

Burns' mistress Highland Mary invented by objects

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The legend of 'Highland Mary' – Robert Burns' most celebrated and mysterious muse - was largely constructed through statues and objects, academics at the University of Glasgow claim.

Until now, there has been doubt over the documentary evidence relating to the story of Highland Mary and ultimately her connection to the Bard.

According to Professor Murray Pittock, director of the AHRC funded project entitled, 'Robert Burns – Beyond Text', the legend came about in the variety of ways Highland Mary was depicted during her lifetime in objects such as statues and snuff boxes – rather than written documentation. These items dictated the social and cultural legend of Highland Mary throughout the 19th century and after.

Prof Pittock, Head of the College of Arts, explains: "Clearly much is to be gained from an understanding of the way in which different materials 'beyond text' create and preserve the cultural memory of the poet and his works and influence biography. Objects can be just as important as documents in the making of memory."

Robert Burns – Beyond Text is a collaborative project with the University of Dundee. Researchers looked at Burns' life and memory through memorabilia dating as far back as 1842. The whole range of images and items used in the transmission of Robert Burns' reputation into the sphere of cultural memory can now be accessed, for free, the following website: www.gla.ac.uk/robertburnsbeyondtext/

Many of the commemorative objects stress Burns' drinking or sexuality to an unusual degree for the 19th century, say academics.

Dr Pauline Mackay, Research Assistant for Robert Burns - Beyond Text, said: "While Burns' biographies often mark regret for his heavy drinking, the souvenirs positively celebrate it. For instance, we examined the tankards, whisky jugs and snuff boxes, objects which would typically have been considered masculine objects in their original 19th century context, and found that Burns was indeed celebrated as an icon of convivial male friendship and masculine sexuality.

"Statues and objects play an important part in the commemoration of Robert Burns. And from what we see of the typically masculine objects, you could say they reflect the fact that Burns himself was 'one of the lads' insofar as he enjoyed spending time with male companions.

"We also found that Burns' biography, reputation and favourite poems were often influenced by monuments and mementoes of the poet, rather than documentary records. Indeed, relics of the poet, the areas where he lived and even the trees he touched helped create an image of Burns as a secular saint."

Provided by University of Glasgow

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