

Samuil Marshak

ARTICLES AND LETTERS ON BURNS AND SCOTLAND

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Translated by Maria Artamonova

ROBERT BURNS IS 200 (Vol. 6, pp. 343-5)

It has been two hundred years since the birth of Burns, but some of his lines sound as if they were written in our own time.

He spoke of the peace and freedom of nations in his solemn verse:

The Golden Age we'll then revive:
Each man will be a brother;
In harmony we all shall live,
And share the earth together;

[Let the golden age come
And slavery disappear into the abyss,
And let man be brother to man forever] {1}

and in his jocular poems full of hearty popular humour:

The deities that I adore
Are social Peace and Plenty;
I'm better pleas'd to make one more,
Than be the death of twenty.

[I praise the dominion of peace,
Content and plenty.
It is more pleasant to make one
Than to kill ten!] {2}

Burns seems to have found a second motherland in our country. The first translations of his works date back to over a hundred years ago.

Our greatest poet, Pushkin, kept a volume of Burns' verse on his desk; it is still preserved in the Pushkin apartment museum. Another great Russian poet, Lermontov, translated four lines of Burns which served as an epigraph for Byron's *The Bride of Abydos*.

It is well-known that the poet Nekrasov, who did not know the language of Burns, asked Turgenev to make a crib translation of the Scottish bard's songs for him so that he could then prepare his own versified translations.

But the first translator who properly introduced Russian readers to Burns is Mikhail Mikhailov, a heroic poet condemned to hard labour in Siberia by the Tsarist government.

It was he who first endowed his fellow Russians with translations of such famous poems as *John Barleycorn*, *To A Mouse*, *To A Mountain Daisy*, *John Anderson* and others.

But it was not until after the revolution that the great Scotsman's poetry was truly appreciated in his own country. His works were translated not just into Russian but into languages spoken by many ethnicities within the Soviet Union.

Many of Burns' poems have been put to music by our best composers: Shostakovich, Sviridov, Kabalevsky, Khrennikov {3}.

Engravings for his *Ballads and Songs* were made by the extraordinary Russian artist Vladimir Favorsky {4}.

I am delighted to have the honour to present my contemporaries and compatriots with the most complete collection of Burns translations to date. I have devoted over twenty years to this labour and I still believe my task is not finished.

The Russian reader knows and loves *Tam O'Shanter* and *The Jolly Beggars*, *The Twa Dogs* and many lyrical poems, epistles and epigrams, but this is by no means the entirety of the treasure bequeathed to the world by Robert Burns.

I have spent many enjoyable hours and days on this work, but it was only recently, three years ago, that I was able to visit the motherland of Scotland's great poet.

I saw the thatched house where he was born, the fields that he ploughed, the free-flowing river Nith on the banks of which he composed his immortal *Tam O'Shanter*.

I also visited the Globe inn in Dumfries, where the poet inscribed his recently composed verse with a diamond on glass, and in the Pussy Nancy pub where the Jolly Beggars had once drunk and sung.

As I laid a wreath at the bottom of the memorial in the town of Ayr, I looked at the statue depicting a slim young man with his arms crossed on his breast and thought of how much work these hands had done during his lifetime.

I recalled the lines which Burns dedicated to his fellow poet Fergusson, who died of privations and poverty in early youth:

Why is the Bard unpitied by the world,
Yet has so keen a relish of its pleasures?

[Why does the singer who is bereft of a place in life
Fell all the beauty of this life so keenly?]

The following day I was making an address at a major gathering in honour of the great bard, and I said that I would perhaps have never come to Scotland if I hadn't been brought there by paths that go through Burns' poetry.

And when I voiced my wish that all peoples would follow such paths rather than the roads of war to visit one another, the whole packed hall erupted in harmonious applause, and the Lord Mayor of Glasgow in his ermine mantle rose from his seat and said, addressing everyone assembled:

'As my old Nan used to say, let these words be a lesson to you!'

Continuing this wise old lady's thought, what I would say is: let Burns' poems, generous, modest and magnanimous, be a lesson to the young generations of the entire world!

