# Writing in Burns's Shadow: The Great Unknowns of Nineteenth-Century Scottish Labouring-Class Verse

## By Corey E. Andrews

Writing in the 'great shadow' of Robert Burns proved to be a difficult enterprise for nineteenth-century labouring-class Scottish poets; a wave of tributes and elegies were prompted by Burns's death in 1796, as his 'brother' and 'sister' poets confronted his legacy. The critical reception of Burns in the early nineteenth century complicated Burns's persona as a 'heaven-taught ploughman' without entirely dismissing the fundamental tenets which assessed the poet's skills as 'natural' and uneducated. For fellow Scottish poets, this perception of Burns made him an inspirational yet forbidding figure. Inasmuch as he was 'mortal', Burns could be approached by admirers, but to imitate his success was another endeavor altogether, one that many poets from this period despaired to achieve. Frequently, laboring-class poets sought to assert close ties to Burns through class and nation, writing to confirm their allegiance to the great dead poet. While such assertions drew attention to their otherwise ignored verse, recognition often came at great cost. Writing in Burns's shadow invited inevitable comparisons, particularly when one came from a labouring-class background. The need to justify one's works was felt personally by such poets, who frequently addressed the matter in poems to or about Burns. Much of this body of verse has been critically dismissed as inferior imitations of Burns's preferred modes, and some critics have gone so far as to claim that Scottish verse virtually disappeared after Burns's death. In his wake there was only a great unknown of labouring-class verse, for Burns's shadow kept many of his fellow Scottish poets in the dark.

The process of interrogating Burns's influence upon living poets began immediately after his death. Alexander Balfour's 'Elegy to the Memory of Robert Burns', published in the *Edinburgh Magazine or Literary Miscellany* (December 1796), presents a thorough assessment of Burns's merits as a poet. Eight years

younger than his subject, Balfour was also a labouring-class poet, having been raised in Monikie, Forfarshire, and apprenticed as a weaver at an early age. However, Balfour outlived Burns by thirty-three years and gained renown as a novelist later in his career, although his finances remained uncertain throughout his life. In 1796, he was working as a clerk for a merchant manufacturer in Arbroath and writing for the *Aberdeen Magazine*. His elegy in many respects expresses perceptions of the poet and his legacy that were fast becoming the standard elements of his emerging national iconicity. However, Balfour also provides some important variations in his elegy, especially those concerning Burns and his meaning for living Scottish poets.

One such difference is detectable in the poem's opening stanzas, where the speaker is represented not solely as an impressed spectator of Burns's great 'genius' but as a poet himself, working in the same tradition as Burns. Within a gloomy natural setting, the speaker portrays himself as a solitary figure in the mode of Gray's 'Elegy', seeking repose and solace in the midst of the 'busy bustling throng' where 'I wander'd forth along the vale, / To list the widow'd blackbird's song'.[1] Beneath a 'sweetly sylvan shade' (10), the speaker falls victim to 'Morpheus' and experiences a vision which enthralls him in much the same fashion as Burns's speaker in his own 'Vision'. Balfour's speaker describes the event in considerable detail, explaining the awe-inspiring approach of the Muse: 'A maid of matchless grace I saw, / Array'd in more than mortal pride' (23-24). Unlike the 'tight outlandish hizzie' in Burns's 'Vision', Balfour's maid is gravely distressed: her gloom infects the speaker and substantially darkens the remainder of the poem, which recounts her grief for the death of Burns. The 'solemn scene' the speaker represents is the future of Scottish poetry without Burns, an absence which Balfour suggests cannot be filled by any living contenders. This pessimism is shared by the Muse; she prepares to instruct Balfour on his present purpose, but her excessive sorrow for the loss of her bard interrupts her design: 'To sorrow [she] gave unbounded sway' (38).

Empathy provokes Balfour to similar displays of distress before the Muse finally begins her own elegy for a favorite son. She lists the 'sons' whom she has inspired, among whom number King James I as well as the Scottish warrior Wallace: she declares that '[I] Inspir'd his soul with martial glow, / And call'd his country's wrongs to mind' (51-52). However, none of these heroic forebears compares with Burns, whose loss is immeasurable: 'Chief of all the tuneful train, /

Was BURNS, my last — my latest care' (57-58). As Balfour expands his depiction of Burns's 'care' by the Muse, he underscores key elements in the 'heaven-taught ploughman' persona for which the Muse herself was responsible, including his essential difference from others in 'peasant garb': she recounts that 'I saw the young ideas rise / Successive, in his youthful mind; / Nor could the peasant's garb disguise / The kindling flame that lay confin'd' (61-68). Balfour's Burnsian diction directly echoes 'The Vision' here, but Balfour's Scottish Muse is not a lesser figure in the pantheon of Muses. Her place and role are sacrosanct, and her decision to shelter and feed Burns's 'kindling fame' is intended to prepare him for his future role as a national bard.

