet, and when he married discovered that his father in law was part of a spy ring who informed against dissenters, these spies usually curates. Acutely this grandfather predicted a revolution in France.

Robert seemed to have grown more priggish in old age; he deplored "the loose life of the hero" in **Peregrine Pickle** and the "positively licentious language" not suitable for females. As for the 1753 **Adventures of Count Ferdinand** this was "a book one could wish he had never written...the hero a libertine, gambler and swindler." He approved though of the description of Edinburgh in 1766; "An ugly mass of mean buildings called the Luckenbooths had not thrust itself...into the middle of the way."

He summed up Smollet's character; impatient and intolerant, satirical, irritable and vindictive, but this "continual exasperation of spirit" he put down largely to the malice of his enemies. Smollett also ruined his health through overwork; what Robert did not mention and has indeed been generally overlooked,

is that he went out to Calcutta and worked for the East India Company under an assumed name for a period. This would not have done his health any good, though it improved his finances. He died in Leghorn at the age of fifty one, an astute commentator on his times, and Scott was, said Robert, greatly influenced by his characters. Robert got much of the material for the book from notes given to him by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe in 1824; which shows that through all the many moves of his life he preserved with care his important sources.

Carlyle expressed himself much pleased with the **Life of Smollett**, but it gives the impression of being put together rather loosely from those old notes, by a man failing in energy but still unable to give up. Burns was a different matter altogether. The two volumes that appeared in 1851 were the result of a lifetime's interest, and were intended to repair the damage done by previous biographers. Within three years of Burns's death Dr Currie M.D had given to the world the first of these, followed by Lockhart, Heron. Walker, Cunningham, all in different ways tampering, distorting, ignorantly conjecturing, or just generally misconstruing; and all in the business of bringing their own prejudices and moralising to bear on their hapless victim.

Robert's interest in Burns started in his early twenties, when he began to wander the precincts of the poet's homes and talk to the people who had known him. A notebook he kept in his twenty second year records some of his findings; the elderly farm worker, for instance, who talked of Burns as a young man trying to cure his rheumatic pains by sleeping in a barn loft (sharing the worker's bed) and dipping into a bath of cold water. This is a good example of some of the "cures" of the day, which often ended by killing. Burns did indeed eventually die of the effects of his boyhood rheumatic fever.

Through the years that followed Robert became closely involved with Burns's sister and her daughters, and helped them financially, finally giving to them the proceeds from the biography. He was also a close friend of George Thompson, the man who more than any other inspired the most fruitful enterprise of Burns's life, the songs. Thompson has since received a great deal of violent critisizm, but without his encouragement and suggestions, we would never have had that last lovely harvest. .

The main facts of the life were common knowledge long before Robert's biography appeared. Currie had been able to talk to many of the people who knew Burns; his wife outlived him by thirty years, his brother Gilbert was generous with information, his friends came forward, Thompson handed over all the letters he had received along with his replies, and Burns himself wrote a long autobiographical account for a Dr Moore which took him up to 1787. Then of course the poems were full of echos of his friendships, his loves, his worries, his hates, his interests in the life around him.

So everybody knew of his harsh childhood and the ill health that was the result of poor food,and damp housing, and the effects of prolonged, exhausting toil on a growing body. They knew of his father's financial problems, and of his despairing effort to make his farming work. They knew this father had done his best to give his sons, Robert and Gilbert. an education, and this had ended when Burns was sixteen. They had heard of the rather uncomfortable facts of Burns's bastards, twins by Jean Armour and a daughter by a servant, Elizabeth Paton the first to arrive in his twenty seventh year. They were happy to travel with him to Edinburgh at the end of that uncomfortable year, 1786, to enjoy some lionising after the publication of his collection of poems.

They returned with him to the farm he had rented, Ellisland, but which after four and a half years was abandoned when Burns took his growing family to Dumfries to concentrate on being an excise man. They were told that he started to go downhill after that, drinking too much and becoming involved in dangerous politics. It was not emphasised that it was during those last five years of supposed disintegration that he wrote his immortal songs. They mourned his early death at thirty eight years, brought on they were told by dissipation, leaving his family penniless. Newspapers of the day announced his death with the comment that "he was accompanied by frailties which rendered him useless to himself and his family." Three years later this same press was raving about another young poet and his vastly superior (in their opinion) "Pleasures of Hope."

What was lacking in the forest of truths, half truths and guesses supplied by Currie, Lockhart et al was a serious axe bearer who would hack through the confusion of branches and let light in. Robert combined the skills needed to hold the axe, and to recognise where to strike it. He was himself a first rate folklorist and collector of ballads and songs, so could deal comfortably with the greatest of Burns's work. He was an accomplished researcher, always ready with the right questions, at home in archives and libraries. He was genial and sensitive, and in the confidence of the old lady Isabella Begg, Burns's sister, and her daughters.

He shared the anti-ecclesiastical stance that produced some of Burns's most powerful satire, but offended Lockhart. He also understood Burns's complex political views; his emotional tie to the Jacobite cause and loathing of the House of Hanover; but a liberal conscience that drew some inspiration from France, demanding freedom, equality, and a better life for the under classes. The idea that Burns was simply "a wonderful peasant" was a total distortion; even supposing Currie, Lockhart and their like knew what the phrase meant.

