

**ROBERT BURNS AND
SIR WALTER SCOTT,
TWO LIVES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649694457

Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, Two Lives by James White

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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JAMES WHITE

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ROBERT BURNS
AND
SIR WALTER SCOTT:

Two Vols.

BY
THE REV. JAMES WHITE,
AUTHOR OF "THE LANDMARKS OF ENGLISH HISTORY,"
ETC.



LONDON:
G. ROUTLEDGE & CO., FARRINGDON STREET.
NEW YORK: 18, BEEKMAN STREET.
1858.

[The Author reserves to himself the right of Translation.]

210. m. 314.

LONDON:
SAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS,
CHANDOS STREET.

ROBERT BURNS.

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1759-1796.

EVERYBODY knows the name of Robert Burns, but, as in the case of many others, the name is nearly all that is known. He is a poet; no one is ignorant of that. A Scottish poet; that also is universally known. But by what means his poetic faculty was called forth, at what exact period he lived, how he was received in his own time, how his reputation has been preserved till now, and what are the constituents of his powers,—very few of us could answer minutely, if examined on these points.

There are excellent lives of Burns; some too ponderous for easy reference, others devoting themselves exclusively to the incidents of his career, and referring the reader for examples of his genius to separate portions of his works. Without pretending to rival either the completeness of the larger biographies, or the critical skill of the smaller, it is the object of the present little sketch to give a narrative of the poet's life, with a different view of some portions of his career from that which obtained a few years ago,

interspersing it with such specimens of his genius as will enable the reader both to know the man, and judge for himself of his merits as an author. Those who are already masters of his poems will not be unwilling to read short selections from them again. Those to whom they are new, will assuredly be grateful for the opportunity of making their acquaintance.

Many years ago, in the good old days of fast coaches and dusty roads, I was fortunate enough to sit on the box, next the well-known and highly respected Mr. Fawlkner, the driver of the "Rocket" from Portsmouth to London. When we were fairly in a trot, he began the conversation by telling us that "he and about forty others had been celebrating Bobby's birthday the night before." I inquired who "Bobby" was; and he said, "Burns, sir; Robert Burns the poet." And all the way through Petersfield, and all the way to Guildford, and all the way to Hatchett's, in Piccadilly, Mr. Fawlkner and I spoke, quoted, criticised, and admired Robert Burns. Now this is real fame. Here was an English coachman (who, by the by, never travelled without an edition of his favourite poet in the pocket of the coach) engaged with forty tradesmen, shipowners, and other gentlemen, in the far south, in the busy port of Portsmouth, doing honour to the memory of the most tho-

roughly national of all Scotch poets, nearly fifty years after his death, and not a Scotchman (for I asked the question) among them all. The natives of Scotland, he said, resident or visiting at Portsmouth, celebrated the event in a different hotel. I know nothing like this, except in the universal appreciation of Shakspeare; but perhaps that name will help us to the cause of this extra-national, this unlimited sympathy with Burns. Though he wrote in a provincial dialect, he appealed, like Shakspeare, to the universal heart. He described nature—the field, the flower, the river; enriching them with the emotions they excited in a warm and impulsive disposition; and who could be provincial in spirit, however local his language might be, when he struck upon the great chords that vibrate in every human bosom, telling of love, and hope, and youth, the sanctities of a quiet, religious home, as in the "Cotter's Saturday Night," the softening uses of adversity, as in his address to the mouse turned up by the plough? But the charm of Burns is different from that of Shakspeare in this respect, that while Shakspeare is so myriad-minded and so many-formed that he almost ceases to be an individual, there never was so true, so total, so entire a man as Burns. Never was a human being so strong in individual existence, giving us glimpses into a

real mind, and standing before us as clear, personal, and unmistakeable as the most intimate of our friends.

One day—it was the 25th of January, 1759—there raged a great storm over the valley of the Doon, in Ayrshire, and, among other evidences of its power, blew down the gable end of a rough, mud-walled cottage near the river, and put the inhabitants into great alarm. No wonder; for a baby had been born that day, and when the wall fell in, the mother and child had to be carried to the nearest hut, and there Robert Burns spent his first night. His father had been a gardener in one of the northern counties, and a year or two before this time had settled in the west, building the cottage with his own hands, and, renting a small piece of ground, had turned it into a nursery garden, and fought his way as well as he could. A venerable man, though working for his daily bread; a stern disciplinarian, and deep in all the mysteries of the theology of his persuasion, but softened and ennobled by a conscientiousness and affection which endeared him to his children, even when he held them most strictly under his authority. In addition to Robert of the stormy birth, his family soon consisted of two sons and three daughters; and the tenderer disposition of his wife worked its usual effect, and influenced