



Routledge Studies in Romanticism

ROBERT BURNS AND THE PHILOSOPHERS

J. Walter McGinty



Robert Burns and the Philosophers

This volume expounds the influence of Robert Burns's reading of Philosophy on his life and work, supplementing this with his personal encounters with those philosophers he met. The work begins with the Homespun Philosophy of his early years under the tutelage of William Burnes and John Murdoch, then examines in detail some of the texts of John Locke, Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson, including other writers who reflect Hutcheson's thinking. Further chapters include the exploration of Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Archibald Alison and William Greenfield. *Robert Burns and the Philosophers* does not purport to be a work of philosophy but rather to show the poet's reaction to the subject and the development of his understanding. This work opens up a subject that hitherto has been almost unexplored.

J. Walter McGinty received his PhD at the University of Strathclyde on 'Literary, Philosophical and Theological Influences on Robert Burns'. Dr McGinty is an ordained Minister, having trained for the Ministry of the Church of Scotland at the University of Glasgow and Trinity College Glasgow. Other publications are *Robert Burns and Religion*, (Ashgate); and *Robert Burns the Book Lover: From Reader to Writer*, (Humming Earth.) The present volume completes the trilogy of books that have examined the influence of the reading of Robert Burns. McGinty has also written a biography, '*An Animated Son of Liberty*': *A Life of John Witherspoon*, (Arena) and has published papers on 'John Goldie and Robert Burns' and 'Milton's Satan and Burns's Auld Nick' in *Studies in Scottish Literature Vols XXIX and XXXIII*.

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Robert Burns and the Philosophers

J. Walter McGinty



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Introduction

Robert Burns's first philosophy was abstracted from theology. Brought up to view his life in a framework of Calvinistic belief, he developed an understanding of himself as a creature who derived his being from God, as did all of the natural world around him. His initial understanding of himself and the world came from his being nurtured in the tenets of the *Confession of Faith* and its accompanying *Shorter Catechism*, drawn up at Westminster and ratified by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1647.

The opening chapter of the *Confession* presents the framework within which the young Burns lived his life:

Chapter I. – Of The Holy Scripture

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet they are not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people now being ceased.¹

This one hundred and thirty-nine-word sentence sets out to present the reader with all he needs to know about God, nature and man's accountability, and how he has been provided through the Church, with guidance for the living of his life and achieving his necessary salvation. Within this first chapter, there are indications of man's imperfection and his being subject to the malevolent power of Satan, but within it too, there is a proviso of there being help available through the scriptures. In this one chapter, the six reference numbers in the text are supported by

2 Introduction

no fewer than sixteen quotations from the *Old* and *New Testaments* of the *King James Authorised Version of the Bible*.²

The lesser document, which also would have influenced Burns's early years, the *Shorter Catechism*, which was constructed for the teaching of children, has just as formidable an opening. It uses the same authoritative tone and the same proof-text method of taking supportive texts from the *Bible* to lend credence and to substantiate its claims. Here are the first four questions and answers:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.

Q. What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?

A. The word of God which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.

Q. What do the scriptures principally teach?

A. The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Q. What is God?

A. God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being wisdom, power, holiness, justice goodness and truth.³

The four answers to these questions are backed up by seventeen quotations from the *Bible*, eleven from the *New* and six from the *Old Testament*. It was from these formidable documents that the early religious education of Burns would have been formed and from within their framework that some of the elements of his earliest philosophy might have been constructed.

Beginning with the homespun philosophy gleaned from the Calvinistic *Confession* and the *Shorter Catechism*, this book looks at the influence of these early documents along with the more liberal theology of Burns's father William Burnes's compilation, *A Manual of Religious Belief*, and the input of his teacher John Murdoch.

Burns's introduction to formal philosophy is looked at through a study of his early encounter with the work of John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, and the later read *Letter on Toleration* and *Two Treatises of Civil Government*. Adam Smith's two books *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, another early reading experience, and after a long interval *The Wealth of Nations* are then examined for their influence. Francis Hutcheson does not seem to have been read directly, but I look at Burns's understanding of his work absorbed through intermediaries such as Henry Mackenzie, Hugh Blair and Alexander Pope. Returning

again to the direct texts of the philosophers, I study the influence of Thomas Reid's philosophy of common sense in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* and Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind*. Two of the literati Burns met in Edinburgh, Archibald Alison and William Greenfield, provide the subject of the final study with their respective works: *Essays on the nature and principles of taste* and *Essays on the sources of the pleasures received from literary compositions*.

