

Robert Burns and Ireland

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Robert Burns's relationship with Ireland is patchy (at least in terms of the poetry; the songs represent potentially a much more plentiful area of investigation beyond the scope of this essay). At the same time, it provides some interesting portals and also difficult to resolve puzzles in his poetry, politics and cultural placement generally.^[1] The editors of a recent edition of Burns's works claim that in one piece he 'crucially passed commentary on Irish political affairs' during the mid-1790s.^[2] The text referred to here is a lost one, the manuscript now untraced, whose existence pertains only so far as is currently known in a sales catalogue for the London auction-house of Puttock and Simpson for May 1861. Here we find a description of the manuscript for sale:

'No Spartan tube, no Attic shell' / Early copy of the first two verses of the poem [i.e. ('Ode) for General Washington's Birthday'], with variations and substitution of HIBERNIA for COLUMBIA. 1 page folio.^[3]

The attempt to present Burns as 'crucially' interested in Ireland is actually undermined by this manuscript. Obviously, Ireland had caught Burns's attention, but thereafter, clearly too, he decided to shift his focus to American affairs, reworking his 'Hibernia' text into the longer poetic version, four stanzas rather than two, 'Ode [For General Washington's Birthday]'. The Irish text, then, over-written by the American one looks almost certain to be a *cancelled* text. Why was this cancellation made by Burns? Was it because America simply provided more fruitful material for him, or did he fear fully to produce, let alone publish, a work that in diagnosing 'tyranny' in Ireland might be seen to be dangerously seditious?^[4] Burns writes his Irish and American texts in 1794 at a time of abundant revolutionary tension and when he is a crown employee in the Excise service, and so his discretion here might well make career sense. However, the 'Ode for Washington' was never published by Burns himself, nor did it even appear soon posthumously, being completely absent from James Currie's first collected edition of the work of the poet in 1800. Currie almost

certainly had in his possession the holograph, but for many years it only ever appeared in subsequent editions in its minor excerpted form by dint of the appearance of the last nineteen lines as quoted by Burns himself in a letter to Frances Anna Dunlop of 25th June 1794.^[5] As a result the text, in so far as it was known in its published form, for most of the nineteenth century was transformed into a piece discussing only the Scottish Wars of Independence of the fourteenth century without the more awkward nuances of the revolutionary 1770s-90s, such as are to be found in the complete four stanzas of the 'Ode for Washington'. Remarkably, the full text does not surface in published form until 1874.^[6] Prior to its sale in the same lot as the 'Hibernia' ode at the London sale in 1861, some Burns scholars, though possibly not all (probably depending on their access to Currie's papers) had sight of the 'Ode for Washington' and seemingly decided not to publish it, and so it is clear that not only the rightly cautious Burns himself, but his editors for many decades after remained worried by, in some cases perhaps wished to censor, its political sentiments. In other words Burns's American text, with all its wider nuances of the 1790s, is as potentially compromising and uncomfortable as his Irish one. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that Burns was simply more interested, or at least thought his material worked better, in the context of American revolutionary republicanism. Burns's comment on Ireland, then, however sincere in its initial textual drafting is certainly not 'crucial'.

Another item in Burns's radical C.V. concerns Ireland, or at least one of her most famous political sons. This is the poet's squib on Edmund Burke:

On Mr. Burke by an opponent and a friend to Mr. Hastings.

Oft have I wonder'd that on Irish ground
No poisonous Reptile ever has been found:
Revealed the secret stands of great Nature's work:
She preserved her poison to create a Burke!

Since being first printed in the *Burns Chronicle* for 1932, Burns's editors have routinely accepted the attribution of this text to the poet.^[7] However, my recent researches have discovered the following text from the London periodical, *Politics for the People*^[8]:

EPIGRAM.

I'VE often wonder'd that on Irish ground
No poisonous reptile yet was ever found;
But nature soon or late completes her work.
She sav'd her venom to create a Burke!^[9]

Most likely, then, Burns is not the originator of the epigram. Though not certainly ruled out as its author, the cautious Burns would have been most unlikely to have sent this text to the periodical but, more plausibly, instead saw it in *Politics for the People*, learned it and recited it to John Syme, his friend in whose hand the manuscript is found along with other such items that Burns had not necessarily written but admired.^[10] If this conclusion is seen to be a disappointment for those who wish the pro-revolutionary voice of Burns to sound clarion clear, in fact it ought not to be. Burns's pleasure in an anti-Burke stance in his interest in this text is obvious enough. Also, one might well wonder how Burns came to catch sight of such an outspokenly radical publication as *Politics for the People* edited by that uncompromising proponent of reform, Daniel Isaac Eaton. Probably unanswerable are several questions. Did Burns come across the largely London-centred publication in the course of his official duties in the south west of Scotland, perhaps seeing, or even being party to, its seizure as seditious literature? Might Burns's knowledge of *Politics for the People* actually be suggestive of the poet's mixing in radical affairs and even societies? A third, though probably less likely, possibility: was the epigram on Burke a well-travelled squib, maybe orally transmitted, that Burns knew without having seen Eaton's publication?

