3-1-2018

The “Sighan, Cantan, Grace-Proud Faces”: Robert Burns and the Kirk

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Publication Info

Reprinted from 2018, pages 37-54.
I take my title from a poem which Robert Burns sent privately to the Reverend John McMath in 1785 enclosing a copy of “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” because it so perfectly encapsulates the poet’s attitude to the ultra-conservative members of the Scottish church, ministers and laymen alike, with whom he skirmished in his early days as a poet. In considering the relationship of Burns to the Kirk, we need first to look briefly at the situation of the Kirk as it evolved during the eighteenth century in Scotland. While not at the center of the Enlightenment, Scotland was certainly not untouched by it. There were editions, for instance, of Montesquieu, Rousseau, D’Alembert, and others which were published in Scotland during the eighteenth century. And even these books, produced in Scotland and presumably destined for the Scottish market, were only a part of those available to Scots, because the London booksellers did a very considerable business in Scotland during the century too. But we need to go back even further, to the beginning of the century, to situate Burns in the religious context of his day.

Students of Scottish religious history are familiar with the doctrinal dispute which split Scottish Presbyterians into the fundamentalist “Auld Lichts” (or Old Lights) and the more moderate “New Lichts,” and it is this dispute which needs to be recalled when we read the kirk satires of Burns. Briefly, it hinged upon predestination, that contentious doctrine which has stuck in the craw of divines and laymen alike throughout most of the history of Scotland since the Reformation. In the eighteenth-century there was a movement towards a more liberal interpretation of salvation. The fundamentalist position stated that those predestined for salvation were to achieve it by the mercy of God, through Jesus, and in no way because of their own goodness. Thus, the reasoning went, if a person
was of the elect, nothing he or she could do would alter this pre-ordained fact.

One of the principal divines on the side of the Auld Lichts was Thomas Boston, the elder (1677-1732). Most of Boston’s work was published only after his death, edited by his son, Thomas the younger. One of his books, of which Burns owned a copy, Human Nature in its Fourfold State (1720) almost perfectly states the fundamentalist position. This work was enormously popular in Burns’s time—I have identified fifteen editions published in Scotland during the poet’s lifetime, but there were doubtless several more; we have a so-called 13th edition published in Edinburgh in 1763, and a 23rd in Perth in 1776. Like many theological works, there was no early translation into Gaelic—the first edition I have been able to trace appeared in 1811. It must not be thought that Boston’s position was new at this time, or peculiar to the Church of Scotland; Edward Fisher (fl. 1627-1655), in The Marrow of Modern Divinity, which was first published in London in 1646, and a copy of which Burns ordered from his bookseller, had written:

your God in Christ will never un-son you, nor yet as touching your eternal salvation will He love you even a whit the less though you commit never so many and great sins; for this is certain, that as no good in you did move Him to justify you and give you eternal life, so no evil in you can move Him to take it away being once given.1

Put in modern terms, God does not make mistakes among his chosen! This ultra-conservative creed was obviously not that of the General Assembly, and in fact that body declared such doctrines to be heretical. But as history has shown repeatedly there are times when the voice of moderation is not heard in the land. A so-called 12th edition of Fisher was published in Edinburgh in 1726, and we can assume that it enjoyed a substantial readership at that time in Scotland—we find Burns ordering a copy of it for the private library to which he acted as unpaid secretary in 1791 (Letters, II: 66).2

Another divine whose work Burns most likely knew was Ralph Erskine (1685-1752), author of a very popular collection first published in 1720 as Gospel Canticles and in enlarged form as Gospel Sonnets in

