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**BEATTIE'S *THE MINSTREL*:  
A MISSING LINK IN SCOTTISH POETRY**

*Ian C. Robertson*

James Beattie's poem *The Minstrel* (1771-1774) has a recognized place in the development of Romantic poetry, but anthologists and critics often seem to forget the extent to which it was also an authentically Scottish poem. Part of the problem has been accessibility, though reliable editions are now available.<sup>1</sup> Where Beattie is represented in Scottish anthologies, it has usually been through lesser or atypical poems, rather than through his most important work, and the same is true of many general Romantic anthologies. The extensive group of poets, Scots and otherwise, affected by *The Minstrel*, indicates the widespread influence of Beattie's poem on both sides of the border.<sup>2</sup> Recent decades have seen welcome scholarly reappraisal of the variety of mid-eighteenth-century Scottish poetry. As Rhona Brown and Gerard Carruthers argue in relation to Beattie's predecessor James Thomson, there are

hugely successful Scottish writers ... left ... outwith, the canonical confines of Scottish literature, [because of] a canonical formation within mainstream Scottish literary history ... that overprivileges a post-Romantic conception of ... the natural as the supposed 'real language of men.'<sup>3</sup>

Despite the growing volume of scholarship on his work, Beattie is among

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., James Beattie, *Poetical Works*, ed. Roger J. Robinson (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press 1996). Quotations below are cited from this edition, by book and stanza number, based on Beattie's final text of 1784.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson lists among the poets who read and admired Beattie in their formative years Cowper, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Bowles, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Clare, Rogers, and Tennyson: Roger Robinson, *The Poetry of James Beattie: A critical Edition* (unpub. PhD thesis, Aberdeen, 1996), iii; and cf. Everard H. King, as in n. 17 below.

<sup>3</sup> Rhona Brown and Gerard Carruthers, "Commemorating James Thomson: *The Seasons* in Scotland and Scots Poetry," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 46.1 (Spring 2013): 71. On the reappraisal of Thomson in relation to Scottish poetry, see also Mary Jane W. Scott, *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

the poets who have often been marginalized or excluded as “Anglo-Scots.” Brown and Carruthers caution against relying on essentialist concepts of Scottishness in reassessing this period, but it nonetheless seems worth reexamining some aspects of Beattie’s poetry in relation to the Scottish literary developments of his time.

The term “Anglo-Scot” is indeed more problematical for Beattie than for Thomson. It is true that Beattie wrote most of his poetry in English and he assiduously cultivated the London intellectual market where he was lionised for the *Essay on Truth*—his attack on David Hume and the sceptical philosophers—and subsequently also for *The Minstrel*. Beattie also certainly expressed admiration for English tolerance, once writing to Beilby Porteous, a future Bishop of London:

I am one of those who wish to see the English spirit and English manners prevail over the whole island: for I think the English have a generosity and openness of nature, which many of us want.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, apart from his periodic arduous trips to London, Beattie hardly budged from northeast Scotland, where, for almost forty years, he was Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College, Aberdeen. Only fourteen years in age and a few miles in birthplace separated Beattie and the father of Robert Burns. Maybe even the second element of the tag “Anglo-Scot” is a little misleading without further definition; the region around Aberdeen had its own micro-culture and its distance even from Edinburgh and Glasgow meant not just relative isolation but a distinctive intellectual life. Its two university colleges had their own preoccupations within the body of Scottish Enlightenment thought.<sup>5</sup>

Beattie’s contemporaries and near-contemporaries had no doubt that he was a Scottish poet and that *The Minstrel* was firmly rooted in the Scots environment. Thomas Gray thought some of the poem patriotic, commenting “I like this compliment to your country.”<sup>6</sup> John Pinkerton, the controversial and voluminous historian and critic, wrote to Beattie in 1782 in these terms: “You are the living ornament of poetry in Scotland.”<sup>7</sup> A more populist judgment on him was made by the collective of committees and architects of the Scott Monument, inaugurated in 1846. Beattie’s bust,

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<sup>4</sup> Beattie to Beilby Porteous, March 4, 1775 (Letter 624) This opinion is given in the course of defending the Scots against Dr Johnson’s views of them in his *Journey*. Quotations from Beattie’s letters are referenced by number from Roger J. Robinson, ed., *The Correspondence of James Beattie*, 4 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock. *Aberdeen and The Enlightenment* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Gray to Beattie, March 8, 1771 (Letter 227).

<sup>7</sup> John Pinkerton to Beattie, November 28, 1782 (Letter 1089).

like Thomson's, sits in the Monument as one of just sixteen Scottish poets and writers so honoured.<sup>8</sup>

So Beattie was Scots, and we can detach him from any Anglo-Scottish obscurantism. Self-evidently, *The Minstrel* would also qualify him under those canalised criteria for national identity set out by Scott. However, that is far from saying that Beattie exhibited all the conventional Scottish characteristics and influences; he was perhaps another kind of archetypical Scotsman, a dogged empiricist and pragmatist who made up his own mind on things, if at the same time a little too concerned about what people thought of him. But if the poet was Scots, is it helpful also to deem the poem Scots or was it trying to be something different?

