As Burns Night approaches on January 25, Gillian Dooley considers how much – or little – is known about her admiration for the work of the philandering Scottish poet Robert Burns and Jane Austen, while both being objects of literary idolatry today, had little in common except, as the commentator Elaine Bander once wrote, “for their limited formal education, enthusiastic reading, comic wit, and unquenchable desire to write”. She adds: “They differed in almost every other respect: nationality, gender, class, politics, religion, temperament, and (conspicuously) sexual experience.”

Burns died in 1796, but his celebrity lived on. During Jane Austen’s later years he was, says Bander, “still very much in the news, and still controversial”. Although there can be no doubt that Jane knew Burns’s poetry, the only surviving references to him in her writings (including the letters) are in Sanditon. Charlotte Heywood, the heroine of the novel, is confronted by the rhapsodies of Sir Edward Denham, a devoted fan of Burns: “I confess my sense of his Pre-eminence Miss H. – If Scott has a fault, it is the want of Passion. … But Burns is always on fire,” he enthuses.

Charlotte’s reaction is to hose him down: “‘I have read several of Burn’s Poems with great delight,’ said Charlotte as soon as she had time to speak, ‘but I am not poetic enough to separate a Man’s Poetry entirely from his Character; – and poor Burns’s known Irregularities,
greatly interrupt my enjoyment of his Lines. – I have difficulty in depending on the *Truth* of his Feelings as a Lover. I have not faith in the *sincerity* of the affections of a Man of his Description. He felt & he wrote and he forgot.’ ”

This has usually been interpreted as a fairly transparent statement of Austen’s own views of Burns. However, there are reasons for caution. First, *Sanditon* is very much a first draft, and a fragment at that; and though it appears that Charlotte is a sensible, reliable character – “a pleasing young woman of two and twenty” – whose opinions are endorsed by her author, since we only have the first twelve chapters, I would be reluctant to jump to any such conclusions. And consider the context of this conversation. Sir Edward, whose “great object in life was to be seductive”, is, not to put too fine a point on it, chatting Charlotte up: “The Coruscations of Talent, elicited by impassioned feeling in the breast of Man, are perhaps incompatible with some of the prosaic Decencies of Life; – nor can you, loveliest Miss Heywood – (speaking with an air of deep sentiment) – nor can any Woman be a fair Judge of what a Man may be propelled to say, write or do, by the sovereign impulses of illimitable Ardour.”

Charlotte, very sensibly, decides to pour cold water on this: “This was very fine; – but if Charlotte understood it at all, not very moral – being moreover by no means pleased with his extraordinary stile of compliment, she gravely answered ‘I really know nothing of the matter’. And she changes the subject to the weather.
So there is not much to go on in *Sanditon*, apart from the repetition of a generally held disapproval of Burns’s private life, as well as an admission of ‘great delight’ in reading his poetry.

A rich source of information about Jane’s cultural life, which is now available for investigation, is the surviving collection of fifteen family music books. Of these, eight are catalogued in Ian Gammie and Derek McCulloch’s 1996 publication, *Jane Austen’s Music*. Two of these are manuscript books written entirely in Jane’s handwriting, while another contains a mixture of printed music and manuscript in various hands, including Jane’s. Music was expensive and it was common in those days - before stringent copyright law - for amateur musicians such as Jane and her sister-in-law Elizabeth to make copies of music borrowed from circulating libraries or other musicians for their own use. Two Burns songs, *My Love She’s But a Lassie Yet* and *My Ain Kind Dearie*, are copied in one of Jane’s manuscript books, but only as sets of variations for piano solo, without any words. There appear to be no other Burns songs in this part of the collection, although there are many other Scottish songs.

The other part of the collection belongs to Richard Jenkyns and is on deposit at Chawton House Library, where I spent a few short days in September 2010. Three of these seven books are manuscript books and one, signed “Cass: Eliz: Austen”, is almost certainly in Jane Austen’s handwriting. And here, finally, we find Burns’s words written in Austen’s hand.

