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The Burns Supper is a unique phenomenon in the history of global literature. No similar feast, gathering millions in celebration of a long dead poet, can be found elsewhere in the world. 220 years after the first Burns Supper was held, at the poet's birthplace, in July 1801, it would be natural for apprentice Burnsians to expect an endless reading list on this topic, testifying to more than a century of intense scholarship, lively conferences, and noisy symposia. Surprisingly, however, serious research on the history of Burns Night is only just a decade old.

The Burns Supper has remained outside of academia for most of its existence. This situation is due in large part to historical tensions between Scottish intellectuals and the popular Burns movement. Indeed, Scotland's literary revival and early Burns scholarship, in the last century, drew on a rather elitist separation between the study of Burns's poetic genius and the so-called, depraved 'Burns Cult' that seemed to mar his legacy. As declared by Hugh MacDiarmid in his famous poem, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, 'the core o' ocht is only for the few' and the past and present of Scottish poetry could not be left to the 'common trough' of inebriated Burns diners.<sup>1</sup> Epitomising Scotland's 'kailyard' in the eyes of many Scottish *literati*, the Burns Supper became an object of intellectual cringe—if not execration. Sentimental, petit bourgeois, glutton, drunken, tartanesque, inauthentic, and conventional: the seven deadly sins of Burns Night appeared in total contradiction with avant-garde Scottish writing and sober scholarship. Whilst the popularity of Burns prevented Scottish intellectuals from ignoring the poet's works, aloof denunciations of the 'Burns Cult' remained *de rigueur* for most of the twentieth century.

As early as 1930, the novelist Catherine Carswell questioned Scottish critics:

No poet who maintains his place in the affection of the unliterary can at any period fail to inspire the interest and respect of the few critics who count in any generation. [...] In what other country would serious writers have been deterred by the existence of a cult from constant discussion and re-examination of so remarkable a phenomenon?<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, Carswell had little time for the 'absurdities, vulgarities, sentimentalities, and unrealities' of the 'Burns Cult' and her controversial *Life of Robert Burns* (1930), irritating many admirers of Burns, further widened the gap between Scottish intellectuals and Burnsians.<sup>3</sup> That said, her question had the merit of highlighting a regrettably missed opportunity in the history of Scottish criticism.

It was not until the Bicentenary of Burns's death, in 1996, that tentative steps were taken to reconcile Burns studies with the broader Burns movement. Introducing a major edited volume on *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, Robert Crawford, for instance, developed a careful argument, away from the anti-Burnsian 'orthodoxy' of Scottish intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> Crawford refused to 'clumsily direct' this book 'against all who have toasted the immortal memory of Robert Burns on 25 January', though he wished they at least 'incorporated in their ritual observances the passing-round of a hat for contemporary literature'.<sup>5</sup> This more pacified

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, Kenneth Buthlay (ed.) (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), 1.111, 121.

<sup>2</sup> *Radio Times*, 14 February 1930.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Robert Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1997), p.xii

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

approach also marked Kenneth Simpson's Bicentenary volume, featuring a (now classic) piece by Richard J. Finlay on 'The Burns Cult and Scottish Identity'.<sup>6</sup> Despite critical, MacDiarmidian undertones, Finlay's inaugural survey normalised the Burns movement as a subject worthy of scholarly consideration.

These early attempts at a rapprochement between Burns scholars and Burns enthusiasts would bear fruit a decade later, around the poet's 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the 2009 'Year of Homecoming'. On that occasion, the whisky company Famous Grouse used new technologies to record more than 3,500 Burns Suppers, across 80 countries, and with an estimated total of 9 million attendees. What for so long had seemed a rather monotonous, monocultural ritual now appeared a colourful, global feast—the largest festival of Scottish culture, identity, and gastronomy. Certainly, the history of the Burns movement and the international development of the Burns Supper could be ignored no longer.

In the wake of 'Homecoming', the 2010s were marked by an exponential growth of Burns reception studies. From Burns in European, North American, and globe cultures to his influence on Scottish society, literature, and politics, works by Murray Pittock, Leith Davis, Sharon Alker, Fiona Stafford, Ann Rigney, Christopher Whatley, Josephine Dougal, and Arun Sood account for the recent boom of this field of research.<sup>7</sup> Compensating for decades of academic silence about—if not contempt for—the so-called 'Burns Cult', these studies all stressed the key role played by the Burns movement in shaping popular representations of Scottish culture, in both Scotland and overseas.

