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William Donaldson

The Glencairn Connection: Robert Burns and Scottish Politics, 1786-1796



On the 17th of April 1784, Sir Adam Fergusson of Kilkerran, the M.P. for Ayrshire, and Sir John Whitefoord of Ballochmyle met at King's Well a few miles from Kilmarnock. It was a final attempt on the part of each to preserve a political alliance and to save a friendship. It did not succeed. In the background of this meeting lay several years of intrigue and manoeuvre for the political control of Ayrshire. With the full weight of the Administration behind him, Fergusson had carried the county at the last three elections. Now there were rumours of a change, and Whitefoord wanted the seat in his place. This was impossible, as Kilkerran explained. Government had other plans. The discussion grew heated. On parting, Fergusson offered his hand. Whitefoord would not take it. That gesture was to have disastrous consequences for Robert Burns.¹

In order to grasp its implications, we must first consider the poet's own relations with what he was to call "that insidious whore Politics."² Burns is a manifestly political poet. Few scholars or critics would dispute the point. But enquiry into this central aspect of his work has been confined, as a rule, to assessing the influence of the American and French Revolutions upon a handful of his later poems and songs. Domestic politics have not received the same attention, although they are as strongly present over a longer period of time. Few have commented in any detail upon the politics of Burns's earlier years, and those who have can hardly be said to have established a consensus. According to W. L. Renwick, he was "an unsophisticated Pittite;" James Kinsley considered him "naturally Whiggish;" David Daiches said he was "both Jacobin

and Jacobite;" while Sir Henry Craik, in a passage which may be quoted as typical of the older school, declared him entirely quixotic and original:

It would be hard to give any connected or consistent account of Burns's politics, according to the party shibboleths of the day...His opinions followed the lead of no party, and were independent of the mood of any age. Jacobite and democratic, Calvinist and Socinian, strongly national by tradition, and yet cosmopolitan in mood--his views defied all classification, and were moulded into definite form only by the fire of his own temperament and by the indomitable might of his own genius.³

Our knowledge of this subject is clearly in need of review.

In order to shed light on the development of the poet's views, I have adopted the expedient of counting friendly and hostile references in the poems and songs to leading politicians of the day, to see what kind of pattern emerges. It may be stated at the outset that Ministerial bias is clearly present in the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions. There are several references to Pitt, all favourable; and several to Fox, all unfavourable. In the earliest example, the "Fragment" ("When *Guilford* good"), Burns is seen in his initial Northite phase. The poem depicts the Whig chieftains as sinister political banditti, and reveals a particular animosity towards Fox, who is shown as an unscrupulous gambler ruined by the unlooked-for wreck of his India Bill:

Then *M-nt-gue*, an' *Guilford* too,
 Began to fear a fa', man;
 And *S-ckv-lle* doure, wha stood the stoure,
 The German Chief to thraw, man:
 For Paddy *B-rke*, like onie Turk,
 Nae mercy had at a', man;
 An' *Charlie F-x* threw by the box,
 An' lows'd his tinkler jaw, man.

Then *R-ck-ngh-m* took up the game;
 Till Death did on him ca', man;
 When *Sh-lb-rne* meek help up his cheek,
 Conform to Gospel law, man:
 Saint Stephen's boys, wi' jarring noise,
 They did his measures thraw, man,
 For *N-rth* an' *F-x* united stocks,
 An' bore him to the wa', man.

Then Clubs an' Hearts were *Charlie's* cartes,
 He swept the stakes awa', man,
 Till the Diamond's Ace, of *Indian* race,
 Led him a sair *faux pas*, man:
 The Saxon lads, wi' loud placads,
 On *Chatham's Boy* did ca', man;
 An' Scotland drew her pipe an' blew,
 "Up, Willie, waur them a', man!" (ll. 33-56)⁴

In "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons," written perhaps a year later, the Scots members are urged to promote patriotic measures in defiance of the brutal and dissipated Fox:

Yon ill-tongu'd tinkler, *Charlie Fox*,
 May taunt you wi' his jeers an' mocks;
 But gie him't het, my hearty cocks!
 E'en cove the cadie!
 An' send him to his dicing box,
 An' sportin lady. (ll. 109-14)⁵

At the same time, support is generously pledged for Pitt, the "Premier youth," so long as he taxes anything but drink:

Tell yon guid bluid of auld *Bocconnock's*,
 I'll be his debt twa mashlum bonnocks,
 An' drink his health in auld *Nanse Tinnock's*
 Nine times a week,
 If he some scheme, like tea an' winnocks,
 Wad kindly seek.

