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# Robert Burns's Politics and the French Revolution

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## ROBERT BURNS'S POLITICS AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

(1973)

As Hugh MacDiarmid has pointed out, Burns has been made to prove whatever the writer wanted him to prove with little regard for the facts.<sup>1</sup> There can be few major writers who have been used so consistently to prove such opposing points of view. For instance, Emerson would have us revere a simple bard; whereas to Hilton Brown, "Burns was always a perplexing bundle of contradictions."<sup>2</sup> With respect to politics we are told by Charles J. Finger, "There is little more than a hint in the Burns correspondence as to political views, or lack of them,"<sup>3</sup> when in fact there are many references to politics and things political in his letters, not to mention the political poems he wrote, as well as poems celebrating Scottish heroes which can be interpreted in a political light. It should be said in partial extenuation of Finger that when he made the above statement the standard edition of Burns's letters was not available, but he certainly had access to a large number of them.

At a time when talk of revolution was "in the air," Burns was certainly not in the forefront of any revolutionary movement; in 1793 he defended the king while admitting that he felt that the principles of the Glorious Revolution had not been adhered to:

As to REFORM PRINCIPLES, I look upon the British  
Constitution, as settled at the Revolution, to be the most glorious

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (Edinburgh: Castle Wynd Printers, 1959), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Celebration of the Hundreth Anniversary of the Birth of Robert Burns by the Boston Burns Club* (Boston: H. W. Dutton, 1859), p. 37; Hilton Brown, *There was a Lad* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Charles J. Finger, *A Man for A' That: The Story of Robert Burns* (Boston: the Stratford Co., 1929), p. 38.

Constitution on earth, or that perhaps the wit of man can frame; at the same time I think . . . 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 (*Letters*, II: 173).<sup>4</sup>

This letter, written to Robert Graham of Fintry on January 5, 1793, was admittedly, sent to Burns's patron to clear his name from charges of disaffection to the government, but, as William Witte has pointed out with respect to these letters (Burns wrote more than one such at this time), "there is no need to assume that, being an apologia, they must be wholly untrustworthy."<sup>5</sup>

Burns wrote much the same thing to John Francis Erskine somewhat later that same year. We must not, he said, sacrifice the British Constitution to "an untried, visionary theory" (*Letters*, II: 208). He also repeated his feeling that there had grown up a "corruption between the Executive Power & the Representative part of the legislature, which boded no good for our glorious Constitution; & which every patriotic Briton must wish to see amended" (*ibid.*).

It would appear that Burns held substantially these views before he became an exciseman. Writing as a private citizen to the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* (Nov. 8, 1788) he staunchly upheld the constitution: "I went last Wednesday to my parish church, most cordially to join in grateful acknowledgements to the Author of all Good, for the consequent blessings of the Glorious Revolution. To that auspicious event we owe no less than our liberties religious and civil—to it we are likewise indebted for the present Royal Family, the ruling features of whose administration have ever been, mildness to the subject, and tenderness of his rights" (*Letters*, I: 333).

Although ready enough to admit his admiration for the current regime, he was not prepared to damn the House of Stuart which had been deposed a century earlier: "The Stuarts have been condemned and laughed at for the folly and impracticability of their attempts, in 1715 and 1745. That they failed, I bless my God most fervently; but cannot join in the ridicule against them" (*Letters*, I: 334). In this unwillingness to blame those who had supported the Stuarts, Burns acted as did a large number of

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<sup>4</sup> [For consistency through this volume, quotations from the letters originally cited in this essay from Ferguson have been standardized to Roy edition pages. Eds.]

<sup>5</sup> William Witte, *Schiller and Burns* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), p. 21

Scotsmen of his day. He signed the letter *A Briton*, but the use of a pseudonym was at that time rather the rule than the exception.

Burns did, however, harbor a definite sympathy for the unfortunate Stuarts. In 1791, for instance, he wrote a song for James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, "There'll Never be Peace till Jamie comes Hame," which reads in part:

The Church is in ruins, the State is in jars,  
Delusions, oppressions, and murderous wars:  
We dare na weel say't, but we ken wha's to blame,  
There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame.—

Now life is a burden that bows me down,  
Sin I tint my bairns, and he tint his crown;

But till my last moments my words are the same,  
There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame.

