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James Ayton

Sir Robert Ayton—The Last Castalian Time for a Reappraisal

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in the neglected Scottish literature from the period around the departure of the Stuart monarch to the London court in 1603 when the crowns of Scotland and England were united, an event viewed at the time with general acclaim as is evidenced by Sir Robert Ayton's sensitive sonnet: "On the River Tweed":

Faire famous flood, which sometyme did devyde,
But now conjoynes, two Diadems in one.¹

Subsequently, that same event has been interpreted with dismay at the too heavy price yielded in Scottish national pride, together with a shattering of Scottish English, then deemed to be in a period of vigor. With such an argument, James VI/1 is seen as a cultural villain together with those Scots, such as Robert, who followed the court to London. Ayton's verse is poorly represented in most anthologies, an unfortunate fate for one who has been called "the last Castalian" by a perceptive scholar, Helena Shire, who also spoke of him as "the father of the Cavalier lyric."² So the point of this essay is to ex-

¹*The English and Latin Poems of Sir Robert Ayton*, ed. Charles B. Gullans, Scottish Text Society, 4th Series, 1 (1963), 167. Henceforth Ayton.

²Helena Mennie Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry of the Court of Scotland under King James VI* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 215, 216. The word "cavalier" is used without a source,

plore his omission, discover why it has happened, and indicate a way forward to a recovery of an enigmatic personality with a distinctive voice. This period of millennium change, as Scotland redefines its relationship within the United Kingdom, not to mention Europe, may be the most opportune moment for the reappraisal of his gentle touch.

In his Preface to the Scottish Text Society edition of Sir Robert Ayton, Charles B. Gullans wrote:

While the present life is generally more nearly adequate than previous accounts, it is the only new work done in the last century and makes no pretensions to finality nor definitiveness. It is to be hoped and expected that much information about the life is still to be found (Ayton, p. x).

There is something here not a little sad. What happened? Robert either slipped away or was never there to be found. Possibly Gullans was under pressure to meet the remit of his backers with restrictions on what could and could not be said. The world has moved a long way since 1963 and yet even in that period there were speculations about human motivation, psychological probing, and sexuality. "What kind of man would write such poetry?", a fundamental question, is never addressed. The reader is given a tantalizing shadow of Robert lurking behind the official court correspondence which was available to Gullans and that is it.

Fortunately for Robert's reputation, Helena Mennie Shire was able to alert the academic world that here was a voice worth hearing. In his time Robert was almost certainly a lady's man, so perhaps it needed the refinement and susceptibility of a lady to see his merits. Shire was captivated by his sparkle in a way that Gullans was not, but her book was never intended to be a life of one individual, however pleasing. Shire carried the personality into new dimensions, recognizing, as no one before her, his musicality: Because of his enormous popularity in his time, he dominates the penultimate chapter of the book (Shire, pp. 215-254).

Since Shire's work came out in 1969 there has been the contribution of Mary Jane Wittstock Scott in an essay of 1975 claiming Ayton to be a Scottish metaphysical, writing poetry that was "exquisitely logical and balanced through a disciplined use of paradox and antithesis." Scott noted further that his "mind has controlled the power of emotion."³ Her essay, though positive, is not blinded by praise. He was a metaphysical who never came to his full potential because he seems to have lacked the time, the inclination, the talent and, finally, because southern English was not natural to him (Scott, p. 11). Robert had the problem also faced by his fellow compatriots including the

leaving a question mark over its origin. Henceforth Shire.

³Mary Jane Wittstock Scott, "Robert Ayton: Scottish Metaphysical," in *Scottish Literary Journal*, 2 (1975), 7. Henceforth Scott.

king. These exiled poets were in competition with luminaries such as Donne, Jonson, not to mention the bard himself, writing comfortably in their own natural English.

With new insights derived from earlier critics, Maurice Lindsay wrote that Ayton "has been cavalierly treated by most historians of our national literature."⁴ The word "cavalierly" is ironic and apt, for quite possibly earlier arbiters of the canon had silently censored out the dash and feather of the cavalier.

