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## Highland Mary: Objects and Memories

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Very little is known about Robert Burns's affair with Mary (or Margaret) Campbell (c.1763/66–86), whom the poet is thought to have immortalised as 'Highland Mary' in poems such as '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 only two suspected references to 'Highland Mary' in Burns's correspondence and even these serve only as introductions to the poet's related verse: the first in a letter to Mrs Frances Anna Dunlop on 13 December 1789, accompanied by the sentimental verse 'To Mary in Heaven';<sup>1</sup> the second in a letter to the poet's editor George Thomson dated 26 October 1792, a trifling introduction to the song 'Will ye go to the Indies my Mary' (*Letters*, ii. 154). Despite this, an elaborate myth has developed and Highland Mary remains the most famous of all women associated with Burns. It seems likely that the mystery surrounding the affair has formed a significant part of its attraction. Scholars are unable to determine Highland Mary's exact name, date of birth, when or how the couple met and embarked upon their relationship, whether or not the couple were betrothed, or indeed how Mary or Margaret Campbell met her tragic and untimely death.<sup>2</sup> The most

widely believed story is that Burns and Highland Mary's affair commenced in April 1786, following Burns's separation from the then pregnant Jean Armour (who had been removed to Paisley). On 14 May, just six weeks later, it is held that the couple parted to make arrangements for their proposed emigration to Jamaica, at that time exchanging Bibles as a token of their attachment. Shortly after their farewell, it is believed that Mary contracted a fever, dying within a matter of days, and before word had reached the poet of her illness.<sup>3</sup>

The essay that follows will argue that Highland Mary's fame is due not so much to the archival record, but rather to the images, objects and memorialisation through which her relationship with the poet was constructed as an act of public memory in the nineteenth century. The memorialised relationship of Burns and Highland Mary is, we will argue, a clear example of biography not being determined by recollection or documents, but by the influence of objects 'beyond text', the role played by material culture in composing memory in the nineteenth century, just as the electronic media have influenced the nature of recollection in the twentieth. The composure of a narrative of memory helps to promote communal solidarity and personal equilibrium: in Highland Mary's case, it reassured generations that Burns's place as a national icon was justified by one relationship at least which could be idealised on a personal level, and which

on a national one spoke to both the unity of Highland and Lowland Scotland and the experience of generations of emigrants.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Highland Mary has long been seen as one which is not strongly sustained by archival evidence, but we will be arguing that not only is it an example of 'cultural memory', that is 'relics and stories left as a reminder of past experience';<sup>5</sup> it is also a composed memory, a memory of something that never took place, or at least took place in terms so different from those in which it is recollected as to bear witness in its memorialising narrative to almost nothing of a sustaining infrastructure of fact. Composure is the means by which memory is composed under the pressure of personal desire, group dynamics ('we all saw this, don't you remember seeing it too?') or by the representation of experience which reinforces certain kinds of memories, or creates them in those who never experienced them. The myth of the Blitz, which focuses on social solidarity rather than stealing or looting in its representation of wartime London is one example, and it can be argued that the heavy degree of attention paid to representation of the Second World War through anniversaries and other collective solidarities, as well as through education and cultural representation, is designed to compose memory of the conflict in a certain way. The ideas and sites of these memories are narrowed down, 'encapsulating multifarious experience in a limited repertoire of figures', fulfilling, as Ann Rigney points out, the Foucaultian dictum of '*loi de rareté*', the 'principle of scarcity' which 'affects cultural memory' through – Rigney suggests – selectivity, convergence, recycling and transference. In the case of Highland Mary, a composed memory in oral transmission and wider tradition is supplemented by the creation of a '*lieu de memoire*' in Pierre Nora's terms, as the monument on her grave at Greenock, erected in 1842, heralded a new age of cultural memory composed through public monuments

and objects, a Highland Mary and Highland Mary country sustained through the provision of monuments, images and relicware.<sup>6</sup>

Recent work by a team led by Professor Gerard Carruthers at the University of Glasgow has revealed that the short note in Burns's hand from the *Interleaved Scottish Musical Museum*, which addressed his relationship with Highland Mary and was long thought lost, was in fact on display at the Birthplace Museum in Alloway for many years. This note is the sole direct prose evidence for Highland Mary's and Burns's affair. The editor of the first posthumous edition of Burns's *Life and Works*, Dr James Currie, makes no mention of this note in his account of this episode in the poet's life. Currie rather vaguely places Highland Mary among those 'youthful passions of a still tenderer nature, the history of which it would be improper to reveal, were it even in our power, and the traces of which will soon be discoverable only in those strains of nature and sensibility to which they gave birth', stating only that she 'died early in life, and the impression left on the mind of Burns seems to have been deep and lasting'.<sup>7</sup> Whether or not Currie (who was renowned for his prudent omissions) was aware of the note from the *Interleaved Scots Musical Museum* is a matter of conjecture. R. H. Cromek, however, reproduced this previously unseen note in *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808), claiming that it accompanied the song 'The Highland Lassie O', and, in doing so, disclosed the affair for the first time:

This was a composition of mine in very early life, before I was known at all in the world. My Highland lassie was a warm-hearted, charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love. After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment, we met by appointment, on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the Banks of Ayr, where we spent the day

in taking a fare el [*sic*], before she should embark for the West-Highlands, to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change of life. At the close of Autumn following she crossed the sea to meet me at Greenock, where she had scarce landed when she was seized with a malignant fever, which hurried my dear girl to the grave in a few days, before I could even hear of her illness.<sup>8</sup>

The note became the evidence for the final meeting of the poet and his beloved, 'by the Banks of Ayr'. However, following Cromek's publication the note was mysteriously lost, and remained lost for so long that its absence in the end cast a shadow over Cromek's veracity. The 1896 Henley and Henderson centenary edition of Burns accepts Cromek's note as being from the interleaved *Museum*, but shortly afterwards a vigorous reaction set in. In the early twentieth century, J. C. Dick, one of the leading experts on Burns song, cast doubt on Cromek's work altogether, and even when Davidson Cook showed in the 1920s that some of the Cromek notes were based on Burns's holograph, the Highland Mary note appears to have remained unknown. Yet, as Carruthers and his team concluded, it was acquired as a separated MSS by the Burns Birthplace Museum long before (probably around 1907) the *Interleaved Museum* came there in 1964, and from 1961 to 1974 was publicly on show, although it was not until many years later that it seems to have been clearly adopted by scholarship.<sup>9</sup>

Carruthers' discovery fits the argument that follows well, for by the dawn of the twentieth century, Highland Mary's role in Burns's biography had become unshakeable (despite occasional doubts of the veracity of that 'old and exploded' myth) even in the absence of archival evidence. It did not depend on such evidence, and so when the evidence appeared publicly it almost escaped notice. What the memory of Highland Mary did depend on was nineteenth-century statues, images, relic-ware,

material culture and souvenirs, all of which built up a picture of Mary or Margaret Campbell. She was (variously) Burns's only true love and a guarantee of the essential fidelity of his nature; the 'saintly' loved and lost ideal; the Highland love of a Lowland poet who completed his claim to be a national bard; and an icon of the tragedy of emigration, and the promise it lost through death and displacement. Burns's wife Jean Armour's image was seldom reproduced, and if it was so often appeared in the unflattering guise of a middle-aged housewife; but Mary Campbell was on postcards, statues, plaques and much else, eternally lost and eternally young. Burns's relationship with her may have occupied six weeks at most (more likely two or three), but it was composed in popular memory as an eternal verity. Jean Armour's pregnancy was disclosed in Mauchline Kirk Session Minutes on 2 April; on 15 April, Burns was still 'indignant' about Jean, and does not seem to be focussing on anyone else; by 3 May, he wrote in better mood to Gavin Hamilton; on 14 May he parted from Mary Campbell. This hardly leaves more than four weeks for their relationship, a term surely incompatible not only with the significance it long enjoyed, but also with the rather heightened description of it given by Mary's mother, Mrs Campbell, in her 1823 interview, quoted from below. By 12 June 1786, Burns was proclaiming that 'Never man lov'd, or rather ador'd, a woman more than I did her; and... do still love her to distraction'; but the subject of his passion was Jean Armour.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this, perhaps the cult of Highland Mary began with Burns himself, whose Interleaved note speaks of Mary leaving 'for the West-Highlands' to prepare for 'our projected change of life' (emigration or marriage or both). This was a Romantic destination somewhat more redolent of Macpherson's Morvern than the more prosaic locales of Dunoon, Lochranza, Greenock (where the Burns Club may have considered a monument to her as early as 1803)

