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**THE KING AND THE PEOPLE
IN BURNS, LADY NAIRNE, AND
JANE AUSTEN'S FAVORITE BURNS SONG**

Carol McGuirk

Three generations of Stuarts contended for the throne during the long eighteenth century: James II and VII, crowned in 1685 and declared by Parliament as having abdicated in Feb. 1689; his son James Stuart (1688-1766) in 1715; and James Stuart's son, Charles Edward Stuart (1720-1788) in 1745. Parliament's suspensions of habeas corpus in 1688-89, 1715, and 1745 correspond with popular support for these Jacobite risings, the 1745 suspension occurring within a month of Charles Edward's landing in Scotland. The government's right to imprison British subjects without trial if suspected of sedition was invoked again in 1794-95, this time as a response to British supporters of the French Revolution. Over the course of the long eighteenth-century, the grounds of rebellion had shifted from the king to the people; and Robert Burns's writings (while seldom easy to parse on these matters) reflect on and perhaps, by the later 1790s, began to become part of this shift in political context. In contrast, Carolina Oliphant (Lady Nairne in later life) dedicated her best songs to the Stuart risings, in which her family had been active. Yet she elegizes the cause as a matter of long-ago contention: she too, like Burns, mainly pays tribute to the Scottish people for standing up to their political beliefs in supporting the Scottish kings. Jane Austen's favorite song by Burns, with which I conclude, evidently echoes a Burns song about tyrants and slaves in exotic foreign lands (a song she sang and played daily) in a passage in *Emma* that reflects on English culture and foretells the eventual reform of her most flawed and interesting heroine.

In 1789, Burns wrote to Lady Winifred Maxwell Constable, whose father had forfeited his Earl's title after the 1715 Jacobite rising, that by their day the Stuart cause had all but run its course. Still he warns her that "the inclosed verses" "are for your Ladyship's eyes alone I can do nothing for a Cause which is now nearly no more ... [and] do not wish to

hurt myself.”¹ The poem he sent, “Epistle to Mr. Tytler of Woodhouselee, Author of a Defence of Mary Queen of Scots,” written in 1787, expresses sympathy for the Stuarts in its opening lines and mocks the current Hanoverian family as a mere “Electoral Stem”: “If bringing them over was lucky for us / I’m sure ‘twas as lucky for *them!*” (l. 20)². Yet though “‘tis nothing of mine” (l. 15), his speaker concedes that British consensus is favorable to King George: the “title’s allowed in the Country” (l. 16). With a tardy onset of prudence, he then rejects as dangerous any political comment in times of crisis: “the doctrines today that are loyally sound / Tomorrow may bring us a halter” (ll. 23-24).

Burns often in this way refuses political silence yet to some degree embraces indirection, even contradiction. The Stuarts’ bygone struggles invite compassion, yet most in the “Country” (Great Britain? Scotland?) “allow” the current royal family and “gladly sing ‘God Save the King’”: the speaker even agrees to “cordially join” them (ll. 13-14) despite having already recorded his personal indifference: “‘tis nothing of mine.” Popular assent, not royal heritage per se, makes a king. Commenting on the trial of Charles I in 1649, John Milton argued in similar terms: “the power of Kings ... is onely derivative, transferred, and committed to them in trust from the people ..., in whom the power remains fundamentally, and cannot be tak’n from them, without a violation of thir natural birthright.”³ To Burns’s speakers, whether the ruler be Mary Stuart or her descendant Charles Edward Stuart, claims of sovereignty by inheritance are “nothing.” It is widely understood that Burns rejects social status based on rank in writings from the first lines of “Elegy for the Year 1788” (“For Lords or kings I dinna mourn, / E’en let them die—for that they’re born!”: Kinsley I: 454) to “Is there for honest poverty” (Kinsley II: 762-763). Less well understood is his tacit deferral to popular consensus even when his own opinions differ—though often he goes on to express or imply these dissenting views. On political issues he chose his words cautiously during the 1790s, having been questioned by Robert Graham of Fintry about charges of disaffection stemming from his apparent refusal to sing “God Save the King” at the Dumfries Theatre on 28 November 1792.⁴ In his letter of reply, he protests that he remained silent because those around him

¹ G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), I: 461.

