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Dietrich Strauss

Burns's Attitude to Medieval Reality

Among the papers read at the Germersheim conference in 1984 was Thomas Crawford's "The Medievalism of Allan Ramsay,"¹ a highly illuminating paper. It made me realize something of the possibilities a Scottish literatus had in the first half of the eighteenth century to derive creative impulses for his poetic work from Scotland's medieval past. The time up to the end of that and the beginning of the next century considerably extended the range of another Scotsman's artistic potentialities—Walter Scott's, potentialities which consequently produced remarkably wider and deeper literary visions of the socio-cultural nature of bygone ages of the rivalling British nations. Between these two in time Burns celebrated certain aspects of his country's more distant past in rhymes, some of which were soon to be found among the best known of his poetry.

Once Crawford's investigation had been presented at Germersheim it was found desirable that a similar study should be made of Burns's relation with Scotland's medieval civilization, which to do will be endeavored in this paper. At the outset some principal considerations and qualifications are necessary.

As Crawford explained with regard to Ramsay's medievalism it is to be noted that Burns did not, as far as I am aware, make speculative use of the

¹Thomas Crawford, "The Medievalism of Allan Ramsay," in *Scottish Language and Literature, Medieval and Renaissance*, ed. Dietrich Strauss, Horst W. Drescher (Frankfurt am Main, Bern, New York, 1986), pp. 497-507.

words "medieval" or "Middle Ages." Apparently for him all events of Scotland's history from its early Caledonian beginnings up to the Glorious Revolution formed his country's ancient past, as opposed to his own post-revolutionary age. In this respect his historical outlook was anticipatorily modern, as—well after him—some historians have recommended that we should not regard the time of the Reformation but that of the British, American and French revolutions as the decisive turning period in the history of Western civilization, so that one would arrive at the two eras, not the "Middle Ages" and "Modern Times," but "Pre-Revolutionary Europe" and "Modern Times." Burns's famous letter of 8th November, 1788, clearly shows that this was his very concept of the periodization of European and, consequently, Scottish history:

"The bloody and tyrannical house of Stuart" may be said with propriety and justice, when compared with the present Royal Family, and the liberal sentiments of our days.

* * *

The simple state of the case, Mr. Printer, seems to me to be this—At that period, the science of government—the true relation between King and subject, like other sciences, was but just in its infancy, emerging from the dark ages of ignorance and barbarism. The Stuarts only contended for prerogatives which they knew their predecessors enjoyed, and which they saw their contemporaries enjoying; but these prerogatives were inimical to the happiness of a nation and the rights of subjects. In this contest between Prince and People, the consequence of that light of science which had lately dawned over Europe, the Monarch of France, for example, was victorious over the struggling liberties of the subject: With us, luckily, the Monarch failed, and his unwarrantable pretensions fell a sacrifice to our rights and happiness. Whether it was owing to the wisdom of leading individuals, or to the justings of party, I cannot pretend to determine; but, likewise happily for us, the kingly power was shifted into another branch of the family, who, as they owed the throne solely to the call of a free people, could claim nothing inconsistent with the covenanted terms which placed them there.²

It evidently follows from this letter that for Burns's historical concept the period which we call the "Middle Ages" formed an integral and important part of Scotland's ancient history, apparently the border line between medieval times and the subsequent centuries before 1688 being conceived as of comparatively small importance. So whenever we talk of Burns's "medievalism" we ought to be aware of the possibility that we may have in focus post-Reformation but pre-Revolutionary periods as well!

²*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 333-4. Henceforth cited as *Letters*.