*(Poems, II: 572)*

The song, which was published in 1792, was unsigned, but so were most of Burns's contributions to the *Museum*, and the poet certainly made no attempt to disguise his authorship. He apparently felt that he was not writing a political song in any very real sense; he wrote to Alexander Cunningham about it, "You must know a beautiful Jacobite Air There'll never be peace till Jamie comes hame.—When Political combustion ceases to be the object of Princes & Patriots, it then, you know, becomes the lawful prey of Historians & Poets" (*Letters, II: 82*).

Burns also used other Jacobite airs, or, perhaps more accurately, traditional airs to which Jacobite songs were sung and which would be associated with the cause wherever they were played throughout Scotland. In not a few instances these airs had been published without words before Burns took them up. The reason for the omission of the words was, I suspect, that whereas it would be difficult if not impossible to prove Jacobite leanings on the part of a music publisher, if he included the words he might find himself in trouble with the authorities. As late as 1793 Burns wrote to George Thomson, "I do not doubt but you might make a very valuable Collection of Jacobite songs, but would it give no offence?" (*Letters, II: 181*). Whether it would have we do not know, but Thomson prudently let the matter rest.

Burns had guardedly admitted his sympathy for the Jacobite cause a good deal earlier than 1793. In May 1787 he sent a copy of his "Epistle" to Mr. Tytler with this admonition, "Burn the above verses when you have read them, as any little sense that is in them is rather heretical"

(*Letters*, I: 112). Addressing Tytler as “Reverend Defender of beauteous Stuart” in the opening line of the poem, Burns added with respect to the Stuart name:

My Fathers that *name* have rever’d on a throne,

My Fathers have died to right it:

Those Fathers would spurn their degenerate Son

That NAME should be scoffingly slight it (*Poems*, III: 332-333).

In fact Burns was a direct descendant of a Jacobite; he told Ransay of Ochertyre that his grandfather had “been plundered and driven out in the year 1715, when gardener to the Earl Marischal at Inverury.”<sup>6</sup> And in December 1789 he sent a copy of the Tytler “Epistle” to Lady Winifred Maxwell Constable, whose father, the 6th Earl of Nithsdale, had suffered forfeiture for having “come out” in 1745. In his covering letter to Lady Constable he mentions that his forefathers had also done “what they could” and as a result “what they had they lost.” As a matter of prudence Burns finished the letter thus: “This language, and the inclosed verses, are for your Ladyship’s eye alone—Poets are not very famous for their prudence; but as I can do nothing for a Cause which is now nearly no more, I do not wish to hurt myself” (*Letters*, I: 461).

It can thus be seen that there is a distinct difference between Burns’s public and private utterances. While his heart lay with the House of Stuart he was pragmatic enough (as indeed he had to be once he had taken up his position with the Excise) to realize that the Jacobite cause really was a lost one by that date; to have openly avowed support of it could not have turned back the clock, but it most certainly could have harmed him. In thus keeping his private sentiments from all but a trusted few he was following the example of the overwhelming majority of Scotsmen at that time. What Burns’s Jacobitism did do was to predispose him to accept the idea of republicanism, for if Great Britain were to embrace that ideal Scotland would regain at least a measure of the independence it had lost to England over the centuries, more particularly as a result of 1715 and 1745. The poet’s enthusiasm for Scottish causes extended to early events too, as we see, for instance, in the comments he sent to various correspondents with copies of “Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn” (“Scots, wha hae”). The first copy was sent to Thomson about August 30,

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Allardyce, ed., *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century. From the MSS. of John Ramsay, Esq. of Ochertyre*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, London: William Blackwood, 1888), II, 554.

1793, with the comment, "There is a tradition, which I have met with in many places of Scotland, that it was Robert Bruce's March at the battle of Bannock-burn" (*Letters*, II: 235). After copying the poem Burns concluded, "So may God ever defend the cause of Truth and Liberty, as he did that day!" To the Earl of Buchan he was equally enthusiastic:

Independant [*sic*] of my enthusiasm as a Scotchman, I have rarely met with any thing in History which interests my feelings as a Man, equally with the story of Bannockburn.— On the one hand, a cruel but able Usurper, leading on the finest army in Europe, to extinguish the last spark of Freedom among a greatly-daring and greatly injured People; on the other hand, the desperate relics of a gallant Nation, devoting themselves to rescue their bleeding Country, or perish with her (*Letters* II: 276).

