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John Gray

Burns and his Visitors from Ulster: From Adulation to Disaccord

In March 1794 “Scotia’s bard” was peremptorily summoned by Samuel Thomson, the decidedly lesser-known “bard of Carngranny” in County Antrim, and otherwise, as Thomson rather unfortunately put it, from “the land of bogs.” His lines read:

Soon as I knew his lordship liv’d convenient,
I for him sent, nor could wait till morning.¹

Thomson’s visit to Burns with his friend John Williamson fulfilled a long-cherished dream.²

Thomson’s note of authority in addressing Burns was calculated to impress his readers in Ulster. They also required due reverence; already well

¹“A Jonsonian Fragment Occasioned by a Visit to Mr Burns, in Spring, 1794” in Samuel Thomson, *New Poems on a Variety of Different Subjects* (Belfast, 1799), pp. 169-71; reprinted in Ernest McA Scott and Philip Robinson, eds., *The Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson, the Bard of Carngranny 1766-1816* (Bangor, 1992), pp. 45-6. The reference in the title appears to be to the playwright Ben Jonson who journeyed to Scotland in 1618 to visit the Scottish poet William Drummond of Hawthornden, and shows Samuel Thomson demonstrating his broad range of literary reference. Henceforth *Country Rhymes*.

²“Epistle to Mr R[obert] B[urns],” in Samuel Thomson, *Poems on Different Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect* (Belfast, 1793), pp. 85-7. Henceforth *Poems*. Reprinted in *Country Rhymes*, pp. 53-4.

versed in Belfast printed editions of Ramsay and Fergusson, they had soon shown the greatest enthusiasm for Burns outside Scotland.³ Thomson paid due court; when Burns appeared he “scarce could credit give my wondering eyes” and listened “with a pleasing awe.” So awestruck indeed that poetically he could record nothing of the meeting. It was enough to be able to say, “Oh yes, Hibernians, I beheld the bard!”

Was there anything more than hero worship involved here? On the face of it, the relationship appears fleeting and one-sided. Thomson’s own achievement in having his *Poems on Different Subjects Partly in the Scottish Dialect* published in 1793, and the first of many such volumes by those usually described as the Ulster weaver poets, was dedicated to Burns and was advertised as “being printed so as to match Burns’s poems.”⁴ While Burns, writing to the editor of the *Belfast News-letter*,⁵ and for his Ulster audience, happily used the inaccurate persona of “a simple plough boy,”⁶ Thomson took upon himself the guise of “shepherd lad,”⁷ and his “weakly constructed hovel [was] like the shiel of the Caledonian shepherd,”⁸ this although he was a hedge school master.⁹ Thomson was easily tempted into overblown classical mode, but here again could be seen as merely imitating the Bard. Certainly in Scots he managed a fair pastiche of Burns although without the life and fire.

And yet the connection had some duration. In March 1791 Thomson sent his poetic “Epistle to Mr R[obert] B[urns],” and although a friend replied on Burns’s behalf to this “very polite” overture,¹⁰ he sent the welcome news that

³James Dewar, ed., *A Tribute to the Memory of Burns* (Belfast, 1893), p. 24 lists five Belfast printed editions of Burns by 1800, namely editions published by James Magee in 1787 and 1789, and by William Magee in 1790, 1793 and 1800. For a wider discussion see Liam McIlvanney, “Robert Burns and the Ulster-Scots Literary Revival of the 1790s,” in *Bullán*, 4.2 (1999/2000), 125-43. Henceforth McIlvanney.

⁴*Northern Star*, 3 Feb. 1794.

⁵*Belfast News-letter*, 3 June 1789.

⁶Robert Burns “to the printer,” 18 May 1789, published *Belfast News-letter*, 3 June 1789.

⁷See the “Dedication” to *Poems*, p. 3.

⁸Preface to *New Poems*.

⁹See the introduction to *Country Rhymes* for a useful biographical sketch.

