

# **LIFE OF ROBERT BURNS**

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Life of Robert Burns by Thomas Carlyle

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**THOMAS CARLYLE**

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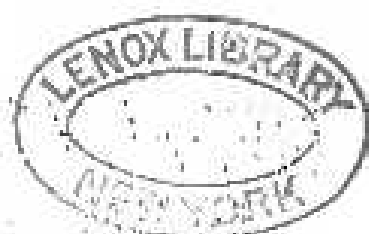
MOSTLY BY

Thomas Carlyle.

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1859.



## EDITOR'S PREFACE.

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THE readers of the "Household Library" will certainly welcome a Life of Burns. That his soul was of the real heroic stamp, no one who is familiar with his imperishable lyric poetry, will deny.

This Life of the great Scottish bard is composed of two parts. The first part, which is brief, and gives merely his external life, is taken from the "Encyclopedia Britannica." The principle object of it, in this place, is to prepare the reader for what follows. The second part is a grand spiritual portrait of Burns, the like of which the ages have scarcely produced; the equal of which,

in our opinion, does not exist. In fact, since men began to write and publish their thoughts in this world, no one has appeared who equals Carlyle as a spiritual-portrait painter; and, taken all in all, this of his gifted countryman Burns is his master-piece. I should not dare to say how many times I have perused it, and always with new wonder and delight. I once read it in the Mauffini Palace, at Venice, sitting before Titian's portrait of Ariosto. Great is the contrast between the Songs of Burns and the *Rime* of the Italian poet, between the fine spiritual perception of Carlyle's mind and the delicate touch of Titian's hand, between picturesque expression and an expressive picture; yet this very antithesis seemed to prepare my mind for the full enjoyment of both these famous portraits; the sombre majesty of northern genius seemed to heighten and be heightened by the sunset glow of the genius of the south.

Besides giving the article from the "Encyclopedia Britannica," as a kind of frame for



the portrait of Burns, we will here add, from the "English Cyclopaedia," a sketch of Carlyle's life. A severe taste may find it a little out of place, yet we must be allowed to consult the wishes of those for whom these little volumes are designed.

CARLYLE, (THOMAS,) a thinker and writer, confessedly among the most original and influential that Britain has produced, was born in the parish of Middlebie, near the village of Ecclefechan, in Dumfries-shire, Scotland, on the 4th of December, 1795. His father, a man of remarkable force of character, was a small farmer in comfortable circumstances; his mother was also no ordinary person. The eldest son of a considerable family, he received an education the best in its kind that Scotland could then afford—the education of a pious and industrious home, supplemented by that of school and college. (Another son of the family, Dr. John A. Carlyle, a younger brother of Thomas, was educated in a similar manner, and, after practising for

many years as a physician in Germany and Rome, has recently become known in British literature as the author of the best prose translation of Dante.) After a few years spent at the ordinary parish school, Thomas was sent, in his thirteenth or fourteenth year, to the grammar school of the neighboring town of Annan; and here it was that he first became acquainted with a man destined, like himself, to a career of great celebrity. "The first time I saw Edward Irving," writes Mr. Carlyle in 1835, "was six-and-twenty years ago, in his native town, Annan. He was fresh from Edinburgh, with college prizes, high character, and promise: he had come to see our school-master, who had also been his. We heard of famed professors—of high matters, classical, mathematical—a whole Wonderland of knowledge; nothing but joy, health, hopefulness without end, looked out from the blooming young man." Irving was then sixteen years of age, Carlyle fourteen; and from that time till Irving's sad and premature death, the two were intimate

and constant friends. It was not long before Carlyle followed Irving to that "Wonderland of Knowledge," the University of Edinburgh, of which, and its "famed professors," he had received such tidings. If the description of the nameless German university, however, in "Sartor Resartus," is to be supposed as allusive also to Mr. Carlyle's own reminiscences of his training at Edinburgh, he seems afterwards to have held the more formal or academic part of that training in no very high respect. "What vain jargon of controversial metaphysic, etymology, and mechanical manipulation, falsely named science, was current there," says Teufelsdröckh; "I indeed learned better perhaps than most." At Edinburgh, the professor of "controversial metaphysic" in Carlyle's day, was Dr. Thomas Brown, Dugald Stewart having then just retired; physical science and mathematics, were represented by Playfair and Sir John Leslie, and classical studies by men less known to fame. While at college, Carlyle's special bent, so far as the work of the