But it is obvious that one could be pro-Scottish without being anti-English, and it is probable that this was the case with Burns.

Before considering the impact of the French Revolution on Burns, it will perhaps be enlightening to briefly review his reaction to the American Revolution. In the letter already quoted in part which Burns sent to the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* in November 1788 he said, "I dare say, the American Congress, in 1776, will be allowed to have been as able and as enlightened, and, a whole empire will say, as honest, as the English Convention in 1688...." (*Letters* I: 334-335). He mentioned Franklin as a genius (*Letters*, I: 462), and wrote an "Ode [for General Washington's Birthday]" in 1794 (*Poems*, II: 732-734). While it certainly is not one of his better poems, the comment which he sent to Mrs. Dunlop about the poem says more about his feelings for Washington than does the ode itself: "The subject is LIBERTY: you know, my honored friend, how dear the theme is to me. I design it as an irregular Ode for General Washington's birthday" (*Letters*, II: 297). Finally, an unsubstantiated toast is attributed by Lockhart to Burns: when a toast was called for William Pitt, Burns is reputed to have called for the health of "a greater and a better man, George Washington."<sup>7</sup>

Although Burns wrote several political poems during the early years of the French Revolution, including his election ballads, the first years of the Revolution itself were apparently passed by in silence. One critic and biographer of Burns, Snyder, has suggested that this silence was due to fact that when the Bastille fell Burns was in the process of petitioning for

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<sup>7</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1828), p. 213.

active assignment to the Excise, for which he had previously qualified.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to accept this claim; Burns was never one to keep his strongest feelings from his intimate friends, and it seems improbable that he would have done so at this time. Obviously it would have been impossible for poet to have been unaware of what was happening in France. It is my guess that Burns did indeed know of the happening across the Channel, and probably commented on them to friends privately, and possibly in letters which have not survived, destroyed, perhaps, by well-wishers who did not want to leave potentially incriminating documents lying about—it is a curious fact that barely more than ten percent of the known Burns letters were written during the eighteen months between July 1789 and December 1790.

The first account (although not fully documented) we have of Burns involvement with the Revolution is reported by Lockhart. A smuggling vessel, the *Rosamond*, was captured, on February 29, 1792, with Burns leading the attack. Subsequently, according to Lockhart:

The vessel was condemned, and, with all her arms and stores, sold by auction next day at Dumfries; upon which occasion, Burns, whose behaviour had been highly commended, thought fit to purchase four carronades, by way of trophy. But his glee went a step further,—he sent the guns, with a letter, to the French Convention, requesting that body to accept of them as a mark of his admiration and respect. The present and its accompaniment, were intercepted at the custom house at Dover...<sup>9</sup>

That Burns, himself an Exciseman, would do anything so foolish and unlikely to succeed appears, to say the least, highly improbably.

To Mrs. Dunlop with whom he was usually rather outspoken he wrote in December 1792:

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 & 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—What my private sentiments are, you will find out without an Interpreter (*Letters*, II: 166).

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<sup>8</sup> Franklin B. Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1932), p.342.

<sup>9</sup> Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns*, p.213

This revealing letter points up two things: it shows us Burns's concern for his position (he was acutely aware that not only his own livelihood but the welfare of his wife and children depended upon this position) which would tend to discredit the *Rosamond* story; more important it shows us that Burns had already a quite definite republican leaning, so that although this may be the first documented mention of his bias in favor of the French Revolution, that feeling had probably not been recently come by. Earlier that year, on November 13, he had written to the reforming publisher of the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, William Johnston, who was later imprisoned, taking out a subscription to the paper. "If you go on in your Paper," Burns wrote, "with the same spirit, it will, beyond all comparison, be the first Composition of the kind in Europe." After asking Johnston to send him all back issues Burns continued, "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 colors these 'Calm, thinking VILLIANS whom no faith can fix' whatever be the Shibboleth of their pretended Part" (*Letters*, II: 158-159).

