

1998

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Recommended Citation

Elrod, Norman (1998) "Robert Burns and Thomas Paine: Two Proponents of Human Rights," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 30: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol30/iss1/13>

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Norman Elrod

Robert Burns and Thomas Paine: Two Proponents of Human Rights

I intend to address Robert Burns's regionalism and internationalism, and to draw some comparisons with these traits in the works of Thomas Paine. That Burns was a Scotsman, devoted to the strengthening of Scottish self-awareness and self-confidence, seems clear to me. We need only think of the collection of 274-odd songs which he wrote or amended for James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum* and George Thomson's *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*, many of them definitely set in Scottish history, referring to the hopes and hardships of the people of Scotland. Certainly one of these songs has in itself up to the present time inspired countless Scots to be proud of their native land, grateful for the chance to be part of the Scottish community. I am thinking, of course, of "Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn," now usually referred to as "Scots Wha Hae." In short, I am assuming that Burns's literary nationalism is obvious to most people who encounter a good number of his works. The language in many of his poems dealing with Scotland is certainly not the kind spoken in London, Dublin, or Swansea, let alone in Boston or Atlanta.

Burns's regionalism is not so easy to come by, particularly for his many readers who are not acquainted with the landscape of Ayrshire, an area in the southwest of Scotland. As John Inglis has shown in a recent essay on Burns, the poet was fundamentally rooted in Ayrshire.¹ This is verified by most of the poet's Epistles, which "touch on, one way or another, aspects of everyday life"

¹John Inglis, "Burns—Poet of Ayrshire," *Burns Chronicle*, New Series, 3 (1994), 88-92.

in the Ayrshire area (p. 89). Time and again Burns's poems refer to real people, "the lads and lasses of Ayrshire" he knew and with whom he amused himself, "the folks he came in contact with at work in the fields, at the kirk, in the taverns" (p. 89). Burns wrote:

A country lad is my degree,
 An' few there be that ken me, O;
 But what care I how few they be,
 I'm welcome ay to Nanie, O.²

As for the scenery of Ayrshire, Burns portrayed it more than once with beautiful descriptive passages in his poems, ballads and songs.

One night as I did wander,
 When corn begins to shoot,
 I sat me down to ponder
 Upon an auld tree root:
 Auld Aire ran by before me,
 And bicker'd to the seas,
 A cushat crouded o'er me
 That echoed thro' the braes.
 ("A Fragment," *Poems*, I, 13).

The flora of the area assumed a prominent place in "To a Mountain Daisy," and Ayrshire's fauna, for example some of its local birds, was mentioned in Burns's song "Now Westlin Winds." In the second stanza of this song he mentioned seven of these birds in the space of eight lines:

The Pairrick lo'es the fruitfu' fells;
 The Plover lo'es the mountains;
 The Woodcock haunts the lanely dells;
 The soaring Hern the fountains:
 Thro' lofty groves, the Cushat roves,
 The path o' man to shun it;
 The hazel bush o'erhangs the Thrush,
 The spreading thorn the Linnet.
 ("Song, Composed in August," *Poems*, I, 5)

In my study of the life and works of Robert Burns I have been particularly interested in a stance of his which I suggest we call internationalist. Certainly he was not a cosmopolitan like Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense*, an exceptionally influential work in North America from its publication in 1776

²*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), "Song," I, 9. Henceforth *Poems*.

onward, and *The Rights of Man* (1791; 1792), a highly explosive work which came out in London and dealt with the subject of monarchy, an institution which Paine argued should be brought to an end both in Great Britain and France.

Burns was familiar with some of Paine's endeavors and agreed with him on certain fundamental matters dealing with the nature of human beings and how the cause of humanity is to be furthered, for example, at that time by the freeing of the slaves. But Burns had a home; he was rooted in the Ayrshire region, and he considered himself a Scotsman through and through. Paine, although he grew up an Englishman and later became in his mind a citizen of the United States of America and of France, did not really belong, I suggest, to any of these nations. We might think, while reading a poem Paine wrote in Paris and reflecting on what it says, that he really felt attached to the United States. I would not argue that he did not, but, it seems to me, he was all for the *idea* of what the USA stood for, not for the land and its people as it and they existed and developed from day to day. The poem I am referring to reads as follows:

CONTENTMENT; OR, IF YOU PLEASE,
CONFESSION

O could we always live and love,
And always be sincere,
I would not wish for heaven above,
My heaven would be here.

