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"ROBERT BURNS" THROUGH THE YEARS

Robert Burns was a product of the 18th century in which he was born, lived, and died. The literature linked with his name grew tremendously as the time-testing years of the 19th century proved the permanence of his place among the immortals. How does Burns stand in this second quarter of the 20th century—in these crowded days of literary reevaluation? It is said that the poet prophesied he would be more famous a hundred years after his death. By that time (1896) over 300 editions of his works had been published in Scotland—and even more significant—over 360 in England; 34 in Ireland and at least 60 in America. World tributes had also been paid to him by the translation of his poems into Bohemian, Danish, Dutch, Flemish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Latin, Russian and Swedish. Owing to the lack of an adequate bibliography it is difficult to give precise information about the output of Burns' books in the present century, but we are still swelling the stream of Burns' literature, the latest addition being one of the most beautiful of Burns' books ever published: "Robert Burns' Commonplace Book" 1783-1785 reproduced in facsimile "from the poet's manuscript" and published in a limited edition by Gowans and Gray of Glasgow at two guineas.

A reliable method of assessing the degree in which the reputation of a poet has waxed or waned, is provided by the measure of interest manifested by successive generations of biographers in his life. Burns' own century accorded him two

biographies—Heron 1797 and Currie 1800. The 19th century multiplied them; Walker 1811, Lockhart 1828, Cunningham 1834, Hogg 1836, Chambers-cum-Currie 1838, Waddell 1867, Gilfillan 1879, Shairp 1879, Blackie 1888, Angellier 1892, Higgins 1893 and Hepburn 1896.

Excluding scores of sketches and essays of biographical interest, we thus credit the 19th century with twelve biographies of Burns. The present century is witnessing an intensification rather than a diminution of biographical interest in the "High Chief of Scottish Song." Already in barely 38 years the output of lines of Burns almost equals that of last century. Here they are: Macintosh 1906, McNaught 1921, Hughes 1922, Dakers 1923, Mackenzie 1924, Auld 1929, Carswell 1930, Thomson 1931, Snyder 1932, Hecht 1936 and Lindsay 1938.

The acid test of the advance or decline of a writer's reputation is furnished by the auction room, where the surety or fickleness of literary favour registers itself in the price barometer. The Kilmarnock edition of Burns 1786 is not really a scarce book, but it is always wanted by collectors. On December 12, 1828 a much damaged copy belonging to David Constable, an Edinburgh advocate, was knocked down for 17/-. For many years a copy could be had for £10 or less, and the first big jump was in 1879 when David Laing's copy enhanced by "lines in the autograph of Burns" fetched £90. It was considered marvellous when the Lamb copy, uncut, and in original blue paper covers, fetched £572 in 1898. However that price was only a forerunner of 20th century auction room tributes to Burns. In 1908 the per-