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E. B. LYLE

Two Eighteenth-Century Poets: James Dobie and Hugh Brodie

The compositions of those poets who do not aim to reach a public beyond their own friends and neighbours are particularly liable to destruction, and we are fortunate to have some of the verses made by two lively eighteenth-century writers, James Dobie of Beith in Ayrshire and Hugh Brodie of Langcraft in the neighbouring parish of Lochwinnoch in Renfrewshire. The pieces mentioned here, with one exception, are to be found among the papers of Andrew Crawfurd of Lochwinnoch, who went to considerable lengths to collect the work of local poets either in manuscript copies or as preserved in memory.¹

All the verse by James Dobie that I know of takes the form of epistles, and Dobie was also the recipient of verse epistles sent by others. There are two, for example, in the Poetical Works of Alexander Wilson² who had evidently found encouragement from Dobie for he says in the first one:

Oh! how my heart exulting loups,
To meet a chiel like you;
Life's bitter horn aside it coups,
And fills 't wi' cheering blue:
While chaurnin' critics grinn and growl,
And curse whate'er they light on,
The honest, friendly, generous soul,
Can check, inspire, and brighten,
Wi' ease each day.

Dobie was a merchant and bank agent³ and two of his epistles

¹Crawfurd's papers are in the Local History Department of Renfrew District Libraries, High Street, Paisley. I give references to the local poetry in a survey of the collection which is still in preparation.


³Dobie settled in Beith in 1777 and died in 1819; see Cuninghame, Topographized by Timothy Pont, with continuations by James Dobie, ed.
deal with business matters. In one instance, indeed, both sides of a
transaction were carried out in verse. The following request for
weft addressed to Mr James Dobie was dated at Lochwinnoch on
14 May 1783:

Re[ce]ive the Pin frae Gowdie John;
It is the ane my web was on.
What mair I want you'll ken anon
In a short space
For I am sair the push upon
'Afore the race.

Of waft I want a wee treat mair
Sent owr the morn by Gowdie's care
To get some claith out ere our fair
Gin I can maun 't;
Sae it will wreck me gayen sair
If waft I want.

Sae, least I trouble you wi jaw,
I shall not now insist at a'
But what you do my number ca
Is as before,
Just Hundreds three and eighty-twa,
Yours, William Orr.

William Orr was a common Lochwinnoch name, but this weaver
can probably be identified as the man nicknamed "Blacktie Bane"
(1735–1809). Dobie replied:

I've sent you shute per Goudie John
Be sure the same [you] put well on
Or else of money you'll get non
To had your fair
And that will cause you girn and groan
And that richt sair.

John Shedden Dobie (Glasgow, 1876), pp. 95–96, and Crawford's manu-
script Cairn of Lochinnoch Matters 26. 498.

4 The verses and the identification of William Orr are found in Craw-
ford’s hand at Cairn 6. 19b–c. Orr’s dates are given at Cairn 1. 295. I have
read “ere” for “gin” in stanza 2 line 3, and “that” for “thy” in the fifth
line of the reply. In all the verse quotations from manuscript I have freely
supplied punctuation.
A more extended letter from Dobie to Mr James Hog, banker in Paisley, concerned the sum of £820:

Your letter, sir, baith neat and clean,
Came saftley to my hand yestreeen.
By it I learn you mine hae seen
And got the siller
And it has overhaeled been
By Tom the teller.

By this I freely do avouch
I brought the money in my pouch
And no-ane did me steer or touch
Or me mollest;
Neither devil, warlock, nor witch,
Nor any guest.

By this I do declare ance mare
There was just ane and forty score
Of pounds and no a penny mare
That I could see;
For that sum debit me therefore
And right you'll be.

I am your servant true and steady;
To serve you I am always ready;
I wad be proud to see your Lady—
It wad make me vogie;
To hear a wee thing Ca you daddy
Wad please James Dobie.

Dobie, who was an elder of Beith Kirk, takes a moral tone in his verses. In an epistle addressed to "Dear brother brute" he warns against giving free rein to passion:

Wi brutes don't stray, by instinct's ray
And feli'est passion driven.

