These are the papers which were read at the international bi-centenary Burns conference at the University of Strathclyde in 1996. There are thirty-two pieces on a comprehensive selection of subjects. The volume looks at the poet in the many different contexts in which he lived and suggests reciprocal relations between those contexts and his creations. The important result of this activity is an enriching of our understanding not only of the complex personality of the poet but also of the wide-ranging implications of the poems and songs. If you come to this book with a love of Burns based on a handful of his poems, you will find an abundance of instruction and amusement.

There is much to amuse here. At the simple level, for instance, there is a report of the recent invention of the aphrodisiac haggis complete with a testimonial to its effectiveness. A more complex amusement is given by the evidence of an expert in hand-writing that Burns' signature shows that he "was emotionally reserved, had a mundane personality and was mean with money." Both these jewels occur in David Hutchison's
"Burns, the Elastic Symbol: Press Treatment of Burns’ Anniversary, 1995 and 1996” (pp 79-86).

The most original contribution to this book is a series of imagined addresses to Burns by five famous people from the late 18th to the 21st century composed by Edwin Morgan (“The Five Pointed Star”: pp 13-17). In the first of these addresses Catherine (the Great) proposes that Robbie come visit her in Russia in order to enjoy a comfortable sleigh-ride together through the snow (and whatever might develop from this imperial intimacy);

What could he miss? He’ll be at home with us.
Cold blasts? An unmistakable plus.
Strong drink? We’ll toast him under the table.
Superstitions? We’ve reams of myth and fable.
They say he’s rather hard on royalty.
Well well, but that was France, we’ll see, we’ll see.

Most instructive, I think, are the papers on the contemporary translation of Burns into Gaelic (by Roderick Macdonald, pp 248-255) and Japanese (by J. Derrick McClure, pp 87-104). McClure’s paper culminates with a literal interlinear translation into English of Japanese versions of four Burns poems (including two attempts at translating “My Luve is like a Red, Red Rose” by different poets with distinctive styles). This close analysis and recreation of Burns’ text certainly possesses its own exquisite delight.

Macdonald has now translated all Burns’ poems and
songs into Gaelic and in the course of his piece here he provides a more satisfactory translation of the “lawless leg” passage in “Holy Willie’s Prayer” (pp 43–48) than he had previously published:

Is aithne dhuit le Meg a raoir -
Mathanas iarram ort gun fhoill -
'S na biodh e nar phlaigh, mar thoill,
'Thoirt dhomh eas-onair!
Is sliasaíd neoghlaine a chaoidh
Cha tog mi oirre.

Rather than reporting briefly on each piece in the volume however, I will focus instead on those papers which deal most directly with the second topic included in the book’s title: liberty. The consistency of Burns’ life and writing in regard to this subject is explored from a number of perspectives in many of the papers. Generally this examination makes it clear that if we keep in mind the different audience for which different poems were intended, and indeed the different characterisation of a poem’s speaker, we can explain the expression of opposite viewpoints in different poems without recourse to the theory of the incoherence of the poet.

Liberty, in its most contemporary political manifestation, is for Burns freedom from monarchy. He expressed his satisfaction with this ideal many times, openly or through satire; in *Elegy on the Year 1788*, for instance, he wrote:
Lords or Kings I dinna mourn,
E'en let them die - for that they're born....

And in *A Dream* under the guise of offering George III humble birthday wishes the poet advises him in the art of ruling and criticises the heir apparent, the “young Potentate of Wales”. In this regard it is no surprise to learn that Burns supported both the American and the French revolutions. The meaning of liberty in the Scottish tradition is concisely expounded by R.J. Fechner in “Burns and American Liberty” (pp 274-288). The contribution of the Kirk to Burns' conception of liberty is explored in Liam McIlvanney's “Sacred Freedom': Presbyterian Radicalism and the Politics of Robert Burns” (pp 168-182).

Liberty for Scotland from the domination of England is also a constant theme in Burns as he writes to vilify the Union of 1707 or to praise the great leaders of the past who successfully resisted aggression “from the south”. In the heroic, independent past Scotland was free from England, though not from monarchs; glory is given unstintingly to Bruce and the Stuart line. The significance of the contrast between this Jacobitism (in support of the restoration of the native kings) and the revolutionary ideal of the kingless state (supported by Burns and from the contemporary French context known as Jacobinism) is assessed in various ways in a number of papers.

P.H. Scott in “Robert Burns, Patriot” (pp 266-273) considers that the poet had a good appreciation of
historical change and felt no need to criticise the institutions of the past, especially when these had served Scotland well. Moreover the Scottish kings are presented by Burns as the executors of law and justice, and are therefore free of the charge of despotism. Nevertheless Scott suggests that Burns prefers to praise Wallace than Bruce (“no doubt because of his humbler origin, uncompromising patriotism and dreadful end”) and that in any case he praises “the injured Stewart line” not as kings but as Scots.

In strong disagreement with the attempt to harmonise these contrasting views of monarchy in Burns' work with his contemporary radicalism, C.A. Whatley in “Burns and the Union of 1707” (pp 183-197) deplores the lack of realism in Burns' portrayal of Scotland's past in the service of an impoverished nationalism, classing it as a contribution to “the 'we wuz robbed' or inferiorist school of Scottish history”. In a contrast which is not to be elided, Burns' pragmatic radicalism, according to Whatley, was British rather than exclusively Scottish.