If there was a discernible flow of ideas from Thomson to later poets Scots and British, they first washed over Beattie. Beattie acknowledged a fundamental debt to Thomson when he wrote: "if I have any true relish for the beauties of nature, I may say with truth, that it was from Virgil, and from Thomson, that I caught it."<sup>9</sup> But Beattie being Beattie, he elsewhere expressed reservations about Thomson's poetry, writing that he had in his youth been unduly affected by him; with Edward Young, he was a bad model with a style "very unclassical, at least in the Seasons."<sup>10</sup> His preference, expressed in his essay, *Elements of Moral Science* (1790-93), was for Thomson's Spenserian poem *The Castle of Indolence*, which may have influenced his choice of stanza form for *The Minstrel*. Nevertheless, he and Thomson were considered poetical soulmates by contemporary readers. Lord Lyttelton, Thomson's influential patron and perhaps greatest enthusiast, wrote extravagantly, and almost inconceivably, to Elizabeth Montagu:

I read your 'Minstrel' last night, with as much rapture as poetry, in her noblest, sweetest charms, ever raised in my soul. It seemed to me, that my most beloved minstrel, Thomson, was come down from heaven, refined by the converse of purer spirits than those he lived with here, to let me hear him sing again the beauties of nature, and the finest feelings of virtue, not with human, but with angelic strains!<sup>11</sup>

Beattie may not have been a reincarnated, heaven-wise Thomson, but he had created something new and different. In a poem which explored the sources and obligations of poetic inspiration, Beattie introduced to poetry

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to Beattie and Thomson, the busts include Hogg, Burns, Fergusson, Ramsay, Buchanan, Lindsay, Tannahill, Byron, Smollett, Home, Mary, Queen of Scots, James I, James V and Drummond of Hawthornden.

<sup>9</sup> Beattie to Robert Arbuthnot, July 22, 1778 (Letter 877).

<sup>10</sup> Beattie to Elizabeth Montagu, leader of the Bluestockings, April 20, 1778 (Letter 852).

<sup>11</sup> Lord Lyttelton to Elizabeth Montagu, March 8, 1771, (Letter 228).

impressionistic, internalised descriptions of natural scenes, a sense of the spiritual power of Nature and the first romantic hero, complete with mixed up inner life and eccentric behaviour. Brown and Carruthers say of Fergusson and Burns that it may be “true to say that without Thomson, and *The Seasons* in particular, these would be very different poets.”<sup>12</sup> Can Beattie be bracketed with Thomson in that claim? It is tempting to see in Fergusson’s “The Farmer’s Ingle” influence from *The Minstrel*, in the Spenserian stanza form and Beldame character. More seriously, there is no doubt that *The Minstrel*, and, in particular, the character of Edwin in Book One, as the budding uneducated minstrel brought up in Nature, made an indelible mark on Burns’s concept of himself as poet.

However, in making these claims we have probably outstripped critical reception of the poem. For several generations of critics, the tone was set by Kurt Wittig’s observation that for all the successes of the “North Britons” in philosophy and history, “in poetry they failed miserably,” and one of those failures was that they “glorified James Beattie’s *Minstrel*.”<sup>13</sup> More recently, however, there are signs that the importance of *The Minstrel* is beginning to percolate through to mainstream criticism of Scottish literature.

Robert Crawford in his *Scotland’s Books* says “An academic tone at times constrains the work of the Reverend James Beattie,” but this “did not stop Burns enjoying the professor’s work and learning from it.”<sup>14</sup> Later in the same book, when Crawford deals with James Hogg, he suggests that one of the factors in the choice of title for his collection of poems *The Forest Minstrel* was to take advantage of that of *The Minstrel* which “presenting a primitive-sophisticated poet, was still quoted as a Scottish classic.”<sup>15</sup> Hogg’s collection was published in 1810, approaching forty years after the publication of Beattie’s poem, years which had seen the new wave of Burns, Byron and Scott appear on the market. Crawford’s two brief mentions of *The Minstrel*, of its influence over Robert Burns and a cachet as classic lasting well into the next century, do not sit well with modern critical neglect. Yet they remain passing observations, and, in *Scotland’s Books* at least, Crawford does not take them further.

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<sup>12</sup> Brown and Carruthers, 74

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Wittig *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), 159-60.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Crawford *Scotland’s Books* (London; Penguin Books 2007) pp. 338 and 425. Beattie was never in fact ordained. In recognition of his honorary degrees from King’s College, Aberdeen and the University of Oxford, he was known as “Dr Beattie.” Crawford discusses Beattie’s influence on Burns further in *The Bard: Robert Burns A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 138, 192, etc. .

<sup>15</sup> Crawford, *Scotland’s Books*, 425.

A rather different approach is taken by Christopher MacLachlan in his anthology *Before Burns*. MacLachlan resituates Beattie in the vernacular tradition from Allan Ramsay, selecting as the sole Beattie item his only published poem in the Scots language, "To Mr Alexander Ross at Lochlee," which was written under a pseudonym in 1768 to publicise a collection of Ross's poetry. MacLachlan comments:

Both Beattie, and Macneill after him, name their predecessors and continue the work of tradition-making Ramsay initiates. But innovation and originality do not seem to be the aim of these poets, even when they write or rewrite freshly. Their verse is a medium for personal and sometime communal and national expression, not a device for poetic experiment and revolution. Craftsmanship is more evident than change.<sup>16</sup>