It will prove helpful to ask what Burns could fairly have been expected to perceive of the cultural substance of the Middle Ages if we take into consideration the circumference of learned knowledge in the field of history as it was spread in reasonably educated circles in later eighteenth century Scotland. Surely Burns would have an overall knowledge of the main stream of political events in Scottish history; such knowledge was available to every interested Scot ever since an English translation of George Buchanan's *Rerum scoticarum historia* of 1582 had come out in 1690, which remained the authoritative work on the history of Scotland for some considerable time. This work, however, and similar others that were to follow, yielded very little understanding of the nature, substantiations, and the development of the cultural life of the Middle Ages. It was only the eighteenth century that saw the beginnings of what we now call "cultural history." David Hume's *History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688* (1763) is one of the first historical works that tried to a more noticeable degree to refrain from rash and apodictic verdicts, and instead endeavored to arrive at explanations of attitudes and actions of historical personages that were based on psychological insight which thinkers of the Enlightenment, not least Hume himself, had gained. Though Burns mentioned Hume only once in his correspondence, in a context which does not interest us here, he seems to have been aware of the essence of Hume's historical work, of which, as we shall see later, his letter quoted above seems proof. Further on in the century, Edward Gibbon published his momentous *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88), which at once became widely known not only in the English speaking world. He ventured, in accordance with the spirit of the age, on an explanation of Rome's destruction that indicated something like the birth of the discipline of cultural history: for him it was Christianity that had caused Rome's downfall. It is possible that Burns heard of this explanatory historical theorem; it would most probably have, at least to some degree, appealed to him.

Those were the historiographical tools that were at his disposal to understand the cultural atmospheres of pre-Revolutionary ages. Being aware of the fact that in the following century Thomas Carlyle's vigorous attempt to gain access to the spirit of the Middle Ages remained limited in several basic aspects, and considering that the independent discipline of medieval studies became fully fledged only in this century, one cannot but realize that Burns's concept of medieval reality had of necessity to be infinitely narrower than its perception in our century, say, by Johan Huizinga in his *Herfsttijd der Middeleeuwen* of 1919, translated into English as *The Waning of the Middle Ages* in 1924.

Nor were there any individual possibilities for Burns that would have yielded access to important immediate sources of medieval cultural, or, more

specifically, literary history. Burns was never in Ramsay's privileged position in which the latter temporarily had access to the invaluable *Bannatyne Manuscript*—thus having for a longer time been able to directly breathe something of the poetic spirit of the Scottish Middle Ages. Of course Burns knew Ramsay's *Ever Green*, but the relatively small selection from the riches of the *Bannatyne Manuscript* it presented, and the rather thinly disguised fact that these texts were often considerably tampered with, obviously did not arouse Burns's enthusiasm. This William Hamilton of Gilberfield's edition of Harry's *Wallace* (1722), was apparently able to do—in spite of its anglicized text. It was the subject that directly appealed to Burns—as was the case with several editions of the *Bruce* that were accessible to him.

Finally the Gaelic component of Scottish culture was sealed up to Burns. It is significant that what little he could perhaps have perceived of the medieval material which was behind Macpherson's literary machinations did not affect him. The fact that Burns took up so little of the Ossianic spirit that had swept and was still sweeping Europe would in itself be worth some intenser deliberations. May it here suffice to say that Macpherson's strained elegiac style was evidently so diametrically opposed to Burns's energetic, vigorous creativity that the former's effusions had no impact on the latter's poetic imagery.

So much to elucidate what Burns could draw on when he was to incorporate elements of the cultural substance of the Middle Ages into his poetry or his letters: it was indeed very little.

Now to turn to Burns's achievement. The disillusioning facts outlined above had to be demonstrated in order to arrive at a fair assessment and characterization of Burns's performance in the field in question—as compared to Ramsay's and Scott's merits in the same realm. These facts, moreover, serve as a more general outline of the potentialities that were in the second half of eighteenth-century Scotland available to men of letters to gain some noteworthy access to the spirit of the Middle Ages. It is the use Burns made of these limited potentialities that shall interest us here.

In his autobiographical letter of 2nd August 1787 to Dr. John Moore, Burns wrote

The two first books I ever read in private, and which gave me more pleasure than any two books I ever read again, were, the life of Hannibal and the history of Sir William Wallace. . . . the story of Wallace poured a Scotch prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest (*Letters*, I, 135-6).

