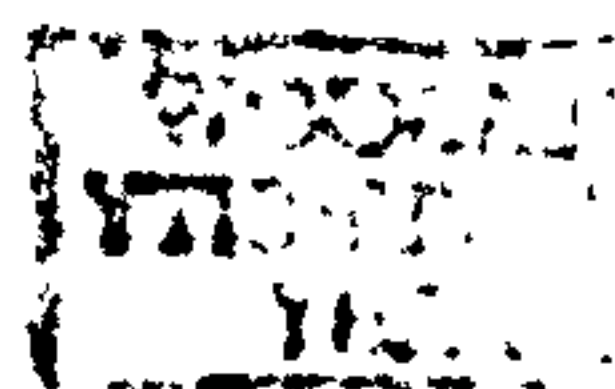


# **The Invention of Scottish Literature During the Long Eighteenth Century.**

A thesis presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, April 2001 by **Gerard Charles Carruthers**.



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# **TEXT BOUND INTO THE SPINE**

If conjectures and opinions formed at a distance, have not sufficient authority in the history of mankind, the domestic antiquities of every nation must, for this very reason, be received with caution. They are, for the most part, the mere conjectures or the fictions of subsequent ages; and where at first they contained some semblance of truth, they still vary with the imagination of those by whom they are transmitted, and in every generation receive a different form.

Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), Part II. Section I.



## ***Abstract.***

**“The Invention of Scottish Literature During the Long Eighteenth Century” examines the limited place in the canon traditionally allowed to creative writing in Scotland during this period and the overarching reading of creative impediment applied to it in the light of Scotland’s fraught and not easily to be homogenised national history and identity. It interrogates the dominant mode of what it terms the Scottish literary critical tradition and finds this tradition to have many shortcomings as a result of its prioritising of literary and cultural holism. In examining the Scots poetry revival of the eighteenth century the thesis challenges the traditional identification of a populist and beset mode, and finds eighteenth-century poetry in Scots to be actually much more catholic in its literary connections. These more catholic “British” connections are reappraised alongside the distinctively Scottish accents of the poets Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns. The poetry of James Thomson, it is also argued, fits more easily into a heterogeneous Scottish identity than is sometimes thought and the work of Thomson is connected with the poets in Scots to show a network of influence and allegiance which is more coherent than has been traditionally allowed. Similarly, the primitivist agenda of the Scottish Enlightenment in creative literature is examined to demonstrate the way in which this provides license for reclaiming elements of the historically fraught or “backward” Scottish identity (thus an essentially conservative, patriotic element within the Scottish Enlightenment cultural voice is emphasised). Also, with the writers of poetry in Scots, as well as with Thomson, and with those whose work comes under the intellectual sponsorship of Enlightenment primitivism such as Tobias Smollett, James Macpherson, James Beattie and others we chart a movement from the age of Augustanism and neoclassicism to that of sensibility and proto-Romanticism. From Burns’s work to that of Walter Scott, John Galt and James Hogg we highlight Scottish writers making creative capital from the difficult and fractured Scottish identity and seeing this identity as, in part, reflecting cultural tensions and fractures which are more widely coined furth of their own country. The connecting threads of the thesis are those narratives in Scottish literature of the period which show the retrieval and analysis of seemingly lost or receding elements of Scottish identity. Creative innovation and re-energisation rather than surrender and loss are what the thesis finally diagnoses in Scottish literature of the long eighteenth century.**

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## **Introduction.**

The following thesis attempts to be an essay in literary criticism and a history of Scottish literature. It examines the period of the long eighteenth-century, a time from the 1690s to the 1820s when the constitutional volatilities of Scotland and Britain are reflected in the cultural currents of the literary expression of Scotland. These cultural currents are to be found in the nationalist reflexes of poetry in Scots from early in the eighteenth-century particularly honed, in the first instance, in the work of Allan Ramsay. They are to be found in the work of James Thomson whose poetry makes reference to Scottish cultural identity in less obviously “patriotic” fashion, but in terms of a “Whiggish” and “British” literary and cultural identity, which is as deeply Scottish as the revivalist and Jacobite-imbued literary identity of Ramsay. Though there are points of contact in the literary identities of Ramsay and Thomson, as we shall see, these two writers cannot be placed together in an absolutely coherent and univocal version of Scottish identity. This “lack of wholeness” or “fractured identity” in the Scottish literary context is something which has deeply worried modern Scottish criticism. However, while Scottish criticism is accurate to some extent in its diagnosis of a literary heritage which is heterogeneous, it has tended, paradoxically, to decry and to base a too rigid canonicity upon the observation of multifaceted Scottishness, and this has extended not only to the excision from the canon almost completely of James Thomson and other “Anglo-Scots” but also to exercising such canonicity in constrictive fashion to their accepted canonical writers such as Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns. To take the most obvious example of this constriction, these writers are seen to be less skilled, and even in an *a priori* state of confusion and under-development, when they write in a mode which is predominantly English as opposed to Scots (a state of affairs where the canonisers all too glibly pass over the fact that each of these writers operate in a Scots-English language in their “Scots” productions). Much of what follows will attempt not only to rehabilitate Thomson as a “true” Scottish writer, but to expand the canonicity of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns. That is to say, their literary resourcefulness and various identities will be seen to be more articulate and articulated in both British



and Scottish contexts. Utilising the techniques of literary criticism and literary history, I will attempt to argue that Scottish literary identity is creatively more innovative and culturally less exclusive than is suggested in the predominant narrative of Scottish criticism applied to the eighteenth century and Scottish literary history, generally, during much of the twentieth century.