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2 [For consistency through this volume, quotations from the letters originally cited in this essay from Ferguson have been standardized to Roy page numbering. Eds.]
1726. This work was an eighteenth-century best-seller in Scotland. In this country it was published by Benjamin Franklin in 1740. We do not know that Burns possessed a copy of the book as there is not a full list of his library, which was dispersed by his sons years after his death, but it seems very likely that he knew the work. Erskine too was of the predestinational persuasion. In the Preface to the *Gospel Sonnets* he wrote: “the Salvation of Sinners is not of the Free-will of Man, nor of Works; but of the Free-will of God, and of Grace.”³ He went on to say: “I fear the Tendency of some new Phrases, Expressions and Positions that have been spread abroad ...” (p. ix), and he claimed that salvation “lies in accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for Justification, SANCTIFICATION, and eternal Life, by vertue [sic] of the Covenant of Grace” (p. x). The important thing to note in these quotations is not their strict adherence to what was perceived as the tenets of the Calvinist doctrine, but rather that, as early as 1726 (I have not seen a copy of the first edition of 1720, so do not know if the statements appear in that edition also), Erskine felt that there was backsliding enough that such a blast was called for. One might almost infer that the fundamentalist position was beginning to be on the defensive by this time. This sort of writing (and many more examples are at hand) at this time should finally put the lie to the claim that Burns’s poetry played an important role in the tempering of the stand which most people took, and which was adopted (probably slowly and silently) by the church itself. Writers making this claim for Burns are motivated rather by admiration for the Bard than by an examination of the history of the time. Furthermore, it must not be thought that this New Licht philosophy completely swept Scotland; Auld Licht ideas linger yet, and were the cause of several of the splits which took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most notably the formation of the United Free Church in 1900, created by the union of the Free Church of Scotland, which had been founded at the Disruption in 1843, and the United Presbyterian Church, itself founded in 1847 from the union of the United Secession Church, founded in 1820 by a fusion of Auld and New Lichts, with the Relief Synod which had been formed in 1761 over the system of patronage.

Burns’s father, a displaced Kincardineshire man, was no liberal in matters ecclesiastical, but neither was he an arch-conservative, as we see

³ Ralph Erskine, *Gospel-Sonnets; or, Spiritual Songs* (Edinburgh: for John Briggs, 1726), p. vi. Henceforth references to this edition will be included in the text.
from a fascinating document which survives in the form of a catechism written by William Burnes for the use of his children. In 1875 this was published with the title *A Manual of Religious Belief*. The work takes the form of a dialogue between father and son. It is a short book extending to less than twelve printed pages, and there is nothing in it of the joyless predestination of the rigid Calvinist doctrine of the time. This is not to suggest that Burnes was a liberal, or a New Licht. He was, for instance, bitterly opposed to dancing and other “frivolous” enjoyments which he felt were a very real danger to the soul. When Burns was seventeen he decided “to give my manners a brush” as he wrote, and enrolled in a dancing class at Tarbolton. His father, he said,

had an unaccountable antipathy against these meetings; and my going was…in absolute defiance of his commands.—My father…was the sport of strong passions: from that instance of rebellion he took a kind of dislike to me, which, I believe was one cause of that dissipation which marked by future years.—I only say, Dissipation, comparative with the strictness and sobriety of Presbyterean country life…” (*Letters*, I: 139).

According to tradition, the poet’s father expressed concern for his first-born even on his deathbed, and on his part Burns carried to his deathbed a feeling of guilt over having defied his father. Nevertheless he did draw a very sympathetic portrait of him in the patriarch of *The Cotter’s Saturday Night*. Interesting too are the choice of religious themes which Burns selected for inclusion in his picture of family worship in the poem. The Psalms are chanted in “artless notes in simple guise;” and the tunes themselves are the simple ones: Dundee, Martyrs and Elgin—which one scholar has termed tunes of “no great variety,”—yet Burns compares “Italian trills” to them much to the simple tunes’ advantage. Even more interesting is Burns’s choice of names from the Scriptural reading from “the big ha’-Bible.” In order we find Abraham, Moses bidding “eternal warfare” with the descendants of Amalek, David, Job and “rapt Isiah’s wild seraphic fire.” Even in the following stanza, when “perchance” the father turns to the “Christian Volume,” we find the Jesus of suffering, not of love. One should not read too much fundamentalism into this portrayal of an eighteenth-century Scottish peasant at worship, but there are certainly elements of it there. Burns was writing of what he had experienced as a boy, after all.

Much of this experience he rejected in part when he grew up—but only in part. People with axes to grind have tried to read into his poetry a total rejection of Presbyterianism, relying on his church satires to argue the case. This, it seems to me, is to misuse his poems—they were written as satires, to amuse his small circle of friends—and few, it must be recalled, were published during his lifetime; some of those that got into print (“Holy Willie’s Prayer,” for instance, in 1789) were published without the poet’s knowledge or consent. But those who argue for Burns’s wish to undermine the basis of Scottish religion forget that satire does not necessarily presuppose an author to be opposed to the concept of the idea satirized, but rather its implementation, or a perceived falling away from principle. Throughout his life Burns remained a deeply religious though troubled man as we can see from his correspondence. In 1788 he wrote to his benefactress Mrs. Frances Dunlop:

Religion ... has not only been all my life my chief dependance, but my dearest enjoyment ... A Mathematician without Religion, is a probable character; an irreligious Poet, is a Monster.— (*Letters*, I: 230).