James Currie in his biography of 1800 said in his introduction that he would "tread lightly over his still warm ashes", which gave him, he felt, licence to expunge, omit, and scatter asterisks over his text. He often had to draw veils over events too "delicate" to mention, always conscious of the "public eye", readers who must be sheltered from the coarse events in the life of his passionate peasant. The love affairs, for instance, were not a proper subject for discussion. Unfortunately veils and asterisks only drew attention to what they were concealing, Currie himself noted that love and poetry were the twin passions of Burns's life, the one dependent on the other, which made his task well nigh impossible.

In his introduction Currie rambled on at some length about peasants, though he admitted that "the condition and manners of the humbler ranks of society (were) hitherto little observed", so he was somewhat in the dark. He did have Burns's autobiogrphical sketch to help him, so could describe the gruelling hard work of his thirteenth to fifteenth years when every evening he had a dull headache. However he learnt from this that his father borrowed Derham's "Mysico and Astro Theology" and Ray's "Wisdom of God in the Creation" which his twelve year old son read with avidity; not really to be expected in a "peasant" household.

In Burns's seventeenth year, 1777, the family moved to a new farm, Lochlea, but Currie assured his readers that he was "chaste" until he was twenty three, on what authority he does not say. After that the veil was much in demand, and the "public eye" also had to be protected from the poet's Commonplace Book. Currie was not a very good critic of the poems and considered the songs "very unequal", and

hoped that some "written in unguarded moments" would be speedily forgotten. He was careful not to produce any of these. Poetry was supposed to be "elevated and ornamental."

Later it was generally agreed that the first biographers took too stern a view of the Dumfries years. "Perpetually stimulated by alcohol" said Currie, and then as a doctor went on to discuss at some length the relievers of stress; alcohol, opium, tea, coffee, and wine; the latter could lead to fever, dropsy, jaundice, paralysis and insanity was his professional opinion, though he drew a veil over the connections any of this had with Burns.

Currie intended to be kind, Lockhart aimed to be more accurate but added little . He wrote his Life as Volume Xlll of Constable's Miscellany, and in it referred several times to information received from Robert Chambers, then in his twenties. For instance in June 1826 Robert told him of an old inhabitant who described Burns as dark, thoughtful and gloomy, silent and reserved, which hardly fitted the many descriptions of him as a brilliant conversationalist. Burns certainly suffered from moods of depression, for which there were many causes, physical and psychological.

Lockhart reserved his strongest distaste for Burns's "blasphemy" in his ripping apart of the bunch of ruffians masquerading as ministers he had come into contact with in Ayr. He skated over the love affairs and their consequences, though mentioning Highland Mary as "the object of by far the deepest passion that Burns ever knew"; biographers were not then required to give sources for such remarks, and if Lockhart had read all the poems Burns wrote during that summer when he was planning to leave the country for Jamaica, he would have seen that it was Jean he hated to leave, not Mary. These poems would also have cast doubts on the story that Mary was going with him. Clarinda, the married lady whom Burns visited and wrote many love letters to in Edinburgh, had a purity of character "above suspicion" he said. Robert thought it most questionable that she, living alone, should entertain a man of Burns's known reputation in her house.

Then there were Heron, Walker, Cromek and Cunningham, with no new material but with plenty of pious comment but little critical ablity. In 1838 Robert wrote a long letter to Thompson after reading Cunningham's book. By that time he knew the outlines of the story, and was sick to death of all the ignorant carpers. "I believe his real transgressions were not in a larger proportion to his impulses and temptations than those of other mens, probably they were less. He requires a standard for himself, I am for making mind a much more physical thing than is normally done. I do not know how far his extraordinary genius arose from the exactly same material conditions which sent him headlong the way of passion...and I would therefore take the faults of the man as something which must be put up with for the sake of the singular talents with which they were inseperably connected. Let us be content with Burns on any terms say I, for how often do we find men who in connection with such or even with greateer faults, give us such fruits of mind?...what manliness, what kind and philanthropic feeling, what scorn for all that was mean and servile...if there were anything which could make me want to live in the last rather than in the present century it would have been the opportunity of enjoying personal commerce with Robert Burns."

Having given voice to these strong sentiments, Robert did later object to the pendulum swinging too far in the opposite direction with an effort to whitewash that was equally absurd. One of these whitewashers was James Gray, who taught the Burns boys when they were in Dumfries. On an

unpublished scrap of paper Robert wrote in January 1853, two years after the appearance of his biography, "I am informed by Dr John Scott that Gray was fully conscious of the aberrations of Burns." James Gray lived with Scott's brother in Canongate and was a visitor and talked of Burns's Dumfries days, "admitting that they were marked by great dissoluteness. He described the unfortunate bard's habit of staying out late at taverns and going away more or less intoxicated so as to become the victim of a still grosser vice before he reached home." Certainly Burns's last illegitimate child was fathered on the sister of the owner of the Globe Tavern, Anna Ewing. She "did not smell very sweet like other red headed people" Robert commented as an interesting if questionable aside.

He deplored Gray's wilful distortion of the facts. "To me it seems monstrous in any one out of a lunatic asylum to write as Gray has done when his actual knowledge of facts was to so different a purpose." It was a problem faced by all Burns scholars. Dr Carruthers admitted in a letter to Robert of 1850 "I used to be aggrieved as a boy in Dumfries to hear the old acquaintances of Burns speak so disparagingly of him as a man...his wild talk as to religion, his obscenity and common swearing - were always insisted upon." His uncle, said Carruthers called him "coarse, debauched and arrogant" and even the Dr Maxwell who attended him in his last illness "had a very bad opinion of him."

