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A. M. Kinghorn

Scots Wha Hae and A' That

On St. Andrews Day, 1995, it was announced on the BBC that a nationalist procession, seeking the early return of a Scots Parliament, was marching down the Royal Mile in Edinburgh to the skirl of the pipes while a demonstration was held by the Wallace Monument in Stirling. A goodly measure of independence from England is a probability today whereas two centuries ago it was never on the cards. Some Scots are asking if Robert Burns, their national poet, has a role to play in the nation's political future while others would have him deified as an Immortal Memory, not to be sullied by the vulgar rivalries of a modern national movement? Which identity suits him better?

Burns was no sentimental Jacobite in the spirit of Ramsay's Easy Club, animated by hazy ambitions to turn the clock back to pre-Union times, but a Scottish poet-patriot who developed radical views and republican leanings. Anglophobe he was not. His attack on "such a parcel of rogues in a nation" was launched at fellow-countrymen who had in the popular view sold out their country and committed treason "for English gold," rather than at the English themselves. Comparison with the martial days of Wallace and Bruce he made with regret that these "hireling traitors" of his own generation had greedily surrendered to corruption.

After 1745 feelings that their national identity had been surrendered forever and belief that union with England had driven a hard and unfair bargain caused an undercurrent of resentment to flow through all ranks, especially the poorer classes, who continued to endure the blatant inequalities and injustices of the age. This fueled radicalism rather than nationalism. Old-fashioned patriotism was sustained by tradition and separated from political movements.

Fired by youthful enthusiasm for the American and French revolutionary movements and later by Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*, Burns spoke up for the "have-nots" ground down by poverty at a time when great wealth meant great power and expressed contempt for the "haves" and their reliance on the hierarchy of birth and its attendant trappings, riches, class and outward show, a social despotism upheld by the national government. That is what the song "For a' that and a' that" signifies and it is easy to see why it soon became popular in America, since it lauded the basic tenets of the U.S. Constitution and, in fact, paraphrased Paine's message.

Social unrest, marked by riots in England, spread to Scotland. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth, Dundee and Aberdeen witnessed violent uprisings between 1787 and 1791. Republicanism was in the air; nationalism became less significant than the power of universal brotherhood united in a quest for reform. It is hard to over-estimate the influence of the distant American Revolution and the nearer French example on popular opinion in both England and Scotland. It cut through all classes and problems of government, attracting leading philosophers and historians, including Adam Smith, David Hume and Dugald Stewart, *literati* who regretted that Scotsmen had not shown more interest in claiming their civil liberties. The fact that the French, for hundreds of years acquiescent slaves of a despotic ruling class, had suddenly burst into revolt, stirred the apathetic majority to remember their own comparable grievances.

With his trenchant poetic appeals to the idealized Brotherhood of Man, Burns's name as a favored voice of the new doctrine spread to London although he was not the only Scots poet to attack the government. James Wilson, a weaver from Paisley, gave Paine's *Rights of Man* strong support in even more incisive verse but unlike Burns's his fame remained local. Many of Burns's poems and letters sigh for the passing of heroic resistance and as in "Such a parcel of rogues in a nation" bewail the national decline. Narratives of Wallace and Bruce ensured that the image of a continuous struggle for freedom, with the adversaries delineated as good and evil forces, would live on in the common memory. Stereotyped tales of these doughty warriors were handed down from one generation to the next so that every Scottish child knew about Wallace's campaign and martyrdom and Bruce's victory at Bannockburn.