¹⁰T[homas] Sloan to Samuel Thomson 31 March 1791, Samuel Thomson Papers, Trinity College, Dublin, MS.7257, fols. 72-3. Sloan wrote in place of Burns who couldn’t “by the ill fated misfortune of having his arm broke.” This was Thomas Sloan of Wanlockhead. G. Ross Roy in his edition of *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985) includes as letter

Thomson's "Rosebud in June" was to appear in the *Scots Musical Museum*,¹¹ and, what was more, Burns as a token of his regard sent a gift of Fergusson's *Poems*, though he in return made a special request for a pound of snuff known as "Blackguard" or "Lundy foot,"¹² and of Irish manufacture. Thomson made much of his present from Burns, telling the readers of the United Irish newspaper, the *Northern Star*, that this was an expression of Burns's "admiration of his [Thomson's] talents and genius."¹³ Currie's mutilated and incomplete notes on Burns's incoming correspondence record another letter from Thomson in May of the same year with which he sent more "trifles for the miscellany."¹⁴ Evidently the trade in "Blackguard" continued as Thomson's published verse that included "Postscript with a Pound of Snuff" dated 18 April 1792 (*Poems*, pp. 85-8). Currie picks up on the arrival of yet another "pound of blackguard" in March 1794 (*Letters*, 2, 426, no. 252).

But there was more immediate and serious business at hand. Thomson evidently wrote with some passion on "the state of Ireland." A reference to the "overthrow of the rag" appears opaque, but combined with Thomson's declaration that he "sticks by the *Northern Star*" suggests that he is referring to the bitter contest between the United Irish newspaper the *Star* and the older *Belfast News-letter*. Sticking by the *Star* required commitment in March 1794 as the proprietors imminently faced trial for sedition.¹⁵ Arguing the case for the *Star* with Burns was complicated because Henry Joy, editor of the *News-letter*, had some claim to his allegiance as the first to publish him outside Scotland, and had reminded Burns of this on 8 December 1792 (*Letters*, 2, 423, no. 226).

Enlisting Burns's support for the *Star* was clearly one purpose of Thomson's visit to Burns in April 1794. Immediately after his return to Carngranny, John Rabb, printer of the *Star*, wrote to him saying, "I'll very gladly open a

444, an undated letter from Burns to Sloan telling Sloan of his broken arm. The editor ascribes this to April, but Sloan must have received it in March. Henceforth *Letters*.

¹¹Described here by Sloan as "a Miscellany of Scots [music]."

¹²The snuff was manufactured by a Mr. Lundy Foot, and hence not directly named after Colonel Robert Lundy who sought to surrender Londonderry to James II in 1688. Most Irish users of the snuff would have connected the name "Lundy," the most notorious in loyal demonology, with the epithet "blackguard."

¹³*Northern Star*, 18 April 1792.

¹⁴*Letters*, 2, Appendix 1 "Currie's List of Letters to Burns," no. 185, 2 May 1791.

¹⁵For the contest between the two newspapers see John Gray, "A Tale of Two Newspapers: The Contest Between the *Belfast News-letter* and the *Northern Star* in the 1790s" in John Gray and Wesley McCann, eds., *An Uncommon Bookman: Essays in Memory of J. R. R. Adams* (Belfast, 1996), pp. 175-98.

correspondence with Mr Burns...and send him the *Star*." Rabb wanted more information from Thomson on "how Burns lives now" and "what the Scotch people are about."¹⁶

Certainly Thomson's visit to Burns was more than a dumb show. He was received in Burns's parlor and secured the words of his "Clarinda" and his "Epistle to Mr H. Adam"; "Clarinda" had been published in 1788, but the "Epistle to Mr H. Adam" remains otherwise unknown.¹⁷ It also seems inescapable that they must have talked of respective political circumstances in Scotland and Ireland, with Burns, no doubt, rueing the misfortunes of the radical cause in Scotland, and Thomson still enthusiastic about prospects in Ireland.

This at least suggests an immediate and fresh source for Burns's optimistic portrayal of Irish possibilities in his "Ode for Hibernia's Sons," written only a couple of months later, even if this was left incomplete and merely adapted for use in his "Ode for General Washington's Birthday."¹⁸ It has been suggested of Thomson that his radicalism can only be inferred from some of the company he kept.¹⁹ His role with Burns as an emissary for the *Northern Star* suggests more, as befitted a man who used the *Star* office as his post-box,²⁰ used *Star* fliers for notepaper,²¹ and was a "friend of friends" at the other United Irish

¹⁶John Rabb to Thomson 14 March 1794, Thomson Papers, fol. 175. Rabb was convicted in the trial of the proprietors of the *Northern Star* later that year and fled to America. Aeneas Lamont sent Thomson news of his fortunes there: Lamont to Thomson 3 Sept. 1795, fol. 74.

¹⁷Thomson Papers, fols. 71-72. "Clarinda" was first published in the *Scots Musical Museum*, Vol. 2 (1788). The full title of the otherwise unrecorded Burns poem is "Epistle to Mr H. Adam on Receiving a Polite Letter from Him at the Commencement of my Poetical Career." An added note reads, "received the above from Mr Burns in his own parlour on the morning of March 1st 1794. Samuel Thomson."