Burns's premature death not only robs the Muse of her favored son but also deprives his country of its bard; instead of celebrating his 'genius', she considers the future awaiting Burns's large family in the wake of his death, asking 'who shall thy sweet prattlers chear, / Now that a green-turf wraps thy head?' (103-4). For the Scottish Muse, Burns is everything a national bard could have been, representing the 'genius' of the country effortlessly in his person and verse. He appears to be irreplaceable, leaving the Muse to mourn her poet without hope for another: 'This garland for my bard entwin'd, / No brow but his shall ever wear' (157-58). However, there is a slim promise for living poets like Balfour, for she offers hope for those 'souls whom boundless Fancy warms', provided they show proper homage to her 'darling's tomb' as they attempt to win (and wear) the bays. The vision dissipates, leaving Balfour to wake in dismay: 'I waked — and wish'd again to sleep, / But ah! the pleasing dream was o'er' (191-92). He concludes his elegy with an apology to the 'shade' of Burns, hoping that this product of his 'infant Muse' has not displeased him: 'My infant muse, untaught to sing, / Has marr'd the vision's solemn strain' (193-94). Balfour elevates Burns to the stature of myth by using the poet's own poetic vehicle of the 'vision', but within Balfour's vision, the Scottish Muse experiences perpetual grief due to the loss of her bard. She may be assuaged by the efforts of a poet like Balfour, whose 'infant muse' has also been 'untaught to sing', but her gloom for the future of Scottish verse seems unlikely to lift.

Other labouring-class poets expressed similarly grim sentiments about their prospects. In his 'Dirge, to a Person who lamented that no Monument had been erected on the Grave of Robert Burns' written in 1798, John Struthers assessed the state of affairs for labouring-class poets writing after Burns and addressed the

perceived need for the poet's memory to be consecrated with a suitable monument. The son of a shoemaker in Lanarkshire, Struthers found an early patron in Joanna Baillie who encouraged his efforts in verse; as an adult, he settled in Glasgow and worked in his father's trade. Through Baillie's agency, Struthers enlisted Walter Scott's help in negotiating with the printer Archibald Constable. His first works, including *The Poor Man's Sabbath* (in which his 'Dirge' was reprinted in 1808), sold well and led him to continue writing throughout his life. However, he continued working as a shoemaker until the early 1820s and even anonymously published a treatise in 1816 entitled 'Essay on the State of the Labouring Poor, with some Hints for its Improvement'. Despite his success as a poet and anthologist throughout his life, Struthers has been all but forgotten in the history of Scottish poetry.

Quite unlike Balfour's elegy, Struthers's 'Dirge' confronts a much different reality facing Scottish poets who have had the misfortune to outlive Burns. Struthers's speaker perceives his auditor's question about the lack of a monument over Burns's grave to be both impertinent and immaterial: 'Why sigh'st thou, my friend! for a monument great, / To point where the poet fills, cold, the clay urn, / Whom Nature profuse, in a peasant's estate, / Gave with all the bold ardour of genius to burn?' The speaker isolates the key elements of Burns's verse that made it the work of 'burning genius', stating that 'his powers of description each bosom shall own, / Consenting emotions their wonder shall show' (13-14). In addition to his talents in evoking his readers' 'consenting emotions', Burns is praised for his ability to mobilize martial sentiment for Scotland. Struthers sketches a situation replete with Burnsian conceits: 'When roused by the coward insults of the vile, / His anger is up, and his arms dreadful gleam!' (21-22). Into the fray the 'bard' appears: 'the strength of the strains of our bard shall be known' (23). He then deploys his full arsenal of verse: 'In a torrent of fire it shall burst on the foe!' (24). Such enthusiastic rhapsodies are counterbalanced by the dirge's persistent refrain: 'The hero shall weep, for by folly undone, / In the cold tomb he lies, all untimely laid low' (25-26).