William Edmonstoune Aytoun (1813-1865), a descendant of the Ayton sept of Inchdairnie, captures the disdain for the courtier in lines from his poem *Bothwell* (1856), vindicating Mary Queen of Scots:

Not mine the arts that gallants own
Who glide and prattle round the throne,
A soldier I, unused to sue,
Or fawn as courtly minions do.⁵

Robert Ayton was a courtier, a career diplomat, a civil servant and an entertainer and in a poem such as "Upon Mr Thomas Murray's Fall" well aware of the dangers in his kind of life: the idea that he was some kind of parasite shows a failure of imagination and historical sense. Those who have commented with sarcasm on his "hatband sett with diamondes" which was to be disposed in his will, fail to see that such were his badge of entry into the court and to read more is to misunderstand the age and class in which he found himself. Five minutes in front of one of the many swagger portraits of the period should put them right.

In his essay "A New Maid Channoun? Redefining the Canonical in Mediæval and Renaissance Scottish Literature" published in 1991, Professor R. J. Lyall⁶ gives a refreshingly objective overview, coming down favorably for Ayton. He notes that "the second half of the sixteenth century and virtually the whole of the seventeenth have been written out of the Scottish literary tradition" and he then continues, "But the virtual invisibility of Scott, Montgomerie, Ayton and others goes much further than such a gap strictly justifies" (Lyall, p. 8). Lyall himself does not rate William Alexander, Alexander Craig (youthful friend of Robert), or Sir David Murray of any high significance, but and here is the but:

⁴Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London, 1977), p. 128.

⁵William Edmonstoune Aytoun, *Bothwell: A Poem* (Edinburgh, 1868), p. 162.

⁶R. J. Lyall, "'A New Maid Channoun'? Redefining the Canonical in Medieval and Renaissance Scottish Literature," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 26 (1991), 7. Henceforth Lyall.

The exception to this general assessment, however, is Sir Robert Ayton, whose poetry is, I think, seriously undervalued, both in the Scottish canon and in the English. From an English perspective, no doubt, Ayton appears as a pallid imitator of Donne, while against the background of the Makars—and even the Castilians—his verse may seem anglicized, mannered and the work of a cultural quisling (Lyll, p. 15).

Robert Ayton did little to promote his own works, and he appears to have shown little concern over the historical fate of his works or to put them into order. The truth was that for much of the time he was living his life, not recording it. The life was a busy one, full of achievements: he was secretary to two European queens, at home with the inside gossip of their courts and at the same time able to maintain a balance with their consorts who were his ultimate masters. The titles of surviving poems suggest this: “To Queen Anne upone New-year’s-day 1604” (Ayton, p. 168), “Upon Prince Henry his death to Prince Charles” (Ayton, p. 194), “Upon Mr Thomas Murrays fall” (Ayton, p. 193), “A Sonnet Left in A Gentlewoman’s Looking Glasse” (Ayton, p. 162), and “To his coy Mistres” (Ayton, p. 176). Shire believes that as fast as the lyrics were written, they were handed to the instrumentalists who took them away to transcribe to music (Shire, p. 215). Of historical vanity there was none and indeed she noted that Ayton’s motto was “Vita verecunda: Musa jocose mihi” which is the equivalent of “Let us live modestly” (Shire, p. 254). He most likely got his satisfaction in the passing gratitude of the court. The idea that some hundreds of years after his death he would be the subject of probings such as these would have astonished him, no doubt:

That when some friend my name to mind shall call,
Thou’lt only sigh and wish me well, that’s all.”⁷

Robert was a bachelor, and most of the genealogical experts are of the opinion that Robert’s house, that of the Ayton’s of Kinaldie, is extinct, although the present Lord Lyon has expressed some doubt. The house ended in financial scandal following soon after the tragedy of Culloden. These Aytons were very political and had been so from time immemorial.⁸ While Robert Ayton was an astute political animal, many of the others were not. They had been centered originally on the debatable lands north of Berwick where a handsome Victorian castle now marks their spot. Probably they had proved a

⁷Helena Mennie Shire. “Poems and Songs of Sir Robert Ayton.” *The Ninth of May*. (Cambridge, 1961) p. 25.