In 2019, this dynamic context fostered the publication of the first book-length survey of Burns Suppers, written by the Scottish scholar and veteran Burns orator, Clark McGinn.<sup>8</sup> His work covers the history of Burns Night, from its origins, in eighteenth-century Scottish masonic and club culture, to its global, twenty-first century developments. Crucially, McGinn puts forward a credible argument explaining the historically fraught relations between Scottish intellectuals and Burnsians. Following a Weberian method, McGinn's *Comprehensive History* reveals that the Burns Supper, after multifarious, 'charismatic' beginnings, became rapidly corseted, during the Victorian era, as the grassroots movement of Burns clubs started to organise. This 'bureaucratic' capture of Burns's legacy, codifying the Burns Supper into a rather ritualistic, small-c conversative format, alienated the more creative, radical readers of Burns who, in turn, caricatured Burnsian conformity and shunned the Burns movement altogether. It was not until the contemporary, 'global era', marked by a both geographic and cultural diversification—as well as a feminisation—of Burns Night, that attempts were made to bridge the gap.

The present issue stems from this process of reconciliation. After more than a decade of friendly collaboration, the University of Glasgow's Centre for Robert Burns Studies (CRBS)

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<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Finlay, 'The Burns Cult and Scottish identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in Kenneth Simpson (ed.), *Love & Liberty: Robert Burns* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997), pp.69-78

<sup>7</sup> Amongst other references, see Ann Rigney, 'Embodied Communities: Commemorating Robert Burns, 1859', in *Representations*, 115, 1, pp.71-101, Murray Pittock (ed.), *Robert Burns and Global Culture* (Bucknell University Press: Lewisburg, 2011) and *The Reception of Robert Burns in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Sharon Alker, Leith Davis (eds.), *Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2012), Fiona Stafford, David Sergeant (eds.), *Burns and Other Poets* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2013); Josephine Dougal, 'Public Culture and the Making of National Memory: Robert Burns in Contemporary Scotland', Phd thesis, (Curtin University, 2015), Christopher Whatley, *Immortal Memory: Robert Burns and the Scottish People* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016), Arun Sood, *Robert Burns and the United States of America. Poetry, Print, and Memory, 1786-1866* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), Paul Malgrati, 'Robert Burns in Scottish Politics (1914-2014)', Phd thesis, (University of St Andrews, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Clark McGinn, *The Burns Supper: A Comprehensive History* (Edinburgh: Luath, 2019).

and the Robert Burns World Federation (RBWF) have come together, turning the historic organ of the Burns movement, the *Burns Chronicle*, into a full-bodied, academic review. Simultaneously, in 2020, CRBS launched a two-year research venture into the past and present of Burns Suppers. Conducted by Gerard Carruthers with support from the present author, this project led to the recent release of a giant, interactive world map of contemporary Burns Suppers, providing the broadest, most detailed database of Burns Night activities ever made, with more than 2,500 events across 148 countries.

The 131<sup>st</sup> issue of the *Burns Chronicle* aims to second CRBS's map with a compelling trio of essays about the past and present of Burns Suppers. Building on a decade of buoyant research, the three pieces enclosed, written by authors from very different provenances, are a testament to the rich, diverse history and geographies of Burns celebrations.

In the first essay, we are delighted to feature new work by Clark McGinn, adding key, gastronomic elements to his *Comprehensive History* of Burns Suppers. With a focus on 'The Development of the Burns Supper Menu', this mouth-watering piece charts changes in Burnsian cuisine, from the gourmand, early nineteenth-century *service à la française* to contemporary, multicultural dinners and takeaway 'Burns Night boxes'. This historical perspective is complemented, in our second article, by Lauren Brancaz-McCartan's analysis of twenty-first century Burns Suppers. Hailing from Université Savoie Mont Blanc, Brancaz-McCartan draws on a detailed, questionnaire-based study of the Robert Burns World Federation, revealing the profoundly cross-cultural, multilingual shift of Burns Suppers in recent years, away from traditional pageantry. Finally, in the third article, Brancaz-McCartan's findings are supported by the present author's quantitative analysis of contemporary Burns Suppers. This unprecedented study, based on CRBS's map and database, provides a typology of contemporary Burns Suppers, highlighting their both geographic and ritualistic diversity—from highly formal types of events to more casual gatherings.

Overall, it is hoped these articles encourage further research about Burns Suppers. Despite recent progress, many questions remain unanswered. For instance: how did food patriotism develop in Scotland in the eighteenth-century and what was the literary background to Burns's 'To a Haggis'? What are the religious, potentially sectarian aspects of Burns Night's history? What are the various, economic, and cultural reasons behind the global expansion of Burns Night since the 1980-90s? And finally, what is the social composition of the Burns movement, in Scotland and overseas? As the international Burns movement slowly recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic—a plague that blighted the more fleshy, convivial, Burnsian side of our shared humanity—we pray that future years bring more scholars to the supper table.

Paul Malgrati

1<sup>st</sup> June 2021