In November 1786 he had already confessed that his heart, "glowed with a wish to be able to make a Song on him [i.e. Wallace] equal to his merits" (*Letters*, I, 62), and, on another occasion, in January 1787, that it was his wish "to be able to do justice to the merits of the *Saviour of his* [i.e. Wallace's] *Country*" (*Letters*, I, 85).

Thus in these passages from some of his letters the keynote of Burns's occupation with his country's past was struck in prose; its poetic realization was substantiated accordingly:

At WALLACE' name, what Scottish blood,
But boils up in a spring-tide flood!
Oft have our fearless fathers strode
 By WALLACE' side,
Still pressing onward, red-wat-shod,
 Or glorious dy'd!³

he exclaimed, almost aggressively, in his verse epistle "To William Simson of Ochiltree" in May 1785, to go on in the same mood in "The Vision":

My heart did glowing transport feel,
To see a Race heroic wheel,
And brandish round the deep-dy'd steel
 In sturdy blows;
While back-recoiling seem'd to reel
 Their Suthron foes (*Poems and Songs*, I, 106)

He realized "His Country's Saviour" on the mantle of Scotland's muse and subsequently noticed

. . . a martial Race, pourtray'd
 In colours strong;
Bold, soldier-featur'd, undismay'd
 They strode along (*Poems and Songs*, I, 107)

Unlike what Peter Zenzinger had to say about Ramsay's Scottish national sentiment lessening in the course of time,⁴ Burns's remained the same, and emphatically so—despite his "Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat" (*Poems and Songs*, II, 765) of 1795 with its all-British message which was evidently

³*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 95. Henceforth cited as *Poems and Songs*.

⁴Peter Zenzinger, *My Muse is British: Allan Ramsay und die Neubelebung der schottischen Dichtkunst im 18. Jahrhundert* (Grossen-Linden, 1977), pp. 385-6.

prompted by the impending danger of a French attack on the British Isles. Three years before "the flood-gates of [his] life shut in eternal rest" (*Letters*, I, 136) he composed the song that is perhaps the best known of the section of his poetry that deals with Scotland's medieval past, "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," in which he welcomed his ancient countrymen to their "gory bed,—Or to victorie," (*Poems and Songs*, II, 707), then to sum up his vision of that historic situation

Wha for SCOTLAND's king and law,
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
FREE-MAN stand, or FREE-MAN fa',
Let him follow me.—

By Oppressions's woes and pains!
By your Sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they *shall* be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
LIBERTY's in every blow!
Let us Do—OR DIE!!! (*Poems and Songs*, II, 708)

In our century Burns has repeatedly been criticized because of the unabashed and unrestrained aggression that he gives artistic expression to in this song. It seems to me that such criticism is totally unfounded, being apparently an unreflected tribute to the spirit of peace every intellectual ought to be pledged to in the present age. Instead, Burns might be blamed for having chosen the subject of the Battle of Bannockburn at all, because once having decided for it, Burns had to observe one obvious poetic necessity: the address of a national leader to his troops could on no artistic pretense whatever be metamorphosed into an elevated lyric, appealing to the more tender of human emotions. No, Burns's handling of the subject was in complete concordance with the rules of poetry, producing indeed one of the most admirable examples of the literary genre of war song. To deny Burns's highly emotional and emphatic commitment to his country's fate the right to select "Bannockburn" as a theme would mean to completely misunderstand the existential conditions of his being a poet—a poet who had, on another occasion referring to a more recent historical event, vehemently blamed "a parcel of rogues" (*Poems and Songs*, II, 643) that had sold out Scotland to her mighty neighbor. Which brings us to the idea that constituted the justification of the Bannockburn song, the idea of liberty. That Burns had only little mental access to the meaning of feudal "fredome" is obvious; that, on the other hand, for a man of his character it was only natural to be intensely

affected by the contemporary concept of national liberty, is equally evident. After all he did not only show apparent sympathies with the French Revolution, but—be it remembered here on American ground—he also wrote an "Ode [for General Washington's Birthday]" (*Poems and Songs*, II, 732-4). In his letter to George Thomson of about 30th August 1793 he talked—with reference to his composing "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn"—"of that glorious struggle for Freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of some other struggles of the same nature, *not quite so ancient*" (*Letters*, II, 236) and of his "enthusiasm on the theme of Liberty & Independance" (*Letters*, II, 235). Obviously he imagined his medieval countrymen to have fought, at Bannockburn, for something that was co-substantial to the eighteenth-century idea of liberty.