Burns's slippery relationship to things Irish becomes more pronounced as well as more seriously contentious in a third example, his 'The Dumfries Volunteers'. As with the texts already mentioned this song belongs to the period of the mid-1790s, a time for Burns of certainly veiled, but perhaps also vexed, allegiances. 'The Dumfries Volunteers' might appear, on the face of things, a loyalist patriotic song written for the local volunteer militia that Burns, along with at least one other friend of previous reformist, pro-French sympathies, the aforementioned John Syme, had joined at the end of January 1795. Burns's text was published first of all in the Edinburgh *Evening Courant* in May amidst the spring-time fears of French invasion. As Liam McIlvanney shows in his path-breaking work on Burns's relationship to Ulster, however, strong reaction against the text surfaced when it was published in the *Belfast News-Letter* for 16th-19th October 1795, followed by a reprinting in the *Northern Star* for 29th October-2nd November where poetic response from that United Irishmen organ was furiously condemnatory.^[11] A text placed immediately following 'The Dumfries Volunteers' accused Burns of dipping 'th' dish wi' slee D[unda]s' [Henry Dundas even more than William Pitt, in the government administration, being seen as having war-mongered with France and as being particularly opposed to democratic reform by those on the radical left]. The same text accused the poet of betraying the democratic legacy of the already iconic Scottish lawyer, Thomas Muir, who had been transported to Botany Bay for sedition in 1794. Burns's fall from grace in Ulster radical circles, then, could not have been more resounding, though McIlvanney argues persuasively that 'The Dumfries Volunteers' was written in such a way as to be 'completely consistent with the Real Whig ethos of British radicalism'.^[12] Certainly the song's opening line, 'Does haughty Gaul invasion threat' sees France

in its old, pre-1789 imperial garb of long British memory and the text also suggests that Great Britain should bring about any necessary political reform internally: 'For never but by British hands/Must British wrongs be righted'.^[13] It also perhaps proposes the merits of limited monarchy as it ends:

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!^[14]

With that final cry of 'THE PEOPLE' it is perhaps not too difficult to imagine Burns and his friend William Maxwell, who had been present at the execution of King Louis XVI in Paris and the one notable man in Dumfries reformist circles who had refused to join the volunteers but remained Burns's close friend, singing a very different, highly subversive version of the song's final stanza in their cups and behind closed doors.^[15] However, there is no actual evidence for any such occasion and McIlvanney's defence of Burns's song as showing his more moderate reformism is the most that can be done to dissociate Burns from the taint of a (usually supposed to be) reactionary loyalism.

What McIlvanney's treatment also does, however, is interestingly propose that loyalism (encompassing perhaps a 'Real Whig' branch) in the 1790s might be more nuanced and less monolithic than some accounts of the period have hitherto suggested. Even so, what should be clear is Burns's recoiling, perhaps following his earlier retreat if we take his cancelled Irish ode into account, from the idea of all-out 'anti-British' rebellion, aided and abetted from outside. By contrast, however, the United Irishmen were to retain their amenability to French intervention and the idea of the British Isles becoming divided into three democratic republics. Clearly, even if Burns's loyalism has previously been over-read, there is cold blue water between the reformism of Burns and that of the United Irishmen, and this disjunction between the two turns out to be a very useful way of placing Burns's political complexion by 1795.^[16] An interesting aside in addition here is that Burns's 'Real Whig loyalism' as adduced for 'The Dumfries Volunteers' might also throw into doubt his long disputed authorship of 'The Tree of Liberty'. During the 1790s this emblem famously became associated with the oath pledged by the United Irishmen, 'to dethrone all kings and plant the Tree of Liberty.'^[17] Most commentators agree that 'The Dumfries Volunteers' and 'The Tree of Liberty' are from around the same time, and so between the two it is a case of Real Whig pro-monarchism versus out-and-out radical republicanism. Can these texts of very different sentiment both be by Burns? If they are can we ever fix the poet's politics with any certainty? One Scottish poet who certainly did use the liberty tree poetically with all its revolutionary connotation was Alexander Geddes (1737-1802) in his 'Ode to the German

Despots, on their burning the Tree of Liberty' from the mid-1790s.^[18] Geddes remained utterly outspoken and unwavering in his support for revolutionary France and was also interestingly expressive on Irish affairs, in a way that counterpoints Burns's near-silence. The London-based Geddes penned in this period 'The Irish ça ira', 'Ode to Hibernia' and 'Ode to the Hon. Thomas Pelam', all poems which complain of Ireland's abject colonial subjugation by Britain.^[19] Geddes, then, might be taken as a gauge of Burns's more moderate reformist involvement of the 1790s so far as the British Isles, in which Ireland is such a touchstone, are concerned.

