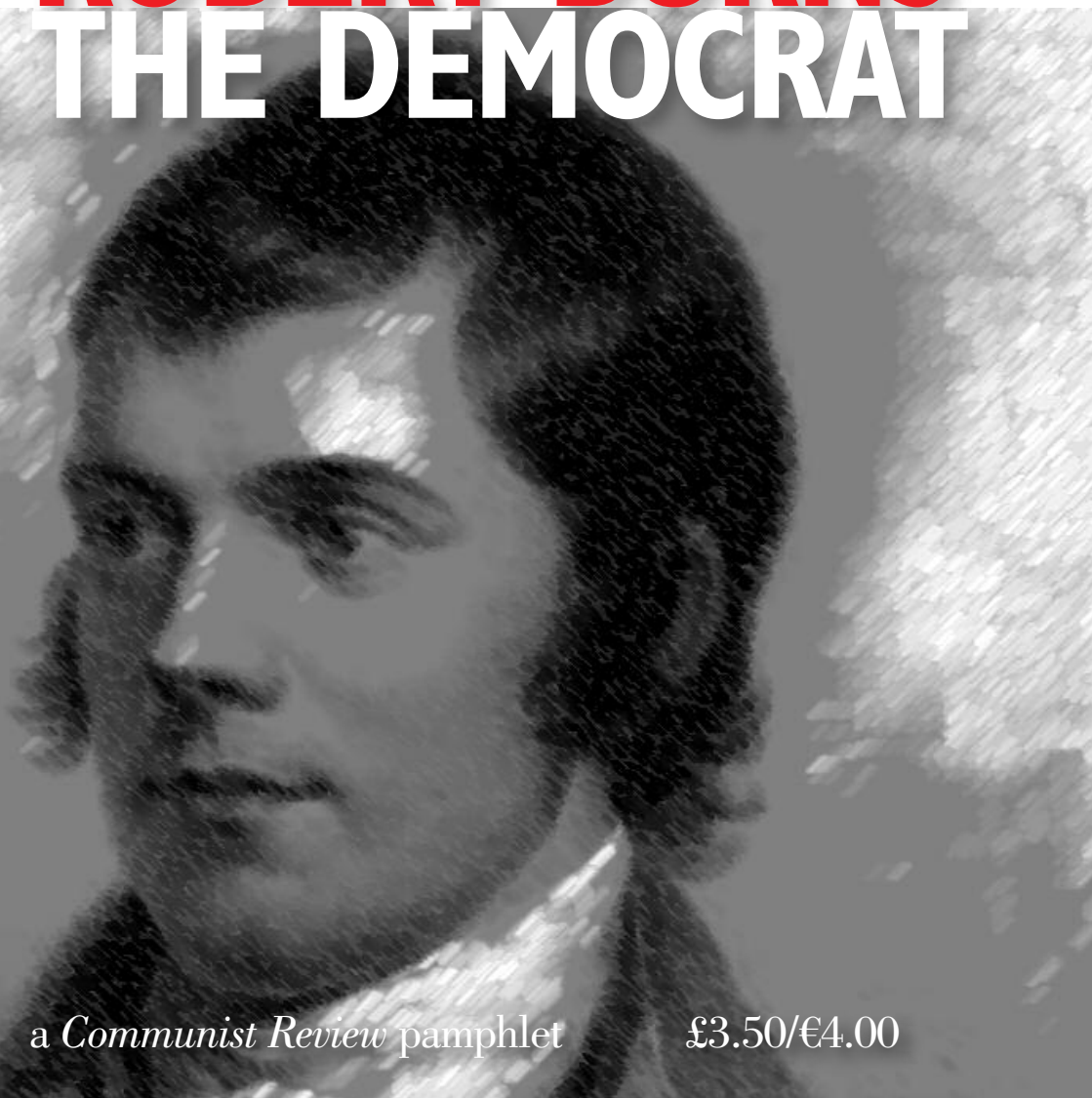
JR Campbell

ROBERT BURNS
THE DEMOCRAT



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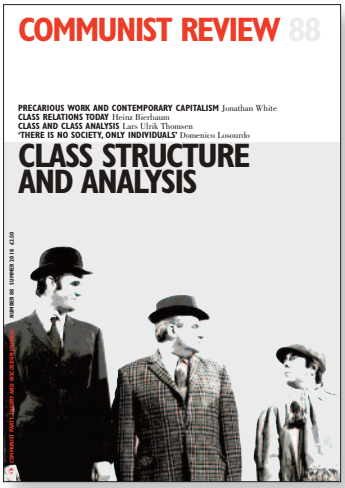

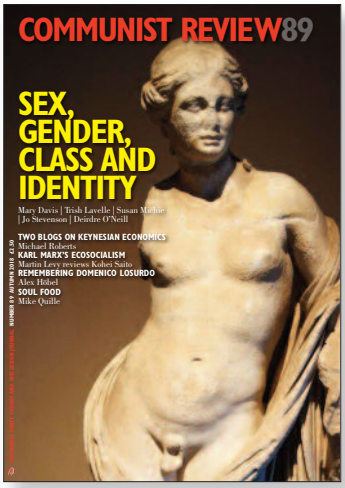

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Robert Burns the Democrat

JR Campbell

A republication of the 1958 edition with a new foreword, explanatory notes and an added glossary.

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Foreword

JR CAMPBELL'S *Burns the Democrat* was first published by the Scottish Committee of the Communist Party in 1945. The pamphlet was then reprinted in 1958, with some alterations, as *Robert Burns the Democrat*, to commemorate the bicentenary of the poet's birth in 1959. That edition in turn was reprinted in 1985 by Clyde Books, the Scottish Committee's bookshop, as a contribution to the celebrations around the bicentenary in 1986 of the Kilmarnock edition of Burns' poems.

However, that last edition has been out of print for many years, and the occasion of the 260th anniversary of the poet's birth, on 25 January 2019, is a timely opportunity to make the text available to younger generations.

John Ross Campbell (1894-1969) was one of the towering figures of the Communist Party from its foundation – nearly always 'JR' in his published work, but 'Johnny' to his close comrades. Starting with his activity in the Clyde Workers Committee in the early 1920s, he was always at the centre of events, becoming a fine communist journalist and political writer, with a bent to the Party's trade union work. He was appointed foreign editor of the *Daily Worker* in 1932, then later assistant editor, editor (1939), assistant editor again (1942), then finally editor once more, from 1949 to 1957. He was also a prolific writer of pamphlets.

Here, in a mere 45 pages, the author skilfully examines Robert Burns' life and work in light of the economic, social and political circumstances through which Burns lived. For many people, it therefore casts new light on much about Burns that has been inadequately understood. The pamphlet places the poet firmly where he belongs – in the forefront of the literary, religious, social and political thought of his day – and was thus an original contribution to Burns scholarship.

Too often, Burns is portrayed as a sort of caricature, a lover of wine, women and song, with an attachment to a romantic view of Scottishness, while his opposition to bigotry, his democratic principles, his championing of the equality of women and men, without regard to title, and his support for international brotherhood are all but ignored.

It is not for nothing that the fine 20th century Scottish communist poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, wrote as follows in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

> No' wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote
> But misapplied is a'body's property,
> And gin there was his like alive the day
> They'd be the last a kennin' haund to gi'e –
>
> Croose London Scotties wi' their braw shirt fronts
> And a' their fancy freens, rejoicin'

That similah gatherings in Timbuctoo,
Bagdad – and Hell, nae doot – are voicin'

Burns' sentiments o' universal love,
In pidgin' English or in wild-fowl Scots,
And toastin' ane wha's nocht to them but an
Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' their thochts
…
Rabbie, wad'st thou were here – the world hath need,
And Scotland mair sae, o' the likes o' thee!
The whisky that aince moved your lyre's become
A laxative for loquacity!

O gin they'd stegh their guts and haud their wheesht
I'd thole it, for "a man's a man," I ken,
But though the feck ha'e plenty o' the "a' that,"
They're nocht but zoologically men.

We are proud to offer *Robert Burns the Democrat* once again. It was an important booklet of its time, and is even more relevant now. To help those readers unfamiliar with Lowland Scots to get the most from the poetic extracts, a glossary is provided; while notes have also been added, to clarify some of the references and provide sources for quoted prose. We hope that JR would understand – after all, such features are common in most Burns compendiums.

A very small number of JR's comments reveal the date when the first version of the pamphlet was written: Marshall Aid is a thing of the distant past; the St Rollox chemical works is long gone, together with its workforce; and Scotland's Parliament was refounded in 1999. The first, essentially a device for boosting US-owned businesses, and stemming the advance of the left, has been succeeded today by the role of the European Commission. The fate of the second reflects the basic inhumanity of capitalism, that dispenses with its workers once their labour power is no longer needed. The third has yet to realise its full potential to act on behalf of Scotland's working people – and it would certainly not be able to do so with so-called independence inside the EU, or by dividing Britain's working class in the face of the unified monopoly capitalist ruling class at British level. It is notable, as JR shows, that while Burns was very much a Scottish patriot, he also argued that Britain should be united and right its own wrongs itself.

In such a short work of scholarship it is inevitable that there will be omissions, and those familiar with Burns will have their own views. For my own part, I wish that JR had found space to include *Thanksgiving for a*

National Victory, thought to refer to a naval victory in the early stages of the French Revolutionary War:

> Ye hypocrites! Are these your pranks?
> To murder men, and give God thanks?
> Desist, for shame! Proceed no further:
> God won't accept your thanks for Murther!

This is arguably one of Burns' best anti-war pieces, with its exposé of hypocrisy. However, its omission is a minor quibble.

Burns' heritage is for Scotland, Britain and the world. May the republication of this pamphlet further contribute to a deeper and fuller understanding of the work of Scotland's most popular poet.

Keith Stoddart
Chair, Scottish Committee
of the Communist Party

Editorial Comments

This pamphlet is intended to be the first of an occasional series from Communist Review*, the theoretical and discussion journal of the Communist Party. The journal has a regular poetry feature, Soul Food, as well as artistic features and occasional cultural articles.*

The text of the *pamphlet was scanned from the 1985 edition, where "the text was reproduced without alteration from the setting of 1958." Here, however, as well as adding a glossary and explanatory notes (the original ones from the author being marked 'JRC'), we have taken the opportunity to correct minor errors, insert titles of poems where they were missing, and check the texts of Burns' poetry and prose against James A Mackay's recent authoritative anthologies (cited in footnotes). In the poems, one consequence is the removal of many apostrophes, in recognition of Scots as a distinct language. This does not apply to the MacDiarmid poem above. Some of the footnotes are also taken from Mackay's anthologies.*

Martin Levy
Editor, Communist Review

The Social Background

ROBERT BURNS, Scotland's national poet, whose bicentenary will be celebrated in many lands this year, was born on 25 January 1759 at a period of great social and political change in the Western world.

He was born 13 years and three months after the clans, under Bonnie Prince Charlie, went down to defeat at Culloden. The opening shots in the American Revolution were fired when he was a lad of 16, and the Bastille was stormed when he was 30 years of age and had three years previously published the Kilmarnock edition of his poems. Thus he lived in a period of two great revolutions and was greatly influenced by them and by the development of the movement for political reform in his home.

His *Ballad on the American War* showed that he was familiar with the military campaign in America and the consequent political repercussions in Britain.