Where in fact do Beattie and his poem stand in relation to the touchstone status of Robert Burns? Of all the poets inspired by *The Minstrel*, Burns was the first.<sup>17</sup> As Carol McGuiirk observes, "*The Minstrel* provided Burns himself with some of his favorite all-purpose quotations."<sup>18</sup> Kinsley notes many echoes in his poetry from across the canon of Beattie's verse, and Burns expressed admiration for Beattie by praising him in his poems and letters.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that Burns borrowed from Edwin's dream of fairies in *The Minstrel* to set the scene for the devilish activities in Kirk Alloway.<sup>20</sup> He also quoted admiringly from "To Mr Alexander Ross."<sup>21</sup> It did not appear to matter to Burns whether Beattie wrote in English or in Scots, and it is hard to imagine that he would call anybody other than a respected fellow-Scot the familiar "Jamie Beattie", as he does in *The*

<sup>16</sup> Christopher MacLachlan, ed., *Before Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2002), xvi; the Beattie poem is on pp. 192-195.

<sup>17</sup> Everard H. King documented Beattie's influence on, e.g., Burns, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Scott, Shelley, and Wordsworth in a long series of articles: see, e.g., his "James Beattie's *The Minstrel*: Its Influence on Wordsworth," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 8 (1970): 3-29: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol8/iss1/2/>; and also his *James Beattie* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 107-133.

<sup>18</sup> Carol McGuiirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985; repr. East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), 144-146

<sup>19</sup> James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968). Quotations from Burns's poems are taken from this edition.

<sup>20</sup> See Ian C. Robertson, "The Bard and the Minstrel," *Scottish Literary Review*, 8:1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 133-142; the link to "Tam o' Shanter" had previously been noted by Ralph Walker, "Introduction," in *James Beattie's London Diary 1773* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press 1946).

<sup>21</sup> When Burns tells Mrs Dunlop that he took the idea of Coila from Ross's muse, Scota, he is ambiguous about whether his source was Ross himself or Beattie's poem: G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985), II: 256.

*Ordination*. Finally, Beattie's decree was to treasure the poetic gift if you had it—"let thy heaven-taught soul to heaven aspire" (I:vii)—respecting its integrity and high mission at the cost of ambition and riches. This was also Burns's formative poetical credo, and Henry Mackenzie's derivative label "heaven-taught ploughman" would become Burns's public image. In her opening remarks about Beattie, McGuirok observes, with scrupulous understatement, that *The Minstrel* "offers some fascinating parallels to Burns's career as a bard."<sup>22</sup>

Beattie speaks for himself in "To Mr Alexander Ross," making his own very persuasive case for membership of the vernacular version of the Scots heritage in a poem written in the Scots of the North East and framed in Standard Habbie. He laments the neglect of Scottish poetry, praises Allan Ramsay, appreciates Scottish scenery and national values, traces the genealogy of Scottish poets and regrets the incursions of the English language:

Since Allan's death naebody cared  
For anes to speer how Scots faired  
Nor plack nor thrised turner wared  
To quench her drouth;  
For frae the cottar to the laird  
We a' rin south (ll. 31-36).

But this poem is deceptive. Beattie was always wary of it and, during his lifetime, it never appeared in his collected works. The name he had assumed as author of the poem, "Oliver Oldstile," reveals his mindset. He was revealingly quick to position the poem with his friends, for example within a month of its publication writing to John Gregory, Professor of Medicine at Edinburgh University:

These verses are my first attempt at the Scotch Dialect, and will very probably be my last; for though I very much admire some of our old Scotch poems, I would not wish to add to the number of them. Without regard to our political circumstances, the English language, from its own intrinsick value, is a thousand times more worthy of our cultivation. The Scotch tongue is really barren in itself, and, having been long confined to the lowest sort of people, is now become incapable of expressing any thing but low humour.<sup>23</sup>

This was one of many such statements made by Beattie throughout his life; ten years later he offered further elaboration to John Pinkerton:

To say the truth, I believe all the poetry in the Scotch dialect that deserves to be handed down to posterity might be comprised in two or three small volumes. Formerly our men of genius wrote in Latin; and of late they have written in English. Those who now write

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<sup>22</sup> McGuirok, 144.

<sup>23</sup> Beattie to John Gregory, July 1, 1768 (Letter 101).

Scotch use an affected, mixed, barbarous dialect, which is neither Scotch nor English, but a strange jumble of both.<sup>24</sup>

In 1792 in a letter to his friend Robert Arbuthnot, Beattie left no room for misunderstanding by also condemning

that vile and profligate jargon which was introduced into our songs and ballads by Allan Ramsay and his imitators.<sup>25</sup>

Such statements give us licence to conjecture that it was unlikely that Burns's appreciation of Beattie was reciprocated. When asked in 1793 by George Thomson to contribute a preface to the collection of Scots songs on which he and Burns were working, Beattie restated his general position:

But now the language of Great Britain is English; and an attempt to revive the old dialect, or rather to mingle English and Broad Scotch words together is affectation; for no man alive can write the Scotch of the reign of James IV or V. If we were to hear a clergyman pray or preach in Broad Scotch, should we not say that he was burlesquing religion; and if we were to receive a letter of business in the same style, would it be possible for us to believe that our correspondent was in earnest? Does this not show that the modern Scotch dialect, such I mean as we see in Allan Ramsay, is from its vulgarity become ridiculous?<sup>26</sup>

Just when we are congratulating ourselves that we do not need for once to qualify an intellectual position taken up by Beattie, we come across an innocent remark lurking in a letter to Mrs Montagu of 1771. Beattie speaks approvingly of his son:

Our little Boy is in perfect health and spirits. He is now three years old, and speaks the broad Scotch with great elegance and propriety.<sup>27</sup>

What are we to make of all of this? David Hewitt relates Beattie to the wider situation of English and dialect Scots in the eighteenth century:

James Beattie's affiliations offer a view of the possibilities for Scottish literature different from that prevalent in the south of Scotland. He wants English as written by the best writers, and spoken by the best educated in London, Oxford and Cambridge, to be the one language of Britain, but he promotes a local dialect to express a regional consciousness. He rejects the Edinburgh compromise that Edinburgh, consciously or unconsciously,

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<sup>24</sup> Beattie to John Pinkerton, June 20, 1778 (Letter 865).