and even Campbeltown that Mary Campbell knew: if she was 'Highland' Mary at all, it was on a rather liberal interpretation of the term, and it is by no means clear that this name derived from her Gaelic accent as was subsequently claimed. Burns's sentimental language about her years after her death reinforced the perception of her as 'Highland' in the sense of elusive, fey and other worldly. Brean Hammond has suggested that Byron was aware of the thematic importance of Highland Mary as early as 1813, while as Chris Whatley has pointed out, on Mary Campbell's mother's death in 1827, the lack of mementoes of Burns was a disappointment (though it appears that one of Mary's brothers may have burnt letters from Burns, if indeed anything in the whole tale can be trusted). Memory was clearly not going to be supported from the archives. Even the interview unearthed by Robert Crawford that Mary's mother gave to a Greenock newspaper in 1823 seems redolent of composed memories rather than evidence: 'he repeatedly offered her his hand'; 'Mary almost dreaded a union with one whom her friends condemned as a rake'; 'Impatient at the delay and silence of his betrothed, Burns wrote repeatedly to the Highlands', 'his mental anguish was affecting in the extreme' and so on. Second-hand novelesque is already occupying the space of memory, even in a 'firsthand' account.

As early as 1832 Highland Mary's descendants were all too aware of the significance and potential value of any related heirlooms. It is documented that, following Mary's death, the two-volume Bible given by Burns to the tragic heroine was passed down through her family, eventually reaching the hands of her nephew, William Anderson. Anderson emigrated to Canada in 1832, taking the heirloom with him. The Bible's journey back to Scotland demonstrates that, by 1840 the iconisation of Highland Mary was already prominent both in Scotland and abroad. J. L. Hempstead summarises that, 'in 1840, seventy

Scotsmen living in Canada raised 100 dollars for the purchase of the Bible, which they then forwarded to the Provost of Ayr with a request that the volumes be deposited in the Monument at Alloway, an act which will forever reflect great credit and honour on those seventy exiled Scots'. The Bible, together with 'a lock of Mary's fair shining hair', was placed in the Burns Monument at Alloway on the poet's birthday in 1841, as a kind of relic in the poet's temple, and by the time John Steele's 1886 Dundee statue, which shows Burns contemplating Highland Mary 'in heaven' was unveiled, her cult was emplaced not only in the popular celebration of Burns, but also – remarkably – in the literary record. The development of the 'Burns Country' through objects which commemorated Alloway and Ayrshire in preference to Dumfries, and which in 'Tam o'Shanter' iconised a locodescriptive poem which offered a tour through the heartland of the Burns world, from the Auld Kirk at Alloway to the Brig o Doon, was matched by the development of a 'Highland Mary' country at Greenock, Dunoon and elsewhere. As recently as 2010, a plaque of Burns and Highland Mary based on James Archer's 1881 painting was mounted by the Kintyre Antiquarian and Natural History Society to commemorate Mary's 'childhood here in Dalintober'. In the same year, a standard text of Scottish history could still identify Burns and Mary as 'one famous couple who practised handfasting, in which they kissed the thumbs of their right hands and then held them together, or held their hands across a stream to signify betrothal and marriage'. The primary evidence for this is almost entirely lacking.<sup>11</sup>

When there was a controversy over the removal and re-siting of Mary's grave arising from the proposed extension of Caird's shipbuilding yard just after the First World War, what the *Burns Chronicle* called 'the domain of sentiment' was loud in its opposition.

Fraser Paton described the gravestone as the 'one monument justly famous because of all that it stands for in Scottish sentiment, literature, and history – the monument commemorating Burns's Highland Mary'. James Cameron Ewing described it as 'a shrine'. When Highland Mary's ashes were eventually re-interred in some of the original earth from her sacred lair on 13 November 1920, the officiating minister asked God to 'help us to cherish the hope' that Mary and Burns 'were re-united in the fellowship of soul in that place where love is perfect and immortal'. Even the Kirk of Scotland, it would seem, now dismissed Burns's wife from union with her husband in heaven in favour of the now legendary charms of his mistress. A new monument at Failford commemorating the final meeting of Burns and Mary was opened the following year.<sup>12</sup>

Cromek's claim underpinned the early biographical accounts of 'that interesting female, the first object of the youthful Poet's love'. Originally these began in footnotes to the main text, as in James Currie's reference to Highland Mary as 'a modest and amiable girl'. The 'limpid stream' where Burns and his love parted, 'laving their hands' in its waters, was a repeated leitmotif, while John Gibson Lockhart, repeating Cromek yet again, also described her as 'the object of by far the deepest passion Burns ever knew'. Gradually, the episode made its way into the main text of biographical accounts of the poet. By 1896, the centenary of Burns's death, and the year the Dunoon statue of Highland Mary was unveiled, Archibald Munro's overblown *The Story of Burns and Highland Mary* was symptomatic of the inflationary language which had been piled on an episode almost without sustaining evidence:

There is probably no name in Scottish literature that has so affectingly touched the hearts of her fellow-countrymen as that of Mary Campbell. Though born of an obscure family, brought up in circumstances little

fitted to attract attention, and credited with no achievement that invests heroism with permanent or even transient distinction, this Highland girl is now a brilliant star in the galaxy of Fame, and has become an object of unmingled and growing admiration. The lustre of Mary's name, like that of other stars, whether fixed or planetary, borrows its fascination from a luminary brighter and greater than itself. The very obscurity of her origins and early condition sets off by contrast the halo that now encircles her memory.<sup>13</sup>

In the same year, William Wallace's revised version of Robert Chambers's *The Life and Work of Robert Burns*, while acknowledging (in the eleven pages that deal with this episode in Burns's life) that the 'various traditions' of Highland Mary are not necessarily 'absolutely authentic' nonetheless speculates repeatedly about her origins, 'Highland' pronunciation and other issues, while to Principal Shairp, writing in 1897, she was 'the simple and sincere-hearted girl from Argyll' whose 'one day of parting love' is an 'oft-told tale', one at the heart of Burns's biography. Henley and Henderson's atypically scathing commentary of the cultural reception of the legend in *The Poetry of Robert Burns* (1896) declares, quite reasonably, that:

On the strength of sporadic allusions by Burns, meant, as it seems, to dissemble more than they reveal – and especially of certain ecstatic expressions in the song *Thou Ling'ring Star*, and in a letter to Mrs Dunlop – (penned when the writer was 'groaning under the miseries of a diseased nervous system') – Mary Campbell has come to be regarded less as an average Scots peasant to whom a merry-begot was then, if not a necessary of life, at all events the commonest effect of luck, than as a sort of bare-legged Beatrice – a Spiritualised Ideal of Peasant Womanhood. Seriously examined,

her cult – (for cult it is) – is found an absurdity; but persons of repute have taken the craze, so that it is useful to remark that the Mary Campbell of tradition is a figment of the General Brain, for whose essential features not so much as the faintest outline is to be found in the confusion of amorous complaints and cries of repentance or remorse, which is all that we have to enlighten us from Burns.

‘The cult’, however, did not depend solely on ‘the strength of sporadic allusions’, but upon the many different material cultural objects produced throughout the nineteenth century which exploited and expanded this tenuous legend with remarkable effect, persistently reinscribing the episode in the memory of Scottish (and international) consumers. David Lowe (who demonstrates an awareness of Henley’s argument) devotes two entire chapters of *Burns’s Passionate Pilgrimage* (1904) to Highland Mary on the basis that, ‘The closer we apply ourselves to the contemplation of this subject, the deeper becomes our conviction that what has been termed ‘a national delusion’ is at long last the sanest estimate of all, and that the delusion is in reality the portion of the modern critics.’ And so, on the basis of no very real documentary evidence, and despite the counter-arguments of a handful of scholarly publications, by the early twentieth century Highland Mary had become the imagined spiritual partner to Henry Mackenzie’s idealised Burns: a child of nature fit to match with ‘the heaven-taught ploughman’.<sup>14</sup>

The Greenock Burns Club had been promoting the idea of a memorial to Highland Mary since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and following a public subscription which was – interestingly – apparently not very successful, John Mossman’s monument over Mary’s grave at Greenock was erected in 1842, the foundation stone being laid (inevitably) on 25 January, the poet’s birthday. It depicted

Burns’s muse Coila, possibly as a kind of inspirational double for Mary herself, who was thus depicted as a double of the *spéirbhean* or sky-woman from the *aisling* tradition, a supernatural and symbolic figure. Burns and Mary’s parting interview was depicted beneath. The ceremony of laying the foundation stone was accompanied by full Masonic honours, for the laying of such stones generally was an activity undertaken to raise the profile of Freemasonry in the Victorian period:

All considered their attendance to be their way of doing ‘honour to the piety and virtue of Highland Mary.’ The Reverend William Menzies declared during prayers that the memorial was a ‘beautiful tribute to the memory of Burns and his ‘Highland Mary’’.<sup>15</sup>

The Greenock monument seems to have opened the floodgates to the memorialisation of Mary through statues and objects. From at least the Ayr Festival in 1844 onwards large numbers of small-scale memorabilia were produced: Highland Mary eggcups (symbolic perhaps of fertility and unrealised (unhatched) potential, Highland Mary postcards (some based on the 1853 Thomas Faed painting), Highland Mary napkin rings and many more, including statuettes of her and Spode Burns plates with her image.

