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Back to Burns

Fred Freeman
University of Edinburgh

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Cover Page Footnote

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Back to Burns

Fred Freeman

Perhaps there is no country in the world, where the prejudice in favour of national music is carried to so great a height as in Scotland. This is the more surprising at first view, because the Scots are, in many other respects, a people singularly liberal and enlightened...Many of the Scottish melodies, having in themselves very little intrinsic merit, are yet fixed in the hearts and affections of Scotsmen.

The above quotation is from a little-known, but far-reaching, manifesto of taste, *An Account of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival held between the 30th October and 5th November, 1815. To which is added An Essay, Containing Some General Observations on Music* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1816).

It was written by George Farquhar Graham, one of the founding fathers of the Edinburgh Festival, and a man who most succinctly expressed the social and cultural values of a nation formally disavowing its own outstanding achievement. Rhetorically, he would differentiate between 'science', 'knowledge' and 'foreign composition', on the one hand; 'ignorance', 'prejudice' and 'national' music, on the other.

Graham was neither the first nor the last to explain away the great anonymous song tradition of the Scottish Borders, the Northeast and Highlands, the songs of Ramsay, Burns, Hogg and Tannahill and many others, simply because they represented a popular culture that was not part of the way he, and the elite arbiters of taste, saw Scotland in the world.

Their legacy was to create what John Clive has dubbed “cosmopolitan provincials”: a nation so studiously hell-bent on becoming cosmopolitan that it denies its own national ‘genie’. In very practical terms this meant that, in the eighteenth century, our university libraries would have every copy of the French philosophes going and little of the poets on their own doorstep, like Robert Fergusson or Thomas Mercer. It meant that we might have a national vernacular poet, Robert Burns, who was culturally acceptable to the literati of Scotland and England as a poet of ‘nature’, but we would perpetuate the nonsense of compiling lists of Scotticisms and, generally, of rejecting Scots language as backward and inferior.

In our rewriting of history we would, in the minds of Scots men and women, reduce one of Europe’s rich, colourful languages to a ‘dialect’, the merest ‘slang’ - and that even in the face of great writing in Scots over several centuries, from Barbour to MacDiarmid and beyond. As far back as 1724 Allan Ramsay pinpointed the problem with exquisite accuracy.

There is nothing can be heard more silly than one’s expressing Ignorance of his native Language; yet such there are, who can vaunt of acquiring a tolerable Perfection in the French or Italian Tongues, if they have been a Fortnight in Paris or a Month in Rome: But shew them the most elegant Thoughts in a Scots Dress, they as disdainfully as stupidly regard it as barbarous. But the true Reason is obvious: Every one that is born never so little superior to the Vulgar, would fain distinguish themselves from them by some Manner or other, and such, it would appear cannot arrive at a better Method (Preface to *The Ever Green*).

The point is as a nation we pride ourselves, to use Ramsay’s expression, on ‘Ignorance’ of our native languages and our vernacular traditions (especially those of song) so as not to appear uneducated or socially inferior. We lack integrity, and for that we pay a heavy price. Instead of working on the axiomatic principle that it is better to know two or three languages than one, we continue to educate our children in total ignorance of their Scots and Gaelic heritage, in total ignorance of the folk traditions (yet thriving underground in and out of the country) which, ironically, keep Scotland in the forefront of international culture. One

thinks, naturally, of Eric Bogle who, as a song-writer, has won the highest cultural awards the Australian government bestows; our numerous folk groups – Malinky, Deaf Shepherd, Capercaillie, Battlefield Band, the Tannahill Weavers, Old Blind Dogs, etc. – who have long earned their livelihoods performing Scottish folk music in Germany, America and farther afield. They are, for all the world, the cultural face of Scotland and are, arguably, better known than so much of what passes for Scottish literature or music in Scotland.

The problem is that, for the most part—and we are indeed very adept at this—we have become a nation not of actors but of reactors. Historically, we have so preoccupied ourselves with reacting against one form of cultural domination or another that we have lost much of what we are. As Muir so aptly put it in “Scotland 1941”:

Courage beyond the point and obdurate pride
Made us a nation, robbed us of a nation.