Yet Burns's occupation with his country's past had a second important source, something apparently of no concern in Ramsay's dealing with the Scottish Middle Ages, though after Burns employed by Scott, namely a strong affection for his rural native region. In August 1785 he remarked in his *First Commonplace Book*:

. . . I am hurt to see other places of Scotland, their towns, rivers, woods, haughs, &c. immortalized in such celebrated performances, whilst my dear native country, the ancient Bailieries of Carrick, Kyle, & Cunningham, famous both in ancient & modern times for a gallant, and warlike race of inhabitants; a country where civil, & particularly religious Liberty have ever found their first support, & their last asylum; a country, the birth place of many famous Philosophers, Soldiers, & Statesmen, and the scene of many important events recorded in Scottish History, particularly a great many of the actions of the GLORIOUS WALLACE, the SAVIOUR of his Country . . . [and] the fertile banks of Irvine, the romantic woodlands & sequestered scenes on Aire, and the heathy, mountainous source, & winding sweep of Doon . . .⁵

These had, in his opinion, not yet been poetically recorded in a way that would do them justice.

That very sentiment had manifested itself early in the poet's life. In November 1786 he wrote:

In those boyish days, I remember in particular, being much struck with that part of Wallace' [*sic*] history where these lines occur—

"Syne to the Leglen wood when it was late.

"To make a silent and a safe retreat"—

[James Thomson, *Autumn*, l. 899]

⁵Robert Burns's *Commonplace Book 1783-1785*, ed. James Cameron Ewing and Davidson Cook (Glasgow, 1938), p. 36.

I chose a fine summer Sunday, the only day of the week in my power, and walked half a dozen miles to pay my respects to the "Leglen wood," with as much devout enthusiasm as ever Pilgrim did to Lorreto; and as I explored every den and dell where I could suppose my heroic Countryman to have sheltered, I recollect (for even then I was a Rhymmer) that my heart glowed with a wish to be able to make a Song on him equal to his merits— (*Letters*, I, 62).

This passage displays in an almost exemplary manner the local roots of Burns's poetic enthusiasm for his country's heroic medieval past. Already in the previous year he would resolve:

We'll sing auld COILA's plains an' fells,
Her moors red-brown wi' heather bells,
Her banks an' braes, her dens an' dells,
Where glorious WALLACE
Aft bure the gree, as story tells,
Frae Suthron billies (*Poems and Songs*, I, 95)

The realization of this resolution was carried out in "The Vision" in which the "Scottish Muse" distinguished Burns's home region by wearing a "mantle" that showed, in a historical setting, scenes only from Scotland's southwest. Among other objects Burns perceived his native Ayr:

Low, in a sandy valley spread,
An ancient BOROUGH rear'd her head;
Still, as in *Scottish Story* read,
She boasts a Race,
To ev'ry nobler virtue bred,
And polish'd grace (*Poems and Songs*, I, 105)

to be followed by these lines

By stately tow'r, or palace fair,
Or ruins pendent in the air,
Bold stems of Heroes, here and there,
I could discern;
Some seem'd to muse, some seem'd to dare,
With feature stern (*Poems and Songs*, I, 105)

A few lines further on "HIS COUNTRY'S SAVIOUR," identified by Burns in a footnote as William Wallace, a son of Scotland's southwest, emerged.

That Burns's admiration for this champion of medieval Scotland's freedom was later reinforced by Mrs. Dunlop, who was herself a descendent of the ancient Wallace family, should, of course, not be forgotten, though for chronological reasons it does not much help to explain the fact that William Wallace figures more often in his imagination than Robert Bruce, himself

also a son of Burns's native region. Was it perhaps that William Wallace, who had not been a member of the Scottish royal family, seemed for the poet to be more a protagonist of the common Scots people than King Robert? It was probably this fact of lower birth that especially endeared him to Burns.

