

# Robert Burns and the Re-making of National Memory in Contemporary Scotland

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**Abstract:** Robert Burns, the eighteenth-century Scottish poet and song writer, continues to maintain a substantial cultural ‘afterlife’ in the twenty first century, both within Scotland and beyond. Achieving cult status in the nineteenth century, the power of Burns as a popular cultural icon remains undiminished. Where the appropriation of Burns as national icon in the nineteenth century was made manifest in statuary, commemorative objects, and painted portraits, the twenty-first century has been marked by the proliferation of the image of Burns in new forms and technologies, with Burns as product and brand logo, museum and heritage attraction, and tourism industry selling point. This recent flourishing of interest and engagement raises questions about why and how an eighteenth-century poet continues to be the object of such extensive cultural elaboration at this time. In approaching this question, some fruitful lines of enquiry are being suggested in recent discussions that have looked at the nineteenth-century Burns as a ‘mobilizing agent in collective memory production’ (Rigney 2011, 81). One such appraisal points to how the construction of Burns in the nineteenth century as an iconic figure of Scottish cultural memory has the potential to ‘be resignified as necessary in subsequent chronological and geographical sites’ (Davis 2010, 14). It is this potential for the resignification of Burns as a symbolic site for the nation’s memory that this paper explores. In pointing to Burns’ representation in a variety of popular forms and in public discourse, the paper examines how a writer comes to be invested and reinvested as the voice and persona of the nation.

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## 1. Cultural Memory, National Identity and Robert Burns

Robert Burns (1759 - 1796) is celebrated all over the world. In both scholarly assessments of his life and work, and in the arena of popular opinion, **Burns** continues to attract critical acclaim and to exert broad appeal. He was recently, for example, described as the ‘man of the millennium’ and voted ‘the greatest ever Scot’ by academics and historians, and by a wider television viewing audience.<sup>1</sup> Memorialised in a plethora

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<sup>1</sup> Scotland’s First Minister, Alex Salmond, refers to Burns as “my Man of the Millennium” (quoted in “Homecoming – the real thing.” Scottish Government News Release, June 5, 2009: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2009/06/homecomingcoke>). See “Robert Burns Voted Greatest Scot.” STV, November 30, 2009: <http://news.stv.tv/scotland/141018-robert-burns-voted-greatest-scot/>, and, “Fleming, Wallace, Bruce ... but Burns is the man for a’ that.” Scotsman.com, January 8,

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of forms – in Burns statues and portraits, Burns suppers (where Burns is traditionally toasted as ‘The Immortal Memory’), annual Burns birthday celebrations, in Burns museums, tourist souvenirs, stamps and currency, product marketing, popular recordings of his songs, and in publications of his poetry and life – the figure of Burns permeates public culture today in Scotland. Yet, despite Burns’ high visibility and cultural profile, little is understood about what these representations say about the place of Burns in contemporary Scottish culture.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to make a contribution to that understanding by focusing on the cultural mechanisms through which Burns is positioned as a memory site for Scotland.

While earlier approaches to public and collective memory have emphasised the recording and preservation of the past, this paper contributes to recent conceptual shifts in the field that focus on contemporary meanings and the mutable and fluid nature of cultural memory.<sup>3</sup> Here, memory is viewed as a dynamic cultural process in which the past is re-presented and re-configured and its meaning is re-assigned in the context of the present and through new forms and processes. Such things as stories, images, objects, museums, galleries, and cultural practices, such as rituals and festivals, ‘all work together in creating and sustaining sites of memory’ (Erll and Rigney 2006, 111). Whether they take the material form of actual places and objects or the immaterial form of narratives and discourses, ‘sites of memory’ are ‘defined by the fact that they elicit intense attention on the part of those doing the remembering and thereby become a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment’ (Rigney 2005, 18).