A year and a half later he wrote:

Religion, my dear friend, is the true comfort! A strong persuasion in a future state of existence; a proposition so obviously probable, that, setting revelation aside, every nation and people, so far as investigation has reached, for at least near four thousand years, have, in some mode or other, firmly believed it. In vain would we reason and pretend to doubt. I have myself done so to a very daring pitch; but when I reflected, that I was opposing the most ardent wishes and the most darling hopes of good men, and flying in the face of all human belief, in all ages, I was shocked at my own conduct (*Letters*, I: 439).

But like so many eighteenth-century people he was not immune to doubt. What, if anything, there was beyond the grave perplexed him. Again to Mrs. Dunlop, he wrote:

Can it be possible, that when I resign this frail, feverish being, I shall still find myself in conscious existence! When the last gasp of agony has announced that I am no more to those that knew me, & the few who loved me; when the cold, stiffened, unconscious, ghastly corse is resigned into the earth...shall I be yet warm in life, seeing & seen, enjoying & enjoyed? ...If there is another life, it must be only for the just, the benevolent, the amiable, & the

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humane…Would to God I as firmly believed it, as I ardently wish it! (Letters, I: 457)
Elsewhere Burns mentions that “idle reasonings sometimes make me a little sceptical, but the Necessities of my heart always give the cold philosophisings the lie” (Letters, I: 307).
So Burns was, as he said himself, “in perpetual warfare with that doctrine of our Reverend Priesthood,” as he calls it, that we are “born into this world bond slaves of iniquity & heirs of perdition” (Letters, I: 303). I have, incidentally, excluded from this essay all quotations from the poet’s letters to Clarinda, because he was so ardently courting her in his letters that I think good deal of his talk of religion in them is mere posturing written in order to gain her favor, and thus little inference can be drawn from them. But that very warfare in the poet was a giant leap forward from the stricter acceptance of his father.
Rural Ayrshire was a long way behind Edinburgh in this respect. Sir Walter Scott was probably accurately mirroring the concerns of a father around 1737, in The Heart of Midlothian, when he has David Deans, a strict Cameronian, question his prospective son-in-law Reuben Butler to be sure that he is on the right track, not so much, I suspect, as the future husband of Jeanie, but as the pastor of the flock where he (Deans) is to be factor. But Midlothian was published in 1818, and even at that date there is little doubt that Scott’s Scottish audience would have understood, although not necessarily sympathised with, David Deans’ concern. This was a third of a century after Burns was writing his kirk satires.
Broadly speaking there are three sources of information about Burns’s relationship to the presbyterianism of his time: his letters, the poems and songs which he published during his lifetime, and those which were published posthumously. The letters show some variation depending upon how intimately Burns knew the addressee, and upon his or her attitudes, and those poems and songs which Burns published during his life are those less likely to have given offense to person, state, or church than those which he circulated privately. In the closed society of Ayrshire in the 1780s, it might have done the poet some considerable harm had he openly admitted to being the author of these poems.
I have mentioned some of the poet’s comments on religion in his letters. A scrutiny of his letters discloses the fact that Burns knew his Bible very well indeed, as would be the case of almost any person raised in rural Scotland in the eighteenth century. In the process of editing Burns’s letters I have run across hundreds of biblical quotations, misquotations, paraphrases, and biblical-sounding passages which upon
examination turn out not to be found anywhere in the Bible, and must, we conclude, come as echoes of the Bible, which the poet had heard from the pulpit. A very large proportion of these passages have their roots in the Old Testament; few in the New. There was, I am convinced, a connection between the patriarchal society of agrarian eighteenth-century Scotland and a preference for the Old Testament. Nor did his enthusiasm for reading the Bible wane when he was free of the paternal scrutiny; we find him writing in December 1787 when he was laid up with a sprained knee, “I have taken tooth and nail to the bible….It is really a glorious book” (Letters, I: 183).

Although Burns would have been considered a religious as well as a political liberal, he still had not abandoned his Auld Licht upbringing entirely, as we see from a letter of 1790:

I am deeply read [he wrote] in Boston’s fourfold State, Marshal on Sanctification, Guthrie’s trial of a Saving Interest, &c. &c. but “There is no balm in Gilead, there is no physician there,” for me: so I shall e’en turn Arminian [sic], & trust to, “Sincere though imperfect obedience” (Letters, II: 16).

