Robert Burns, Scotland’s much loved national bard, has had many images throughout history. Two polar extremes stand out. Depending on the agenda of the author and the political climate of the time, Burns has largely been depicted as a pious and conservative rural author or as an atheist and radical par excellence. Gerard Carruthers addresses these images of Burns in a short but thoughtful book entitled Robert Burns, which is part of the British Council’s Writers and Their Work series. The books are brief, yet provide readers with readable, up-to-date and thorough analysis of both well-known and marginalised authors. Carruthers, a lecturer of English Literature at the University of Glasgow and the Director of the Centre for Robert Burns Studies, is particularly well-placed to introduce Burns.

Carruthers starts by stressing the multifaceted nature of Burns’s personality and works. He argues Burns has been misread as either an essentially conservative or a radical author. The conservative, or Kailyard, image of the bard presents him as a de-sexed, rural and Christian writer which proves popular with Burns Clubs and expatriate Scots. Poems such as ‘The Cotter’s Saturday Night’ uphold this image. Lately, however, there has been a movement towards presenting Burns as a left-wing hero. Carruthers criticises what he refers to as a “New Bardolatry” of Burns, which inflates his radicalism (p. 6). Carruthers’s insistence that we acknowledge the ambiguous and contradictory sides of Burns runs throughout the book whether he is discussing Burns’ thoughts on love, religion, politics or Scottish identity.
The image of Burns as the ‘heaven-taught ploughman’, a term coined by Henry Mackenzie in his review of the Kilmarnock edition of Burns’s 1786 Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, has had remarkable longevity and is the focus of the second chapter. Carruthers debunks this humble image of Burns by stressing the poet’s education and polished writing, and also emphasises that Burns himself was instrumental in the construction of the ‘heaven-taught ploughman’ persona. In the preface to the Kilmarnock edition Burns, writing in the third person, presents himself as:

Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing poetry by rule he sings the sentiment and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language (p. 13).

Burns was acutely aware of and plays upon the appeal of primitivism and the ‘noble savage’, exemplified by the popularity of the Ossianic poetry in the later eighteenth century. Burns is thus presented by Carruthers as actively creating his own poetic space and image. Moreover, Burns’s literary interests were far wider than his ploughman persona suggests and Carruthers emphasises the interplay between local, national and international influences on Burns’s writing.

Carruthers is unafraid to ask some controversial questions with regard to Burns’s political commitments. Although acknowledging that he mostly sided with liberal causes and showed great sympathy for the poor, he suggests Burns might at times have been more interested in following literary conventions, as a man of feeling, than expressing genuine radical philosophy. In his interpretation of ‘The Rights of Woman’, Carruthers wonders whether the poem is more about Burns’s desire to impress the pretty actress Louisa Fontenelle than a genuine dedication to women’s rights (pp. 74-75). Even more controversial is Carruthers’s discussion of Burns’s stance on the abolition of slavery.
Despite abolition being one of the big political issues of the time, Burns only produced one poem, ‘The Slave’s Lament’, about the suffering and injustice of slavery. Carruthers also emphasises the fact, often not discussed critically, that Burns considered becoming a plantation manager (p. 60). Carruthers’s discussion is, as many of his discussions are, brief. It is based partly on speculation and raises questions that are left unanswered. However, he questions statements about Burns that elsewhere are often taken for granted.

With regard to Burns’s national sentiments, Carruthers rightly points out that Burns should not be depicted as subscribing to a Scottish nationalism, which is a modern phenomenon. Yet, this reader does not agree with other conclusions Carruthers draws on Burns and Scottish national identity. For instance patriotic sentiments in such poems as ‘Such a Parcel of Rogues’ and ‘Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn’ are played down and Burns’s patriotism is described as a “Scottish historical alibi”. In other words, Burns uses a Scottish historical setting for expressing his present discontent with a self-serving British aristocracy at a time when it was unsafe to make such criticisms explicitly (pp.44,100-101). However, it seems to me more credible that Burns’s patriotic sentiments co-existed alongside his concern for social injustice in these works.

Despite Carruthers debunking so many myths surrounding Burns, this reader found the book remained a positive account which celebrates the complexity of Burns’s personality and his brilliance as a poet. The book contains a biographical timeline of Burns’s life and an annotated bibliography, which are useful tools for students or general readers wanting to learn more about Burns. In terms of its readability and potential to spark further interest, this book has much to offer.

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