Could he some *commutation* broach,
 I'll pledge my aith in guid braid Scotch,
 He needna fear their foul reproach
 Nor erudition,
 Yon mixtie-maxtie, queer hotch-potch,
 The *Coalition*. (ll. 115-26)

In "A Dream," which belongs to the summer of 1786, the poet takes stock of the rather motley royal princes, and reminds the eldest of the pitfalls of sensualism. Even here, he detects the hand of Fox:

For you, young Potentate o' W----,
 I tell your *Highness* fairly,
 Down Pleasure's stream, wi' swelling sails,
 I'm tauld ye're driving rarely;

But some day ye may gnaw your nails,
 An' curse your folly sairly,
 That e'er ye brak *Diana's pales*,
 Or rattl'd dice wi' *Charlie*
 By night or day. (ll. 82-90)⁶

Pitt, by contrast, is shown at the head of affairs, holding aloof from such ongoingings:

I'm no mistrusting *Willie Pit*,
 When taxes he enlarges,
 (An' *Will's* a true guid fallow's get,
 A Name not Envy spairges)
 That he intends to pay your *debt*,
 An' lessen a' your *charges*;
 But, G-d-sake! lat nae *saving-fit*
 Abridge your bonie *Barges*
 An' *Boats* this day. (ll. 55-63)

As late as the spring of 1789, Fox and the Opposition are regarded with undiminished hostility. The "Ode to the departed Regency-bill" commemorates a fierce parliamentary battle to define the prerogative of the Prince of Wales should his father become permanently insane. The Government proposed a limited Regency in order to tighten their hold upon power. The Opposition resisted any diminution of the Regent's authority in order to safeguard their own interests when they replaced the Government--which they expected shortly to do. The Foxite Whigs were closer to power than they were to be again for nearly twenty years. It was a tantalizing trick of fortune in which everything hung upon the mental balance of the king, and something of this sense informs Burns's lines:

Paint CHARLES'S speed on wings of fire,
 The object of his fond desire,
 Beyond his boldest hopes, at hand:
 Paint all the triumph of the Portland Band:
 Mark how they lift the joy-exulting voice;
 And how their numerous Creditors rejoice:
 But just as hopes to warm enjoyment rise,
 Cry, CONVALESCENCE! and the vision flies.--

Then next pourtray a darkening twilight gloom
 Eclipsing, sad, a gay, rejoicing morn,
 While proud Ambition to th' untimely tomb
 By gnashing, grim, despairing fiends is borne:
 Paint ruin, in the shape of high D[undas]
 Gaping with giddy terror o'er the brow;

In vain he struggles, the Fates behind him press,
And clamorous hell yawns for her prey below:
How fallen That, whose pride late scaled the
 skies!
And This, like Lucifer, no more to rise! (ll. 51-68)⁷

Later this year, however, an interesting change takes place in Burns's attitude towards Fox. Disparagement and dislike give way to something like grudging admiration. In the "Sketch. Inscribed to the Rt. Hon. Ch. J. Fox Esq.--" we see a conscious attempt to map out the points of similarity between his own character and that of the politician, and the discovery in each of a self-destructive mixture of talent and folly leavened by benevolence. Fox, although still held a little at arms length, is regarded with a personal warmth that contrasts strongly with his earlier reception. A draft of the poem was sent to Mrs. Dunlop in the early summer of 1789:

How Wisdom and Folly meet, mix and unite;
How Virtue and Vice blend their black and their white;
How Genius, th' illustrious father of fiction,
Confounds rule and law, reconciles contradiction,
I sing; if these mortals, the Critics, should bustle,
I care not, not I, let the Critics go whistle!

But now for a Patron, whose name and whose glory
At once may illustrate and honour my story.--

Thou, first of our orators, first of our wits,
Yet whose parts and acquirements seem just lucky hits;
With knowledge so vast, and with judgement so strong,
No man, with the half of 'em, e'er could go wrong;
With passions so potent, and fancies so bright,
No man with the half of 'em e'er could go right;
A sorry, poor, misbegot son of the Muses,
For using thy name offers fifty excuses.-- (ll. 1-16)⁸

Several reflections upon the chequered character of human nature follow, then comes the concluding verse paragraph in which he apparently abandons his pro-government stance:

But truce with abstraction, and truce with a muse,
Whose rhymes you'll perhaps, Sir, ne'er deign to peruse:
Will you leave your justings, your jars and your quarrels,
Contending with Billy for proud-nodding laurels?
(My much-honor'd Patron, believe your poor Poet,
Your courage much more than your prudence you show it;
In vain with Squire Billy for laurels you struggle,