The men of the Scottish Enlightenment are a case in point. They would self-consciously make Scotland *the* ‘historical nation’ through beating the English at their own game: polishing their English prose and verse; driving a wedge between an unwanted past and a desirable present (writing-off the seventeenth-century as the dark ages despite the achievements of Napier, Sibbald, Mackenzie, Pitcairne and others); turning their backs, officially speaking, on a Scots Vernacular Revival that was creative, dynamic, revolutionary. They would play the game out with a vengeance.

In summarising the benefits of a post-Enlightenment Scotland that had regenerated itself at the expense of its past, Lord Kames would aptly describe what had been deemed ‘progress’ as a Janus-faced ‘blessing’ and a ‘curse’.

For Burns much of it was undoubtedly the latter. As a song-writer he has suffered 200 years of neglect for pursuing his own way and creating a different behavioural model for us all. This would not have surprised him. He followed his vocation as song-writer with open eyes, challenging the social and artistic hierarchy of the G. F. Grahams of the day.

In a defiant letter to fellow song-writer Rev John Skinner, he avers:

The world may think slightly of the craft of song-making, if they please...The world, busy in low prosaic pursuits, may overlook most of us; - but "reverence thyself". The world is not our *peers*, - so we challenge the jury (Roy, I: 167-8)

Burns's nemesis was not only the literary world, who accorded the 'lesser lyric' (popular song) a lowly status, which it still has, but those who would try to recast his work and make it, from their point of view, fully acceptable to the nation and the world. It was George Thomson, editor of the influential and far-reaching *Select Collection*, who engaged Pleyel, Kozeluch, Hummel and, ultimately, Haydn and Beethoven to orchestrate the Burns songs: a mini industry for Viennese Classical composers who churned out hundreds of Burns arrangements at a guinea a time. In all fairness to him, Thomson was a musical entrepreneur who hoped to win fame through marrying Scottish folk song to the most celebrated 'art' music of the day.

Unfortunately, what he succeeded in doing was to make a dog's breakfast of the Burnsian tradition. The two idioms, classical and folk, were not well suited. Moreover, Thomson treated the songs cavalierly, either encouraging the Viennese composers to do with them as they would (they, in fact, paid little attention to Scottish folk conventions and musical forms) or tampering with them himself. After all, they were only, in the words of Pleyel, "*une musique barbare*."

Little wonder that Patrick MacDonald would complain in 1784 about "modern harmony that weakens..native expression" (*Collection of Highland Vocal Airs*) and William Daune about the "absurd" and "incongruous...dressing up of our Scottish melodies in German, or Italian, or even in English costume too!" (*Ancient Scottish Melodies*). Burns's colleagues, essentially the committee of *The Scots Musical Museum*, James Beattie and William Tytler, remonstrated in their essays against the entire operatic approach as "finical gesticulation," vocal "quavering," "smothering of words"; for Burns, the "capon craws and queer ha ha's" of the stage settings ("Amang the trees").

One has only to hear Beethoven's very heavy, sentimental orchestration of "Duncan Gray" to appreciate how far off the mark he was, and how far from Burns's directives:

Duncan Gray is that kind of light-horse gallop of an air, which precludes sentiment. – The ludicrous is its ruling feature (Roy, II: 163-4).

The pawkie Scots understatement of “Duncan Gray,” underpinned by the lightness of the tune, gives way, in Beethoven, to Germanic overstatement as the light reel and rural humour completely dissolve. We are reminded of George Steiner’s claim: “very language maps the world differently.” We might add that every national tradition maps the world differently. The change of idiom conveys us from the genuinely rural comic to the heavily contrived, self-consciously operatic: the metropolitan personae of country bumpkins singing, with wide vibratos, heavily textured classical music. This is Burns as he never was—a manikin whom we must dress-up to make respectable, a specimen of the ‘natural’ man, ‘the heaven-taught ploughman’.

As Burns tried to convince Thomson, folk humour was “not vulgarity”; it did not require the gloss of buffoonery to make it palatable:

What pleases me as simple & naïve disgusts you as ludicrous
& low (Roy, II: 252-3).