Burns's first hero was Wallace, representing the oppressed poor. In a frequently-quoted letter to Dr. John Moore we find his dramatic self-dedication recalling Wallace's story, one of "the two first books I ever read in private," which "poured a Scottish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest,"¹ and in 1794 he designed an irregu-

¹*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 136. Henceforth *Letters*.

lar ode for Washington's birthday into which he worked the name of his champion:

Where is that soul of Freedom fled?
Immingled with the mighty Dead!
Beneath the hallowed turf where WALLACE lies!²

bewailing the disappearance of the nation's warlike qualities. He goes on to contrast the dead Wallace "quenched in darkness like the sinking star" with an image of his own degenerate land, a "palsied arm of tottering, powerless Age" (*Poems*, II, 734, alternative reading). These regrets about the old freedom refer to a present nostalgia for a social cohesion that had slipped away rather than to any clear political ideal to be pursued now and into the future. The freedom that Burns sought for himself and others was in the main release from the grinding poverty that crushed ambition from birth: "Poverty! Thou half-sister of Death, thou cousin-german of Hell, where shall I find force of execration equal to thy demerits!" he declared in a 1791 letter to Peter Hill (*Letters*, II, 65). The subject was never far from his mind.

Another graphic contrast with post-Union apathy is the stirring song "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" (frequently called "Scots Wha Hae"):

Scots! wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,
Scots, wham BRUCE has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,—
Or to victorie.— (*Poems*, II, 707).

was the first of six stanzas Burns set to the old tune "Hey Tutti Taitie" which "often filled my head with thoughts of Liberty & Independence" (*Letters*, II, 235). The song isolated one decisive event in Scottish history and made it into a glorious image of resistance. In 1793, when Burns wrote the words, French revolutionary fervor was at its height in Scotland. Though such lines may have stirred dormant emotions by appealing to Scotland's colorful and violent feudal past, the aggressive feelings they might have roused were unfocused. To survive, nationalism needs an enemy but no conspicuous foe stood at the castle gate, though many thought that he had been living inside the castle wall since the Act of Union. The political ideal of loyalty to the Union existed uncomfortably alongside traditional Scots patriotism rooted in the kind of narrative and anecdotal history compiled by Hector Boece in the fifteenth century and given authority by George Buchanan in the sixteenth.

William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, the Jacobite Gilbert Stuart, and other Enlightenment figures, convinced of the essential progress by peaceful evolu-

²The *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), II, 733. Henceforth *Poems*.

tion of civil society from feudal barbarity to their own more fortunate orderly condition were succeeded in the nineteenth century by academics like Patrick Fraser Tytler and John Hill-Burton who sought hard documentary evidence and blew legend away. Their school demolished most, but not all, of the romantic structure erected by Boece and Buchanan.

Most but not all. Barbour's epic poem *Bruce* retained its status as a reliable authority for the events recorded in it and in modernized versions bathed later events in its reflected glory. A century later, Hary's *Wallace* (read by Burns in a version by William Hamilton of Gilbertfield) exaggerated the heroics and distorted the chroniclers' evidence. Looking back through the eyes of the young Burns, the field of Bannockburn was magnificent, that of Flodden was tragic, Wallace was a martyr, savagely done to death by the English. The War of Independence, viewed as the start of a constant struggle for liberty from Southron tyranny, made it possible for the old guerrilla warriors to be admired while their feudal legatees the Catholic Stuarts were condemned in the progressive spirit of the Union and the approved belief in the ascent of civil society from the dark ages. The rest of the literary-historical saga was clouded by royal tyranny, religious oppression, treachery and violence unpleasing to "enlightened" Scots. The Scottish universities neglected it and the early heroes were silently celebrated by numerous monuments erected in her cities and towns during the nineteenth century.

