

Review of *The Ghost of Rabbie Burns* by Laurence Overmire
by Anita Scott-Philbrick, PhD, Deputy Chieftain, Clan Scott Society
In *Stag & Thistle* (April/May/June 2016; Vol 37, No 2)

*A society that has no respect
No regard
For its Bards
Its historians, its storytellers
Is a society in steep decline
A society that has lost its
Very soul
And may never find its way.*

~ Laurence Overmire, *The Ghost of Rabbie Burns*, 2016

Laurence Overmire penned these words in his poem, “The Bards of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales,” part of his collection of poems to be published in his latest book, *The Ghost of Rabbie Burns*, which [was released] this May. And, he himself is certainly one of these bards and storytellers, so all is not lost yet. Through haunting images painted with words, Overmire invites us to travel with him through the places and stories of Scotland. This volume, though purportedly a journal of his travels through Scotland with his wife Nancy McDonald in 2014, is so much more than just a travelogue of the wonders and beauty that those who travel in Scotland discover. Indeed, he uncovers the heart of each place he visits and helps us know the very soul of this country. In reading his verse, we come to discern not only who the ancient Scots were, but also, who we, the descents of these often fierce people, really are. As Overmire states, “Fantasy / Myth / Legend / Truth. / All are intertwined in the story / That is Scotland.”

Overmire’s poems, a collection of impressions from an American arriving in Scotland for the first time, evoke emotions of homecoming through American eyes. And, we empathize as he discovers what all of us with Scottish heritage have felt as we stepped from a plane, train, or boat onto Scottish soil for the very first time – maybe the first in our family to be back in hundreds of years. In his poem, “The Train to Edinburgh,” he states, “This is the return / After so many hundreds of / Years. / All of my ancestors are with me / Burns, Scott, Douglass... / As the door opens / My foot steps down on / Solid ground / Home.” Reading those words, I remembered that same feeling in 2010, when I stepped out of the airport and recognized that I, too, had come full circle with my ancestors who left for America over a hundred years ago.

As he visits the myriad historical sites Scotland has to offer, Overmire often portrays images of war, heartache, suffering, and grief. These impressions remind us that though Scotland may be markedly changed from the days of Flodden, Culloden, or the Covenanters, the spirit of freedom, which our Scottish ancestors passed down to us, still burns strongly in Scottish hearts. In “Stirling Bridge,” “The

Stone of Scone,” and “The Battle of Falkirk,” Overmire reminds us that “Freedom is an idea that no tyrant will ever crush.” He also asks us to remember that the cost of freedom can be very steep as in his poem, “The Last to Die” about Flodden, where “10,000 Scots they say / Gave their lives that day / The cream of the Scottish / Nobility.” On visiting St. Giles’ Cathedral, he says that we may find peace only temporarily, but at least for today we put aside our disputes and contemplate Rabbin Burns’ “way of / Universal brother- and sisterhood.”

Many of his other poems deal with issues of war, religious unrest, and rebellions, and he asks us to consider, “Did it make any difference, those wars and rebellions?” and reminds us that it is up to us to make the changes in our hearts first. He ends his book with poems called “Universal Brotherhood” and “The Yes and No Campaign” about the then upcoming referendum. “Wisdom is finding the path that is / Best for all... And having the courage to change / What must be changed / For the sake of the / Entire world.”

I would be remiss if I left you believing that these poems only deal with difficult issues. Overmire also has many poems that tell of the humorous side of Scotland’s story. Although his humor is often subtle and ironic, he goes for the belly laugh in the poem, “Don’t Mess with Mons Meg.” “A 400 pound cannonball / Does wonders for a castle’s / Complexion / Now the king could rightly say / He had the biggest damn balls / In Scotland!” Now, who but a true Scottish storyteller would have ever imagined that line?

This review does not even begin to capture the depth and beauty of Overmire’s poetry. You will want to sit by the fire with a cup of hot chocolate or a wee dram, and Rabbin Burns looking over your shoulder as you revisit the places and stories of Scotland over and over in these verses.