



Riach, A. (2016) Not Burns – Dunbar! *National*, 2016, 22 Jan.

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Deposited on: 12 October 2017

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Not Burns – Dunbar! So who was William Dunbar?

Alan Riach (Friday 22 January 2016)

‘Not Burns – Dunbar!’ was one of two slogans Hugh MacDiarmid came out with in the 1920s, advising all Scots they’d be better off spending time reading the poems of William Dunbar rather than indulging in the annual monster-fest of self-indulgence commonly known as ‘Burns Night’.

He was right then and even more so now.

Many Burns suppers have as little to do with poetry as they can get away with, and nothing to do with Scottish poetry at all. If you find yourself at a bad one, the best you’re likely to get is a potted biography of the Bard, an exaggerated recitation or two, a plate of offal and a washout of whisky. I speak from experience.

Of course, the best Burns suppers deliver real illumination, songs that take you deep into the words and the meanings of the words, poems that give the Scots language full rein, where you can hear what range Burns has, from the most intense sympathy to devastating satire and from utmost tenderness to bodily humour of the coarsest kind. He is the quickest poet there is, shifting nuance and insight brilliantly or wielding the scalpel of scorn with surgical precision.

But there’s more to it than Burns, and more Scottish poets worth your attention, and some just as good – or even better!

William Dunbar is one of them. He is not simply to be read as a poet of the distant past, irrelevant to modern times, but rather as a major figure at the foundations of Modernism. Just as Charles Rennie Mackintosh went back to the architecture of medieval castles to design the Glasgow School of Art, just as the artist J.D. Fergusson in Paris from 1907 to 1914, embracing Cubism, looking at Picasso and Braque, stated boldly that Modernism was simply a matter of getting back to fundamentals, and went looking for copies of Dunbar’s poetry to read in this context, just as Stravinsky’s quintessential Modernist work, *The Rite of Spring*, is subtitled ‘Pictures from Pagan Russia’, going back even further than Dunbar, the great artists, writers and composers of the Modern movement regenerated their work through return to their earliest sources.

Dunbar lived from around 1460 till around 1513. He was a churchman, a chaplain at the great Renaissance court of James IV, widely travelled in England, France, Denmark and elsewhere. His poems range just as widely as Burns. Formal poems for state occasions, squibs and satires of daily life at court, playful, topical, colloquial poems, verbally dexterous, ‘enamelled’ verse or vulgar, downmarket rhymes of more popular purpose. He moves from the flippant comedy of ‘How Sir John Sinclair Began to Dance’ (one foot always gets it wrong) to the steady, heavily-paced ‘Lament for the Makars’, a lengthening list of predeceased poets and friends, written in the pressing knowledge of his own mortality. From the most carefully poised love poem: ‘Sweet Rose of virtue and of gentleness, / Delightsome lily of every lustiness, / Richest in bounty and in beauty clear / And every virtue that is dear /

Except only that you are merciless...' to the Quentin Tarantino hell-dance vision of the Seven Deadly Sins, from the sexually explicit 'Twa Marriet Wemun and the Widow', where three ladies discuss the relative merits of men, to the sheer ferocity of the religious poems in praise of God and condemnation of evil.

Sins are awful realities in Dunbar's poems, and their meanings apply today as much as ever. When temptation rises, prompting greed, lechery, drunkenness, violence, the threats are as much with us now as in the sixteenth century. Date rape, drunk driving, bullying, gluttony. The sensual apprehension of the attractiveness of self-indulgence is vivid in Dunbar, and countered by the shields of self-knowledge and active defence against its allure. This is central in his poem 'The Golden Targe', where male desire is roused by the approach of a host of beautiful women. The conflict is as intense as any you'll see in *Star Wars*. The force awakens, indeed!

The value he puts upon the ideals of social justice is central to 'The Thrissil and the Rose', the poem he wrote in celebration of the marriage of King James to Margaret Tudor of England in 1503. The union he affirms can only be maintained, he says, if the king himself is virtuous, as the lion, king of beasts, the eagle, king of birds, or the thistle, crowned above all plants. He must 'do law alike to apes and unicorns' and is in Dame Nature's charge, at her ultimate command. With hindsight, of course, we know how that union failed, James leading his army to slaughter at Flodden in 1513. But the ideals remain, brilliantly expressed in Dunbar's poem.

When MacDiarmid recommended Dunbar back in the 1920s, he was saying that not only is there another poet of vision and technical brilliance equal to Burns, but that there is a whole history, a tradition of Scottish poetry that opens its doors to all sorts of human experience. To celebrate only one poet in this tradition is not good enough. It's a big world, pilgrims, so come on, take a big bite!