¹⁸Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, eds., *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh, 2001), pp. 819-20 publish the "Ode for Hibernia's Sons" "for the first time" and argue that "Burns crucially passed commentary on Irish political affairs." As Gerard Carruthers points out in "The New Bardolotary" in *The Burns Chronicle* (Winter 2002), pp. 9-15, Noble and Hogg reconstruct the Irish "Ode" from the briefest of evidence in a sales catalogue and, in any case the "Ode for Hibernia's Sons" "potentially even amounts to a cancelled poem."

¹⁹*Country Rhymes*, p. x: "Thomson's radical politics can only be assumed from the friendships he made."

²⁰Letter from Luke Mullan 1796 addressed to Thomson at the *Star*, Thomson Papers, fols. 1-2.

²¹Thomson Papers, fol. 185, using a flier for the *Star* dated 1st March 1794.

printing house in Belfast.²² Nor was Thomson merely a man of letters, as he wrote to Belfast requesting the “new system of exercise” for the Volunteers.²³

What then of his friends? In addition to John Williamson, his companion in 1794, of whom we know little, two others in his circle visited Burns on separate occasions. Luke Mullan, one time neighbor and close friend, went probably in late 1795 staying some nine weeks in the district, and provided Thomson with a bleak enough view of Burns’s situation:

He is not much respected in Dumfries on account of his infidelity to his wife. But as an officer of the excise he is said to be very humane to poor people. In short he is allowed to be a fine social companion and an honest man but too much enamoured of the joys of bachuus—I believe he writes little now—he offers some to the Dumfries papers that is not accepted. So little is great men thought of in their own country.²⁴

Mullan was a poet himself and author of an “Ode to Freedom.”²⁵ As brother-in-law of James Hope, Ulster’s best-remembered weaver revolutionary, he was more directly involved in the ferment of the time. When in July 1792 the Volunteers paraded in Belfast to mark the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, Mullan painted the banner carried by the Roughfort Volunteers, “a green flag, bearing for a motto on one side—‘Our Gallic brother was born July 14, 1789, Alas! We are still in embryo’ and on the other side—‘Superstitious galaxy’ ‘The Irish Bastille: let us unite to destroy it.’”²⁶ His United Irish sympathies appear to have cost him his freedom. His correspondence with Thomson was undertaken “since I came to prison” and more precisely after being sent to the

²²Mullan to Thomson 29 Sept. 1796, sent care of Mr. Thomas Storey, Bridge Street: Thomson Papers fols. 3-4. John and Thomas Storey, former printers at the *Northern Star*, ran the Public Printing Office from 1795 onwards. Both were active in the 1798 rebellion and John Storey was executed while his brother escaped from prison and fled to America; see Charles Dickson, *Revolt in the North: Antrim and Down in 1798* (London, 1997), p. 135. Henceforth Dickson.

²³Fragment of an undated reply to Thomson’s request for drilling information. Thomson Papers, fol. 183.

²⁴Mullan to Thomson 29 Sept. 1796. Thomson Papers, fols. 3-4.

²⁵Mullan to Thomson, 27 Dec. 1797. Mullan asked Thomson to “send me a printed copy.” Thomson Papers, fols. 18-9.

²⁶For the “Autobiographical Memoir of James Hope” see R. R. Madden, *The United Irishmen Their Lives and Times*, 3rd ser., 1 (London, 1846), 218-95.

fleet at Spithead.²⁷ He was there during the 1797 mutiny,²⁸ and as late as February 1798 was writing that he preferred the thought of “cruel war” to “peaceable slavery.”²⁹ He was undoubtedly speaking of the Irish context.

By contrast, Alexander Kemp, a private tutor at Portglenone, County Antrim, was of more conservative vein, maintaining contact with the *Belfast News-letter* rather than the *Northern Star* and writing for whichever would publish him.³⁰ His appeal to Thomson lay in his sometime residence in Dumfries arising from family connections,³¹ and his garnering of verses from Burns from 1791 to as recently as 1795.³² He had sent the *News-letter* “two songs of Burns” which were then, so he claimed, also “first published there in 1791 or 1792.”³³ This was not actually the case, but he had better claims to a pioneer role when he announced to Thomson, “You will probably see in the *Newsletter* shortly an ‘Address to the Toothache’ which was dictated to me by our inesti-

²⁷Mullan to Thomson 4 Feb. 1797, Thomson Papers fols. 5-7. Just possibly Mullan was speaking metaphorically, and had joined the navy in order to escape his “former wretchedness,” and we may presume as a hand loom weaver, hence his response to news of Burns’s oldest son, “it seems his oldest son is bound apprentice to a weaver!!! Good God!!!”