He'll have them by fair trade, if not, he will smuggle;
 Not cabinets even of kings would conceal 'em,
 He'd up the back-stairs and by G-- he would steal 'em!
 Then feats like Squire Billy's you ne'er can atchieve 'em,
 It is not, outdo him, the task is, outthieve him.)--
 (ll. 39-50)

It is true that in the autumn of 1789 Burns supported the ministerial candidate in the contest for the Dumfries burghs; but he seems to have been motivated by personal loyalties as much as by political partisanship, as he was when he backed the Opposition candidate in Kircudbright in 1795. It was an occasion for settling personal scores and finding agreeable employment for his powers of invective--which were considerable. Mrs. Dunlop wrote in 1790:

A lady told me lately she was thankfull she was
 at another side of the country; she would not for
 the world have such a neighbour; nothing within a
 score of miles could escape your ridicule; was I
 not afraid?⁹

In 1789 it was dislike for a local magnate--the Duke of Queensberry, that chiefly influenced him. As the Duke was a cynically recent convert to the Whigs, Burns lent the weight of his pen to the other side.¹⁰ Yet during the next few years, the underlying movement of his sympathies is unmistakably towards the Opposition. The circles he frequented in Dumfrireshire were hardly of a character to impose a check upon this. They were predominantly Whiggish, and contained such notable county reformers as Robert Riddell of Glenriddell and Alexander Fergusson of Craigdarroch.¹¹ Just how familiar Burns had become with the jargon of party is shown by the delightfully arch verses "On Glenriddel's Fox breaking his chain," which probably date from 1791. In this gentle satire upon the shortcomings of political theory, the poet chides his friend for confining a wild creature while being at the same time a warm advocate of human freedom:

These things premis'd, I sing a fox,
 Was caught among his native rocks,
 And to a dirty kennel chain'd,
 How he his liberty regain'd.--

Glenriddel, a Whig without a stain,
 A Whig in principle and grain,
 Couldst thou enslave a free-born creature,
 A native denizen of Nature?

How couldst thou with a heart so good,
 (A better ne'er was sluic'd with blood)
 Nail a poor devil to a tree,
 That ne'er did harm to thine or thee?

The staunchest Whig Glenriddel was,
 Quite frantic in his Country's cause;
 And oft was Reynard's prison passing,
 And with his brother Whigs canvassing
 The Rights of Men, the Powers of Women,
 With all the dignity of Freemen.-- (ll. 13-30)¹²

An extended passage follows in which Burns sets the party slogans in the context of universal history, showing at once his awareness of their futility, and his grasp of the comic possibilities of anachronism:

Sir Reynard daily heard debates
 Of Princes' kings' and Nations' fates;
 With many rueful, bloody stories
 Of tyrants, Jacobites and tories:
 From liberty how angels fell,
 That now are galley-slaves in hell;
 How Nimrod first the trade began
 Of binding Slavery's chains on Man...
 How Xerxes, that abandon'd tory,
 Though cutting throats was reaping glory,
 Untill the stubborn Whigs of Sparta
 Taught him great Nature's Magna charta...
 With much too tedious to relate,
 Of Ancient and of Modern date,
 But ending still how Billy Pit,
 (Unlucky boy!) with wicked wit,
 Has gagg'd old Britain, drain'd her coffer,
 As butchers bind and bleed a heifer.-- (ll. 31-8, 43-6,
 51-6)

"Glenriddel's Fox" joyfully burlesques the cant of party, but the song "Here's a Health to them that's awa," sent to the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* the following year, is party politics pure and simple and unreservedly Foxite in tendency. It is too diffuse for extended quotation, but the following lines indicate its general character:

Here's a health to them that's awa,
 Here's a health to them that's awa;
 And wha winna wish gude luck to our cause,
 May never gude luck be their fa'!

It's gude to be merry and wise,
 It's gude to be honest and true,
 It's gude to support Caledonia's cause,
 And bide by the Buff and the Blue.