Both of them found it hard to avoid a slight tampering with dates when it came to the events of 1786. "I am afraid we must place the Marian affection in 86" wrote Carruthers, "yet I feel that it dims the fine gold of Burns's passion, and I would gladly fix on 85 if it could be made consistent with fact." Offering to marry Jean Armour one moment and writing deathless love to another girl the next was awkward for his admiring but honest biographers.

This was a momentous year in the poet's life, when his relationship with Jean Armour led to her pregnancy, and the marriage certificate they drew up was angrily mutilated by her father. Burns's reaction was to start another affair immediately, at the same time as planning to emigrate to Jamaica. The girl he chose to woo, variously described as a dairymaid or nurserymaid in the big house, and celebrated by Burns in several poems as Highland Mary, has loomed large in his history because he appeared to feel more seriously about this affair than the many other casual encounters with pretty girls.

To Robert and Carruthers it was all a bit rushed; a pregnant "wife" in one corner and then this girl who he was contemplating taking to Jamaica. Robert tried to sort out exactly the course of events from the Maytime courtship to Mary's death on October 20th. He did not have evidence later discovered that a newborn infant was found near her body in her grave. The facts he got, from Burns's sister Isabella Begg, and her daughter and a grand nephew of Mary's mother, set out in a series of letters, make it seem unlikely that this child was hers, and that she died in a premature delivery.

A letter from Isabella Begg in January 1850 tells Robert of this "love lorn passage"; "it was in 1786...at least so my Mother has always thought from a revulsion of feeling attendant on the heartless desertion of Jean Armour and from a feeling on his part of something very like to disgust at his **unmanly** conduct...she was **then** the very last woman in the world he would have thought of as his wife...then became acquainted with Mary Campbell who was acting as a nurserymaid in the family of Gavin Hamilton which situation she left to become dairy maid at Coilsfie. I said he **just then** became acquainted with her but he must have known her previously to that though his **love fit** had only begun then...it must have required a Poet's licence to go through so much love in so short a space of time." She died in Greenock. "Mother always inderstood that she died in the house of a married sister there. She

also recalled well of his receiving a letter of her death from Greenock...She recalled well she was spinning on the Muckle or Want Wheel for he came betwixt her and the window to read it, now she (sic) never spun on the wheel till the honest work was all over and in the beginning of winter this points to the period of the year...she was struck with his look of agony on reading the letter, but he immediately left the kitchen without uttering a syllable, either my grandmother or one of the aunts was assisting her with the wheel, none else were present except my uncle Gilbert who ironically asked if this was (illegible) love pledge but Robert retired without a word of reply...everyone blamed her (Jean Armour) for the manner in which she threw herself in his way." Another letter, from a great nephew of Highland Mary describes her death from fever, typhus almost certainly. She nursed her brother, who recovered, but she herself succombed.

The possibility that Mary's fever was aggravated by a premature birth; speculation aroused by the infant's body near hers in her grave; will probably not be resolved. It is thought to explain Burns's more than normally sorrowful reaction to her death, but this was surely fairly natural. She was young, they had been lovers, it was unexpected and a shock. They parted in May, apparently agreeing to depart together for Jamaica. She returned to Greenock in October, according to Robert on her way to a job with a Colonel Maciver in Glasgow, so the fact that she was six months pregnant seems unlikely to say the least, nor was it probable that she would head off for Jamaica with Burns in that condition. With the appearance of the Kilmarnock edition of the Poems, both Mary and Jamaica were forgotten. Not vompletely, for he wrote a poem three years later commemorating her death; "O Mary dear departed shade" he addressed her, in language contrived and lifeless. Six years after her death he also sent a few verses to Thompson, "Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary", also fairly unmemorable. The intensity of his feelings seemed to have little to do with the quality of Burns's poetry where women were concerned. The worst and the best of his poems could be written to the same woman.

"The most painful chapter in the poet's history" was how Robert described 1786, though it was also, he surely had to admit, the most important too, with the publication of his first, indeed his only, book of collected poems. The painful part was Burns's behaviour; piqued and petulant, on July 22nd he drew up a formal writ (of which Robert had a lithographed copy) resigning his half of the farm and the profits from his book to his brother Gilbert, for the maintenance of his daughter by Elizabeth Paton. He was making sure that nothing was to go to the child that Jean Armour expected. It was a mean gesture. He expected to be in Jamaica by the time the storm broke, and they tried to sue him for maintenance. Robert explained to his readers that all these rather sordid philanderings "will only be intelligible if we reflect that in Scottish village life there is little of that delicacy as to female purity which prevails in more refined circles." The women were equally to blame he seemed to be saying. Whether they were to blame or not, they certainly suffered most.

This becomes vividly clear in a letter written to Burns when he had left Edinburgh, by another girl he had got into "trouble" there. It was written by a woman she was lodging with and dated May 26th 1787. "My present situation of health has grown every day worst since you left the town. Not being able to wash all my master's (illegible) and the child's cloths and spine the Cuts of yearn every day besides the other work of the house my mrs told me I but to seek another place to be in now as I am growing observable to be with child they for their Character Sake could not keep in there house so I was obliged to leave them this forenoon and god only knows what I am to do for I dare go near no person that knows me and I have not got a penny from my own people.