The repetitive stress on Burns's 'cold tomb' serves as a *memento mori* for future Scottish poets, who are implicitly advised to defer to their great predecessor's 'genius'. Addressing the state of the poor in the poem's final stanza, Struthers makes a critical judgment on the verse of his fallen 'hero', dissecting its meaning for fellow labouring-class poets who might wish to follow Burns's example: 'While

the trust of the poor man is placed upon heaven, / While devotion the breasts of the wise can inspire, / While to virtue and calm contemplation is given, / In his works the Creator to see and admire; / His cottar shall live' (27-31). At this point a caesura follows, stretched to a full stop before the line resumes, 'But the good shall bemoan' (31). And what shall they bemoan exactly? The character of the poet himself, deceived and deceiving, undone by unspecified 'error' and 'folly'. Struthers writes, 'The warm tear of pity unceasing shall flow; / For by error bewilder'd, by folly undone' (32-33). Struthers's dirge negates the possibility (indeed, desirability) of another poet emerging with the same great gifts. In the shadow of Burns, Scottish poetry is advised to take another path altogether, leaving no visible monument over the poet's 'cold tomb'.

Other poets would confront similar challenges when examining the influence and legacy of Burns upon their own works while standing in his shadow. Robert Tannahill was no more sanguine about the future of Scottish poetry than Struthers; although he emerged as a significant songwriter in the early nineteenth century, like Burns he died an 'untimely' death at the age of thirty-six. Tannahill was born into a labouring-class family in Paisley and worked as a cotton weaver from the age of twelve; he was also largely self-taught and found much inspiration in Scottish folk songs. He published his first (and only) volume of poetry in 1807 by subscription, but his attempt to publish a second edition with Archibald Constable was unsuccessful. Following a serious mental breakdown, he committed suicide in 1810 by drowning himself in a culvert. Throughout his brief career, Tannahill was acutely aware of writing in the shadow of Burns; in fact, he sought out opportunities for direct comparison with his great forbear. He was deeply involved in the formation in 1805 of the first Burns Club (located in Paisley) and served as its secretary and unofficial poet laureate. Tannahill's ode to Burns written for this club commends the club's paterfamilias while also interrogating his legacy for living Scottish poets.

In his 'Ode, Written for, and read at the Celebration of Robert Burns' Birthday, Paisley, 29th January, 1805′, Tannahill constructs an elaborate scenario that stages the club's veneration of Burns by employing the council of the gods as its occasion. 'Once on a time, almighty Jove', Tannahill writes, 'invited all the minor gods above, / To spend one day in social festive pleasure'. In such a setting, a stranger appears, identifying himself as the 'the guardian of that far-fam'd land, / Nam'd Caledonia, great in art and arms' (45-46). He voices a sore complaint

which he expects the gods to redress: ‘But what avail the virtues of the North, / No Patriot Bard to celebrate their worth, / No heav’n-taught Minstrel, with the voice of song, / To hymn their deeds, and make their names live long?’ (54-57). The ‘guardian’ requests that such a ‘Patriot Bard’ be found for Scotland, pleading for the gods to ‘grant my country one true Patriot Bard’ (106, l. 65). At this point, the guardian is revealed to be the ‘Genius’ of Scotland— ‘Speechless the Genius stood, in glad surprise / Adoring gratitude beam’d in his eyes’ (78-79) — before the identity of the ‘Patriot Bard’ is disclosed: ‘And on that morn, / When BURNS was born, / Each muse with joy, / Did hail the boy’ (84-87). Commendation of this chosen poet expresses largely unqualified praise: ‘His merits proven — fame her blast hath blown, / Now Scotia’s Bard o’er all the world is known’ (91-92). However, Tannahill ends his ode ambiguously by expressing as much self-doubt as validation of his subject: ‘Trembling doubts here check my unpolished lays, / What can they add to a whole world’s praise’ (93-94). His ode ends where it had begun, with the veneration of the ‘Patriot Bard’ whose birth alone acts as proof of the ‘Virtues of the North’ and cause for Scottish ‘glory’; he writes, ‘Yet, while revolving time this day returns, / Let Scotchmen glory in the name of BURNS’ (95-96). For his own ‘unpolished lays’, Tannahill has little hope, seeing the only worthy function of his verse to be commendation of a great dead poet.