When Burns was born, Scotland was just beginning to recover from the economic consequences of the union with England (1707). The union meant free trade with England, and in the first half of the century the much more efficient industries over the Border had wrought havoc with the poorly-equipped Scots industries on the east side of the country. It was not until the trade of Glasgow with the American colonies, particularly the tobacco trade, began to develop on a large scale, that the long and painful struggle to improve Scotland's economy began to show substantial signs of progress.

The exploitation of the American colonies was a source of superprofits and of great capital accumulation in Glasgow, which was later to provide the means of stimulating economic development in the West of Scotland.

In Burns' boyhood, James Watt in Glasgow University was busily improving the steam engine, while his colleague Adam Smith, the professor of moral philosophy, was turning more and more from philosophy to political economy in his lectures. He was already entering the path which led to the publication of the *The Wealth of Nations*, in which the policy of releasing emergent capitalism from the shackles of state regulations was powerfully expounded. This policy was to find its most ruthless applications in Scotland in the not too distant future.

Linen manufacture in Burns' boyhood was still the predominant textile industry. It was carried on mainly in the homes of the workers, who were, however, falling into growing dependence on the merchants who supplied them with raw materials and took away the finished products to sell on the market. There was some factory development though it was yet slight. A

similar set-up prevailed when linen began to be displaced by cotton in the latter part of Burns' lifetime.

The semi-independent weavers, earning a good living by eighteenth-century standards when trade was booming, were a section of the people easy to organise and ever-ready to express their discontent. They were the backbone of the popular radical movements which began to sprout up towards the end of the century

In Burns' time, therefore, factory capitalism was but slightly developed. Indeed the only mention of a large-scale capitalist enterprise in Burns is his quip on the new Carron Iron Works near Falkirk, founded in the year in which he was born.

Burns tried to see this industrial wonder, which was rather a white elephant in its early period, when visiting the neighbourhood on 26 September 1787, but the dour gateman refused to admit him.

His dourness in refusing admission was immortalised in:

> We cam na here to view your warks
> In hopes to be mair wise,
> But only, lest we gang to Hell,
> It may be nae surprise:
> But whan we tirl'd at your door,
> Your porter dought na bear us:
> Sae may, should we to hell's yetts come,
> Your billy Satan sair us!
> *(Impromptu on Carron Iron Works)*

Still, maybe posterity may have lost a lot because Burns was deprived of a close-up view.

There was one aspect of the changing economy with which Burns was only too well acquainted – the sweeping changes which were then taking place in agriculture. The old strip system of farming, in which a peasant's holding was divided into a number of strips intermingled with those of his fellows, was passing away and in its place was coming in a compact consolidated farm, in which the owner of the land and the farmer, usually employing some hired labour, were interested in introducing the latest improvements. Unfortunately the rents were fixed at levels which proved to be ruinous if there was a poor harvest or a fall in prices.

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o Mice an Men
Gang aft agley,
An lea'e us nought but grief an pain,
For promis'd joy!
(To a Mouse)

Burns' father and Burns were to know the heartbreaking worry of trying to make ends meet in a lean year.

Burns in *The Cotter's Saturday Night* has left us a highly sentimentalised picture of the cotter – the small peasant who was being eliminated by the enclosures and by the advance of the new farming technique. It was the cotters' life, as Burns' upright, intensely religious father would perhaps have liked to see it; but the cardboard figures in the poem are far from resembling the real earth-bound cotters whose Saturday night was not always spent in reading the bible and in singing psalms. *The Holy Fair* and *Hallowe'en* give a picture of Scots rural life, which is much more alive.

Burns himself was not a cotter but a tenant farmer – as was his father. For the farm at Mount Oliphant, his father paid an annual rent of £40 to £45. When following his father's death Burns and brother Gilbert rented the farm at Mossgiel they paid an annual rent of £90. Burns' Dumfriesshire venture, the Ellisland farm, was rented from Patrick Miller at a sum of £50 per annum for the first three years and thereafter £70 per annum. It must be said, however, that Burns' father entered on the vocation of a farmer with very little capital, and so had to stint his family in food and to grossly overwork them.

The hired ploughman in Burns' day received an annual wage of £7 per year plus food and lodgings. The £90 per year which Burns paid for Mossgiel was a comfortable lower middle class income in the Scotland of that period. Burns was therefore not a member of the dying peasantry. He was a member, though a poor and financially handicapped one, of the class of tenant farmers employing the new agricultural technique.

Burns felt himself to be a member of a class that was rising in the social scale and was claiming a wider share in the life of the country.

In Ayrshire, in the Edinburgh interludes and in Dumfries, Burns' bosom friends were of the rising middle class. In the circle of lawyers, doctors, schoolmasters and progressive clergymen, Burns moved on terms of complete intimacy. So nothing could be more absurd than to represent Burns as a 'heaven-inspired peasant' born with a miraculous gift of poetry,

emerging from a mass of country bumpkins to astonish the world. Burns' Ayrshire acquaintances, Gavin Hamilton and Robert Aiken, lawyers, John Goldie and Robert Muir, wine merchants, the Reverend John McMath and John Mackenzie, were men of high intelligence taking a deep interest in all of the questions of their time.

From 1730 onward Scotland was experiencing an intense intellectual development. Hume in philosophy and history, Adam Smith in moral philosophy and political economy, Principal Robertson in history, Alexander Munro in anatomy, are but a few of the famous names of the period. More important still was the fact that poetry in the Scots tongue was beginning to revive.

Allan Ramsay was to print some of the old Scots poems in the *Evergreen* collection and *The Tea Table Miscellany*. But such Scots poetic tradition as came to Burns was truncated. Dunbar, Henryson and the other great Scots poets of the 15th and 16th century, he did not have the opportunity of reading.

The most powerful and beneficial poetic influence on Burns was Robert Fergusson (1750-1774), whose mastery of the Scots tongue was second only to that of Burns himself. So Scotland's national poet grew up in a situation in some ways favourable to a further advance in Scots poetry. In relation to Scots songs Burns made himself the best-informed man of his day. He was in addition a keen student of all the religious, political and philosophical questions of his time. The man who wrote *Holy Willie's Prayer* knew Calvinist theology inside-out, a fact that helped to give that powerful satire its lethal punch.

By the time he went to Edinburgh at the age of 27 he was by any reasonable standard a well-educated man, a brilliant conversationalist (what a pity no-one played Boswell to him) with an exceptionally retentive memory. The conception of Burns as a prickly, uncouth genius out of place in the Edinburgh salons is fantastic. On any discussions relating to poetry, philosophy, religion or politics, he could give points to most of those present.

Dugald Stewart, the philosopher and economist, who was six years older than Burns, left an account which shows the impression he made on a keen and cultured mind. Writing of his first meeting with Burns, Stewart said:

> "His manners were then, as they continued ever afterwards, simple, manly and independent; strongly expressive of conscious genius and worth; but without anything that indicated forwardness, arrogance or

> vanity. He took his share in conversation but not more than belonged to him …. Nothing, perhaps, was more remarkable amongst his various attainments than the fluency and precision and originality of his language when he spoke in company; more particularly as he aimed at purity in his turn of expression and avoided more successfully than most Scotchmen the peculiarities of Scottish phraseology."[1]

Burns' education was, however, dearly bought. It was acquired after strenuous days of work on the farm. In youth and young manhood in his daily toil and in his studies Burns worked far beyond his physical capacities. The result was a strained heart, the source of recurring fits of melancholia, and one of the major causes (along with wholly incorrect medical treatment) which hastened his early death.

By the standards of the Scotland of his day he did not in adult life live in conditions of grinding poverty. But both as farmer and exciseman he had to work hard to earn every penny of his modest competence. He was oppressed, sometimes unduly, by the insecurity of his position. No doubt his work as a farmer and exciseman helped to keep his feet on the ground of reality, but he had neither that peace of mind nor freedom from economic worry that would have enabled him to concentrate on his literary work.

In the later years of his life he lived under the menace of political victimisation. He was undoubtedly frustrated by the fact that he could not publicly express, in all vigour, what he felt and thought on the major political struggle of his day. That he achieved so much under conditions of extreme nervous strain is the real miracle of Burns.

His achievements were vast. He was the forerunner of that brilliant galaxy of English romantic poets of the early 19th century and was acknowledged by them to be such.

In his work for Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* and for Thomson's *Select Scottish Airs* he rescued hundreds of the folk tunes (particularly the Highland tunes) of his country from impending oblivion and fitted them with his immortal words; they remain a joy to all mankind.

His satires are amongst the most powerful ever written in exposure of humbug, hypocrisy and oppression. His epistles express in glorious rhythm the joy of life and he made the life of the common man, his fears and hopes the theme of poetry in a way that remains unsurpassed.

---

[1] Dugald Stewart's *Letter Respecting Burns*, in J Currie, *The Life of Robert Burns, with a criticism of his writings*, William and Robert Chambers, Edinburgh, 1838.

What a pity that his countrymen in praising him, often indiscriminately, did not take to heart his injunction to encourage Scots literature.

> … if a' the land
> Would take the Muses' servants by the hand;
> Not only hear, but patronise, befriend them,
> And where ye justly can commend, commend them;
> And aiblins when they winna stand the test,
> Wink hard and say: 'The folks hae done their best!'
> Would a' the land do this, then I'll be caition,
> Ye'll soon hae Poets o the Scottish nation
> Will gar Fame blaw until her trumpet crack,
> And warsle Time, and lay him on his back!
> (*Scots Prologue, for Mrs. Sutherland's Benefit Night,* 1790)

Books have been written on the value of his contribution to poetry and song, but as our theme is "Burns, the Democrat", we will, in this modest booklet, confine ourselves to Burns as the herald of the common people in their struggle for a higher and nobler way of life.

Burns on the Social System

THE DOMINANT SECTION of the ruling class in Burns' day was the landlords. They controlled the sparse group of voters in the country and degraded even the House of Commons of that day with a Scottish representation that was beneath contempt.

Burns had always his eye on the reactionary section of this class and immortalised some of them in biting satire.

In 1786 he wrote the *Address of Beelzebub* to the Earl of Breadalbane. The Earl and the Highland Society had met in Covent Garden, London,

> "to concert ways and means to frustrate the design of five hundred Highlanders, who, as the Society was informed by Mr. M'Kenzie of Applecross, were so audacious as to attempt an escape from their lawful lords and masters whose property they are by emigrating from the lands of Mr. MacDonald of Glengary to the wilds of Canada in search of that fantastic thing—LIBERTY."[2]

The successful American revolution was in everyone's mind, and Burns

[2] Burns' words.

pictures the emigrating highlanders setting up institutions on the American model in their new surroundings.[3]

> Faith! you and Applecross were right
> To keep the Highland hounds in sight!
> I doubt na! they wad bid nae better,
> Than let them ance out owre the water!
> Then up amang thae lakes and seas,
> They'll mak what rules and laws they please:
> Some daring Hancock, or a Franklin
> May set their Highland bluid a-ranklin;
> Some Washington again may head them,
> Or some Montgomery, fearless, lead them;
> Till (God knows what may be effected
> When by such heads and hearts directed)
> Poor dunghill sons of dirt and mire
> May to Patrician rights aspire!
> Nae sage North now, nor sager Sackville,
> To watch and premier o'er the pack vile.
> An whare will you get Howes and Clintons
> To bring them to a right repentance?—
> To cowe the rebel generation,
> An save the honor o the nation?
>
> *They*, an be damn'd! what right hae they
> To meat, or sleep, or light o day?
> Far less to riches, pow'r, or freedom,
> But what your lordship likes to gie them?