This book will attempt to show the influence of philosophy on Burns's own outlook and some of the ways in which this is reflected in his work. It will look at those who had an input into his philosophical understanding: his father, his teachers, the works that he read and the few philosophers that he met, and of how traces of these various influences can be found in his writings.

In this book, I do not attempt to make any judgement on the value or relative merit of the works of philosophy that Burns read but instead try to assess the impact they had on Burns. I make no pretence to being skilled in the dissection and analysis of philosophical concepts, and for the purpose of this book, I have been trying to read the texts read by Burns not to pursue a philosophical analysis of them but rather to come fresh to them, to read them as I think he might have and to react to them as I think he might have reacted. I try to stand in his shoes and to gauge the effect that the words of the philosophers and their stance might have had upon him. I try to imagine how the poet is likely to have been affected by his reading of philosophy as one approaching the subject with no previous training in the discipline, even such as that of a university student.

This book does not purport to be a work of philosophy but rather one that seeks to explore how the poet's work and life was influenced by the philosophy he read and the few philosophers that he met.

1 Homespun Philosophy

From the sources presently available, it is difficult to identify the precise order in which Robert Burns read the books that so influenced his thinking and his work. I have therefore decided to deal with them within broad chronological periods in which it is likely that he read certain writers or came under the influence of people who were instrumental in assisting him in the modification of some of his views or in the adoption of certain ideas.

The first period of his childhood was dominated by the influence of a Calvinistic philosophy through the pervasiveness of the Westminster *Confession of Faith*. But right from his early years, the nurturing of his thinking process was tempered by being in the hands of a father who cared deeply about providing an education for his children and who committed himself to ensuring that they would be exposed to the thinkers that he himself respected as able educators. Robert's father, William Burnes, was an avid reader, and within his home at the time of Robert's childhood, there were books by two well-known philosophers, John Locke and Adam Smith. Robert Crawford, in *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography*, comments on Burns's reading, 'Burns's knowledge of Adam Smith's major work on moral sentiments shows that by 1783 he had done so'.¹ Burns was also an avid 'sermon taster' and a member and regular attender of the Auld Kirk of Ayr where the Minister, the Reverend Dr William Dalrymple, was the author of several books on Religious Education whose sermons display the influence of the philosophy of Francis Hutcheson.²

William hired a tutor for his sons Robert and Gilbert, and was fortunate in his choice of John Murdoch, an eighteen-year-old trainee teacher at Ayr Academy. Along with William, Murdoch helped establish in the six-year-old Robert, the habit of reading. In addition, Murdoch liked to visit the family on weekends and tells of how he got into the habit of taking some well-educated person along with him to explore various subjects and matters of the day with William and his family.

It is during this period of Murdoch's teaching of Robert and Gilbert that Burnes, probably in collaboration with Murdoch, produced a book of religious education for use within the family: *A Manual of Religious Belief in a Dialogue between Father and Son*.³ In 1800, James Currie,

in his first edition of his biography of the poet, draws attention to the existence of this document. Currie is quoted in the 1875 edition of the *Manual* and begins, rather patronisingly, with a description of Burnes:

He was of a religious turn of mind, and as is usual among the Scottish peasantry, a good deal conversant in speculative theology. There is in Gilbert's [Burns] hands a little manual of religious belief in the form of a dialogue between a father and his son composed by him for the use of his children in which the benevolence of his heart seems to have led him to soften the rigid Calvinism of the Scottish Church into something approaching Arminianism.⁴

When the *Confession* is compared with the *Manual*, the difference between the two documents soon becomes obvious. The *Confession* is magisterial in tone and supports every statement with what it asserts is the authority of the God-given words of scripture. The *Confession* states that 'the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave man inexcusable', that is, without argument against God's existence.⁵ Whereas the *Manual* in its very first question introduces a note of human querulousness and hints at a reasoning against the expected answer: 'How shall I evidence to myself that there is a God?' The answer the father gives is simply that the work of creation is evidence of God's existence; he is responsible for the 'very fabrick of nature', and because of this, 'we owe all that we have to him'.⁶ In Question 2, there is an immediate response by the son to this God: 'Ought not we then to love him, as well as fear and serve him?',⁷ while the *Confession* in its opening passage does not mention love at all. Although Chapter II of the *Confession* – 'Of God and the Holy Trinity' – describes God as 'most loving',⁸ there is no mention of man responding to God with love. Indeed, the impression is that the God of the *Confession* does not need anything from man:

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in any need of any creatures which he hath made, not deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory.⁹

All that is due to him is not love, 'but whatsoever worship, service, or obedience, he is pleased to require of them'.