The reference to Arminianism, made tongue-in-cheek no doubt, shows us that Burns certainly did not accept the hard-line Calvinist doctrine since the Dutchman Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) was one of the early theologians to break with the strict interpretation of predestination and “assert the freedom of man and limit the range of the unconditional decrees of God.”

Mention has already been made of Boston’s *Fourfold State*; the Reverend Walter Marshall’s *On Sanctification* and the Reverend William Guthrie’s *Trial of a Saving Interest* were works of an equally somber persuasion. But here again we must be careful not to accept unconditionally as fact Burns’s knowledge of a book as proof that he agreed with it. In his famous autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore of 1787 he mentions knowing from an early date John Taylor’s *Scripture Doctrine of Original Sin* (1740) (Letters, I: 138). Taylor was a Unitarian minister at Norwich whose ideas Burns equated to the New Licht doctrine. In fact, in a note which he appended to “The Ordination,” Burns defined New Licht (which he had used in a poem) as: “a cant phrase, in the West of Scotland, for those religious opinions which Dr. Taylor of Norwich has defended so strenuously.” But these comments by Burns in

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his letters are not nearly as interesting as the satirical attacks which he
made on church foibles in his poems.

These, as was mentioned, fall into two classes: those published during
the poet’s lifetime, and those published posthumously. In the first group
we find such poems as “The Holy Fair,” “The Ordination,” “The Calf,”
“Address to the Unco Guid,” “Address to the Deil,” and others. It
is interesting to note that only one of these appeared in the Kilmarnock
edition of 1786; all the others were published first in the Edinburgh
edition the following year, even though most of them appear to have been
written before the Kilmarnock volume went to press. One can infer that
Burns had reservations about these and only felt able to own them when
he had moved his poems and himself to the capital, far from Ayrshire.

One of the best known of Burns’s kirk satires, “The Holy Fair,” was
written in 1785 and revised for publication the next year. The title, the
poet said in a note to the poem, “is a common phrase in the West of
Scotland for a sacramental occasion,” and the poem paints a ribald picture
of one of these. With the author we see the goings-on at such an occasion,
supposedly one of solemn religious celebration, which was frequently
made the pretext for much that was certainly not holy—in fact the goings-
on owe much more to the title word Fair than Holy. We are told that,
“some are thinkin’ on their sins,/ An’ some upo’ their claes.” The first of
the preachers, “Sawnie” (Alexander Moodie), holds forth with tidings of
damnation, although Burns changed the word to salvation in subsequent
editions; he clears the points of Faith with thumping and stamping and
jumping. A moderate then takes his place, Geordie (George Smith, a New
Licht) and harangues his listeners on practice and morals; but this is
barren ware for the faithful—“His English style, and gesture fine,/ Are a’
clean out o’ season,” Burns writes—and the listeners drift away. But
Geordie is replaced (“an antidote/ Against sic poosion’d nostrum;”) and
when William Peebles takes over, Common-Sense takes the road. Burns
is here making a double play on the words: Common-Sense probably also
represents the Reverend John Mackenzie of Mauchline, one of the
moderates. The last of the pastors of the flock is “Black Jock” (John
Russell), a man who could terrorize people by his preaching. Throughout
the poem Burns shifts our focus from the preachers to the audience, many
of whom are in the ale-house slaking their temporal thirst at the expense
of their souls, and assignations are made for purposes far from holy. In
the final stanza Burns tells us of the participants:

There’s some are fou o’ love divine;
There’s some are fou o’ brandy;
An’ monie jobs that day begin,
May end in Houghmagandie [fornication]
Some ither day.

This was pretty mild stuff, and there was no great outcry against the poet when his book was published, although he was under censure, and had been for some time, because of his personal life.