Though many countries I have seen,
And more may chance to see,
My Little Corner of the World
Is half the world to me;

The other half, as you may guess,
America contains;
And thus, between them, I possess
The whole world for my pains.

I'm then contented with my lot,
I can no happier be;
For neither world I'm sure has got
So rich a man as me.

Then send no fiery chariot down
To take me off from hence,
But leave me on my heavenly ground—
This prayer is *common-sense*.

Let others choose another plan,
 I mean no fault to find;
 The true theology of man
 Is *happiness of mind*.³

Paine was, it seems to me, a true cosmopolitan, a man who treated the world as his country. He was a citizen of the world, as they say in German a *Weltbürger*. Paine worked out for himself a philosophy of life that was free from national attachment or prejudices. With this thought in mind he (1778) wrote: "My attachment is to all the world, and not to any particular part, and if what I advance is right, no matter where or who it comes from" (*Writings*, I, 146). This view got Paine into serious trouble in England, France and the United States. When persons and institutions became angry over what he was out to accomplish and attacked him, Paine had, in a sense, nothing to fall back on. He could very well be a citizen of the world but the reality of this world was only in his mind; it was not an entity to lend him support in time of need.

As time went by, Burns, too, came to realize that his understanding of civil life and loyalty to region and nation did not correspond to what the majority of the people in Scotland considered right and proper. Difficulties developed, problems which became quite acute from 1792 to the time of his death in 1796, owing to his advocacy of democratic reform within the nation of his abode, and of support for republican movements in other countries.

Some local difficulties with Burns's notion of proper living cropped up quite clearly in the 1780s in connection with his sexual relationships with women. These were not taken lightly, and it looked for a while as if he would be obliged to leave the country and emigrate to Jamaica. We can imagine that the thought of leaving the region which had been his home filled Burns not only with separation anxiety but also with melancholy.

With the storming of the Bastille in July 1789 it was not only in France that Burns's world began to be turned upside down. The government in London, led by William Pitt the Younger, revealed itself to be more and more sensitive to the events in Paris and began to dictate how certain current affairs should be judged, expressing expectations which did not suit Robert Burns in the least. Indeed, by its very nature, this official analysis and evaluation could only frustrate, and certainly not inspire him.

A major policy which the government started putting into practice in the latter part of 1792, and then in earnest after the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, was the restriction of freedom of the press and of speech, together with freedom of assembly. The first two restrictions, the threats to free speech and the free press, greatly irritated Burns. But, as many of us know, he was obliged to hold his tongue in public and to get on with the business of

³*The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner. 2 vols. (New York, 1945), II, 1098-9. Henceforth *Writings*.

making a living to support his many dependents.

In his songs and poetry Burns found on occasion an opportunity to express himself so that readers would understand his real evaluation of what was going on in the world. Two examples of what I mean read as follows:

O wae upon you, Men o' State,
That brethren rouse in deadly hate!
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!
(“Song,” *Poems*, II, 691)

* * *

Grant me, indulgent Heaven, that I may live
To see the miscreants feel the pains they give:
Deal Freedom's sacred treasures free as air,
Till SLAVE and DESPOT be but *things which were!*
(Untitled lines written extempore
in a lady's pocket-book, *Poems*, II, 693)

But all in all, when I think about how Paine fared between 1792 and 1809, the year of his death, Burns was fortunate in having his dependents, in being rooted in Ayrshire. Burns felt himself to be, and was, responsible for specific individuals. Paine was for the happiness of everyone. Burns was forced to remain closely associated even with many of his enemies, for example, when he became a member of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers, a civilian self-defense organization set up by the government early in 1795 to train male citizens in marching and in the handling of musketry “two or three times a week,” James Mackay informs us.⁴ In a sense Paine burned all his bridges behind him, writing, for instance, as he did in 1792 in Part II of *The Rights of Man*, “I speak an open and disinterested language, dictated by no passion but that of humanity....I view things as they are, without regard to place or person” (*Writings*, I, 413-4).

With Paine's concern for reality in the raw, so to speak, and living according to the principle “my country is the world, and my religion is to do good” (p. 414), he could even begin, apparently in 1797, setting forth a plan to have England invaded by General Bonaparte in order to liberate the people. He did, in fact, as Philip Foner writes, submit “a plan to the French Directory in 1798 for a military expedition against England....Napoleon received Paine's pro-

⁴James Mackay, *R B: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 589. Henceforth Mackay.

posal enthusiastically and even visited the writer to discuss the plan," (*Writings*, II, 675). Paine went still further and "contributed funds he could hardly spare toward the expedition" (*Writings*, I, xl).