This was a critical distinction for the poet. When Domenico Corri spoke of comic song as “the most comprehensive and expressive style”; as the genre that “approaches very nearly to speaking” (*The Singer’s Preceptor*), he clearly had Burns in mind, especially the songs, like “Gude’en to you, kimmer.” that might fall into the category of grotesque humour. The grotesque, and Burns’s use of it, bears serious reevaluation in the Scottish tradition, from the damning comments of James Sibbald, in 1802, to modern notions that comic verse in Scotland is somehow responsible for giving rise to an intellectually light-weight literary tradition. The operative word, as Corri notes, is “comprehensive.” The grotesque, as Burns saw it, provided not one but two texts in its Hogarthian ambivalence: (1) social satire on a society that created decadent characters in the first place; (2) recognition of principles of energy and freedom amongst the downtrodden over social hierarchies and decorum designed to keep the lowly in their place. As Burns put it so pungently:

Life is all a variorum,
 We regard not how it goes;
 Let them cant about decorum,
 Who have character to lose.

(“See the smoking bowl before us”)

The comic was, as Corri suggested, the most ‘expressive’ genre, embracing Burns’s idea of reunifying the individual through a more comprehensive vision of self, the idea being that, on a higher plane, all human contradictions could be reconciled – man/woman at once a beast who defecates, fornicates, lactates, etc. and an aspiring angel who looks towards redemption and the afterlife. To paraphrase Burns: God understands all man’s ‘passions’ as it was he who implanted them in the first place. The problem with the Holy Willies of this world is that they are not whole people; that they pretend these passions do not exist; that they, like the lassie oblivious to the louse in her hair, think they dwell on a higher plane of being from the rest of us.

Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between two types of poets is pertinent here. In his essay on Verdi, Berlin distinguishes between

Those who are not conscious of any rift between themselves and their milieu..and those who are so conscious...(For the first) art is a natural form of expression; they see what they see directly, as they seek to articulate it for its own sake.

Burns, in Berlin’s terms, was a direct artist, articulating what he saw (or heard) for its own sake. Hamish Henderson, perhaps more closely than Berlin, identifies the central divide between Burns and the literati when he differentiates between art that “turns in on itself,” art for art’s sake, and art that grows organically out of its milieu. This art “depends on society,” is integrally part of the community. The artist’s songs are “part of reality for the people.” For Henderson (writing in hitherto unpublished papers), as for Burns, the primary concern for the modern Scottish art-poet was to renew his energies through ‘direct contact’ with the folk.

This, essentially, was Burns’s great achievement. He avowedly came out of a people’s tradition and was wholeheartedly behind Johnson’s defence of simple lyrics and music (*Scots Musical Museum*, preface to vol. 2) as “the favourites of Nature’s Judges-the Common People.” To a

remarkable extent he was a folk artist working in an oral tradition. His mother and one of the old maids of the household provided him with a seemingly illimitable fund of stories, songs and ballads. He was himself “a brother catgut”: that is, a fiddler who tested all his songs on his own fiddle; who mixed with fiddlers up and down the country, usually pilfering their tunes for song; who drew continually upon his fiddle background in advising Thomson (who played the violin) about getting “any of our ancients Scots fiddlers” (Roy, II: 317) to demonstrate the points he was making about the tradition within which he worked.

Burns would use all his instrumental experience in perpetuating the tradition and, innovatively, adapting it for song – and all this against a background of stiff opposition; hence his ongoing arguments with Thomson about strathspeys, jigs and hornpipes. Very often in Burns, the medium – the jig or reel – is an integral part of the message. For example, if his subject is mischievously festive, normally with reference to dance, Burns employs jigs and slip jigs in a rhythmical mouth-music (like “The Deil’s Awa”). If his subject is whimsically descriptive in its representation of jerkily moving characters of lore, like ‘Wee Willie Gray’, he will use the jerky, jumping, double hornpipe from the Borders. For an unbroken, breathless tension, as in the description of the chaos of Sheriffmuir (“O cam ye here”), his choice is always a reel. And so forth.

What is wholly revolutionary in Burns is, however, his use of form as an end in itself, where the song is, fundamentally, just about rhythm, about the tune itself: an elaborate excuse to bask in the flow of the jig, reel or strathspey. For this reason alone he would spend hours composing songs on horseback between the beats of his horse’s hooves or, as he said, “swinging at intervals, on the hind-legs of my elbow-chair” (Roy, II: 242), neatly to wed his words to the traditional dance forms. He had a nightmarish time convincing Thomson of something that yet eludes the scholars: the fact that, very often, meaning is less important than form in the songs; that many of the songs are a highly evolved mouth-music that calls upon skills far beyond the accomplished poet.