In 1853 Queen Victoria gave Albert for his birthday a Parian Ware statuette of Burns and Highland Mary by W. T. Copeland and Sons Ltd., while Albert gave her a plaster cast of what was to become Benjamin Edward Spence’s statue of her in the emigrant city of Liverpool, which he followed up in 1854 with a marble version. The original statue (which still stands in Sefton Park, Liverpool) portrayed Highland Mary as poor and modest – almost an emblem of the Virgin – with carvings of thistles at her feet. She has almost become an ‘Our Lady of Scotland’.



Figure 1. Relicware Eggcup, presented to McLean Museum Greenock by William Wilson in 1928. Image © Robert Burns Beyond Text.

By this stage, the relationship of Burns and Highland Mary and its images had almost become a national icon, and its memorialisation was often materialised through a reliquary of their relationship: she was indeed a secular saint, and as such widely venerated. On the centenary of Burns's birth in 1859, branches of Highland Mary's Thorn and objects made from it were on display in Boston; several pieces of allegedly the same tree were also to be found at the Crystal Palace, at least apparently evidence of Foucault's law of scarcity, though in reality these objects seems to have been made from a variety of sources. By this time Mary was popular in America, which proved to be a fertile home for not only such associational objects, but also 'Highland Mary' locations and activities, such as the Highland Mary mine (founded in the early 1870s by the Ennis

brothers) and lakes in Colorado, and rather less probably, the Highland Mary morris dance. As Chris Whatley has pointed out, 'America's first statue of Burns, unveiled in New York's Central Park in 1880, portrays Burns seated, eyes gazing towards the evening star, captured by the Scottish sculptor Sir John Steell in the act of composing 'To Mary in Heaven'.<sup>16</sup>

Many Highland Mary objects referred to the scanty biographical record in order to attempt to reinforce it: Glasgow Museums Resource Centre has a Cumnock snuffbox allegedly made of wood of the Sycamore tree under which Burns and Highland Mary sat; the evidence that they sat under such a tree seems to be that it was the main production wood for the ware produced by Smith's of Mauchline. Highland Mary and Burns's most frequent meeting place was allegedly under the hawthorn tree at



Figure 2. Burns and Highland Mary Picture Frame: a version of one of the commonest images in use in the nineteenth century. This one was sold at the Burns Cottage in Alloway. Image © Robert Burns Beyond Text.

Coilsfield, and ‘part of the thorn under which Burns and Highland Mary had many a happy interview’ was a frequent kind of relic ware. The eggcup at the McLean Museum Greenock (Figure 1) promises its purchaser the benefits of owning a relic of another memorial tree, the ash tree which grew over Highland Mary’s grave. Objects such as these were part of an unquestionable industry: snuffboxes ‘with portraits of Burns or Highland Mary or both together’ were common, while Burns’s son himself wrote to John Brown of Mauchline – his cousin, who was employed by the boxworks – in 1840 to order a snuffbox ‘of Thorn (we can call it Highland Mary’s Thorn)’ thus acknowledging that the specific tree or trees of which it was claimed relic ware was made was in reality a marketing convenience rather than a matter of authenticity: the *loi de rareté* was

an advertising device. The relic ware industry reinscribed Mary’s image largely through associational tokens such as these, although paintings such as James Archer’s *The Betrothal of Robert Burns and Highland Mary* (1881) also played a significant role.<sup>17</sup>

The 1896 Burns Exhibition at Glasgow displayed a small vase made from Highland Mary’s thorn, two snuffboxes allegedly made from the same, two locks of her hair, a gold ring, a glove box, what purported to be her father’s snuff mull, a dram glass given by Jean Armour to her uncle, a china ornament of herself and Burns and a statuette of the statue by D. W. Stevenson erected at Dunoon that year. The Dunoon statue – which portrayed Mary as a simple and modest Highland girl in plaid – had an immensely impressive list of patrons, including the Marquesses of Lorne and



Figure 3. Highland Mary by David Watson Stevenson, Dunoon, Scotland, 1896. Image © Robert Burns Beyond Text.