Such an emphasis on the cultural processes by which collective memories become shared pays attention to the ways in which memories are formed and transformed over time and across different media. The forms and contexts in which cultural memory comes to have contemporary social valience are varied, and shaped by those available processes and technologies that a society has its disposal, and is not limited to the forms of the past. As Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka emphasise, cultural memory’s ‘cultivation’ of ‘reusable texts, images, and rituals’ is variable in the ‘manner of its organization, its media, and its institutions’, and ‘across cultures, contexts and time’ (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 132-133). Of interest here is the way in which memories move across media, across generations, and across cultural spheres, and what happens to those memories in that process, especially as new media and technologies arise.<sup>4</sup> As Andrew Blaikie has observed in his study of modern Scotland, new technologies have

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2006: [http://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-news/edinburgh-east-fife/fleming\\_wallace\\_bruce\\_but\\_burns\\_is\\_the\\_man\\_for\\_a\\_that\\_1\\_1407047](http://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-news/edinburgh-east-fife/fleming_wallace_bruce_but_burns_is_the_man_for_a_that_1_1407047).

<sup>2</sup> There is some work, though not extensive, that discusses or refers to the representation of Burns in a more contemporary context, see O’Rourke (1994), Hutchison (1997), Finlay (1997), Braidwood (2009), Rodger (2009), Davis (2011). A major research project ‘Robert Burns: Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory, 1796-1909’, jointly conducted by the University of Glasgow and the University of Dundee, is focused on the role of material culture in representing Burns and cultural memory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see <http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/research/researchcentresandnetworks/robertburnsstudies/majorresearchprojects/burns/>).

<sup>3</sup> See Rigney (2011, 20-3; 2004, 387).

<sup>4</sup> See Rigney (2005, 15).

altered the way societies remember, with ‘memory-construction and memory-keeping [...] increasingly dependent upon media representation’ (Blaikie 2010, 11). Ann Rigney also comments that ‘however one may judge the quality of the information conveyed, these modern media need to be taken into account as an integral factor in the production of cultural memory today’ (Rigney 2005, 15). This has particular relevance to the topic of this paper and informs the examination of how the figure of Burns has ‘moved’, for example, from literature to tourism/brand/marketing logo, from museum artefact to T shirt, from academic discourse to mobile phone app, from monument to light and sound installation, and the implications of such shifts for the making of cultural memory today.

While representations of Robert Burns today, such as these, refer to an historical figure from Scotland’s past, the meanings that attach to them are constructed and situated in the context of the present. In this model of cultural memory, ‘memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and reconstructed in the present rather than resurrected from the past’ (Rigney 2005, 14). In this process, cultural texts and images are mobilised and reframed, ‘sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation’ (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 130). As a result, sites of memory are ‘constantly being reinvested with new meaning’ (Rigney 2005, 18).

Embodied in and articulated through contemporary media forms, artefacts, texts and practices, cultural memories not only ‘use the past to order the present’, they also have considerable force in shaping collective identity and ‘national memory’ (Storey 2003, 84-5).<sup>5</sup> As Benedict Anderson has argued, history and the nation are inseparable. A sense of historical connection with the past is crucially important for the nation to be imagined as a community that exists over time and place.<sup>6</sup> Following Anderson’s conception of nation as ‘imagined community’, David McCrone’s view is that the idea of ‘nation’ is made possible through real, imagined or remembered connections, however distant in time and space. Referring to Scotland, he remarks:

‘Scotland’ [...] is a complex theatre of memory in which different ways of ‘being Scottish’ are interpellated and handed down, constructed and mobilised [...] There is a complex interaction of social process and cultural meaning. (McCrone 2001, 3)

This ‘complex theatre of memory’ is not the ‘dead weight of the past on the present, but the very means whereby identity is shaped in an active and ongoing fashion’ (McCrone 2008, 355). Its story is ‘told and retold through national histories, literatures, the media and popular culture, which together provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols and rituals’ (McCrone 2008, 334). McCrone’s theatrical metaphor is especially pertinent to an understanding of the

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<sup>5</sup> See also Nora (1989, 7), and Assmann and Czaplicka (1995, 128-9).