Did Paine change his mind with the passing of time? Apparently not, from what Foner writes: "in 1804...Paine welcomed the report of Napoleon's plan to invade England and pledged it full support," (*Writings*, II, 675). With this in mind Paine (1804) even wrote an article spelling out in some detail how he viewed such an action on Napoleon's part. Before Paine wrote this letter, he had, while still in Europe, even actually gone to Belgium "to watch the collecting of two hundred and fifty gunboats destined for the English invasion."⁵

Various aspects of Paine's development during the last twenty years of his life warrant careful consideration, if only because of the important role he played in the freeing of the thirteen English colonies in North America from Great Britain. Ehsan Naraghi says of Paine, "as one of his biographers has written, 'Washington was the sword of the American Revolution, Paine was the pen.'"⁶

There is no doubt that Paine contributed greatly to launching the American Revolution, but once the revolution was more or less over, he was, in a sense, out of work—homeless. In contrast to Benjamin Franklin, who once reportedly remarked to him, "Where liberty is, there is my country," Paine quipped in reply, "Where liberty is not, there is my country."⁷ I think I know what Paine meant by his reply to Franklin, but I do not think he realized what the attitude also implied, namely combating arbitrary government with arbitrary means. Paine, it seems to me, made a dogma out of disassociating himself from regional and national obligations. Cut off from various ties of dependency and responsibility, he was unable to make a self-critical reappraisal of certain prejudices he held, for example those concerning William Pitt the Younger. As for the British statesman, Paine came out in the early 1800s with generalizations about him which were, as I see it, simply false. I refer to the following statement he recorded in 1804:

With respect to the French Revolution, it was begun by good men and on good principles, and I have always believed it would have gone on so had not the provocative interference of foreign powers, of which Pitt was the principal and vindictive agent, distracted it into madness and sown jealousies among the leaders (*Writings*, II, 683).

⁵Kingsley Martin, *Thomas Paine* (London, 1925), pp. 15-16.

⁶Ehsan Naraghi, "1789 An Idea that Changed the World: The Republic's Citizens of Honour," *The Unesco Courier* (June 1989), p. 15. Naraghi's quotation is unattributed.

⁷John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (London, 1995), p. xiii.

Such an evaluation of Pitt's influence on French affairs in the early 1790s is absurd, at least from what we now know about Pitt's ideas and activities at that time. Certainly his administration was not "the plague of the human race," as Paine, according to Keane "was fond of repeating" (Keane, p. 440).

Now it seems to me that I need not bring a number of specific proofs from Burns's writings to demonstrate that he would in no way have agreed with Paine's plan for Napoleon to invade England. One poem, "The Dumfries Volunteers" (Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?), from 1795, would appear to be enough:

O, let us not, like snarling tykes,
In wrangling be divided,
Till, slap! come in an *unco loun*,
And wi' a rung decide it!
Be BRITAIN still to BRITAIN true,
Amang oursels united;
For never but by British hands
Must British wrongs be righted.
(*Poems*, II, 765)

Furthermore, even as things stood while both men were alive, Burns and Paine did not agree on the essential question, "What is to be done?" Burns, for example, wrote that he had nothing against the execution of Louis XVI, whom he called a "perjured Blockhead."⁸ Paine was definitely against it and spoke twice to the French National Convention, agreeing with the Girondins that the king should be banished or interned.⁹

It would seem as though Burns and Paine came to very different conclusions on how human rights might be realized. Let us take a brief look at what they may have considered human rights to be—at that time considered natural rights.

As to what is human, I should think both of them would have agreed that God in his wisdom and goodness did not make both rich and poor. According to George Spater, Paine claimed that God "made only *male* and *female*, and He gave them the earth for their inheritance."¹⁰ Both Burns and Paine were definitely conscious of men's and women's inherent ability to attain certain degrees of independence in daily life. Most of us can remember what Burns

⁸*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 334.

⁹See "Reasons for Preserving the Life of Louis Capet" and "Shall Louis XVI be Res-pited?" *Writings*, II, 551-8.