Endnotes:

'Robert Burns is 200'. First published in *Kultura i zhizn* journal 1959 (1), January.

1 From the poem 'Why Should We Idly Waste Our Prime...'

2 From the poem 'I Murder Hate...' ['Lines on War and Love']

3 Shostakovich, Sviridov, Kabalevsky and Khrennikov mostly used Samuil Marshak's translations in their songs and romances based on Burns' poetry.

4 Vladimir Andreyevich Favorsky (1886-1964) is a Soviet Russian artist specialising in book woodcuts.

The text reproduces the journal publication.

'TO THE IMMORTAL MEMORY' (Vol. 6, pp. 346-50)

To mark the 200th anniversary of Robert Burns

We honour the great poets of the past centuries: Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, not because they have been recognized as geniuses once and for all and forever included in the hall of fame, but because these poets are still provoking a vivid response in people's hearts.

One might say that they are put to the test by each new generation and they pass these tests with flying colours. Otherwise they would have been relegated to the archive or at least to a museum.

The poets of the past that we need the most are those who in their own time were the poets of the future. They turn out to be our contemporaries and take an active part in our lives, despite the fact that their very bones have long rotted away.

Each historical period seeks and finds its favourites, its chosen ones in the past – those close to it in spirit.

Today, the figure of Scotland's great bard is looming large before us: the brave, cheerful and life-affirming Robert Burns, the rovin' Robin who first gave a voice to the common people of his land.

When one reads Burns' poems, one is surprised at how the rough hands of a ploughman could have produced those superbly exquisite and delicate songs, ballads, epistles, epigrams. And it is all the more remarkable that the hard, back-breaking labour and the constant lack of even the bare necessities did not suppress in the poet his buoyant joy, his belief in his fellow men and their future happiness.

In essence, it is himself and his own life he that he refers to in his tragic lines dedicated to Robert Fergusson, another poet who wrote in the Scots dialect and who died of poverty and starvation in early youth.

Burns invested his meagre savings into a monument to him and wrote the following under his portrait:

Curse on ungrateful man, that can be pleased,
And yet can starve the author of the pleasure.
O thou, my elder brother in misfortune,
By far my elder brother in the Muses,
With tears I pity thy unhappy fate!

Why is the Bard unpitied by the world,
Yet has so keen a relish of its pleasures?

[Curse on those who enjoyed the song
But let the poet starve.
O my elder brother in harsh fate,
My much older brother in the service of the Muses,
I weep bitterly as I remember thy fate.

Why does the singer who is bereft of a place in life
Fell all the beauty of this life so keenly?} {1}

But in the teeth and at cross purposes with these tearful and angry verses fly the cheerful lines
full of power and defiance, written by the same hand:

"Mair spier na, nor fear na,
Auld age ne'er mind a feg;
The last o't, the warst o't
Is only but to beg.

[We will argue with grief.
Old age is nothing to us.
And poverty is no disaster.
We can live with it as well] {2}.

Or:

Some hae meat, and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat, and we can eat -
And sae the Lord be thankit.

[Some have something to eat but sometimes cannot eat.
Others can eat but have no bread.
And we have something to eat and something to eat with, -
So we have to thank heaven!] {3}

It looks like not a single poet endowed by fate with riches and glory had the joy that Burns had.
He never complains of misfortune but always meets it with defiance.

I never was cannie for hoarding o' money,
Or claughtin't together at a', man;
I've little to spend, and naething to lend,
But deevil a shilling I awe, man.

[I am not a fraud or a scoundrel,
I haven't saved any money.
I am earning my own living, brother.
I spend a little,
I don't hoard anything,
And I don't owe a penny to devils, brother!..] {4}

The poet is aware that nothing of true value can be bought with money: either love, friendship or
inspiration. In several instances, he repeats an idea that is close to his heart:

Love for love is the bargain for me

[For us, love is the price of love!] {5}

And he says this in his song about his beloved:

She is not the fairest, altho' she is fair;
O' nice education but sma' is her share;
Her parentage humble as humble can be;
But I lo'e the dear lassie because she lo'es me.