<sup>6</sup> Anderson 2006, 6 and 26.

relationship between cultural memory and national identity since it alludes to how the nation is performed through stories of its past. This telling and retelling of the nation produces those plots and themes which, in turn, provide the narrative devices that represent the nation in symbolic form. These narrative devices, what Assmann and Czaplicka would call 'that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals', are both the product of storytelling and the means whereby the story continues to be told and retold. In other words, how the nation is conceived discursively at any one time bears on how it is remembered and vice versa.

A case in point is Robert Burns, whose role in imagining the Scottish nation through his work has been the subject of extensive scholarly endeavour and debate. What has also been examined, in the context of the nineteenth century's reception of Burns, is the ways in which Burns and his work was 'used by Scots to bolster particular perceptions of Scottish national identity' and how, in that process, Burns was 'shaped and reshaped to give credence and authority to particular ideologies in Scotland' (Finlay 1997, 69). As Richard Finlay comments, 'it is not so much how Burns has shaped Scottish identity as how Scottish identity has shaped our vision of Burns' (Finlay 1997, 69). Identified as the national expression of Scotland, his work was seen as 'a mimetic description of life in Scotland and of what it meant to be Scottish' (Nash 1997, 181). While Burns *was* Scotland, shifting conceptions of Scottish identity have also shaped how Burns was received, understood and represented. Andrew Nash's account of the literary and critical reception of Burns in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, traces how Burns was appropriated 'by forces eager to impose their own patterns of cultural authority' (Nash 1997, 181). Burns was taken up and articulated to the needs of philosophical/political theories and literary markets and was moulded to signify a nostalgic Scottish past. In the Enlightenment period, Burns was 'accommodated' to primitivist theories as a native genius, and, as such, Burns could be marketed as the 'heaven taught ploughman'. Later critics and publishers in the nineteenth century aligned Burns with the 'real' Scotland—a Scotland that was rural, peasant, domestic, and patriotic. Burns became Scotland personified—'what was said about Burns' character was understood as Scottish character', and what he wrote about was seen as 'recording' Scotland as a place and a people. In this way, Burns' work was received as 'social history', and Burns' poetic topography—exploited by the tourist industries—*was* Scotland. As industrialisation and urbanisation changed the physical and social landscape of Scotland, Burns became a lingering relic of a fast-disappearing Scotland, with the Burns cult forming part of the nostalgic reminiscence of the past. By the end of the nineteenth century Burns was performing an ennobling and ethical function, being marketed as national poet and 'national messiah' (Nash 1997, 192).

If that fast-disappearing Scotland was a nostalgic re-construction through the figure of Burns, it was also, according to Carol McGuirk, in part, a creation of the poet himself. Burns imagined and 'remembered' a 'language, a class, and a place that for reasons determined by history and by Burns's own artistry cannot be found', a vanished rural world (McGuirk 1994, 61). It is not surprising then that Burns became a site for what McGuirk refers to as 'nostalgic reminiscence' and 'wishful reconstruction'. As

Burns remembered a Scotland on behalf of the Scots, 'in their turn, the Scots remembered Burns' (McGuirk 1994, 60). In the traditional 'immortal memory' toasts made to Burns each year on the anniversary of his birth, the poet is displaced by memory itself. Living on 'in collective memory as 'immortal' to be sure, yet, improbably stylised [...] in multiple and often contradictory images' (McGuirk 1994, 32).