Here's a health to them that's awa,
 Here's a health to them that's awa;
 Here's a health to Charlie, the chief o' the clan,
 Altho' that his band be sma'.
 May Liberty meet wi' success!
 May Prudence protect her frae evil!
 May Tyrants and Tyranny tine i' the mist,
 And wander their way to the devil! (*ll.* 1-16)¹³

In 1794, we find Burns at work upon a celebratory "Ode for General Washington's Birthday" which contrasts the current threat to political liberty in Britain with the successful defence of their rights by the American colonists, in a spirit of Foxite Whiggism of the purest dye.¹⁴

This profile of the poet's political opinions seems simple enough on the surface. Until about 1789/90, he inclined towards Pitt and the Government; after that, he sided with Fox and the Opposition. If we consider what he was actually doing at the time, however, we discover a curious inconsistency. Within days of coming to Edinburgh in 1786, he had become the familiar companion of the Earl of Glencairn, Henry Erskine, and other Whig leaders in Scotland. He paraded about the capital in political colours, frequented Whiggish Mason lodges, and in a number of ways publicly identified himself as a creature of the Opposition.¹⁵ In 1789 he was given a job in the revenue by Robert Graham of Fintry, a commissioner of Excise, friend of Dundas, and an active ministerialist in Forfarshire. Fintry succeeded Glencairn as chief patron, and Burns commenced placeman, dependent for his daily bread upon the good offices of a Tory administration.¹⁶ So that while apparently a supporter of Government he associated with the Whig Opposition; then, when he got a Tory job, he became, apparently, an adherent of the Whigs. How can we explain this paradox?

Burns's first visit to Edinburgh was well-timed to coincide with the beginning of the winter "Season," and was as much a bid for patronage as a literary excursion. It may have been weeks, for example, before he saw the poet Dr. Blacklock, who is sometimes considered responsible for introducing him to the metropolis.¹⁷ But how did he become involved with the Earl of Glencairn? At first sight it is far from obvious that the intricate social and political ties which surrounded the poet and his circle in Ayrshire should have issued in such an alliance. By virtue of his existing connections, Burns had poten-

tial access to most of the great men in the South-West, and it could not have required undue discernment to see that of several patrons, Glencairn was a poorish prospect. The Earl's family, once paramount in the South-West, had been declining for more than a century. By Burns's time, the baronies of Kilmarnock and Ochiltree were all that remained of extensive Ayrshire properties. The estates were deeply encumbered. Earl James was forced to sell Kilmarnock in 1790, and five years later, his brother, who had succeeded to the title, was sending begging letters to the King, complaining that he had not enough even for "the common necessarys of life."¹⁸ No Glencairn had sat in parliament since the Union, until Earl James was elected a representative peer in 1780 (largely, it may be added, because his circumstances would have him responsive to the wishes of those who had such things in their gift). In the 1780's, Glencairn's main strength lay in Renfrewshire, and there were several more powerful interests which might have taken the poet under their wing.¹⁹

The Montgomeries of Eglintoun were the greatest family in Ayrshire; they owned much of the county, and, until the recent inroads of Henry Dundas, had been politically dominant. In ordinary circumstances they were the obvious protectors of the Ayrshire Bard. But the only evidence of their interest is a subscription to the Edinburgh edition.²⁰ The reasons for this failure of contact probably lay with the family rather than the poet. The Earl of Eglintoun was one of a select band of Scottish magnates wealthy enough to gratify their political ambitions upon the English stage. In the winter of 1786/7, Eglintoun was to be found not in Edinburgh, but in London.²¹ He had been a Whig, but thanks to Dundas, was now rather uneasily attached to Government.²² We may guess that Burns's quickly-forged Opposition connections soon pushed him out of the Earl's orbit.

The next big interest lay across the county boundary in Lanarkshire. Some of Burns's friends diligently tried to attach him to the Duke of Hamilton. The Duke's former travelling tutor, Dr. John Moore, had established himself in a successful literary career in London, and he had the Hamilton interest at his disposal in his own and his friends' affairs.²³ One has simply to consider the career of his son Sir John, the hero of Corunna, to realize what Moore was capable of. In December 1786, the son, then M.P. for the Linlithgow burghs and a close friend of the Duke, happened to be at Hamilton Palace. The Doctor urged Burns to visit; but Burns didn't go.²⁴

A third possibility was the family of Buccleuch. The Duke's former travelling tutor was Adam Smith.²⁵ Smith suggested the salt-office as an appropriate job for the poet. It would keep

him in Edinburgh, the duties were negligible, and though worth only £30 a year, Burns was a single man with the prospect, for all anybody knew of a decent competence. Smith was on the Customs Board and probably had the place in his gift.²⁶ He was the only man of literary reputation in Edinburgh who could directly exercise that kind of patronage; and he was almost the only literary man in Edinburgh Burns did not see. Critics have frequently deplored the chance which robbed the poet of a meeting with the great divider of loaves and fishes himself, Henry Dundas, at Blair Athol in August 1787. It is open to question, however, whether a mere introduction would have influenced Dundas, considering Burns's ties with his political opponents.