5 This and the following three pieces are to be found at Cairn 44, 243 fol. and in the index Crawfurd dates them "about 1788". The four poems are in a hand which appears likely to be of the eighteenth century and may be the poet's. I have altered many small letters to capitals and linked a number of separated syllables. There is a letter dated 27 March 1793 from James Hog of Paisley bank to James Dobie among the Beith Papers (No 1932) in Glasgow University Archive.
Wild pleasure Suits not men but brutes
Whose light is light from heaven.⁶

and an epistle to Brodie lays out the plan for living in such a way as to obtain salvation:

What is forbid, let us never do it,
Nor what looks like it or leads to it;
I am sure that we will never rue it
When at our last;
Whoever is right, the end will shew it—
It's coming fast.

Tho we draw near that distasteful Glumman
There's a transparent morning Comming
When we shall hear that joyfull summon
"Awake & sing!";
Then a our species, man and woman,
To life shall spring—

Here the Biblical language gives a lyrical tone but, though Dobie can write of the things of God with lyricism, it is when the Devil enters the verse that we have the vigour of a colloquially turned phrase bringing fresh life to the myth of the garden of Eden and the fall of man. In the same way, Dobie affirms, that the Devil now deceives Brodie's neighbours, tempting them to unbelief:

In that same way and in nae other
He did beguile our great-grandmother,
Telled her a lie the truth did smother
And made her proud,
And Ca'ed the tree as good's another
And fine for food.

In another epistle, which I quote in full, Dobie encourages Brodie to continue composing poetry. They should not, he says, let themselves be cowed into silence by the genius of Burns. The poems that Dobie mentions in which this genius is displayed are The Twa Dogs, Scotch Drink, The death and dying words of Poor Mailie, the author's only pet yowe, The Author's earnest cry and prayer to the . . . Scotch representatives in the House of Commons, Address to the Deil, The Holy Fair, The auld Farmer's new-year-morning Saluta-

⁶Dobie seems here to be echoing lines 235-40 of Burns's poem The Vision, and elsewhere in the epistle he may be recalling Burns's satire The Calf.
tion to his auld Mare, Maggy and possibly The Fornicator, all but the last of which were printed in the Kilmarnock edition of 1786. This edition also includes an epitaph On Wee Johnie whose "body lies fu' low— / For saul he ne'er had ony", which Dobie appears to be echoing in his fourth stanza:

Good honest Hugh, shoud you and I
Stap balth our gabs and never try
And let our rhyming talents by
Wad be great folly
Because a Billie leaves ourby
Has beat us hallie.

Near Mauchline town at the Mossgill
A lad Cau'd Burns wha has sick skill
He has made famous mony a hillie
Wi few sweet rants;
Hale breek, a scone & whisky gill
Is a he wants.

He sings two dogs and whisky het,
The dying words of his eew pet,
An adress to parliment you get,
Ane to the devil;
The holy fair in order set
And sung fu' well.

But O! sae sweetly he does lilt
The farmer's mare and a base jilt
That caused him commit some guilt
That was no bonny;
His very Saul she wad hae killed
Had he hae an any.

O Hughie, I could wad a bodle
There's something yet in thy Auld nodsle
That wad make many a tail to todle
We mirth and glee,
And Burns himself it even might fuddle
To match wi thee.

Thou's no like monie a doited hash
Who can do nough but clish-me-clash
But thou can gab and that fu gash
And speak wi mense;
Thou has som harens in thy pash
Wi routh of sence.
O Hughie, write some wittie thing
And tell how trees do sprout and spring
And how the lavrock chirps and sings
About the glen
Or something that may knoledge bring
To sober men.

I am sure wad thou begin to think
The wards wad come themselves and clink
And a the paper, pen and Ink
Won't cost a happennie
Unless thou need a we drap drink
To wet thy crappin.

Tak ye a draught of good strang ale
Ar if you please a double gill;
When I come our I'll clear the bill
Whate'er it be,
Only my wishes you'll fulfill
And write to me.