Out of quarters without friends my Situation at present is really deplorable I beg for god sake you will write and let me know how I am to do you can write to any person you can trust to get to me a place to stay in till such time as you come to town yourself. Was I not thrown destitute I would not wrote you When you write Direct to me to the care of James Hogg shoemaker Buchanans Land head of Canongate His wife write for me The letter will come safe but you must post pay the letter as I cannot desire the people to pay it They have no bed but one or I would not be distute. I depend you write me in course of post. I write a line to Mr Andrew Bruce and toke it myself and got the direction myself and he asked me several questions such as if I knowed M.Cameron and where she stayed and what business she followed. I answered Lawnmarket I told him I did not know her myself I was only sent the message and this was all that past."

Burns sent this appeal to his friend Ainslie in Edinburgh. "I am very sorry for it but what is done is done" was his rather callous comment, along with instructions to give her ten or twelve shillings and arrange for her to go into the country. In fact she sued him, and the affair only ended when the child miscarried or was aborted. One wonders if May Cameron would have sued plain Robert Burns the farmer, or if she calculated on getting something solid out of Burns the talk of the town that winter. But her case is interesting; she was thrown out by her employers, but she was not entirely without recourse to justice, and she knew where to go for it. Abortions were available, but obviously dangerous. Doctors supplied "poisons" ; "ye hae made repeated trials Wi drugs and draps in doctor's phials Mixt as ye thought, wi fell infusion Your ain begotten wean to poison" Burns wrote in his mock "summons", parodying the Kirk Sessions tribunals.

"This is a painful area", he "appears to least advantage" was how Robert tried to ease himself through the thicket of Burns's affairs. While he was in Edinburgh Burns veered between the admiring salons of the rich and scholarly, and some relaxed carousing with his friends. During the second winter, which was less of a social whirl, when he was laid up for more than a month with an injured leg, the result of a cab accident, he amused himself writing love letters to a married lady. Robert had only one side of the correspondence, but was not happy at this philandering of a married man with a woman who had a husband (albeit absent and unpleasant) and two children. Burns had sorted out his merital affairs and was legally Jean Armour's husband by then, but perhaps he didn't really understand this Robert thought. He was after all "a rustic not necessarily learned in the law." He knew enough to make legal arrangements about his property, but perhaps did not grasp the ins and outs of the Scottish marriage system. Perhaps.

Burns, as he himself admitted, had a heart of tinder, and even in his last illness with his wife about to produce their seventh child, he was able to lose it to his little nurse. This girl, Jessy Lewars, became a Mrs Thomson, and in 1838 wrote an interesting letter to Robert about the man she remembered. Her father was dead and she was a constant visitor at the Burns house, her brother being a fellow exciseman with the bard. Burns obviously did not stagger back nightly from the pub; she recalled him coming back late and finding no supper, eating bread and cheese "reading his book all the time or mingling his studies with an occasional word of chat with Miss Lewars or any other friend who might be in the house." He bought his wife good clothes, such as a gingham "of which she was one of the first wearers in Dumfries."

He used to joke with Jessy about who she would marry, a form of flirtation harmless in her case. "There's Bob Spalding he would say, he has not brains a midge would lean its elbow on he wont do." She affirmed Burns's competence at his job, he was good at Maths and a capital land surveyor. His work for the excise took him two hundred miles a week on horseback, something unlikely to be achieved by the habitual drunk described by Currie and the rest.

Robert's biography aimed to extract the kernel of truth from the considerable chaff of speculation of the first half century after Burns's death, and he also set the life beside the poetry for the first time. The Library Edition gave more space to the poems than to the commentary; most were printed in full and only occasionally did Robert allow himself to question their content. "Most people would have wished it not written" he suggested of "To a Louse."

As well as setting the poems in their chronological order, Robert supplied footnotes from his extensive knowledge of folklore, balladry, and the social scene. He quoted Scott on beggars; "the old remembered beggars who were often good talkers with patched cloaks like jesters... The class had some privileges. A bed in a byre, a handful of meal which was put into a bag - scraps of meat from gentry." Indolent peripatetics they may have been but they were, as Robert knew, important carriers of news and gossip.

Communion Fairs were described in a letter from a blacksmith; "The field preaching surrounded by men and women lying on the grass" a mixture of "religion, sleep, drinking, courtship." Burns's superb satire "Holy Fair" which offended Lockhart and enraged the clerics, brought such a scene to vivid life, including the preachers. They were "a set of rascally hypocrites and bigots" Robert noted in a private aside, whom the poet treated with "remarkable leniency." His own anti-clerical stance was to get him into trouble; had done so by the time his Life was published.

On the whole Robert tried to keep a scholarly distance between himself and his subject, only occasionally overstepping the mark. One of Burns's abiding interests was Freemasonry, and Robert himself was a mason so should have been sympathetic; but he confessed himself amazed that the poet could associate with "the ordinary tradespeople of Tarbolton," in lodge meetings in a room behind the village inn. The tavern was, he admitted, the centre of social life then; everyone went there instead of to "the decent sanction of the home circle" as now. Robert did not condemn Burns for his heavy drinking, but regretted that he wasted his time in the company and conversation of rather stupid people: "empty gabble...endless disputes" was how he remembered pub conversation, perhaps from way back to his father's time. It was in the pub that Burns began to "kindle to French politocs", not sensible for a man in his job.