If the 1790s are sparse but intriguing regarding Burns's engagement or lack of it with Ireland, the rather different atmosphere of the mid-1780s provides, arguably, no clearer a point of contact. Appearing first in *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable and Honorable, the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons' opens:

Ye Irish Lords, ye knights an' squires,
Wha represent our Burghs an' Shires,
An' dousely manage our affairs
In Parliament,
To you a simple Bardie's pray'rs
Are humbly sent.^[20]

One of the manoeuvres rather too little noticed in the 'Kilmarnock' edition of 1786 is the way in which Burns's bardic persona is employed to counterpoint an unnecessarily complicated (because corrupt) polity. In this vein, 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer' refers to the representation of some Scottish seats in parliament by Irish Protestant peers. To a large extent a legacy of Jacobite times when certain Scottish peers were not to be trusted, this situation was also conveniently carried on through the ensuing decades of the eighteenth century as a means of curtailing what was believed to be anyway the over-dominating presence of the Scots in British politics. The text is one of several in the 'Kilmarnock' edition that diagnoses institutional corruption in the British polity. Specifically, in this poem Burns is complaining against parliament's Wash Act (1784) which had effectively raised taxes paid by Scottish distillers who were making strong incursions in the English market at this time so as to allow English (gin) distillers to reclaim a more competitive platform. As a result, according to Burns, the Scottish whisky industry is actually unfairly hampered with its more difficult reach towards its southern market. Leaving aside the complexities of this rather technical economic debate, we might simply notice that Burns's poetic response was to propose that 'Freedom and Whisky gang thegither', and that this represents a part of Burns's positive engagement with the Scottish highlands, a project carried through much more extensively across his career than in any previous lowland writer.^[21]

'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer' in its typical (pseudo-drunk) digressiveness notices Scottish highland troops from the 1760s fighting for the Hanoverians, specifically alluding to their military service in the previous colonies in North America with the implication that they might as well return there or otherwise emigrate from a despoiled Scotland. The reader is reminded of the service rendered to King George by these men, fierce and buoyed up only by a 'highlan gill'.^[22] If not quite an incitement to rebellion, the text suggests that the Scots might easily become disillusioned by the British project of the eighteenth century. Particularly interesting amidst all of this is Burns's rehabilitation of the highland soldier. For his Scots poetry predecessor, Robert Fergusson, only a decade and a half before in the early 1770s, the Scottish Gael in martial service to the Sassenach and his whisky (helping bring about the grotesqueness of his appearance), is a figure of abject ridicule.^[23] Burns's poem counterpoints the power-grubbing, British parliament including in keynote fashion Irish aristocracy, versus the simply virtuous, hardy highland soldier. Albeit that the poem is interested in a specifically Scottish situation, it is perhaps odd to modern eyes that Burns does not make connection between the (actually more pertinent) Irish Protestant ascendancy over the Gaelic speaking Catholic Irish (to say nothing of their same over-lordship to Irish dissenters). Such a Gaelic connection would have been rather easy to make since down to Burns's time and beyond the 'Erse' speaking peoples of Ireland and Scotland were often treated by Anglophone (lowland Scottish as much as anywhere else) culture as essentially continuous and as one and the same thing. Burns's re-usage of the highlander, then, might be said to be ultimately Hanoverian-centric as it reminds us of the great service of the post-Jacobite highland soldier, where by contrast Fergusson saw the Gaelic police force of Edinburgh drawn from former soldiers to represent a debased figure (because now standing *volte face* towards a Stuart loyal culture that had been largely extirpated in the *Gaelhealtachd*). What we also see is Burns, as would be the case later *a propos* his American and Irish odes, passing by the more specifically pertinent Irish connection with regard to corrupt political and cultural imbalances in the British body polity.

Like many post-eighteenth century writers, Burns's relation to authentic Celtic culture, whatever that may be, and whether Scottish, Irish or anything else, is an entangled area. Seamus Heaney draws some very interesting conclusions with regard to Burns's 'The Vision' (1785), remarking that '[t]his is Burns' *aisling*, and its transcultural allegiance to the Gaelic heritage of Scotland is made clear by his calling each section of it a *duan*.'^[24] It might or might not be an objection to say that Burns did not have any direct knowledge of the *aisling* of Ireland (its overwhelmingly predominant locus), or indeed any possible Scottish form of the same. It is true enough that the dream-vision of Ayrshire, complicatedly past and present, granted by his muse Coila to the narrator in the poem is one of the weirdest, most mystical moments in Burns's canon. There is clearly some act of 'transcultural' Celtic-bardic status being conferred in the text and so Heaney is right to make sense of it in such general terms. We come back to the question, however, of