¹⁰"European Revolutionary, 1789-1809," in Ian Dyck, ed. *Citizen of the World: Essays on Thomas Paine* (New York, 1988), p. 65. See *Writings*, I, 274.

wrote on this subject. As for Paine, he noted in *The Age of Reason*: "My own mind is my own church" (*Writings*, I, 464). Certainly both Burns and Paine had a high regard for reason and each in his own way tried to use reason in his writing to expose many of the scholarly, priestly and political perversions he encountered. To be more specific, both of them questioned a number of theological dogmas on the nature of male and female human beings. They were passionately opposed to hypocrisy and very much in favor of men and women being, as Paine wrote, "mentally faithful" to themselves (p. 464). All human beings are equal, they thought, a view that did not sit well with the power elites in Great Britain, France and the United States of America. Let us not forget that in the 1790s in America members of the House of Representatives "were apportioned among the states according to their respective numbers of free persons...including three fifths of 'all other persons,' that is, slaves."¹¹ That meant quite simply "one Negro only counted for three-fifths of a white."¹²

However, as I mentioned earlier, not only those in power resisted the analysis of human society set forth by Burns and Paine. Both men met with popular opposition. To be sure, Great Britain banned the slave trade in 1806, but it took decades before the slaves were freed in the United States, and only then in 1863 during the waging of a bloody civil war.

Burns and Paine learned time and again that freedom, harmony and love are treasures not easily come by and easily lost. This was particularly the case with Paine, who went astray by thinking human beings are essentially only responsible to themselves. He considered ideas as valid or false regardless of their reception and interpretation by other people. And so he could write, quite arrogantly I would argue, "I have never yet made, and I hope I never shall make, it the least point of consideration, whether a thing is *popular* or *unpopular*, but whether it is *right* or *wrong*."¹³ I also see Paine's tendency to make absolutes of his own ideas in the following statement: "I scarcely never quote; the reason is, I always think."¹⁴

Always thinking? Was Paine thinking when he suggested an invasion of England to Napoleon? Of course he was, but it was a thinking disassociated from the current and past history of France and England, having no regard whatsoever for what the majority of the population in England thought, felt and

¹¹Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Beards' New Basic History of the United States*, ed. William Beard (New York, 1968), p. 131.

¹²Russel B. Nye and J. E. Morpurgo, *A History of the United States, I, The Birth of the U.S.A.* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 259.

¹³Paine, quoted in Spater, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹⁴Quoted in George Spater, "The Early Years, 1737-1774," in Ian Dyck, ed. *Citizen of the World: Essays on Thomas Paine* (New York, 1988), p. 18.

wanted in the 1790s. If Paine had been related to these people as they were in flesh and blood he could have learned something:

In the winter of 1792-1793, in particular, there were dozens of public demonstrations of popular hostility to the seditious views of Thomas Paine. He was burned in effigy across the length and breadth of the country. There were at least thirty such incidents in the north-west of England alone, and almost as many occurred in Northumberland and Durham even though the north-east was one of the least militantly loyalist in the country.¹⁵

On a theoretical level Paine set forth in one sentence his conception of what constituted a nation:

A nation is composed of distinct, unconnected individuals, following various trades, employments and pursuits; continually meeting, crossing, uniting, opposing and separating from each other, as accident, interest and circumstance shall direct (*Writings*, II, 371).

It is not surprising that when he was growing old and had returned from France to the United States in 1802, Paine found himself with no family and few close friends. It is said he was "cantankerous and argumentative, turning more and more to the solace of drink."¹⁶ He died on 8 June 1809 and was buried at his farm in New Rochelle. Only a handful of New Rochelle neighbors and friends showed up for the burial. There were no dignitaries, no fanfare, no ceremony, no eulogies, no official notices of his death. Paine really departed from the living as a cosmopolitan, as a citizen of the world more or less completely forgotten or ignored by the countless people he had left behind him, the men and women of North America he had inspired to free themselves from the British monarchy.

On the other hand Robert Burns, the regionalist, nationalist and internationalist, ended his life very differently from Thomas Paine, the cosmopolitan. To the very end Burns was quite strongly involved in interactions with various people around him, as Mackay (pp. 585-632) informs us in a very convincing way. Other people also took an interest in him, and I do not mean only Matthew Penn, who in his capacity as lawyer for the haberdasher David Williamson wrote to Burns early in July 1796, demanding payment of a bill which stood at £7 4s for the making of Robert's uniform for the Royal Dumfries Volunteers (Mackay, p. 623). Allan Cunningham, who may have been in the

¹⁵H. T. Dickinson, "Popular Conservatism and Militant Loyalism, 1789-1815," in H. T. Dickinson, ed. *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Basingstoke and London, 1994), p. 118.

¹⁶Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, 1976), Introduction, p. 36.

Dumfries area at this time, wrote later that various people, of high and low station, showed a concern for Burns's health, particularly in July 1796. And when two or three of them met and talked to each other the topic was Burns, what he had been and had achieved and what seemed now to be coming to an end (Mackay, p. 626).