Although seriously interested in reform, Burns showed that he could turn the fever pitch to ribald verse. On December 12 he sent a short note to his friend Robert Cleghorn enclosing the bawdy "When Princes and Prelates"—a bold political fescennine poem which Burns later had to excuse to his superiors (*Poems*, II: 668-669, and cf. III: 1417).<sup>10</sup> In November the poet sent a poem "The Rights of Woman Spoken by Miss Fontenelle on her Benefit Night" to the actress Louisa Fontenelle who was at that time playing with George S. Sutherland's company in Dumfries. Considering the attitude of the day, the opening lines, with their scarcely veiled allusion to Paine's book, are rather daring:

While Europe's eye is fixed 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 (*Poems*, II: 661).

There follow twenty-eight lines complimentary to the fair sex and the poem concludes with:

But truce with kings, and truce with Constitutions,  
With bloody armaments, and Revolutions;  
Let MAJESTY your first attention summon,

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<sup>10</sup> [*fescennine*: OED glosses as *scurrilous*. Eds.]

Ah, ça ira! THE MAJESTY OF WOMAN !!! (*ibid.*, 662).

These imprudent writings, and probably more imprudent statements, by the poet soon came to the ears of government officials. His superior, Collector John Mitchell, a man of taste who was sympathetic to Burns, was instructed to look into the matter of Burns's supposed disaffection. On December 31, 1792, the poet wrote to Robert Graham of Fintry, who, as Commissioner of the Scottish Board of Excise, had had Burns appointed to his post. The letter, obviously written when he was distracted at the prospect of summary dismissal, does Burns little credit. About the specific charge of his being "disaffected" he wrote: "The allegation, whatever villain has made it, is A LIE! To the British Constitution, on Revolution principles, next after my God, I am most devoutly attached!" (*Letters*, II: 169). The revolution here referred to is, of course, that of 1688; obviously Burns would never mention the French Revolution in a letter such as this.

But Burns had to pour his heart out to someone, and that person was his friend and patron, Mrs. Dunlop. She had suggested that through her good offices he might be appointed Supervisor, but in the light of the pending investigation he wrote that it would be unwise for his name to be put forward at that time. The reason, he wrote, was that "some envious, malicious devil . . . has raised a little demur on my political principles, & I wish to let that matter settle before I offer myself too much in the eye of my Superiors—I have set, henceforth a seal on my lips, as to these unlucky politics; but to you, I must breathe my sentiments" (*Letters*, II: 170). It seems likely that he wrote too openly, for nearly a page of manuscript has been cut away at this point; probably Mrs. Dunlop felt it unwise to keep that part of the letter. Later in the letter he told her that the Board had absolved him of the charges.

On January 5, 1793, Burns received a letter from Graham of Fintry informing him that the charges against him had been dropped. Burns immediately sat down to answer it, and to refute the charges. The reply is too long to quote in its entirety, but the following points are made: Burns denies membership in, or even knowledge of, a Republican or Reform party; he denies having called for *Ça ira* at the theater; he denies having "uttered any invectives against the king." He then outlined his reform principles which were quoted in part at the beginning of this paper; he denied knowing anything about Johnston, the publisher of the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, and swore that he had never contributed anything in prose for that newspaper. He did admit, however, to having sent in two poems, one

of which was "The Rights of Woman." Finally, as concerned his attitude to France, he wrote:

As to France, I was her enthusiastic votary in the beginning of the business—When she came to shew her old avidity for conquest, in annexing Savoy, & to her dominions, & invading the right of Holland, I altered my sentiments—A tipling Ballad which I made on the Prince of Brunswick's breaking up his camp, & sung one convivial evening, I shall likewise send you (*Letters*, II: 174).

But despite this letter, and his claim to Mrs. Dunlop that he would set "a seal on my lips" Burns had not said his last about France and the French Revolution.

In a headnote to a letter which he copied out for Robert Riddell, the original of which (its whereabouts are unknown) was sent on April 13, 1793, Burns wrote:

In the year 1792-93, when Royalist & Jacobin had set all Britain by the ears, because I unguardedly, rather under the temptation of being witty than disaffected, had declared my sentiments in favor of Parliamentary Reform, in the manner of that time, I was accused to the Board of Excise of being a Republican, & was very near being turned adrift in the wide world on that account (*Letters*, II: 207).