[She is not fair but comelier than most.
I know she doesn't have a large dowry,
But I fell in love with her from the first day
Because she fell in love with me!] {6}

Few nations honour and love poets as much as the Scots love their Rabbie Burns. He has become a symbol of the unity of their nation, a mouthpiece for the thoughts and hopes of the country's ordinary folk.

When some years ago I was lucky enough to tour the cities, towns and villages connected with the poet's life, I was treated to recitals of his poems, short and long, by people of every rank, position, age – an elderly miner and an old fisherman, a travelling salesman working for a sewing machine company, and a young girl which looked very much like the strict and demure Highland Mary as she is portrayed by artists.

Burns is a popular poet in the truest and deepest sense of the word. The very landscape of Scotland lives and breathes in his verses:

Yon wild mossy mountains sae lofty and wide,
That nurse in their bosom the youth o' the Clyde,
Where the grouse lead their coveys thro' the heather to feed

[The rocky mountains where clouds sleep,
Where the river frolicks in her early youth,
Where to seek food through thick heather
A grouse leads her chicks after her] {7}.

The poems soaked in well-aimed and saucy popular humour, such as *Tam O'Shanter* or *The Jolly Beggars*, the songs about weavers and ploughmen, allow the Scots to recognize their countrymen, to laugh at their jokes and to repeat after the itinerant poet the riotously cheeky stanzas from *The Jolly Beggars*:

Does the train-attended carriage
Thro' the country lighter rove?
Does the sober bed of marriage
Witness brighter scenes of love?

Life is al a variorum,
We regard not how it goes;
Let them cant about decorum,
Who have character to lose.

[You, Milord, in your carriage
Cannot overtake us on the road,
And such caresses are unknown
To your bridal bed,

Life is in endless motion:
Joy, grief, dark and light.
We don't have to care about our reputations
Because we have none!]

Robert Burns is inseparable from Scotland, its land and its people. But this national poet's scope was not limited to the confines of his own country.

Burns, who never left Scotland even to travel to England, let alone abroad, dedicated one of his poems to a certain lord's journey through Spain, Italy, Germany. And he can describe foreign countries with no less verve and insight than Byron who had travelled a lot in his day.

However, his key difference from Byron is that he maintains his farmer's focus when he describes a high-society drone's idle trip to Spain. This is how he treats his travelling lord:

Or by Madrid he takes the rout,
To thrum guitars an' fecht wi' nowt

[He'll drop by Madrid on his way,
And he'll thrum a guitar,
And he'll enjoy the picture
Of Spaniards fighting cattle] {8}.

When describing the battles between toreadors and matadors and a raging bull, no high-society poet would refer to the mighty animal by the familiar and rural word *nowt*.

Burns would sometimes shock the critics of his time by his unexpected use of popular idioms, but when he wanted to, he could be every bit as refined and gallant as his fashionable colleagues. This is him writing about himself:

Though I canna ride in weel-booted pride,
And flee o'er the hills like a craw, man,
I can haud up my head wi' the best o' the breed,
Though fluttering ever so braw, man.

[Like important nobbs
I cannot prance about
In fashionable boots, on horseback, brother.
But in a society circle
I can hold myself
And I won't lose face, brother] {9}.

It was once common to speak and write of Burns as a self-taught poet. It is true that like our Maxim Gorky, he has not finished any school, but throughout his short life he was an earnest student of 'life's universities', keenly aware of politics, informed about world history, a reader of Virgil and the French poets, and a true connoisseur of English poetry and his native country's folklore.

A natural intellect, a poet's intuition and a wide erudition combined with rich personal experience – all of it raised him head and shoulders above his milieu and allowed him to see so far into the future that now, a century and a half later, he can rightly be considered our contemporary.

Isn't he being entirely modern in his jocular yet grave lines about war which go straight to the heart of any ordinary person:

I murder hate by flood or field,

Tho' glory's name may screen us;
In wars at home I'll spend my blood-
Life-giving wars of Venus.
The deities that I adore
Are social Peace and Plenty;
I'm better pleas'd to make one more,
Than be the death of twenty.