The *Confession* is devoid of any indication that man should love God, whereas the *Manual* builds on this response to God's perfection by asking in puzzlement, 'Why don't all men love him?' and 'How shall we account for so much wickedness in the world?'¹⁰ In answer, the father merely repeats, 'God's revealed word teaches us' and tells the story of Adam and Eve, of sin entering man and of a world that is prey to the

6 *Homespun Philosophy*

machinations of the Devil. In this most orthodox of answers, it is almost as if the author of the *Manual* is inviting criticism or at least a cross-examination of this statement. In Question 4, the child makes his response, asking, 'But has God left his own rational offspring thus, to the tyranny of his and their enemy?' The answer is, 'No', and the father offers the hope that through faith in the man God has brought into the world, Jesus, and significantly through a 'strenuous use of their own faculties', man will overcome the Devil.¹¹ When this document is analysed, it is revealed as running contrary to the Calvinistic orthodoxy of the time. The *Confession* conveys a much more bleak picture of God and a much less hopeful picture of man.

Further questions and answers show the distinctive differences between the *Manual* and the *Confession*. Question 5 of the *Manual* seems like that of a rebellious child who is unwilling to accept as truth the story of Adam and Eve, and asks, 'But by what shall I know that this is a revelation of God, and not a cunningly devised fable?'¹² The answer given by the father is longer and more detailed than any other answer to any other question in the *Manual*. In this answer, Burnes displays an awareness of the philosophy of Locke as to the relation between revelation and reason. The answer stresses the importance of examining any 'revelation' in the light of reason:

A revelation of God must have these four marks: 1. It must be worthy of God to reveal: 2. It must answer all the necessities of human nature: 3. It must be sufficiently attested by miracles: and 4. It is known by prophecies and their fulfilment.

The father then goes on to elucidate these four points. In the course of this, the importance of the recognition of the value of human reasoning in any assessment of revelation is stressed. In explaining Point 1, Burnes writes, 'That it is worthy of God is plain, by its addressing itself to the reason of men [...]'. Point 2, while allowing for the weakness of men, still asserts the hope that man has as having been made available by the power of reason assisted by God's spirit bringing a composure of mind, thus enabling the faculties to overcome the passions that might otherwise rule. Points 3 and 4 are the most orthodox parts of the answer: allowing for a miracle being 'a contradiction of the known laws of nature' and proof of a God-like power, and for prophecies having been fulfilled. But it is implied that a miracle is only such as an act that has been performed 'for the glory of God'. This opens the door for questioning the miraculous nature of some events occurring in the *Bible*. But although the latter part of the answer has been in more orthodox terms, the question has been raised as to whether the Adam and Eve story is to be taken as literal and historical truth or as a fable. The answer in brief is let your reason be the judge.

Question 7 indicates the relative nature of the laws of Moses: 'Am I equally bound to obey all the laws delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai?' To which the father answers unequivocally, 'No'.¹³

In Question 8, a theological time bomb is placed under the Calvinistic Doctrine of Predestination:

If the Moral Law be of indispensable obligation, I become bound to perfect and perpetual obedience, of which I am incapable, and on that account cannot hope to be justified and accepted with God.¹⁴

The wording of this question is hardly that of a child. Burnes seems here to be setting up a 'dolly' that he might knock it down. His answer, if it had been orthodox, might have indicated that had the child been one of God's elect, he would have been provided with the capability of responding to the obligations God laid on him. Instead, Burnes gives a reply that implies that if a man does his best to meet the obligations of the moral law, his 'failing or shortcoming' will be accepted by God:

The moral law, as a rule of life, must be of indispensable obligation; but it is the glory of the Christian religion, that if we be upright in our endeavours to follow it and sincere in our repentance, upon our failing or shortcoming; we shall be accepted according to what we have, and shall increase in our strength, by the assistance of the Spirit of God co-operating with our honest endeavours.

Question 10, 'What do you understand by faith?',¹⁵ allows for an answer that could be interpreted as opening the door to a universalist interpretation of the final judgement in that it seems to describe faith as man's response to Jesus Christ and not as the gift of God to his chosen people. Question 12 seems to allow for the true enjoyment of the fullness of our human nature and asserts that the 'animal part' of our nature is as its creator designed it and not a sign of its fallenness.¹⁶

Question 13 relates to the nature of religion:

I should be glad to hear you at large upon religion giving pleasure to animal life; for it is represented as taking up our cross and following Christ.