⁸The seer Thomas of Erceldoune had mentioned the house in the thirteenth century, where his prediction reads like *Macbeth*: “none of woman born should succeed to the estates of Kinaldie and Kippo save those of Ayton blood.” See James Ayton, *The Stuart Experience: The Story of a Jacobite Inheritance* (London, 1966), p. 84. Henceforth *Stuart*.

nuisance. Their lands passed to the powerful Douglas Homes through an heiress, and by the 1490s they had moved north. Based on Stirling, they were to fan out into Fife where the three sons of Captain Andrew Ayton, Master of the Works of Stirling Castle, were given large estates, Ayton, Inchdairmie, and Kinaldie. As the heirs of these sons were frequently to intermarry over the coming centuries, genealogy becomes extremely complicated. As late as 1940 an aunt of the present writer married her own first cousin, Edward Scott, showing this tradition to be alive and well even though this particular family is known to have been established in England at least since the eighteenth century and living in the very different circumstances of the London metropolis. Captain Andrew and his firstborn, John, were to end their lives in the carnage of Flodden in 1513.

Although Robert Ayton lived a charmed and peaceful life befitting one deemed to be the "last Castalian," the peace party established by James VI as a youth, his family was never far from blood. In 1546 an Ayton, together with a Moneypenny, was caught up in "the treasonable slaughter of Cardinal Beaton" though it seems from the sketchy reports they were lucky to get off so lightly (*Stuart*, p. 85). Cardinal Beaton was born a Moneypenny through his mother and tended to take his friends from his extended family, which was not unusual for those times. This family had estates bordering those of the Kinaldie Aytons and the two families were to marry, bicker, and hate for at least two centuries, and it was a Moneypenny who was finally to destroy them. Then again, in the generation after Robert, in 1679, a young Ayton Royalist laird was killed in the aftermath of the murder of the martyr Archbishop Sharp in circumstances which have never been explained. If Robert had lived into the civil wars he would almost certainly have put his pen, if not his sword, at the service of his king. As it was, his nephew John went into exile with Charles II.

These earlier Aytons drew the central meaning of their lives in service and adherence to the Stuarts. Professor William Aytoun also could not let the matter drop, witness his *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers* which came out in 1849, by which time Stuart tragedy had evolved into Stuart mythology. The Aytons had their reasons: Robert's paternal grandmother had married as a second husband one of the half brothers of Mary Queen of Scots and she herself claimed descent from the Duke of Albany, younger brother of James III. Helena Shire noted that so many Aytons traveled south to attend the funeral of Mary after her execution that Elizabeth's security forces gave up trying to designate them as individuals; they came "as of kin." Thus it will never be known if Robert was one of them. He would have been a young graduate about seventeen at the time.

It is unlikely that Robert ever traded openly on his royal connection for that would not have been the style in those highly stratified times. James would certainly have known of it and treated Robert as some kind of insider. This explains his entry into court life, his steady rise through the ranks from Groom of the Privy Chamber upwards. One may conjecture that Ayton's love

of poetry, something he shared with James VI, came from their joint descent from James I, presumed author of *The Kingis Quair*. It will be recalled that Mary Queen of Scots also wrote poetry.

There are puzzling gaps in the early history of Robert which may indeed have gone beyond recall. Shire found no sign he was ever a member of the Castalian band, though she felt he had got their tone of voice; no sign he was ever at the last court of James in Scotland during the decade of 1590; no papers have ever turned up as evidence of his stay in Paris, believed to be a long one, before his arrival at the London court post (Shire, pp. 7, 217-9, 234, 254).

Various dates have been suggested for his arrival in London from as early as 1604 to the late date of 1608.⁹ I am inclined towards the former because of the internal evidence of the poetry. The sonnet "On the River Tweed" (Ayton, p. 167) has an immediacy and authority which speaks of someone who was there and felt these things; in any case, the whole point was to throw the poems into the waters as part of the ceremony of the king's symbolic crossing of his kingdoms. Surely Robert would have been in the van of his followers? The poem dedicated to Queen Anne at the New Year of 1604 indicates a presence. It indicates that he was remarkably well informed and keeping an eye on developments.

At this point we may make some speculations. Robert's father died in 1589, about the time of his graduation from the University of St Andrews, leaving him a generous £1,000, a huge sum for those days. As a younger son, Robert was obliged to leave the nest for the great world. Still, he never forgot his brother, and evidently remained on sound terms as is proved by the provisions for his nephew and nieces. Robert probably set out on his version of what was to become known later as the grand tour. Because of the auld alliance Paris would have been a natural focus. The fact that he went on a later commission for James to Germany in 1611 indicates he must have had some knowledge of that country as well (Ayton, pp. 27-30).