There were certain additional pressures upon the poet of which sympathetic contemporaries would probably have been aware. During the 1770's and '80's, there was extensive rural depopulation in the South-West of Scotland, and surplus agricultural labour was crowding into the villages of Ayrshire.²⁷ Burns certainly needed help, not only for himself, but for his father's family which had to be kept together.²⁸ The Scottish Whigs, however, were hardly in a position to help him. The keys of the meal kist were not held by Henry Erskine; the right of bestowing places and pensions belonged to Government alone. In the closing years of the century, it was unwise, even unsafe, to be a Whig in Scotland. Cockburn has left a vivid account of the hardships endured by Whig lawyers through loss of business in the prevailing political warfare.²⁹ Other people lost things too: Glencairn lost his seat in Parliament; Erskine lost the Deanship of the Faculty; Burns, when he eventually got it, nearly lost his job.

In order to understand his part in these affairs, we must turn our attention to the structure of Scottish county politics at the time. The basic unit of organization was the "Connection." This might include a number of people, ten or twelve if it was of middling size, thirty or forty if it was large. The figures are relative; however, much depended on the size of the electorate, which could be anything from a mere handful to a couple of hundred of voters, depending on the county. By contemporary standards, Ayrshire was enormous.³⁰ At the head of each connection would be a landowner holding directly of the crown. By manipulating the superiorities of his property, which alone conferred electoral rights, he could create nominal or fictitious votes which he then bestowed upon his friends and relations.³¹ The system had a tendency to create ladders of influence stretching from the localities to great men, perhaps at a distance. Mossiel lay at the foot of one of these ladders, and it led to Sir John Whitefoord, who, after his row with Fergusson, was now among

the ranks of the Opposition.³² Whitefoord led in turn to James Dalrymple of Orangefield, a genial and raffish figure whom the poet may also have known as a Mason.³³ Dalrymple was a central figure in the Glencairn connection, a cousin and close friend of the Earl.³⁴ Burns was carried to the top of the Whig party in Scotland because it controlled the bit of Ayrshire where he lived. Once the link had been established, he could not escape from it, or from its lasting implications.

Glencairn possessed only one real advantage, his association with William Creech--another former travelling tutor, this time his own.³⁵ Creech was also a member of the Glencairn connection, and perhaps the biggest publisher in Scotland. He was even then falling under the sway of Henry Dundas, and when Glencairn mustered his forces for the Renfrewshire election in 1788, Creech wasn't going to be there.³⁶ But he did publish the Edinburgh edition, and the Earl acted as an enthusiastic subscription secretary, and Burns eventually got his money. It may be, however, that he paid a higher price in return.

In 1789 he received his order of instructions for the Excise. It was a significant choice of career. The Excise was the most recently formed, the most efficient, and by far the least corrupt of the revenue departments. In the Excise, a man could do more for himself by his own efforts than in any other branch of the public administration.³⁷ It was organized locally into Collectorships, each under the direction of a Collector. Beneath the Collectors were the Supervisors, who actually ran the service. At the bottom came the gaugers, who went the rounds of the various branches of manufacture upon which duty was levied. Promotion to the rank of Supervisor went by seniority. A Collectorship, which was Burns's ultimate goal, and which would have given him the literary leisure he desired, was obtainable only by political influence.³⁸ By the time the Portland Whigs joined the Administration in 1794, however, the Earl of Glencairn was dead. He had fallen victim to consumption in the winter of 1791, leaving Burns dependent upon Robert Graham of Fintry for the last push up the ladder.³⁹

Meanwhile, Dundas's power was growing in the Whiggish South-West. He had gained Ayrshire during the eighties, and in 1790 Dumfries fell to him as well when Queensberry turned over the management of his political affairs to his heir Buccleuch.⁴⁰ The country began quietly to fill with people who could do the poet harm, especially in view of the steady leftward drift of his opinions. Mrs. Dunlop wrote to him in the summer of 1791:

your brother Exciseman [Thomas Paine] who...answers
to Mr. Burke's book on the French Revolution...is
indeed much calculated to sow the seeds of discontent,

if not revolution, in Britain next...You see
I take it for granted you read whatever is meant
in support of the equal and independent rights
of man...⁴¹

