

## Robert Burns: Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory, 1796-1909

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### Background

The Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-1796) is one of the most commemorated of all poets. The *Robert Burns Beyond Text* project seeks to document the full range of his memorialisation through objects and public monuments, enabling the whole range of images and items used in the transmission of Robert Burns's reputation into the sphere of cultural memory to be openly available for study or consultation in one place for the first time. In doing so, the project seeks to provide an invaluable base for analysis, and for the development of similar records for other writers.

### Methodology

Researchers at the University of Glasgow will examine and classify Mauchline Ware and other forms of the private memorialisation of Burns. Information gathered from private and public memorabilia collections, online auction sites/records of sale, and other sources will be used to develop a catalogue of the main kinds of private/domestic Burns objects, with data concerning their dates of appearance and places of sale.

Researchers at the University of Dundee will compile a comprehensive bank of images and list of public Burns memorials, gathering information on the meanings and reception of such memorials, and the response to Burns in three dimensional objects and in fine art.

Together, the Glasgow and Dundee researchers will develop a theoretical model for the relationship between literary and material culture.



Above (L-R): Robert Burns Monument, Montrose, Commissioned 1885 & 'Burns's Highland Mary' Statue, Dunoon, Unveiled 1896.

### Robert Burns & 'Highland Mary'

Very little is known about Robert Burns's affair with Margaret Campbell (1763-1786?) whom the poet is thought to have immortalised as 'Highland Mary' in the poems 'My Highland Lassie O' and 'To Mary In Heaven'; certainly not enough to merit the attention and status that she has acquired among many Burns devotees. With the exception of the poems, there are but two suspected references to 'Highland Mary' in Burns's correspondence.

In spite of this, the elusive 'Highland Mary' remains the most famous of all women associated with Robert Burns, in part owing to the extensive and diverse interpretation and memorialisation of this episode in the poet's life by material culture. The record of monuments and objects created by this project will allow users to chart the journey of the 'Highland Mary' story from Robert Burns's few textual references, into the cultural memory of the poet.

That sacred hour can I forget,  
Can I forget the hallowed grove,  
Where, by the winding Ayr we met,  
To live one day of Parting Love?  
Eternity will not efface,  
Those records dear of transports past,  
Thy image at our last embrace,  
Ah! little thought we 'twas our last!

From 'A Song', alternatively titled 'To Mary in Heaven', by Robert Burns.

### Outcomes

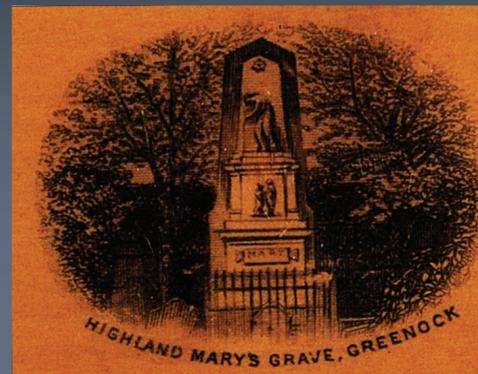
- Web-based catalogue of public monuments to Robert Burns worldwide, erected by 1909.
- Web-based taxonomy of different kinds of Burns-related material culture available commercially or for domestic use up to and including 1909.
- Conference: 'The Object of Poetry', University of Dundee, Spring 2011.
- Exhibition: *Robert Burns Beyond Text*, in association with the National Trust for Scotland, Robert Burns Birthplace Museum.
- Publications: Collection of essays arising from the conference, 'The Object of Poetry'. Research papers arising from the project as a whole.

### References:

Roy, G. Ross and Ferguson, J. De Lancey (eds.), *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 Vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

Kinsley, James (ed.), *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 Vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

Main image: Robert Burns Statue, Aberdeen, 1892.



Above (L-R): Mauchline Ware, Highland Mary's Grave, Greenock, 19th Century & Staffordshire Figurine, *Burns and Highland Mary*, mid 19th Century.