Young men of substance, with good social connections, talented in languages, with a personality that could please, and unconcerned about marriage, would surely be excellent candidates to be the eyes and ears of a monarch and would thereby provide themselves with a useful extra income. A secret agent sounds a trifle inflated; still this was murky and dangerous territory if the unfortunate history of Christopher Marlowe is taken into account. It is significant that if Robert did not appear in London until 1608, almost all that is known of the years between 1590 and then could be written on a page. It is significant that he ended up as secretary to two European queens (Anne of Denmark and Henrietta Maria of France), so he must have been comfortable with their culture, and, as secretary, he would have been privy to their secrets.

⁹Scott states (p. 7), "In 1608 he succeeded and went to London."

Gullans is particularly stimulating on Robert's tracking of the Duke of Buckingham when, in the period between the death of Anne and the arrival of Henrietta Maria, he was lacking an income.¹⁰ Robert kept his nerve in that seven-year cycle between the queens; he was fifty when it began, a time when most men are hoping to relax in their careers and enjoy some of the fruits of their labors. Robert was no man's fool; his character had been tested in the fire.

Determining precisely what Robert Ayton wrote presents a problem. Helena Shire believed that many of his poems had been claimed by others. She wrote:

Ayton's best verses in the vernacular paid the price of their popularity. They were handed about, copied, misread, and copied again, learnt by heart and repeated wrong.... It is no surprise his work appeared in print in other men's names (Shire, pp. 215-6).

The question of Jane Whorwood (née Ryder or Ryther) who was related to James Maxwell, a close friend of Ayton, is perplexing. According to Gullans she "rendered numerous and exceptional services to Charles I... when she acted as a daring and phenomenally successful Royalist spy. She is N or 715 in the cipher letters of Charles I" (Ayton, p. 104). In his will Ayton left his bed to Jane Whorwood. It should be remembered that beds were highly valued status symbols in those days, and one may question the nature of the relationship between Robert and Jane. Was it simply that of friendship between an elderly courtier and a younger, pleasing companion? Was there an intellectual bonding? Robert Ayton certainly had a distinguished mind as we can see from his friendships with the great—Donne, Johnson and Hobbes—and lesser-known personalities such as John Aubrey and the Provost of Eton. Charles Carlton has written about Jane Whorwood:

Without doubt the most curious and, maybe, the most significant of Charles' friendship with ordinary people was that with Jane Whorwood. The exact nature of their relationship will never be fully known, not just because very little of their correspondence has survived, and most that remains being oblique notes through third parties in which Jane and Charles were very guarded, but because one gets the impression that neither really understood what was developing between them; and if they did it both intrigued and frightened them.¹¹

¹⁰Gullans details Robert's shadowing of the Duke of Buckingham for favors (Ayton, pp. 48-76).

¹¹Charles Carlton, *Charles I: The Personal Monarch*, 2nd edn. (London, 1995), p. 327. Henceforth Carlton.

The Parliamentary accounts show Jane to have been a most striking woman “with a fine heard of red hair...a tall, well fashioned and well languaged gentlewoman” (Carlton, p. 328). There, perhaps, is the clue to Robert’s attraction, “well languaged,” not to mention the Celtic head of red hair, for Ayton had spent half a lifetime in the courts observing many of the ladies of fashion and thus knew distinction when he saw it.

It is as well that Robert did not live to see the developing relationship between Charles and Jane, since it would not necessarily have pleased him, for he had his own relationship with Henrietta Maria to consider. Certainly, it would have presented him with an agony of conscience and choice between competing loyalties. Henrietta Maria had been very generous to Robert, ceding to him lands of her own in Lincolnshire. These were to pass to his nephew, John.

It would not be difficult to make a case that Robert was homosexual because he never married, he worked for a homosexual monarch in a personal capacity, he had a number of close male friends, he wore diamonds in his hatbands. On the other hand, his poetry shows an insight into the feminine psyche. Like so many writers of powerful imagination, Shakespeare comes to mind, the truth may be that he lived at the center of his mind, and from there, he watched as at a theatre, in the vanity fair of the court, the posturings and glammers of both men and women, many, no doubt, very clever, and not a few, very silly. But there is no evidence he turned cynic. Probably the social mask he donned on entering the court had, by the end of this life, become part of his identity. By and large, the portrait that Gullans presents reveals a man of honor and principle.