Towards the end of 1792, he took out a subscription to the radical *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, and sent one or two pieces to its editor, a Captain William Johnston, who was shortly to distinguish himself as a Friend of the People and be imprisoned for his pains.⁴² In the song "Here's a health to them that's awa," written the same year, Burns went out of his way to compliment the Earl of Lauderdale and MacLeod of MacLeod, both of whom were leading reformers.⁴³ In December 1792, he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop:

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...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.⁴⁴

Later that same month, he was denounced to the Excise Board by a local informer, and was thrown into consternation by the prospect of an official inquiry. He wrote to Fintry:

I have been surprised, confounded & distracted by Mr Mitchel, the Collector, telling me just now, that he has received an order from your Honble Board to enquire into my political conduct, & blaming me as a person disaffected to Government. Sir, you are a Husband--& a father--you know what you would feel, to see the much-loved wife of your bosom, & your helpless, prattling little ones, turned adrift into the world, degraded & disgraced from a situation in which they had been respectable & respected, & left almost without the necessary support of a miserable existence. Alas, Sir! must I think that such, soon, will be my lot! And from the damned, dark, insinuations of hellish, groundless Envy too! I believe, Sir, I may aver it, & in the sight of Omnipotence, that I would not tell a deliberate Falsehood, no, not though even worse horrors, if worse can be, than those I have mentioned, hung over my head; & I say, that the allegation, whatever villain has made it, is A LIE!...To your patronage, as a man of some

genius, you have allowed me a claim; & your esteem, as an honest Man, I know is my due: to these, Sir, permit me to appeal; & by these may I adjure you to save me from that misery which threatens to overwhelm me, & which, with my latest breath I will say it, I have not deserved.⁴⁵

Fintry replied by return, presumably reassuring the poet, and Burns wrote again in a day or two a carefully-phrased letter appealing to the Commissioner as a fellow Mason, and heavily qualifying his reforming opinions:

I never uttered any invectives against the king.-- His private worth, it is altogether impossible that such a man as I, can appreciate; and in his Public capacity, I always revered, & ever will, with the soundest loyalty, revere, the Monarch of Great Britain, as, to speak in Masonic, the sacred KEYSTONE OF OUR ROYAL ARCH CONSTITUTION.--

As to REFORM PRINCIPLES, I look upon the British Constitution, as settled at the Revolution, to be the most glorious Constitution on earth, or that perhaps the wit of man can frame; at the same time, I think, & you know what High and distinguished Characters have for some time thought so, 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.--This is the Truth, the Whole truth, of my Reform opinions; opinions which, before I was aware of the completion of these innovating times, I too unguardedly (now I see it) sported with; but henceforth, I seal up my lips...⁴⁶

The affair quickly blew over, and he made light of it afterwards.⁴⁷ It is extremely important, however, in showing his hysterical sensitivity to the possibility of political shipwreck. He had obviously been expecting trouble, and it seems that his enemies seized upon the commotion of the times to settle scores of some years standing. It is obvious also that the threat arose not so much from his French politics, as his well-known connection with the Whigs at home.⁴⁸ It damaged not only his career, but his reputation both as a man and a poet.

In 1815, when passions had cooled a little, a pamphlet appeared entitled *A Review of the Life of Robert Burns, and of*

Various Criticisms on his Character and Writings. It was designed to correct some of the unfortunate impressions created by the official biography of Dr. Currie, and it printed a long letter from James Gray, former schoolmaster in Dumfries. He had known the poet well, educated his eldest son, and was now one of the masters of the High School of Edinburgh. It is of sufficient interest to be quoted at length:

The fate of this great man has been singularly hard; during the greater part of his life, he was doomed to struggle with adverse fortune, and no friendly hand was stretched forth to shield him from the storm that at last overwhelmed him. It seemed even to have been the object of a jealous and illiberal policy to accelerate his ruin...[even] the most respectable of his biographers has in some cases suffered himself to be misled by the slanderous tales of malice or party spirit...Burns was one of those who hailed with delight the dawn of the French revolution...He was enthusiastically fond of liberty, and a lover of the popular part of our constitution. Yet he saw and admired the just and delicate proportions of the political fabric; and nothing could be farther from his aim, than to level with the dust the venerable pile reared by the labours and the wisdom of ages. That provision of the constitution, however, by which it is made to contain a self-correcting principle, obtained no inconsiderable share of his admiration: He was therefore a zealous advocate of constitutional reform. The necessity of this he often supported in conversation with all the energy of an irresistible eloquence: But there is no evidence that he ever went farther...Yet...in the face of those known facts, there were individuals from whom he experienced the most cruel political persecution. These men, in violation of all the laws of justice, humanity and candour, construed every stroke of humour, every word uttered in the heat of debate, or the moment of enthusiasm, that did not correspond with their notions of political orthodoxy, into hostility to the existing order of things. To their eternal infamy, they gave that information which brought upon the poet the thunders of the Board of Excise...and which nearly wrested the crust of bread from the lips of his wife and children. It may likewise be observed, that from the same source, many of these calumnies flowed,

which have since been echoed from the Forth to the Ganges, with such malevolent delight.⁴⁹

