Meet

Robert Burns

Scottish author Robert Burns was famous for both his songwriting and his poetry. He had a keen ear for the speech of his native land, and in his work he employed its characteristic sound to impart a fresh vitality to English literature.

Burns was born on a farm in southwestern Scotland to poor, uneducated peasants. As a boy, he worked on the farm and attended school infrequently. Whatever education Burns obtained came mainly from reading. His favorite writers were Shakespeare, Pope, and the early Scottish poets, whose works inspired him to write poetry of his own.

After his father's death, Burns tried to keep the farm going, but he failed. Discouraged, he considered leaving Scotland. His fortunes soon changed for the better, however. At the age of twenty-seven, he published Poems,Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect,a work that enjoyed immediate success with simple farmers and sophisticated critics alike. Burns then gave up farming and moved to Edinburgh, where he played the role expected of him—that of a gifted but uncultured rustic. Fellow Scot and poet Henry Mackenzie called him "this heaven-taught ploughman."

Burns eventually grew tired of being patronized by the fashionable literary set. When his friend James Johnson planned to assemble a definitive anthology of Scottish folk songs, he asked Burns to help him, and Burns jumped at the chance. He threw himself wholeheartedly into the project, and for the next three years roamed the countryside collecting, editing, and writing lyrics for many old Scottish tunes, thus preserving the rhythms and accents of his native tongue.

Considering this work to be a labor of love, he declined payment and refused to allow his name to appear in the collection. In doing so, he created difficulties for scholars who have found it almost impossible to determine where some of the original folk songs leave off and Burns's original contributions begin.

During the last eight years of his life, Burns returned briefly to farming, held a government job, and continued to write poems, only a few of which equaled the quality of his earlier lyrics. Bankrupt and burdened by creditors, he died at age thirty-seven of a chronic heart condition.

"Oh wad some power the gude pleas "To see oursels as others see us!"

"My heart's in the Highlands, my heart "is not here, "My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing the deer."

Robert Burns was born in 1759 and died in 1796.

Reading Further

To read more about Robert Burns, look for these works:

The Poetical Works of Burns, edited by Raymond Bentham, contains many of his best works.
Biography: Robert Burns, by Principal Shear, is a thoughtful examination of Burns's life.

Meet

William Blake

"I must create a System," wrote William Blake, "or be enslav'd by another Man's." Visionary, mystic, and revolutionary, Blake remained an original and unorthodox thinker throughout his life. Some of his contemporaries considered him insane, and his genius was not widely appreciated until long after his death. But fellow poet William Wordsworth said of Blake, "there is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott."

As a child, Blake wanted to become an artist, so at age ten he attended a drawing school in London. At fifteen he was apprenticed to an engraver, an artisan who cuts or carves designs into a hard material from which prints can be made. After completing his apprenticeship, Blake entered the Royal Academy, but he soon left because of a personal conflict with Sir Joshua Reynolds, the school's president and England's most famous and respected artist at the time.

When he was twenty-five, Blake married Catherine Boucher, an uneducated woman from a poor family. In her he found a suitable companion, because she accepted his eccentric lifestyle and his intense spirituality. "I have very little of Mr. Blake's company," she once told a friend. "He is always in Paradise." The couple befriended by a group of progressive writers and artists who admired Blake's unusual thoughts and helped him publish his first book of poems when he was twenty-six.

Blake's books of poetry were unique in their combination of visual and literary art. He produced most of them by a method of relief etching that he invented. In this method, which he called "illuminated printing," Blake used pens and brushes to apply an acid-resistant substance to a copper plate. He then exposed the plate to acid, which ate away the uncoated parts and left a raised pattern of lines—the text and illustration for a single page. Each page was printed and then hand-colored by Blake and Catherine, and each book was bound by hand.

This way of making books was so time-consuming that Blake produced only a few copies. The original's that survive are ranked among the art treasures of the world. Full of striking designs that shimmer with glowing color and line to accompany his equally brilliant poems, these books constitute Blake's unique contribution to both art and literature.

"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite."

"I know my execution is not like anybody else. I do not intend it should be so. None but blockheads copy one another."

"Poetry fetters fetters the human race. Nations are destroyed, or flourish, in proportion as their poetry, painting, and music are destroyed or flourish!"

William Blake was born in 1757 and died in 1827.