<sup>25</sup> Beattie to Robert Arbuthnot, October 8, 1792 (Letter 1784); Arbuthnot, a former merchant and banker, was at this point Secretary of the Board for the Encouragement of Manufactures and Fisheries in Scotland.

<sup>26</sup> Beattie to George Thomson, January 18, 1793 (Letter 1793).

<sup>27</sup> Beattie to Elizabeth Montagu, November 9, 1771 (Letter 274).



represented as the national language, and in so doing provides an intellectual basis for Scottish literary regionalism.<sup>28</sup>

Beattie's writings on the subject have been used to evaluate the standing of dialect in post-Union Scotland and it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the influence he exerted. However, in the final analysis, perhaps what Beattie shows us is an early example of the Scottish self-assumed right to speak in a number of voices, each appropriate to subject and occasion, as Burns demonstrates so dramatically, and probably unmatchably, in the narrator of "Tam o' Shanter."<sup>29</sup>

"To Mr Alexander Ross" demonstrates that Beattie was eminently capable of writing competent, even excellent, traditional verse in Scots, but the poem was an aberration. Now we see why MacLachlan's underlying approval of the quality of writing in the poem was matched by his frustration at its lack of ambition; in reality what Beattie had produced was a deliberate and self-conscious poetic exercise (as, effectively, was most of his poetry) prompted by a wish to make a gesture of kindness to Ross himself, apparently an old friend of Beattie's father.<sup>30</sup> David Hewitt, however, sees the poem as important in its own right as "a forthright claim for the value of a regional dialect against the cultural centrism of Edinburgh,"<sup>31</sup> yet it is difficult to square this away with Beattie's denial of the poem.

Earlier in his letter to John Gregory, in confessing to the existence of "To Mr Alexander Ross," Beattie also told him: "The first Canto of my *Minstrel*, containing near 600 lines, is finished, and the second begun."<sup>32</sup> At the very time he was writing "To Mr Alexander Ross," Beattie was at work on a poem which would live up to MacLachlan's aspiration for "experiment and revolution" in the Scottish poetic tradition. For Beattie, this could only be done in the purest English he was capable of, uncontaminated by the hybrid language he saw in his own generation of Scots poets. What started out as a kind of study in the apparently backward-looking Spenserian stanza became an improbably innovative

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<sup>28</sup> David Hewitt, "James Beattie and the Languages of Scotland," in Carter and Pittock, as in n. 5 above, 251-260 (258).

<sup>29</sup> See also Hewitt, 254

<sup>30</sup> MacLachlan found a way to connect up Burns and Beattie: "Though he lived most of his life in the isolation of Lochlee in the Grampians, Ross published his poetry through the good offices of Beattie, the Aberdeen professor, who brought him to the notice of a patron in the Duchess of Gordon, whose husband also made a contribution to the poetry of the century; she in turn was a friend of Burns. Such networks are typical of the period." (p. xi) But, as far as we know, Burns and Beattie never met and never corresponded.

<sup>31</sup> Hewitt p. 257

<sup>32</sup> See note 23 above.

poem infused with Beattie's nostalgia for his own Scottish youth, concept of the poetic mission and philosophic and religious opinion. As Crawford noted, it was to have classic status; Robinson traced forty-three separate editions of Beattie's poems published in his lifetime.<sup>33</sup>

But what kind of English did Beattie use for his nascent poem? While he lectured in English and at times in Latin, the day-to-day transactional language he heard and used was the Scotch of the North East, to the undoubted detriment of his ear for English.<sup>34</sup> Beattie's self analysis to Mrs Montagu was:

You are pleased to say, Madam, that I write English as well as an Englishman. I cannot admit this compliment, without renouncing an old hypothesis of mine; which is, that no Scotch man, unless he go to England very young, and remain long there, can ever attain to a perfect purity of English style. We may avoid gross improprieties, and vulgar idioms;<sup>35</sup> but we never reach that neatness and vivacity of expression which distinguish the English authors: and our best performances, compared to theirs, have always something of the stiffness [sic] and awkwardness of a man handling a sword who has not learnt to fence. The reason is, we are always afraid of committing some blunder.<sup>36</sup>

His plan for the diction of *The Minstrel* was contained in the "Advertisement" to the first edition of Book One:

All antiquated expressions I have studiously avoided; admitting however some old words, where they seemed peculiarly suitable to the subject: but I hope none will be found that are now obsolete, or in any degree unintelligible to a reader of English poetry.