Eight years later, little had changed: the prospects for recognition as a labouring-class poet in Scotland were perhaps even grimmer. In 1813, Margaret Chalmers published a collection of poems in Newcastle due to ‘circumstances of severe domestic affliction’. She hoped the novelty of her situation — namely, being ‘the first British Thulian quill’ due to her upbringing in the Shetland Islands — would help redress her family’s dire financial difficulties. One year older than Burns, Chalmers felt his presence and influence strongly in her verse. As for other Scottish labouring-class poets from this period, the figure of Burns represented for Chalmers both a touchstone as well as an impediment due to his ongoing posthumous influence. In her poem ‘Verses in Humble Imitation of Burns’, Chalmers examines the matter in self-deprecating fashion, offering a lengthy epigraph which assesses the situation she faces in ‘humbly imitating’ the poet: ‘the thought [struck] me, that had [Burns] been alive, he might, perhaps, have been amused with the novelty of a poetic essay from a Zetland authoress […] Well am I convinced’, she continues, ‘although I have attempted the Imitation, that he is inimitable. Why then embark in the vain pursuit of imitating the inimitable? I stand reproved.’ In this epigraph, Chalmers captures the ambiguous nature of

Burns's legacy for Scottish labouring-class poets — she acknowledges the continuing influence of his style, while at the same time she recognizes the difficulty that living poets face when they choose to imitate such an 'inimitable' poet.

In her 'imitation', Chalmers identifies key figures in the literary marketplace (which she describes as the 'rhyming trade') in order to demonstrate her fitness for participation. She claims that her gender has not traditionally participated in this branch of trade because of the influence of powerful male predecessors: 'The tunefu' lasses lent the pen / To able hands', among whom she numbers Shakespeare, Milton, and Burns (7-8). Despite (or perhaps because of) the preclusion of women in a literary marketplace dominated by figures like Shakespeare, Burns, and Milton, Chalmers announces her decision to write with some trepidation: 'I wat I thought it was right fair, / Whan after muckle thought and care, / On cow'ring wing, / My ain wee muse, in hamely strain, / Ettled to sing' (11-15). Like Struthers, she feels that her efforts may be doomed from the start. She appeals for help by invoking her own muse 'madam Thulia' who dwells 'amang thae awfu' eerie rocks, / Whar selchies, otters, gang in flocks' (51-52). Like Burns's Muse Coila from 'The Vision', Chalmers's muse is also a 'hizzie' who 'has the pertness 'mang the Nine / To be right bizzie' (54-55). Thulia is represented as forthright and confident — 'Fegs, madam Thulia, ye're no blate, / Ye want na for your ain conceit' (56-57) — but also angry: 'Ye're angry; weel, they're aft ill heard / That tell the truth' (59-60).

Thulia's anger stems from the unequal opportunities afforded to her 'daughters', for her 'review' of Chalmers's talents extends to the end of the 'imitation' and offers a much less comforting vision of her future as a poet than Coila had assured Burns in 'The Vision'. Instead of searching for (and expecting) the kind of literary recognition granted to Burns, Chalmers is advised by Thulia to 'rhyme for fun', or else her work will be ignored for its many errors: 'But tak my word, my rhymin lass, / It's for the fun; / And it would hae sae mony fauts, / The task they'll shun' (72-75). Thulia describes the added obstacles Chalmers will encounter due to her gender, writing 'it moves my anger, I confess' (97) when people advise her 'Poetesses' that 'twad set you better to clean fish, / Or knit your socks' (99-100). Chalmers ends her 'humble imitation' by recounting the last words of Thulia, who tells her daughter to stay home despite her ambition for 'tunefu' fame': she advises, 'Since ye maun hae tunefu' fame, / What need ye gang sae far frae hame'

(121-22). Thulia's canny advice underscores Chalmers's self-aware understanding of her novelty as 'the Thulian quill'. For Chalmers, the stakes are much higher (and more improbable) for her to attain even a modicum of success and recognition that would resemble Burns's.

Chalmers's poem exemplifies the tenuous status of labouring-class poets in Scotland who confronted the great shadow of Burns. As she acknowledges, the very act of writing verse itself invited unenviable comparisons to the 'inimitable' Burns. Her inhibitions were well-founded, for her volume of poems sold poorly upon publication. Through the agency of Walter Scott, she secured a grant of £10 from the Royal Literary Fund in 1816. Despite this modest degree of recognition, she never published another collection and it is not known where or when she died. As with Struthers, Chalmers simply vanished from the rhyming trade and the history of Scottish poetry altogether. Burns's 'great shadow' loomed large for labouring-class poets in nineteenth-century Scotland. It is to be hoped that the works of unknown and largely forgotten writers as Balfour, Struthers, Tannahill, and Chalmers might now (at least) be recognized for their prescient understanding of the conditions governing literary production and reception in early nineteenth-century Scotland. Perhaps now they might be given license to emerge from the 'great shadow' of Burns.

