



Sir John Steell c. 1845  
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# Who was Sir John Steell?

Carolyn O'Hara

It's a bit of a surprise to find myself facing familiar features when I am more than 3,000 miles from home.

October 2019 found us on an epic trip to New York City. Unseasonably hot, one day we wound our way along Central Park's leafy, Literary Walk, deliberately dashing for dappled pools of shade, even though the temperature there was still a fiery thirty degrees Celsius.

But what might this have to do with Scotland? Suddenly, there he was before us; our very own Robert Burns, contemplative, holding a musing pose in beautiful bronze. It felt rather like bumping into a next-door neighbour in alien surroundings.

An Ayr lassie, born and bred, for a large portion of my life, I had not paid the Scottish Bard much heed, only

nominally aware of my ignorance about him when strangers shamed me, with their excited interrogations, as they sought inside information.

Fast forward half a century from my naïve youth to the freedom of retirement when new interests blossom, and for my husband a burgeoning career as a Tam o' Shanter performer, the epic poem his star turn, amongst other Burns' classics in his repertoire.

My knowledge about Robert Burns grew too, but I was nonetheless surprised to stumble upon his likeness in Central Park, so what was the back-story to the siting of this impressive work of art?

An accompanying plaque helped answer some questions but the more I read, the more interested I also became in the sculptor responsible, another Scot,

Aberdonian, Sir John Steell.

Born in 1804, he was the son of John Steell Senior and his wife, Margaret Gourlay. His father was a successful carver and gilder who had worked in Edinburgh from 1806. John Steell Junior began to follow in his father's footsteps, becoming apprenticed in 1818, but just one year later, in 1819, his father was declared bankrupt, bringing much shame on the family.

John Steell Junior then began studying art at the Trustees Academy in Edinburgh, under the tutelage of landscape painter Andrew Wilson who had been appointed Master of the Academy.

It was John Steell's first commission, a timber statue of St Andrew, erected in 1827, for the offices of the North British

Fire Insurance Company, which brought him recognition.

Following a trip abroad, to study sculpture in Rome in 1838, he went on to exhibit at both the Royal Scottish Academy and the Royal Academy in London, before being appointed *Sculptor in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen*, which led to international fame. On the death of Prince Albert, he created *The Prince Consort* statue for Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, after which he was knighted in 1876.

During his working life, Steell produced five significant 3-D images of the Bard, the first unveiled in New York in 1880, followed two weeks later by a replica in Dundee. In 1884, he designed another statue of Burns for London's Embankment, with a very similar version provided for Dunedin, in New Zealand, unveiled in the same year. Finally, his marble bust of Burns was installed in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey in 1885 and was Steell's last recorded sculptural work.

During his long career, Steell was responsible for a number of firsts: Edinburgh's Standard Life Assurance Office building boasts the first Scottish stone group pediment, created by Steell. He also introduced large scale marble carving to Scotland, and established the Grove Foundry, in Edinburgh, where fine art bronze casting began.

However, most ground-breaking of all for the arts in Scotland, where earlier generations of talented, ambitious, Scottish sculptors had found themselves with no choice, owing to market conditions, but to seek their fortunes from a base like London, or European cultural centres, Steell proved to be the first Scottish sculptor to conduct his international career whilst steadfastly remaining in Scotland's capital.

So how did he come to be commissioned to provide a statue of Robert Burns for New York's Central Park?