Beelzebub promises the Earl his due station in Hell when he passes over.

> Go on, my Lord! I lang to meet you.
> An in my 'house at hame' to greet you;

[3] The poem lists leading American and British figures during the American War of Independence: John Hancock, president of the second Continental Congress; Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, two of the Founding Fathers; Richard Montgomery, a major-general in the Continental Army; Frederick Lord North, British prime minister; Lord George Sackville, secretary of state for America in North's cabinet; Sir Henry Clinton, British general during the war; William, Viscount Howe, commander-in-chief of the British forces in the early part of the war.

Wi common lords ye shanna mingle,
The benmost neuk beside the ingle,
At my right han assign'd your seat,
'Tween Herod's hip an Polycrate.[4]

In the next generation the Highland lairds were driving their tenants away to make room for sheep.

The life of the more frivolous section of the landed gentry is scathingly depicted in *The Twa Dogs.*

But gentlemen, an ladies warst,
Wi ev'n-down want o wark are curst.
They loiter, lounging, lank an lazy;
Tho deil-haet ails them, yet uneasy;
Their days insipid, dull an tasteless;
Their nights unquiet, lang an restless.

An ev'n their sports, their balls an races,
Their galloping through public places,
There's sic parade, sic pomp an art,
The joy can scarcely reach the heart.

The men cast out in party-matches,
Then sowther a' in deep debauches.
Ae night they're mad wi drink an whoring,
Niest day their life is past enduring.

The ladies arm-in-arm in clusters
As great and gracious a' as sisters,
But hear their absent thoughts o ither,
They're a' run deils an jads thegither.
Whyles, owre the wee bit cup and plaitie,
They sip the scandal-potion pretty;
Or lee-lang nights wi crabbit leuks
Pore owre the devil's pictur'd beuks,
Stake on a chance a farmer's stackyard,
An cheat like ony unhang'd blackguard.

The factors who squeezed the last penny of rent from the unfortunate tenants were a very special target for Burns' anger.

[4] Polycrates, tyrant of Samos in the 6th century BCE.

I've notic'd on our laird's court-day
(An mony a time my heart's been wae),
Poor tenant bodies, scant o cash
How they maun thole a factor's snash;
He'll stamp an threaten, curse an swear,
He'll apprehend them, poind their gear;
While they maun stan wi aspect humble
An hear it a' an fear an tremble!

In his autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore, Burns explained that it was the factor of his father's first farm at Mount Oliphant who was depicted in this poem.[5]

Above all Burns hated the pride and insolence of the reactionary gentry.

While frosty winds claw in the drift
Ben to the chimla lug,
I grudge a wee the great-folk's gift
That live sae bien an snug
I tent less, and want less
Their roomy fire-side;
But hanker and canker,
To see their cursed pride.
(Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet)

Burns and the Poor

THE DEEPEST SYMPATHY of Burns was reserved for the poor man especially:

when they meet wi sair disasters
Like loss o health, or want o masters.
(The Twa Dogs)

He thought there was no more pitiful spectacle in the whole of human existence than that of a man searching for work.

See yonder poor, o'erlabour'd wight,
So abject, mean and vile,
Who begs a brother of the earth
To give him leave to toil;

[5] See James A Mackay, ed, *The Complete Letters of Robert Burns*, Bicentenary Souvenir Edition, Alloway Publishing, Ayrshire, 1987/1990 *(CLRB)*, p 252.

And see his lordly fellow-worm,
The poor petition spurn,
Unmindful, tho a weeping wife
And helpless offspring mourn.

The neglected, poor man, in his old age, wrung his heart:

Look not alone on youthful prime,
Or manhood's active might;
Man then is useful to his kind
Supported is his right.
But see him on the edge of life,
With cares and sorrows worn,
Then Age and Want – oh! ill-matched pair! –
Shew man was made to mourn.
(Man Was Made to Mourn)

He was later to read and enjoy Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, the first political work to advocate old age pensions. But the poet was to be well over 100 years in his grave before the first niggardly old age pension scheme was inaugurated.

In none of the letters or poems of Burns are any drastic economic changes in the social system of his day envisaged. He looked rather to the gradual economic progress of the tenant farmers. small manufacturers and the middle class in general to create the elements of a better order, with, of course, the more intelligent members of the working class admitted to their ranks. The political reforms which he supported were to contribute to this end by the removal of unjust privilege.

And so, in the *Epistle to a Young Friend*, to Andrew Hunter Aiken, son of Robert Aiken to whom the *Cotter's Saturday Night* was dedicated, the advice is given:

To catch Dame Fortune's golden smile
Assiduous wait upon her,
And gather gear by ev'ry wile
That's justify'd by honor,
Not for to hide it in a hedge,
Nor for a train-attendant;
But for the glorious privilege
Of being independent.

Burns and Religious Reform

NO ESTIMATION OF SCOTS HISTORY is of the slightest value that ignores the central role of the reformed churches.

The Church of Scotland in the 17th and early 18th centuries enjoyed a prestige unparalleled in any other Protestant land. It was the only institution in the country which gave the small man – the peasants, the artisans, the small traders and shopkeepers – a voice in the affairs of their country (for the Kirk did not stand outside politics) and when put to it they had defended it with their lives.

Burns was never blind to the progressive role which had been played by the Kirk in Scots history.

> The Solemn League and Covenant,
> Now brings a smile, now brings a tear
> But sacred Freedom, too, was theirs;
> If thou'rt a slave, indulge thy sneer.
> *(The Solemn League and Covenant)*

But in Burns' day the Kirk was tending to degenerate into an odious spiritual and social tyranny. People were hauled before the spiritual Gestapo, the Kirk Session, for the most trivial offences. To be lax in attendance at Church, to be engaged in worldly pursuits on the Sabbath day, were quite considerable offences.

Sexual laxity in any form was a major offence and no modern state, with all its centralisation of power, would venture to tackle it in the dictatorial manner of the Kirk Session.

Even today the Scots Sabbath is an institution unique in Christendom. In Burns' day and for a long time afterwards it was the amazement of Europe.

In the early 19th century, the great Frenchman of letters, Stendhal. wrote:

> "I shall say nothing of the terrible Scotch Sunday besides which London's is a positive jollification. This day, consecrated to the honour of heaven, is the nearest approach to hell I have seen on earth. Said a Scotchman to a French friend as they were returning from Church: 'Not quite so fast or people will think we are taking a walk.'"[6]

[6] Stendhal (Henri Beyle), *On Love*, transl PS Woolf and CNS Woolf, Duckworth, London, 1915, p 180, https://www.electricscotland.com/lifestyle/weekend7.htm.

Sinners against the sexual moral code – and they were fairly plentiful in the rough, old rural Scotland – had to sit in a special seat in the church – known as the 'creepie-chair' – and be publicly reproved for their sins. If they were well-to-do people the Kirk Session would relax the rules. They might be permitted to endure the reproof while standing in their own pew.

It is such a situation which is depicted in the poem *The Rantin Dog, the Daddie O't*, said to have been given by Burns to Jean Armour when she was with child by him. In the poem it is the woman who is speaking. The Rantin Dog is, of course, the poet himself.

When I mount the creepie-chair
Wha will sit beside me there?
Gie me Rob, I'll seek nae mair –
The rantin dog, the daddie o't.

Wha will crack to me my lane?
Wha will mak me fidgin fain?
Wha will kiss me o'er again?
The rantin dog, the daddie o't

The Poet and Calvinism

ORTHODOX CALVINISM in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries was a religion more concerned with fighting the Devil (who had practically acquired naturalisation in Scotland) than in worshipping God:

> "To feel the smoke of Hell's fire in the throat … to stand beside a river of fire and brimstone broader than the earth and to think to be bound hand and foot and casten into the midst of it quick [*ie* alive] and then to have God locking the prison door, never to be opened for all Eternity."

So wrote Samuel Rutherford, one of Scotland's most famous divines.[7]

In the famous poem, *The Holy Fair*, where excellent poetry and high satire are combined, Burns describes a typical hell-fire sermon.

But now the Lord's ain trumpet touts
Till a' the hills are rairin,

[7] S Rutherford, *Letters, Now Divided Into Three Parts*, Vol 1, 6th edition, E & J Robertsons, Edinburgh, 1761, p 42.

And echoes back return the shouts;
Black Russell[8] is na spairin;
His piercin words, like Highlan swords
Divide the joints an marrow.
His talk of Hell, whare devils dwell,
Our vera 'sauls does harrow'
Wi fright that day.

A vast, unbottom'd, boundless pit
Fill'd fou o lowin brunstane
Whase ragin flame, an scorching heat,
Wad melt the hardest whun-stane!
The half-asleep start up wi fear,
An think they hear it roarin
When presently it does appear
'Twas but some neebor snorin
Asleep that day.

This grim Calvinism was being challenged in Scotland throughout the 18th century. From Francis Hutcheson, Professor of moral philosophy in Glasgow from 1729 to 1746, there stemmed many critical trends. The most extreme developed through David Hume to scepticism or, to use the more modern term, agnosticism. The main trend led to a cautious undermining of the old Calvinist dogmatism within the Church itself, a greater stress on morality and on the necessity of interpreting the dogmas of the Church in the light of current knowledge or 'common sense'. Some of the religious and moral conceptions found in the letters and poems of Burns are the purest Hutcheson.

By Burns' time, the controversy had reached an acute stage. The struggle between the Auld Lichts, who defended orthodox Calvinism, and the New Lichts, who wanted some modification of the historic Calvinist doctrine, was shaking every parish.

Burns threw his weight against the Auld Lichts, "the lads in black",[9] in favour of the New Lichts, the "candid liberal band."[10]

Broadly speaking the Auld Lichts represented the popular masses – the small farmers and the artisans – while the New Lichts were representative

[8] Rev John Russell of Cromarty, successor to Rev James Oliphant, both of whom are cited in *The Ordination*, below.
[9] From Burns, *Epistle to John Rankin*, in JA Mackay, ed, *Robert Burns Complete Poetical Works*, Bicentenary edition (*RBCPW*), Alloway Publishing, Catrine, p 83.
[10] From Burns, *Epistle to the Rev. John McMath*, in *RBCPW*, p 131.

of the middle classes in the towns and the progressive section of the country gentry.

A big issue in the struggle was the question of patronage. The Auld Lichts, strong in popular support, were for the election of the ministers by the congregations. Some New Licht ministers owed their posts to patronage, the nomination of the minister by the patron, usually a local landlord.

In Burns' poem, *The Ordination*, a struggle over the appointment of a Mr Mackinlay, an Auld Licht clergyman, is described. The patron, the Earl of Glencairn, had been responsible in teeth of considerable popular opposition, when he appointed a Mr Lindsay, a New Licht, as the first minister in charge of the Laigh Kirk, Kilmarnock, some time previously. The appointment was said to be due to the influence of Mrs Lindsay, whose maiden name was Maggie Lauder. She had been housekeeper to the Earl. When the time came to appoint a second-in-charge, the Earl had wisely taken account of popular feeling and appointed the Auld Licht – Mackinlay. It was an Auld Licht victory which Burns satirises in the verse:

Curst Common-sense, the imp o hell
Cam in wi Maggie Lauder.
But Oliphant aft made her yell
An Russel fair misca'd her:
This day Mackinlay taks the flail
An he's the boy will blaud her!
He'll clap a shangan on her tail
An set the bairns to daud her,
Wi dirt this day.
(The Ordination)

In *The Holy Fair* the poet satirises one of the massed communion services in which the congregation of a number of neighbouring parishes met together to hear a relay of sermons from the assembled clergymen.

