

Scotland's Music © BBC 2007

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Robert Burns

writer/presenter: John Purser

producer: David McGuinness

Burns - The Ploughman

Lesley Hale

CD The Complete Songs of Robert Burns Volume 4

Linn CKD 083 Track 8

John Purser voiceover: We're in Ayrshire in the spring of the late eighteenth-century and this old song is taking new shape in the head of Robert Burns as he drives his plough team up the slope, cooled by the fresh spring air, the peewits wheeling round, and the horses, obedient to his practiced hands.

Robert Burns (Tam Dean Burn) voiceover: We lived very poorly: I was a dextrous ploughman for my age; and the next eldest to me was a brother, Gilbert, who could drive the plough very well, and help me to thrash corn.

Gilbert Burns voiceover: My brother Robert at the age of thirteen assisted in thrashing the crop of corn, and at fifteen was the principal labourer on the farm, for we had no hired servant, male or female.

JP: The world is full of revisionists who want to make out that Burns was no farmer, that he wasn't even a real labourer, that he was casual with women to the point of abuse, that he's falsely claimed as a libertarian, and that he prostituted his poetry for fame in Edinburgh. I'd like to see these same people achieve what he did from where he came from, and I wonder if they'd be prepared to face the compromises that were forced upon him and which, in part, led to his early death – in penury, by the way. As a poet and lyricist he certainly loved his fellow creature and was able to enter sympathetically into the situations of the women whom he loved and who, let it not be forgotten, loved him. He was one of the great collectors. He rescued so much for us from the past, sometimes from mere fragments - and all of this took place against a background of his wonderful and experienced evocations of nature. The books of songs that Burns edited for the Edinburgh publisher James Johnson are indeed a national treasure.

The songs cover a vast range of emotions and situations, and many of them, for all their outward simplicity, express complex feelings. No song more movingly reflects that mixture of feelings than Ay Waukin' O – the sorrow of a sleepless girl, missing her lover – and it starts in the fields, with the flowers of summer:

Burns - Ay Waukin' O

Jo Miller

BBC recording

JP: Jo Miller. By far the largest proportion of Burns' poetry and songs is concerned with love and, for him, love and nature went literally hand-in-hand – and also holding hands with them were music and poetry. That's how he started writing. At work in the fields with his very first love:

Robert Burns: You know our country custom of coupling a man and a woman together as partners in the labours of harvest. In my fifteenth autumn my partner was a bewitching creature, a year younger than myself ... she was a bonnie, sweet, sonsy lass and among her other love-inspiring qualities, she sang sweetly; and it was her favourite reel to which I attempted giving an embodiment in rhyme.

I did not know myself why I liked so much to loiter behind her; and particularly why my pulse beat such a furious strain, when I looked and fingered over her little hand to pick out the cruel nettle-stings and thistles.

Robert Burns - O once I loved a Bonnie Lass

Davy Steele

CD The Complete Songs of Robert Burns Volume 5

Linn CKD 086 Track 15

JP voiceover: These are the lyrics he wrote on that occasion, sung by Davy Steele ...

JP: Davy Steele with Robert Burns' very first song, written when he was just fourteen years old. It wasn't only from his fellow workers in the fields that Burns gathered the songs and snatches of songs. He could read and write music and, of course, try tunes out on the fiddle. He wasn't a bad fiddle player, although according to his sister: 'His playing was like his singing - rude and rough; But crooning to a bodies' sel' does weel enough.' Here's Jo Miller again with a tune for which Burns reworked the verses – The Auld Man's Mare's Deid.

Trad - The Auld Man's Mare's Deid

Jo Miller

BBC recording

JP: Burns was a master at making new verses for old tunes or re-working old verses, though he claimed that:-

Robert Burns: I invariably hold it sacrilege to add any thing of my own to help out with the shatter'd wrecks of these venerable old compositions; but they have many various readings.

JP: Well, a poet is allowed his poetic licence and we should be grateful that he was able to add to these "shatter'd wrecks" with an intimate knowledge of Scots and a delight in its colour and vivacity – never more so than in The Auld Man's Mare's Deid – a subject on which he would have had much knowledge as it describes all the physical faults and ailments of the mare which was inconsiderate enough to die before she'd brought in the peats. Here's Ewan MacColl.