² James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), I: 332-333 (ll. 18-20).

³ John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (London: Matthew Simmons, 1649, 60 pp. version), 11.

⁴ For context on this episode, see McGuirk, *Reading Robert Burns* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), 23-25.

had begun to sing quite a different anthem, the revolutionary “Ça ira.”⁵ Contending that he “neither knew of the Plot, nor joined in the Plot; nor ever opened my lips to hiss, or huzza, that, or any other Political tune whatever” (Roy II: 173), he still goes on to tell Graham, a Commissioner of the Excise, that systemic malaise does call out for reform:

an alarming System of Corruption has pervaded the connection
between the Executive power and the House of Commons—This
is the Truth, the Whole truth, of my Reform opinions (*ibid.*).

A song of 1795, “The Dumfries Volunteers,” again refers to “God Save the King,” conceding its symbolic power for many during troubled times yet also noting popular pressure for change (Kinsley II:764-766). Comparing the British “church and state” to cracked and broken pots (ll. 17-24), the speaker says that these must be repaired by Britons, not by French invaders: “never but by British hands / Must British wrongs be righted” (ll. 15-16). If “haughty Gaul” (l. 1) attacks, as has been threatened, the volunteers of the Dumfries militia, including Private Burns, are ready to defend the townspeople—and “the people” have his final word:

Who will not sing GOD SAVE THE KING
Shall hang as high’s the steeple,
But while we sing, GOD SAVE THE KING,
We’ll ne’er forget THE PEOPLE (ll. 29-32).

Carolina Oliphant (1766-1845; from 1824 Baroness Nairne or Lady Nairne) was the daughter, sister, and granddaughter of Jacobites: her name, “Carolina,” honored Charles Edward Stuart. Her songs elegizing the eighteenth-century Jacobite risings might be expected to emphasize—as Mary Stuart and Charles I did—that kings are provided by God and birthright, not upheld by popular assent. Yet with some exceptions (“The Attainted Scottish Nobles” is one), Nairne chiefly celebrates Highland support. If her biographer is correct in assigning Nairne’s Jacobite songs to the 1790s, her project coincides with the long years of her engagement, which lasted from her teens until her marriage at age forty.⁶ Her husband was William Nairne (b. 1757), great-grandson of the attainted Jacobite William Murray (1665-1726, the 2nd Lord Nairne) and grandson of John Murray [Nairne] (c. 1691-1770), who fought as a Jacobite both in 1715 and

⁵ There were stanzas written for the tune “Ça ira” along a spectrum of political opinion in France; almost all were pro-reform but there was also a royalist version. It is not clear which version was sung at the Dumfries Theatre, though it could well have been the violent new *sans culottes* version. See Laura Mason’s excellent article, “Ça Ira and the Birth of the Revolutionary Song,” *History Workshop*, 28 (Autumn 1989): 22-38.

⁶ Charles Rogers, *Life and Songs of the Baroness Nairne* (London: Griffin, 1869), xxix.

1745. The family succeeded in regaining the title during the 1720s but it was again forfeited in retribution after the rising of 1745. William Nairne, eventually Lady Nairne's husband, himself served in the British army from the 1770s; following litigation that required an Act of Parliament and signature of the King, he regained his title in 1824.⁷

Lady Nairne wrote to a friend during the 1820s that she had never told her husband that she was writing songs, "lest he blab" (Rogers, xxxv). She met with her music-publisher Robert Purdie in disguise, posing as a rural collector of antique lays: her favorite signatures were "B. of B.," "Unknown," and "Anon." Thus swathed in secrecy, she might safely have emphasized royal prerogatives or even (like Squire Western in *Tom Jones*) Hanoverian wickedness. Instead, her lyrics highlight Scottish solidarity.