Robert's slight snobbery is evident in his description of the city Burns, the Edinburgh Burns. "His figure and countenance were rude, and such as could not be expected to soften suddenly down to the degree of refinement and grace which is necessary for shining in the drawing room" he wrote, in spite of having the accounts of others, such as Dugald Stuart and the Earl of Glencairn, that he fitted remarkably well into their drawing rooms. Robert got from someone, (and there were still people around who had known him,) the fact that Burns had an awkward habit. "the inability to look any person directly in the face...instead of that he looked obliquely down at some indiffferent object". This "impolite and disagreeable peculiarity" was apparent with everyone.

Neither Robert, nor other biographers, seemed to find Burns's last years as an Excise Inspector extraordinary. Here was a man who wrote "Thou curst horse leeches o th' Excise Wha mak the whisky stells their prize" and equally scathingly of oppressive factors and harsh landlords; who hated the way the poor and helpless were bullied and harried by Authority wearing its many hats; clerical, judicial, proprietal; yet who canvassed for and got a job that entailed just such bullying. He was now on the side of the propertied classes who made the game laws, evicted tenants, closed the small gaps which allowed widows to brew ale and sell tobacco, rigged juries under judges like Braxdale, he who sentenced social reformers to transportation. He needed a steady income for his growing family, since his farm was not paying, but turned down a job with a newspaper because he felt ethically unable to write honestly. As he rode the country, prying and spying into the activities of men and women trying to evade the stringent taxes of wartime, his head and heart must have been in constant collision.

This was especially so in the last years of the eighteenth century, where social aspirations expressed in Paine were considered revolutionary. It was quite dangerous for Burns to write "when man to man, the world oer, Shall brithers be for a' that" at a time when a leader of one of the Jacobin societies, Thomas Muir, was sentenced to fourteen years transportation by a ruthless judge in front of a rigged jury. South of the border justice was less tainted, and there were marches, pamphlets, societies, public meetings addressed in fiery language; "Bring out your whips and racks ye ministers of vengeance. Produce your scaffolds...Erect barracks in every street and bastiles in every corner. Persecute and banish every innocent individual, but you will not succeed" were words Burns might have agreed with, but he had to think of promotion in the Excise department or his children would starve.

Robert made a point of showing the positive side of those last years, when the rebellious poet was trying to fit the role of state servant, scared of losing his job, yet unhappy at having to threaten poor old widows. They were lightened, invigorated, totally transformed when two men got him interested in collecting and working on Scottish songs and ballads; one an engraver called James Johnson, an amateur making a collection for his and others pleasure; the other George Thompson clerk to the Board of Trustees in Edinburgh, who eventually produced five volumes. Without these two Burns would probably have let this field of his genius lie fallow. His "zeal, industry and earnestness" were exemplary Robert said. His considerable scholarship and musical skill were evident in the songs themselves and in the letters he wrote to Thompson. He was happier in this work than in anything else he had undertaken; in spite of the drink, and the deadly fatigue of his work, and the small house full of children, he managed to produce feats of concentration to give everlasting delight. As Robert said, all must be forgiven in the light of this golden treasury.

George Thompson, who first approached Burns in 1791, is a much maligned man. His "fussiness and pomposity" were those of "a meddling amateur" his latest biographer has said, echoing others. He paid Burns nothing for his work, except £5 on his deathbed, and took it on himself to tell the great man how to write, and to alter what he, the ignorant barbarian, thought unsuitable. The fact is that Thompson admired Burns extravagantly, and told him so in nearly every letter, comparing him to Shakespeare. "I do not think I can ever repay you or sufficiently esteem or respect you for the liberal and kind manner in which you have entered into the spirit of the undertaking which could not have been perfected without you." he assured the man to whom he was giving infinite pleasure, and who had flatly refused to take any payment; his songs he told Thompson were either above or below price.

Certainly Thompson wanted the most bawdy elements of ballads to be excluded; and very bawdy they were, but occasionally he was right in his remarks on Burns's work. "I am sorry you should be induced to alter "O whistle and I'll come to ye my lad" to the prosaic line "Thy Jeanie will venture wi' ye my lad." I must be permitted to say that i do not think the latter either reads or sings as well." Burns agreed. Thompson ruefully admitted his weakness. "I look back with surprise at my imprudence in so frequently nibbling at lines and couplets of your incomparable lyrics, for which perhaps, if you had served me right, you would have sent me to the devil." Burns in fact was goodtempered although he sometimes flatly refused to make the alterations Thompson demanded. The correspondence between them forms the most interesting chapter of the Life, showing Burns as sensitive, scholarly, knowledgeable, mature. Without Thompson's encouragement he would never have sat at the table in his Dumfries parlour (a good mahogany table said Jessy) and laboured with happy enthusiasm at this task. His wife Jean would often sing the verses to test their quality. It is a scene to put beside the pub crawling and the seduction of red headed barmaids.

Thompson's enthusiasm lasted right through his long life, and forty five years after Burns's death he was still collecting, and now half way through the nineteenth century, was even more pernickety about not offending the "pure" Victorian public: the old words "cannot now be sung either by or to a modest woman." Certain suggestive words must go, for instance Jock which was one of the many pseudonyms for private parts, and if it had to come in must be Jocky. Another kind of vulgarity offended him, the use of Scotticisms. He was going to change one of the songs Robert sent him, "my dislike of the mother telling her to go and kame her hair. If we suppose her daughter a decent kind of girl as I wish to think her..." she would not use such a coarse expression. He would on several occasions "avail myself of your permission to use two or three lines of my own" a permission that Robert seems to have given though he himself was unhappy at tampering with the originals.