Something went seriously wrong with Burns's career. Contemporaries certainly thought so. "They snatch'd him from the sickle and the plough--," said Coleridge, "To gauge ale-firkins."⁵⁰ "[He was] preferred," said Scott, "to the degrading situation of a common exciseman."⁵¹ But the revenue job was his own choice, and we know why he chose it: promotion was possible with little influence. But how could Burns not possess influence? His poems were universally admired, and he was personally acquainted with many noblemen and gentlemen. The reason, of course, is politics--which closed the strings of patronage, threatened his employment when he was alive, and distorted his reputation after he was dead. Why then, when he possessed sympathies which should have made him very much *persona grata* to the Scottish establishment in 1786 did he find himself in the hands of an impotent and penurious Opposition clique? It was a simple accident of geography.

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NOTES

¹ James Fergusson, "Sir Adam and Sir John: Sidelights on an Eighteenth Century Election," in *Scots Magazine*, New Series, 19 (1933), 221-30.

² J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1931), I, 362, (henceforth cited as *Letters*).

³ W. L. Renwick, *English Literature 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1963), p. 196; James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1968), III, 1313, (henceforth cited as Kinsley); David Daiches, "Robert Burns and Jacobite Song," in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London, 1975), p. 141; Sir Henry Craik, *A Century of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1901), II, 85 n, 123.

⁴ Kinsley, I, 50-1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 188.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 268.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 464.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 468.

⁹ William Wallace, ed., *Robert Burns and Mrs Dunlop* (London, 1898), p. 240, (henceforth cited as Wallace).

¹⁰ *Letters*, I, 360-1, 370-1.

¹¹ Alexander Fergusson, *The Honourable Henry Erskine Lord Advocate for Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1882), pp. 253, 257, (henceforth cited as Fergusson); see also Sir Charles Elphinstone Adam, ed., *View of the Political State of Scotland in the Last Century* (Edinburgh, 1887), p. 207, (henceforth cited as Adam); *Letters*, II, 144.

¹² *Kinsley*, II, 815-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 663. Buff and blue were the colours of the Continental Congress adopted by Fox and his circle during the American War.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 732-4.

¹⁵ Robert Chambers, ed., *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, revised by William Wallace, (Edinburgh, 1896), II, 34; Fergusson, pp. 279-82. The Pittites wore red, see *The Lounger*, No. 10 (April 1785).

¹⁶ Holden Furber, *Henry Dundas First Viscount Melville 1742-1811* (London, 1931), p. 261, (henceforth cited as Furber).

¹⁷ Charles Rogers, ed., *The Book of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1889-91), I, 46-9, (henceforth cited as Rogers).

¹⁸ Arthur Aspinall, ed., *The Later Correspondence of George III* (Cambridge, 1962-70, 5 vols.), II, 369-70.

¹⁹ This account of the Glencairn family has been compiled from several sources. See James Murray, *Kilmacolm a Parish History 1100-1898* (Paisley, 1898), *passim*; D. M'Naught, *Kilmours Parish and Burgh* (Paisley, 1912), *passim*; Rogers, I, 210-36; Robert Beatson, *A Chronological Register of Both Houses of the British Parliament from the Union to 1807* (London, 1807), II, 128-39; Sir John Fortescue, ed., *The Correspondence of King George the Third* (London, 1927-8, 6 vols.), V, 124, 127, 128, 130-1; *Scots Magazine*, 53 (February, 1791), 100.

²⁰ *Letters*, I, 64; J. C. Ewing, "The Eglintons' patronage of Burns, 1786-1787," *Burns Chronicle*, Second Series, 14 (1939),

66-71. Gavin Hamilton was factor to Col. Hugh Montgomerie of Coilsfield at this time, and some of the estate correspondence survives. It is obvious that their relationship was unusually friendly; for example, Montgomerie wrote to Hamilton on 13 March 1785: "I am glad to find things are going on so well at Coilsfield...*tho damn me if I think you know anything about turnips.* but I will show you, by & by--I'll make your teeth water, as you ride along the Mauchlin road--", Eglinton Muni-ments, Scottish Record Office, GD3/E/58/4095.