Be that as it may, it can safely be said that in the passages quoted from "The Vision" the local past and the ancient history of the nation blended happily to produce an emotionally intensified poetic effect.

Next to the local element, it is the popular nature of the rule and demeanor of the ancient Scottish leaders that Burns was impressed by and referred to in his respective songs. Both in "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" and in "Gude Wallace," these Scottish heroes address and meet their countrymen and women on an almost equal footing. Wallace greets a country girl as "fair lady"; in turn her father "by gude Wallace . . . stiffly stood" (*Poems and Songs*, II, 870-71). And Bruce, far from treating his troops as mercenaries, appeals to their manly free will to decide between fighting for their country and escaping:

Wha will be a traitor-knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a Slave?
—Let him turn and flie:— (*Poems and Songs*, II, 708)

In the ancient epic Bruce had addressed his army thus:

Ye-quheyer I say *nocht* yis 3ow till,
For *yat* 3e suld folow my will
To *fycht*, bot in 3ow all sall be,
For *gyff* 3ow *thinkis* spedfull *yat* we
Fecht we sall, and *giff* 3e will
We leve, 3our liking to fulfill.
I sall *consent* on *alkyn* wis
To do *rycht* as 3e will *dywys*,
Yarfor sayis off 3our will planly.⁶

It is fascinating to note that although Burns apparently did not work directly from the old epic, his historical and imaginative empathy perceived something quite in keeping with its essence—an element that I should like to characterize as "proto-democratic"—no doubt in thirteenth and fourteenth century Scotland more noticeably developed than in several other parts of Europe, perhaps corresponding to what was then social reality in Scandinavia.

⁶*Barbour's Bruce*, ed. Matthew P. McDiarmid and James A. C. Stevenson, STS, 4th Series, 13 (1981), 34.

Along with that perception went another, seemingly associated with the former, and yet of a vaguer nature, if not blurring medieval reality altogether. A favorite object of Enlightenment speculation, including that of Burns, was the idea of a "social union" that was ultimately to be constituted by all human beings, sometimes transcending to the inclusion of all living creatures. Thus in his poem "To a Mouse" Burns believed to envisage "Nature's social union" (*Poems and Songs*, I, 127). The times of a narrow-minded condemnation of the Middle Ages as "dark ages" having passed, at least for many of the more educated people in Scotland, since David Hume's *History of England*, the fashionable idea of a "social union" was now superimposed by some of these "enlightened" people—not so much by Hume himself—on what little was possible of a substantial knowledge of medieval social reality. Suddenly the Middle Ages were transformed into an era in which social tensions did not exist. Apparently the first part of Duan Second of "The Vision" has a component that points, if not explicitly, back to Scotland's past:

'Know, the great *Genius* of this Land,
'Has many a light, aerial band,
'Who, all beneath his high command,
 'Harmoniously
'As *Arts* or *Arms* they understand,
 'Their labors ply (*Poems and Songs*, I, 109)

In the stanzas which follow Burns describes a Scottish social cosmos in which, according to a differentiating order of abilities, everybody is allotted his fixed place, thus altruistically enhancing the weal of all (*Poems and Songs*, I, 110-11).

This Burnsian view of his country's social past was quite in congruence with what, according to Crawford, Ramsay had believed to perceive of the social reality of "old Scotland."⁷

Such apparent unwillingness to realize that in earlier centuries differences in economic status not unfrequently meant social unrest and strife, the very opposite of union and harmony, is perhaps best exemplified by Ramsay's emendation of Robert Henryson's terser phrasing of the two final lines in stanzas 2 and 4 of the *Moralitas* of his fable "The Two Mice." Henryson's text runs thus:

The sweetest lyfe, thairfoir, in this cuntrie,
Is sickernes, with small possessioun.

* * *

⁷Crawford, p. 503.