We can expand this a little and conclude that Beattie was saying that there would be no quaint Spenserian or Scotch words. Even the "old" words he used prove to be remarkably few, "swain", "wight", "besprent" and the like and some Latinate decoration, though Gray still accused him of including too many Spenserian words.<sup>37</sup> But perhaps the most accurate description for Beattie's diction is that it was a stripped-back form of poetical English. Lacking the confidence to try anything adventurous he could only be imitative and unspontaneous. Scott devotes a whole chapter to the

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<sup>33</sup> Roger Robinson, "Beattie, Wordsworth and Coleridge," *Coleridge Bulletin*, n.s. 4 (Autumn 1994): 13.

<sup>34</sup> Beattie also wrote: "I have been continually poring upon Addison, the best parts of Swift, Lord Lyttleton, &c. The ear is of great service in these matters; and I am convinced the greater part of Scottish authors hurt their style by admiring and imitating one another." Beattie to Sylvester Douglas, January 5, 1778 (Letter 842).

<sup>35</sup> It was in this cause that Beattie produced *Scoticisms*, first circulated privately as a pamphlet, and then published in book form in 1787.

<sup>36</sup> Beattie to Elizabeth Montagu, April 3, 1777 (Letter 805).

<sup>37</sup> Gray to Beattie, March 8, 1771 (Letter 227).

language of Thomson's poetry and how it developed from an original lack of facility in English but it would be very difficult to do the same with Beattie.<sup>38</sup> If *The Minstrel* is considered a transitional poem in the sense that some of its elements point to Romanticism, the basis for its language was unmistakably neo-classical. It is perhaps a mark of the strength of Beattie's concept for the poem that he produced a work with such influential imagery using an unpromising, limited, "safe," vocabulary. This must have had an effect on Burns. In his autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore in 1787, Burns wrote:

I am very willing to admit that I have some poetical abilities; and as few, if any Writers, either moral or poetical, are intimately acquainted with the classes of Mankind among whom I have chiefly mingled. I may have seen men and manners in different phases, which may assist originality of thought.—Still I know very well, the novelty of my character has by far the greatest share in the learned and polite notice I have lately got; and in a language where Pope and Churchill have raised the laugh, and Shenstone and Gray drawn the tear; where Thomson and Beattie have painted the landskip, and Littleton and Collins described the heart; I am not vain enough to hope for distinguished Poetic fame (*Letters*, I: 79).

In the passing, we can note that Burns here implies the distinction between Thomson and Beattie observed earlier in this essay. Beattie's painfully correct but plain and Latinate dialogue must have been a warning to Burns about the limits of what was possible for any home Scot and that to use English solely to support the exuberant verse he wanted to write would be self-defeating. Each poet found his own voice, Burns in a language that needed subscription to promote it, Beattie's competitive in the open market.

The contrived feel of Beattie's diction undoubtedly is a root cause of the critical reaction he gets today but the "old" words and antiquated stanza form helped Beattie to create a poem which was ostensibly timeless and "Gothic" in atmosphere. But below the surface are distinctive Scottish features. Beattie even located his poem in Scotland, if only notionally. A footnote in the first edition of the First Book stated that the poem was situated in the North Country. Bishop Percy found this location ambiguous and Beattie issued a clarification, writing to Percy:

By the words *North Country*, in the poem, I meant not the northern part of the island, but the southernmost part of Scotland; as will appear, if I live to finish the tale, from the action of the third book.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Scott, 182-203

<sup>39</sup> Beattie to Thomas Percy, May 4, 1772 (Letter 303)

Early in his poem, Beattie placed Edwin's father on "Scotia's mountains" (I: xii), but there never was a Third Book and the geography was never tied down. *The Minstrel* emerges as a poem set in a sketchy version of Scotland in the indistinct imaginative past and Beattie was at liberty to toughen up the conceptual topography of the South of Scotland by adding sublime elements of mountainous and marine scenes and, apparently, some landscapes from his own locality in the North East. His friends claimed to be able to identify specific places from the descriptions in *The Minstrel*, speculation Beattie seemed happy to encourage. At one point, for example, he quoted from *The Minstrel*, II. xvii, in stating:

To the "breezy hill that skirts the down," alias, the old churchyard of St. Fergus, I have paid my respects several times.<sup>40</sup>

Beattie's friend and biographer, Sir William Forbes felt local places were easy to identify, for instance:

The high hill which rises to the west of Fordoun would, in a misty morning, supply him with one of the images so beautifully described in the twenty-first stanza.<sup>41</sup>

Forbes refers to an example of the dramatic, strikingly impressionistic approach to landscape which is Beattie's hallmark and great innovation:

And oft the craggy cliff he loved to climb,  
When all in mist the world below was lost.  
What dreadful pleasure! there to stand sublime,  
Like shipwreck'd mariner on desert coast,  
And view th'enormous waste of vapour, tost  
In billows, lengthening to th' horizon round,  
Now scoop'd in gulfs, with mountains now emboss'd!  
And hear the voice of mirth and song rebound,

Flocks, herds, and waterfalls, along the hoar profound! (I. xxi).