Here some are thinkin on their sins
An some upo their claes;
Ane curses feet that fyl'd his shins,
Anither sighs and prays.
On this hand sits a chosen swatch
Wi screw'd-up, grace-proud faces;
On that a set o chaps at watch,
Thrang winkin on the lasses
To chairs that day

…
How monie hearts this day converts
O sinners and o lasses!
Their hearts o stane, gin night are gane
As soft as onie flesh is.
There's some are fou o love divine;
And some are fou o brandy;
And monie jobs that day begin,
May end in houghmagandie
Some ither day.

The most deadly attacks on the old theology were to come. In his *Address to the Deil* Burns goes after the terror of all Calvinist Scotland. His Satan is no arrogant Prince of Darkness, but a comic figure, almost a boozing crony, whom the bard slaps on the back and nudges in the ribs.

O Thou! whatever title suit thee –
Auld Hornie, Satan, Nick or Clootie –
Wha in yon cavern grim an sootie,
Clos'd under hatches,
Spairges about the brunstane cootie,
To scaud poor wretches!

Hear me, Auld Hangie, for a wee,
An let poor, damned bodies be;
I'm sure sma' pleasure it can gie,
Ev'n to a deil,
To skelp an scaud poor dogs like me,
An hear us squeal!

The 'Fall of Man' is sketched in Burns' own inimitable fashion.

Lang syne in Eden's bonie yard,
When youthful lovers first were pair'd,
And all the soul of love they shar'd,
The raptur'd hour,
Sweet on the fragrant flow'ry swaird
In shady bow'r.

Then you, ye auld, snick-drawing dog!
Ye cam to Paradise incog,
An play'd on man a cursed brogue,
(Black be your fa'!)
An gied the infant warld a shog,
Maist ruin'd a'.

One of the points in which Auld Licht and New Licht theologies were in conflict was whether if a sinner repented he would go to heaven. The Auld Lichts were adamant. Only if the sinner in question was predestined for heaven would his repentance matter. The New Lichts, applying 'curst commonsense', thought the repented sinner was fairly safe. Burns went one better. He thought the devil himself should repent and so change the entire cosmic set-up.

> But fare-you-weel, auld Nickie-ben!
> O wad ye tak a thought an men'!
> Ye aiblins might – I dinna ken –
> Still hae a stake:
> I'm wae to think upo yon den,
> Ev'n for your sake!

The Poet Flays Hypocrisy

THE GREATEST BLOW he struck at religious bigotry was in opposition to the Kirk Session of Mauchline, which had charged his friend, Gavin Hamilton, with unorthodox behaviour, to wit:

1. Unnecessary absence from Church two Sabbaths in December and three Sabbaths in January together.
2. Setting out on a journey to Carrick on the third Sabbath of December.
3. Habitual, if not total, neglect of family worship.
4. Abusive letter to the Session dated 13th March 1784.

Heading the spiritual Gestapo, who were pursuing Hamilton, was one William Fisher, a sound man of church discipline, but apt to skid morally.

Soon there began to pass from hand to hand in Ayrshlre Burns' most famous satire, *Holy Willie's Prayer*, in which the elder is found instructing the Deity how to run the universe, not to speak of the village of Mauchline.

> Oh Thou that in the Heavens does dwell
> Wha, as it pleases best Thysel'
> Sends ane to Heaven and ten to Hell,
> A' for Thy glory
> And no for onie guid or ill
> They've done before Thee!
> …
> When frae my mither's womb I fell
> Thou might hae plung'd me deep in Hell,
> To gnash my gooms, and weep and wail
> In burning lakes,

Where damned devils roar and yell,
Chain'd to their stakes.

Yet I am here a chosen sample,
To show Thy grace is great and ample;
I'm here a pillar o Thy temple,
Strong as a rock,
A guide, a buckler, and example,
To a' Thy flock.

This is good Calvinist doctrine, stated without exaggeration and yet presented in such a way as to show its essential irrationality.

Willie has to admit his lurches from the path of virtue.

O Lord! yestreen, Thou kens, wi Meg –
Thy pardon I sincerely beg –
O may't ne'er be a livin plague
To my dishonour!
An I'll ne'er lift a lawless leg
Again upon her.

Besides I farther maun avow,
Wi Leezie's lass, three times I trow –
But Lord, that Friday I was fou,
When I cam near her;
Or else, Thou kens, Thy servant true
Wad never steer her.

In spite of all this, Willie, under the firm conviction that he is one of the chosen few, concludes his appeal –

But Lord, remember me and mine,
Wi mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace and gear may shine,
Excell'd by nane
An a' the glory shall be Thine –
Amen, Amen!

This was strong meat for the year 1784 – and, indeed, the satire was not published in Burns' lifetime.

Enough has been said to show that Burns was no idle rhymer in an ivory tower, but a fighter giving two blows for one in the great controversies of the day.

The Poet's Personal Religion

BEFORE discussing Burns' ultimate religious beliefs it is well to note his wide reading on the question. He sends an epistle to his "auld comrade dear and brither sinner", James Tennant of Glenconner.

> I've sent you here, by Johnie Simpson[11],
> Twa sage philosophers to glimpse on;
> Smith, wi his sympathetic feeling,
> An Reid, to common sense appealing.
> Philosophers have fought and wrangled,
> An meikle Greek an Latin mangled,
> Till, wi their logic-jargon tir'd,
> And in the depth of science mir'd,
> To common sense they now appeal –
> What wives an wabsters see an feel.
>
> *(Epistle to James Tennant, Glenconner)*

The books mentioned are Adam Smith's *Theory of the Moral Sentiments* and Thomas Reid's *Enquiry into the Human Mind* – a none too successful reply to the sceptical philosophy of Hume. Admirers of Reid have said that he anticipated the famous German Immanuel Kant's criticism of Hume. Admirers of Kant usually shudder at the very idea. That such difficult philosophical works should be exchanged between farmers, however, shows something of the intellectual quality of the times.[12]

Burns urges his good friend to return the volumes quickly for he has little left to read except the more orthodox works of Bunyan, Brown and Boston.

> Sae shortly you shall see me bright,
> A burning an a shining light.

There can be no reasonable doubt that Burns knew most of the literature – orthodox and unorthodox of his time – and formed his own opinions.

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[11] The dancing master at Ochiltree.

[12] The Tennants were an exceptional family however. James' half-brother, Charles – "the Wabster Charlie" later in the poem – founded the famous chemical works at St Rollox (now in possession of ICI [but closed 1964 –*Ed*]). The late Countess of Oxford and Asquith was a descendant of the family –*JRC.*

People went astray from the paths of virtue because some were endowed with stronger passions than others:

Thou know'st that Thou hast formed me,
With passions wild and strong
And list'ning to their witching voice
Has often led me wrong.
(A Prayer in the Prospect of Death)

I saw thy pulse's maddening play,
Wild-send thee Pleasure's devious way,
Misled by Fancy's meteor-ray,
By passion driven;
But yet the light that led astray
Was light from Heaven.
(The Vision)

All mankind were beset by the same passions, and liable, given the circumstances, to make the same mistakes. So let us be charitable.

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Tho they may gang a kennin wrang,
To step aside is human:
One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving *Why* they do it;
And just as lamely can ye mark,
How far perhaps they rue it.

Who made the heart, 'tis *He* alone
Decidedly can try us;
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring, its various bias.
Then at the balance let's be mute.
We never can adjust it;
What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.
(Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous)

A life beyond the grave he hoped for, but often doubted. His most frequent attitude to this question is contained in a letter which he sent to his dying friend, Robert Muir, a wine merchant of Kilmarnock.

"I trust the spring will renew your shattered frame and make your friends happy.—You and I have often agreed that life is no great blessing on the whole.—The close of life, indeed to the reasoning eye is "Dark as was chaos, ere the infant sun

Was rolled together or had tried his beams
Athwart the gloom profound.'—[13]

"But an honest man has nothing to fear.—If we lie down in the grave, the whole man a piece of broke machinery, to moulder with the clods of the valley,—be it so; at least there is an end of pain, care, woes and wants; if that part of us called Mind does survive the apparent destruction of the man—away with old wives' prejudices and tales! Every age and every nation has had a different set of stories; and as many are always weak, of consequence they have often, perhaps always, been deceived: a man conscious of having acted an honest part among his fellow creatures; even granting that he may have been the sport, at times, of passions and instincts; he goes to a great unknown Being who could have no other end in giving him existence but to make him happy; who gave him those passions and instincts and well knows their force.—

"These my worthy friend, are my ideas, and I know that they are not far different from yours.—It becomes a man of sense to think of himself; particularly in a case where all men are equally interested and where, indeed, all men are equally in the dark."

(Letter to Robert Muir, 7th March 1788)[14]

On one thing Burns never wavered – the existence of a good, benevolent God. This he deduced from philosophy – from the assumed character of the human mind.

"Still there are two great pillars that bear us up amid the wreck of misfortune and misery. The ONE is composed of the different modifications of a certain noble, stubborn something in man, known by the names of courage, fortitude, magnanimity. The OTHER is made up of those feelings and sentiments which, however the sceptic may deny them, or the enthusiastic disfigure them, are yet, I am convinced,

[13] This is an extract from *The Grave* by the Scottish poet Robert Blair (1699-1746).
[14] *CLRB*, p 90.

original and component parts of the human soul; those *senses of the mind*, if I may be allowed the expression, which connect us with and link us to, those awful obscure realities—an all-powerful and equally beneficent God, and a world to come, beyond death and the grave. The first gives us the nerve of combat, while a ray of hope beams on the field:—the last pours the balm of comfort into the wounds which time can never cure.''

(Letter to Alexander Cunningham, 25th February 1794)[15]

Despising the Holy Willies, Burns did not pray for "grace and gear", but for wit and sense.

O Thou wha gies us each guid gift!
Gie me o wit an sense a lift.
Then turn me, if Thou please, adrift,
Thro Scotland wide,
Wi cits nor lairds I wadna shift,
In a' their pride!

Were this the charter of our state
'On pain o hell be rich and great,'
Damnation then would be our fate
Beyond remead;
But, thanks to heaven, that's no the gate
We learn our creed.

For thus the Royal mandate ran,
When first the human race began:
'The social, friendly, honest man,
Whate'er he be
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan,
And none but he.'

(Second Epistle to J Lapraik, April 21, 1785)

Burns worshipped a God of love and human brotherhood

But deep this truth impress'd my mind—
Thro all His works abroad,
The heart benevolent and kind,
The most resembles God.

(A Winter Night)

[15] *Ibid*, p 470.

Burns, The Patriot

BURNS GREW TO MANHOOD in a period when the flame of Scots nationality was weak and fitful. The Act of Union, which subordinated Scotland politically and industrially to England, was regarded as an irreversible fact, likely to lead to the elimination of all those characteristics which distinguished the Scots from the English. The forces which impeded this prospect of complete anglicisation and which will yet grow strong enough to win for the Scots their own Parliament, with complete right of self-determination once again, grew but slowly.[16] Burns' poetry was, however, a powerful obstacle to any further deterioration of the national spirit.