Of eirthly ioy it beiris maist degre,
Blythnes in hart, with small possessioun. ⁸

It has to be remembered that "The Two Mice" was in itself by no means a poem that intended to stir rebellion, but rather preached the ideal of contentment with the social conditions of a very modest subsistence. Significantly, however, this tame Henrysonian wording was deemed insufficient by Ramsay for his harmonizing poetic purposes. So, in his reprint of the fable in his *Ever Green* in 1724, he added the idea of peace. His renderings of the respective lines read:

The sweitest Lyfe therefore in this Countrie
Is Sickerness *and Peace* with small Possession.

* * *

Of Eardly Bliss it beirs the best Degree,
Blythness of Hairt *in Peace* with small Possession. ⁹

It was the idea of a *peaceful* contentedness prevailing among the lower orders of Scottish medieval society that Ramsay—and to a certain degree Burns as well—intended to transmit to their readers.

And yet Burns seems instinctively to have known better. That he could sharply describe and analyse features of, and reasons for, class antagonism he had proved by his grand tale of "The Twa Dogs"; that from those social data he intuitively inferred similar social cleavages in the Middle Ages is apparent when one considers his epistle to Lapraik of April 21, 1785, where we find such blaming expressions as "the paughty, feudal *Thane*," to be followed by his own social creed:

For thus the royal *Mandate* ran,
When first the human race began,
'The social, friendly, honest man,
 'Whate'er he be,
'Tis *he* fulfils *great Nature's plan*,
 'And none but *he*'
 (*Poems and Songs*, I, 92)

⁸*The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford, 1981), pp. 18-9, ll. 379-80, 395-6.

⁹*The Ever Green, Being a Collection of Scots Poems, Wrote by the Ingenious before 1600*, ed. Allan Ramsay, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1724), I, 155. Italics mine.

Convincing though these lines are as a poetic phrasing of one of the most eminent Enlightenment ideas, they are bluntly opposed to any medieval concept of social order.

If Burns's understanding of the medieval social world was, of necessity, extremely limited, to comprehend the religious aspect of this world was virtually impossible for him even had he wanted to do so—and apparently he did not. We have every reason to assume that Burns's criticism of Scotland's Calvinist church was—though he regarded himself a Christian in a wide sense of that term—the outcome of a deep-rooted anticlericalism that resented any narrow-minded sticking to the letter and bigotted clinging to form in religious matters. He did not directly attack the Catholic Church; however his repeated derisive use of the word "priest" has probably caused many readers to associate the word with Catholicism. Just think of the famous lines

Courts for Cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the PRIEST
(*Poems and Songs*, I, 208)

not to speak of passages one could quote from his erotic poetry. Instead of citing other relevant passages one could try to imagine Burns allowing a monk to figure in a more important sympathetic rôle in one of his poems or songs in order to realize that this is—unlike what would have to be said about Walter Scott—quite inconceivable.

This anticlerical attitude of his automatically transformed the Catholic world of the Middle Ages, its practical and social as well as its scholastic and spiritual manifestations, into spheres of historic existence, the emotional and mental access to which was almost barred for him.

Speaking in the broadest terms possible of Burns's artistic awareness of Scottish Medieval reality, some attention should be drawn to the fact that he carried to perfection the use of the Christ's Kirk stanza. Ramsay and Fergusson had provided him with inspiring models from which he could start. It was not only the form that he took over from them, but also their imaginative handling of subjects, the humorous presentation of social scenes of merry-making. Indeed, the vivacious density and artistic accomplishment of "The Holy Fair" was probably unsurpassed in its eighteenth-century poetry of English-speaking countries, so that it has been unanimously praised by critics as displaying an almost Chaucerian poetic quality.

In his letter of 8th November 1788, already quoted from in another context, Burns provided us with a remarkable piece of historical speculation that should interest us for two reasons. In it he discussed some aspects of the history of the house of Stuarts, having been prompted to do so by the cente-

nary of the Glorious Revolution. Of the fate of that Scottish royal family he said:

We may rejoice sufficiently in our deliverance from past evils, without cruelly raking up the ashes of those whose misfortune it was, perhaps, as much as their crimes, to be the authors of those evils; and may bless God for all his goodness to us as a nation, without, at the same time, cursing a few ruined powerless exiles, who only harboured ideas, and made attempts, that most of us would have done, had we been in their situation.