²⁸Mullan to Thomson 15 May 1797 putting a surprisingly positive view, “the mutiny is all happily settled...they have granted all we desire, and pardones us for asking it,” Thomson Papers, fols. 9-10.

²⁹Mullan to Thomson 25 Feb. 1798, Thomson Papers, fols. 21-2.

³⁰Alexander Kemp to Thomson 10 Sept. [1797]. He was tutor to Robert Galt’s family. He wrote as “Humanitas” for the *Northern Star* and “Albert” for the *Belfast News-letter*. Thomson Papers, fols. 25-8.

³¹Kemp to Thomson 17 Dec. 1797. Kemp’s wife appears to have been from Dumfries, and following some family estrangement stayed there with Kemp’s “propertied sister in law” until December 1797. Thomson Papers, fols. 33-8.

³²James Kinsley suggests that “Address to the Toothache” was written in May or June 1795—see *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), III, 1483. On 30 May Burns had written to Peter Hill [?] complaining of a dreadful toothache. Kemp was there to collect the poem. Henceforth Kinsley.

³³Kemp to Thomson 17 Dec. 1797. The songs were “The Blue-eyed Lassie” and “Willie Brew’d a Peck o’ Maut,” Thomson Papers, fols. 33-8. Both had in fact been published in February 1790 in the *Scots Musical Museum*, vol. 3.

mable and mutual friend"; its first publication duly followed immediately.³⁴ Within a week he sent "'Holy Willies [*sic*] Prayer' [which] was dictated to me by Burns after dining with him and his 'darling Jean' at his own house."³⁵

Both Mullan and Kemp were largely unsuccessful poets in the conventional English mode. Two other acquaintances of Thomson reveal further aspects of the cultural and political milieu in which he operated. Aeneas Lamont³⁶ is an altogether more cosmopolitan figure. At age seventeen in 1778 he was a Belfast Volunteer, spent time in revolutionary America, and certainly Baltimore,³⁷ returned to Belfast by the 1790s, and was active in the Belfast Reading Society.³⁸ A one-time correspondent with Benjamin Franklin, he was also a playwright³⁹ and poet. His *Poems on Different Subjects* were published in Belfast on Bastille Day 1795.⁴⁰ Written in the conventional English mode, they mixed inconsequential love pieces with a brazenly republican agenda. Lamont secured 570 subscribers including almost the entire United Irish leadership,⁴¹ this compared with the more modest 320 Thomson had secured for his 1793 volume.

³⁴Kemp to Thomson 10 Sept. [1797], Thomson Papers fols. 25-8. The "Address to the Toothache" duly secured first publication in the *Belfast News-letter* 11 Sept. 1797—see J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1964), p. 347. Henceforth Egerer.

³⁵Kemp to Thomson 25 Sept. 1797. Thomson Papers fols. 29-30. This text survives as fol. 43. "Holy Willie's Prayer" was first published in 1789—see Egerer, p. 32.

³⁶I have drawn upon Linde Lunney's "Getting to Know Aeneas Lamont" which has helped fill in the blanks.

³⁷Aeneas Lamont, *Poems on Different Subjects* (Belfast, 1795), p. 148.

³⁸The Belfast Reading Society (now the Linen Hall Library) served as a major center for radicals. Lamont is recorded as a member from 1792 onwards. He was one of a committee who on 26th January 1792 drew up a resolution in favor of immediate Catholic emancipation—see John Killen, *A History of the Linen Hall Library, 1788-1988* (Belfast, 1990).

³⁹Dorothea Lamont to Thomson. Her letter of March 1804 recorded her husband's death a year earlier. On 1 August she sent Thomson the Franklin letter and described her husband's dramatic works. She opened a school and was a poet in her own right. Thomson Papers fols. 81-5.

⁴⁰Annotation on copy held in the Library of Queen's University, Belfast.

⁴¹They included Thomas Dickey, Reverend John Glendy, John and Richard Hughes, Robert Hunter, Reverend Sinclair Kelburne, Thomas McCabe, Henry Munro, John, William and Francis McCracken, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Neilson, James Orr, William Orr, four members

Even if Lamont operated on a different plane to Thomson, there was no immediate disjunction. His letters to Thomson have an easy familiarity. He continued to provide Thomson with the literary evidence of radical resistance in Belfast even if it was in the English mode and asked, in March 1797, had Thompson seen William Drennan's "Erin to Her Own Tune":

Alas for poor Erin! That some are still seen,
Who would die the grass red in their hatred for green.⁴²

He also offered to try to get Thomson one of the "scarce" copies of an even more explicit broadsheet, "Men of Erin arise."