In his famous autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore (father of the general who died at Corunna in the Peninsular War) Burns says:

> "the first two books I ever read in private, and which gave me more pleasure than any two books I ever read again, were the life of Hannibal and the history of Sir William Wallace. Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn that I used to strut in raptures up and down after the recruiting drum and bagpipe, and wish myself tall enough to be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins, which will boil along there till the floodgates of life shut in eternal rest."[17]

The Wallace theme constantly recurs in his poetry.

> We'll sing auld Coila's[18] plains an fells,
> Her moors red-brown wi heather bells,
> Her banks and braes, her dens and dells,
> Where glorious Wallace
> Aft bure the gree, as story tells,
> Frae Southron billies.
>
> At Wallace' name, what Scottish blood
> But boils up in a spring-tide flood?
> Oft have our fearless fathers strode
> By Wallace' side

[16] This was of course written originally in 1945, then again in 1959.
[17] *CLRB*, pp 249-250.
[18] Burns' Coila is both the muse which he created as a poetic device for the poem *the Vision*, and the embodiment of the lands of Kyle in Ayrshire, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coila_(muse).

Still pressing onward, red-wat-shod,
Or glorious dy'd.
(Epistle to William Simpson of Ochiltree)

In his *Scots Prologue* which Mrs Sutherland recited on her benefit night in the theatre at Dumfries in 1790, he asked Scots poets to turn to their own history for themes.

Is there no daring Bard will rise and tell,
How glorious Wallace stood, how hapless fell?
Where are the muses fled that could produce,
A drama worthy o the name o Bruce.
How here, even here, he first unsheath'd the sword
'Gainst mighty England and her guilty lord,
And after monie a bloody, deathless doing,
Wrench'd his dear country from the jaws of Ruin!

Sometimes Burns' nationalism took the form of a sentimental look backwards at the Jacobite past.

But why of that epocha make such a fuss
That gave us the Hanover stem,
If bringing them over was lucky for us,
I'm sure 'twas as lucky for them.

But loyalty – truce! we're on dangerous ground:
Who knows how the fashions may alter?
The doctrine, today that is loyally sound,
Tomorrow may bring us a halter.
(Address to William Tytler, Esq., of Woodhouselee)[19]

Or the better known lines *Written by Somebody on a Window of an Inn at Stirling*:

The injured Stewart line is gone,
A race outlandish fills their throne:
An idiot race, to honour lost –
Who know them best despise them most!

The most powerful attack on the Act of Union is in Volume IV of the *Scots Musical Museum*, published in June 1792.

[19] William Tytler was the author of *An Enquiry into the Evidence against Mary, Queen of Scots, 1759.*

Fareweel to a' our Scottish fame,
Fareweel our ancient glory!
Fareweel even to the Scottish name
Sae fam'd in martial story.
Now Sark rins over Solway sands,
And Tweed rins to the ocean,
To mark where England's province stands –
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!

What force or guile could not subdue,
Thro many warlike ages,
Is wrought now by a coward few
For hireling traitors' wages.
The English steel we could disdain,
Secure in valour's station,
But English gold has been our bane –
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.

O, would, or I had seen the day
That Treason thus could sell us,
My auld grey head had lien in clay
Wi Bruce and loyal Wallace,
But pith and power, till my last hour,
I'll make this declaration: –
'We're bought and sold for English gold' –
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation.
(Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation)

What with Marshall Aid,[20] military aid and other American bribes to reduce the independence of the whole island and to install nuclear bases in it, this poem is surely as apposite as ever:

Now, for my friends' and brethren's sakes
And for my dear-lov'd Land o Cakes[21]
I pray with holy fire:
Lord, send a rough-shod troop o Hell,
O'er a' wad Scotland buy or sell,
To grind them in the mire!
(Election Ballad addressed to R. Graham, Esq., of Fintry, 1790)

[20] Marshall Aid (1948-52) was an American initiative, allegedly to help rebuild Western European economies after World War II. Actually the provisions of the aid, regarding what it could be used for, served to boost the profits of US-owned businesses, including US oil companies operating in Saudi Arabia.
[21] *ie* Scotland.

And in the bicentenary year of the poet,[22] so say all of us.

Burns in the Fight for Political Reform

THE SCOTS IN BURNS' TIME were a politically disenfranchised people. Only 3,000 people in the country had votes and every one of these voters had a price – money, a government appointment or some other inducement to ensure that they cast their votes in defence of privilege.

Burns referred to this in his poem *The Fête Champetre (The Garden Party)*.

> Come, will ye court a noble lord,
> Or buy a score o lairds, man?
> For Worth and Honour pawn their word,
> Their vote shall be Glencaird's, man?
> Ane gies them coin, ane gies them wine,
> Anither gies them clatter,
> Annbank, wha guess'd the ladies' taste
> He gies a Fête Champetre.

Virtually all the votes were controlled by a handful of rich merchants, or landed gentry, who in turn were controlled by the King's representative in Scotland – Henry Dundas. The Scottish vote could be generally relied on to support any measures for undermining the liberty of the United Kingdom, in general, or Scotland in particular.

What Burns thought of some of those chosen by the King – the half-mad George III – will be found in the poem called *A Dream*, which is prefaced by the lines:

> Thoughts, words and deeds, the statute blames with reason;
> But surely *Dreams* were ne'er indicted treason.

Addressing the King, Burns says:

> Far be't frae me that I aspire
> To blame your legislation,
> Or say, ye wisdom want, or fire,
> To rule this mighty nation:
> But faith! I muckle doubt, my Sire,
> Ye've trusted ministration
> To chaps wha in a barn or byre,

[22] When JRC wrote the pamphlet in 1959.

Wad better fill'd their station,
Than courts yon day.

Under the guise of loyalty, Burns slipped in a few neat criticisms of the royal princes, who, truth to tell, were amongst the most useless rakes in all the royal families of Europe.

For you young Potentate o Wales,
I tell your Highness fairly,
Down Pleasure's stream wi swelling sails,
I'm tauld ye're driving rarely;
But some day ye may gnaw your nails,
An curse your folly sairly
That e'er ye brak Diana's pales,
Or rattled dice wi Charlie,[23]
By night or day.

The royal princesses are urged to 'marry British'.

Ye, lastly, bonie blossoms a'
Ye royal lassies dainty,
Heaven mak ye guid as well as braw,
An gie you lads a-plenty!
But sneer na British boys awa!
For kings are unco scant ay
An German gentles are but sma'
They're better just than want ay
On onie day.

As a good democrat Burns never lost an opportunity of emphasising the common humanity of people belonging to the most diverse ranks of society.

He addressed the louse, creeping up a fine lady's bonnet:

Ye ugly, creepin, blastit wonner,
Detested, shunn'd, by saunt an sinner,

[23] These appear to be references to firstly, the affair of the Prince of Wales (later Prince Regent) with Mrs Fitzherbert, and secondly, his support for Charles James Fox's Whig Party. 'Breaking Diana's pales' means never getting married, see N Martin, *The Gaelic Rèiteach: Symbolism and Practice*, in *Scottish Studies*, Vol 34, 2006, pp 77-158; downloadable from http://journals.ed.ac.uk/ScottishStudies/article/download/2719/3816/ .

How daur ye set your fit upon her –
Sae fine a lady!
Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner
On some poor body.
…

O Jeany, dinna toss your head,
An set your beauties a' abread!
Ye little ken what cursed speed
The blastie's makin!
Thae winks and finger-ends, I dread,
Are notice takin.

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us
An foolish notion:
What airs in dress an gait wad lea'e us,
An ev'n devotion!

(To a Louse)

Burns and the French Revolution

WHEN the great French Revolution broke out in 1789, it fanned the flames of political reform in Scotland. All over the country reforming societies were formed demanding an extension of the franchise and shorter parliaments. Burns was a strong supporter of political reform and was roused to enthusiasm by the French Revolution. In the beginning of 1792, when he was settled in Dumfries, he was one of a mixed party of dragoons and excisemen who captured a smuggler's brig, *The Rosamond*. The armament of the brig was put up for auction and Burns bought four small cannon which he sent as a gift to the French National Assembly. There was, of course, nothing illegal in this act. Britain was not at that moment at war with France. Nevertheless the government of the day utterly detested the democratic principles of the French Revolution, and Burns' act was doubtless noted by the authorities.

Supporters of political reform, when they met for a convivial evening, were fond of expressing their sentiments in seditious toasts. One of Burns' favourite toasts was:

"To the last verse, of the last chapter, of the last Book of Kings."

When the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* was founded, to champion the cause of political reform, Burns wrote to the editor, William Johnstone:

> "Go on, Sir! Lay bare, with undaunted heart & steady hand, that horrid mass of corruption called Politics & State-craft. Dare to draw in their native colours these
>
> 'Calm, thinking VILLAINS, whom no faith can fix'[24]
>
> whatever the shiboleth of their pretended party."[25]

At the very moment when the Government was preparing to curtail the very limited rights of free speech then existing, Burns sends to the *Gazetteer* the poem, *Here's a Health to Them That's Awa'*.

May Liberty meet wi success
    May Prudence protect her frae evil!
May tyrants and tyranny tine i' the mist,
    And wander their way to the Devil!
…
Here's freedom to him that wad read,
    Here's freedom to them that wad write!
There's nane ever fear'd that the truth should be heard,
    But they whom the truth would indite!

In July 1792 the Society of the Friends of the People was formed in Edinburgh and made clear that it stood for reform on the basis of Kings, Lords and Commons in Parliament. One of its leaders was Lord Daer, whom Burns had met some years before at the house of Dugald Stewart.

Then from his Lordship I shall learn,
Henceforth to meet with unconcern.
    One rank as weel's another;
Nae honest, worthy man need care,
To meet with noble youthfu Daer,
    For he but meets a brother.
(Lines On Meeting with Lord Daer)

Branches of Friends of the People shot up all over Scotland, embracing not only sections of the Whig gentry and the urban middle class, but also the artisans (particularly the weavers) and the small shopkeepers.

[24] Alexander Pope, *The Temple of Fame*, line 410.
[25] *CLRB*, p 681.

On 26 November 1792 Burns sent to Miss Louisa Fontenelle, the leading lady in a company playing in the theatre at Dumfries, a prologue entitled *The Rights of Woman*. The background of the times is neatly sketched in the opening lines:

> While Europe's eye is fix'd on mighty things,
> The fate of empires and the fall of kings;
> While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
> And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
> Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
> The Rights of Woman merit some attention.

After some high-flown compliments to women the prologue concludes :

> But truce with kings, and truce with constitutions,
> With bloody armaments and revolutions!
> Let Majesty your first intention summon,
> Ah! *ça ira*! THE MAJESTY OF WOMAN!

A few days later he asks her to put on a play entitled *The Wonder A Woman Keeps A Secret*. This was an undistinguished piece but it contained one or two platitudes about British liberty, which could be given political point by well-timed applause.