[Robbery camouflaged by laurels,
Both on land and sea,
Is not worthy of praise.
I am ready to give my blood
In that life-creating battle
That we call love.
I praise the dominion of peace,
Content and plenty.
It is more pleasant to make one
Than to kill ten!] {10}

During the last war, we read his little lyrical ballad as if it were written only yesterday by a contemporary of ours:

There was a bonie lass, and a bonie, bonie lass,
And she lo'ed her bonie laddie dear;
Till War's loud alarms tore her laddie frae her arms,
Wi' mony a sigh and tear.

[There lived a lass somewhere.
What a lass she was!
And she was in love with a bonny lad.
But they had to part
And love each other apart,
Because war had broken out...] {11}

And a music not of yesterday, but of today or even tomorrow can be heard in his prophetic words calling for brotherhood and peace between sentient beings on earth.

Like brethren wi' a common cause,
We'd on each other smile, man;
And equal rights and equal laws
Wad gladden every isle, man.

[Slavery and poverty will be forgotten
By peoples and lands, brother,
And people will live in harmony
Like a close-knit family, brother!] {12}

When one reads and re-reads these poems written in the eighteenth century, one understands why the Scots toast the memory of their beloved national poet without even mentioning him by name, saying simply:

- To the Immortal Memory!

And it is clear to everyone present that these words refer to Burns, a wonderful poet who left such a clear and powerful legacy to the world:

Then let us pray that come it may,
(As come it will for a' that,)
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth,
Shall bear the gree, an' a' that.

[A day will come and an hour will strike
When Intellect and Honour
Will have its turn all over the world
To take first place!] {13}

Endnotes:

'To Immortal Memory'. First published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, 1959 (25, 26 February).

- 1 'Inscription For The Headstone Of Fergusson The Poet'.
- 2 From 'Epistle To Davie, A Brother Poet'.
- 8 'Grace Before Meal'.
- 4 From 'The Tarbolton Lasses'.
- 5 From 'My Collier Laddie'
- 6 From 'Yon Wild Mossy Mountains'
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 From 'The Twa Dogs'.
- 9 From 'The Tarbolton Lasses'.
- 10 'I Murder Hate...' ['Lines on War and Love']
- 11 From 'There Was A Bonie Lass' ['A Little Ballad']
- 12 From 'Tree of Liberty'
- 13 From 'Honest Poverty'

Reproduced from the newspaper publication.

Translator's Note: The attribution of 'The Tarbolton Lasses' in notes 4 and 9 is incorrect; the correct poem is 'The Ronalds of the Bennals'.

TO THE PEDAGOGICAL INSTITUTE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, LENINGRAD (Vol. 8, Letter 215)

<Moscow, 21 April 1955>

Dear Comrades,

I would be happy to provide a detailed report of my trip to Scotland, to the festival dedicated to the memory of the poet Robert Burns, but I am unwell and I am finding it difficult to write, so I will confine myself to a few lines [1]. Our delegation consisted of four people: B.N. Polevoy, A.A. Elistratova, myself and my son, I.S. Marshak, Candidate of Technology. We laid a wreath on the

memorial's pedestal on behalf of the Union of Soviet Writers. This was in the town of Ayr, near the place where Burns was born and spent a large part of his life. Then the poet's memory was celebrated in the town of Kilmarnock, where the first edition of his poems was published, in Dumfries where he died at the age of thirty seven, in Glasgow, and finally, in Edinburgh.

The festivities were usually held in town and city halls, with presiding Lords Provosts in curled whigs and ermine mantles, while the ordinary folk toasted the poet in the many clubs and societies named after Burns, which exist in nearly every Scottish town and village.

In our speeches, we Soviet delegates were saying that Burns gave a lot more to his country than received from it during his lifetime (it is well-known that he lived and died in poverty), and that Scotland, like the entire world, is indebted to this poet of common origins. This debt has to be paid, not just by erecting monuments and building museums, but by bringing to life the poet's legacy which is so clearly expressed in his verses which speak of liberty, of the brotherhood of nations, of peace, and of the true nobility of those who provide for themselves with honest labour.

We visited nearly all the places where Burns lived and worked, we saw fields he walked with plough and harrow. We were happy to tell the poet's compatriots how popular and beloved his poems are in our great country.