Lamont kept Thomson abreast of the internal fortunes of the revolutionary movement itself. In September 1797 he reported a letter received in Belfast from John Hughes,⁴³ a leading activist, then in Dublin, saying "your friends are all out and you may expect them with you on Saturday." These were United Irish prisoners held in Kilmainham Jail, many of whom, following release were to lead the rebellion of the following summer. They included Henry Joy McCracken,⁴⁴ a subscriber to Thomson's first volume of verse, and later executed as commander of the rebellion in Ulster.

Then there was the Reverend James Porter, a Presbyterian minister who assumed a leading role in the affairs of the *Northern Star* from autumn 1796 onwards, following the arrest of the then editor, Samuel Neilson. Thomson may have met him through the *Star*, or as he traveled through County Antrim ostensibly giving lectures on natural philosophy. Certainly Thomson addressed him poetically as an astronomer:

of the Rabb family, Robert and William Simms, Thomas Storey, Charles Teeling, and John and William Tennent.

⁴²Published as "Erin" in William Drennan, *Fugitive Pieces in Verse and Prose* (Belfast, 1815), pp. 1-3. Drennan framed the original oath of the United Irishmen, and an address to the Volunteers in December 1792, which led to his own prosecution for seditious libel in 1794, and that of the proprietors of the *Northern Star* for publishing the address. Following his acquittal, Drennan increasingly distanced himself from the United Irish leadership, but remained more involved in underground poetical polemic than has been generally acknowledged: "Erin to Her Own Tune" was explosive in 1797! For more on Drennan see John Larkin, ed., *The Trial of William Drennan* (Blackrock, 1991), and his extensive correspondence in *The Drennan-McTier Letters*, ed. Jean Agnew, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1998).

⁴³Hughes, a Belfast bookseller, and a member of the County Down Executive of the United Irishmen was himself arrested on 20 October 1797 and turned informer, while continuing to advocate a rising—see Dickson, pp. 165-6, 235.

⁴⁴McCracken was not in fact released until 8 December—see Mary McNeill, *The Life and Times of Mary Ann McCracken 1770-1866* (Belfast, 1997), pp. 161-64.

With scientific eye, exploring space,
Pursuing far the philosophic race.⁴⁵

Thomson was one “who boasts that he can call you friend,” and he assumes a common enthusiasm for Burns, as, in the same poem, he mourns “the death of tuneful BURNS.” Porter’s adoption in the *Star* of a vernacular style, if not full-blooded Ulster-Scots, vastly widened the popular appeal of the paper. His excoriating satire “Billy Bluff and the Squire,” first serialized during 1796 and then published separately, was to remain popular well into the twentieth century.⁴⁶ It may also have sealed his fate and execution in 1798.⁴⁷

This is to run ahead of the story. We are more immediately concerned with the disjunction of experience for the radical movement as between Scotland and Ireland from 1794 to 1796. Put very simply the Scottish movement, which had been alarmed by United Irish overtures in 1792 presuming a Scottish desire for independence, was in any case largely crushed by early 1794. In the following two years the noose merely tightened.⁴⁸ The Irish movement had been sorely tried by the onset of repression, but had critical mass in the Presbyterian heartlands of Down and Antrim, and notably in the area immediately around Thomson’s Carngranny, and successfully reorganized from the bottom up. By 1796 the United Irishmen had formidable potential and were only awaiting a French invasion.⁴⁹

Accordingly in any public essay of radicalism, Burns was in a much more vulnerable position than Thomson. Burns inhabited a provincial town far from the center of action and with no cohesive radical force. Thomson dwelt in a

⁴⁵“Lines Addressed to the Rev J[ames] P[orter]” in *New Poems*, p. 177, reprinted in *Country Rhymes*, p. 56. It was extraordinarily courageous to publish any poem mentioning Porter affectionately in 1799 following his execution a year earlier.

⁴⁶The most recent edition is Brendan Clifford, ed., *Billy Bluff and the Squire* (Belfast, 1991). Clifford notes that “Billy Bluff was still not forgotten twenty years ago, and a second-hand copy could always be found in the old Smithfield book market.”

⁴⁷For Porter see Classon Porter, *Irish Presbyterian Biographical Sketches* (Belfast, 1883), pp. 16-19.