Such political demonstrations were common at a time when people had to be discreet in exercising free speech. It may have been during the performance of this play that Burns was involved in an incident which was duly reported to his superiors in the Government service. At the end of a performance some of the people in the best seats called for the orchestra to play *God Save the King*, and were countered by a group in the pit who called for the French revolutionary anthem *Ça Ira*. Amongst the group was the poet himself, though he denied taking part in the demonstration. But his general sentiments were known and he was regarded by the local reactionaries as the leader. In a letter to Mrs Dunlop he describes the incident as follows:

> "We, in this country, here have many alarms of the Reform, or rather the Republican spirit of your part of the kingdom.—Indeed we are a good deal in commotion ourselves, & in our theatre here 'God Save the King' has met with some groans and hisses, while 'Ça Ira' has been repeatedly called for.—For me, I am a Placeman, you know, a very humble one indeed heaven knows, *but still so much so as to gag*

me from joining in the cry. [Italics JRC] —What my private sentiments are you will find without an interpreter.—In the meantime I have taken up the subject in another view and the other day for a pretty actress's benefit I wrote an address which I will give on the other page, called *The Rights of Woman*."[26]

Burns and the Witch-Hunt

AT THE BEGINNING of December 1792 a convention of the Friends of the People Society met in Edinburgh to plan the campaign for reform. It again made it clear that its policy was reform and not revolution by repeating that it stood on the basis of King, Lords and Commons. A delegation from the United Irishmen attended and presented an address whose militant tone alarmed some of the delegates. So the address was read but was not formally received. The convention, however, ended its proceedings with the delegates standing with hands uplifted swearing to "live free or die".

Five days later, on 13 December 1792 in London, Thomas Paine, the author of the *Rights of Man* was indicted (in his absence) of uttering a "seditious libel". The *Rights of Man* (with its defence of the principles of the French Revolution and of republican principles in general) was the textbook of the more militant reformers, and the Government believed that by designating it as a seditious libel it could suppress the book and arrest all who were trying to circulate it.

In his absence Paine was defended by the great Scots-born advocate, Thomas Erskine ("Here's a health to Tammie, the Norlan' laddie, that lives at the lug of the Law,"[27] Burns had written in the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, a reform paper). Erskine's speech was a masterpiece of legal argument, but the bribed jury found that the *Rights of Man* was a seditious libel and Paine was outlawed. On the basis of this verdict the Government proceeded to arrest any reformers guilty of circulating the *Rights of Man*.

It was in this atmosphere that Burns learned that the Board of Excise had started an enquiry into his political opinions. He wrote to his patron, Robert Graham of Fintry, denying the allegations of political disaffection and pleading for his wife and children.

> "Sir, you are a husband—& a father—you know what you would feel to see the much loved wife of your bosom, & your helpless,

[26] *CLRB*, p 202.
[27] From *Here's a Health to Them that's Awa*.

prattling little ones, turned adrift into the world, degraded & disgraced, from a situation in which they had been respectable & respected & left almost without the necessary support of a miserable existence."[28]

Burns, like many authors before him and since, had decided not to court victimisation, but to play for safety for the time being without, however, changing his opinions.

A few days after the letter to Graham of Fintry, he dispatches one of a different kind to Mrs Dunlop, announcing that

> "some envious, malicious devil has laid a little demur on my political principles & I wish to let the matter settle before I open myself too much in the eyes of my Superiors.—I have set, henceforth, a seal on my lips as to those unlucky politics; but to you I must breathe my sentiments."[29]

Unfortunately, the portion of the letter in which Burns breathes his sentiments is missing, but they can be gathered from a letter a few days later which he sent to the same lady.

> "For instance, the amiable circle I so lately mixed with in the hospitable hall of Dunlop,—their gentle, generous hearts; their uncontaminated, dignified minds; their informed & polished understandings what a contrast when compared—if such comparings were not down-right sacrilege—with the prostituted soul of the miscreant wretch who can deliberately & diabolically plot the destruction of an honest man who never offended him, and with a grin of satisfaction can see the unfortunate man, his faithful wife, & prattling innocents, turned over to Beggary and Ruin."[30]

On the same date he dispatched a letter to Graham of Fintry admitting he was in the pit of the theatre when the cry for *Ça Ira* went up, and that

> "one or two individuals with whom I occasionally associate were of the party."[31]

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[28] *Ibid*, p 435.
[29] *Ibid*, p 203; in fact Mackay gives both this and the previous letter as dated "31st December 1792".
[30] *Ibid*, p 204.
[31] *Ibid*, p 436.

But he denies either joining in the shout or of taking any part in the attempt to quell the subsequent free fight. He affirms his belief in the British Constitution but believes:

> "that we have a good deal deviated from the original principles of that Constitution; particularly that an alarming System of Corruption has pervaded the connection between the Executive Power and the House of Commons. …"
>
> "As to France, I was her enthusiastic votary in the beginning of the business.—When she came to show her old avidity for conquest in annexing Savoy, &c. to her dominions, and invading Holland, I altered my sentiments."

From Edinburgh Burns' friend, William Nicol, the classical master in the High School, wrote a letter counselling discretion.

> "Dear Christless Bobbie.
>
> What is become of thee? Has the Devil flown off with thee as the Gled does with a bird? If he should do so there is little matter if the reports concerning thy imprudence are true. What concerns it thee whether the lousy Dumfriesian fiddlers play 'Ça Ira' or 'God Save the King'? Suppose you had an aversion to the King, you could not as a gentleman wish God to use him worse than he has done."[32]

The danger to Burns had evidently blown over by 20 February 1793, when he replied to Nicol in a real rollicking vein:

> "O thou wisest among the wise, meridian blaze of Prudence, full moon of Discretion, & Chief of many Counsellors!—How, infinitely is thy puddle-headed, rattle-headed, wrong-headed round-headed slave, indebted to thy supereminent goodness, that from the luminous path of thy own right-lined rectitude, you lookest benignly down on an erring Wretch of whom the zig-zag wanderings defy all the powers of Calculation, from the simple copulation of Units up to the hidden mystery of Fluxions!—May one feeble ray of that light of wisdom which darts from thy sensorium, straight as the arrow of Heaven against the head of the Unrighteous, & bright as the meteor of inspiration descending on the holy & undefiled Priesthood—may it be my portion;

[32] A reference to the madness of King George III –*JRC.*

so that I may be less unworthy of the face & favour of that father of Proverbs & master of Maxims, that antipode of Folly, & magnet among the Sages, the wise and witty Willy Nicol! Amen! Amen! Yea, so be it!!!"[33]

Among Burns' admirers who were willing to stand by him financially in the event of his victimisation was John Francis Erskine of Mar. In a letter dated 13 April 1793, the poet tells him that the trouble had blown over. It appears that Graham of Fintry had laid Burns' explanatory letter before the Board of Excise, and some of the Board (doubtless because the hat fitted) had taken exception to the remarks on political corruption, so:

"one of our Supervisors general, a Mr Corbett, was instructed to enquire, on the spot, into my conduct and to document me—'that *my* business was to *act*, not to think; & that whatever might be Men or Measures, it was my business to be silent & obedient.'—Mr Corbett was likewise my steady friend; so between Mr Graham & him, I have been partly forgiven".[34]

It was after that experience that the poet penned the well known lines

In politics if thou wouldst mix
And mean thy fortunes be,
Bear this in mind, be deaf and blind,
Let great folk hear and see.
(Lines written on Windows of the Globe Tavern, Dumfries)

While Burns was sidestepping the witch-hunters, the Scottish Reformers were being hounded. Thomas Muir, a young lawyer who was their outstanding leader, was arrested in January 1793, but was let out on bail. He went to France in the meantime in an attempt to dissuade the French Convention from imposing the death penalty on Louis XVI. But he was too late.

He returned to Britain in July and stood trial in August defending himself brilliantly. His chief offence was recommending the works of Paine and in insisting that the address of the United Irishmen should be read at the Convention the previous December. The notorious Lord Braxfield presided over the trial and told the jury that "Mr Muir might have

[33] *CLRB*, p 349.
[34] *Ibid*, p 690.

known that no attention could be paid to such a rabble [of ignorant weavers –*JRC*]. What right had they to representation?"

The jury thus instructed returned a verdict of guilty and Muir was sentenced to 14 years' transportation to Botany Bay.

On 12 September the Reverend Thomas Fyshe Palmer, a Unitarian minister in Dundee, was sentenced to seven years' transportation. He had revised a pamphlet explaining Paine's principles for the Dundee Friends of Liberty and had encouraged people to read the works of Paine.

Palmer's main crime in the eyes of the judge was that he had sought to organise mechanics "and those whose circumstances and education do not entitle them or qualify them to judge of matters of legislation." In a poem circulated a year later, *From Esopus to Maria*, Burns characterises his attitude at this period.

> The shrinking Bard adown an alley skulks,
> And dreads a meeting worse than Woolwich hulks,
> Though there, his heresies in Church and State
> Might well award him Muir and Palmer's fate.

Muir and Palmer were confined in Woolwich hulks prior to transportation to Botany Bay.

It was very difficult to keep Burns down for long. In spite of the mounting persecution he can still sing a song to "Liberty and Independence". So in August 1793, the month in which Thomas Muir was sentenced, he sent *Scots Wha Hae* to Thomson in Edinburgh and describes how he came to write it:

> "I shewed the air to Urbani[35] who was highly pleased with it, & begged me to make soft verses for it, but I had no idea of giving myself any trouble on the subject, till the accidental recollections of that glorious struggle for Freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of some other struggles of the same nature, *not quite so ancient* roused my rhyming Mania."[36] [italics JRC]

Not merely the defeat of the 'Auld Enemy' – England – but the French Revolution and "Muir and Palmer's fate" was stirring Burns when he wrote:

[35] Pietro Urbani, Scottish music publisher, born in Milan.
[36] Ibid, p 639.

Lay the proud Usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow! –
Let us do, or die!!!

In short, the oath of the convention of the Society of Friends of the People to "live free or die" in another form.

In spite of the mounting hysteria the Friends of the People called another convention which met in Edinburgh on 19th November 1793. There were 45 Scottish societies present, four delegates from the English societies and three from the Society of United Irishmen. The official title of the convention was "The British Convention of Delegates of the People Associated to obtain Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments".

On the morning of 3 December the convention's secretary, William Skirving, was arrested with other leading delegates, including Maurice Margarot and Joseph Gerrald of the London Correspondence Society. The Lord Provost of Edinburgh then dispersed the convention. Skirving and Gerrald, released on bail, gathered the delegates together for an evening session which was dispersed by the Sheriff-Substitute and a further attempt to continue the convention at Skirving's house was forbidden by the magistrates.

Skirving, Margarot and Gerrald were tried separately by Braxfield and were each sentenced to 14 years' transportation. Gerrald at his trial protested against the word reformer being used as a term of abuse. After all, Jesus Christ was a reformer he said, whereupon Braxfield retorted, "Muckle ye make o' that: he was hanget."

In this period of suppression Burns may have written *The Tree of Liberty*, which some past editors of his works classified as doubtful. Henley rejected it on the grounds of its poetic worthlessness. With his estimation of its poetical values we agree, but the worthy Henley was doubtless annoyed by what he considered its political worthlessness. Here are some specimen verses:

Heard ye o the tree o France,
    And wat ye what's the name o't?
Around it a' the patriots dance,
    Weel Europe kens the fame o't.
It stands where ance the Bastile stood,
    A prison built by kings, man,
When Superstition's hellish brood
    Kept France in leading strings, man.

…
But vicious folk aye hate to see
The works o Virtue thrive man;
The courtly vermin's bann'd the tree
And grat to see it thrive, man;
King Loui' thought to cut it down
When it was unco sma', man,
For this the watchman cracked his crown,
Cut aff his head an a', man
…
Wi plenty o sic trees I trow,
The warld would live in peace, man;
The sword would help to mak a plough,
The din o war wad cease, man.
Like brethren in a common cause,
We'd on each other smile, man,
And equal rights and equal laws
Wad gladden every isle, man.

