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INTRODUCTION

IN A TRAGICALLY SHORT LIFE, Robert Burns (1759–96) forged for himself a reputation as a poet and songwriter that has never been eclipsed. Today he is widely accepted as the greatest of all Scottish poets, and his verse remains among the most popular in the world. He has the distinction, even above Shakespeare, of being the world's most translated poet.

Born the son of a smallholder, Burns was entirely self-educated – no mean task for a farm labourer. A wide knowledge of, and an assured ear for, old Scots verse and songs led to publication of his early poems in 1786. The collection's huge popularity made the twenty-seven-year-old a social as well as a literary sensation, and assured the publication of later volumes of poetry, as well as collections of old Scottish songs, with their music. His skill in employing conversational rhythms in poetry has always made his verse enormously accessible, despite his widespread use of the Scots vernacular, and he is best known for his dialect lyrical verse on nature, love, patriotism, and rural life, as well as for such well-loved songs as 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'Robert Bruce's March To Bannockburn' – better known as 'Scots, Wha Hae'. This little collection celebrates the work of the poor farmer-turned-exciseman who became, literally, the voice of an entire nation, a poet who was as skilful with bawdy ballads as he was with great lyrics on philosophical subjects.

Song: Mary Morison

(1780)

O Mary, at thy window be,
It is the wish'd, the trust'd hour;
Those smiles and glances let me see,
That make the miser's treasure poor:
How blythely wad I bide the stoure,
A weary slave frae sun to sun,
Could I the rich reward secure,
The lovely Mary Morison.

Yestreen, when to the trembling string
The dance gaed thro' the lighted ha',
To thee my fancy took its wing,
I sat, but neither heard nor saw:
Tho' this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I sigh'd, and said amang them a',
'Ye are na Mary Morison.'

O, Mary, canst thou wreck his peace,
Wha for thy sake wad gladly die!
Or canst thou break that heart of his,
Whase only faut is loving thee.

If love for love thou wilt na gie,
At least be pity to me shown;
A thought ungentle canna be
The thought o' Mary Morison.

Winter: A Dirge

(1781)

The wintry west extends his blast,
And hail and rain does blaw;
Or the stormy north sends driving forth
The blinding sleet and snaw:
While, tumbling brown, the burn comes down,
And roars frae bank to brae;
And bird and beast in covert rest,
And pass the heartless day.

'The sweeping blast, the sky o'er cast,'
The joyless winter day
Let others fear, to me more dear
Than all the pride of May:
The tempest's howl, it soothes my soul,
My griefs it seems to join;
The leafless trees my fancy please,
Their fate resembles mine!

Thou Power Supreme, whose mighty scheme
These woes of mine fulfil,
Here firm I rest; they must be best,
Because they are Thy will!
Then all I want – O do Thou grant
This one request of mine! –
Since to enjoy Thou dost deny,
Assist me to resign.