Scotland easily creates myths. After the Union, another myth grew up. This one, also expressed in the English poems of Goldsmith and Gray, idealized rural conditions unchanged since the seventeenth century and earlier. The "couthie" picture of poor but honest Lowland peasantry speaking Braid Scots and content on a diet of oatcakes and kail found its immediate literary models in Ramsay's pastoral *The Gentle Shepherd* of 1725, which had a Restoration setting, and Burns's "The Cotter's Saturday Night," published in the Kilmarnock edition of 1786. The latter pictured the poor cotter's family and contrasted their humble virtue with the empty pomp of conventional religion by which their lowly lives were regulated. But it had a sting in the tail. Burns's final stanza, an invocation to "SCOTIA! my dear, my native soil"

O THOU! who pour'd the *patriotic tide*,
 That stream'd thro' great, unhappy WALLACE' heart;
 Who dar'd to, nobly, stem tyrannic pride,
 Or *nobly die*, the second glorious part:
 (The Patriot's GOD, peculiarly thou art,
 His *friend, inspirer, guardian and reward!*)
 (*Poems*, I, 151-2).

ended on a note of incitement which arbiters of taste, like Hugh Blair and Henry Mackenzie, did not notice or chose to overlook.

"The Cotter's Saturday Night, with their seal of approval, became an inspiration for generations of followers who reworked its sentimental elements.

After the publication of Mackenzie's *Lounger* review of the Kilmarnock volume on 9 December 1786, the sympathetic face of Burns, the "Heaven-taught" ploughman-poet, was held up to the light and flattered by the tea-urn ladies of Edinburgh who believed him to be a true native genius straight from the plough and, for a few months, drew entertainment from his "shocking" opinions. Initially gratified, Burns came to dislike being treated as a curiosity and left Edinburgh for good. His egalitarian utterances became more frequent and started to attract official attention after the fall of the Bastille in July 1789 sparked off the French Revolution.

His biographer Chambers reflected the conventional attitude to Burns's egalitarianism in the 1790s. Of "For a' that and a' that," a late piece composed in January 1795, Chambers commented: "This song may be said to embody all the false philosophy of Burns's time, and of his own mind." Scottish radicalism took a more definite shape after Burns's death. Its politics of envy and the bitterness felt by people in the new industrial Glasgow and Stirling areas, who blamed their wretched working conditions on the Union, eventually came to a head in the violent insurrection of 1820 known as "the Radical War." The spirits of Wallace and Bruce were invoked and "Scots Wha Hae" sung at anti-government meetings as a national anthem.

Had Burns survived, without falling victim to the virus of "bourgeois respectability" in his old age, he would certainly have been held up as a totem of this failed uprising, the leaders of which were given sentences of hanging or imprisonment. After this purge radicalism went underground, to re-emerge after 1850 in a less violent form which survives to this day in the policies of the Scottish National Party.

Though Burns paraded radical beliefs he was above all a dedicated Scots-writing poet and it would be wrong to tie Burns, the Scots language and political nationalism too closely together. When C. M. Grieve, an ardent Scottish nationalist, announced in 1925 that his inspiration for his new Scots or Lallans was not Burns but Dunbar, he associated the revival of this modern literary movement with the recorded vocabulary of late medieval Scots *makars* like Dunbar and Douglas, rather than with Burns, whose "plain braid Lallans" he affected to despise because it depended heavily on English borrowings.³ Such a rigid connection of Scots language (or Gaelic which was also a contender for rehabilitation) with Scots political nationalism chains the literary heritage, but Burns is not to be shackled by any ideology that restrains his Muse.

It may be asked why Robert Fergusson did not fill a similar role when his contribution to the revival of Scots was as great and even more varied than Burns's. Fergusson died aged twenty-four in 1774, before the international revolutionary movement had made an impact and with only local fame as a poet. He celebrated the City of Edinburgh and its worthies, and his political

³*Albyn, or Scotland and the Future* (London, 1927), p. 35.

interests lay in satirizing local elections, though he occasionally cast a backward, nostalgic glance at Scotland's historical past, for example in "Auld Reikie":

To Holy-rood-house let me stray,
 And gie to musing a' the day;
 Lamenting what auld Scotland knew,
 Bien days for ever frae her view:

* * *

For O, waes me! The thistle springs
 In domicile of ancient kings,
 Without a patriot to regret
 Our palace, and our ancient state.⁴

In "The Farmer's Ingle" he praises the simple diet which supposedly led the Scots to their (legendary) victory over the Danes at Luncarty. But Fergusson was not given to uttering bellicose exhortations in the spirit of "Scots Wha Hae"—at least not in his published verse. He followed the example set by Ramsay, Hamilton of Bangour and others more obscure, using whatever resources of Scots vocabulary he could absorb, notably the "livan words" he heard around him. Though Fergusson was the first to construct a rich Lallans, Hugh MacDiarmid had little to say in his favor, impetuously consigning him to the same linguistic rubbish-heap as Burns.