²¹ *Letters*, I, 68.

²² Frank Brady, *Boswell's Political Career* (New Haven, 1965), pp. 107-11, (henceforth cited as Brady); Adam, p. 18.

²³ The Duke of Argyll, ed., *Intimate Society Letters of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1910), II, 329-432; *Hist. MSS Comm.*, "Supplementary Report on the Manuscripts of the Duke of Hamilton," (London, 1932), p. 179; Adam, p. 214.

²⁴ Wallace, pp. 3-4; Hamilton was a supporter of Pitt: see William Aiton, *An Inquiry into the Pedigree, Descent, and Public Transactions of the Chiefs of the Hamilton Family* (Glasgow, 1827), pp. 64-5.

²⁵ The Countess of Minto, *Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot* (London, 1874), I, 83-4.

²⁶ J. E. D. Binney, *British Public Finance and Administration 1774-92* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 25, 179 (henceforth cited as Binney); Wallace, pp. 17-8; the real income from such a post may have been considerably higher than the official salary, see Ernest Campbell Mossner & Ian Simpson Ross, eds., *The Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Oxford, 1977), p. 13, n. 2.

²⁷ See, for example, Sir John Sinclair, ed., *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1791-1799), VII, 169-86.

²⁸ If things came to the worst, the Burns's would not even qualify for poor-relief, as they could not meet the residential qualification--which was three years--in the parish of Mauchline; see John Strawhorn, ed., *Ayrshire at the time of Burns* (Kilmarnock, 1959), pp. 22, 178-9.

²⁹ Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of His Time* (Edinburgh, 1856), pp. 83-92.

³⁰ Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons*

1754-1790 (London, 1964), I, 471-3; for a more specialized account of the politics of Ayrshire in the second half of the 18th century, see James Fergusson, "'Making Interest' in Scottish County Elections," *Scottish Historical Review*, 26 (1947), 119-33; and Brady, *Passim*.

³¹ Adam, pp. xxiv-vii; see also "A. B.," "A Serious Address to Freeholders upon Liferents or Wadsets of Superiority," *Scots Magazine*, 46 (1784), 115-7, 177-9.

³² Adam, p. 26; Rogers, II, 31; *Letters*, I, 54-5.

³³ John D. Ross, ed., *Burnsiana* (London, 1892-1897), I, 77, 79. It is possible that they may already have met socially: one of the poet's earliest admirers, Robert Aiken, was related to Orangefield on his mother's side, Rogers, I, 1, 169-71.

³⁴ Adam, pp. 23, 282; Rogers, I, 171-2. The warmth of Orangefield's regard for Glencairn is apparent in his letter to the dowager Countess, 19 July 1791, which refers to "The death of my dearest friend I ever had on this Globe, or will ever have...*the first of men your Late son Glencairn...*", Glencairn Muniments, Scottish Record Office, GD39/Sec 6/Bundle 11.

³⁵ Rogers, I, 130-1.

³⁶ Adam, p. 23.

³⁷ Binney, pp. 36-8, 41, 179.

³⁸ *Letters*, II, 292; but see also James Fergusson, ed., *Letters of George Dempster to Sir Adam Fergusson 1756-1813* (London, 1934), p. 123.

³⁹ *Letters*, II, 59.

⁴⁰ Furber, p. 247.

⁴¹ Wallace, pp. 327-8.

⁴² J. C. Ewing, "Burns and the 'Edinburgh Gazetteer'," *Burns Chronicle*, Second Series, 19 (1944), 8-13.

⁴³ Henry W. Meikle, *Scotland and the French Revolution* (Glasgow, 1912), pp. 49n, 79, 92n, 96, 106n, 113, 119-20, 112, 126, 132n, 136, 139, 141, 159, 177, 217.

⁴⁴ *Letters*, II, 137.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 139-40.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 143-4; see also J. C. Ewing, "Burns's literary correspondents, 1786-1796: with lists of letters addressed to the poet," *Burns Chronicle*, Second Series, 7 (1933), 18-77; and *Ibid.*, 14 (1939), 28-51.

⁴⁷ But see *Letters*, II, 169.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 170-1.

⁴⁹ Alexander Peterkin, *A Review of the Life of Robert Burns, and of Various Criticisms on his Character and Writings* (Edinburgh, 1815), pp. lxxxiii-ix.

⁵⁰ "To a friend [Charles Lamb] who had declared his intention of writing no more poetry," *ll.* 24-5.

⁵¹ *Quarterly Review*, 1, (1809), 27.