In this sense Burns looks far ahead to the Russian Formalists. Here is the poet, in a Formalist posture, taking Thomson to task over the simplest of traditional Scottish forms, the jig:

If you mean, my dear Sir, that all the Songs in your Collection shall be Poetry of the first merit, I am afraid you will find difficulty in the undertaking more than you are aware of.-There is a peculiar rhythmus in many of our airs, a necessity of adapting syllables to the emphasis, or what I would call, the *feature notes*, of the tune, that cramps the Poet, & lays him under almost insuperable difficulties.-For instance, in the air, My wife's a wanton wee thing, if a few lines, *smooth & pretty*, can be adapted to it, it is all that you can expect.-The following I made extempore to it; & though, on farther study I might give you something more profound, yet it might not suit the light-horse gallop of the air so well as this *random clink* (Roy, II: 157).

One cannot help but admire his vast musical knowledge here, down to the slightest of appropriate touches: his use of that watch-word 'rhythmus', probably borrowed from Alexander Malcolm's *A Treatise of Musick* (Edinburgh, 1721), one of the first major musical treatises in Europe. In his adherence to the 'feature notes' principle we have Burns's direct method of composition: from the tune to the lyrics. And in the exercise of the principle we find both the conservative and the revolutionary, conserving a huge body of instrumental music (which would probably have been irretrievably lost) and putting it to song.

Burns was no mere collector. In fact, he rightly describes himself as a 'composer'. He expected to be treated as such. In a damningly critical letter to Thomson and those of 'cultivated taste', Burns unswervingly states his case.

Many of our Strathspeys, ancient & modern, give me most exquisite enjoyment, where you & other judges would probably be shewing signs of disgust...in fact, unless I be pleased with the tune I never can make verses to it.-Here I have Clarke on my side, who is a judge that I will pit against any of you (Roy, II: 307).

Brave words indeed: Burns pitting his judgement against that of the preeminent composers of Europe. In fact, he would not be restrained by Thomson's "strait-jacket of Criticism" (Roy, II: 351).

With these arguments he had thrust himself into the forefront of the ongoing European battle for national cultures. Burns did not flinch. It is hard for a twenty-first-century person to appreciate fully his courage and pertinacity. At a time when Pleyel was lionised in London; when Haydn, his mentor, conducted Pleyel's own symphonies, Burns, without any formal musical qualifications, laid down a direct challenge to him:

Whatever Mr Pleyel does, let him not alter one iota of the original Scots Air; I mean, in the Song department...But, let our National Music preserve its native features.-They are, I own, frequently wild, & unreduceable to the more modern rules; but on that very eccentricity, perhaps, depends a great part of their effect (Roy, II: 211).

Moreover, Burns would function, not merely as a traditionalist, but as an artist of his own time. It is a pity MacDiarmid did not know Burns the song-writer better; he would have appreciated one who could "see the Infinite, / And Scotland in true scale to it." No archetypal Ayrshire figure entrenched in his region, 'Robin' was indeed, "a rovin boy": a national internationalist traveling throughout Scotland, collecting and adapting Gaelic tunes, Borders slip jigs and hornpipes, Northeast Strathspeys, European melodies off the boats and amongst the immigrant musicians (like Pietro Urbani and Domenico Corri). As a man of the Enlightenment Burns would use the 'poet of nature' role to his own ends:

You know that my pretensions to musical taste, are merely a few of Nature's instincts, untaught & untutored by Art.-For this reason, many musical compositions, particularly where much of the merit lies in Counterpoint, however they may transport & ravish the ears of you, Connoisseurs, affect my simple lug no otherwise than merely as melodious Din (Roy, II: 235).