Nasty rumors were spread about Fergusson by his earliest biographers, notably David Irving, and a just evaluation of his worth was blocked for over a century. After Robert Heron's memoir of Burns in 1797 and James Currie's 1800 edition, representing the poet as a drunken womanizer and self-inflicted victim of an artistic temperament, a politically subversive Burns might well have suffered from the same curse of character-assassination as Fergusson had it not been for a popular inclination to pass over this boozy demon in favor of the milder Burns. The Currie image was softened and the ploughman-poet's reputed amatory and alcoholic indiscretions forgiven by generations of worshippers. The first of many monuments to his immortal memory was erected in 1816.

However, the face of Burns most likely to attract modern campaigners for an independent Scotland is the one which his conservative contemporaries suppressed, namely, the whipper-up of the disaffected, the rabid adversary of the establishment known as far afield as London for his dangerous opinions, the denouncer of the all-powerful Kirk and its two-faced ministers and in this anniversary year of his death proposed as an anonymous writer of inflammatory verses for the radical press in London as well as Edinburgh.

⁴*Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, ed. Alexander Manson Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 148.

Opinions on this last point are divided. Was he really such a menacing subversive or just a fireside soldier who when it came to serious action, hesitated on the brink? How far can his correspondence be relied upon to provide an answer?

In a December 1794 letter to his loyalist friend Mrs. Dunlop Burns says that he approved of the executions of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, whom he calls "a perjured Blockhead & an unprincipled Prostitute" (*Letters*, II, 334)—betraying a naive and ill-informed prejudice. The counterparts of those admiring Edinburgh ladies in Paris and Lyons were soon to take the low road to the guillotine. Would Burns have approved of that? He soon came to lose his faith in France, a far-off country of which he really knew very little, but his sympathies with the democratic principles which had fired both the American and French Revolutions, as distinct from the blood-letting which shocked young idealists like Wordsworth, had been outspoken enough to alienate many of his loyalist friends. When he wrote this letter, the Terror launched by Robespierre was at its height in France. The execution of Louis XVI in January 1793 had horrified the government and encouraged the ordinary man in "North Britain" to support the monarchy; those who attacked the establishment were henceforth regarded as traitors. This made the radical position dangerous.

Cunningham's *Life* supplies an account of Burns's petty gestures, speaking of peers and politicians with contempt, defiantly praising Washington before Pitt and hesitating to remove his hat in the Dumfries Playhouse when the National Anthem was being performed. Dumfries was a loyalist town and a non-conformist stood out; in Cunningham's words:

all his rash words about freedom, and his sarcastic sallies about thrones and kings, were treasured up to his injury, by the mean and the malicious. His steps were watched and his words weighed; when he talked with a friend in the street, he was supposed to utter sedition⁵

Burns was certainly a handy target for slanderers and there was enough truth in what they said to put him in danger. He probably went out of his way to annoy. He had made enemies and his correspondence after 1790 suggests political wariness. In a reply to Robert Graham, Commissioner of Excise, dated 5th January, 1793, Burns denied party-political connections and active participation in the Playhouse incident, revered the Monarch and the Constitution of 1688 and restricted his professions of reform to unveiling corruption.