Dufferin and Ava, the Earl of Rosebery, Lord Kelvin, Sir Frederick Leighton, Sir Henry Irving, Sir Noel Paton and many others; there was both a British and an American committee. In 1896 a massive statue of Burns and Highland Mary was also commissioned at Victoria in British Columbia, Canada, with fundraising from the St Andrews and William Wallace societies: it was unveiled in 1900. Her memory was intensively reinscribed and intensified: it became both a counterpart and a guarantor of Burns's.<sup>18</sup>

As suggested above, by far the most popular Highland Mary tree was the hawthorn tree at Coilsfield (or, more romantically, the 'Castle of Montgomery'), where Burns and Highland Mary allegedly enjoyed their last interview in May 1786. Here is Munro's description of the tree's importance in their relationship:

Within a distance of about a hundred yards from the lordly mansion there stood – but, alas! stands no longer – a thorn tree, 'the

hawthorn hoar' celebrated by the great poetical painter of the grove, in his song connected with the Castle of Montgomery. At this place of rendezvous the bard would halt while his chaperone cautiously threaded his way past the main entrance, on to the back or Kitchen door, at which he would ask for the inspiring dairy maid. As a rule, Mary herself answered to the blackfoot's call, and in due time accompanied him to the 'hawthorn hoar,' or 'trysting thorn,' where her languishing lover met her with characteristic enthusiasm.

(*Story*, 64)

The story of the hawthorn tree seems to be one of the touchstones of evidence for the relationship of the poet and his beloved, as it occurs in the poetry. Burns himself commemorated it in the song 'Highland Mary', to the air of 'Katharine Ogie':

'How sweetly bloom'd the gay, green birk,  
How rich the hawthorn's blossom;

As underneath their fragrant shade,  
I clasp'd her to my bosom. '(ll. 9–12)<sup>19</sup>

But even here things are not as they appear. The hawthorn was the May tree, in blossom during May, and Burns and Mary's last meeting was allegedly on the 14<sup>th</sup> of that month, a Sunday. Nor is this all: Thomas the Rhymer is supposed to have met the Faery Queen by a hawthorn bush. Hawthorn's status as the 'May-tree' linked it with blossom and fertility, while the fact that it was traditionally unlucky to take it indoors might suggest the snatched, symbolic and unrealisable nature of Burns's and Highland Mary's relationship. Intriguingly, John Burnett also notes that the hawthorn was widely ordered on a massive scale to enclose land at this time. Originally, the hawthorn – one was said to have been planted by Joseph of Arimathea – was 'Mary's Mayflower' after Our Lady, who is of course in heaven, like that more worldly 'Mary' of the poet. Birks are associated with the land of the dead, *Tir na nÓg*, and in ballads such as 'The Wife of Usher's Well' indicate a return from the grave: they evoke a world which can never be attained, one 'at the yetts o Paradise' as the Usher's Well ballad puts it (the same thing may be going on in Burns' song 'The Birks of Aberfeldy' (K170)). The whole 'last interview' story in Burns's poem may thus be a symbolic reconstruction of a hagiographical narrative drawing on many existing cultural references, not an account which even aspired to veracity. In other words, Burns's 'Highland Mary' may have been from the beginning both Fairy Queen and the Virgin, both *spéirbhean* and Our Lady.

Burns's mention of 'the hawthorn's blossom' invites such associations, while the 'birk', the tree of the other world, and of unrealisable and lost aspiration indicates a world to which the poet will never return and cannot now reach, an image of unattainable prospect as much as admired retrospect, and in itself a guarantor of

Foucault's law of cultural scarcity linked to lost memories and displaced places. Moreover, with regard to hawthorns, Burns was also drawing more generally on the Scottish song tradition. In Allan Ramsay's 'The Yellow-hair'd Laddie':

There, under the shade of an old sacred  
thorn,  
With freedom he sang his loves e'ning and  
morn –  
He sang with so fast and enchanting a  
sound,  
That sylvans and fairies unseen danced  
around.  
The shepherd thus sung, Tho' young Mary  
be fair,  
Her beauty is dash'd with a scornfu' proud  
air...

Thus here we have Mary and the hawthorn linked with love and the pastoral convention which Nigel Leask has identified as being core to Burns's oeuvre, and which in any case was a storehouse of Scottish national identity and value in the long eighteenth century. Archibald Crawford's (1785–1843) song, 'Bonnie Mary Hay', may be later than Burns's version, but still seems to draw on the same conventions:

Bonnie Mary Hay I will loe thee yet,  
For thy eye is the slae and thy hair is the  
jet;  
The snaw is thy skin, and the rose is thy  
cheek,  
Bonnie Mary Hay I will loe thee yet.  
Bonnie Mary Hay will you gang wi' me,  
When the sun's in the west, to the  
hawthorn tree,  
To the hawthorn tree in the bonnie  
berry den,  
And I'll tell you, Mary, how I loe you  
then?