“The Ordination” appeared in the second edition of Burns’s poems in 1787, although it was written before February 17, 1786, in plenty of time for it to have been included in the Kilmarnock edition. But where “The Holy Fair” is a rather general and mild satire which does not lampoon any particular person, “The Ordination” concerns a specific event, the induction of the Reverend James Mackinlay, an Auld Licht clergyman, to the charge of the Laigh Kirk of Kilmarnock in 1785. Mackinlay was put forward by the Earl of Glencairn, Burns’s patron in the Excise, and himself a moderate, because, it is said, he believed that the Kilmarnock parishioners wanted a conservative. But due to the opposition of the Kilmarnock moderates, it was nine months after the charge became vacant before Mackinlay was able to assume office. The gist of the satire is that Common Sense, or the Arminian doctrine, was introduced to the Laigh Kirk by the Reverend William Lindsay, an earlier appointee; that she was frequently attacked by the Reverend James Oliphant and the Reverend John Russell, both at one time ministers at the High Church in Kilmarnock; and that now, with Mackinlay in the pulpit of Laigh Kirk, Common Sense would be routed. Russell appears in “The Holy Fair” also, as does the doctrine of the New Lichts under the name Common Sense.

Burns wasted no time getting at the opposition in the poem. In the second stanza he wrote:

Curst Common-sense, that imp o’ hell,
Cam in wi’ Maggie Lauder:
But Oliphant aft made her yell,
An’ Russell sair misca’d her:
This day Mackinlay taks the flail,
[slap]
An’ he’s the boy will blaud her!
[clap stick]
He’ll clap a shangan on her tail,
An’ set the bairns to daud her
[pelt]
Wi’ dirt this day.

The poet also took aim at the patronage system which “wi’ rod o’ airn, [iron]/ Has shor’d [threatened] the Kirk’s undoin.” The stanza goes on to say that the Earl of Glencairn, “a godly, elect bairm,” has selected a good man to set things to rights. Burns was fortunate that the Earl did not take
offence at this slighting remark, because it was Glencairn who obtained Burns his Excise appointment in 1788. With a fine burst of ribaldry, Burns ends the poem by telling us that “Orthodoxy’s faes”—Learning, “with his Greekish face”; Common-Sense; and Morality, “embracing all opinions”—have all been packed off to hell. And, much as he had done in his more extended work The Jolly Beggars, he issues a call to fill up the glasses, the toast in this case being:

And here’s—for a conclusion—
To ev’ry New-light mother’s son,
From this time forth, confusion!

Since neither the poet’s “Address to the Unco Guid, or the Rigidly Righteous” nor “The Calf” has much to say about religion as such, we can pass them over. The former is a comparison between the self-proclaimed righteous and the “poor mortals” with whom Burns identifies; the latter a play on the variant words for members of the bovine race. This completes our examination of the religious satires openly published during the poet’s lifetime.

Turning to those satires which circulated in manuscript until after Burns’s death, we find, as was mentioned, that they tend to be more specific in their targets and somewhat more pointed. Among them we find “The Twa Herds,” which first appeared in Thomas Stewart’s Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns in 1801; a year later Stewart republished the poem in a much expanded edition of Burns’s works and added a sub-title to the poem—thus “The Twa Herds; or, Holy Toolzie” (the word means a quarrel or brawl). Subsequent editors have sometimes only used the sub-title. According to a note which Burns added to a copy of the manuscript, this was “the first of my poetical productions that saw the light.” Stewart, perhaps having seen this note, added a note of his own to the 1801 printing stating that the poem was “among the first of our Author’s productions which he submitted to the public,”7 thus strongly implying that the piece had been previously published, whereas we know that not to be the case—Burns meant that it was the first to be written. The people being satirized were two Auld Licht reverends once again—the Reverend John Russell and the Reverend Alexander Moodie, both of whom we have already met in “The Ordination.” These two had a falling out over parish boundaries which was taken up by the Presbytery of Irvine, where, according to John Gibson Lockhart:

7 Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns (Glasgow: Chapman and Lang, for Thomas Stewart, 1801), p. 34n.
in the open court, to which the announcement of the discussion had drawn a multitude of the country people, and Burns among the rest, the reverend divines, hitherto sworn friends and associates, lost all command of temper, and abused each other *coram populo*, with a fiery virulence of personal invective, such as has long been banished from all popular assemblies, wherein the laws of courtesy are enforced by those of a certain unwritten code.\(^8\)

I have not ascertained exactly when this fracas took place, but it appears to have been in 1784, which is probably the date of composition of the poem. Thus Burns’s reference to its being his first composition “to see the light” is not strictly accurate; the poet may have meant that it was the first to have been circulated.