Why Should We Idly Waste Our Prime is another poem the cautious editors have classified as doubtful.[37]

Why should we idly waste our prime,
Repeating our oppressions?
Come rouse to arms, 'tis now the time,
To punish past transgressions.
'Tis said that Kings can do no wrong,
Their murderous deeds deny it.
And since from us their power is sprung,
We have a right to try it,
Now each true patriot's song shall be
"Welcome, Death or Libertie."
…
The golden age we'll then revive, –
Each man will be a brother,
In harmony we all shall live,
And share the earth together.
In virtue trained, enlighten'd youth

[37] It is not listed in Mackay's *RBCPW*, while *The Tree of Liberty* is. Patrick Scott, in *the Early History of 'Why Should we Idly Waste Our Prime'*, https://works.bepress.com/patrick_scott/347/, notes that the song was widely distributed in the 1790s, in different versions, and that at most Burns could only be responsible for minor revisions.

Will love each fellow creature,
And future years shall prove the truth
That Man is good by nature.
Then let us toast with three times three
The reign of Peace and Libertie!

In the middle of 1794 Burns was present at a Saturday night party in Dumfries where one of his seditious toasts got him into trouble with a certain Captain Dods. In fact the Captain abused Burns so fiercely that

> ''had I had nobody's welfare to care for other than my own, we would certainly have come, according to the manners of the world, to the necessity of murdering one another about the business.— The words[38] were such as generally, I believe, end in a brace of pistols; but I am still pleased to think that I did not ruin the peace and welfare of a wife & a family of children in a drunken squabble."[39]

The toast which related to the war which Britain was then waging with revolutionary France, was "May our success in the present war be equal to the justice of our cause."

This Burns argued in a letter he wrote the following morning, when he was a sobered and a wiser man, was "A toast that the most outrageous frenzy of loyalty cannot object to."[39]

The valiant Captain evidently thought otherwise. Maybe it was not what Burns said but the nasty way he said it that aroused his loyalist ire.

The Captain was not subject to any misunderstanding for about the same time Burns was writing to George Thomson, in Edinburgh:

> "Is there no news yet, my dear Sir, of Pleyel[40]?—Or is your work to be at a dead stop until these glorious Crusaders, the Allies, set our modern Orpheus at liberty from the savage thraldom of Democrat Discords.—Alas the day! And woe is me! That auspicious period, pregnant with the happiness of millions—that golden age, spotless with Monarchical innocence & Despotic purity—that Millenium of which

[38] *ie* of Captain Dods –*JRC.*
[39] Burns To Samuel Clark, Jr, in *CLRB,* p 702.
[40] Ignaz Jozef Pleyel, Austrian-born composer, a pupil of Haydn, and resident in Paris during the French Revolution. Thomson had the idea of marrying Scots songs to accompaniments by the leading composers of the day, and asked Burns to write or adapt songs for the collection.

the earliest dawn will enlighten even Republican turbulence, & shew the swinish multitude they are but beasts & like beasts must be led by the nose and goaded in the backside—these days of sweet chords & concords seem by no means near."[41]

In short the success of the Allies in the war with revolutionary France was "equal to the justice of their cause" – they were being heavily defeated. And so Burns lets himself go with a swing:

> When Princes and Prelates and het-headed zealots
> All Europe hae set in a lowe,
> The poor man lies down, nor envies a crown,
> But comforts himsel with a mowe.
>
> When Brunswick's great Prince cam a cruising to France
> Republican billies to cowe,
> Bauld Brunswick's great Prince wad hae shawn better sense,
> At hame wi his Princess to mowe.
>
> Out over the Rhine, proud Prussia wad shine,
> To spend his best blood he did vow,
> But Frederick had better ne'er forded the water,
> But spent as he docht in a mowe.
>
> By sea by shore! the Emperor swore,
> In Paris he'd kick up a row,
> But Paris sae ready just leugh at the laddie
> And bade him gae tak him a mowe.
>
> *(Why Should Na Poor Folk Mowe)*[42]

Meanwhile the Government was following up the suppression of the Convention in Edinburgh by prosecutions of reformers all over England. In May 1794 it arrested a number of leading London reformers, Thomas Hardy, John Horne Tooke and James Thelwall, representing three reform societies. By this time public opinion was swinging against the arbitrary actions of the Government and after separate trials the three men were acquitted.

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[41] *CLRB*, p 653.

[42] The prince of Brunswick was Charles William Ferdinand, commander of the joint Prussian and Austrian armies; the king of Prussia was Frederick William II; the Austrian Emperor was Leopold II; and 'mowe' means to copulate.

After Hardy's trial in October 1794 the crowd carried him and Thomas Erskine, who defended him, home in triumph. Burns was so enthused that he committed one of his most famous indiscretions. On 12th January 1795 he wrote to Mrs Dunlop:

> "Thank God, these London trials have given us a little more breath, & I imagine that the time is not far distant when a man may freely blame Billy Pitt [the Prime Minister –*JRC*] without being called an enemy of his country."[43]

Commenting in the same letter on the executions of the French King and Queen in the previous year he asked:

> "What is there in the delivering over of a perjured Blockhead and an unprincipled prostitute to the hands of the hangman, that it should arrest for a moment attention in an eventful hour, when, as my friend Roscoe in Liverpool gloriously expresses it –
>
> When the welfare of millions is hung in the scale,
> And the balance yet trembles with fate.[44]"

Mrs Dunlop was deeply offended and appears to have broken off relations with Burns until the last few days of his life.

In the same period he was busy with the poem *A Man's a Man for a' That*. Here is the purest expression of his democracy. In January 1795 Burns sends a copy of this poem to Thomson, with the following remarks:[45]

> "A great critic, Aikin, on songs, says that love & wine are the exclusive themes for song-writing.—The following is on neither subject, & consequently is no Song; but will be allowed I think to be two or three pretty good *prose* thoughts inverted into rhyme."

He impressed on Thomson that the song was not for publication.

> "l do not give you the foregoing song for your book[46], but merely

[43] *CLRB*, p 214.
[44] Verse from William Roscoe, *Song: O'er the vine-covered hills and gay regions of France.*
[45] *CLRB*, pp 669-670.
[46] Thomson's *Select Scottish Airs –JRC.*

by way of vive la bagatelle; for the piece is not really Poetry."

Professor John Macunn, in his *Ethics of Citizenship*, has drawn attention to the close resemblance between Burns' "pretty good prose thoughts inverted into rhyme" and the attack on aristocracy in the *Rights of Man*, the banned work of the other great exciseman, Thomas Paine.

A comparison between Paine's prose and Burns' poetry leaves no doubt of the correctness of this. Paine says:

> "The patriots of France have discovered in good time that rank and dignity in society must take a new ground. … It must now be the substantial ground of character, instead of the chimerical ground of titles."
>
> "The artificial noble shrinks into a dwarf before the noble of nature."
>
> "Through all the vocabulary of Adam there is not such an animal as a Duke or a Count".

This pretty good prose thought is inverted into rhyme as:

> A prince can mak a belted knight,
> A marquis, duke and a' that;
> But an honest man's aboon his might –
> Guid faith he mauna fa' that!
> For a' that, an a' that,
> Their dignities an a' that,
> The pith o sense, and pride o worth,
> Are higher rank than a' that

Paine ridicules aristocracy in memorable prose:

> "The French constitution says there shall be no titles; and in consequence all that class of equivocal generation, which in some countries is called 'aristocracy' and in others 'nobility' is done away with and the peer is exalted into the man."
>
> "[A title] talks about its fine blue ribbon like a girl and shows its new garter like a child."
>
> "The genuine mind of man, thirsting for its native home, society, condemns the gewgaws that separate him from it."

Burns expresses an identical thought with:

You see yon birkie ca'd 'a lord',
Wha struts, and stares, an a' that,
Though thousands worship at his word,
He's but a cuif for a' that.
For a' that, an a' that,
His ribband, star an a' that,
The man o independent mind,
He looks and laughs at a' that.

"For what we can foresee all Europe may form but one great Republic and man be free of the whole," says Paine.

The similar thought is expressed in the immortal:

Then let us pray that come it may
(As come it will for a' that),
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth
May bear the gree an a' that,
For a' that, an a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.

Burns could be intimidated, temporarily, through fear of the suffering which his family would endure if he were victimised, but he could not be silenced for long. In one way or another he had to give expression to his true feelings.

His relation to the great French Revolution is well expressed by Professor GP Gooch in his chapter on 'Europe and the French Revolution' in the *Cambridge Modern History*. After pointing out that no political book supporting the Revolution had been published in Scotland he says:

> "In literature certain French ideas found an eminent representative. In the uprising of the common people Burns saw the reflection of his own passionate hatred of social inequality …. The philosophical and abstract side of the Revolution left him untouched. It was the struggle for equality based on the conception of a common manhood that stirred his enthusiasm and drew music from his lyre."

The Dumfries Volunteers

IN 1794 THERE SETTLED in Dumfries Dr William Maxwell, who had received his medical education in France, had been an enthusiastic

supporter of the Revolution and as a member of the National Guard was present at the execution of King Louis. Together with Burns and John Syme, who held the office of Distributor of Stamps for Dumfriesshire, he was regarded as the centre of Dumfries radicalism.

A "True Loyal Natives" club had been formed in Dumfries "for preserving the Peace, Liberty and Prosperity; and for supporting the laws and constitution of the country." Burns and his friends were naturally the target of their attacks. One of their anti-Burns squibs reads:

> Ye sons of Sedition, give ear to my song,
> Let Syme, Burns and Maxwell pervade every throng,
> With Cracken, the attorney, and Mundell, the quack,
> Send Willie, the monger, to hell with a smack.

Burns lost no time in framing his crushing reply:

> Ye true 'Loyal Natives' attend to my song;
> In uproar and riot rejoice the night long!
> From Envy and Hatred, your core is exempt,
> But where is your shield from the darts of Contempt.
> *(Ye True Loyal Natives)*

As Burns was putting his finishing touches to *A Man's a Man for a' That* an invasion scare was sweeping the country. The Jacobins – the left small middle-class democrats – had split and had been overthrown in France; but the more right-wing groups, representing the main body of emerging French capitalism which had replaced them, were in no conciliatory mood with regard to Great Britain. Threats to invade Britain were a prominent feature of their speeches and this enabled the British Government to launch a great invasion scare and to call upon all loyal citizens to rally to the defence of their country. Companies of volunteers were formed everywhere.

On 31 January 1795 a meeting was held in the Dumfries Court House, at which it was decided to form a volunteer company for the town. Burns' name, together with those of Syme and Maxwell, were amongst the signatories asking the permission of the authorities for the company to be formed. When permission was granted Burns and Syme joined and played an active part in the organisation. Maxwell did not. Doubtless in the interval he had grasped the politics behind the scare.

Some critics have suggested that Burns' action in joining was largely make-believe; that desiring promotion as an exciseman he sought to stand

in well with the Government. This overlooks the fact that most middle-class and petty middle-class radicals throughout Scotland who neither expected or desired favours of the Government, did likewise. They were susceptible to the wave of chauvinism that was sweeping the country. Their arguments were that an invasion of Britain by France would not promote political reform. Some of them even calculated that a mass rally to national defence would weaken the drive that the Government was making against political reformers of all shades – which events soon showed to be a sad misjudgment.