It would be fair to say that Robert Burns' iconic status as a cultural figure cannot be attributed to his literary and musical achievements alone. Rigney has commented that memory sites come into being where many acts of remembrance converge and coalesce. In this, Burns' work was clearly an important locus around which these many acts of remembrance converged and coalesced. But the mapping of Burns as a symbol of cultural memory was equally, if not predominantly, shaped and informed by a narrative of 'biography'.<sup>7</sup> It was around Burns himself, or rather his literary persona that much of the symbolic investment accrued. If, as a literary figure, Burns stood as a metaphor for cultural memory in the nineteenth century, as Davis has suggested, it was a metaphor that inextricably combined both 'voice' and 'verse'. What was widely venerated and canonised (debated and mythologised) was a Burns as *creator* of ideas and works. The secular saint that he was deemed to be circumscribed the 'man' and his 'word' as one. Seeing Burns through the prism of biography lent itself to locating him within his social milieu and within his physical, material, and topographical world, especially as it could be so readily 'read' through his work. When pictured in the social and critical imagination, Burns and his work were staged in the 'land of Burns'. It was a place of the tourist imagination but it was also a larger metaphoric Scottish space in which the idea of Burns could be located. It was not Scotland, nor the Scottish world of Burn's own literary imagination, but that world re-imagined by others, to *be* Scotland. And in that re-imagining, Burns and his work came to serve as an emblematic source for a sought after Scotland—a Scotland of wishful thinking—or as McGuirk has put it, Burns became a site for 'wishful reconstruction' of a desired Scotland.

That 'wishful reconstruction' came to be viewed by many later critics and commentators as a backward-looking, nostalgic impulse that not only sentimentalised Burns and his work, but also turned Scottish culture into stereotype and kitsch.<sup>8</sup> But the wishful reconstruction of the nineteenth century can be equally understood as an aspiration. The sense of national pride associated with Burns has been characterised as part of a cultural narrative of agency and empowerment, in which Scottish cultural icons, symbols and literary and historical figures were represented as objects of pride, and as multivocal icons of national achievement.<sup>9</sup> In the nineteenth century, the salience of Burns can thus be seen as tied to the sense of national agency. Whether the making of Scottish cultural memory in the nineteenth century was a backward-looking glance or a forward projection, it nevertheless 'closely tied the poet's life, language, and nation

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<sup>7</sup> See Davis (2010, 11).

<sup>8</sup> See Nash (1997), McGuirk (1994), Davis, Duncan and Sorensen (2004, 6), Rodger and Carruthers (2009, 8-9).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Devine (1999, 287-92), and Hearn (2002, 745-7).

together in a complex bond that shows little sign of breaking' in the twenty first century (Andrews 2010, 12).

## 2. The Cultural Elaboration of Burns in the Twenty-First Century

The accounts of Burns in the nineteenth century demonstrate not only how Burns and Scotland have been inextricably intertwined—how Scottishness, Scottish cultural and national identity have been predicated on received ideas of Burns as Scotland, and vice versa. They also serve to demonstrate the 'continuous mutual coproduction' of collective memory and identity, and the specific role that Burns has played in that coproduction. At the same time, Burns' role in satisfying a nostalgic reminiscence for a mythic Scotland is now being re-interpreted, both in terms of his work and within a wider conception of his role in Scottish identity.

As the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has brought increased political independence, a global economic outlook, and cultural buoyancy to Scotland, it has also been marked by a renewed scholarly interest in recovering a fresh Burns from the nineteenth century's cult of nostalgia and sentimentality.<sup>10</sup> This current engagement with Burns and his potential for reinterpretation is evident across a wide range of cultural activity. In addition to new scholarship, publications and conferences, major research projects, new centres for Burns studies, international and interdisciplinary academic networks, there has been the establishment of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, considered to be the single most important Burns site in the world, and the interpretation of Burns by a new generation of poets and writers, designers, visual and installation artists, sculptors, and architects (see Rodger and Carruthers 2009, 3).