Now, my auld bille, fare you well,
And may ye hae baith milk and meal
And that will fill your Kyte fu well
& make you vogie
And, tho I am but a dafed cheil,
From yours, James Dobie—

I do not know of any epistles written by Brodie but a piece of his which found its way into print took the form of "a speech, in verse, upon husbandry" which Brodie delivered to the Kilbarchan Farmer Society "on the first Friday of January 1769". Brodie was a farmer himself and drew on his personal knowledge, as, for example, in his advice on rotation in this stanza:

So, if you please, you may it try,
One-third to plow, and two to lie,
Your land is still in strength thereby,
With small expence:
This is the plan which yearly I
Experience.

The whole speech is quite ambitious and amounts to sixty stanzas in "standart Habbie", but Brodie was, I think, happier with the

7 The History of the Shire of Renfrew by George Crawfurd with a continuation by William Semple (Paisley, 1782), pp. 115–19.
simpler verse forms employed in the other poems quoted here, all of which appear to have been written down from memory in the nineteenth century.

Before his marriage to Eliza Brodie, heiress of Langcraft, Hugh Brodie had been proprietor of part of a nearby farm called the Linthills 8 which lay within the barony of the Glen, and this barony is the subject of a pastoral poem he composed in couplets in which he catalogues first the names of the lands within the barony and then the names of the thirty-three lairds. The section on the place itself runs as follows:

It's bound by Calder on the east,
By Loch and Maich on South and west
And on the north by a lofty muir
Which from the cold keeps it secure.
The chief of seat it is the Barr
That ancient pallace built for war,
And Hamilton, that ancient Squire,
For ages long his name's been there.
About his places grows corn and grass,
Both Hills, Millbank, Lochheads & Kerse;
Moss and meadows and valleys prime,
Woods and waters and coal and lime.
There's Nervilstoun and Langstilie
With Auchinhane and Plantlie.
The Jaffraystock we must not miss,
Newfauld, Kaimhill and Gavilmoss;
The verdant pasture & pleasant lye
For rearing horse and sheep and yce;
The verdant pasture and pleasant greens
For oats and barley and peas and beans.
There's Auldyard, Langyard and Fairhill,
With Lorabank, Braes and Garpal,
Burnfoot, Sunnyacres and the Linthills,
Brigend and Lowps beside the mills;
There's Muirfauldhouse and Brannochill
The lands [of] the Glen for to fulfil;
The Hole, the Bleachfield and the Bankend,
And these are all the lands of the Glen.9

8 Crawfurd supplies information about Brodie, who was born in 1736, in his Cairn at 2. 352, 7. 472 and 26. 73–4 and in his Lochynych Matters at 8. 111.

9 The boundaries referred to are the River Calder, Maich Water, the Lochs of Barr and Kilbirnie, and Mistlaw Muir; and "Barr" is Barr Castle.
One of Brodie's pieces, *Gawn's Brig*, chronicles how, "There was a brig built up at Gawn's / By wit of heads and pith o' hauns". Millers, lairds and farmers made a plan, the Quarter Session agreed to it and a grieve was appointed. Then the work was set in hand and eventually completed with the driving home of the keystone:

Some came wi spades and some wi shules
And some wi mattocks to set poolls;
Some with gavelocks, Some wi mells
To beat these rocks o flint to shells.
So parties all did well agree
Until that they did caw the key.

The verse is particularly expressive when Brodie speaks of the force of the hammers smashing the rocks, and this same evocation of strength comes into an admiring epigram on John Clerk:

I hae seen our wordie Sire John Clerk
Baint willing and prodigious sterk
Wi naething on but breek and serk
Beat huge ponderous rocks to pounter
Or cairyan millstanes owr his shouther . . .

Another epigram, satirical this time, was reputed to have angered its object so much that he said to Brodie, "Thou sould be put out o' the kintra". This one runs, in its entirety:

There aims our wordie Sire John Sheills
Wi a big horse and airn on his heills;
Our brases and craigs he spells
Lyke onie bird, upo my word.  

Another satirical comment beginning "There lives a Prophet in this place" concerns an unnamed young man who meanly assures the lassie he wants to marry that the man she is attached to would make a very bad husband, and receives a tart answer:

The lassie was surprised
How he these things could know;

The poem appears in Crawfurd's hand in his manuscript *Auld Ballats* at 3.101-4.