By this time there was a strong tide of opinion running that English was the language of the upper classes, and as far as possible the old rhymes must have their crudeness ironed out. Yet for all this Thompson was a great benefactor, and Robert was fond of him, often inviting him to musical soiress in his house. They shared in the fund raising for Burns's family; Thompson could not understand why an annuity had not been settled on Burns in his last years, allowing him to concentrate on his writing and perhaps prolonging his life. This was done for the far less talented James Thomson. whose "Pleasures of Hope" was in the best seller of the age and merited, it was thought, a burial in Westminster Abbey.

Robert said he wanted to write "with tenderness" about Burns; so much had his reputation been blackened by that time, that when the Queen's physician, Sir James Clarke, wrote to him asking for a copy of the poems for the royal children, he specified that nothing of the poet's private life should be included. Robert saw the man as a mixture, like most men; impressionable, irritable, capricious, impulsive was his Great Peasant, but generous, sensitive, and so supremely gifted that he somehow stepped free of censure. Not that Robert considered him up with the really greats, not even on a level with Dryden or Pope.

He tried to correct the extremes of the Curries and Lockharts and Herons; Burns was not desperately poor, nor excessively wild. He was a hardworking exciseman, by his own choice largely; he petitioned for quite a while to get the job. He left debts of £5 and assets of £95, and would have

left more if he had not generously helped his brother. He was always loud in condemnation of the church, too loud thought his prim neighbours, but his biting satire fell on many responsive ears. He followed Pope after all, and wished he could emulate him.

O Pope, had I thy satires darts
To gie the rascals their deserts
I'd rip their rotten, hollow hearts
An tell abroad
Their jugglin' hocus pocus arts
To cheat the crowd."

He did tell it abroad, and the wretched condition of agricultural labourers like his father, helpless in the face of the heartless factor; "He'll stamp an threaten, curse and swear, He'll apprehend them, poind their gear; While they maun stan, wi aspect humble, An hear it a'. an fear an tremble. I see how folk live that hae riches: But surely poor-folk maun be wretches." His admiration for Fergusson, the poet who died young and mad just before him, made him realise the poetic potentials of village life. He took several of Fergusson's poems as models, and in some cases did not exceed them in strength; he was the first to realise the mastery of his predecessor, and the loss to Scotland of his early death. Like Fergusson, he was a chronicler of the social scene; from the hollow hearted clergy and the flinty factors, down to the innocent creatures who were misused, disturbed and hunted around him. "Two mornings ago" he wrote to Mrs Dunlop "I was at a very early hour sowing in the field. I heard a shot , and presently a poor little hare limped by me, apparently very much hurt. You will easily guess, this set my humanity in tears and my indignation in arms" and his pen in motion. Robert listed the stock on Burns's last farm, Ellisland, and typically there were three pet sheep.

It was nearly a great biography but for some reason the easy, accessible stylist of the essays disappears when he handles more serious subjects, and a stiff conventional prose is considered appropriate. Yet it was one on which all succeeding biographers could rely for its careful research, impartial (usually) judgements, and deep knowledge of the background, particularly that of the songs and ballads. He gave the proceeds, £200 ( ) to the Beggs, advising them, of course, to invest it. When the old lady, Burns's sister died soon afterwards her nephew wrote to say that Robert had done more for the family than any other person. Particularly it was the poet who mattered, and the book was really a running commentary on the poems, which occupied the greater part of the space. The life and the poetry were inextricably bound up together, so that Burns became the voice of the age; of the farmer labouring a difficult land under a heartless landlord, his few pleasures thwarted by a pitiless church; of the exuberance that somehow evaded this harsh Calvinism, and erupted in joyous song and dance at fairs and weddings and in the taverns where even the beggars were jolly. With his biography, and with the constant support he gave to Burns's family, Robert did more for the poet than any man then living.

As a historian he is hard to pin down, because history, past, local and contemporary, is scattered through everything he wrote. The past fascinated him, particularly its little known aspects, and he picked these up and recorded them in his books, his articles, his encyclopoedias, his printed lectures. His "Domestic Annals" in two volumes is typical. In 1640 Orders for a Kirk School run; " for the mair perfyte understanding of the childrens behaviour there shall be a **clandestine censer** of whom nane

shall know but the master, that he may secretly acquaint the master with all things and according to the quality of the faults the master shall inflict punishment" beating with a taws "but none at any time or in any case on the head or cheeks"; orders that soon came to be ignored.

He recorded the fate of Scottish prisoners taken at the Battle of Worcester in 1631, handed over to Guineau merchants to be tranported and put to work as slaves in the mines. He noted the huge sums of money paid to clan chieftans for their men to fight in European wars, and how one of these had to return twice, in 1628 and 1630, to collect fresh supplies of cannon fodder. Robert made no comment on this cruel trade, or on the light it cast on highland life in a period later glamorised by Scott.

Gipsies were victims of ethnic cleansing as far back as 1621 when the Privy Council "issued a thundering order for the putting down of those vagabonds thieves and limmers the Egyptians, of whom large bands were going about to the north part of the kingdom, armed, extorting whatever they needed from such as ... were not able to resist them." On a smaller scale. the Town Council of Edinburgh forbade the wearing of plaids by women in the streets under pain of corporal punishment. "The plaid was the Scottish mantilla", as Robert pointed out, "and serving to hide the face was supposed to afford a protection to immodest conduct." As a result "matrons not being able to be discovered from loose-living women, to their own dishonour and scandal of the city."

