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"Robert Burns, Open Access, and the Digital Studies in Scottish Literature"

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/patrick_scott/273/
Beginning in March 2014, the whole run of Studies in Scottish Literature, including well over a hundred scholarly articles about Robert Burns, has been made freely accessible on the Web. The journal’s URL is:  
http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/.

Now that the last remaining twelve volumes have been added to what had previously been digitized, this makes available 39 volumes, with over 800 articles and a total of over 7000 pages, published over a period of fifty years (1963-2013). This month also, for the first time since the first volumes went up in late summer 2012, the SSL web-site has reached a cumulative total of over 70,000 full-text article downloads.

Digitizing SSL is giving us new information about which Burns topics are of the widest interest, who wants to read about Burns, and how they find the articles about him. As the success of Robert Burns Lives! has shown, interest in Burns through the Web is much greater and more widespread than anyone could have foreseen. The completion of the SSL digitization project seems a good time to step back and explore what it shows about current interest in Robert Burns and his writings.

It is not surprising that Robert Burns has featured prominently in Studies in Scottish Literature over the past fifty years. SSL was founded in 1963, and edited till 2007, by the Burns scholar G. Ross Roy (1924-2013), editor of the standard Letters of Robert Burns, 2 vols. (Clarendon Press, 1985). In 2007, he had announced that he had edited his last volume, and that the journal would cease publication, but from the fall of 2010 he began making plans for it to continue under my editorship (but see the next paragraph on this), and in July 2012 he transferred all rights in the journal to the University of South Carolina Libraries, clearing the way for new volumes and for digitization.

For the editorial side, I am fortunate to have as joint editor Prof. Tony Jarrells, a Walter Scott and James Hogg scholar in the English Department. Tony’s interest in Scottish literature dates back to a post-doctoral research assistantship at the University of Glasgow, and he has also been a visiting fellow at the University of Edinburgh’s Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities.

Three new volumes have now been published, both in digital form and in “guid black prent” as paperbacks available through such on-line vendors as Amazon and Amazon
Articles on Burns in the new volumes have included Stephen Brown’s essay identifying the original printer of *The Merry Muses* and Marvin McAllister’s account of “Scots wha hae” on the antebellum Harlem stage (in SSL 38), and several reports on Burns manuscripts, including “The Poet’s Welcome” (SSL 38), Burns’s music for “The German Lairdie” (SSL 39), and two on newly-discovered sources for Burns’s “patriarch” letter to his uncle Samuel Brown (SSL 38, 39). Digitization lets us include images of each of the manuscripts being discussed.

The digital version of SSL has been mounted in the libraries’ Scholar Commons site, under the supervision of Chris Hare of Library Systems. The Scholar Commons site is an “institutional repository,” mounting a variety of papers and articles by the University’s faculty members in many disciplines. The underlying system and specialist support are licensed from Berkeley Electronic Press, and their web designers incorporated SSL’s longtime logo of the Scottish lion. *Studies in Scottish Literature* is the most successful journal based on the University’s site, and month after month tops the statistics for the most used portion of the site. The first stage of digitization, reported earlier in Robert Burns Lives! Ch. 153, was funded by the University Libraries. This new phase, completing digitization of the earlier volumes, has been supported in part by donations in memory of Ross Roy.

Completing the digital site is a landmark for us in re-establishing the journal after a five-year gap in publication. We started by recruiting an expanded editorial advisory board, and many of these advisors have also written for *Robert Burns Lives!*. Previous
Burnsian board members Ian Campbell and Ken Simpson agreed to continue, and new members include such well-known Burns scholars as Carol McGuirk, Murray Pittock, Gerard Carruthers, and Leith Davis. We have revived a feature going back to the early years of the journal, when poets like Tom Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith argued fiercely (and wittily) about the nature of Scottish literature. Each of the new volumes opens with a symposium of short pieces discussing a current issue in the field. The first symposium, on the Present State and Future(s) of Scottish Literary Studies (in vol. 38), drew wide attention to the journal’s reemergence and helped jump-start the relaunch. We are also looking for ways to broaden interest and rejuvenate the journal through articles that can link Scottish literary studies with interdisciplinary, international, and other scholarly trends.

But one of the great strengths of the digital journal is in making available articles published in the earlier volumes that Ross Roy edited. As my co-editor Tony Jarrells commented in a recent interview with Craig Brandhorst, “The back issues are a who’s who of every generation of Scottish scholars. Think of a big person in the field and you can go back and find his or her articles in one or more volumes of the journal.” Over the last eighteen months, even before digitization was complete, the journal has drawn over 72,000 full-text article downloads. The three new volumes together made up about 10% of this, with the other 90% coming from previously-published items.