With these words we see him at the very centre of the Ancients-versus-Moderns controversy, which had raged throughout the century and reached a head in the 1790s. He loathed the "melodious din" – the "new noisy stile," Dr John Gregory called it – of the Classical composers. In the Ancients vs. Moderns debate – whether complex harmony was better than simple melody; instrumental music better than vocal; accompaniment more important than words – he

stood with Du Bos, Rousseau, Burney, his own colleagues, Tytler and Beattie, on the side of simplicity, clarity, the enunciation of words and syllables. In the course of debate with the Viennese composers, Burns evolved a theory of what he termed “ballad simplicity.” His ruling principle was that great art was a matter of simplicity; one should see the bare bones of the art form. In this connection Burns agreed with the Classical Greek artists as well as with his friend and portrait painter, Alexander Nasmyth, who came to believe that “it is amazing how little makes a good picture: and frequently the less that is taken in the better.” In practical terms this meant that he could do exactly what Hamish Henderson advocated 200 years later: namely, renewing his art through drawing upon the purity and simplicity of Scottish folk traditions: basic dance and instrumental rhythms and forms; mouth music; speech patterns of vernacular song; simple pentatonic and hexatonic tonalities. The ideal was stated by Johnson on a title page of *The Scots Musical Museum*:

In this Publication the original simplicity of our Ancient Airs is retained unincumbered with useless Accompaniments and graces depriving the hearers of the sweet simplicity of their native airs.

But this is not to say that Burns did not engage with European ‘art’ music. He clearly knew (and enjoyed) Baroque music, often spending musical evenings with harpsichordists like Jessie Lewars and his close colleague, Stephen Clarke, who was a resident player at St Cecilia’s Hall. He admired and adapted for song the airs of Oswald and of Niel Gow, which owed much of their inspiration to Corelli; and here, in fact, we see him advocating the happy recipe Ramsay had commended as follows earlier in the century:

And with Corelli’s soft Italian song,
Mix ‘Cowdenknowes’ and ‘Winter nights are long’.
(“To the Music Club 1721”)

Overall, the light texture, clarity and articulation of the Baroque were more akin to Scottish folk music. The Baroque, which belonged to the opposite end of the century, was everything the coming classical composition was not. That is what Burns discerned and Thomson did not.

But there was another serious bone of contention. Burns conceived of song essentially as speech and unflinchingly championed vernacular Scots as the ideal medium for “the pastoral simplicity” he sought. Where even his mentors, Dr John Moore and Professor Josiah Walker, had failed to dissuade him from using Scots, the poet was hardly to be browbeaten by Thomson. The ‘Doric’ was so central to his doctrine of “ballad simplicity” that he was prepared to withdraw his material from publication rather than to compromise on the use of it, asserting:

Apropos, if you are for *English* verses, there is, on my part, an end of the matter (Roy, II: 149; 16 September, 1792).

But let me remark to you, in the sentiment & style of our Scottish airs, there is a pastoral simplicity, a something that one may call, the Doric style & dialect of vocal music, to which a dash of our native tongue & manners is particularly, nay peculiarly apposite.... Now, don't let it enter into your head, that you are under any necessity of taking my verses.— I have long ago made up my mind as to my own Authorship; & have nothing to be pleased, or offended at, in your adoption or rejection of my verses (Roy II: 153; 26 October, 1792).

But why did Burns argue for only a “sprinkling” or “dash” of his “native tongue”? The reason was because he had the artistic integrity to appreciate, as Stanley Hyman, Gavin Greig, David Daiches and Hamish Henderson and others have underlined, that Scots song was naturally ‘bilingual’; that, to use Hamish Henderson’s expression, it “may be said to include English and go beyond it” (*Alias MacAlias*).

Burns would forge a very malleable language out of a conflation of Scots dialects, Old English, neoclassical English and more. He was like a painter with the largest palette of colours, freely using “ee,” “keeker,” “eye”; “nicht” or “night,” etc., depending upon his rhyme, internal rhyme or alliteration pattern; his register of language. When, for example, in “Auld Lang Syne,” he fluctuates between “cup o’ kindness” and “williewaught”; when he mixes everyday colloquial idioms, like “gie’s a haun,” with that little biblical “thine,” he ingeniously gives us both intimate personal reflection and serious universal statement. No wonder Ralph Waldo Emerson declared, in a Burns Centenary speech, that

Burns created “the only example in history of a language made classic by the genius of a single man.”

Alexander Keith maintains that Burns almost single-handedly rescued the song tradition of Scotland and reinvented it in the process. In more recent times Hamish Henderson has insisted (in unpublished papers) that “Gradually the poet and the community must be threaded together again.” Arguably, Burns was the first modern to attain to this goal and, in so doing, saved folk-song for Scotland and, perhaps, for much of Europe.

The song tradition has again had to go underground in order to survive, but it is yet alive and well. As a nation we would be well advised to go back to it and to the man who fully recreated it.