If you feel that this view of Scottish nationalist history discounts the power inherent in the archetype of “the hero who lost”, you can turn for a satisfactory synthesis to M.G.H. Pittock “Burns and the Jacobite Song” (pp 308-314). All references to and reminiscences of the Stuart cause, he argues, have the connotation of rebellion. Now that the Hanoverian succession is unshakeable, Stuart kingship is removed from the world of the practicable and set free to serve as the emblem
and symbol of revolt, even against monarchy. “Jacobite language is made a contemporary vehicle for radical value... in an egalitarian, proletarian vision... of the 'pride o' worth'.

The only monarchy which should survive, in Burns' view, is symbolic and individual: “the majesty of woman” and “the royalty of man”, that is of the independent man of moral integrity:

The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
is King o' men for a' that.

While good morals may make a king, the individual however needs to beware of turning tyrant, especially against non-human nature. Donald Low in “Nature’s Social Union and Man’s Dominion: Burns the Poet after Two Hundred Years” (pp 105-110) conveys the scope and depth of the poet’s care for the animal and vegetable beings around us, as he deplores not alone the intentional killing of hares and birds in hunting but even the accidental destruction of a mouse’s nest or the stalk of a mountain daisy. Repeatedly the pejorative language of political domination is used to characterise such abuses of individual human power, as in these lines from On scaring some Water-fowl in Loch Turit:

Man, your proud, usurping foe
Would be lord of all below;
Plumes himself in Freedom’s pride,
Tyrant stern to all beside.
Thirty years on Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* takes up this theme of the oppression which may be practiced by those who have themselves just gained freedom, elaborating it even in regard to inanimate atoms in these same political terms. It is not unlikely that Burns on this point contributed to the English poet's conscientious radicalism.

The poet set forth his moral aims; but he also regularly confessed to lapses from his ideal behaviour. He took the liberty of dissolution, turning into "rantin' rovin' Robin," like his inebriated, wamefou hero Tam o' Shanter:

Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious,
O'er a' the ills o' life victorious!

Whatever of his reputation as a drinker, Burns' record in love affairs tarnished his reputation in his own time and has continued to do so in most of his biographies. In "Sexual Poetics or the Poetry of Desire" (pp 289-298) M. Palmer McCulloch discusses the exceptional biographical novel on Burns' life by Catherine Carswell which defuses the charges of the poet's sexual opportunism by emphasising the consensual nature of the unions. McCulloch connects the genesis of Burns' best love poems with the renewed stimulation of his sexual desire. It may indeed be so. It is very surprising however that although love is the leading topic in the book's title there is only a single paper on the poet's love affairs. There must be other trenchant and illuminating views on this subject.
Writing at the age of twenty-four in the First Commonplace Book Burns describes himself as “a man of some sense, a great deal of honesty, and unbounded good will to every creature, rational and irrational”. In other words he aims at being a “King o’ men” in terms of his honesty and benevolence. This went unrecognised however by the aristocratic polite society, upon whose patronage he in some respects depended. His balancing-act in this delicate situation is examined by D. Daiches, “Robert Burns: the Tightrope Walker” and V. Bold, “Inmate of the Hamlet: Burns as Peasant Poet”. He casts himself as the unlettered rustic (and so inferior to his polite patrons) who owes his poetry to inspiration from Nature or Heaven (whose precedence even polite patrons will accept).

His prose writings (whether the Commonplace Books or his prolific correspondence) show that Burns is widely-read and, more importantly, that he has taken deep thought about the issues he has read about. It is evident then that his knowledge comes to some extent from his own study rather than simply from a direct inspiration. His conversational powers were widely regarded as brilliant (so much so that some thought him a better thinker even than poet). His ability to express himself manifested itself then, not as deriving from a natural or celestial source, but simply within an ordinary Scottish social setting.

The “Heaven-taught Ploughman”, in other words, was well instructed in the ideas of the 18th century and so was, to this extent, unrepresentative of the
ploughman commonalty. He cultivated the cool rational satire of Voltaire, while at least equally embracing the naturalism of Rousseau, according to I.S. Ross, "Burns and the Siècle des Lumières" (pp 217-228). E.J. Cowan, "Burns and Superstition" (pp 229-238) agrees that Burns was a wholehearted supporter of the Scottish enlightenment but shows that at the same time he was willing to represent himself as being "naturally of a superstitious cast". Cowan holds these divergent qualities of the poet together in suggesting that Burns was,"perhaps, a superstitious skeptic".

Another interesting feature in this collection is the demonstration of various ways in which the text of Burns could be used to promote causes which he himself would scarcely espouse. See in the first instance C. MacDougall, "Rabbietising Reality" (pp 32-42). For example, his praise of sobriety in poems like _The Cotter's Saturday Night_ has been used to promote Temperance and Abstinence from alcoholic drink (the celebration of the joys of drinking in other poems is taken as evidence of the poet's fall from his own best light and so discounted). Socialists can quote lines about the corrupting effect of gold; nationalists lines against England, and so forth. This claim on Burns by radically opposed groups is possible only because of the variety of his writings. But such versatile utilisation of the poems may be seen as the penalty of his popularity.

I have made no mention of the four papers on Burns and folksong, of papers on the poet in the literary and critical traditions of Scotland and Britain
as well as on his role in the establishment of Scottish identity. But perhaps enough has been said to indicate the richness of this book’s contents. In sum, I would say that this is a volume worthy as few are to stand beside the collected works of Burns - than which there is no greater honour - and like them to be read and, aye, reread.

Padraig O' Cleirigh
University of Guelph