One case in point is "The News from Moidart" ("Wha'll be King but Charlie?"), first published as by "Author Unknown" during the 1820s in vol. 6 of R.A. Smith's *The Scottish Minstrel*. Nairne recreates Charles's early meeting with clansmen at Kinlochmoidart in mid-August 1745. While birthright is mentioned—the chorus hails the Stuarts as "rightfu,' lawfu'" kings—, Nairne's chief focus is on the gathered Highlanders, who at once resolve to raise an army in support of the almost solitary Young Pretender. (The historical Charles Edward Stuart, having failed to secure French army or naval support, had arrived in the Highlands with a retinue of only a dozen or so, including several elderly advisers of Charles's father James in 1715.) Donald MacDonald, the fourth, of Kinlochmoidart carried the news of Charles's landing to potential supporters, asking in return to be made an aide de camp to Charles; but Nairne's reconstructed scene excludes even such mild negotiations. Multiple speakers at once and as one—"to a man" (l. 15)—pledge unconditional support. For Nairne's late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century audience, who knew the end of this story, the song's joyous welcome must have been received with a touch of pathos. "Wha'll be king but Charlie?" is a rhetorical question for the loyal clansmen, but in the event a different king prevailed:

The news frae Moidart cam yestreen,
 Will soon gar mony ferlie;
 For ships o' war hae just come in,
 And landit Royal Charlie.
 Come thro' the heather, around him gather,
 Ye're a' the welcomer early;
 Around him cling wi' a' your kin;
 For wha'll be king but Charlie?...

The Hieland clans, wi sword in hand,

⁷ Robert Mair, *Debrett's Peerage*, ... (London: Dean, 1884), 503.

Frae John o' Groats' to Airlie,
 Hae to a man declared to stand
 Or fa' wi' Royal Charlie.
 Come thro' the heather, &c....

The Lowlands a', baith great an' sma,
 Wi' mony a lord and laird, hae
 Declar'd for Scotia's king an' law,
 An' speir ye wha but Charlie....

Come thro' the heather, around him gather,
 Ye're a' the welcomer early;
 Around him cling wi' a' your kin;
 For wha'll be king but Charlie?
 Come thro' the heather, around him gather,
 Come Ronald, come Donald, come a' thegither,
 And crown your rightfu', lawfu' king!
 For wha'll be king but Charlie? (Rogers 118-19)

These clansmen of the northwest Highlands and islands do not grudgingly "allow" their king, as in Burns's verse-letter to Tytler of Woodhouselee. They "cling to him with all" their "kin," wrapping him in approval. The chorus foretells support in the northeast, too, "from John o' Groats to Airlie," while a later stanza adds the Lowland lairds, making consensus national.

Another Nairne song, "Will Ye No Come Back Again," concentrates on the Highlands. Following the battle of Culloden (April 16, 1746), a reward for Charles's capture was set at £30,000. Nairne's speaker, using the present tense in this line although the song looks back five or six decades, exults that during those five months "there is nane that wad betray" (Rogers 135). Nairne's version of the song, again published in the 1820s in *The Scottish Minstrel*, repeats another of her equivocal questions, "Will ye no come back again," posed with longing by the speaker, but known by Nairne's belated audience to be historically null, for Charles had died in January 1788 and will not return. A historian of 1877 perhaps recalls Nairne's popular stanzas, for his wording is similar:

At the risk of their own destruction. . . [the Highlanders] extended to him the aid of their protection, and relieved his necessities. Many of these persons were of desperate fortunes, and there were others in the lowest ranks of life; yet, among nearly 200 persons whom Charles must have known during the five months he wandered as a fugitive, not one ever offered to betray him, though they knew that a price of £30,000 was set upon his head.

History nowhere presents such a splendid instance of disinterested attachment to an unfortunate family.⁸

Nairne's strongest Jacobite songs highlight historical people and events, offering her readers (and the performers of her songs) an immersion experience in being Jacobite. Yet dramatic episodes such as the meeting at Kinlochmoidart take on a dimension of irony when read in the light of outcome. On September 20, 1746, Charles Edward did make his escape from Scotland, eventually arriving in Paris; but less than a month later, on October 18, Donald Macdonald of Kinlochmoidart, celebrated in Nairne's song, was hanged in Carlisle for treason. Kinlochmoidart House, where the chiefs, chieftains and Charles had slept after that early parley, was plundered and burned to the ground by order of the Duke of Cumberland, a younger son of George II.