Burns opens the poem with a mock-sober question:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{O a’ ye pious, godly Flocks} \\
&\text{Weel fed in pastures orthodox,} \\
&\text{Wha now will keep you frae the fox,} \\
&\text{ Or worryin tykes?} \\
&\text{Or wha will tent the waifs and crocks} \\
&\text{About the dykes?} \\
&\text{The twa best Herds in a’ the west} \\
&\text{That e’er gae gospel horns a blast} \\
&\text{This five and fifty simmers past} \\
&\text{O dool to tell!} \\
&\text{Hae had a bitter, black outcast} \\
&\text{Atween themsel.} —
\end{align*}
\]

Burns then takes aim at an issue which, though dating back to 1712, was by no means settled in rural Scotland by Burns’s time, namely, the matter of patronage. By the Patronage Act of that date, descendants of donors of ecclesiastical property had the right to “present,” or appoint, ministers to parish kirk\(s\). The matter was further complicated by the Act of Assembly of 1732 which gave the right of election to elders and heritors in the event that a patron did not exercise his right. There was yet further dissent over the Burghers’ Oath of 1747, a result of the ’45, which required all holders of public office to affirm the established religion—this led to a secession, and the Anti-Burghers were formed, with their own synod. The original Burghers, who held with the Solemn League and Covenant, became known as the Auld Lichts; those wishing to follow a modified form of

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Presbyterianism became the New Lichts. Naturally, Burns did not even try to put all of this in a few lines, but the basis of the doctrinal dispute would have been well known to his readers. Just the mention of Auld Licht or New Licht would, to Burns’s audience, have conjured up all the old animosities. Moodie, Burns tells us, kept his flock well in hand:

Nae poison’d Arminian stank
He loot them taste;
But Calvin’s fountain-head they drank,
That was a feast!

And like any good shepherd, Russell too knew what was best for his flock—even if the sheep didn’t!

He fine a mangie sheep could scrub
And nobly swing the Gospel-Club;
Or New-Light Herds could nicely drub,
And pay their skin;
Or hing them o’er the burning dub
Or heave them in.—

The “burning dub” is, of course, the burning lake of hell, but here again Burns shows his sure hand at satire by reducing it to a puddle.

The poem ends with Burns calling on all the flocks “To cowe the lairds,/ And get the Brutes the power themsels/ To chuse their Herds.—” If this should come about, then Orthodoxy would flourish, Learning be put in a halter,

And that curst cur ca’d Common Sense
Wha bites sae sair,
Be banish’d o’er the seas to France,
Let him bark there.—

“The Kirk’s Alarm” I also include among this group of satires not published by the poet, although in the case of this poem Burns did in fact publish it, but under the cloak of anonymity. Writing to Mrs. Dunlop on 17 July 1789 he said:

You will be well acquainted with the persecutions that my worthy friend, Dr Mcgill, is undergoing among your Divines.—Several of these reverend lads, his opponents, have come thro’ my hands before; but I have some thoughts of serving them up again in a different dish.—I have just sketched the following ballad, & as usual I send the first rough-draught to you.—I do not wish to be known in it, tho’ I know, if ever it appear, I shall be suspected.—If I finish it, I am thinking to throw off two or three dozen copies at a Press in Dumfries, & send them, as from Edin’ to some Ayrshire folks on both sides of the question.—If I should fail of
rendering some of the Doctor’s foes ridiculous, I shall at least gratify my resentment in his behalf.—(Letters, I, 422).

We can assume that the finished product was *The Ayrshire Garland: A New Song*, a broadside containing the first thirteen (of eighteen) stanzas of the poem. A manuscript copy of the poem sent by Burns to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham on 23 December 1789 calls the work “The Kirk of Scotland’s Garland.” It was, of course, the last of Burns’s great kirk satires, following the others by three years or more, written at a time when the poet had turned his attention almost exclusively to the writing of songs for James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum*. The particular reason for Burns’s having another go at the clergy was the case of the Reverend William McGill (1732-1807), who had been ordained to the second charge of Ayr in 1760 and had been a friend of the poet’s father, and a supporter of the New Lichts, though because of his natural timidity probably not much of a leader in their cause—in reply to Burns’s letter cited above, Mrs. Dunlop warned the poet on August 1st that his poem might “cast off a whole pack of blood-hounds against a poor little white rabbit.”