A natural feature, then, which might have been interesting localisation had the poem been written in the Ramsay tradition is here raised by Beattie to the generality and grandeur of atmospheric scenery. Burns seems to have exploited this artistic process in *The Vision*. In two stanzas praising the land of Kyle, he first adopts Beattie-like language, as if to say that his home scenery is as grand as that portrayed in any high-sounding poem in English, and lists the more down-to-earth familiar features of his local countryside:

Here rivers in the sea were lost;  
There, mountains to the skies were tost:  
Here, tumbling billows mark'd the coast,  
With surging foam;

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<sup>40</sup> Beattie to Duchess of Gordon [? early August, 1783] (Letter 1161)

<sup>41</sup> Sir William Forbes *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie, LL.D* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1806), I: 22; Beattie was schoolmaster in Fordoun in 1753-1758.

There, distant shone Arr's lofty boast,  
The lordly dome.

Here, DOON pour'd down his far-fetch'd floods;  
There well-fed IRWINE stately thuds;  
Auld hermit AIRE staw thro' his woods,  
On to the shore;  
And many a lesser torrent scuds,  
With seeming roar.<sup>42</sup>

In the second stanza, Burns becomes more specific, and the third line with its Broad Scots elements arrives with some relish. Burns's strange "Auld hermit Aire" may refer to the distant source of the longest river in Ayrshire but it is possible, since Beattie was expressly in his mind in Duan Second of the poem, that Burns considered the river a mentor and teacher, much like the Hermit of Beattie's Second Book.<sup>43</sup> Burns expresses no linguistic preference: the "Beattie" stanza and the hybrid one coexist happily alongside each other, each apparently in its natural place.

Into the illusory Scottish scenery sublimated by his imagination, Beattie decanted his own Scottish youth to form the basis for the career of Edwin and to animate the poem's alternative title *The Progress of Genius*. He wrote to the Dowager Lady Forbes:

From the questions your Ladyship is pleased to propose in the conclusion of your letter, as well as from some things I have had the honour to hear you advance in conversation, I find, you are willing to suppose, that in Edwin I have given only a picture of myself as I was in my younger days. I confess the supposition is not groundless. I have made him take pleasure in the scenes in which I took pleasure, and entertain sentiments similar to those of which even in my early youth, I had repeated experience. The scenery of a mountainous country, the ocean, the sky, thoughtfulness and retirement, and sometimes melancholy objects and ideas, had charms in my eyes, even when I was a schoolboy; and at a time when I was so far from able to express, that I did not understand, my own feelings, or perceive the tendency of such pursuits and amusements: and as to poetry and music – before I was ten years old, I could play a little on the violin, and I was as much a master of Homer and Virgil as Pope's and Dryden's translations could make me.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "The Vision," ll. 73-84: Kinsley, I: 105. Burns uses language similar to *The Minstrel*, I xxi, I liv, and II xvii, but characteristically adds a picturesque image of rivers lost in the sea.

<sup>43</sup> The river was considered sacred in pre-Christian times and there are a number of sacrificial horse burials along its banks but even if Burns was aware of this it is a long way from giving it hermit status.

<sup>44</sup> Beattie to Dowager Lady Forbes, October 12, 1772 (Letter 333).

This passage is critical to the interpretation of the poem, because, as Robinson points out, the letter from Lady Forbes to which he was responding nowhere overtly identified Beattie with Edwin:

This makes his strongly autobiographical assertion about Edwin even more significant, because it came from him unprompted. His letter says that Edwin's response to nature, especially in the sublime aspect, his thoughts and feelings, his tendency to melancholy and love of solitude, his early attachment to poetry *and* music, and his encounters with Homer and Virgil, *all* record Beattie's own experience as a boy.<sup>45</sup>

It can be added that Beattie used tenets of Scottish education and religion in the older version of himself which he fictionalised to create the Hermit in Book Two. Perhaps also he gives his nationality away in making a philosophical point about the even-handedness of Nature by contrasting the "gold and gems" of the mountains of Chile where "plague and poison, lust and rapine grow" with Scotland's "bleak and barren hills" in which peace, purity and freedom prevail (I: vi).

But it was a poem of its times. Reason reduces the old Scottish superstitions of Thomson and Collins to the stuff of dreams and stories (though they would return with a vengeance in Burns) but, just to be sure, the Hermit wants young villagers to linger by his grave:

'And when mild Evening comes in mantle grey,  
'Let not the blooming band make haste to go;  
'No ghost nor spell my long and last abode shall know (II: xviii).

The poem's philosophical and emotional register is also strongly marked by sentimentality. Brown and Carruthers<sup>46</sup> would have no worries about an ambivalent attitude to hunting in Edwin, as they detected in Thomson, because:

His heart, from cruel sport estranged, would bleed  
To work the wo of any living thing (I: xviii).

And in Beattie's empathy with the gnat there are stirrings of Burns's fellow-feeling for the mouse:

Shall he, whose birth, maturity, and age,  
Scarce fill the circle of one summer day,  
Shall the poor gnat with discontent and rage  
Exclaim, that Nature hastens to decay,  
If but a cloud obstruct the solar ray,  
If but a momentary shower descend!  
Or shall frail man Heaven's dread decree gainsay,  
Which bade the series of events extend  
Wide through unnumber'd worlds, and ages without end! (I: xlix).

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<sup>45</sup> Letter 320; Robinson, as in n. 2 above, 480.