On the other hand, those who would admit Burns to the pantheon of Scottish heroes as a brilliant inspiration for modern nationalist supporters believe that the famous myth has obscured a political influence much greater than Cunningham and the lobe of biographers have claimed. The power of Burns to in-

⁵*The Complete Works of Robert Burns...With a New Life of the Poet...* by Allan Cunningham (London: George Virtue, nd), p. xl.

flame the mob through his verse was, according to this hypothesis, quite enough to frighten the loyalists. This is to consider him not as a poet but as a hammer. One must ask how he wanted to be seen at the time. It is hard to believe that he envisaged such a restricted view of his own potential and this version of Burns as a firebrand-parliamentarian ranged against Pitt and Dundas sells the poet short.

Nevertheless, such a view has its supporters. Attention has been drawn to radical poems printed anonymously in London's *Morning Chronicle* and *The Edinburgh Gazetteer* and attributed to Burns. One is titled "The Ghost of Bruce" and demands liberation from slavery in conventional eighteenth-century English verse.

I who erewhile the Ghost of far fam'd Bruce
 Made aft the dread and eke the joy to see
 Alone went wandering through his laurel'd field
 The other night revolving all the ills
 Our country has indur'd from P..t D....s
 And all their pentioned slaves
 That curse your Isle
 O'erwhelmed with grief and bursting into tears
 Cried indignant — O dear Native Land!
 My country!

Printed in *The Edinburgh Gazetteer* on 6th February, 1793, this is not particularly distinguished stuff and could have been composed by any patriotic journalist conscious of the power of King Robert's name to evoke folk-memories of national heroism. Here Bruce has been turned into an eighteenth-century Man of Feeling. The tone is weak and this tearful indignant phantom is scarcely a fit companion for the belligerent living Bruce of "Scots Wha Hae" which Burns composed only seven months later.

After his death there were many self-styled "ploughman poets" trying to cash in on their inheritance from the Kilmarnock volume. In the absence of MSS or other solid evidence Burns's authorship is doubtful. In a letter to Robert Graham, Burns said that he knew nothing of Capt. William Johnston, editor of *The Edinburgh Gazetteer* (like the *Star* known for its radical outlook) though he had written to Johnston praising the paper and ordering a subscription (*Letters*, II, 174, 158). This was apparently enough to brand him subversive in a spy-conscious town like Dumfries.

Burns emphatically denied authorship of any such political correspondence. "I never, so judge me, God! wrote a line of prose for the *Gazetteer* in my life," he stated (*Letters*, II, 174). He had, however, sent verses on "The Rights of Woman" to that paper. His "Rights" were those of protection, decorum and most of all admiration, attributes hardly likely to appeal to today's feminists. Johnston went to prison about that time, as did his successor later,

so it seems that Burns suffered for this indirect connection with a known reformist publisher.

But was he not somewhat economical with *la vérité*? In a 1789 letter to Alexander Cunningham he said: "I would scorn to put my name to a Newspaper Poem" (*Letters*, I, 405). A few weeks later a poem of his appeared in the London *Star* (a paper which frequently changed its name) signed "Duncan M'Leerie." His few *noms-de-plume* were not difficult to unveil, though, like "Aratus" they could have been misappropriated. In early April 1789, Burns had complained that verses falsely attributed to him had been printed in the *Star*, and copied to the *Gazetteer* and *New Daily Advertiser* (see *Letters*, I, 394-6).

From what we may deduce from estimates of his open character and professed ideals of honesty, Burns was not one to tell calculated untruths (except possibly to women), to allow misleading impressions about his social status to stand, or to hide under an impenetrable cloak of anonymity. He was proud of his name and said so more than once, resisting definition by others. Writing to Peter Stuart, editor of the *Star*, he sought permission "to correct the addresses you give me,— I am not R. B. Esq.... I am as yet simply, Mr ROBERT BURNS, at your service" (*Letters*, I, 408). On a previous occasion Burns had identified himself simply as "A Briton" in a letter to the editor of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* dated 8th November, 1788, in which he defended the Constitution, the present royal Family, the shortcomings of the House of Stuart and the sanctity of the fourth of July as a tribute to the American Congress—a fine example of how to be fair to all sides.