⁴⁸See E. W. McFarland, “Scottish Radicalism and the ‘Belfast Principle’” in John Erskine and Gordon Lucy, eds., *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland: Varieties of Scottishness* (Belfast, 1997), pp. 65-90; and John Brims, “Scottish Radicalism and the United Irishmen” in David Dickson, et al., eds., *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion* (Dublin, 1993), pp. 151-66.

⁴⁹Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin 1791-1798* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 98-101.

seething countryside half a day's ride from Belfast, the most revolutionary center in the British Isles. In Scotland it was Burns's misfortune to fatally misjudge the durability of the loyalist counter-offensive. He responded to initial attempts in January 1794 to form a loyal militia in scathing satirical vein:

Ye true loyal natives attend to my song,
In uproar and riot rejoice the night long,
From *envy* and *hatred* your corps is exempt;
But where is your shield from the *darts of contempt*? (Kinsley, II, 732).

He had put his head above the parapet, and this time in the face of what proved to be an unstoppable force. What could he do? Survival required a show of loyalty. He attended the inaugural meeting of the Dumfries Volunteers on 31 January 1795, joined the body, and wrote them a rousing loyal song.

Does haughty Gaul invasion threat,
Then let the loons beware, Sir!
There's WOODEN WALLS upon our seas,
And VOLUNTEERS on shore, Sir: (Kinsley, II, 765).

In extremis "The Dumfries Volunteers" can be scoured for saving Real Whig clauses, and well concealed literary references, which can then be wielded two centuries later in defense of an immaculate radical Burns,⁵⁰ but that was not the way it was read in 1795. Then its loyal import was immediately recognized and extensively used in pro-government newspapers which had otherwise long since abandoned Burns.

Meanwhile in Belfast, the United Irish citadel, radicals were successfully resisting the formation of any pro-government force, and indeed it was not until January 1797 that the Belfast Yeomanry was formed.⁵¹ In this context the appearance in 1795 of Burns's "The Dumfries Volunteers" was viewed as apostasy requiring an immediate response. Burns's poem was first published in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* on 4 May. On 18 May, Samuel Thomson's "The Ayrshire Rose" appeared in the *Northern Star* under the pseudonym

⁵⁰*The Canongate Burns*, p. 220, is determined not to think the unthinkable! The editors view any imputation of "loyalism" as "naïve," but "sadly" have to recognize that it was an Ulster radical reading, as well as that of "willful reactionaries." Liam McIlvanney in his *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton, 2002), pp. 236-7 is uneasy—"Certainly the note of coercive loyalism—is unwonted, and perhaps even hypocritical," and yet, in contradiction, stands by Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (Edinburgh, 1960) p. 237 and his finding of "a patriotic but still radical" mood too often misread as loyalism.

⁵¹For an account of the resistance in Ulster to the formation of the Yeomanry see Allan Blackstock, *Double Traitors? The Belfast Volunteers and Yeomen 1778-1828* (Belfast, 2000).

“Thomalin.” It was a virtual obituary for the still living Burns. It opens with a ludicrously overblown account of Burns’s arrival on the literary scene as “this lovely rose began to shine”; however, destruction was at hand:

But ah! Lamented be the day!
Presumptive wealth usurping all,
With fatal stride found out the bower,
And tore the sacred bush away.

For readers missing the obvious point, Thomson added a helpful footnote: “The reader will perceive that the above allegory is characteristic of the fate of Burns, once the Ayrshire Poet and Ploughman.”

This was not yet a direct attack on Burns, but when on 19 October the *Belfast News-letter* belatedly recognized the propaganda value of “The Dumfries Volunteers,” a more frontal response was needed. Once again Thomson worked at breakneck speed and by 26 October had composed a savage parody. The *Northern Star* was so delighted with this that on 2 November they published Burns’s song with Thomson’s parody alongside it under the pseudonym “Lowrie Nettle.”⁵² They were confident that Thomson’s poem would carry the greater weight.

While Burns had warned of those “who would set the mob above the throne,” Thomson reminded him of his one-time defense of the swinish multitude:

For those you Burke-like call the mob,
The very PEOPLE are man.