The answer indicates that religion 'cannot fail to give a relish to all the pleasures of life', a sentiment hardly in keeping with the tone of the *Confession* that urges the taking up of the cross and following of Christ.¹⁷

One thing that is obvious from any comparison of the *Confession* with the *Manual* is that whereas the first is encyclopaedic in its scope, the second is only touching on the subject. The *Confession* is a finished work, whereas the *Manual* has the appearance of a work in progress.

The Manual looks as if it had been started and left unfinished. It is as if Burnes might have started this document, and while Murdoch was around, Burnes would give Murdoch assistance, but when Murdoch left for another post, the project was abandoned. Nevertheless, although the documents vary hugely in terms of the coverage they give to the expounding of the Christian faith, the huge variation in their extent and scope of coverage does not detract from the essentially different and distinct religious viewpoint. Although the *Confession* runs to thirty-three chapters containing one hundred and seventy subsections, the *Manual* has only thirteen questions and answers. The difference, however, does not lie in the size but in the substance, not in the matter of the coverage but in the tone and attitude conveyed.

In the *Confession*, there is a dominant tone of authority, often with a hint that these matters are not up for discussion but are beyond dispute, while in the background, there are hints of the consequences of disobedience. For example, Chapter IV, Of Creation, states that

It pleased God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost [...] in the beginning to create or make of nothing, the world and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.¹⁸

All questioning is silenced by that ‘All very good’. There can be no awkward querying, such as ‘What about invisible things like air? How did he make that?’ There is no room for the person who finds some things puzzling and who wants to ask, ‘Why did God make a shark or a scorpion or a wasp? How can you call these things “good”?’ The questions that a child might ask are eliminated by the covering of all the bases. Whereas in the *Manual*, for example, Question 7, which asks about the status of the Laws in the Old Testament, is answered with a simple ‘No’, thereby indicating the Laws’ relative nature and encouraging a questioning attitude towards the scriptures and the use of reasoning against any assumed authority.¹⁹ One early sign of the possible influence of the tone of the *Manual* on Robert Burns is hinted at in his later letter to Dr John Moore, where Burns tells of his engaging in a disagreement with his teacher Murdoch, who used a *Spelling Book* that was written from an orthodox Calvinist view. Burns claims to have had ‘an enthusiastic idiot piety’, but perhaps it was because his religious understanding was at variance with the orthodoxy of the *Spelling Book* that ‘caused the schoolmaster some thrashings’.²⁰

The style and tone of his *Manual* is in keeping with other things that are known about the character of Burnes. The editors of *The Burns Encyclopaedia* say that he adhered to the ‘New Licht’ or Moderate ‘wing of the Kirk’.²¹ This view is certainly substantiated by the fact that he was a member of the Auld Kirk of Ayr when it was ministered by two

men known for their 'New Licht' theology: Dalrymple and the Reverend Dr William McGill. Both Dalrymple and McGill were regarded with suspicion by those who considered themselves as orthodox Calvinists and upholders of the *Confession*. The University of St Andrews had awarded Dalrymple with a Doctor of Divinity in 1779, and McGill was similarly honoured by the University of Glasgow in 1785. The publication of McGill's book *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ* (1786) was to cause several members of the Presbytery of Ayr to question its orthodoxy. Indeed, matters came to a head in 1788, the year that celebrated the centenary of the 'Glorious' Revolution of 1688 when the Reverend John Russel of Kilmarnock and the Reverend William Peebles of Newton on Ayr, who was Clerk to the Presbytery of Ayr, preached and later published sermons that set in motion the proceedings that eventually examined the book for heresy and McGill's fitness to remain as a Minister of the Church of Scotland. At the instigation of Peebles, the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, on 15 April 1789, ordered an investigation into the alleged '*fama clamosa*' by the Presbytery of Ayr and instructed it to report back. The issue was taken up by an ad hoc committee and was processed back and forth in the Church courts until finally, the General Assembly threw out the charges against McGill at its meeting in May 1791. Burns took a keen interest in the case and in his letters defended McGill against his attackers and went on the offensive against them and their views in the detailed and accurate references to their characters, theology and activities in his poem 'The Kirk of Scotland's Garland' or, as it is sometimes known, 'The Kirk's Alarm'.²²