The trouble began in 1786, when McGill published *A Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ*. The Reverend William Peebles denounced the work as heterodox. Objection was taken to McGill’s stance that “the death of Christ derived all its merit and efficacy from its being subservient to the plan of Divine wisdom and goodness for promoting the true happiness of man.” As McGill wrote:

> Upon the whole, to suffer many indignities in the world, and to die on a cross, were not the chief and ultimate ends of our Saviour’s mission, nor any direct ends of it at all, but only incidental calamities, which could not fail to come upon him in discharging the duties of his mission faithfully, amidst an evil and adulterous generation. The direct and immediate end of his mission, was to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom, or reveal the Will of God; to confirm his doctrine by proper evidences; to set an example of what he taught; and in short, to promote the salvation of sinners in the most effectual manner, whatever

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sufferings the doing so might bring upon him, and though it should cost him his life.\textsuperscript{11}

The attack against McGill was mounted by the Reverend William Peebles of Newton-on-Air, in November 1788, in a sermon on the centenary of the Glorious Revolution. Early in 1789, McGill answered Peebles himself in another sermon, \textit{The Benefits of the Revolution}. He was charged with heresy before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr in April 1789, but in May the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ordered the charges dropped. Burns described the matter thus to Graham of Fintry in December enclosing a copy of “The Kirk’s Alarm”:

Though I dare say you have none of the Solemn-league- &- covenant fire which shone so conspicuous in Lord George Gordon and the Kilmarnock weavers, yet I think you must have heard of Dr McGill, one of the clergymen of Ayr, and his heretical book.—God help him, poor man! though he is one of the worthiest as well as one of the ablest, of the whole priesthood of the Kirk of Scotland, in every sense of that ambiguous term, yet for the blasphemous heresies of squaring Religion by the rules of Common Sense, and attempting to give a decent character to Almighty God and a rational account of his proceedings with the Sons of Men, the poor Doctor and his numerous family are in imminent danger of being thrown out to the mercy of the winter winds.— (\textit{Letters}, I: 453-454).

I have always particularly enjoyed the opening stanzas of this satire, in which Burns so succinctly sets the stage, reducing the insubstantial charges to their appropriate level of absurdity:

\begin{verbatim}
Orthodox, Orthodox, wha believe in John Knox,
    Let me sound an alarm to your conscience;
A heretic blast has been blawn i’ the West—
    That what is not Sense must be Nonsense, Orthodox,
    That what is not Sense must be Nonsense.—

Doctor Mac, Doctor Mac, ye should streek on a rack [stretch
To strike Evildoers with terror;
To join FAITH and SENSE upon any pretence
    Was heretic, damnable error, Doctor Mac,
    ’Twas heretic, damnable error.
\end{verbatim}

Burns then devotes a stanza each to most of the Auld Licht clergy who had attacked McGill, some of whom had already made appearances in “The Holy Fair.” The Town of Ayr itself is castigated, called “rash” for

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{ibid.}, pp. 244-5.
having taken up the quarrel, and passing reference is made to Provost John Ballantine and Robert Aiken, friends and benefactors of the poet. We know the people Burns satirizes only by reputation, and that mostly through his poems, but it seems evident that he knew his quarry well; in this poem each person has some personal trait singled out and mocked—one for excessive zeal in condemning the damned, another is admonished to “leave the fair Killie [Kilmarnock] dames,” another is mocked for his parsimoniousness, yet another is characterized as a rock the Lord has made “To crush common sense for her sins.” Even William Fisher, whom we shall meet again in a moment, has his stanza:

Holy Will, Holy Will, there was wit i’ your skull,
When ye pilfer’d the alms o’ the poor;
The timmer is scant, when ye’re ta’en for a saint, [material]
Wha should swing in a rape for an hour, Holy Will,
Ye should swing in a rape for an hour.

This accusation was to follow Holy Willie beyond the grave to be taken up by Allan Cunningham who, in 1834, wrote:

Yet he was by no means rigid as far as regarded himself: he scrupled not to “get fou,” when whiskey flowed at the expense of others: he was more particular, too, in the examination of female transgressors than some of his brethren thought was seemly; and when he left Mauchline for an eldership in a neighbouring parish he had a sore fall, for it is said he made free with the money of the poor.12

Never one to set himself above or apart from those he mocked, Burns ended the poem (I exclude two postscript stanzas) with a stanza on himself:

Poet Burns, Poet Burns, wi’ your priest-skelping turns,
Why desert ye your auld native shire?
Tho’ your muse is a gipsey, yet were she even tipsey,
She could ca’ us nae waur than we are, Poet Burns,
She could ca’ us nae waur than we are.