In part, this is because of the range as well as the quality of the journal’s back volumes. In Prof. Roy’s words, Studies in Scottish Literature has always welcomed scholarly articles on “all aspects of the great Scottish literary heritage.” Since the first articles were digitized the top twenty-five downloads have included articles about such authors as Robert Henryson, Allan Ramsay (2 articles in the top twenty-five), Henry MacKenzie, James Hogg (3), Walter Scott (3), Robert Louis Stevenson (3), George Douglas Brown, Hugh MacDiarmid (2), Muriel Spark, Edwin Morgan, Tom Leonard, and Alasdair Gray (2). The bench is deep: over 230 articles in the journal (more than 40% of the articles originally mounted) have drawn over 100 downloads apiece. Their variety reflects the range of Ross’s own literary interests. As I said at Ross’s memorial service, the amount of use that these earlier articles are getting on the Web is among the best memorials to Ross Roy himself and the best tribute to the years of work that he and Lucie Roy put into editing the journal.

Articles about Robert Burns have played a significant role in building the journal’s reputation. The top twenty-five downloads include six articles about Robert Burns, and Burns has been the subject of more contributions to SSL than any other Scottish author. Over the past fifty years, SSL has included over 120 items about Burns. The first article wholly about Burns, on “Tam o’ Shanter,” was in October 1963 (volume 1, issue 2), and soon thereafter Ross Roy used SSL to describe his acquisition of the only copy of the 1799 Merry Muses to have an intact title-page (vol. 2, issue 4). Two volumes have been largely devoted to Burns: SSL 30 (1998), which published thirty articles from the Burns Bicentenary conference hosted by the University of South Carolina in 1996, and SSL 37 (2012), which published thirteen Burns-related essays in honor of Ross Roy. But aside from those special volumes, the journal has included over sixty other articles,
notes, and reviews on different aspects of Burns’s writings and influence; indeed, this count is certainly low because, for Burns-related book reviews, the way the journal has been digitized only provides separate entries through 1976, with book-reviews in later volumes being grouped together.

The Burns articles in SSL are not only the most numerous category but have also been among the items most fully used. Full-text downloads of Burns articles to date total nearly 10,700 (about 16% of total downloads), with 3273 total downloads for vol. 30 alone, and 2447 for vol. 37. The most popular Burns articles over this period have been Peter Zenzinger’s article on Ramsay and Burns (in vol. 30: 651 downloads), Derrick McClure’s study of Burns in Gaelic translation (in vol. 33: 435 downloads), Corey Andrews on Burns’s poem “Halloween” and Kirsteen McCue on the air for Burns’s “Red, red, rose” (both in vol. 37: 388 downloads and 336 downloads respectively), the Chinese scholar Yang De-you writing on Burns’s Russian translator Samuel Marshak (in vol. 22: 361 downloads), and Jeff Ritchie writing on Burns and Wordsworth (again in vol. 30, with 293 downloads, as of March 21).

The article on Burns’s Russian translator highlights one area in which SSL anticipated more recent developments in Burns studies. Ross Roy’s own earlier background was in comparative literature, and among his own earliest research on Burns were two articles on Burns’s reception in France. He had a special interest in Burns’s international influence, or what we now call “Global Burns.” Volume 1 included an article on “Robert Burns in Japan,” and over the year this was followed by articles on “Robert Burns through Russian Eyes” (vol. 2), “Robert Burns in Hungary” and “Robert Burns’s Danish Translator” (both in vol. 15), the Marshak article already mentioned (vol. 22), “Robert Burns and His Readers in China” (vol. 26), the reception of Burns in Brazil (vol. 30), and German responses to Burns (vol. 33). This interest in researching Burns’s status in world literature is also shown by such recent books as Robert Burns in Global Culture, edited by Murray Pittock and others (2011), Robert Burns Poetry in Russia and in the Soviet Union, by Natalia Koh Vid (2011), Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture, edited by Sharon Alker and others (2012), The Reception of Robert Burns in Germany, by Rosemary Ann Selle (2013), and this year The Reception of Robert Burns in Europe, also edited by Murray Pittock. Several of these books have been reviewed or noticed on Robert Burns Lives! The earlier articles now available in the digital SSL complement these recent studies.