Here, dear Comrades, is the short report of our participation in the Burns Festival. I wish you every success in your study of literature.

S. Marshak

Endnote:

Reproduced from the typewritten copy.

1. In a letter dated 8 February 1955, the editorial board of the Student Research Society Bulletin of the Leningrad First Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages asked the poet to tell about his trip to England to the Robert Burns Festival in late January – early February 1955.

TO JOHN MITCHELL (Vol. 8, Letter 262)

Moscow, 21 March 1958

Dear Mr. Mitchell,

I was very glad to learn that you liked my translations of Robert Burns' poems [1].

He is very popular in our country – perhaps no less than in his motherland.

He was first translated by the poet you like so much, Lermontov [2].

About a hundred years ago, Burns was translated by the revolutionary poet Mikhail Mikhailov [3] who was condemned to hard labour by Tsarism. But it was not until the Soviet times that Robert Burns became a household name in our country. Nearly every year sees the publication of new editions of the Scottish poet's ballads, songs, epigrams.

I am sending you as a memento a collection of my translations which took me over twenty years to accomplish. In this collection, you will also find an essay by Rita Rait-Kovaleva and an article by Professor Mikhail Morozov on Burns and his relevance for our country.

Another book on Burns was recently published; it is by Professor Anna Elistratova and is entitled *Robert Burns: A Critical-Biographical Study* (Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Khudozhestvennoj literatury 1957).

I hope that like elsewhere in the world, we will be celebrating a glorious anniversary of this profoundly popular poet in January 1959 [4].

Please accept my cordial greetings.

S. Marshak

Endnotes

1. In a letter dated 5 March 1958, the Englishman John Mitchell, who was in 1958 a member of staff at the Department of English and American Studies of the Humboldt University (East Germany, Berlin), expressed his admiration for Marshak's translations of Burns; he asked to point him to the most prominent studies of Burns published in the Soviet Union.

2 In 1830, Mikhail Lermontov translated a stanza from Burns' *Parting Song to Clarinda* which served as an epigraph to Byron's *The Bride of Abydos*. Lermontov's translation is titled after the first line in the original: 'Had we never loved so kindly'. The poem was translated in full as *Parting* in vol. 3 of the present edition.

3 Mikhail Mikhailov translated six poems by the Scottish poet, among which were such influential works as *John Barleycorn*, *The Ploughman*, *To A Mouse*, *On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough*. The translations were published in Nekrasov's *Sovremennik*, 1856 (6).

4. The 200th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns.

TO GERHART LIEBNER (Vol. 8, Letter 286)

Moscow, (January 1960)

Dear Gerhart Liebner,

Your letter [1] touched me deeply. I was happy to hear from a German miner a sincere and heartfelt appreciation of Robert Burns, a poet from a foreign land and from a different time, who is still akin to ordinary people all over the world.

I find convincing and justified your desire for the memory of the great Scottish poet to be commemorated in your native town of Weimar, where the great Goethe who valued Burns so much had lived and worked, and where monuments to Shakespeare and our own Pushkin have already been erected.

But of course, only the state where this good town is located can decide to erect a monument to Burns in the German city of Weimar.

But regardless of whether your suggestion will ever become reality, it will undoubtedly find a response in the hearts of many people who hold dear the poetry of Burns, the bard of friendship, love, honest labour and freedom.

Please accept my heartfelt greetings,

Yours sincerely,

S. Marshak

Endnote:

Reproduced from the *Literaturnaja Gazeta* 1960 (10), 23 January.

1. In early November 1959, Samuil Marshak received a letter from a miner called Gerhart Liebner (Waltrop-Recklinghausen, Federative Republic of Germany). Mr Liebner suggested that a monument to the Scottish poet Robert Burns should be erected in Weimar (the letter was published in the *Literaturnaja Gazeta* 1960 (10), 23 January).