The twenty-first century has also highlighted Burns' importance to the Scottish economy. Linked with the Burns 250th birthday celebrations in 2009, a major tourism campaign, *Homecoming Scotland 2009*, promoted national and international interest in Robert Burns as one of its main aims in showcasing a modern Scotland with unique heritage 'pulling power' to the world. Under its umbrella, more than 400 events and activities were staged throughout the year. It represented the largest collaborative tourism initiative Scotland has ever staged, attracting £53.7 million of additional tourism revenue, 95,000 visitors to Scotland, and £154 million of positive global media coverage (see EventScotland 2010, and Morrison and Hay 2010, 50).<sup>11</sup> The over 400 'official events' and a plethora of other associated activities lifted the profile of Burns through the Homecoming Scotland website (the domestic and international information and marketing hub for all of this activity), news media and commentary, television

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<sup>10</sup> Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen have noted the recent move by critics and scholars 'to salvage an attractively bawdy, rough, insurgent Burns from the Victorian cult of sentimentality'. This very much male Burns personifies the 'masculine values of muscular assertiveness, virile heterosexuality, and 'horizontal brotherhood' that typify emergent nationalisms' (Davis, Duncan and Sorensen 2004, 6). See also McCue (1997).

<sup>11</sup> In 2003 the World Bank estimated that Burns contributed over 157 million pounds to the Scottish economy (see "Burns brings in £157m a year." Scotsman.com, January 24, 2003: [www.scotsman.com/news/burns\\_brings\\_in\\_163\\_157m\\_a\\_year\\_1\\_637743](http://www.scotsman.com/news/burns_brings_in_163_157m_a_year_1_637743)).

programming, information dissemination regarding the enhancement of websites and collections associated with Burns, and Burns heritage sites, academic conferences within and outside of Scotland, art exhibitions and travelling displays, local festivals, new academic and popular publications, and recordings of Burns' songs. It was also the occasion for new commemorative Burns stamps and currency, shortbread, whisky and souvenirs, a special limited edition of Coca Cola featuring Burns, and the UK Google website logo symbolising one of Burns' most famous songs—*My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose*.

What is striking about this renewed interest in Robert Burns is the appropriation of Burns as visual and product icon. Images of Burns might be said to have reached saturation point, not only in the world of commerce but also throughout almost all walks of Scotland's cultural life, where images of Burns are possibly more to the fore in the popular imagination than Burns' work (see Braidwood 2009, 80 and 81). Alongside the use of more conventional imagery of well known eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Burns portraits and statues depicted on book covers, stamp, bank notes and coin issues, there is also the notable presence of appropriations and re-workings of these images in art, graphic design, commodities, and in museum display. Here there is a contemporary Burns who is playful, ironic and sexy, political and unconventional, colourful and stylish, youthful and media-savvy—suggesting a confident, progressive and globally connected Scotland, and taking Burns in new directions that reframe and rework the nineteenth century's more narrow and conservative representational field.<sup>12</sup> We see Burns being rendered, for example, as an Andy Warhol pop art icon to promote a major exhibition of new artists interpretations of Burns, Burns as Che Guevara in a university student recruitment poster and T shirt, a rock star Burns, Burns as a light and sound installation projected onto buildings, a digitised Burns, Burns wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses, Burns as a modern-day Jesus Christ hosting a Last Supper flanked by the likes of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley as his disciples, and Burns as a 'do-it-yourself' electronic portrait making activity in an interactive and online museum display.

Burns' pervasive representation in such forms, and in souvenirs, coffee mugs and aprons, drink coasters and platters, whisky labels and shortbread tins has been viewed by some in scholarly circles as an unfortunate aberration, as inauthentic, detracting attention from Burns' stature as a great poet and writer of national songs, and detaching Burns from his work and history: "There is a danger that in the twenty-first century we

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<sup>12</sup> See Pittock (2011) for the renewed focus on the global relevance and appeal of Burns. That global relevance is also translated into economic terms. See, for example, First Minister, Salmond's comment that the commemorative Burns Coca Cola bottle "is a fantastic way of translating our heritage and identity into the language of popular culture ... [and] ... of tapping into the Scottish market and its global connections." ("Homecoming – the real thing"). Also, see Culture Minister Fiona Hyslop's remarks at the launch of the new Burns mobile phone app: "This app uses the very latest technology to bring Burns firmly into the 21st century, with his enduring messages of human equality and international brotherhood now available to iPhone users the world over." (quoted in "Should auld Burns poems be forgot, pick up an iPhone." Scotsman.com, January 18, 2011: [http://www.scotsman.com/news/arts/should\\_auld\\_burns\\_poems\\_be\\_forgot\\_pick\\_up\\_an\\_iphone\\_1\\_1495085](http://www.scotsman.com/news/arts/should_auld_burns_poems_be_forgot_pick_up_an_iphone_1_1495085)). See Pittock (2007) for an account of material culture associated with Burns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