What is interesting about his note is that Burns shows the Board to have made no distinction between advocates of parliamentary reform and republicans who are lumped together without distinction. And strangely enough Burns did not raise his voice in protest over this failure to distinguish between two quite different philosophies—perhaps because he was, in the deepest recesses of his being, sympathetic to them both.

Certainly Burns was no Royalist in any accepted sense of the word. He deeply offended Mrs. Dunlop when he wrote to her about the guillotining of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, "What is there in the delivering over a perjured Blockhead & 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!" (*Letters*, II: 334).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The quotation is from William Roscoe's "Song: O'er the vine-covered hills and gay regions of France," written "for the purpose of being recited on the anniversary of the 14<sup>th</sup> August [July], 1791." [Cf. Ferguson's note, II, 282: Roscoe's "Commemoration Song" appeared unsigned in James Sibbald's *Edinburgh Magazine or Literary Miscellany*, XIV (July 1791): 72 (which reported

The poet's brush with officialdom, while it may not have changed his privately held ideas, disgusted him with the way politics worked. Two days after he had defended himself to Graham of Fintry he sent a song, "O Poortith Cauld," to Thomson, the two final stanzas of which must have had particular meaning to him at the time:

O wha can preudence think upon,  
 And sic a lassie by him:  
 O wha can prudence think upon,  
 and sae in love as I am?

How blest the wild-wood Indian's fate,  
 He wooes his simple Dearie:  
 The silly bogies, Wealth and State,  
 Did never make them eerie (*Poems*, II: 676-677).

Thomson commented, "These verses I humbly think have too much of uneasy & cold reflection, for this Air ["Cauld Kail in Aberdeen"] which is pleasing, & rather gay than otherwise." Burns admitted the justice of Thomson's comment, but added, "yet for private reasons I should like to see it in print."<sup>12</sup> These private reasons may well have been that the song was apparently written for Jean Lorimer, but the stanzas quoted above suggest that there may have been a less obvious reason for the poet to wish to see the song printed.

Burns's disillusionment with politics was the subject of a political "Catechism," as Burns called it, which he sent to his friend Alexander Cunningham on February 20, 1793:

Quere, What is Politics?

Answer, Politics is a science wherewith, by means of nefarious cunning, & hypocritical pretence, we govern civil Politities for the emolument of ourselves & our adherents.—

Quere, What is a Minister?

Answer, A Minister is an unprincipled fellow, who by the influence of hereditary, or acquired wealth; by superior abilities; or by a lucky conjuncture of circumstances, obtains a principal place in the administration of the affairs of government.—

Q. What is a Patriot?

news from the month of its cover date, and so actually appeared early the following month, in this case August, perhaps the reason for the misdating of Bastille Day. Eds.]

<sup>12</sup> [Both Thomson's and Burns's comments come from marginalia on the song manuscript: see *Letters*, II: 176n. Eds.]

A. An individual exactly of the same description as a Minister, only, out of place (*Letters*, I: 182-183).

Another remark, to Miss Deborah Duff Davies, may have been a mere outburst of pique on the part of the poet; nevertheless it does bear quoting, as it shows us how profoundly disturbed Burns was, and had long been, with the manifestations of privilege which were so common in his day—privilege which, so he thought, would be abolished under a republican regime:

Out upon the world! say I; that its affairs are administered so ill!  
They talk of REFORM—my God! What a reform would I make  
among the Sons, & even the Daughters of men!

DOWN, immediately, should go FOOLS from the high places  
where misbegotten CHANCE has perked them up....I remember,  
& 'tis almost the earliest thing I do remember, when I was quite a  
boy, one day at church, being enraged at seeing a young creature,  
one of the maids of his house, rise from the mouth of the pew to  
give way to a bloated son of Wealth and Dullness, who waddled  
surlily past her (*Letters*, II: 202-203).

This sentiment was what Burns had in mind when he wrote his famous “For a’ that and a’ that” early in 1795, or perhaps in 1794:

Then let us pray that come it may,  
As come it will for a’ that,  
That Sense and Worth, o’er a’ the earth  
Shall bear the gree, and a’ that.  
For a’ that, and a’ that,  
Its comin yet for a’ that,  
That Man to Man the world o’er,  
Shall brothers be for a’ that (*Poems*, II: 762-763).