As an example of a “depairt song,” Robert’s “Old-Long-Syne” must have few rivals, yet it is almost unknown. It is a celebration of heterosexual love. Burns took it over and used it for his own purposes, so that now it is remembered everywhere in the English-speaking world. Both men owed a debt to a line of earlier bards.

Robert Ayton’s version of the song repays a close reading. Of all his works, it is one of the most polished, perhaps even the most complex. In it, was he trying to convey something about his own love life, that he loved too much, too well, above his station perhaps? It is a commonplace that women can marry upwards out of their class; rather fewer men do so. In that stratified society it is possible that Robert caught the eye of a young heiress or great lady, but the second son of an obscure Scottish laird had few prospects in that direction. The lack of property clearly hurt if not rankled with him:

If e’er I have a House, my Dear,
That truly is call’d mine,
And can afford but Country Cheer,
Or ought that’s good therein;

And then he makes a disconcerting invitation, the most daring he can think of, given his absolute loyalty to the crown:

Tho' thou were Rebel to the King,
And beat with Wind and Rain,
Assure thy self of Welcome Love,
For Old-long-syne (Ayton, p. 204).

The secret of this love, whomever it was, went with him to the grave.

The highlight of Robert's professional career must have been his journey into the realms of the Emperor Rudolph II where he went as the representative of James, together with that monarch's book explaining the nature of allegiance subjects owed their rulers.

Was Robert awarded the Order of the Golden Fleece? The anonymous author of his biography in *Eminent Men of Fife* appears to think he may have been.

There is every probability that he was elected to the Order of the Golden Fleece by Rudolph the Second of Germany, who possessed the earldom of Flanders, and who, in all likelihood, bestowed the honour, to testify his regard for his friend and ally King James, and to mark the appreciation of the learning and courtly accomplishments which the poet-ambassador would no doubt display.¹²

"To The Author of the Monarchicke Tragedies," a poem of Robert's, is dark, somber and frankly prophetic, certainly for moderns who come to it knowing the long trail of Stuart misfortune:

Crownes throwne from Thrones to tombes, detomb'd arise
To match thy Muse with a Monarchick theame;
That whilst her sacred soaring cuts the skies,
A vulgar subject may not wrong the same: (Ayton, p. 169).

As Robert was signing the bills for the court entertainments, quite possibly overseeing these in some fashion, mixing with the likes of Inigo Jones, writing letters to the Princess Elizabeth, sometime Winter Queen of Bohemia, he could not fail to be abreast of the Faustian ideas that were sweeping across Europe. His sonnet "To King James" shows he knew all about "talking statues," so his occasional pieces shed light into his mind and how it was reacting to the passing scene.

Thus the award of the Golden Fleece may well have been some kind of initiation for Robert, since it was to involve elements of ritual and high ceremony. A survey of the masonry of Scotland may be another line to pursue.

¹²M. F. Connolly, ed., *Eminent Men of Fife* (Edinburgh, 1866), p. 19.

The re-founder of his house had been Captain Andrew Ayton, Master of the Works of Stirling Castle in the years running up to 1513. For at least one hundred and fifty years Ayton men had sustained the fabric of the Scottish palaces, completing some of the finer carvings, until about 1650 by which time the kings had departed and the spirit had gone out of it. Is it so fanciful that these talented men, Robert's kith and kin, were themselves heirs to the masons and before that the Knights Templar even? Yes, these are speculations, but speculations based on family traditions. Ayton's inherited family lore may well have been a basis for his cool judgment and integrated personality.

A researcher into this line of enquiry would need to go no further than some of the published evidences such as the *Accounts of the Masters of Works: Building and Repairs Royal Palaces and Castles 1529-1615*,¹³ and check the indexes for Aytons which appear in many of such architectural and historical surveys.

In conclusion, a call is made for further scholarship. Robert Ayton, a poet who delighted Kings James and Charles, together with some of the most discriminating intellects of his time, remains a figure of mystery. The received opinion of the academic world is that Sir Robert Ayton is an important poet who has been neglected. It is hoped that this essay will lead to new and fruitful research.

Faversham, Kent

¹³London: HMSO, 1957.