TO THE BURNS FEDERATION. SCOTLAND (Vol. 8, Letter 299)

<Moscow, September 1960>

Your decision to elect me Honorary President has once again reinforced the bonds of friendship that link Scotland not just with myself but with all Burns lovers in my Motherland. I don't believe there is now a more contemporary poet, a poet who so clearly defines humankind's aspirations as Burns did with his heartfelt desire for a brotherhood of men. Now we can state that the day has come when Burns' dream is becoming reality.

S. Marshak

Endnote:

Reproduced from the *Literaturnaja Gazeta* 1960 (117), 1 October.

TO KORNEY CHUKOVSKY (Vol. 8, Letter 394)

5 Sudeysky per., Yalta, Crimea

The Literary Foundation House of Creativity (more precisely, the House of Relief from Creativity), 26 July 1963.

My dear Korney Ivanovich,

I hope you received my telegram [1]. The article [2] is superb: intelligent, convincing, youthful. I am glad you haven't said a word about the editor and author of the preface, because both they and the readers will get a clear understanding of the share of your indignation reserved to those who aided a poor translator and his book. By the way, the wretched book has already found its way to the Crimea. One of the instructors in Artek told me the other day he was reading it. This young man was completely unaware of the quality of the new translation and was taken aback when I told him the translation was poor. Of course, rivalry with an untalented translator is not in any way a threat for me, although his book has come out just before my own Burns is due to be reprinted (this time in two volumes). But it is sad to see the publishers being so undiscerning, and the readers as well – not all of them, I grant you. (...)

Let's return to the article. As I already wrote to you (I am not sure if you got my telegram in full), I only had a few small quibbles. I believe that a Scottish winter should be characterised as 'harsh' rather than 'fierce' or 'cruel', if the poem 'Hallowe'en' (I think) deals with Southern Scotland where Burns lived. (I did not translate that poem and I don't remember it very well.) It can snow in

Southern Scotland in winter, and sometimes there is a lot of snow. There are even snow drifts, but the frosts are a lot weaker than in the Highland [sic] [3]. (...)

Do you believe you should have mentioned at the start of the article those who translated Burns 'before Fedotov', such as Lermontov, Mikhailov, Kurochkin etc., and quoted Belinsky, Nekrasov etc. on Burns? I would like Fedotov's patrons and readers to understand

Against what he raised his hand!.. [4]

I am glad you are working on a new edition of *A High Art* [5]. This is a very necessary and useful book. The standard of poetic translation is very high here, perhaps as nowhere else. But very few realise how difficult and demanding this labour is.

A.I. Puzikov [6] recently reminded me of my presentation inscription in one of the first editions of Burns published by Goslitizdat:

Although different fees apply
To one's own poems and to translations,
Shakespeare and Shevchenko's verses
Are sometimes harder than your own.

My friend, the peoples' poetry
Cannot tolerate bland translations.
Please pay an extra five roubles –
Let them spruce it up a little!

This is, of course, a joke. It's not a matter of five roubles!

I will send you my protest against poor foreign translations of my poems and plays. But I haven't got these translations with me. When will you need this couple of lines?

I am finally preparing the *Selections from Blake* for publication which I've been working on since 1913 – fifty years! It's a shame I haven't got Etkind's book with me [7].

Please send my best regards to Lida. I am waiting for news from you and her.

With love,

Yours,

S. Marshak

My sister asks to pass on her heartfelt greetings to you and Lida.

Endnotes:

1. A telegram from Samuil Marshak to Korney Chukovsky dated 23 July 1963.
2. Korney Chukovsky's article 'In Defence of Burns', a review of a book entitled *R. Burns, Songs and Poems Translated by Viktor Fedotov*, Moscow: Sovetskaja Rossija, 1963; published in the *Novy Mir* journal, 1963, 9 (September).
3. The Highlands is the mountainous part of Scotland (the North and West of the country).
4. From Mikhail Lermontov's poem 'The Death of a Poet'.
5. Korney Chukovsky was working on the second edition of his book about literary translation called *A High Art*. The book was published by Iskusstvo publishers in 1964.
6. Chief Editor of the Khudozhestvennaja Literatura publishing house.
7. E. Etkind, 'Poetry and Translation', *Sovetskij Pisatel*. Moscow-Leningdard, 1963.