

1996

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Recommended Citation

McGinty, J. Walter (1996) "John Goldie and Robert Burns," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol29/iss1/19>

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J. Walter McGinty

John Goldie and Robert Burns

The only surviving physical evidence of John Goldie's skill as a cabinet maker is a clock case in the possession of the Duke of Hamilton. His theoretical work in mathematics and astronomy has been superseded, but his most lasting legacy yet may prove to be the influence that his theological writings had upon the work of Robert Burns.

A neat summary of Goldie's life is given by James A. Mackay in his head-note to the poem "Epistle to John Goldie" of August 1785:

John Goldie (1717-1809), son of the millar of Craigmill, Galston—cabinet maker, inventor, wine merchant, mathematician, astronomer, theologian, speculator in coalmines and canals, and one of the guarantors for the Kilmarnock Edition—a prime example of the Augustan virtuoso.¹

The date of publication of Goldie's first work, *Essays on Various important Subjects*,² immediately precedes one of the most productive periods in Burns's life. The popularity of the *Essays* is indicated by the publication of a

¹*The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, ed. James A. Mackay (Alloway, 1986), p. 121. Further references will appear in the text.

²*Essays on Various Important Subjects, Moral and Divine. Being an Attempt to Distinguish True from False Religion. [In Three Volumes].* Vol. I (Glasgow, 1779); probably no more published. All quotations from the *Essays* are from this edition.

second edition in 1785. In between the first and second editions Goldie had in 1784 produced *The Gospel Recovered from its Captive State*,³ a five-volume work that became part of the six-volume set whose first volume was composed of the reprint of the original *Essays*. By the time Burns was writing his "Epistle to John Goldie" the *Essays* were being referred to locally as "Goudie's Bible."

Drawing upon Kilmarnock folk-lore, which seems to have emanated from the son of John Goldie, the anonymous author of *The Contemporaries of Robert Burns* credits John Goldie with having made arrangements for Burns to meet with some Kilmarnock men who might assist in the publication of his work. He records Goldie as saying to Burns at Mossgiel, "Come your wa's down to Killie some day next week, an' tak' pot luck wi' me. I hae twa or three guid friens that'll be able to set the press going."⁴ Whether or not the story attributing the initiative to Goldie is accurate, undoubtedly he was instrumental in securing financial backing for the Kilmarnock edition, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786).

The bond of friendship and respect between the two men was established initially through the poet's knowledge of the essayist rather than the other way round. Burns's "Epistle to John Goldie" (p. 121) was written in appreciation of the religious views expressed by the author of the essays, and in congratulation for the publication of a second edition.

Burns had imbibed from his father a milder and less rigorous form of Calvinism than was then prevalent in Scotland. William Burnes's manual of religious belief⁵ which he had compiled for the instruction of his children conveys a much gentler and kindlier vision of God and his attitude toward mankind as compared with the theology that emerged from the Westminster Confession of Faith that undergirded the Church of Scotland at that time. Burns, by his own admission, was at that time beginning to "puzzle Calvinism with . . . heat and indiscretion."⁶ Goldie's material must have contributed to the fires that were testing the fabric of the established religion of the day. Burns found himself in conflict with such ideas as election, predestination, original sin. He found himself questioning whether faith and obedience must be set over against reasoning and the questioning human intellect. He looked for a place for common

³[John Goldie], *The Gospel Recovered from its Captive State, and Restored to its Original Purity*, By a Gentle Christian [initialled J. G.] (London, 1784); 2nd edn. (London & Edinburgh, 1785).

⁴[Hugh Paton], *The Contemporaries of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1840), Appendix, p. 5.

⁵William Burnes, *A Manual of Religious Belief in a Dialogue between Father and Son* (Kilmarnock, 1875).

⁶Letter to Dr. John Moore of 2nd August 1787, in *The Complete Letters of Robert Burns*, ed. James A. Mackay (Alloway, 1987), p. 250. Further references will appear in the text.

sense and understanding and generosity of spirit in matters of religion, and instead found superstition and authoritarianism and small mindedness. John Goldie must have seemed like a kindred spirit. Burns had a natural affinity for a man who set out in his essays to deal rationally and in a common sense way with matters of doctrine and scriptural interpretation.

In his "Epistle to John Goldie," Burns applauded the attitude adopted by Goldie toward religion. They both believed in its value, but knew it to be suffering from the accretions and distortions brought about by people who sometimes had their own case to make or their own position to protect. Burns warned Goldie that there were those who, had it been permitted, would have been only too pleased to have ended his dispute with orthodoxy by means of:

A toom tar barrel
An twa red peats (p. 122)

Goldie, however, was aware that he would be attacked for the statements he had made, and in his words "To the Reader" of the second edition of the *Essays* he took pre-emptive action:

Let none who look on these different essays imagine that they are done with a view to expose or to deride real religion. They are intended for a quite different purpose, for the design thereof is only to separate the dross from the metal, or the chaff from the wheat and to expose them to the wind on purpose that the wheat may be cleansed and the metal purged from every pernicious corruption of alloy.⁷

Goldie began his Introduction to the *Essays* with these words: "The Christian religion hath received its worst or deepest wounds from those who style themselves its best friends."⁸

It is surely significant that this is a theme that Burns takes up just one month after congratulating Goldie. In the "Epistle to the Rev. John McMath," enclosing a copy of "Holy Willie's Prayer," he writes,

All hail, Religion! Maid divine!
Pardon a Muse sae mean as mine,
Who in her rough imperfect line
 Thus daurs to name thee;
To stigmatise false friends of thine
Can ne'er defame thee. (p. 130)

⁷Preface, *Essays*, p. 1.