On 15 July 1789, The Presbytery of Ayr appointed a committee to investigate the alleged heresy of McGill. It was composed of fifteen ministers and ten elders, with David Grant, Minister of Ochiltree, as its convener.²³ Two days afterwards, on 17 July 1789, Burns writes to Mrs Dunlop,

You will be well acquainted with the persecutions that my worthy friend, D^r McGill is undergoing among your Divines.—Several of these reverend lads, his opponents, have come thro' my hands before; but I have some thoughts of serving them up again in a different dish.—I have just sketched the following ballad, & as usual I send the first rough-draft to you.—[] If I finish it, I am thinking to throw off two or three dozen copies at a Press in Dumfries, & send them as from Edin^r to some Ayr-shire folks on both sides of the question.—If I should fail of rendering some of the Doctor's foes ridiculous, I shall at least gratify my resentment on his behalf.

The 'ballad' was 'The Kirk of Scotland's Garland' or as its sometimes known 'The Kirk's Alarm'. No fewer than nine of the fifteen ministers on the committee feature in its verses. Here are four of its verses

that indicate Burns's grasp of the theological and ecclesiastical issues at stake and also his contempt for those who had been appointed to examine McGill:

ORTHODOX, Orthodox, who believe in John Knox,
 Let me sound an alarm to your conscience;
 A heretic blast has been blawn i' the West—
 That what is not Sense must be Nonsense, Orthodox,
 That what is not Sense must be Nonsense.—

Doctor Mac, Doctor Mac, ye should streek on a rack,
 To strike Evildoers with terror;
 To join FAITH and SENSE upon any pretence
 Was heretic, damnable error, &c.

[...]

Rumble John, Rumble John, mount the steps with a groan,
 Cry, the BOOK is with heresy cramm'd;
 Then lug out your ladle, deal brimstone like aidle,
 And roar ev'ry note o' the D-MN'D, &c.

[...]

Poet Willie, Poet Willie, Gie the Doctor a volley
 Wi' your 'liberty's chain' and your wit:
 O'er Pegasus' side ye ne'er laid a stride,
 Ye only stood by where he sh—, &c.²⁴

I have thoroughly researched both Kirk Session and Presbytery records of the period and am satisfied that the sometimes seemingly abusive words are vindicated by the conduct of the ministers concerned and that Burns's criticism was based on facts.

Burnes's *Manual* reflects the theological and philosophical views of a man under the influence of thinkers who were battling for their freedom to assert the use of their reason in all matters. For people like Dalrymple and McGill, there had to be a way of understanding of humanity that was not restricted by man-made authorities. They were fighting for their right to understand their religion, from which they abstracted a basic philosophy of life, without interference from the controlling authorities of the Church, an 'Authorised Version' of the *Bible* or a politically arrived at *Confession of Faith*. In matters of theology, the voice of reason had to be listened to if a philosophy of life that was commensurate with reason and experience was to be held.

During the second half of the eighteenth century in Scotland, a battle was being waged within the Church as to the relative authority of the *Bible* and the *Confession*. People such as Dalrymple and McGill were not radical in their thinking; they remained respectful of much of the beliefs of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, most of which were

derived from the reformers of the sixteenth century who constructed a Church along the lines of the ecclesiastical and scriptural tenets of John Knox and John Calvin. But Dalrymple and McGill were also men who were influenced by philosophers such as Locke, Hutcheson, Smith and Thomas Reid. They were guided too by thinkers, such as Vincent Taylor of Norwich and John Goldie of Kilmarnock, who were looking at the Biblical documents with fresh eyes.²⁵ These were men who knew that men and women of their generation would not be content with being instructed to accept something just because it was in a book or had been prepared by a priest or a minister. The very methods of scriptural interpretation and exegesis were being challenged by such scholars, and underlying their thinking was the basic idea that any faith or religious beliefs arrived at by man must be such as were compatible with the understandings revealed by their experience of man, nature and the world in which they lived day by day.

Burnes's more moderate theology comes across in this brief document, and his advocacy of the use of reason in matters of religion was influential on the young Robert Burns and helped him to a philosophy of religion that owed as much to philosophy as it did to religion.

