

Some comments on the life of Robert Burns through the writer, James Barke.

For those readers who would like to get enjoyably inside the life and nature of the Scottish Bard poet, Robert Burns, but without the intellectual hassle of combing commentaries, one could look no further than the five-volume biographical novel by Scottish author, James Barke.

Barke (*born 1905 - died 1958*) was a Scottish novelist who began his writing career from 1933. He wrote his five volume series on Burns from 1946 through to 1953. The series is said to be the result of forty years of accumulated scholarship re-creating, in novel form, Burns' life.

Even though this is my first formal introduction to the life of Robert Burns, I feel cheeky enough to declare that Barke has done the Scottish bard, the Scottish people as well as the rest of the world, a great service by his masterful 'idealistic and romantic' rendition of Burns' life. He sheds bright light on Burns: the complex human being; the conduct of his muse poetically and in his intimate relationships; his cultural life locally, in Edinburgh and Dumfries, together with his philosophical freedom aspirations for humankind. These aspirations include perspectives held about freedom of the individual, human relations, religion, the church, national government and the idealism and possibilities evoked by the French Revolution and the new United States of America.

While not overtly appearing to take sides with or wishes to idealise Burns, Barke clearly has an ability to stimulate a writer's empathy for the character in his sights. He brought the character of Burns to life for me - including 'warts and all' - yet with a non-judgemental sympathy where the reader not only obtains the 'facts' of Burns' life, but enters into the feeling state of the man. Barke 's objective about Burns but, it appears, without prejudice for or against him. I was left with a view that Barke had chosen a subject whose substance he appreciated and wanted to proclaim it creatively to a reading audience.

Robert Burns, the oldest of seven children, was born into poverty. His father, a highly intelligent and God fearing man, fought a losing battle as a tenant farmer but who knew the value of education. He worked to ensure that his sons, Robert and Gilbert, benefited from the best of such through private arrangements – not so for his daughters.

The family suffered from the meagre crop returns due to poor soil through a series of tenancies located in Ayrshire. Robert, though acknowledged as the Scottish Bard, was, nevertheless, destined to work much of his life as a ploughman, first on his father's plots then and finally, with his own family, at Ellisland near Dumfries. To ensure a more reliable income provision for his family, he gave up his tenant ploughman role to work in Excise.

Almost exclusively as an economic consideration, Burns' poetry output had to be a secondary role as any income obtained was miserable and the state had not thought to value his poetic genius financially.

Burns, as a budding young personality, was a puzzle to his first teacher and his father. Teacher Murdoch remarked "...there is an element of opposition in him.....", but also thought that there was 'something of the irrational' about him. Father, William, responded that Robin, ".....is given to strange unaccountable moods." Whereas Robin withdrew from the rationalism of Murdoch, he warmed to the story-telling, peasant natured, earthy next teacher, Betty, who inspired in him 'the words and their meaning and the lilt and the rhythm.....as they wrought deep emotions in his heart – emotions beyond the plumbing or probing of his intellect'.

Burns was an articulate, complex and passionate man; a conundrum to those who could not see below his surface beginning with his brother, Gilbert, who, by contrast, was anything but a conundrum. At one point, Barke made reference to Burns as a Protean personality where he could interact quite naturally and mutually with any person he met no matter their type, station or role.

He enjoyed the company of men across class, particularly in a tavern setting or, long-standing with particular individuals. He would not easily stand on ceremony and could be frank towards those he with whom he had great respect even if it risked the relationship. His style and manner would lower the risk.

"Peter Hurley is a recently retired Welfare Worker and Generalist Counsellor from Australia. He now lives with his partner Rebecca a social worker & her son in the Inverness area. For the last year, Peter lived on the Shetland Islands; a complete contrast to OZ! Peter knew little of Burns until he came across Barke's work while living in Shetland. For a short time he attended the Lerwick Literary Group & presented this article at one of their meetings. With his interest piqued he plans to read more of Burns & visit some of the places where he lived & worked".

Re: James Barke's Novels

Burns engaged in intimate relationships (sexual and non) with several women (even alongside his marriage) ranging from some of his own class through to women above his station. Women appeared to be overwhelmingly attracted by an aura presence.

Psychologically, his innate personal type was primarily intuitive or forward seeing in its perception; looking for life's possibilities. In terms of judgement, he made his decisions using deep feeling, in a valuing way, in his engagement with life, be it personal, philosophical or social. He was not logical, conformist or belonged genetically to anybody or social entity for meaningful association.

Burns is speculated as an introvert by nature. He exuded a powerful presence in the company of others especially in terms of his physical stature, voice, eyes, broad knowledge, articulation, capacity to discuss, dance to name some. He was not dependent but he loved the company of particular individuals with whom he resonated in a soulful way. Yet, he was outspoken in defence of the freedom of people (particularly of the individual), the need for governmental justice and expressed this authoritively through his poetry and social discourse:

"But he could take nothing simply.....(h)is imagination was ever on fire.....it was not for him to take a back seat in the tavern and drop a casual word here and there.....(H)e was too daring, too sweeping, too courageous, too devastating."