The last four lines of the two poems point up a now bitterly contested difference, thus Burns proclaims:

Who will not sing God Save the King,
Shall hang as high as the steeple,
But while we sing God save the king,
We’ll ne’er forget THE PEOPLE.

and is subverted by Thomson:

⁵²McIlvanney (p. 138) rightly praises the quality of this piece but cannot firmly ascribe it to Thomson, noting that the Scottish poet Alexander Wilson used a similar pseudonym. The address “Lyle’s Hill” is used which is specific to Thomson. See also James Orr’s reference to Thomson’s propensity for “netting” in a letter to Thomson of 2 March 1806, Thomson Papers fol. 60. Ernest Scott and Philip Robinson in *Country Rhymes*, p. xi, do not include “Lowrie Nettle” amongst the list of pseudonyms used by Thomson; they do include “Mathias Bramble, [of] Lyle[’s Hill].”

So now I sing God Save the King,
And the Queen to keep him warm sir:
But may he high as Haman hing,
Who dares oppose — REFORM Sir.

Thus Thomson achieves an impressive riposte to Burns, disrespect for the majesty of monarchy in his reference to the royal bedchamber, and an implicit threat of regicide in the sure knowledge that the king opposed “REFORM.”

For all the evident conviction with which Thomson did his political duty, he could not break the umbilical cord with Burns. After all in substantial measure his entire *raison d'être* and standing depended on Burns. When in 1796 news of the latter's death reached Belfast, Thomson immediately responded in maudlin and panegyric overdrive:

O Burns, my harmonious child,
My darling for ever adieu.⁵³

In the midst of Thomson's “big tears” which fell “in pitiful chace, as ye ought” there was a point to be made:

Thee justly lamented by all,
But doubly lamented by me.

The legacy of Burns was still to be contended for, and Thomson was staking his claim.

Most immediately the *Northern Star* published “Bruce's Address to Roman Troops at Bannockburn,”⁵⁴ originally a clarion cry for Scots radicals in the political circumstances of 1794, but now a call to rebellion in the Ulster of 1796. Meanwhile the more conservative *Belfast News-letter* refused to publish “Holy Willie's Prayer.” The editor regretted that, “Mr Burns should have sported so freely with the sacred pages,”⁵⁵ and instead published an anonymous poem praising Burns for depriving “religion of the Papish mask,”⁵⁶ and thus in Ulster the processes of cleansing Burns and of seeking to attach him to one sectarian party began early.

⁵³*Northern Star*, 19 Aug. 1796.

⁵⁴*Northern Star*, 14 Oct. 1796. First published in the *London Morning Chronicle* 8 May 1794. See Egerer, p. 347.

⁵⁵Kemp to Thomson 25 Sept. 1797, Thomson Papers, fols. 29-30.

⁵⁶*Belfast News-letter*, 2 Sept. 1796.

Thomson remained attracted to Burns's social radicalism, and on the eve of the 1798 rebellion was engaged in a novel exercise in pastiche, a "continuation of Burns's tale of the Twa Dogs." Alexander Kemp liked the piece but forcefully warned him: "Let me caution you again—shun politics—they are the *no limi tangere* of the present day...however obliquely discussed or tenderly touched."⁵⁷ Kemp meanwhile, disgusted by the failure of his own poetry in Ireland, had determined to try England.⁵⁸

For all his incaution Thomson survived the debacle of the United Irish rebellion, which followed a month later. His second volume, *New Poems on a Variety of Different Subjects*, appeared in 1799 and for the times he showed considerable courage, prefacing the subscribers' list with bitter words for fair-weather sailors:

Who formerly professed themselves friends, [who now] from a penury of liberality towards the encouragement of *the domestic literary exertions of Ireland*, have with a coldness, which adds little or nothing to their honor, refused their assistance to this publication.

Dialect verse, if not now actually under post-rebellion interdict, certainly faced new metropolitan pressures. There were those of a previously radical disposition who now discouraged Thomson's use of Ulster Scots. William Hamilton Drummond,⁵⁹ who, while a student for the ministry, had had his *Hibernia* published by the *Northern Star* office in 1797, and whose *Man of Age*, first published in Belfast, saw a second Glasgow edition "to Which is Added 'The Sighs of Genius,' an Elegiac Ode Occasioned by the Death of Robert Burns,"⁶⁰ wrote to Thomson in not unfriendly spirit, but warning him that "the Scottish dialect is pleasing to few but Scotch readers because of the barbarous mixture of scotch and english words." [*sic*]⁶¹

In 1799 Drummond contemplated an epic poem "The Rebels" with its "scope for incident and pathos" but thought better of it. Now Minister of the Second Presbyterian Church, Belfast, he was one of the founders of the elite

⁵⁷Kemp to Thomson 9 May 1798, Thomson Papers, fols. 47-50.

⁵⁸Kemp to Thomson 17 Dec. 1797, Thomson Papers, fols. 33-8.