particular authenticity. Burns derives his idea of what a duan is from his reading of James Macpherson's Ossian, as his own note to the poem tells us, and Macpherson's usage of Ulster Gaelic materials in his work can be read with much justification as an act of cultural colonialism.^[25] Is Burns, like perhaps many another Anglophone writer, merely a later part of the aggressive post-eighteenth century British appropriation of Gaelic culture? Alternatively, does he fruitfully rework and re-implicate something that might genuinely be called 'Celtic' in Scottish or Irish terms? As with the hyphenated culture of Ulster-Scots writing, which has so often looked to Burns, Celto-British literary identity in Burns and many other writers might either be seen to be contaminated in its readily assumed instability, or alternatively its hybridity might be accepted as a proper state of being. More work needs to be done on the cultural politics of all this, on Burns and 'Celticism', on Burns and Britishness, as well as on Burns and Ireland and Ulster (including reception studies). For a poet whose certain cultural ownership has been more vehemently attested than most, Burns still poses crucial and largely unresolved questions in British, Irish and Celtic history and identity.^[26]

NOTES

[1] A small example, though one that is often over-read by the modern, novice reader of Burns is to be found in his 'Death and Dr Hornbook' (1785). The lines, 'the Deil's in hell,/Or Dublin city' (James Kinsley (ed.), *Burns: Poems and Songs* (London, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 60), represent for readers a puzzle, though editors have not, so far as I am aware, attempted to elucidate the cultural significance here, if any, of the Irish city. It sounds as though there might be some reference, perhaps, to a traditional song, but such cannot easily be found. The most likely explanation turns out to be the old Scandinavian name for Dublin of 'Divelin[a]', as a piece of antiquarian lore that Burns, with his extensive interest in the diabolic across his oeuvre, has come across. Perhaps *a propos* also, is the legend that if one walks around St Mary's church in Dublin at midnight the Devil will appear.

[2] Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), p. 820.

[3] *Sales Catalogue for Puttock and Simpson* (May 1861), 'First Day's Sale', p. 24.

[4] See the lines 'No more the Despot of Columbia's race./A tyrant's proudest insults braved' (ll.10-11) in Kinsley, p. 580, where 'Hibernia's race' in the cancelled text would seemingly savour the thought of revolutionary uprising in Ireland as had previously been accomplished in America.

[5] Published first in R.H. Cromek (ed.), *Reliques of Robert Burns* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1803), pp.156-8; see *The Letters of Robert Burns* Vol. II [1790-1796] edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson; 2nd edn. edited by G. Ross Roy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 297-8.

- [6] *Notes & Queries* 5th March, 1874, pp. 242-3.
- [7] Frederic Kent, 'Burns Epigrams Garnered by John Syme' in *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, VII, 1932, p. 11.
- [8] See Gerard Carruthers, 'Robert Burns's Epigram on Edmund Burke published in *Politics for the People*, October 1794' in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXXIII-XXXIV (2004), pp. 469-471.
- [9] *Politics for the People*, II, No. XVIII (1794), p. 286.
- [10] See *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXXIII-XXXIV, pp. 470-71.
- [11] Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002), pp. 238-40.
- [12] McIlvanney, p. 237.
- [13] Kinsley, p. 604.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 605.
- [15] See Robert D. Thornton, *William Maxwell to Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), pp. 177-9.
- [16] I am grateful to Carol Baraniuk, in her usual insightful way, for this point; see her 'Ulster's Burns? James Orr, the Bard of Ballycarry' in *Review of Scottish Culture* No. 19 (2007), pp. 54-62, for a reading of Burns's relationship to Ulster-Scots poetry that begins to bring out Orr, and by extension other writers of the period, from under Burns's all too indiscriminately read shadow.
- [17] I am grateful to Norrie Paton for this point. See Kinsley, pp. 721-3 for the poem; see also Gerard Carruthers & Norman Paton, 'Did Burns Write "The Tree of Liberty"?' in Johnny Rodger & Gerard Carruthers (eds.), *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21st Century* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2009), pp. 242-56.
- [18] See in Essex County Records (Chelmsford) D/DP Z.57
- [19] For the first two poems, see manuscript copies in Essex County Records (Chelmsford) D/DP Z.57; *Ode to the Hon. Thomas Pelham, Esq.* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1795).
- [20] Kinsley, p. 149.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- [22] *Ibid.*
- [23] See especially Robert Fergusson's poem 'Leith Races' (1773), stanzas VIII-X.
- [24] Seamus Heaney 'Burns's Art-Speech' in Robert Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns & Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 231.
- [25] Kinsley, p. 80.
- [26] For a typically erudite and thought-provoking recent essay in the area see Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Burns and Ireland' in Rodger & Carruthers (eds.), *Fickle Man*, pp. 267-308.