will forget that Scotland's greatest poet belongs to the art form of poetry, not as an adjunct to or excuse for tourism, 'creative industries', rock concerts or marketeers' gigs' (Crawford 2009, 406).<sup>13</sup> More broadly, there has been a concern that memory itself can be transformed, co-opted, and appropriated through popular culture forms, reconfiguring histories as consumerism and entertainment (see Sturken 2008, 75).

Nevertheless, the 'commodification' of Burns *is* a significant part of his contemporary presence in Scottish material culture.<sup>14</sup> If Burns' representation takes the form of commodity and kitsch, then that needs to be taken into account in examining the workings of cultural memory and the mechanisms through which a nation remembers. In Marita Sturken's introduction to the journal *Memory Studies*, she argues that such commodities are a valid subject for memory studies:

One of the key aspects of the field of memory studies is that it can mine those areas of study, and those objects and images, that might seem most counter-intuitive to the study of memory. This means, for instance, to think about the capacity of objects and images that might be traditionally considered to be within the realm of the 'inauthentic'—such as commodities, mass-produced souvenirs, greeting cards, postcards and kitsch objects as well as forms of popular culture such as television dramas and feature films—to produce and maintain cultural memory. In contemporary society, the stuff of consumer culture is an integral component of the structures of feeling and affect of our times. (Sturken 2008, 77)<sup>15</sup>

Not only is the 'stuff of consumer culture' integral to ways in which societies remember, the social/cultural frameworks in and through which those memories are interpreted and understood extend beyond any one or series of memory forms and technologies. Other stories, discourses, or narratives that are told about that past also provide a social/cultural framework for remembering it, forming what Ann Rigney describes as 'memorial layers':

In this sort of superimposition of one narrative on another [...] new frames of relevance help revitalize earlier memories and infuse them with renewed cultural significance [...] The 'working memory' of a particular community seems more often than not the result of *various* cultural activities that feed into, repeat and reinforce each other. (Rigney 2005, 19-20)

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<sup>13</sup> Other scholars are recognising the role of material culture in the remembrance of Burns; see Mackay and Pittock (2011), and "Inventing Tradition and Securing Memory" project referred to above.

<sup>14</sup> Burns also functions as global on-line web commodity. In addition to the types of products mentioned in this article, websites also offer babies' clothes, women's underwear and customised coffins bearing the image of Burns.

<sup>15</sup> See also Pittock (2007, 65), and Mackay and Pittock (2011, 149-50).

With respect to the ‘working memory’ associated with the figure of Robert Burns, consumer culture is an important but one of many ‘*various*’ cultural activities that feed into, repeat and reinforce each other’. Burns’ representation in other cultural spheres, such as academic and political discourse, museum practices, news reportage, and so on, also participate in framing the ways in which any remembrance of him is conducted and interpreted. Each of these frames of relevance contributes to the cultural elaboration of Burns as a site for cultural memory. As G. Ross Roy has observed, “the writing about the poet seems without end: scholarly books and articles, entries in magazines, guidebooks to the poet’s haunts, newspaper accounts, novels, plays, radio and television scripts, movies [...]” (G Ross Roy 1997, 53). Across such frames of relevance is a Burns who, at any one time, can be a ‘nostalgic time-warp’, a genius or a hackneyed cliché, a literary and cultural hero, a patriot, a reactionary or a postmodern visionary, a national poet or a myth, ‘a socialist superhero’ or ‘a romantic solitary figure’, a male voice or a female one, a ‘Rhinstone Ploughboy’ or a ‘Noble Savage’, a bawdy masculine Burns or ‘a piercingly lyrical’ one, a global phenomenon or ‘Scotland’s favourite son’, ‘the guardian of Scottish song or its manipulator’, ‘a couthy comic or a dangerous subversive’, an empty sign or an ‘immortal memory’.<sup>16</sup>