The genealogy of May as Mary's month, the hawthorn as Mary's tree and the tree itself as a place of rendezvous for men with a beloved



Figure 4. Burns and Highland Mary Tazza, Silber and Fleming, London, 1883. Image © Robert Burns Beyond Text.

named Mary are all surely too much of a coincidence. It looks as if Burns was drawing on a tradition to embellish a relationship: Mary was not only 'Highland' she was virginal (by association with the Blessed Virgin) and she was also a beloved whose meeting place was as much an evocation of a tradition of literary convention as an empirical reality.<sup>20</sup>

What function did the poet's brief relationship with Mary or Margaret Campbell have in a popular memory as intensely realised and celebrated as this one was? For one thing, Burns and Highland Mary appear to have symbolised the union of Highland and Lowland Scotland. This model rendered Burns's heroine both romantic and unfamiliar by exacerbating the Highland/Lowland cultural divide romanticised in popular nineteenth-century fiction, and particularly in Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814): a divide that the legend of

Burns and Highland Mary at once epitomised and reconciled. Theirs was a relationship which cemented Burns's claim to be a National Bard. The object record sometimes alludes to this: for example, the tartanware Tazza for the table produced in 1883 shows the statuette of both of them at their last interview (the same given by Queen Victoria to Prince Albert in 1853) superimposed on a background of Royal Stewart tartan, symbolic of old Scotland and its revival in the reign of Queen Victoria. In his turn, Burns was often depicted wearing the Lowland plaid, or 'maud' in pictures of him with Mary, whose feet are often bare, signifying her role as a child of nature, a daughter of the mountain race of the Highlands.

Mary or Margaret Campbell's role in popular memory was to make her lover more loyal and faithful of heart than history allowed;

to present him as a national figure, reconciling Highland and Lowland; to be herself a national symbol of the crisis that emigration had brought to nineteenth-century Scotland, particularly in the Highlands; and through the focus on relics allegedly made from the few places associated with their elusive love, become a secular saint to be venerated via the suspiciously Marian (and fairy) locale of a hawthorn tree, sacred in this case to human rather than divine love. The biographical coverage responded, and what was once a reported note had within ninety years become a book. The twentieth-century response was to dismiss the legend, though in reality it has never really gone away. The interesting thing, though, is how it developed in the first place, for what was embraced by the histories of Burns's life was little more than the discourse of the object record composed as the story of a life: the Highlander, the pure of heart, the true love, the emigrant Scot, the angel out of doors.

#### NOTES \_\_\_\_\_

1. *The Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. G. Ross Roy and J. DeLancey Ferguson, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (2 vols, Oxford, 1985), i. 457–8.
2. The confusion surrounding Highland Mary's name arises from James Mackay's discovery of inconsistent information recorded in the Dunoon parish registers and the register of births. Previous scholars recorded that 'Highland Mary' was the eldest daughter of Archibald and Agnes Campbell, and yet Mackay reveals that there is no record of a marriage between these named persons. There exists, however, a record of the marriage of Archibald and Anne Campbell followed by the birth of their eldest daughter Margaret Campbell. And so Mackay deduced that Margaret and not 'Mary' Campbell is, in fact, Burns's 'Highland Mary'. See James Mackay, *A Biography of Robert Burns* (London, 1993), 212–14.
3. See Robert Crawford, *The Bard* (London, 2009), 214–17.
4. This article is based on research taking place under the terms of the Arts and Humanities Research Council Beyond Text Programme Grant held at Glasgow and Dundee universities, 'Robert Burns: Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory, 1796–1909'; for 'composure' as a historiographical theory designed to secure a narrative of personal and communal memory and the reassurance of personal equilibrium, v. Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, 1.1 (2004), 65–93.
5. Building on the work of Jan Assmann, Ann Rigney has recently discussed this phenomenon in 'Plenitude, scarcity and the circulation of cultural memory', *Journal of European Studies*, 35.1 (2006), 11–28 and 'Portable Monuments: Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans', in *Poetics Today*, 25.2 (2004), 361–96.
6. See Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure'; Rigney, 'Plenitude', 16. See also *Les Lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (7 vols, Paris, 1984–92).
7. *The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. James Currie, 2nd edn (4 vols, Liverpool, 1800), i. 128.
8. R. H. Cromek, *Reliques of Robert Burns* (London, 1808), 237–8.
9. Gerard Carruthers et al, 'Some Recent Discoveries in Robert Burns Studies', *Scottish Literary Review*, 2. 1(2010), 143–7; see also Carruthers, 'Fresh light on Robert Burns's note on "Highland Mary"', *The Kintyre Antiquarian and Natural History Magazine*, 68 (2010), 16–18; *Glasgow Herald* (14 September 1889) for a note of doubt on Highland Mary; Crawford, *The Bard*, 214–15, 230, 320.
10. Peter J. Westwood, *The Deltiology of Robert Burns* (Dumfries, 1994), 34, 36, 37; Crawford, *The Bard*, 210–11, 215, 220.
11. John F. Harvey, 'Statue of Robert Burns and "Highland Mary Campbell"', *Burns Chronicle* (Spring 2009), 46–7; Crawford, *Bard*, 230–1; Brean Hammond, 'The Ethical Turn in Burns and Byron', unpublished paper, Burns, Byron, Scottish, British and European Romanticism conference, Byron Centre, Manchester, 4 December 2010; *The Scotsman* (10 October 1827); J. L. Hempstead, 'Highland Mary's Bibles' in *Burns Chronicle* (Kilmarnock, 1979), 35–7. See Elizabeth Foyster, 'Sensory Experiences: Smells, Sounds and Touch', in *Everyday Life in Scotland, 1600–1800*, ed. Elizabeth Foyster and Christopher Whatley (Edinburgh, 2010), 220 for Highland Mary as 'history'.