This, one of Burns’s best-known songs, has been variously interpreted as heralding a Christian or other religious revival, as singing the advent of Communism or some form of socialism, even a future government of all nations. While we do not need to accept any one of these interpretations as *the* sense of the song, there can be little doubt that the song did mean some sort of confraternity to Burns—the sort which the ideal, if not the practice, of the French Revolution had advanced.

One poem which it is not certain was written by Burns, although it is championed by the great French critic Auguste Angellier, is “The Tree of Liberty.”<sup>13</sup> If it is by Burns, it is by far his most outspoken endorsement

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<sup>13</sup> Auguste Angellier, *Robert Burns, La Vie, Les Oeuvres*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1893), II, 203-205.

of the French Revolution. Some of the most pertinent lines follow (the entire poem contains 88 lines):

Heard ye o' the tree o' France,  
     I watna what's the name o't;  
 Around it a' the patroits dance,  
     Weel Europe kens the fame o't.  
 It stands where ance the Bastille stood,  
     A prison built by kings, man,  
 When Superstition's hellish brood  
     Kept France in leading strings, man.  
  
 Upo' this tree there grows sic fruit,  
     Its virtues a' can tell, man;  
 It raises man aboon the brute,  
     It makes him ken himsel, man.  
 Gif ance the peasant taste a bit,  
     He's greater than a lord, man....  
  
 My blessings aye attend the chiel  
     Wha pitied Gallia's slaves, man,  
 And staw a branch, spite o' the deil,  
     Frae yont the western waves, 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....  
  
 Syne let us pray, auld England may  
     Sure plant this far-famed tree, man;  
 And blythe we'll sing, and hail the day  
     That gave us liberty, man (*Poems*, II: 910-913).

Certainly if the poem is by Burns it is not among his best; it does, on the other hand, display pretty much what we know and what we can infer were the poet's attitudes to France—before war broke out between the two nations. Henley & Henderson said that the poem reads “like a bad blend of *Scots Wha Hae* and *Is There For Honest Poverty*; and as the MS has not been heard of since 1838 [when the poem was first published by Robert Chambers in his edition of Burns], we may charitably conclude

that Burns neither made the trash nor copied it.”<sup>14</sup> While it may still be debated whether or not the poem was written by Burns, as for its being “trash” this comment should be dismissed as an unwarranted outburst by Henderson (who was responsible for the *apparatus criticus* of the edition); he was sometimes carried away with an opinion and expressed himself rather too vehemently. Finally, it was not Burns’s custom to copy out poems for reasons other than, as in the case of the songs he collected for Johnson and Thomson, to send them off to be published. Granted he would probably not have sent this particular poem to a publisher, but unless he was the author of it, I see no reason for it to be in his hand.

When war broke out between France and Great Britain, Burns reacted in two ways. Characteristically, he was against war, and several of his poems show us this emotion. To George Thomson he wrote June 25, 1793, enclosing the poem “Logan Water” (“O Logan, sweetly didst thou glide”)

Have you ever, my dear Sir, felt your bosom ready to burst with indignation on reading of, or seeing, how these mighty villains who divide kingdom against kingdom, desolate provinces, & lay Nations waste out of the wantonness of Ambition, or often from still more ignoble passions? In a mood of this kind today I recollected the air of Logan Water, & it occurred to me that its querulous melody probably had its origin from the plaintive indignation of some swelling, suffering heart, fired at the tyrannic strides of some Public Destroyer; & overwhelmed with private distresses, the consequence of a Country’s ruin (*Letters*, II: 217).

The first three stanzas give us a picture of how sweet life had been by Logan’s braes until Willie went off to war and the woman who sings the plaintive song was left at home:

But I, wi’ my sweet nurslings here,  
Nae Mate to help, nae Mate to cheer,  
Pass widowed nights and joyless days,  
While Willie’s far frae Logan Braes (*Poems*, II, 691).

The real indictment of war and upon those who make it is in the final stanza:

O wae upon you, Men o’ State,  
That brethren rouse in deadly hate!

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<sup>14</sup> W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, eds., *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896-97), IV, 107. [The original essay, based the textual note in *Poems*, II: 910, commented that Kinsley had located and used the missing manuscript source: we have deleted this misunderstanding. Eds.]