These qualities of paradox and contradiction, ambiguity and elusiveness mark the figure of Burns as a ‘multireferential, multivocal’, and ‘infinitely variable’ cultural symbol (Cohen 1993, 207), rather than as a ‘smoothed-out, consistent and one sided’ product image or icon (Rodger and Carruthers 2009, 8). Full of contradictions and variations in meaning, evoking varied reactions, sentiments and emotions, the figure Burns can be understood a key cultural symbol, one that is ‘central to the organisation of specific cultural systems’, wherein ‘the ‘natives’ say it is culturally important; they are positively or negatively aroused by it; it comes up in different contexts; it is the object of great cultural elaboration’ (Brettell 2003, 16).<sup>17</sup> Such social arousal, contextual differentiation and cultural elaboration has been especially evident in the recent resurgence of cultural discourse surrounding Burns. Some of that social arousal, as noted above, has been concerned with the negative effects of the ‘iconisation’ and ‘commodification’ of Burns and its potential to distract and subvert attention from an ‘authentic’ Burns and his emblematic stature in Scottish identity. But the debate itself is part of the cultural functioning of Burns, and as such provides one of the frames of relevance that contribute to the ongoing construction of Burns as a site for cultural memory.

That debate is also situated within the wider reinterpretation of Burns where the subject of Burns is undergoing intense scrutiny and re-appraisal, and which enters the public domain through such activities as exhibitions, events, publications and conferences; through university, museum, library and gallery programs, courses and websites; and through government sponsored initiatives in these and other areas, such

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<sup>16</sup> These references to Burns are drawn from variety of sources, including scholarly texts, news commentary, web sites, and museum publications.

<sup>17</sup> Brettell, drawing on Turner (1967), and Ortnier (1973).

as tourism.<sup>18</sup> The discourse in these contexts also receives and generates further interpretation through media reporting. Publicity and news stories about new findings, controversial opinions, awarding of grants and accolades, coverage of events, collections, conferences, exhibition and book launches, interviews and commentary from scholars, curators, artists, politicians and others all contribute to a complex network of memory making in which Burns as subject is framed and reframed within academia and without.<sup>19</sup>

This varied social arousal, both positive and negative, surrounding Burns also serves to underscore his malleability as a cultural figure—a feature that has not gone unnoticed in Burns scholarship, where Burns’ ‘many headed polyphonic manifestations’ are regularly discussed.<sup>20</sup> That malleability has often been offered as a part explanation for his appeal as a literary and cultural subject. While Burns’ work and life is often at the centre of such discussion, it is also his iconic status as a cultural figure that leads to him to being claimed by different groups for different reasons. As Johnny Rodger and Gerard Carruthers have pointed out,

since the day Burns walked out in public in his poetry, he was already adaptable, and allowing himself to be adapted, as a symbol for the sort of myths and legends peoples (sic) use to celebrate the identities and values manifest in the social situations in which they find themselves. (Rodger and Carruthers 2009, 3)

This malleability also plays out in Burns’ place in contemporary Scotland. How Robert Burns persists today as a popular memory figure is largely dependent on that malleability. It is both evidenced in, and constructed through, a process of varied cultural elaboration, where the figure of Burns is put into circulation and made continuously available as a ‘moving sign of the times’, as both object and subject.<sup>21</sup> It is not that there is one Robert Burns that continues to be popular, but many, ‘popular in

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<sup>18</sup> The Scottish government has played a significant role in the remembrance of Burns through initiatives such as Homecoming Scotland 2009, the funding of Burns research projects, centres and museums, collections and websites, and through the sponsoring of marketing strategies such as the Burns mobile phone app, and the Burns commemorative Coca Cola bottle.