10 There are two variants of this poem, A in the hand of William Orr "the merchant" at Ballats 2.124 and B in Crawfurd's hand at Ballats 2.233-4; I quote from B.

11 These two epigrams and an epitaph on Wull Brodie appear at Cairn 26.1-2, as remembered by "auld John Cochran, the Theiker" in 1835.
“Says, “Was you at the region
Of darkness doun below?

“Was it frae necromancy
You learnt these curious arts?
Was it by fortune-telling
Or cup, or packs of cards?””

There are several other pieces treating members of the community, but it was an enterprise of his wife's that gave Brodie the material for what may be his masterpiece, a good-humoured satire on the trials of raising chickens which was so well remembered in the area that Crawfur'd was able to glean three variants from tradition. What follows is a composite version; the title has been derived from the recurrent use of these words in the text.

My Lady's Craws

My lady she gaed to the Kame;
To buy some fowls it was her scheme
And she bought hen and birds an a
And they were a as black's a craw.

The number o them, an ye wad ken,
Was thirteen birds and the auld hen
And she paid for them shillings twa
And they were a as black's a craw.

She got them up into her lap
And down the rig wi them did hap;
Quo she, “I'm glad that no man saw it”
For they were a as black's a craw.

12 This poem occurs at Ballats 2. 127–8 in the hand of William Orr. In the quotation I have normalised the spelling, and read “it” in place of “its” in the second last line.

13 There are two bawdy songs concerning respectively Brodie's Uncle Sandy (Ballats 3. 326) and Butcher Barr (Ballats 3. 104–5), and a panegyric verse addressed to Mr McDowall (Ballats 3. 310).

14 A is at Ballats 2. 125–6 in the hand of William Orr, B at Ballats 3. 199–201, headed “Langcraft's Gudewyle's Black Hens", in Crawfur'd's hand, and C at Cuirn 15. 265c–e in the hand of James Speir, Upper Hole, and dated 1839. There is no indication whether the poem treats Brodie's first wife, Eliza Brodie, or his second wife, Mary Gemmill. “The Kame” mentioned in the first line is a neighbouring farm.
She set them doun in the house neuk
And daily unto them did look
And gied them daigh made up in baws
For to sustain my lady's craws.

Ae day wi' them she bred a quarrel
For they gaed in the sowan barrel;
She took the spurtle instead of tawse
And felt the mither of the craws.

Ye wad a thocht it noble fun
To see my lady how she run
Unto the door where the wind blaws
To save the mither of the craws.

But when they was a fortnight fed
By there cam the greedy gled
And he brak through all honest laws
And he's taen ane o my lady's craws.

Ae day when ane of them was dry
It burnt its hause on seaudin whey
And it gaed doun into its jaw
And that consumed another craw.

Ae day when the craws in the bent did stray
When they came in, one was away;
We sought the barn, we sought the byre,
We sought it out through dub and mire
And up and doun by the house wa
Till we fand out my lady's craw.

We did get it in a blink
Lying breathless in the sink;
She did it wash with water warm
And brought it to the fire en
And laid it doun into the ause;
Says, "I'll be herled wi' my craws!"

Quo she, "I'll let thee lie
Until the feathers of thee dry
And we will pluck thee and make sauce
And we'll get some good of the craws."

I wau na if the craw did hear
But it began its head to steer
And through its throat the wind did draw
Quo she, "There's life yet in the craw!"

To bring the living from the dead
She gied it butter wanting bread
And dried its coat and made it braw
And it became a living craw.

When twenty days was past and gane
The greedy gled cam back again;
He's taen up into his claws
Anither o my lady's daws.

Anither day when they gaed out
Ane o them in auld Jean's well got drunt.
When a month was past and gane
The thirteen craws turnd into nine.

"Surely of wit I was but scant
When I was beguil'd by my aunt;
She fed me up wi her applause
And said they wad be fruitful craws."

But afore she counted her expense
The profit she had was sixteen pence.