⁸Introduction, *Essays*, p. 9.

That Goldie and Burns were working in parallel in their thoughts on religion is beyond doubt. But there are certainly some things that indicate a more direct influence of Goldie upon Burns.

In his third Essay, "Thoughts Concerning Persecution and a Blind Zeal in Judging Others," Goldie writes,

Such as these [those who harshly judge] are not serving the true God aright, but are only worshipping a creature of their own mind, and an idol moulded to the dishonour of him that gave them a being (p. 30).

Burns echoes these sentiments in his "Address to the Unco Guid":

Then gently scan your brother man
Still gentler sister woman;
.....
Who made the heart, 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us: (p. 76)

But the influence of Goldie is sometimes even more identifiable. Throughout his work he makes a plea for the due place of reason in determining religious belief, saying on one occasion, "all such [men] as deny reason and the proper use of these powers are not only half, but full brothers to Balaam" (p. 37). Now this is a motif to which Burns returns again and again. The story of Balaam, the Old Testament character who believed that his ass spoke to him, is referred to in at least five of his letters and two poems. He also makes a more oblique reference to it in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop when referring to the basis of his own religious beliefs. He says, "I am a very sincere believer in the Bible, but I am drawn by the conviction of a Man not the halter of an Ass" (p. 164).

In his "Epistle to John Goldie" Burns lists the things that have been harassed by the writings of the lay theologian—superstition, enthusiasm and orthodoxy—and links Goldie's name with that of Dr. John Taylor of Norwich, one of the "New Licht" ministers:

'Tis you an Taylor are the chief
To blame for a' this black mischief (p. 122)

Taylor and Goldie had both written on the same subject. Taylor's *The Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin* (1740) was one of the books that Burns had read as a boy. He included it in his list of his reading that he gave in a letter to Moore noted above (p. 251). Goldie in his *Essays* had written "An Essay upon what is Commonly Called Original Sin" (p. 108). He sets the tone of his treatment, if not to say his attempted debunking, of the doctrine by giving this description of the contents of the first chapter:

Contents: An immediate deliverance to the enslaved and liberty to the captives; or a release to all such as are enslaved by the doctrines, traditions and commandments of fallible superstitions and bigotted man (p. 108).

Then, despite saying “A few syllables will serve to convey a truth, while many sentences are required to persuade people into error” (p. 109), he goes on for 220 pages attempting to persuade his reader not to believe in what is commonly called “Original Sin.” Goldie does not pull his punches:

Now what a most horrid and shocking theology is this that millions of millions of rational beings, for no fault of their own, but only for an offence committed by another (viz an adult person) thousands of years before ever they so much as had an existence should be given up and delivered over to eternal damnation without mercy for ever upon account whereof (p. 191).

The parallels to be found in “Holy Willie’s Prayer” are, I think, obvious:

<i>Burns</i>	<i>Goldie</i>
And no for onie guid or ill	for no fault of their own (p. 191)
When thousands Thou has left in night	millions and millions...should be given up and delivered over to eternal damnation. (p. 191)
I, wha deserv’d most just damnation For broken laws Sax thousand years ere my creation, Thro’ Adam’s cause	thousands of years before ever they so much as had an existence... (p. 191)
Thou might hae plung’d me deep in Hell (p. 93)	eternal damnation without mercy for ever. (p. 191)

Such a passage as that in Goldie may well have provided Burns with the raw material for his own equally vitriolic criticism of the same year as the second edition of the *Essays*.

Again the likely influence of Goldie may be glimpsed when we read his comments on prayer: “Where is the sect, or party however grossly wrong in their sentiments or opinions but will petition God that he may prosper them, above all others” (p. 23). Compare this with Holy Willie, who after “praying against” Gavin Hamilton, Robert Aitken and the whole Presbytery of Ayr, concludes:

But, Lord, remember me and mine
Wi mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace an gear may shine,
 Excell'd by nane,
And a' the glory shall be Thine—
 Amen, Amen! (p. 95)

There in poetic form is precisely what Goldie was criticizing.

But the clearest sign of Goldie's influence I have discovered is to be found in several passages in which he expounds the theory of the intrinsic value of things and people:

... if one should take a piece of metal the colour of gold, and impress upon it the coin of a guinea, in order that he may make it pass for the said value, so that by counterfeiting the impression he borrows the King's authority, to deceive his subjects (p. 25).

Further on in the same essay he says, "it is only the quality that gives an intrinsic value and right to the image" (p. 83), and again:

... for the quality lies only in the internal part of religion, and not in the external; for the latter is no more than the stamp impressed on the coin, or quality whereby it may the better pass current from one person to another. . . as ignorant people value the worth of their coin upon account of its stamp (p. 98).

And lastly:

For as base or corrupt metal having falsely received the King's impression passes current as value with ignorant people, so doth corrupt doctrines or opinions when once they have falsely ascribed God's authority thereto for their sanction (p. 99).

In these passages Goldie has labored the theme of intrinsic value almost to the point of exhaustion, but anyone reading his words could not fail to get their message. Notwithstanding any other influences that brought about "A Man's a Man for a' that," Burns seems to owe much to Goldie for the lines:

The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gow'd for a' that. (p. 535)

In a letter to George Thomson in January 1795, Burns had been discussing originality in composition and readily admits that the poem, "A Man's a Man for a' That" is "two or three pretty good prose thoughts inverted into rhyme" (p. 669).

I am only claiming that Goldie's words formed part of the mixture that went into the crucible of the poet's mind.⁹ Long years after he had first read them, the lessons of "Goudie's Bible" continued to influence Robert Burns.

Alloway

⁹See Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960), p. 246nn, for other possible sources.