At the start of his Constable commisioned life of James l he summed up the generally accepted picture of James; "We think of him possessed of some sense and much learning, who burnt witches...who was very weak in the legs, and much given to leaning on the shoulders and twitching the cheeks of young gentlemen." James's feeble constitution he put down to the fact "that he had a drunkard for a wet nurse from whose vitiated milk, although weaned within twelve months, he had contracted a feeble consitution of body." He couldn't walk until he was six, and always had feeble limbs which shook and struck against each other at every step and a tongue that hung out so that he dribbled.

Here Robert was expressing one of the commonly held views of the day, that breast milk was responsible for the later development of the child, both mentally and physically, though it is hard to understand why a royal child should be handed over to a drunken wet nurse. When he describes Regent Morton he betrays his belief in phrenology; Morton had a mouth "which in savage life indicates mere animal stupidity but in the civilised condition betokens a propensity for all the lower passions." This is not history, but conjectural racism, and the older Robert would surely regret it.

Constable then asked him to write a history of the 1745 rebellion, which was also to be short and easily assimilated by the general reader; "to give a picture of that extraordinary and warlike pageant" in a style "approaching to that of an epic poem." in other words much in the manner of Sir Walter. But unlike Scott he set to work to collect everything in print or accessible in manuscript, to follow the tracks of the armies, visit the battlefields, and meet eye witnesses as well as collect local traditions. In 1827 there would be few if any who had actually been at Culloden, but children who had heard stories from their parents.

"The people amidst whom Charles Stuart had cast his fate were then regarded as the rudest and least civilised portion of the nation", indeed there was "scarcely any parallel in the whole world" he

thought, to the Highlanders whom their lowland neighbours thought "were all alike barbarians." Most of them were "miserable serfs" under their gentlemen chiefs, whose bidding they were forced to do. The English army was not much better; "that ghastly spectre of powder, pumatum, blackball and flagellation which was then considered a regular and well-appointed army." Under their general Cope they trailed north with herds of black cattle and butchers in attendance, but horses and cows were stolen and Cope fled to Inverness. The Battle of Prestonpans in fact lasted about fifteen minutes

In Edinburgh there was alarm; they had thought of the proceedings as "but a formidable sort of riot" and now realised how unprepared they were. Their peacetime force numbered one thousand, "who appeared once a year to crack off their antique pieces in honour of the King's birthday." Efforts to get men to enlist resulted in two hundred and fifty "desperate persons" after a week. The Highlanders who were approaching were an unknown quantity, and their arrival was announced by the ringing of the fire bell in the city, at which the churches, in which the ministers were preaching with swords by their sides, were instantly emptied. The Bonny Prince had arrived, youthful and handsome, so unlike the king he was aiming to overthrow.

After six weeks enjoying Edinburgh, Charles Edward set off south. On December 5th he turned back from Derby, and though the Battle of Falkirk on January 16th was a Jacobite "victory" the heart had gone out of both the Prince and his army. The Battle was simply a race uphill, the Jacobites getting there first with the wind behind them and no cannons to lug up in the gathering darkness. But after that it was all downhill for the Jacobites, their Prince becoming stressed and ill, the men deserting in large numbers, particularly as they were back on home territory with the need to get back to their land and prepare for seed time.

By the time the Duke of Cumberland had taken his army up to Stirling to catch up with the retreating Scots, three thousand of them had deserted. At Culloden the men were nearly starving, and the last battle between the two countries lasted forty minutes. Then came the shameful chase, across the Highlands, and into the Islands, as far as St Kilda "peopled by only a few aboriginal families" as Robert put it. When the Prince landed by boat on a small island off Harris the few fishermen fled, under the impression athat he and his party were a press gang. The enormous sums offered to the poor crofters to betray Charles, and proudly turned down, were about the only creditable part of the atory. Later Robert bought the manuscript **The Lyon in Mourning** which threw much more light on the rebellion, and he also published another account, but there is a freshness, a collection of small remembered details about this first book, which make it both readable and important.

Robert did not have access to material now available to draw the '45 into the wider political spectrum, to show it as part of the wars being waged in Europe by mercenary armies, many of them Scots. He did not describe the irritation felt at having to bring back troops from Holland to deal with the "rebels" up north, who were important chiefly because they were part of the invasion plans of France. The Duke of Cumberland's vengeful anger was fuelled by his fury at being distracted by "beggarly wretches" at a time of national danger, not from a Scottish pretender but from the ancient enemy, France.

Robert's penultimate book, the two volume **Book of Days,** he described as "A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities. Anecdote and Biography and History. Curiosities of Literature. Oddities of

Human Life and Character;" and those words, anecdote, curiosity, oddity define both his own interests and the presumed ones of his readers. Here Robert the social historian, the folklorist, the journalist and editor of encycyclopoedias meet in a glorious collection centred round the calendar. Trivial some of the material may be, but there is also a vast amount of fascinating, carefully researched information, most of which could be legitimately shelved by a librarian under History.