More than that, he was indicating a rich culture in Scotland that common popular currency neglects or ignores, or even suppresses. When was the last time you heard of Dunbar anywhere in the mass media?

In his 1943 book, *Modern Scottish Painting*, J.D. Fergusson described his attempt to buy a copy of Dunbar's poems: 'I went to every bookshop in Paris, London, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and got the only one existing at a reasonable price in Edinburgh, and of course *not at all complete*. This means that the Calvinists have kept the work of Dunbar from the poor student of Scottish poetry, from the time of the Reformation till the time I asked for it – from say 1565 till 1914.'

It's not only Calvinists who suppress one's knowledge of the arts, though.

In 2014, the politician George Galloway and the former NATO chief George Robertson publicly derided the very idea that there was such a thing as Scottish culture. That position is too easy to assume. As Paul Kavanagh has pointed out to readers of *The National* ('There's nae need tae cringe', 9 January 2016): 'The most common complaint about Scots is

that it's not a language at all. People whose knowledge of linguistics fills a dictionary from A to Aa all of a sudden turn into Noam Chomsky when the subject is Scots.'

In MacDiarmid's beautiful poem, 'Homage to Dunbar', he notes that anyone can visit the graves of Burns or Walter Scott, but nobody knows where Dunbar is buried, lost in an older Scotland, abandoned, unexplored. Like Atlantis drowned beneath the ocean, Dunbar and his Scotland remain almost unknown. And yet, as if from the bells of the cathedral under sea, sometimes a strange sound can indeed be heard across the distance: 'Still, like the bells o' Ys frae unplumbed deeps, / Whiles through Life's drumlie wash your music leaps / To'n antrin ear, as a'e bird's wheep defines / In some lane place the solitude's outlines.'

There is even more than that. The phrase, 'Not Burns – Dunbar!' suggests a different way of approaching poetry, culture, and all the arts. As a medieval and early Renaissance poet, Dunbar lived in a world where all art was didactic. Paintings, music, architecture, poetry: all art was made to teach, seriously. Serious lessons all folk need to know, about what virtue is, about what hurt and pain will come when certain temptations are surrendered to. The arts, in this understanding, are not merely entertainment. Underestimate their worth at your peril.

This is neither pious nor solemn, neither sentimental nor sanctimonious – as some of the worst Burns suppers can be! Rather, it is an affirmation that poetry and all the arts are there to help people to live, to tell us things we need to know about immaterial life. Economic realities are not the only ones. There are these qualities of what, for want of a better word, we might call the spirit. They can raise things up, as in 'high spirits' (and Dunbar can be a very funny poet indeed), they can help with formal occasions of great moment, or they can help us deal with grief at times of irreparable loss. And they're not just with us one night every year, they're essential to all of us, every day.

Burns is a great poet and songwriter – praise him, enjoy, and learn from his best work – but don't neglect the whole inherited world that helps make Scotland so rich a nation. Burns didn't. He honoured Robert Fergusson and many more, emphatically. To do Burns justice, we should learn from his example.

[Off-set in box]

William Dunbar's 'To a Ladye' is a different kind of poem from Burns's 'My love is like a red, red rose' but it's every bit as poignant, sharp, yearning, and subtle in its suggestion of material and emotional realities. 'Rew' is a pun on the word 'rue' or sorrow, regret, pity, and the same word meaning the evergreen garden-grown herb, supposed to repel venomous snakes, diminish amorous desire in men, and encourage it in women. The phrase 'that I of mene' signifies, 'of which I speak'.

To a Ladye

Sweit rois of vertew and of gentilnes,
Delytsum lyllie of everie lustynes,
Richest in bontie and in bewtie cleir
And euerie vertew that is deir
Except onlie that ye ar mercyles.

In to your garthe this day I did persew.
Thair saw I flowris that fresche wer of hew,
Baithe quhyte and rid, moist lusty wer to seyne,
And halsum herbis vpon stalkis grene,
Yit leif nor flour fynd could I nane of rew.

I dout that Merche with his cauld blastis keyne
Hes slayne this gentill herbe that I of mene,
Quhois petewous deithe dois to my hart sic pane
That I wald mak to plant his rute agane,
So confortand his levis vnto me bene.

From: *The Poems of William Dunbar*, edited by Priscilla Bawcutt, 2 volumes (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1998)

Education Scotland's 10-minute film on the history of Scots is available online at:

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/curriculumareas/languages/scotslanguage/supportmaterials/historyofscots/intro.asp>