2 John Locke

Opening up Other Worlds

In a letter to Dr John Moore in August 1787, among the authors and books Robert Burns lists to indicate the extent of his reading in the period just prior to his father's death in 1784, are several that might be considered relevant to the development of his philosophical understanding.¹ John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) was immensely popular and by 1706 was in its fifth edition.² For Burns, it was a treasure trove of ideas and a huge stimulus to his imagination. Its analysis of the means by which human understanding is achieved would have been of great benefit to the young man who had set himself the task 'To study men, their manners and their ways'.³ There is considerable evidence to support the view that Burns acquired a reasonable working knowledge of some of Locke's ideas. His presentation of his views would have been accessible to the competent reader that Burns was, and such a reader would have been attracted to the style in which the philosopher wrote and the relative simplicity of the manner in which he presented his arguments. In a preface to the *Essay*, an 'Epistle to the Reader', Locke sets out an inviting stall, one that would have appealed to the countryman in Burns and one that would have encouraged the beginner in philosophy to read on. Using the metaphor of hunting, Locke writes,

He that hawks at larks and sparrows has no less sport, though a much less considerable quarry, than he that flies at nobler game; and he is little acquainted with the subject of this treatise, the UNDERSTANDING, who does not know that, as it is the most elevated faculty of the soul, so it is employed with a greater and more constant delight than any of the other. Its searches after truth are a sort of hawking and hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the pleasure. Every step the mind takes in its progress towards knowledge makes some discovery, which is not only new, but the best too, for the time at least.⁴

The first page of this 'Epistle' is so full of attractive, arresting phrases that it is difficult for this writer to control his desire to quote them at greater length. Burns, as one who feasted on words, finding in them

respite from the back-breaking labour of a farm that barely kept his father's family above the poverty line, and as one used to a frugal family lifestyle, would have been able to relate to such remarks as:

He who has raised himself above the alms-basket, and, not content to live lazily on scraps of begged opinions, sets his own thoughts on work, to find and follow truth.⁵

The work of philosophy has not yet begun, but in this opening gambit, the philosopher was using language that was likely to resonate in the mind of his young reader. A few years later, in November 1787, in a letter to Mrs Anna Dunlop, Burns uses the metaphor of hunting when referring to the ministers who were pursuing Dr William McGill. He threatens vengeance on them and promises to 'fly at them with the falcons of ridicule'.⁶ But he reins himself in when Mrs Dunlop replies in a way that is in tune with Locke's remarks regarding 'less considerable quarry' and statement that the 'very pursuit makes the greater part of the pleasure'.⁷

Locke goes on to further describe himself and his method of writing:

This, Reader is the entertainment of those who let loose their own thoughts, and follow them in writing; which thou oughtest not to envy them, since they afford thee an opportunity of the like diversion, if thou wilt make use of thy own thoughts in reading.⁸

This light-hearted, whimsical beginning to a work of philosophy would, I think, have appealed to the young Burns, who was already experimenting with 'letting loose his own thoughts' and 'learning to follow them in writing'.⁹ I feel confident in asserting this and offer in support Burns's wholehearted response to the writings of Laurence Sterne and Henry Mackenzie. Burns makes known his wholehearted approval when he writes to Dr Moore, 'Sterne and M^ckenzie. - Tristram Shandy and the Man of Feeling my bosom favorites'. Sterne's themes and style are emulated by Burns in several of his letters.¹⁰

In approaching the reading of a work of philosophy, Burns did not have the advantage of any professorial assistance or input as to what he might find within such a work. His only reason for reading it was to advance his understanding. He does not seem to have been disadvantaged by not having a tutor. Had he, he might, for example, have been led to understand Locke's work in the context of that of other philosophers of the past or present, but on the other hand, he might not have been led to discover the insights he found for himself. He approached his reading as part of his quest to 'Study men, their manners and their ways'. He was not burdened with much knowledge of the history of philosophy and just eager to learn from what lay in front of him. In what follows, I shall be

contending that Burns, nevertheless, approached the subject of philosophy with a mind equipped to openly assess the ideas that were being put to him and to pick up on things that seemed to widen and deepen his understanding. In some respects, it could be said that what Burns might only have been capable of grasping was a superficial understanding of the philosophical themes, but undoubtedly, as a careful and assiduous reader, he would pick up on the main thrust of any work he read.