## References & Further Information

[1] Corey E. Andrews, *The Genius of Scotland: The Cultural Production of Robert Burns, 1785-1834* (Brill, 2015), pp.6-7. Page numbers hereafter appear within the text.

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One such difference is detectable in the poem's opening stanzas, where the speaker is represented not solely as an impressed spectator of Burns's great 'genius' but as a poet himself, working in the same tradition as Burns. Within a gloomy natural setting, the speaker portrays himself as a solitary figure in the mode of Gray's 'Elegy', seeking repose and solace in the midst of the 'busy bustling throng' where 'I wander'd forth along the vale, / To list the widow'd blackbird's song'.[1] Beneath a 'sweetly sylvan shade' (10), the speaker falls victim to 'Morpheus' and experiences a vision which enthralls him in much the same fashion as Burns's speaker in his own 'Vision'. Balfour's speaker describes the event in considerable detail, explaining the awe-inspiring approach of the Muse:

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Other poets would confront similar challenges when examining the influence and legacy of Burns upon their own works while standing in his shadow. Robert Tannahill was no more sanguine about the future of Scottish poetry than Struthers; although he emerged as a significant songwriter in the early nineteenth century, like Burns he died an 'untimely' death at the age of thirty-six. Tannahill was born into a labouring-class family in Paisley and worked as a cotton weaver from the age of twelve; he was also largely self-taught and found much inspiration in Scottish folk songs. He published his first (and only) volume of poetry in 1807 by subscription, but his attempt to publish a second edition with

Archibald Constable was unsuccessful. Following a serious mental breakdown, he committed suicide in 1810 by drowning himself in a culvert. Throughout his brief career, Tannahill was acutely aware of writing in the shadow of Burns; in fact, he sought out opportunities for direct comparison with his great forbear. He was deeply involved in the formation in 1805 of the first Burns Club (located in Paisley) and served as its secretary and unofficial poet laureate. Tannahill's ode to Burns written for this club commends the club's paterfamilias while also interrogating his legacy for living Scottish poets.

In his 'Ode, Written for, and read at the Celebration of Robert Burns' Birthday, Paisley, 29th January, 1805′, Tannahill constructs an elaborate scenario that stages the club's veneration of Burns by employing the council of the gods as its occasion. 'Once on a time, almighty Jove', Tannahill writes, 'invited all the minor gods above, / To spend one day in social festive pleasure'. In such a setting, a stranger appears, identifying himself as the 'the guardian of that far-fam'd land, / Nam'd Caledonia, great in art and arms' (45-46). He voices a sore complaint which he expects the gods to redress: 'But what avail the virtues of the North, / No Patriot Bard to celebrate their worth, / No heav'n-taught Minstrel, with the voice of song, / To hymn their deeds, and make their names live long?' (54-57). The 'guardian' requests that such a 'Patriot Bard' be found for Scotland, pleading for the gods to 'grant my country one true Patriot Bard' (106, l. 65). At this point, the guardian is revealed to be the 'Genius' of Scotland— 'Speechless the Genius stood, in glad surprise / Adoring gratitude beam'd in his eyes' (78-79) — before the identity of the 'Patriot Bard' is disclosed: 'And on that morn, / When BURNS was born, / Each muse with joy, / Did hail the boy' (84-87). Commendation of this chosen poet expresses largely unqualified praise: 'His merits proven — fame her blast hath blown, / Now Scotia's Bard o'er all the world is known' (91-92). However, Tannahill ends his ode ambiguously by expressing as much self-doubt as validation of his subject: 'Trembling doubts here check my unpolished lays, / What can they add to a whole world's praise' (93-94). His ode ends where it had begun, with the veneration of the 'Patriot Bard' whose birth alone acts as proof of the 'Virtues of the North' and cause for Scottish 'glory'; he writes, 'Yet, while revolving time this day returns, / Let Scotchmen glory in the name of BURNS' (95-96). For his own 'unpolished lays', Tannahill has little hope, seeing the only worthy function of his verse to be commendation of a great dead poet.