A week is said to be a long time in politics and Burns was surely entitled to modify his opinions, especially in the 1790s. After all, he had a family to support. To avoid arrest under the 1792 Sedition Laws and to keep his Excise job Burns said that he made a declaration undertaking not to publish political matter. He had probably made it unwillingly, for in March 1794, through Patrick Millar, he was offered a job on the London *Morning Chronicle* on a generous salary thrice his Excise wage, which he turned down, perhaps foolishly, on family grounds, though recompense for his efforts was never a great concern of the poet. His diffidently-expressed wish to contribute "little prose Essays" to "a Newspaper" (*Letters*, II, 289) was stated in a reply to Millar, but no such essays have ever turned up. In his letter of refusal he enclosed a copy of "Scots Wha Hae" which *The Morning Chronicle* published anonymously on 8 May 1794, but with a broad hint of authorship.

Though it is tempting to be carried away by enthusiasm for a new slant on Burns, especially when it is timed to coincide with the bicentenary of his death, the circumstantial evidence is not strong enough to credit the poet with authorship of many anonymous contributions reflecting the common radicalism of his time, though it may still be asked whether the republican Burns or the cosy Rabbie of the myth is the truer "Man For A' That"—the latter elected as a fitting symbol of old Caledonia to be wheeled out if ever the militancy of "Scots

Wha Hae” and the old rousing exhortations to fight for that elusive lost liberty be called up to help rearrange the socio-political face of Scotland. Carlyle, who idealized Burns as an heroic man-of-letters, raised the poet’s popularity by casting him in the heroic mould, in these pseudo-democratic times an unfashionable status but still acceptable if the hero in question is long dead.

So, to a conclusion. Is Burns to serve in a materially prosperous and possibly independent Scottish nation of the future only as a signpost to her romantic history, looking down from his monument like Wallace and Bruce, or will he continue as an updated Immortal Memory, not purged of “offensive” elements by a trail of latter-day launderers but taken all in all for what he actually represented, Edwin Muir’s Protean figure?

What would Burns himself have decided? In an era of unprincipled political greed, not unlike that of the eighteenth century, we should find it encouraging that a Scots poet should still be exalted far from Scotland two hundred years after his death. Were Burns to return today and tell us which of his works he would wish preserved he would surely choose the songs, done for no pecuniary reward, and above all the love songs, for example, “I Love my Jean” to Jean Armour, composed when he was lonely and separated from her:

There’s wild-woods grow, and rivers row,
And mony a hill between;
But day and night my fancy’s flight
Is ever wi’ my Jean.— (*Poems*, I, 422)

Like Ramsay before him, Burns took Scottish landscapes for his subject and his hills and his streams are familiar. His images carry the exile back to home ground—“The Banks o’ Doon,” “The Braes o’ Ballochmyle,” “Afton Water,” Alloway’s “auld haunted kirk” with Tam o’ Shanter and Souter Johnnie “bousin at the nappy,” Tam’s resentful wife Kate, a “sulky sullen dame”; the quack Dr. Hornbook and the many worthies drawn with such flair come to life from unmistakably Scots originals; his mouse and his louse, even if they are now seen as political symbols, owe their immortality to this young man of outstanding perceptions and common sense. In these words Burns, unwilling to be defined by others, defined himself:

A Scottish Bard, proud of the name, and whose highest ambition is to sing in his Country’s service.... The Poetic Genius of my Country...bade me sing the loves, the joys, the rural scenes and rural pleasures of my natal Soil, in my native tongue.⁶

Sandwich, Kent, Emeritus

⁶Robert Burns, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Edinburgh, 1787), Dedication to the Noblemen and Gentlemen of the Caledonian Hunt, pp. v-vi.