As ye make mony a fond heart mourn,  
 Sae may it on your heads return!  
 How can your flinty hearts enjoy  
 The widow's tears, the orphan's cry:  
 But soon may Peace bring happy days  
 And Willie, hame to Logan braes! (*ibid.*)

The chorus to another. song "As I stood by yon roofless tower" which Burns contributed to Johnson for his *Scots Musical Museum* is a lament for those torn from their loved ones to die in a senseless cause:

A lassie all alone was making her moan,  
 Lamenting our lads beyond the sea;  
 In the bloody wars the fa', and our honor's gane and a',  
 And broken-hearted we maun die (*Poems*, II: 832).

Burns drew upon much the same sentiment in a jacobite song of the same period (both first appeared in the fifth volume of the *Museum*, 1796); while "The Highland Widow's Lament" is specifically a song about the 1745 uprising, the concluding lines are timeless: "Nae woman in the world wide/Sae wretched now as me" (*Poems*, II: 878).

When there was a scare that France might even invade Great Britain Burns, like many of his nationalistically-minded compatriots, hastened to join a militia unit—in his case it was the Royal Dumfries Volunteers. "When you return to the country," Burns wrote in March 1795 to Patrick Miller who was in London, "you will find us all *Sogers*" (*Letters*, II: 344). The most durable result of his soldiering was "The Dumfries Volunteers" ("Does haughty Gaul invasion threat") which Burns called a ballad (*Poems*, II: 764-766). He was pleased enough with it that he had some broadside copies of it printed up. But even though it was written in a tone of high patriotism, Burns made two points. The first was that he felt Britain must solve her own problems, neither reform nor republicanism could be tolerated if it was imposed by a foreign power: "For never but by British hands/ Must British wrongs be righted." And in the final half stanza we find Burns returning to his great theme:

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! (*Poems*, II: 766).

Unfortunately Burns could also be rather jingoistic, as we see in a poem he wrote in 1793, "When Wild War's Deadly Blast was Blawn." A frank song of praise for both the soldier and his way of life, ending on the following note:

But glory is the sodger's prize,

The sodger's wealth is honour;  
 The brave poor sodger ne'er despise,  
 Nor count him as a stranger;  
 Remember, he's his country's stay  
 In day and hour of danger (*Poems*, II: 687).

It is significant that the poet sent this poem to the wife of Robert Graham of Fintry. Burns made a distinction between "great folk" and "little folk"—he sent this poem to one of the "great folk" because he felt that it would be welcome in that household; to the "little folk" he more probably sent a copy of "The Dumfries Volunteers."

Short mention should also be made of Burns's *Love and Liberty*, which is more usually known as *The Jolly Beggars*, although it dates from long before the poet's involvement with war, having been written during the period 1784-5 (*Poems*, I: 195-209). As a paean to the joy of living and the dignity and greatness of mankind it is unsurpassed. Two of the songs in the work deal with the military life: the first is the soldier's song, to the tune "Soldier's Joy," which is a frankly chauvinistic exultation of following "the sound of the drum." This is succeeded by the song, to the tune "Sodger Laddie," of a camp follower, who has delighted and been delighted by almost everyone in a regiment. *The Jolly Beggars* is from the pen of Burns when he was yet unconcerned with politics to any extent, and of course before the French Revolution; it is mentioned in passing to show a lighter side of Burns's involvement with military topics.

Thus it can be seen that Burns was deeply affected by the French Revolution and by the question of parliamentary reform. As has been pointed out he interwove two ideas—that of reform, and that of brotherly love and equality—into his own political and moral philosophy. On the whole he was true to his ideals, even though he had to keep some of them from those who were his superiors; to have done otherwise would have been openly to court dismissal and disaster for his wife and family. No one can fault him for having a higher sense of responsibility to them than to ideals which it would have been disastrous to make public. Surely it is not to his discredit that he did not senselessly make a martyr of himself.

Perhaps the best reason we have to be thankful that he did not choose to sacrifice himself to the bigotry of the day is the immortal body of song which he left as a heritage to the world. Few writers have had a higher sense of mission than Burns exhibited in collecting and refurbishing the singing tradition of Scotland, and few writers have so brilliantly fulfilled their mission. Beside that all else pales into insignificance.