In Burns's "Their Groves of Sweet Myrtle," the speaker's allusions to "tyrants" and "slaves" in "Foreign Lands" turn away from political unrest in Scotland to convey something like Nairne's elegiac perspective. According to recent research, this Burns song of 1795 is notable as Jane Austen's favorite Scottish song, among three pieces she sang and played daily c. 1810. Her niece Caroline (1805-1880) recalled later in life Austen's daily practice before breakfast:

My Aunt Miss Jane Austen had nearly left off singing by the time I can recollect much of her performances—but some songs of hers I *do* remember—One was—

Her groves of green myrtle, let foreign lands reckon,...

The song, as she sang it, was in manuscript. I never saw it in print—.⁹

The lines Caroline Austen remembered were identified by Deirdre LeFaye in 1999 as being by Burns, but, as Jeanice Books points out, until recently few Austen scholars had seen the original manuscript music book from which Austen was playing, which remained in private ownership.¹⁰ Brooks thinks that the copyist probably was Austen herself: "the hand of the Burns setting strongly resembles Jane Austen's mature text hand, and there are only minor differences between the music script and earlier, more securely attributed examples of Austen's music copying" (Brooks, 919). The tune is

⁸ John S. Keltie, ed., *A History of the Scottish Highlands, Highland Clans, and Highland Regiments*, 8 vols (Edinburgh: A. Fullarton, 1877), I: 721.

⁹ Caroline Austen's letter in J.E. Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 193, quoted by Jeanice Brooks, "In Search of Austen's 'Missing Songs,'" *Review of English Studies*, 67.282 (November 2016): 914-945 (917).

¹⁰ Deirdre LeFaye, "Three Missing Jane Austen Songs," *Notes & Queries*, n.s. 46 (1999), 454-5; *The Austen Family Music Books* (University of Southampton, 2015): Jenkyns 03, pp. 68-69, on line at: <https://archive.org/details/austen1676477-2001https://archive.org/details/austenfamilymusicbooks>; Brooks, 917-918.

different from other settings of the stanzas, including the Kozeluch setting, commissioned by George Thomson, and the Haydn setting, commissioned by William Whyte: both of these were based on Burns's suggested choice, an Irish air titled "The Humours of Glen" (Roy, II: 343). New musical settings were also circulating, but no extant printed book uses the version played by Austen.

The Burns stanzas were popular: one London newspaper had printed "Sweet Myrtle" as having been the last song written before Burns's death in 1796.¹¹ Austen either herself inserted JANE for JEAN in the manuscript copy or was working with an anglicized printed source text that had done so.¹² For Brooks "the knowledge that Jane Austen might have engaged this closely with Burns's work at a textual level," synthesizing a Scottish with a more Anglicized printing and perhaps inserting her own name, leads her to a new reading of a scene in *Sanditon* that discusses Burns (Brooks 926-927). In Burns's stanzas as sent to Thomson in 1795, the bracing wind and simple wild beauty of the Scottish landscape are preferred to lusher growth in warmer places where tyrants treat the people as slaves:

Their groves of sweet myrtle let Foreign Lands reckon,
 Where bright-beaming summers exalt the perfume,
 Far dearer to me yon lone glen o' green brechan
 Wi' th' burn stealing under the lang, yellow broom:
 Far dearer to me are yon humble broom bowers,
 Where the bluebell and gowan lurk, lowly, unseen;
 For there, lightly tripping amang the wild flowers,
 A listening the linnet oft wanders my JEAN.

Tho' rich is the breeze in their gay, sunny vallies,
 And cauld, CALEDONIA's blast on the wave;
 Their sweet-scented woodlands that skirt the proud palace,
 What are they? The haunt o' the TYRANT and SLAVE.
 The SLAVE's spicy forests, and gold-bubbling fountains,¹³
 The brave CALEDONIAN views wi' disdain;
 He wanders as free as the winds of his mountains.
 Save LOVE's willing fetters, the chains o' his JEAN.
 (Kinsley II: 788)¹⁴

¹¹ Lucyle Werkmeister, "Robert Burns and the London Daily Press," *Modern Philology*, 63.4 (May 1966), 322-335 (334-335), quoted by Brooks, 920 n. 20.

