

Andrew Carnegie & his Library Burns Busts.

An investigation into their mysterious “disappearance”

By Ron Ballantyne

There are several websites stating that as many as 3460 libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie were required to have a bust of Robert Burns Prominently displayed. The claim exceeds by almost 1000 the 2509 libraries funded by the Carnegie Foundation worldwide.

My interest in these busts arose when I prepared a presentation on Burns Statues etc. for the Halton Peel Burns Club.

I came across the article by Thomas Keith in the 2001 Burns Chronicle “Burns Statues in North America-a Survey”². In it there is this quote, “*Andrew Carnegie commissioned [Charles] Calverley to sculpt an heroic bust of Burns which was then reproduced and placed prominently inside every Carnegie library funded throughout the United States (Burnsiana, p. 47)*”⁵.

However the citation is incorrect and Thomas Keith tells me the first published reference actually came from James Mackay’s 1992 “Biography of Burns”¹. It is also mentioned in “Dirt & Deity” by Ian MacIntyre (1995)⁸ and in “Pride & Passion” by Gavin Sprott (1996)⁹.

I decided to include a photo of one of these busts in the presentation. I first approached Carnegie Libraries, in the Greater Toronto area. None had a bust of Burns or any record of a requirement to display one.

I was referred to the librarian at Guelph University who runs a blog-site ‘Libraries Today’. He was unaware of the requirement but referred me to Columbia University who hold all the records of the Carnegie Foundation on microfilm.

I received the following from Columbia University:-
“*Andrew Carnegie did own a bust of Robert Burns by the sculptor Charles Calverly (it is listed as part of Carnegie Estate after his death), but I have not been able to find information on any Burns bust donations to Carnegie Libraries. We have microfilmed correspondence files on building all the Carnegie Libraries in the United States, and the ones I’ve seen contain no references to a mandatory Burns bust donation*”.

I was sure that of all the libraries surely Pittsburg, where Carnegie made his fortune, would have a Burns bust.

I received the following reply from them:-

“*As far as we can tell from materials we have here, the story about Carnegie requesting works and busts of Robert Burns in libraries he built "may" have some slight roots, but there is nothing in anything that we have that supports or substantiates this premise.*

I have also looked in the first 3 years of the library annual reports and while there is a lengthy discussion

about scientific oriented books, no mention is made of Burns or a bust.”

I visited the Dunfermline Library, Carnegie’s first, but the only bust of Burns they have came with the Murison Burns Collection, acquired 30 years after the library’s founding in 1883.

I later came across a book “**The Best Gift: A Record of the Carnegie Libraries in Ontario**”³.

This book documents the founding correspondence and early history of 111 libraries in Ontario.

The book makes no mention whatsoever of Robert Burns, or any reference to a Burns bust being required.

The book also includes a copy of the “**Resolution to accept the donation from Andrew Carnegie**” as Appendix 3 on page 183, which can also be viewed on the web in Google Books.

In that document there is no mention of a bust of Robert Burns.

Another US book, written in 1917, ‘**A Book of Carnegie Libraries**’ by Theodore Wesley Koch⁴ makes no mention of Burns or of busts, apart from listing him along with other great writers on the archway of one building.

Two biographies of Andrew Carnegie mention his love of Burns and regular quotations from his works but there is no mention of his requiring busts of Burns to be placed in any of his libraries^{6 & 7}.

Quite apart from the lack of documentary evidence, there are practical implications.

The Calverly bust of Burns is considered one of the artist’s major works. A copy donated by Carnegie is exhibited in the New York Metropolitan Museum of the Arts. This is a second casting. Had there been multiple copies, they would have been recorded by the Museum and in the Inventory of American Sculpture. They are not.

Carnegie’s descendants are apparently unaware of the whereabouts of the original Calverly Bust. It was valued at \$1800 in his estate, equivalent to \$25,500 in 2010. Again the high cost of these busts would have been a burden on



Fig 1
Calverly Bust of Burns
Photo N. Strachan

the small community libraries being funded. Many turned down the funding offer, because of the burden placed on local taxes and as such a bust would have been an added obligation. {Carnegie even refused to provide a free photograph of himself when requested}³.

Thomas Keith tells me that James Mackay was fascinated with the “story” and had mentioned it to him on several occasions. .

Mackay refers to the story in his 1992 “Biography of Robert Burns”(page 688)¹:- “*At one time every Carnegie library in the United States had its obligatory bust of Burns, some 3,460 in all – but this was done away with in the 1950s*”

This appears to be the earliest reference to the story in print. Mackay does not identify his sources, or how the number 3460 came about, or why the “change” in the 1950s, unlike his extensive source citations throughout the rest of the book.

In 2009 after the formal dinner at the Robert Burns World Federation conference in Edinburgh, when the Scottish Minister of Culture & Constitution, Mike Russell, had again referred to the story, I happened to mention in the hearing of Professor David Purdie, Editor of the Burns Encyclopedia, that I was of the opinion that the tale was an urban myth. He reacted rather strongly and was obviously convinced of the veracity of the story. He assured me in an email that:-

“{He} had a word with a friend who’s a descendent of Andrew Carnegie - and with the Foundation. They confirmed that in each Deed executed by, or on behalf of Carnegie, for the foundation of all of his 3000! libraries, it was an absolute specification that each should exhibit a bust of Burns and contain a copy of his Collected Works”.

This statement does not accord with the documented facts, or the complete absence of any busts in funded libraries. As noted above, the grant acceptance document, which must be the “Deed” referred to, contains no reference to a Burns Bust.

The Andrew Carnegie “story” has been widely accepted as factual and is regularly referred to in speeches by Scottish politicians.

The St. Andrews Society of Tampa, Florida, have also responded to it and have raised money to donate a very fine ‘replacement’ bust to each of the three local Carnegie libraries¹⁰. They had hoped that other groups would follow suit in their communities. It is a fine gesture and stands on its own as a positive act.

Carnegie is on record as stating that “There cannot be too many statues erected to the memory of Burns.”

It is possible that someone in the Carnegie Foundation may have come across a statement of intent or the like in the records, which unbeknown to them had never been

implemented. However their reputation and connections were such that no one ventured to question the claim and it has taken on a life of its own.

The funded libraries generally display a photograph, or portrait of Carnegie or a plaque and three acquired a bust of Carnegie.

Based on the foregoing one can only conclude is that the story about placing busts of Robert Burns in all libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie is an Urban Myth.

References:-

- 1 A Biography of Robert Burns, James McKay, ISBN 1851584625
- 2 The Burns Chronicle 2001.
3. The Best Gift: A Record of the Carnegie Libraries in Ontario, by Margaret Beckman, John B Black, and Stephen Langmead. ISBN 0919670822
4. ‘A Book of Carnegie Libraries’, by Theodore Wesley Koch 1917, Google Books
5. Burnsiana, by James McKay, 1988, ISBN 0-9075026-35-7
- 6 Andrew Carnegie, by David Nasaw, 2006, ISBN 1-59420-104 8
- 7 Carnegie, by Peter Krass. 2003, ISBN 0471468835,
8. Dirt & Deity, by Ian MacIntyre (1995) ISBN 0 00 638759 4
- 9 Pride & Passion, by Gavin Sprott (1996) ISBN 0 11 495744 4
- 10 http://standrewsoftampabay.org/index_files/Page766.htm
11. <http://www.newstatesman.com/200005080025>

This article is an abbreviation of one first published in the Winter 2010 edition of the Burns Chronicle.