* * *

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.—Who does not know that the abilities or defects of leaders and commanders are often hidden until put to the touchstone of exigence; and that there is a caprice of fortune, an omnipotence in particular accidents, and conjunctures of circumstances, which exalt us as heroes, or brand us as madmen, just as they are for or against us?

* * *

To conclude, Sir, let every man, who has a tear for the many miseries incident to humanity, feel for a family, illustrious as any in Europe, and unfortunate beyond historic precedent; and let every Briton, and particularly every Scotsman, who ever looked with reverential pity on the dotage of a parent, cast a veil over the fatal mistakes of the Kings of his forefathers (*Letters*, I, 333-5).

Such deliberations were a definite advance in Scottish historical thinking: psychological considerations replaced the then frequent apodictic denunciations of a dark past as hideous materialization of papal paganism. It is interesting indeed, in this connection, to recollect what Alexander Kinghorn has written about the anti-popish fulminations of the Scottish literary historian John Merry Ross (1833-83), who lived almost a century after Burns!¹⁰ In Burns's considerations a restrained psychological relativity is intelligibly outlined and argued for, an attitude which, as an epistemological starting point, is a *sine qua non* for any modern historian, an attitude for which David Hume had paved the way.

The second aspect of interest is hinted at in the following passage of the same letter by one significant term: "But is there no allowance to be made for the *manners of the times*?" (*Letters*, I, 333; my italics).

Burns's demand to take into consideration the "manners" of bygone ages when assessing human actions performed in them was, from the epistemological point of view, of course, fully justified. However, "manners" were in Scotland's medieval past determined by a near-irrationally construed

¹⁰See p. 87 of this volume.

feudal social order, a para-rational sphere of scholastic learning and a trans-rational catholicity of religious life, to all of which Burns was, as we have already seen, denied intellectual contact by late eighteenth-century Scotland's cultural conditions.

Yet the first of the two aspects of interest of this letter deserves to be stressed all the more: everyone being occupied with the more distant past should employ a tolerant method of psychological understanding of earlier human action as an indispensable condition for any validity of his own historical judgment.

Let me, by way of summary, make use of Crawford's assessment of Ramsay's medievalism which he characterized as "militant patriotic anti-quarianism."¹¹ This may certainly be said of Burns's as well. But there is more to be stated about the latter's attitude towards medieval reality: the Scottish patriotic component derived from it, remaining (unlike what Zenzinger had to say in the case of Ramsay)¹² very strong in the last phase of Burns's life, amalgamating with it other elements which were not at Ramsay's disposal—an intense, almost loving, attachment to a historic rural region that was his home and the ideas of the American and French Revolutions. If these were factors of intensifying momentum, so was Burns's greater creative potential. His verse that directly dealt with the Scottish medieval past or was indirectly, by form and the subject of social merry-making, linked with it, expressed a masculine poetic vigor which marked an unsurpassed highlight in Scottish literature. Burns's idealization of the Scottish past as a time of social harmony was not so consistent and convincing as the elements mentioned before. His social sense was so highly developed that it proved impossible for him to fancy the Middle Ages simply as an era of perpetual concord. He was prevented from doing this, moreover, by his deeply-rooted revolutionary belief in "the dignity of man," a belief in a postulate which was, he felt, still to be realized. Access to many aspects of medieval human existence was unobtainable to him; but his admonition to judge the past more tolerantly than was done by most of his Presbyterian countrymen, but also by many of those who considered themselves enlightened yet ignorantly sneered at the "dark ages," put him in the first row of truly progressive minds of his time. The letter from which I have quoted breathes the spirit of David Hume.

*Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz
Germersheim*

¹¹*Op. cit.*, p. 505.

¹²*Op. cit.*, pp. 125-52; 380-89.