12. 'Proposed Removal of the Highland Mary Memorial at Greenock', *Burns Chronicle* (1918), 86–93; 'Proposed Removal of the Highland Mary Memorial, Further Developments', *Burns Chronicle* (1920), 31–44; 'Removal of the Highland Mary Memorial', *Burns Chronicle* (1921), 87–91.
13. R. H. Cromek, *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808; London, 1817), 238n; James Currie, *The Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1838), 30; John Gibson Lockhart, *The Life of Robert Burns*, ed. William Scott Douglas with an essay on Robert Burns by Sir Walter Raleigh (1883; 2 vols, Liverpool, 1914), i. 113–15, 115n.; Archibald Munro, *The Story of Burns and Highland Mary* (Paisley and London, 1896), 9.
14. *The Life and Work of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, revised by William Wallace (4 vols, Edinburgh and London, 1896), i. 335–46; Principal Shairp, *Robert Burns* (London, 1897), 27; *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. William Ernest Henley and Thomas F. Henderson (4 vols, London, 1896), iii. 308–9; David Lowe, *Burns's Passionate Pilgrimage or Tait's Indictment of the Poet with Other Rare Records* (Glasgow, 1904), 200–63.
15. See <http://www.robertburnsmemorials.arts.gla.ac.uk/>. See also Andrew Prescott and Julia Thomas, 'Memory, Masonry and the Making of Shakespeare', unpublished paper, The Object of Poetry conference, University of Dundee, 26 March 2011.
16. *Celebration of the Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Robert Burns*, By the Boston Burns Club (Boston, 1859), 27–8; E. Goodwillie, *The World's Memorials of Robert Burns* (Detroit, 1911), 47–9; Murray Pittock and Christopher Whatley, 'Poems and Festivals', unpublished essay arising from Beyond Text project. See also [www.gla.ac.uk/robertburnsbeyondtext](http://www.gla.ac.uk/robertburnsbeyondtext) for further details on Highland Mary monuments.
17. See [www.gla.ac.uk/robertburnsbeyondtext](http://www.gla.ac.uk/robertburnsbeyondtext) for more details on memorabilia; Edward and Eva Pinto, *Tunbridge and Scottish Souvenir Woodware* (London, 1970), 80 (plate 34); David Trachtenberg and Thomas Keith, *Mauchline Ware* (Woodbridge, 2002), 137, 176 ff., 181.
18. *The Burns Exhibition* (Glasgow, 1896), 130, 133, 134, 146, 148, 160, 162, 174; see Ann Rigney, 'The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between Monumentality and Morphing', in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning (in collaboration with Sara B. Young), *Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin and New York, n.d.), 350 for 'calibration' as a feature of memorialisation.
19. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley (3 vols, Oxford, 1968), K389.
20. See Glasgow University Library Rare PR 974.G47 S.L. nos 6, 19; Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral* (Oxford, 2010); John Burnett, National Museums of Scotland, in conversation with Murray Pittock, 26 March 2011.