¹² Brooks (920-923) has found a similar musical manuscript by a person unknown to the Austens that uses nearly the same music and anglicized text, also using Jane not Jean, and notes that both might draw on some as yet undiscovered printed source.

¹³ The phrase "spicy forest" occurs in Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk V, line 298, when Raphael approaches through the forest to the bower of Adam and Eve.

Both the speaker and his Jean “wander” at will (ll. 8 and 15) with no constraints except the “fettters” of their love. The temporal setting feels earlier than 1795, for free roving was no feature of Highland life after the Jacobite rebellions. In July 1792, Highlanders in Ross protesting sheep farming were put down within days by a full regiment deployed from Edinburgh. In Atle Wold’s words, the local authorities “knew that those who were involved in the disturbances were chiefly concerned with the spread of sheep farming,” but “others found reason to stress what they believed to be a seditious element.”¹⁵ If the song’s heroine is inspired by Burns’s wife Jean Armour (not Jean Lorimer or Jean McMurdo, daughters of friends who also figured in his lyrics at this time), these stanzas suggest matters more personal than political, looking back on a troubled early courtship: in near despair of his prospects in Scotland, Burns had almost sailed to Jamaica to oversee slaves as a plantation bookkeeper.¹⁶ The song’s rather nebulous “foreign” imagery may refer indirectly to a painful memory.

In concluding, I would suggest that Burns’s muted vision of tyrants and slaves figures in a brief but much discussed reverie on English landscape in Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815). Burns’s cold, windswept Scottish landscape—suggesting hardy Scottish independence and humble wildflowers as well as strong interpersonal bonds—is transmuted into the well-tended “English verdure” of Austen’s Hampshire countryside:

It was a sweet view—sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a sun bright, without being oppressive.¹⁷

¹⁴ Burns’s polar imagery—distant places comprised of kings and slaves—may recall, or simply coincide with, language in Milton’s *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*:

the right of birth or succession can be no privilege in nature to let a Tyrant sit irremovable over a Nation free born, without transforming that Nation from the nature and condition of men born free, into natural, hereditary and successive slaves (Milton, as in n. 3, 48).

For a reading of Burns’s song in relation to contemporary chattel slavery, see Nigel Leask, “‘Their groves o’ sweet Myrtles’: Robert Burns and the Scottish Colonial Experience,” in Murray Pittock, ed., *Robert Burns and Global Criticism* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011), 172-188.

¹⁵ Atle L. Wolde, *Scotland and the French Revolutionary War, 1792-1802* [*Scottish Historical Review Monographs*, 24] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2015), 11.

¹⁶ Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 222-224.

¹⁷ [Jane Austen], *Emma. A Novel*, 3 vols (London: Murray, 1816), III: 98 (ch. 6).

Like Burns's speaker, Austen's narrator takes in a landscape that epitomizes the virtues of her "culture."¹⁸ Emma sees no groves of sweet myrtle but also gazes on no haunts of tyrants or slaves—for that degree of polar inequity is to Austen no more "English" than it is "Scottish." Not in Burns's icy blast but under a temperate sun, the heroine enjoys a scene "bright, without being oppressive." The pleasing prospect she considers is not a "proud palace" but the well-tended farm of Robert Martin, George Knightley's tenant. Rejected as a coarse rustic by Emma herself but highly regarded by his landlord Mr. Knightley (the only adult in the room of this novel), Martin, in spite of Emma's hostile machinations, will finally marry Emma's protégé Harriet Smith. Self-willed Emma—"faultless in spite of all her faults," thinks Mr. Knightley just before proposing to her—relinquishes her delusion that she can mastermind all her community's love affairs according to her fancy. In the end she admits, as in the Burns song Austen daily performed, that the bond of love is to be made and kept only by lovers themselves. It is self-forged and cannot be decreed by tyrants. Emma's ill-judged class-prejudice against Robert Martin (whose first name and exclusion from the gentry as a tenant farmer hint at Burns) is, like Emma's other errors and character misreadings, finally corrected.

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¹⁸ The term "culture" in Austen's passage is glossed by editors as meaning horticulture, but the emotion of this brief effusion suggests a broader meaning, too.