The song, titled by Jane *Song from Burns*, is *Their Groves o’ Sweet Myrtle* and is both a love-song and a fierce statement of Scottish nationalist fervour:
Their groves o’ sweet myrtle let Foreign Lands reckon,
Where bright-beaming summers exalt the perfume;
Far dearer to me yon lone glen o’ green breckan,
Wi’ the burn stealing under the lang, yellow broom.
Far dearer to me are yon humble broom bowers
Where the blue-bell and gowan lurk, lowly, unseen;
For there, lightly tripping, among the wild flowers,
A-list’ning the linnet, aft wanders my Jean.

Tho’ rich is the breeze in their gay, sunny valleys,
And cauld Caledonia’s blast on the wave;
Their sweet-scented woodlands that skirt the proud palace,
What are they? – the haunt of the Tyrant and Slave.
The Slave’s spicy forests, and gold-bubbling fountains,
The brave Caledonian views wi’ disdain;
He wanders as free as the winds of his mountains,
Save Love’s willing fetters – the chains of his Jean.

It is with great excitement that researchers have noted a slight difference in Jane Austen’s version of these lyrics. Aside from the occasional variation in spelling – ‘of’ for ‘o’, etc – the last line of each verse is slightly changed. In verse one Jean is altered to Jane and in verse two “the chains of his Jean” becomes “the charms of his Jane”. Surely here we have evidence that Jane Austen, however much her public persona disapproved of Burns, secretly admired
him, even perhaps cherished a secret fantasy of taking the place of his wife Jean in his affections?

The painstaking research of Jeanice Brooks, of Southampton University, has called this romantic notion into question. She has found the same version of the lyrics in another manuscript book, which belonged to one Mary Egerton, “copied c1801 and currently held at Tatton Park, nr Knutsford, Cheshire.” It is likely that both manuscripts were copied from printed sheet music in circulation at the time, although further research is needed to confirm this. The reason for the change in words, by an unknown editor, can only be guessed at but one might remark that while in verse one ‘Jean’ rhymes with ‘unseen’, in verse two ‘disdain’ seems to require ‘Jane’ rather than ‘Jean’. Also, Jean is the Scottish version of Jane, so the change fits with the anglicisation of the rest of the lyrics.

More research is also needed to establish when Jane Austen copied this song: dates have yet to be established for any of the manuscripts in the collection. We don’t know if she copied it when she was a young woman whose fancy was caught by the mention of her name by the famously inconstant bard, or when she was older and amused by the incongruous possibilities that the reference brought to mind. Or perhaps she just liked the song: it’s a charming Scottish air and the words are eloquent and pithy, with their sweeping disdain for the effete foreigner and their pride in the hardy “brave Caledonian”.

These music collections raise as many questions as they answer. Why, for example, did Jane Austen copy The Marseilles March (a version of the French revolutionary anthem, which became ‘La Marseillaise’) into her manuscript book, alongside Stephen Storace’s moving
lament for Marie Antoinette, ‘Captivity’? Patrick Piggott (in *The Innocent Diversion*) noted that “it would be idle to pretend that many of the songs and piano pieces which Jane Austen copied with such care and labour into her books are of a good musical standard, … too many of the items in her collection being no more than superficially pretty and sometimes rather worse than that”. But we can’t be sure that the music she copied gives a faithful and comprehensive picture of her taste in music, because there could be a variety of reasons for the choices she made: she could need a particular song for a specific occasion, perhaps, or it might have words which she thought would amuse a young relative. Copying music from a friend’s collection could be an obligation of friendship, just as today young women might share recordings on iTunes. Or it could simply be a matter of what was both available and within her capability as a performer. And it is by no means certain that what survives comprises what was her whole music collection.

As for her attitude to Burns, little can be safely assumed, beyond that she had read his poetry with some enjoyment and that she had some (surely justified) reservations about the sincerity of the sentiments expressed therein. The charming Song from Burns adds little definite information, but allows a tantalising glimpse of another range of possibilities.