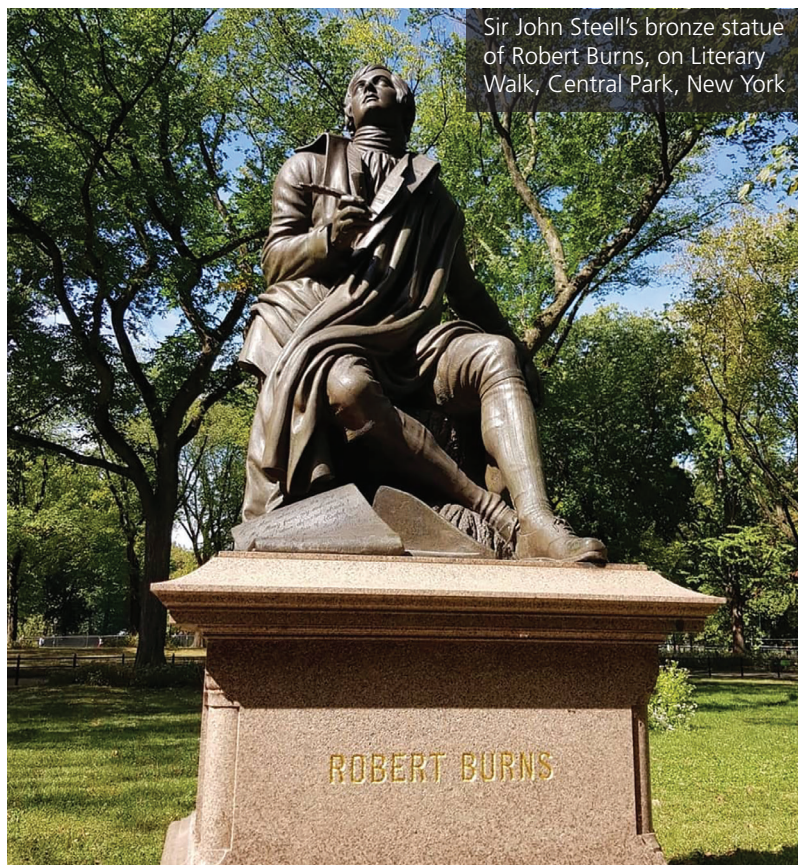
In the early 1870s, he had been chosen to provide an image of Sir Walter Scott, having already carved the iconic, marble statue of the writer and his dog, for the Scott Monument in Edinburgh. It therefore proved a natural step to employ the same artisan to provide a bronze counterpart to Scott, on the Literary Walk, where the Burns' sculpture was installed in 1880, and was regarded in a book by Edward Goodwillie (*The World's Memorials to Robert Burns*) as 'America's first tribute to the Bard of Scotia'.

Steell's trademark combination of contemporary and classical elements are well represented in this depiction of Burns. As in classical models, Steell's statues were of a smooth, matte finish, with 'uninscribed eyes', a phrase which means that the pupils of the subject's eyes were never depicted. In common with many sculptors over the years, Steell used a cast of Robert Burns' skull in order to accomplish the statue, and the ploughman poet is portrayed in eighteenth century attire but styled in classical form.

Seated on a tree stump, with two objects at his feet – a plough and a scroll revealing a poem dedicated to Mary Campbell – he is poised pensively, his quill in his hand, the inclusion of these items the sculptor's tribute to the poet's agrarian and literary life. In keeping with his approach to all his subjects, Steell reveals a tendency to idolise, and Burns' features are regarded as refined. All Burns' statues crafted by Steell between 1880 and 1887, are regarded as *traditional, nostalgic and idealised* symbols of Scotland.

After an impressive and productive career, Sir John Steell died, aged 86, in 1891 in his family home at 24 Greenhill Gardens, in Edinburgh's southern suburbs but this prominent exponent of Scottish art lies in an unmarked grave in Edinburgh's old Calton Cemetery.

For someone who had achieved so much in his lifetime, this at first struck me as unusual and perhaps even suspicious. Did it suggest that, as some wealthy high achievers do, he ended his life as a pauper? Thankfully, there is no evidence to suspect that this was the case.



Sir John Steell's bronze statue of Robert Burns, on Literary Walk, Central Park, New York

The grave had been purchased by his father, John Steell senior, and many members of the Steell and Gourlay families were also interred there. Having experienced first-hand the shame the family had suffered, at the time of his father's bankruptcy, it would not be a stretch to imagine the impact on John Junior, making him keen to avoid similar humiliation and poverty in his own lifetime.

A sense of the man can be found in his obituary, published in *The Times* on 16 September 1891, which confirmed that Sir John's health had been deteriorating for some time, leaving him 'confined to his house'. But more revealing are the words used to describe him as a person, one who had 'a very genial and kindly disposition' and was 'greatly esteemed not only by the members of the Royal Scottish Academy', and others 'in his profession', but also 'by the public at large'.

How apt this tribute seems to me, for a modest man from humble beginnings who achieved world-wide acclaim but who sought to have his sculptures, rather than his name, admired globally.

And so, I stood in New York's Central Park, sheltering in the shadow of Burns' statue, watching as my husband – not one to miss an opportunity – toasted the Bard, in the poet's own words, to the intrigue and mystification of Americans and passing fellow tourists.

But more than that, as I admired the beauty of Sir John Steell's craftsmanship, I also marvelled at the genius of two great Scotsmen, whose works live on for us to appreciate, generation after generation, in so many places around the world.

Having taught English for 20 years, Carolyn O'Hara is now a tutor and freelance writer, with many articles published, often history related. Her non-fiction, social history book, *Oculus: The Musings of a Liberal Victorian in Ayr*, was published in 2020, and her most recent article, 'Hot off the Press, 18th Century Style' about the first edition of *The Edinburgh Courant* (1705), was published in *History Scotland* magazine in the Jan/Feb edition, 2022.