For those not familiar with the story of William McGill, it is pleasant to report that the magistrates of Ayr published an appreciation of his services to the community. The Presbytery of Ayr, on orders from the Synod, looked into McGill’s teachings; in April 1790, he declared his adherence to the church’s doctrines, and all was well.

I have left the best for the last. “Holy Willie’s Prayer” has been called, accurately I think, the finest short satire in the English language; one critic has called it, “perhaps the greatest satire in European literature.”¹³ It was published in a chapbook in 1789, apparently without the author’s permission, although a copy fell into the hands of the wrong person and, the poet wrote, it “alarmed the kirk-Session so much that they held three several meetings to look over their holy artillery, if any of it was pointed against profane Rhymers.—” (Letters, I: 144). William Fisher (1737-1809) was a kirk elder of Mauchline Parish, and the target of Burns’s satire. The event which triggered the poem was an action against Burns’s friend Gavin Hamilton who, as a New Licht, was distasteful to Auld Licht minister William Auld (1709-1791) and other conservatives. Attempts were made to discredit Hamilton at the Kirk Session, and when he appealed to the Presbytery of Ayr on June 25, 1785, he was charged with:

1) Unnecessary absences 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 January
3) Habitual if not total neglect of family worship
4) Sending an abusive letter to the Session on 13 November 1784.

Both the Presbytery and the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, to which body the Session appealed the lower finding, found for Hamilton. Burns was exultant and soon after he wrote “Holy Willie’s Prayer.”

The poem so completely demolishes the Auld Licht position on predestination that it has been argued it finished off orthodoxy as the fundamentalist faction knew it, but, as was mentioned earlier, this group was already fighting a rearguard action by this time, and it is unlikely that Burns’s poem had any great effect on the outcome of the Auld versus New Licht controversy. True, Burns cited the “holy artillery” which might have been trained on him, but the fact that nothing was done is significant. Burns begins the poem in broad general terms before moving on to the specific. Willie says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{O thou that in the heavens does dwell!} \\
\text{Wha, as it pleases best thysel,} \\
\text{Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,} \\
\text{A’ for thy glory!} \\
\text{And no for ony gude or ill} \\
\text{They’ve done before thee.---}
\end{align*}
\]

There follow two more stanzas in which he reminds God that he is one of the chosen, “A burning and a shining light/To a’ this place,” when he, God, “might hae plunged me deep in hell,” but instead has singled him, Fisher, out “To shew thy grace is great and ample.”

The focus is now on Willie, and we see how far from the ideal his life really is, but with great subtlety Burns has the suppliant shift the responsibility for his admitted sins of fornication, drunkenness and abuse of office from himself to God, who is testing Willie:

Maybe thou lets this fleshly thorn
Buffet thy servant e’en and morn,
Lest he o’er proud and high should turn,
That he’s sae gifted;
If sae, thy hand maun e’en be borne
Untill thou lift it.—

This leads Willie to ask God to “bless thy Chosen in this place,” and then he goes on to ask God to raise his hand against the enemies of his chosen:

Thy strong right hand, Lord, make it bare
Upon their heads!
Lord, visit them, and dinna spare,
For their misdeeds!

Only in these stanzas (numbers 12 through 16 of 17) does Burns come to the supposed point of the poem—Gavin Hamilton’s suit. Finally the prayer rounded with the splendid last stanza:

But Lord, remember me and mine
Wi’ mercies temporal and divine!
That I for grace and gear may shine,
Excell’d by nane!
And a’ the glory shall be thine!
AMEN! AMEN!

And so Holy Willie has come full circle in his prayer—from a petition to God who whimsically saves a few predestined souls to please himself, to Willie’s request that he outshine the lot in grace, but particularly “gear,” we infer, so that he (God) may continue to be praised by Willie for his indulgence to the suppliant.

None of the other satires can match “Holy Willie’s Prayer” for the succinctness, almost sparseness, of the presentation, nor the perfect balance between serious criticism of religious bigotry and unrestrained fun at the sight of a man making a fool of himself. There are other poems in which Burns satirizes the Kirk or its tenets—“Address to the Deil”—, but only incidentally, and as this essay has been concerned with the poet’s church satires I have omitted them.
The shift from control of the synods and presbyteries by the Auld Lichts to the New had begun before Burns wrote his satires, and the balance was already shifting at the parish level. A radical change was taking place in Scotland at time, and would have taken place with or without Burns’s satires. No complaint that Burns made against the Auld Licht position but had been made before him. It is just that he did it so much better, raising his criticism to the level of high art.