<sup>19</sup> See Erll and Rigney (2009) for a detailed analysis of the role of the media in cultural memory. Also see the following sample of headlines from news stories associated with Burns scholarship, museum, gallery, library and art activities, and government initiatives over recent years: “Robert Burns conference in Glasgow 2012”, “Robert Burns Birthplace Museum nominated for Art Fund Prize 2011”, “Robert Burns: A racist, sexist drunk?”, “Robert Crawford interview: A Burns to believe in”, “Robert Burns app created to promote Bard”, “Robert Burns museum exacts revenge on Jeremy Paxman”, “Robert Burns becomes first person to feature on Coke bottle”, “Homecoming 2009: First Minister Salmond issues a worldwide invitation”, “Burns experts gather in Dumfries”, “Artists inspired by Robert Burns”, “Lost and found - Burns’ hidden poems make it into collection”, “New centre to study Burns’ work”, “Zig-Zag: the Paths of Robert Burns - Exhibition - National Library of Scotland”, “Robert Burns book project awarded £1m grant”, “Burns biography wins book prize”, “New £21m Robert Burns Birthplace Museum opens”, “Bitter spat between feuding Burns scholars threatens to overshadow Year of Homecoming”, “Biggest Burns seminar starts”, “Top artists create their vision of Burns for Homecoming show”, “Twitter to woo fans of Rabbin Burns”, “No holds bard on new Burns website”, “Burns treasures make way to the city”.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Rodger and Carruthers (2009, 3).

<sup>21</sup> This concept derives from Bennett and Woollacott’s 1987 analysis of the fictional James Bond.

different ways and for different reasons at different points in time'.<sup>22</sup> In this conceptualisation, there is no 'original' or 'authentic' Burns that holds a privileged position with respect to his representation, but rather a constantly evolving set of representations—material, performative, discursive and mediated—that interact with one another to produce the conditions for his interpretation at any one time. Established as a site of cultural memory in the nineteenth century, the figure of Burns has become a 'reusable' historical cultural text, able to be mobilised, reframed, and reinvested with new meaning and in new forms in response to shifting social and cultural circumstances. As the cultural, economic and political landscape of contemporary Scotland shifts so does the interpretation and representation of Burns. How Scotland seeks to create the memory of itself today is also manifest in how it remembers Robert Burns.

### 3. Conclusion

This brief account of Robert Burns' role in the making of Scottish memory has sketched out some of the processes through which a literary figure comes to serve as a reference point for the nation. In doing so, it has also sought to provide a particular perspective on the more general dynamics of reputation building surrounding literary figures. Jesseka Batteau has suggested that whether or not an author becomes canonised in the working memory of a society depends a great deal on the dynamics of reputation.<sup>23</sup> These dynamics, as noted by Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, are 'only loosely correlated with life-time achievements; not only talent, but social factors play a role in securing and maintaining the outstanding reputations of individuals' (Olick and Robbins 1998, 130). While the author's work itself provides an important reference point in the building of reputation, what comes to count and be remembered about an author is, as Gladys and Kurt Lang argue, 'refracted' through other social, economic and cultural and political factors. An author can be made to serve broader cultural, economic and political purposes and be taken up as a 'symbolic focus for a variety of sentiments that may have nothing to do directly with art' (Lang and Lang 1988, 106). Authors who are taken up in this way are 'more likely to be granted a prominent place in the collective memory' (Lang and Lang 1988, 100). But, as Ann Rigney has observed, those memory figures will 'only stay alive as long as people consider it worthwhile to argue about their meaning' (Rigney 2008, 346). The case of Robert Burns demonstrates how such processes of meaning making may continue to invest a writer with a persona that has the authority to 'speak' for the nation.

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<sup>22</sup> See Bennett and Woollacott (1987, 20).

<sup>23</sup> Batteau (2009, 232).

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