



Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland

Nigel Leask

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Robert Burns and Pastoral is a full-scale reassessment of the writings of Robert Burns (1759-1796), arguably the most original poet writing in the British Isles between Pope and Blake, and the creator of the first modern vernacular style in British poetry. Although still celebrated as Scotland's national poet, Burns has long been marginalised in English literary studies worldwide, due to a mistaken view that his poetry is linguistically incomprehensible and

of interest to Scottish readers only. Nigel Leask challenges this view by interpreting Burns's poetry as an innovative and critical engagement with the experience of rural modernity, namely to the revolutionary transformation of Scottish agriculture and society in the decades between 1760 and 1800, thereby resituating it within the mainstream of the Scottish and European enlightenments. Detailed study of the literary, social, and historical contexts of Burns's poetry explodes the myth of the 'Heaven-taught ploughman', revealing his poetic artfulness and critical acumen as a social observer, as well as his significance as a Romantic precursor. Leask discusses Burns's radical decision to write 'Scots pastoral' (rather than English georgic) poetry in the tradition of Allan Ramsay and Robert

Fergusson, focusing on themes of Scottish and British identity, agricultural improvement, poetic self-fashioning, language, politics, religion, patronage, poverty, antiquarianism, and the animal world. The book offers fresh interpretations of all Burns's major poems and some of the songs, the first to do so since Thomas Crawford's landmark study of 1960. It concludes with a new assessment of his importance for British Romanticism and to a 'Four Nations' understanding of Scottish literature and culture.

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