The volunteer records show that Burns was an assiduous member of the company until his health broke down a few weeks before his death

On 5 May 1795 the patriotic ballad, *Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat*, appeared in the *Dumfries Journal*. This is the one poem the Tory Burnsites seize upon to prove that Burns was not as radical as some people imagine.

There are two versions of how the ballad came to be written. One is that Burns at a volunteers' gathering proposed the toast: "Gentlemen, may we never see the French and the French never see us."

On a certain captain taking umbrage, Burns, it is said, wrote the ballad and sent it to the journal. This is so like the case of Captain Dods that one is inclined to think that tradition is presenting the same incident in a new context.

The other is that his fellow volunteers expected some kind of poetical tribute to the volunteers and Burns obliged, managing to combine his own sentiments with those of a more traditional kind.

O, let us not, like snarling tykes,
In wrangling be divided,
Till, slap! come in an unco loon,
And wi a rung decide it!
Be Britain still to Britain true,
Amang ourselves united;
For never but by British hands
Maun British wrangs be righted!

That there were British wrangs and that they ought to be righted was hardly the True Loyal Nature creed.

The wretch that would a tyrant own,
And the wretch, his true-sworn brother
Who would set the mob above the throne,

May they be damn'd together!
Who will not sing God Save the King
Shall hang as high's the steeple;
But while we sing God Save the King,
We'll ne'er forget the people!

This is precisely what the reactionaries were doing, singing *God Save the King* and oppressing the people. So the Dumfries Volunteers got their ballad and the poet's friends had reason to rejoice. There was a powerful shot of reform principles even there.

A Rebel till Death

HOW ABSURD it is to claim that Burns was becoming reconciled to mad old George III and his monstrous brood of princely profligates can be seen in one of the last political ballads he wrote. At the end of 1795 the Government introduced new sedition Bills extending the meaning of treason and giving the magistrates power to break up meetings without reading the Riot Act. Henry Erskine, Dean of the Faculty of the Advocates in Edinburgh, brother of the famous Thomas Erskine, came out energetically against the new Bills, thereby enraging the majority of the advocates who on 12 January 1796 elected Robert Dundas of Ormiston in his place by 128 votes to 38. Dundas is the "pious Bob" and Erskine "Squire Hal" in Burns' ballad, *The Dean of the Faculty*, from which we take the following characteristic verses.

This Hal for genius, wit and lore,
Among the first was number'd;
But pious Bob, 'mid learning's store,
Commandment the tenth remember'd,
Yet simple Bob the victory got,
And wan his heart's desire,
Which shows that Heaven can boil the pot
Tho the Deil piss in the fire.

Squire Hal, besides, had in this case,
Pretensions rather brassy;
For talents to deserve a place,
Are qualifications saucy.
So their worships of the Faculty,
Quite sick of Merit's rudeness,
Chose one who should owe it all, d'ye see
To their gratis grace and goodness.

…
In your heretic sins may you live and die,
Ye heretic Eight-and-Thirty!
But accept, ye sublime majority,
My congratulations hearty!
With your honors, as with a certain King,
In your servants this is striking.
The more incapacity they bring
The more they're to your liking.

The hand of death was already upon him when he was writing this ballad and six months afterwards he was dead.

He worked to the last, writing and perfecting songs for Thomson's *Select Scottish Airs*. Nor was his old friendly enemy forgotten.

Ah Nick! Ah Nick! It is na fair
First showing us the tempting ware,
Bright wines and bonie lassies rare
To put us daft;
Syne weave unseen, thy spider snare
O Hell's damn'd waft.
(Epistle to Colonel de Peyster)

He passed from the world on 21 July 1796 at the early age of 37, leaving behind a legacy of song and verses that Scotsmen will ever be proud of, and a record of struggle against hypocrisy and privilege that will inspire his fellow-countrymen to continue the fight until the system that gives rise to them is superseded by a new and better social order.

His fight for liberty, equality and fraternity is our fight – in a new setting! He will be remembered and honoured in our country, and in the world, long after class society has been relegated to the dustbin of history.

Burns takes his place, and a foremost one, in the procession of Great Scottish Rebels who have striven to make the lot of the common people a happier one. And now the common people themselves, with ever-growing unity and determination, go forward to achieve their freedom and to make our beloved country a land of which Burns would be proud.

GLOSSARY

Definitions have been taken from a number of sources, including: MacKay's *Robert Burns Complete Poetical Works*, *op cit*; a nineteenth century edition of Burns' *Complete Poems*; the online *Robert Burns Country: The Works*, http://www.robertburns.org/works/, and the online *Dictionary of the Scots Language*, http://www.dsl.ac.uk/. Words marked with an asterisk are in the MacDiarmid poem in the Foreword. Except where the Scots meaning is unclear, participles ending in "-in" (instead of "-ing"), and past tenses ending in "-'d" are not included in this list; where, as in "cursed" in the *Epistle to Davie* (p 9), the "e" is not elided, it often means that it is pronounced, *ie* "curs-ed".

a', all
a'body*, anybody
aboon, above, overhead, up
abread, abroad, in sight
adown, down
ae, one
aff, off
aft, often
agley, askew
aiblins, perhaps
ain, own
aince*, once
amang, among
an, and
ance, once
ane, one
anither, another
auld, old
awa, away
aye, always

bauld, bold
bear, permit
ben, inside, indoors, right up
benmost, innermost
be't, be it
beuk, book
bid, ask
bien, comfortable, well-to-do
billie, friend, comrade, fellow
birkie, clever, forward, conceited fellow
blastie, pest, shrivelled small person
blastit, blasted, pestilential
blaud, slap
blaw, blow
bluid, blood
bonie, fair, pretty
bow'r, bower
brae, slope, hills
brak, broke
brither, brother
brogue, trick, hoax
brunstane, brimstone
buckler, shield
bure, won, carried

ca'd, called
caition, surety
cam, came
canker, become peevish
chimla lug, chimney corner
cit, city-dweller
clatter, gossip
claw, scratch
clootie, cloven-hooved
cootie, dish
core, crew, crowd, band
cotter, cottager
cowe, scold
crack, talk
crabbit, ill-natured
croose*, pleased with oneself
cuif, fool

daud, thrash, abuse, pelt
daur, dare
deil, devil
deil-haet, devil take it, nothing
dinna, do not
docht, dared
dought, be able
dy'd, died

epocha, epoch (archaic form)

ev'n, even
ev'n-down, downright, sheer

fa' (noun), fortune, turn of events
fa' (verb), fall, befall, come by, win
faitherin'*, feathering
fam'd, famed
fareweel, farewell
feck*, folk
fidgin fain, excited, eager, desirous
fit, foot
flail, a threshing tool
fou, full, drunk
frae, from
freens*, friends
fyl'd, fouled, defiled

gae, go, walk
gane, gone
gang, go, depart
gar, make, cause, compel
gear, wealth, possessions, money
gie (gi'e*), give
giftie, talent, power
gin, before
gled, kite
gooms, gums
grat, wept
gree, prize
guid, good

hae (ha'e*), have
hame, home
han, hand
hanget, hanged
hangie, hangman
haud*, hold
haund*, hand
het-headed, hot-headed
Highlan, Highland
himsel, himself
Hornie, horned one
houghmagandie, fornication

i', in
incog, incognito
indite, indict
ingle, fire burning on the hearth
ither, other

jad, hussy

ken, know, be aware of
kennin, trifle
kennin'*, in recognition

laird, squire, landowner
lang, long
lank, languid
lea'e, leave
lee-lang, live-long
leugh, laughed
leuk, look
licht, light
lien, lain
loun, rascal, rogue
lowe, rage
lowin, raging
lug, ear

mair, more
maist, most
mak, make
maun, must
mauna, must not
may't, may it
meikle, great, large
men', mend
ministration, administration
misca'd, abused, maligned
mither, mother
monie, many
mowe, copulation
muckle, much
my lane, alone

na, nae, not, no
nane, none
neebor, neighbour
neuk, corner
niest, next
no, no'*, not
Norlan', northern

o, of
o'er, over
ony, onie, any
or, ere, before
o't, of it
oursels, ourselves

owre, over, too

pictured beuk, playing card
plaitie, food on a plate

rarely, finely
red-wat-shod, shod with wet blood
remead, remedy
rin, run
run, thoroughgoing
rung, cudgel

sae, so
sair (verb), serve
sair(ly), sore(ly), very
saul, soul
saunt, saint, godly person
scaud, scald
shangan, cleft stick
shanna, shall not
shawn, shown
shog, jog, shock
sic, such
skelp, spank
sma', small
snash, abuse
snick-drawing, scheming
Southron, southern
sowther, solder, patch up
spairge, splash
stan, stand
stane, stone
steer, meddle with
stegh*, stuff, cram
swaird, sward
swatch, sample
syne, since

tak, take
tauld, told
tent, heed, care, tend
thae, those
thegither, together, continually
tho, though
thochts*, thoughts
thole, tolerate, endure, suffer
thou'rt, thou art

thrang, crowd, busy, jostle
thro, through
thy-lane, alone
thysel, yourself
tine, get lost
tirl'd, rattle at a door by turning the latch
touts, sounds
trow, trust, believe
tyke, mongrel

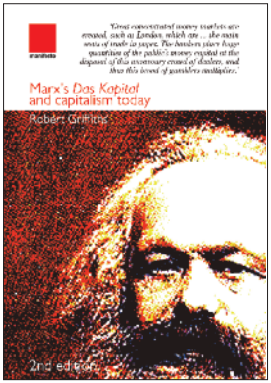
unco, very, mighty
upo, upon

vera, very

wabster, weaver
wad, would
wae, woe
waft, web
wan, won
wan*, one
wark, work
warld, world

warsle, wrestle
warst, worst
wat, know, be aware
wee, small, a little bit
weel, well, fine
wha, who
whare, where
whase, whose
wheesht*, silence
whun-stane, whinstone
whyles, sometimes, then
wi, with
wight, fellow
winna, will not
wonner, wonder, marvel
wrang, wrong
wurd*, word

yestreen, last night
yett, gate
yon, yonder
youthfu, youthful



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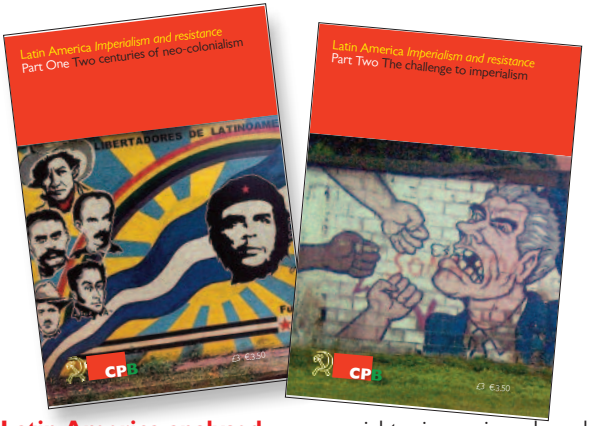

Latin America analysed

The fifteen years after 1998 saw left-wing governments being elected across Latin America. Cuba's isolation was ended. Brazil joined with China, Russia and South Africa to challenge neo-liberal dominance in the WTO. Venezuela set up Bolivarian structures for economic cooperation across the subcontinent. The daily lives of working people were changed. Yet today right-wing and extreme right-wing regimes have been installed across the subcontinent. While resistance continues, it is against the background of police repression, increasing material hardship and the loss of economic and civil rights.
These two pamphlets seek to understand how this has happened and why left-wing governments were so quickly replaced.

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