Eight years later, little had changed: the prospects for recognition as a labouring-

class poet in Scotland were perhaps even grimmer. In 1813, Margaret Chalmers published a collection of poems in Newcastle due to 'circumstances of severe domestic affliction'. She hoped the novelty of her situation — namely, being 'the first British Thulian quill' due to her upbringing in the Shetland Islands — would help redress her family's dire financial difficulties. One year older than Burns, Chalmers felt his presence and influence strongly in her verse. As for other Scottish labouring-class poets from this period, the figure of Burns represented for Chalmers both a touchstone as well as an impediment due to his ongoing posthumous influence. In her poem 'Verses in Humble Imitation of Burns', Chalmers examines the matter in self-deprecating fashion, offering a lengthy epigraph which assesses the situation she faces in 'humbly imitating' the poet: 'the thought [struck] me, that had [Burns] been alive, he might, perhaps, have been amused with the novelty of a poetic essay from a Zetland authoress […] Well am I convinced', she continues, 'although I have attempted the Imitation, that he is inimitable. Why then embark in the vain pursuit of imitating the inimitable? I stand reproved.' In this epigraph, Chalmers captures the ambiguous nature of Burns's legacy for Scottish labouring-class poets — she acknowledges the continuing influence of his style, while at the same time she recognizes the difficulty that living poets face when they choose to imitate such an 'inimitable' poet.

In her 'imitation', Chalmers identifies key figures in the literary marketplace (which she describes as the 'rhyming trade') in order to demonstrate her fitness for participation. She claims that her gender has not traditionally participated in this branch of trade because of the influence of powerful male predecessors: 'The tunefu' lasses lent the pen / To able hands', among whom she numbers Shakespeare, Milton, and Burns (7-8). Despite (or perhaps because of) the preclusion of women in a literary marketplace dominated by figures like Shakespeare, Burns, and Milton, Chalmers announces her decision to write with some trepidation: 'I wat I thought it was right fair, / Whan after muckle thought and care, / On cow'ring wing, / My ain wee muse, in hamely strain, / Ettled to sing' (11-15). Like Struthers, she feels that her efforts may be doomed from the start. She appeals for help by invoking her own muse 'madam Thulia' who dwells 'amang thae awfu' eerie rocks, / Whar selchies, otters, gang in flocks' (51-52). Like Burns's Muse Coila from 'The Vision', Chalmers's muse is also a 'hizzie' who 'has the pertness 'mang the Nine / To be right bizzie' (54-55). Thulia is represented as forthright and confident — 'Fegs, madam Thulia, ye're no blate, /

Ye want na for your ain conceit' (56-57) — but also angry: 'Ye're angry; weel, they're aft ill heard / That tell the truth' (59-60).

Thulia's anger stems from the unequal opportunities afforded to her 'daughters', for her 'review' of Chalmers's talents extends to the end of the 'imitation' and offers a much less comforting vision of her future as a poet than Coila had assured Burns in 'The Vision'. Instead of searching for (and expecting) the kind of literary recognition granted to Burns, Chalmers is advised by Thulia to 'rhyme for fun', or else her work will be ignored for its many errors: 'But tak my word, my rhymin lass, / It's for the fun; / And it would hae sae mony fauts, / The task they'll shun' (72-75). Thulia describes the added obstacles Chalmers will encounter due to her gender, writing 'it moves my anger, I confess' (97) when people advise her 'Poetesses' that 'twad set you better to clean fish, / Or knit your socks' (99-100). Chalmers ends her 'humble imitation' by recounting the last words of Thulia, who tells her daughter to stay home despite her ambition for 'tunefu' fame': she advises, 'Since ye maun hae tunefu' fame, / What need ye gang sae far frae hame' (121-22). Thulia's canny advice underscores Chalmers's self-aware understanding of her novelty as 'the Thulian quill'. For Chalmers, the stakes are much higher (and more improbable) for her to attain even a modicum of success and recognition that would resemble Burns's.

Chalmers's poem exemplifies the tenuous status of labouring-class poets in Scotland who confronted the great shadow of Burns. As she acknowledges, the very act of writing verse itself invited unenviable comparisons to the 'inimitable' Burns. Her inhibitions were well-founded, for her volume of poems sold poorly upon publication. Through the agency of Walter Scott, she secured a grant of £10 from the Royal Literary Fund in 1816. Despite this modest degree of recognition, she never published another collection and it is not known where or when she died. As with Struthers, Chalmers simply vanished from the rhyming trade and the history of Scottish poetry altogether. Burns's 'great shadow' loomed large for labouring-class poets in nineteenth-century Scotland. It is to be hoped that the works of unknown and largely forgotten writers as Balfour, Struthers, Tannahill, and Chalmers might now (at least) be recognized for their prescient understanding of the conditions governing literary production and reception in early nineteenth-century Scotland. Perhaps now they might be given license to emerge from the 'great shadow' of Burns.

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