

Robert Burns Poet and Revolutionist

Harry Holland, edited by Dougal McNeill
Steele Roberts Aotearoa (2016)
ISBN 978-0-947493-17-2
Reviewed by Lydia Wevers

The cover of this charming book features the Romantic portrait of Burns by Alexander Nasmyth, his cream breeches and white stock the only illumination in a darkly moody landscape, throwing light on his sweet and reflective expression. Offset in the corner is a black and white photograph of Harry Holland, also sweetly reflective but as far from Romantic as it is possible to be—a bluff, suited, serious, reliable, public man. And it is the dialogue between these two men, a century lying between them, that makes this such an interesting little book.

Dougal McNeill has brought Harry Holland's tribute to Burns into print for the first time, and the book is in praise of both men, who shared political ideals and attitudes and a deep love of demotic poetry and song. Burns of course was the poet most likely to be found on the shelves and the lips of nineteenth century New Zealanders, and not only when they sang *Auld Lang Syne*. One of the things Harry Holland exemplifies is the devotion felt and expressed by Burns readers, a devotion still echoed in public culture by lines and poems such as ‘the best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men’ and the cheesy favourite of gift cards ‘My love is like a red red rose’. But Holland, the first leader of the New Zealand Labour party, an Australian socialist and trade unionist, who came to the New Zealand at the invitation of the Waihi branch of the Socialist Party in 1912, saw Burns, as his title suggests, as both a poet and a ‘revolutionist’, and emulated Burns in his own life.

Dougal McNeill’s introduction helpfully and clearly recaps the political and intellectual context of Harry Holland’s life. As an activist, writer and editor of the *Maoriland Worker* he stood for the far left of the ‘Red Fed’ years. McNeill describes the shift that occurred in the Labour Party in the 1920s from revolutionary socialism to its ‘modern-day reformist’ nature, a shift which marginalised Holland and caused him to become ‘something of an embarrassment’ to the men who wanted seats in the Cabinet. In subsequent scholarship on Holland the ‘literary element’ of his intellectual make up, McNeill suggests, ‘misses (or dis-misses) its significance’. McNeill argues that Holland’s literary production was an essential constituent of his socialist vision, kindling emotion which led to intellect and action, and he saw Burns as the model for a political militant, writing verse drawn from his love of, and attention to, the lives of working people.

Holland’s belief in the power and importance of education is reflected in his substantial library, his prolific output of articles and pamphlets and his poetry, some of which is reprinted at the end of this book. But for me the unexpected charm of Harry Holland is not his poetry but his essay on Burns. Lightly footnoted by McNeill it is an edited version of several published articles, notes, drafts and jottings from which a highly readable text has emerged, peppered with illustrations from various editions of Burns’ poems and books about him. It is of course a style of literary commentary that is out of favour now—it opens with grand sweeping statements, capitalizations (‘Scottish Poetry’, ‘National Bard’) and unproblematic collectives (‘us Scotsmen’, ‘all the world’s greatest men’)—but then focuses on the intersections between Burns’ poetic and his political and social convictions, along an autobiographical trajectory.

Burns’ songs were composed to supply words to old airs that didn’t have lyrics, or in some cases to ‘displace indecent words’ which had been passed down orally. He refused any payment for these ‘offsprings of his genius’ which he often took down himself from the ‘singing of

country girls' or 'minister of the Kirk'. During the last nine years of his life he contributed over 200 songs to various publications and was a dedicated collector of Scottish vocal and instrumental music.

Holland does not, though, allow this image of Burns, testing song lines to the harpsichord, to align him with the Romantic poets. Holland firmly removes him from the category of Arcadian or 'nature' poet. Burns he declares 'gives us no poem on the skylark...or on the brook' and was not 'Nature's priest' – an 'old soldier in tattered uniform interested him more than a ruined castle'. In landscapes he saw the 'smoking cots', the mouse escaping the ploughshare, the wounded hare uselessly shot or the backbreaking work of labourers. Holland addresses the reader as one, who, living with Burns in his head and his life ('You remember ...his lines on the 'crawlin' ferlie'...) also understands the range of his responses to the world, always a 'realist, recording no fabulous woes, no hollow fantastic sentimentalities', attacking hypocrisy, especially in the church, and excoriating social inequity. Burns, according to Holland, is the 'clear-toned proclaimer of love'.

McNeill's footnotes to Holland's panegyric of Burns note both his references to Lenin and his use of a casual racial stereotype, but you can also see an accomplished orator and devout Christian, both in the rhythms of his prose and its sentiments. They are the cadences and expressions of a literate and religious age, written by a man with very little formal education, who is himself an advertisement for the kind of socialism he advocates for. It is the prelude for a summary account of the age of Burns-the Highland clearances, the Jacobite rebellions, the agricultural revolution, the enclosures- an account which also refers to his admiration for Thomas Muir, Robert Bruce, William Wallace and his long epistolary relationship with Wallace's lineal descendant, Frances Dunlop. But Holland never takes his eye off the poetry- where and how and about whom it was written, how it is interleaved with his politics and beliefs, his way of life and his personality. It is touching, informative and deeply felt.

It is both interesting and enlightening to read Harry Holland on Burns, on both their accounts. McNeill has done an excellent job of letting the text speak for itself. What surprised me was how Holland's love for and knowledge of Burns opened Burns up to me, particularly because of his textual underpinning of Burns' socialism, his satire and philosophies, but also, and more memorably, because of his attention to lines, images, jokes, contexts and stories. The poetry is always front of house, which brings both Burns' political convictions and his love of his natural and social world to vivid and affective life. McNeill is right to criticise previous scholars for their dismissal of Holland's literary knowledge and taste-it illuminates so much about him, including his ear for cadence, his deep love of Burns and of poetry, his careful research and his commitment to a vision of a world in which literature is one of the forces for social and political good. Fourteen of Holland's own poems, taken from *Red Roses on the Highway*, close the book. Like Burns Holland connects 'joy in the breath of the morning' ('Joy of Freedom') with the 'great lesson' of freedom that 'Nature's wide world can teach'. Popular in their time, Holland's songs have rhythm and tempo and lyrical images of loved landscape peppered with stirring rhetoric. You would probably have to be both a believer and a literary historian to seek them out now. Fortunately McNeill is both those things.