Locke himself indicates that he had not written his *Essay* for those

[...] that had already mastered this subject [...] but for my own information, and the satisfaction of a few friends, who acknowledged themselves not to have sufficiently considered it.¹¹

Later, he elaborates on those for whom he was writing,

I pretend not to publish this *Essay* for the information of men of large thoughts and quick apprehensions; to such masters of knowledge I profess myself a scholar, and therefore warn them beforehand not to expect anything here but what, being spun out of my own coarse thoughts, is fitted to men of my own size.¹²

As I continue to think of how Burns might have been attracted to Locke's *Essay*, I can imagine him scanning the Contents page and savouring the chapter headings:

Book I OF INNATE NOTIONS
 Book II OF IDEAS
 Book III OF WORDS
 Book IV OF KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION¹³

Previous to his reading of Locke, Burns might not have had much understanding of the subject of Book I, OF INNATE NOTIONS, but the other three 'Books' could well have sparked interest in a young man full of ideas, one who took great pleasure in words, who thirsted for knowledge and never seemed to lack an opinion. Even a cursory look at the extent of Burns's reading is an indication of the attraction of 'ideas', 'words' and 'knowledge and opinion'. Prior to his reading of Locke, Burns had begun a reading pilgrimage that was to take him into many areas of the written word. Early in life, he began reading widely the novels of the past and his own period. He was soon familiar with Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, Miguel de Cervantes, Francois de Fénelon and William Shakespeare, and also with Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne and Mackenzie and the less well-known John Moore. He read for a variety of reasons: Smollett 'for his incomparable humor' and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Burns said, was close to his heart. He also read, perhaps

for curiosity, theological works, such as Thomas Boston's *Fourfold State of Man*, Thomas Watson's *Body of Divinity* or the religious bestseller of the time James Hervey's *Meditations*, books that held views often contrary to Burns's own opinions. Reading John Goldie's and John Taylor's works of Biblical Criticism helped develop his understanding of the *Bible*. Along with these, he explored works that related to his life as a farmer: the older Jethro Tull's *The Horse-Hoing Husbandry* and the modern William Marshall's *Agriculture of Yorkshire*. All of these together with the texts that we are presently examining indicate the eagerness of Burns to explore the concepts of ideas, words, knowledge, and opinions, and indicate the likelihood of his interest in the prospect of exploring the work of Locke, even at the early stage of Burns's development.¹⁴

I suspect that Burns would have wanted particularly to look into the detail of Chapter III, OF WORDS. He had been well taught by John Murdoch as to the correct use of words and the understanding of their precise meaning. Later in life, he was to show a great concern for finding the correct word that would convey exactly what he meant. He would sometimes express his frustration at his inability to precisely convey with a word the intensity of his feelings.¹⁵

Much that I have so far written in this chapter has been concerned with an explanation of why I think Burns would have been attracted to Locke's *Essay*. I would now like to attempt to outline what Burns found valuable in it and how its influence can be seen both in his writing and in the development of his philosophical understanding. I shall proceed in the order in which the topics are dealt with in the *Essay*.

Innate Notions

I begin with Locke's examination of the concept OF INNATE NOTIONS. Burns's introduction to the concept, although he might not have recognised it at the time, was probably gained with his introduction to *The Confession of Faith*, which in Chapter IV, OF CREATION, Section II, states,

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image, *having the law of God written in their hearts*, and power to fulfil it. [...] Beside this *law written in their hearts* they received a command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.¹⁶

[my italics]

Here, then, at his very creation, the *Confession* asserts, man was endued with these innate ideas, *written in their hearts* by God.

When Locke attacked the concept of innate notions or ideas, he knew that his views were in direct contradiction to the *Confession*, which was

regarded by the Church as reflecting the beliefs of the *Bible*. In his *Essay*, he sets out to dismiss the concept that man is provided with innate ideas and claims that he will show

How men, barely by the use of their natural faculties, may attain to all the knowledge they have, without the help of any innate impressions, and may arrive at certainty without any such original notions or principles.¹⁷

Locke chides the controlling authorities in society:

But because man is not permitted without censure to follow his own thoughts in the search for truth, when they lead him ever so little out of the common road, I shall set down the reasons that made me doubt of the truth of that opinion, as an excuse for my mistake, if I be in one; which I leave to be considered by those who, with me, dispose themselves to embrace truth.