<sup>46</sup> Brown and Carruthers, 85

The poem can almost be dated by the intellectual concerns it addresses. Roger Robinson writes:

The *Essay on Truth* is essential to the understanding of the rest of Beattie's other and more attractive literary works. The motivating ideas – his intense concern for religion and morality, and his belief in 'useful' science, all feature in *The Minstrel*. So, indeed, does his contempt for metaphysics and scorn for sceptical philosophy.<sup>47</sup>

In a recent essay, Ronnie Young goes further, setting out to demonstrate that:

important links with British Romanticism notwithstanding, Beattie's *Minstrel* posits an intricate relationship between social progress, moral education, environment and the development of the individual poet that places him in the mainstream of Scottish Enlightenment thought.<sup>48</sup>

Young argues that, while "Beattie does not directly acknowledge the influence of Aberdeen in *The Minstrel*," the poem "presents the reader with not so much a fable as a philosophical exploration of poetic development according to the factors used at the time in the analysis of genius" (*ibid.*), and to prove this thesis he diminishes the poem's autobiographical core. But as Beattie showed in his letter to the Dowager Lady Forbes, quoted above, Edwin is not a construct created to make a philosophical point; he is a poetical portrayal of Beattie's own adolescent spirit.<sup>49</sup> If a label is needed, the poem is neither fable nor treatise; if anything it is a kind of case study in the development of poetic genius.

Young places Beattie in the midst of an Aberdeen fascination with the concept of genius, as principally explored by Alexander Gerard, and points out that Edwin's education "shows Beattie adopting a mainstay of Aberdeen thought". He is undoubtedly right in this but, as we have previously noted, Beattie is difficult to pin down on influence, particularly where contemporary influence is concerned. Here are the characteristically enigmatic remarks he made to Mrs Montagu in August 1774 and therefore after the publication of the second book of his poem:

I have not seen Dr Gerard's "Essay on Genius." I know the author very well, for I studied philosophy under him; he is a man of great worth, learning, and good sense. His "Essay on Taste" (which you have probably seen) was well received; and I am confident, there

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<sup>47</sup> Roger J. Robinson, introduction, in James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press 1996), xl.

<sup>48</sup> Ronnie Young, "James Beattie and the Progress of Genius in the Aberdeen Enlightenment," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36:2 (June 2013): 245-61 (246).

<sup>49</sup> See above, note 25

will be many good things in this new work, notwithstanding the unpromising and hackneyed title.<sup>50</sup>

This is all a bit waspish of Beattie given *The Minstrel's* uninspiring subsidiary title, *The Progress of Genius*. There are also dangers in automatically conflating Beattie the philosopher and Beattie the poet. Beattie himself tried hard not to do so as he made clear in a letter to Charles Boyd:

A little philosophical acquaintance with the most beautiful parts of nature, both in the material and immaterial system, is of use to a poet, and gives grace and solidity to poetry: as may be seen in the "Georgics," "the Seasons," and "the Pleasures of Imagination:" but this acquaintance, if it is anything more than superficial, will do a poet rather harm than good: and will give his mind that turn for minute observation, which enfeebles the fancy by restraining it, and counteracts the native energy of judgment by rendering it fearful and suspicious.<sup>51</sup>

But in practice Beattie found it difficult to hold to this position. The two major works which built his reputation were written and published almost in parallel but, in all that Beattie wrote on the subject, he made it plain that the *Essay* always overshadowed the poem; *The Minstrel* always had to fight for his attention and its structure was undoubtedly affected by Beattie's evolving philosophical arguments as the *Essay* reached publication and they became more prominent in the poem's Second Book as Beattie struggled to finish it.

Young makes a further point about Edwin relevant to his argument but at the same time emphasising the close connexion between the poem and Beattie's own life:

his instinct and genius at first roam free, but he eventually progresses from History to Philosophy and by that means gains experience of the world. In this respect Edwin is more or less subjected to the reformed Arts curriculum at Aberdeen.

Tellingly also, the second part of the poem is at times a kind of Socratic dialogue, the teaching method Beattie most favoured

The Aberdeen connexion is also emphasised by Dafydd Moore, who . draws together Beattie and James Macpherson:

Near exact contemporaries, and both educated at Marischal College, Aberdeen, under the influence of such luminaries as Thomas Blackwell, Alexander Gerard and Thomas Reid, their careers, and apparently temperaments, could not have been more different... Between them they wrote two of the most important

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<sup>50</sup> Beattie to Elizabeth Montagu, August 5, 1774 (Letter 574; Forbes I: 368).

<sup>51</sup> Beattie to Hon Charles Boyd, November 16, 1766 (Letter 63; Forbes, I: 92).



and influential primitivist works of the eighteenth century, but again these works could hardly be more different.<sup>52</sup>

One of the conclusions Moore comes to is:

Beattie's primitivism is less half-hearted than ahistorical. Where Macpherson seeks to posit a specific Scottish primitive culture existing in a specific time and (Scottish) place, and seeks to place this culture within the framework of literary and social theory, Beattie—at least in *The Minstrel* as we have it—reaches for a more internalised form of primitivism.

In this, Moore is surely correct. Beattie portrays less primitivism than rite of passage. Nature, its importance for revealed religion, and contemplative solitude are structural to the growth of a poetic genius but so are science, philosophy, the lessons of history and the realities of life. For Beattie, the poet's mission is to produce, and go on producing, poetry which confronts all these factors.