Robert Burns - The Old Man's Mare's Dead

Ewan MacColl

LP A Garland of Scots Folksong

Folk Lyric FL 116 Side 1 Track 2

JP: In 1787, Burns met the great Scottish fiddler, Niel Gow. Gow too came of humble origins but, as a performer as well as composer, had the advantage of more continuously secure patronage. He was also better used to dealing with aristocratic patronage, having travelled to London with the Duke of Atholl on the one hand but, on the other hand, feeling no obligation to imitate the manners of the aristocracy.

Robert Burns: Breakfast with Dr. Stewart - Niel Gow plays - a short, stout-built, honest Highland

figure, with his greyish hair shed on his honest social brow - an interesting face, marking strong sense, kind open-heartedness, mixed with unmistrusting simplicity.'

JP: Among the tunes Gow played for Burns was Niel Gow's Lamentation for Abercairney, and with it we'll hear Elizabeth Grant recalling her own visit to Gow:

Niel Gow – Niel Gow's Lamentation for James Moray Esq. of Abercairney

Pete Clark

CD Even Now

Smiddymade SMD 615 Track 2

Reader (Gillean McDougall) voice-over: On this journey I first remember old Niel Gow being sent for to play for us at the inn at Inver - not Dunkeld - that little village we passed through, and went on to the ferry at Inver, which we crossed the following morning in a large boat. It was a beautiful ferry, the stream full and deep and dark, the banks overhung by fine timber trees, a glimpse of a newly-planted conical hill up the stream, only thick wooding the other way. I don't know whether this did not make more impression upon me than Niel Gow's delightful violin, though it had so over-excited me the night before that my father had had to take me a little walk by the river-side in the moonlight before I was rational enough to be left to sleep.

JP: Pete Clark, standing in for Niel Gow and playing on Gow's own fiddle. While on his Highland tour, Burns visited the Falls of Bruar:

Robert Burns: In Athole. Exceedingly picturesque and beautiful, but the effect is much impaired by the want of trees and shrubs.

JP: So Burns wrote The Humble Petition of Bruar Water, successfully requesting the Duke of Atholl to plant its banks and give shelter to its wild life, especially the birds:

Robert Burns:

Let lofty firs and ashes cool,
My lowly banks o'ersprad,
And view, deep-bending in the pool,
Their shadows' watery bed!
Let fragrant birks in woodbines drest
My craggy cliffs adorn;
And, for the little songster's nest,
The close-embowring thorn.

JP: This was no mere romanticism, but intelligent ecology. And he'd long since addressed not just nature, but addressed the place of man in nature. The song is one of his very greatest songs – Now Westlin' Winds, sung here by Gill Bowman.

Robert Burns - Now Westlin' Winds

Gill Bowman

CD Toastin the Lassies

Greentrax CDTRAX 085 Track 2

JP: "Thus every kind their pleasure find, the savage and the tender; Some social join, and leagues combine; Some solitary wander: Avaunt away! The cruel sway, Tyrannic man's dominion; The sportsman's joy, the murdring cry, the flutt'ring gory pinion!"

This was a new philosophy and a challenging one. The Bible gives Man dominion over the rest of creation. Burns expresses it as a tyranny. He felt the same about man's dominion over man and joined the Freemasonic movement which was closely associated with ideals of liberty, freedom and equality. Here is Davy Steele with a half-playful Masonic prayer of Burns' own making.

Robert Burns - Masonic Song

Davy Steele

CD The Complete Songs of Robert Burns Volume 5

Linn CKD 086 Track 19

JP: A Masonic song by Burns. Freemasonry was supposed to make a friend of death, but it's hard to make friends with death when you're only 37 years old. That was his age when, in July 1796, he went to Brow Well to take the waters and to improve his health by sea-bathing in the Solway.

So we leave him there shivering in the waters of the Solway, perhaps recalling one of his earliest songs, composed when he was seventeen, "Tho' fickle fortune has deceiv'd me, She promis'd fair and perform'd but ill. Of mony a joy and hope bereav'd me, I bear a heart shall support me still." He didn't – his heart was what let him down, irretrievably weakened by doing a man's work when he was yet a boy:

Robert Burns - I Dream'd I Lay

Bobby Eaglesham

CD The Complete Songs of Robert Burns Volume 7

Linn CKD 107 Track 14