Some of the subjects discussed in detail are holy wells, London shoeblacks, washing and drinking customs, water supplies, lotteries. Not many people would know that James 11 visited St Winifred's Well in 1688 and "received the shift worn by his great grandmother at her execution" or that a certain Baxter, a schoolmaster at Oundle, heard his local well drumming to warn of the approach of the Scots in 1745. Not only wells, but graveyards were objects of some fascination; the Sexton of Peterborough Cathedral kept a whip to drive away boys from graves and funerals, "one of their most irrepressible passions" in the previous century.

London shoeblacks carried their implements in tin kettles; a pot of ivory black, brown sugar, vinegar and water and an old wig to whisk away the dust. Poor boys from Ragged Schools were sent out with these implements to make their livings, but dressed in uniform to upgrade them a little, and in the 1850's Shoeblack Societies were organised in the manner of trade unions. Just as the aristocracy restlessly moved their patronage, according to Pope

"The poor have the same itch,
They change their weekly barber, weekly news
Prefer a new japanner to their shoes."

Here Pope was speaking of the middle classes, relatively poor. The really destitute would be lucky to have shoes. Among the rich and idle the desire to dress eccentrically was as common in the eighteenth century as now. There were gallants, bloods, bucks, beaux, fribbles, macaronis, fops, monstrosities, corninthinans, dandies, exquisites and swells, each affecting some recognisably peculiar style of decoration, though at that time, unlike today,all male. There were some women who dared to be different, but they never formed cliques.

August 2nd, which recorded the death of William Rufus, gave Robert a chance to describe the cruel game laws of the early centuries, which included mutilation and tearing out of eyes. Landlords were constantly changing their boundaries to confuse their tenants, and though the laws eased in their ferocity, they were still in force until . The general harshness of the law was to be wondered at; a printer "condemned for a false translation of a life of Plato" was tortured, hanged and burned with his books in
.

Robert's comments on lotteries make interesting reading today. The last legal lottery was held in England in 1826, a good thing was his opinion, for they were "legalised swindles, inducement to gambling...helping to impoverish many." The poor and gullible were induced by advertising to risk the little they had, to the enrichment of the organisers; examples of some of these advertisements, executed by quite famous artists, show the subtle and cynical blandishments of the trade, little changed. As now, some lottery money went to useful projects; in 1612 James 1 raised money "for the plantation of the English colonies in Virginia" and in 1630 Charles l1 for the even more worthy project of a new water

supply for London. But there was still a lot of cruel exploitation involved, such as booksellers getting rid of unsellable stock at fancy prices. Such was the excitement at the announcement of the winners, that in Guiidhall doctors were present to let blood when the results, good or bad, overpowered people. They too, no doubt, made it a profitable sideline.

Robert's entry of July 1st, describing the Battle of the Boyne, also has a topical ring. After the story of the battle he commented; "armed musterings, bannered processions, glaring insignia and insulting party cries" were yearly a way of refighting the batlle. This he found offensive; "how unpolite it is to keep up this 1st July celebration in the midst of a people whose feelings it cannot fail to wound" he commented, and what a pity nobody listened to him.

On July 8th. the result of "original research in the state papers" was a description of James 1's extraordinary passion for animals, rare species of which he kept in St James's Park. He had a house built for silkworms, and flying squirrels from Virginia, but the prized acquisition an elephant and five camels sent by the king of Spain. These caused quite a stir as they were walked through the streets of London; people might have been less pleased if they had seen the accounts Robert found in the state papers;

Feeding for the elephant l0s per diem is per annum £180
To the 2 Spaniards that keep him XXs per week £52
To the 2 Englishmen his keepers XV1s per week £40
Total £275.12s

The elephant also got a gallon of wine a day from April to September. sonsiderably more spent on it than on the majority of King James's loyal subjects.

Births and deaths of the famous led Robert into some interesting discoveries. Archdeacon Paley, whose **"Natural Theology"** was a best seller in was found to be a blatant plagiarist. Paley's famous description of the watch he found lying on a heath, giving him the inspiration for understanding how to fit new geology into old theology, "was stolen shamefully...and unblushingly vended as his own." Robert set side by side Paley and Nieuwentyat, to show both the idea and the exact words to express it which the archdeacon had cribbed. As a bonus he gave the origins of the word plagiarism, employed originally in Roman times to describe the habit of kidnapping children and selling them as slaves.

It might have been better if Robert had got one of his irons really hot; been a great folklorist, historian, geologist, biographer; but not attempted to be all of them combined. In his forties, swamped by overwork and the pressures of wearing all those hats simultaenously, he would have liked to throw them all aside and be just a geologist. It was not to be. He would have been famous, perhaps, but in some basic sense he would not have been Robert Chambers, the eternally curious, the collector of Anecdote, Biography and History, the anicipator of Darwin, the man to whom drains, lunatic asylums and homes for elderly governesses were causes to be fought for. Another metaphor suggests itself; he was the hander on of batons to others who, with his help, won the races.

As a historian he was like a man who has collected a great many rare delicacies together, but never made a meal. He did not, like his great forbears of fifty years earlier, Gibbon and de Toqueville, use his material to compare civilisations, to note changes over time, to deduct, induct, predict, challenge. He

had a magpie mind, to use another metaphor; a questing, clever, original, marvellously retentive brain that could not stop collecting but did not find time to sort the bright discoveries. Even the facts he collected for **Vestiges** were not sufficiently brooded over, suspect elements excluded, connections seen. He knew he was too busy, longed fitfully to simplify his life and work, but in spite of it all was a generally happy and successful man who, it would seem, never passed a dull day.