⁵⁹For a brief biographical sketch see "William Hamilton Drummond" in *Belfast Literary Society 1801-1901: Historical Sketch with Memoirs of some Distinguished Members* (Belfast, 1902), pp. 37-9.

⁶⁰For a brief bibliography see Samuel Shannon Millin, "The Poetry of William Hamilton Drummond" in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 7.1 (1901), 37-43.

⁶¹W. Drummond to Thomson 29 Dec. 1798, Thomson Papers, fol. 21.

Belfast Literary Society in 1801, and his *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1806) was better attuned to the times. His later highly edited autobiography of the United Irishman, Archibald Hamilton Rowan, owed more to his own changed opinions than Rowan's original manuscript.⁶²

In Thomson's new 1799 volume it is certainly possible to point to his "Answer to Paine's 'Age of Reason'"⁶³ as an abandonment of the revolutionary cause. And yet his rejection of "infidel" and "diabolical" arguments merely reflected the earlier rejection of Paine's Deism by many revolutionary United Irishmen, most of whom remained deeply religious.⁶⁴

He did not evade the issue of the rebellion itself. "His 'Elegiac Lines Written on the Last Night of the Year 1798'"⁶⁵ speak of "horror," and "scenes of guilt and woe," and are deeply ambivalent about the rebellion, and hardly serve as a tribute to a new just order:

While we the insects of this fleeting day,
For acts of treason stand indicted there:
Impatient *Ruin* howls to drag his prey,
To the hopeless territories of despair

Hopes of establishing God's Kingdom on earth have vanished, to be replaced by the desperate hope of personal salvation; with "fearful eyes" he looks upwards to seek "forgiveness ere I hence depart" from "thou, great King."

Ambition in this world had certainly disappeared by 1806 and the publication of his *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects*. Thomson ignored the warning from James Orr, a survivor of active United Irish service in 1798, and a weaver poet:

⁶²W. H. Drummond, ed., *Autobiography of Archibald Hamilton Rowan* (Dublin, 1840). For an acute analysis see Philip T. Orr, "Doing History; A Re-interpretation of the Life of the United Irishman Archibald Hamilton Rowan (1751-1834)," in Myrtle Hill et al., eds., *1798 Rebellion in County Down* (Newtownards, 1998), pp. 211-30.

⁶³Samuel Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 164-5, reprinted in *Country Rhymes*, pp. 67-8.

⁶⁴Wolfe Tone dismissed the *Age of Reason* as "damned trash." For this and other hostile responses see David Dickson, "Paine and Ireland" in David Dickson, et al., eds., *The United Irishmen*, pp. 135-50. Thomson had shared earlier enthusiasm for the *Rights of Man* and secured his copy from the printer of his *Poems on Different Subjects*. See William Mitchell to Samuel Thomson, 24 Aug. 1792, Thomson Papers, fol. 167.

⁶⁵Samuel Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 82-3. This important poem is surprisingly omitted from the selection in *Country Rhymes*.

But ne'r, tho' pin'd, let's be sae wee
As to implore in supple knee,
The proud folks patronage,⁶⁶

Thomson offered a fulsome dedication in his new volume to his landlord, Baron Templetown, who had offered to build him a new cottage.⁶⁷ Thomson now intended "to give offence to no-one and in the smallest degree to contribute to the innocent amusement of the cottage fire-side."⁶⁸ The opening poem "Sonnet to my flute" hardly fulfilled this promise offering only "the low murmuring of a broken heart."⁶⁹

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Belfast

⁶⁶James Orr, "Epistle to S. Thomson of Carngranny," in his *Poems on Various Subjects* (Belfast, 1804), pp. 101-104. Orr had turned out with the United Irish rebels in 1798 (for this see "Donegore Hill," pp. 13-17) and fled to America following their defeat. This volume was published shortly after his return. Orr's "Epistle" was essentially a friendly one, and on 2 March 1806 he wrote to Thomson accepting a "deserved *nettling*" for failing to keep in touch. Thomson Papers, fol. 60.

⁶⁷Baron Templetown (1771-1846) was MP for the English seat of Bury St Edmunds and in the Whig interest, from 1803-12. He was created Viscount in 1806. Thomson in a memorandum of 15 Aug. 1803 noted that Templetown had invited him to visit and was "vastly pleasant [and] drew the plan of a new cave which he is to build and furnish for me." Thomson Papers, fol. 51.

⁶⁸Samuel Thomson, *Simple Poems* (Belfast, 1806), Preface.

⁶⁹*Simple Poems*, p. 7.