There is a final point to be made. As we have noted, Beattie started writing his groundbreaking poem in English around the same time as he composed "To Mr Alexander Ross." Does a comparison of the two poems offer any insights into the nationality of Beattie's literary mind? There are in fact two sections of each which share similar themes. "To Mr Alexander Ross" contains the following stanza (which Beattie, despite himself, particularly approved of):

O bonny are our greensward hows,  
Where through the birks the burny rows,  
And the bee bums, and the ox lows,  
And saft winds rusle;  
And shepherd-lads on sunny knows  
Blaw the blythe fusle (ll. 49-54).

A parallel and no less beautiful scene in *The Minstrel* demonstrates the layering of sound which is characteristic of Beattie's descriptions in the poem. It reads as follows:

But who the melodies of morn can tell?  
The wild brook babbling down the mountain side;  
The lowing herd; the sheepfold's simple bell;  
The pipe of early shepherd dim descried  
In the lone valley; echoing far and wide  
The clamorous horn along the cliffs above;  
The hollow murmur of the ocean-tide;  
The hum of bees, and linnet's lay of love,  
And the full choir that wakes the universal grove (I: xxxviii).

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<sup>52</sup> Dafydd Moore, "The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie, and Primitivism," in Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, and Murray Pittock, eds., *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, vol 2 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 90 – 98.

And we can juxtapose the stanza in which Beattie compared Scotland and Chile:

Liberal, not lavish, is kind Nature's hand;  
 Nor was perfection made for man below.  
 Yet all her schemes with nicest art are plann'd,  
 Good counteracting ill, and gladness wo.  
 With gold and gems if Chilian mountains glow;  
 If bleak and barren Scotia's hills arise;  
 There plague and poison, lust and rapine grow;  
 Here peaceful are the vales, and pure the skies,  
 And freedom fires the soul, and sparkles in the eyes (I: vi).

with:

It's true, we Norlans manna fa'  
 To eat sae nice or gang sae bra',  
 As they that come from far awa',  
 Yet sma's our skaith;  
 We've peace (and that's well worth it a')  
 And meat and claith (ll. 55-60).

These examples of course assume that Beattie left the verses of *The Minstrel* as they originally were in 1768; however, that said, in fascinating demonstrations of his creative process, they show Beattie on the one hand compliant with the Ramsay tradition and, on the other, remote from it. Subtly different moral and aesthetic conclusions are drawn from much the same material or imaginative vision; the grand and universal overhangs the reassuringly local and intimate and Nature's balance in one is interpreted as dogged contentment in the other, though contentment is a pervading subtext also of *The Minstrel*. In articulating broadly the same observations convincingly in two different styles Beattie shows the discipline of a musician, which, of course, he was. Beattie liked following rules, most of all his own.

If Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns showed how languages and dialects could be combined to deal with these kinds of themes, neither the vernacular nor the evolving hybrid tradition was for Beattie. He was a pragmatist in terms of the broadcast utility of his poetry and a purist in the exercise of the language he chose for it. But purist he also was in the matter of dialect. He criticised Alexander Ross's poetry in the following terms:

The language is motley enough; it is not the language of Allan Ramsay, but the dialects of Angus, Mearns and Aberdeenshire all jumbled together.<sup>53</sup>

Beattie was well-read in old Scots poetry and one feels the mists of earlier poetry written in Broad Scotch swirling around *The Minstrel* but if that

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<sup>53</sup> Beattie to Thomas Blacklock, December 26, 1767 (Letter 87: *Letters*, II: 57).

poetry had any direct influence on the poem it was more as a factor in the personal cultural synthesis which dictated Beattie's own poetical development and from which he selected his poetical options. However, there may be interesting links back to Dunbar's melancholy and introspective moments, though Beattie's fears seemed to be for old age, not death (see e.g. I: xxv and II: ii). Beattie's unsparing portrayal of Edwin probably owes something to the realism of earlier poetry, and perhaps traces of Scots vernacular poetry also survive in what Gray described as Beattie's "excess of alliteration."<sup>54</sup>

The objective of this paper, highlighting the Scottish nature of *The Minstrel*, has meant making only tangential mention of the poem's inherent poetical qualities. But even with this limitation, several points seem clear: the poem's unmistakable Scots identity, an effect on Robert Burns arguably as strong as that of Ramsay and Fergusson, its priority as the first modern Scottish poem to make a best-selling impact on the British intellectual market, the remarkable resilience of its popularity and, finally, a richness of concept and content which even today demands attention from scholars interested in issues of genius, the Aberdeen Enlightenment, or the literary primitivism more usually connected with Ossian.

Omission of *The Minstrel*, or, possibly even worse, token analysis of it, leaves the course of Scottish poetry with a disconcerting gap in interpretation. With *The Minstrel* given its due historical place, the poetry of eighteenth century Scotland takes on an added, more influential and more sophisticated, dimension. It was a poem written by a Scotsman in Scotland, in a Scotsman's English, based on Scottish elements and reflecting the issues and debates of the Scottish Enlightenment, with a strong Aberdeen flavour. Ironically, however, Beattie himself probably did not want his poem to be too obviously Scottish. Its lasting significance stems from what it said about the concept of poetry, the development of the poet and the impressionistic and spiritual dimensions of Nature, all of which went beyond or at least across national boundaries. *The Minstrel* is too important a poem to be dismissed lightly if the central purpose of critics and anthologists is to equip their readers to understand the cultural variety and resourcefulness of eighteenth-century Scottish poetry and to make up their own minds on what constitute its most significant works.

*Oxford.*

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<sup>54</sup> Gray to Beattie, March 8, 1771 (Letter 227).