If the man, Tom Paine, was put in his grave with the world he had opted for more or less completely indifferent to the event, Robin Burns, the lad of Ayrshire, Scotland's bard, was laid to rest with "a grand and proper parade," as his close friend John Syme had wanted (quoted in Mackay, p. 630). William Grierson noted at the time of the funeral that it "was uncommonly splendid" (quoted in Mackay, p. 631). And rightly so; Burns in his loyalty to region and nation could only die a patriot, a fact recognized by those people in power at the time, who saw to it that he should have "a funeral with full military honours" (Mackay, p. 659). Certainly when we hear of this we can think of the last lines of "The Cotter's Saturday Night":

O SCOTIA! my dear, my native soil!
 For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!
 Long may thy hardy sons of *rustic toil*
 Be blest with health and peace and sweet content!
 And O may Heaven their simple lives prevent
 From *Luxury's* contagion, weak and vile!
 Then howe'er *crowns* and *coronets* be rent,
 A *virtuous Populace* may rise the while,
 And stand a wall of fire, around their much-lov'd ISLE.

O THOU! who pour'd the *patriotic tide*,
 That stream'd thro' great, unhappy WALLACE' heart;
 Who dar'd to, nobly, stem tyrannic pride,
 Or *nobly die*, the second glorious part:
 (The Patriot's GOD, peculiarly thou art,
 His *friend, inspirer, guardian* and *reward!*)
 O never, never SCOTIA's realm desert,
 But still the *Patriot*, and the *Patriot-bard*,
 In bright succession raise, her *Ornament* and *Guard!*
 (*Poems*, I, 151-2)

Thus spoke the loyal nationalist Robert Burns. The loyal regionalist Robert Burns can be heard, so the story goes, in two toasts given after having eaten meat in the Globe Inn, Dumfries, which was run by Mrs. Jean Hyslop and her husband William, whom Robert called "Meg" and "the landlord" respectively:

[Graces—at the Globe Tavern]

After Dinner [A]

O Lord, since we have feasted thus,
Which we so little merit,
Let Meg now take away the flesh,
And Jock bring in the spirit!
Amen.

After Dinner [B]

L—D, we [thee] thank an' thee adore
For temp'ral gifts we little merit;
At present we will ask no more,
Let William Hislop give the spirit.
(*Poems*, II, 821)

And a hundred years later? The Heritage Club reports in an article entitled “A Man’s a Man”:

On July 21, 1896, “at least fifty-thousand people” assembled in the market town of Dumfries, in southern Scotland, to observe the one-hundredth anniversary of the death of Robert Burns. “At two o’clock within the Drill Hall a conversazione, attended by four thousand persons, was held,” *The Publisher’s Circular* of London reported in its next issue. “At St. Michael’s Churchyard, wreaths presented by one hundred and thirty Burns and other societies were handed to Lord Rosebery [the Prime Minister], who placed them on the poet’s tomb. The most modest wreath, and yet probably the most interesting, was that from the Glasgow Mauchline Society. It consisted of holly and gowans, the latter grown on the field of Mossgiel, celebrated by Burns in his poem ‘To a Mountain Daisy.’ The wreath was made up by the granddaughters of Burns.”¹⁷

In closing this paper I would like to note that I have learned from this study of Burns and Paine, as I see them in relation to each other, that cosmopolitanism sounds good but overlooks what life is all about. Burns, by adjusting to reality as it was developing in the 1790s, has on more than one occasion been called an opportunist. I think that he made the best of what was possible. I assume most readers are familiar with the various responsibilities he had as a husband, a father and member of two families, and a supporter of various organizations and projects. Therefore, he could only moderate his tone in public on his various proposals for reform and revolution. It is not to be forgotten, as Christopher Hobbhouse noted in 1934, referring to Great Britain in

¹⁷Heritage Club, “A Man’s a Man,” *Sandglass*, XII, 29 (1965), 1.

general: "In 1795, to organize in favor of reform was an indictable offense, and any prominent reformer, or even a prominent dissenter, was in danger of being mobbed in the streets."¹⁸ And so Burns chose to follow the path Montaigne wrote about: "I speak the truth, not enough to satisfy myself, but as much as I dare speak."¹⁹

Zürich-Kreuzlingen

¹⁸Christopher Hobhouse, *Fox* (London, 1947), p. 259.

¹⁹Quoted in George Spater, "The Legacy of Thomas Paine," in Ian Dyck, ed. *Citizen of the World: Essays on Thomas Paine* (New York, 1988), p. 143.