Burns displays this resentment of any authority interfering with his own judgement in a letter to Mrs Dunlop on 17 July 1789, enclosing a copy of 'The Kirk of Scotland's Garland', which contained a lively commentary on the critics of McGill:

I do not care three farthings for Commentators & authorities.— An honest candid enquirer after truth, I revere; but illiberality & wrangling I equally detest.¹⁸

Susan Manning, in her *Poetics of Character*, asserts that Burns is an 'aversive poet [...] – a personality that refuses to take *anything* as a "given", and has no truck with authority *per se*'. She sees a similarity of character in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Burns, but here, a comparison can be fairly made with Locke.¹⁹

Locke argues that 'children and idiots' do not appear to have innate ideas but gradually come to understand certain principles by means of reason. He uses the proposition, '*Whatsoever is, is and It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be*'. He applies this to prove that innate ideas cannot exist and not exist if what are regarded as innate ideas by some men are only brought into being by reason, as seems to be the case with 'children and idiots'. He then points out the fallacy of the argument for innate ideas on the basis that they are universal by questioning the assertion of their universality. He concludes his argument, unusually as far as Burns is concerned, in relation to the idea of God:

If any *idea* can be imagined *innate*, the *idea of God* may, of all others, for many reasons be thought so, since it is hard to conceive how there should be innate moral principles without an innate *idea*

of a *deity*. Without a notion of a law-maker, it is impossible to have a notion of a law and an obligation to observe it. Besides the atheists taken notice of amongst the ancients and left branded upon the records of history, hath not navigation discovered, in these latter ages, whole nations, [...] amongst whom there was to be found no notion of a god, no religion.²⁰

Locke concludes,

Ideas and notions are no more born with us than arts and sciences, though some of them indeed offer themselves to our faculties more readily than others and therefore are more generally received.²¹

He offers a warning about those who don't use their reasoning faculties that would have been music to the ears of the young Burns, who was fond of after-sermon conversations when he used to debate Calvinism:²²

Some (and those the most), taking things upon trust, misemploy their power of assent, by lazily enslaving their minds to the dictates and dominion of others, in doctrines which it is their duty carefully to examine and not blindly, with an implicit faith, to swallow; others, employing their thoughts only about some few things, grow acquainted sufficiently with them, attain great degrees of knowledge in them, and are ignorant of all other, having never let their thoughts loose in the search of other inquiries.²³

Locke does not allow his conclusion that the idea of God is not an innate idea to disabuse himself of the idea of God but indeed affirms his belief:

For, though there be no truth which a man may more evidently make out to himself than the existence of a god, yet he that shall content himself with things as he finds them in this world, as they minister to his pleasures and passions, and not make inquiry a little further into their causes, ends, and admirable contrivences, and pursue the thoughts thereof with diligence and attention, may live long without any notion of such a being.²⁴

Locke concludes that it is by 'the right use of those powers nature hath bestowed on us', and not on innate principles 'as are in vain supposed to be in all mankind for their direction', that we come to an understanding of all things, including God.²⁵

The young Burns, exposed to such thinking, was given a measuring rod with which to examine the Calvinistic doctrine of the *Confession* and the *Shorter Catechism*. He was also enabled by his reading of Locke's *Essay* to see his father's *Manual of Religious Belief in a Dialogue between Father and Son* as a stepping stone to a wider philosophical understanding while

still retaining a reasoned belief in God. Locke opened up a new world of thought that could be legitimately explored within the broad outline of what he considered as a God-given existence, consonant with some of the beliefs of his early upbringing but sometimes based on different premises. Locke gave Burns the intellectual tools with which he could dismantle and rebuild a faith. Locke also gave Burns a glimpse into a much more hopeful understanding of his humanity. He was no longer locked into a view of human nature and himself as part of it as something that had once been perfect but through the disobedience of Adam and Eve had been marred and fallen from grace into sin, and whose only hope was a redemption made possible not by human effort but by God alone. Burns had been freed from the prison of the possibility of an already doomed self to the liberty of walking on a way that fully acknowledged his humanity but that accepted that his weaknesses and failings were a natural part of being human and that those parts were not flaws or sins to be repented of but integral to the nature that God had created for him.

‘To study man, his manners and his ways’

Burns’s early resolve ‘To study man, his manners and his ways’ owes much to the philosophy of Locke. In Book II of the *Essay*, OF IDEAS, he writes on the mind:

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any *ideas*. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation, employed either about *external sensible objects*, or about *internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves*, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the *ideas* we have, or can naturally have, do spring.²⁶

As Locke develops the topic of how ideas are formed in our minds, he more and more emphasises the important input of our senses as they gain impressions from observation and experience. He asserts the growth of ideas as something that is brought about by the growth of our experience and observation as we develop from infancy:

He that will suffer himself to be informed by observation and experience, and not make his own hypothesis the rule of nature, will find few signs of a soul accustomed to much thinking in a new-born child and much fewer of any reasoning at all. [...] Follow a *child* from its