Digitizing SSL not only allows us to get statistics on how much the articles are used, and which topics are drawing interest, but also where the interest is coming from. Interest in Robert Burns is still very international, in perhaps unexpected ways. Scholar Commons doesn’t track individual users, but it does tell us about the countries from which they are visiting the site, by tabulating the differently-tagged internet addresses, IPO’s, for each site-search; an ipo is the standard suffix (.uk, .fr, .de., etc.) at the end of non-U.S. web-addresses. This table illustrates the ten countries from which most searches came, after the United States:
Searches have been recorded that originated in over 120 different countries, but it is worth noting that the top ten countries are not only those with traditional Scottish links. Canada and Australia are there (with New Zealand also scoring well), and some of the European countries with longstanding Scottish ties such as Germany, France and Italy also post good totals, but that the top ten includes Russia, India and Turkey.

The Scholar Commons system also allows us to track how researchers discovered the articles in Studies in Scottish Literature. Before digitization, a student would look up an author or topic in a specialized bibliography, find there was an article in SSL, and then hope the nearest library had the right journal volume on the shelf. Both the bibliographies and the journals have long been available in digital form, but often only to subscribers or through university sites with access restricted to students and faculty. From the beginning, SSL has been indexed in the standard MLA International Bibliography, the gold standard for literature research, and its articles can still be located that way. However, with the decision to make SSL freely available on the Web (“open-access”), like Robert Burns Lives!, articles in the journal are discovered much more easily. The majority of those who now use the site come to an article directly, rather than through a bibliography or a library web-site or even through the journal’s own home-page. Indeed, as the chart below illustrates, only a sixth of referrals to SSL from outside the University come through the journal’s own site or related Scholar Commons listings, while three quarters of users find SSL articles through a Google-related site, either Google itself, or the more specialized Google Scholar.
TABLE II: HOW SSL’S USERS FIND THE SITE
(referrals from external sites, Sept. 2012-Sept. 2013, by domain)

The journal’s own home-page has a search box on the left of the page, and this is often the surest way to find specific articles from SSL, particularly articles on individual works or if you already know the article’s author or the main words in the title. But links to most articles can also be found just as easily by simple keyword searches in Google and Google Scholar. Though a Google search may bring up many thousands of possibilities, articles from SSL, especially on specific literary works, often come up on the first or second page of the search results, and this brings them to the attention of many users who never visit the larger journal site.

Finally, a word about Open Access. The Scholar Commons site would have allowed us to charge a subscription for access, either to all volumes, or to the most recent ones, but we took the decision early on that, as long as we can do so, we would make the digital journal free, just as the libraries that own them have traditionally given free access to the print volumes. SSL doesn’t carry advertising, and unlike scientific journals (and PLOS) we don’t charge our contributors a per-page fee to publish their work. For the time being the libraries and individuals who purchase the print version through Amazon are the journal’s sole (and quite modest) funding stream.

Most research on Burns, like most research in the humanities generally, is done without special grants or funding, but when a university-based scholar does get a grant toward research expenses, it is increasingly common for the grant agency to require that the resulting research be made free to the public. In the U.S., much publicly-funded scientific and medical research is mounted on the PLOS (the Public Library of Science, started in 2003) or another open-access site, BioMedCentral. Over 450 scholarly organizations have now signed on to the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to
Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, and the European Union requires time-delayed open-access on all the research it funds. In 2013, the U.K. government and its Research Councils proposed new regulations mandating free access, immediately or after a stated time-lapse, for grant-funded research (and, in effect, all major research projects in British universities). Whichever way the Referendum goes, most Scottish scholars expect similar open-access policies to apply to their work. These requirements have been much criticized, both by some learned societies and, especially, by the journal publishing industry, but “it’s coming yet, for a’ that.” SSL is well positioned to help Scottish literature scholars meet this growing expectation.

After three new volumes, we think we’ve shown that the journal is fully re-established. So far, we are the only major refereed scholarly journal in Scottish literary studies that meets the grant agencies’ open access requirement, and in time that should bring us some first rate contributions from a new generation of Burns scholars. Like Robert Burns Lives!, and the Glasgow-based on-line magazine The Bottle Imp (sponsored by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies), we’ve found it exhilarating to make this body of literary research free and accessible to readers that traditional journal publication often shuts out. It’s a gamble, but it’s a gamble in the Ross Roy tradition of hospitality and openness, and I like to think that it’s a decision that Burns would have approved. Even if his vision of worldwide brotherhood could hardly anticipate the World Wide Web, the widespread availability of small printing-shops in late 18th century Scotland meant that many of Burns’s own poems and songs were so widely distributed as to be, in effect, Open Access almost from the start.

References

Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities (Max Planck Institut, October 22, 2003): http://openaccess.mpg.de/286432/Berlin-Declaration


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