Living at a time when sentencing to transportation was a regular judgement, Burns suffered a close brush with the Pitt national Government with alleged seditious comments and behaviour that put at risk his government Excise job with the possibility of transportation to Botany Bay.

Though established as an exceptional and forceful personality, Burns was rarely defeated by crisis though he knew what sustained struggle was. He seemed to be generally accepting and able to cope with confronting events of which there were many. However, and caught by surprise, his person was almost stripped away during an interrogation for suspected sedition where a state officer castrated him into silence by way of his designated administrative authority. This action was the antithesis of all that Burns stood for. The high-handed incident shattered and humiliated him to the core. This paradoxically laden event seem to suggest the presence of a levelling force to remind him that he was not invincible; that seeming personal inflation can, utterly unpredictably, be pricked like a balloon, to remind him he is a fallible creature.

Though he identified with his 'ploughman' culture, he could mix with the gentry whom, and with some exceptions, he disliked though he knew he had to connect and compromise with as he needed its patronage and permission. In order to promote his poetry into publication he made several journeys to Edinburgh where he was celebrated and supported by the gentry for his craft though, it appears, few read it.

On one occasion, he was the hapless and drunken victim of a prank where gentry perpetrators skilfully made their prejudice clear that, though he can be allowed into their company only at whim, he was to remember he was not one of them but a ploughman, a common gauger and where his Bard status was not acknowledged with stately value.

A more major part of Burns' complexity was in his deep emotional, physical and psychological relationships with different women and who ranged across class. Here, it is hard to determine as to whether he was sincere in his carryings on or a cad and, therefore, not personally 'responsible' for the inexplicable inherent force he felt towards them and them to him.

Some mythology and psychology would suggest that Burns was subject to or captured by a powerful Anima, a vitalising, animating instinctual force springing from deep within himself and projected onto the other i.e. falling in love. He was particularly successful at conducting highly intense, passionate if not reckless affairs some of which produced four bairns causing him to have to bluster by way of an almost juvenile-toned explanation to his accepting wife who took on one baby born within eight days of her own. In a couple of references among others sprinkled throughout the books, Burns tried to understand:

*"I still love you, Robert."
And, I still love you, Nancy."*

Re: James Barke's Novels

"Sometimes I think you could fall in love with any woman – I mean any pretty woman, any bonnie lassie?"
"Of course I could – that's part o' my folly, Nancy – but there are degrees o' love just as there are degrees o' women –"
"And, yet you'll be writing me to-morrow telling me you love me and me alone; and like the silly woman I am, I'll believe you."
And you'll do right to believe me, dearest Nancy. You see, I've never loved any woman as I've loved you because I've never loved any woman like you. You are unique, Nancy ---"
"And what will that do for me when you are living on your farm and I'm sitting here alone crying out my soul for you."
"It's no easy, my dear – only too well do I ken that. But there is no alternative. Fate doesna deal out alternatives."

OR:

"(His wife) Jean was like the air he breathed – necessary to his very life. In Clarinda there was a breath of different air – a holiday for the heart and the spirit."

In terms of writing artistry, Barke is very satisfying to my Australian eyes. I doubt if he is necessarily unique as a Scottish writer but his command of the Scottish tongue in this historical context appears to be masterful:

"Aye: it could be a verra unpleasant interview – especially if we are wrong."
"Ah, we canna be wrong: she's coupit...and weel coupit."
"Oooh, weel coupit, Jeems. Aha, there's naethin'll uncoop her noo. Oooh, we'll soon hae Mr.Burns in Mossgeil in our grip – and, by certes, Jeems, it behooves Mr. Auld to chirt him sair...."

And, elsewhere, Barke's delicious prose flow:

"Pale-faced, thin-lipped, pointed nosed, Muir ferreted into the attack without fear for his faith was unshakable."

So, how do I rate Barke's biographical novel of Robert Burns? Though in novel form, Barke delivered a very rounded, complete and structurally plausible account of a real life vibrant character. I felt I was able to gather the **feel of Burns** at most points of his dynamic life: his highs of elation; his lows; the incongruousness of an ontologically inspired talent born into the lower echelon of society.

Barke's Burns gave me a glimpsing sense that he has some enduring feature of prophet: born in poverty; develops a philosophy in Ayrshire; disseminated through poetry and song; risked 'crucifixion' by the ruling classes and dies at a young age. It might be stretching it a bit, but something quite good seem to come out of Mauchlin!

Peter Hurley.

Note:-

James Barke's books first published in 1947 to 1953, have been re-printed many times, even as recently as 2009. They are readily available on line both new & used.