

The Myth of Robert Burns.  
A Study in Celebrity

The social fact diversely called fame, celebrity or renown is no more, in its essence, than the manifestation of uncommon qualities in adaptation to some environment. The mere manifestation of uncommon qualities will not determine fame; for the madman and the criminal, no less than the man who deserves but does not attain celebrity, are uncommon human types and show uncommon qualities. It is essential that these uncommon qualities be considered by other men as superior ones that fame or celebrity may result. The promptness, extent and duration of fame depend respectively on the ease with which the man's uncommon qualities are recognized as <sup>superior</sup> taken to be superior, with in the number of contemporaneous and of successive "environments" which so recognize them. and in the number of successive Prompt or easy fame, and therefor<sup>from</sup> extensive fame, may to a large extent be fostered or forced by what there is no reason not to describe as publicity; lasting fame cannot thus be ensured, except in the almost inconceivable case of continuous publicity, carried on for generations. The fame of Robert Burns, whose fame, as I shall show, is almost wholly unmerited, is one of the few cases of this

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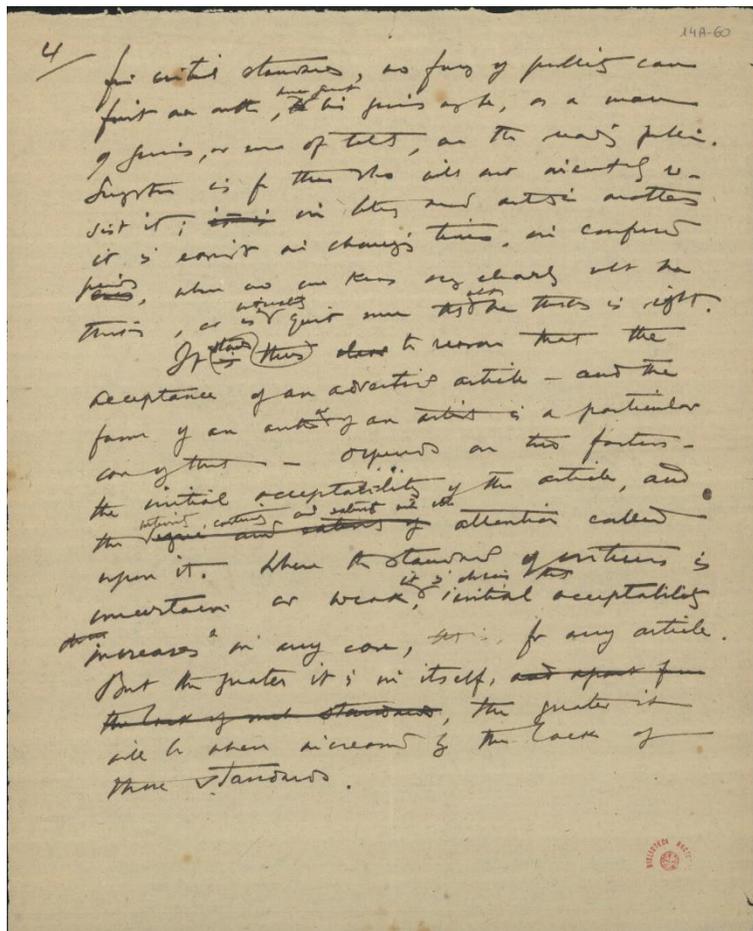
There is one objection to these preliminary considerations which will at once occur, especially after the appearance of the word "publicity" in the case. It will be argued that there is a limit to the results of advertising. A worthless article, it will be said, may be foisted on the public only for a short time; experience of it will show that it is worthless, and will gradually spreading, will irreversibly counteract the best publicity in the world. This is not universally true. It is true, or almost true, of such articles or things for which there are clear and evident standards of criticism. A hand of matches most of which do not strike, a load of motorcars that most of which are broken once a week after initial use will not be found very long on the acceptance of a public. But every one knows what a match is meant for, or what is required of a motor vehicle. The purpose of the object is clear; the standard of criticism perfectly defined. Yet the moment

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we pass from such definite cases to those where suggestion may be operative, the face of the matter is changed. Publicity no longer simply calls attention to the article; it partly creates the article itself. Every one will agree that the effect of medicine can be largely increased or diminished by the initial faith a large part of the user gets. Every one will then agree that, since the article is to be judged by its effect, & since its effect can be increased, if not wholly created, by suggestion, publicity, which is suggestion, can determine to a large extent, in cases such as these, the very effects which it says /claims\ that the article will produce.

In such cases, therefore, in which suggestion is operative, there are no limits to possible effect except the very limits of suggestion |itself|. Everyone knows that the limits of suggestion are the "subject's" preconceived ideas to the contrary. A man who has rooted objection to patent medicines is imperious to advertisement of them. The person will not take his own pills, because he has the preconceived idea - right enough, in his case - that they cannot cure, or, at least, that they cannot cure him. So in an literary age such - such as that of Boileau or of Pope - with rigid and

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firm critical standards, no fancy of publicity can foist an author, however great his genius may be, as a man of genius, or even of talent, on the reading public. Suggestion is for those who will not innately resist it; ~~it is~~ in literary and artistic matters it is easiest in changing times, in confused ~~eras~~ periods, when no one knows very clearly what he thinks, or is intimately quite sure that what he thinks is right.

It thus stands ~~clear~~ to reason that the acceptance of an advertised article - and the fame of an author or of an artist is a particular case of that - depends on two factors - the initial acceptability of the article, and the ~~degree and extent of~~ intensity, continuity and extent which all attention called upon it. Where the standard of criticism is uncertain or weak, it is obvious that initial acceptability ~~decre~~ increases <sup>/so\</sup> in any case, that is, for any article. But the greater it is in itself, ~~and apart from the lack of such standards,~~ the greater it will be then when increased by the lack of those standards.

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