My treatment will begin with an interrogation of the construction of the dominant narratives of the Scottish critical tradition during the twentieth century so as to dissent from the notion of any absolutely “right” way to be a Scottish writer in my eighteenth-century period of concern, as well as in relation to periods prior to or subsequent to this period. In particular, I will oppose what I deem to be “absolutist” versions of linguistic, formal and political Scottish literary and cultural identities. It will be my argument throughout the rest of the thesis that the positing of “absolutist” identities has undersold the literary achievements of the *traditions* of Scottish literature and expressions of various and, indeed, variegated identities during the long eighteenth century, dislocating these traditions especially from the cognate developments of western literature, generally, which Scottish literature follows more closely than some critics would suggest and where Scottish literature actually sometimes plays a *leading* part in these European developments. In this light particularly, the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment, which has often been read as banefully Anglifying, deserves some rehabilitation as a primer of the European age of sensibility and proto-romanticism. Not only this, but the absolutist separation of the strands of eighteenth-century Scottish culture, into the likes of Enlightenment and “vernacular” has tended to underplay the way in which these strands collaborate and interact, even where they do sometimes clash in their values. Notwithstanding such clashes, it is my contention that the evidence for the harmfulness of the multiplicity of Scottish cultural strands during this period is fairly slight. The poetry of “Ossian”, the drama of John Home, the poetry of James Beattie and the novels of Smollett and Mackenzie have frequently been read as constituting almost an anti-canon in eighteenth-century Scottish literature, whereas in fact each of these texts can be seen to reveal a concern to make sense of Scottish literature and the Scottish nation in highly inventive ways.



The most overarching way in which the creativity sponsored by the Scottish Enlightenment collaborates with the remaking of Scottish literary and cultural identity is in its strong discourse of primitivism, which, while often neo-classical in many of its aspects, helps retread and revalidate Scottish expression from a seeming position of weakness. Similarly, the fiction of Walter Scott, James Hogg and John Galt in the early nineteenth-century can be seen to make creative capital from a cultural situation and history which is fraught. Where critics in the past have read this fraughtness as almost totally disabling (especially in the case of Scott), I see the fiction of these writers as comprising the expert handling rather than facile resolving of difficult material. These writers round off the period of the long eighteenth century in being heirs of the Enlightenment and of the protagonists of the Romantic movement.

In short, I see the period of the long eighteenth century as much more progressive in literary terms than has often been the case in the narratives of confusion and recession peddled by much mainstream Scottish literary history. I chart the “invention” of Scottish literary canonicity in modern criticism and the invention - to a large extent the creative inventiveness - of writers in the long eighteenth-century in coming to terms, as Scottish writers have always had to do with the wider currents - “British” and European - in which they are to be placed. No coherent narrative or singular tradition will emerge from my treatment, as I believe this has been the philosophers stone upon the pursuit of which much past Scottish criticism founders in ungenerous treatment of Scottish literary achievement. Judgements of literary, political and even national worth in relation to Scottish literature are valid judgements up to a point, but as I believe the history of Scottish literature in the long eighteenth-century which follows will show, these judgements have been too conclusive. I seek to liberate the literature of Scotland in the long eighteenth-century from over-discriminate ideological conclusions and to bring to it a properly refined literary and historical judgement which is much less foreclosed and, indeed, which eschews sectarian judgement. In what might seem to be a somewhat old-fashioned gesture, I seek to analyse this literature as literature without the *a priori* assumptions of confusion and even bad faith which I believe

have resulted from an unnecessarily univocalised and unworkable version of Scottish literature. I seek, then, to bring some firmness of literary and historical judgement to the literature of the long eighteenth-century, but to *refuse the overarching narratives* which have too often been applied to this literature and which, as I will demonstrate, have constrained both full-sightedness and flexibility in literary and historical judgement.



## Chapter One: The Modern Making of the Scottish Literary Canon and the Problem of the Long Eighteenth Century.<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Trocchi alleged that “Hugh MacDiarmid” (Christopher Murray Grieve), the most influential poet and man of letters in twentieth century Scotland, had verbally abused him in 1962 as “cosmopolitan scum.”<sup>2</sup> If true, in MacDiarmid’s choice of insult, arguably, there was conscious racism toward the Italian-Scot. Certainly, it comprised a fashionable Soviet term of abuse at this time, which, given MacDiarmid’s enduring adherence to communism, lends veracity to Trocchi’s claim. But the most important thing it reveals about MacDiarmid’s mindset is its long-standing cultural essentialism. MacDiarmid, along with Edwin Muir, led Scotland from the 1920s and ’30s in cultural essentialism, or the belief that Scottish culture is to be seen in relation to a state of idealised entity. If we take MacDiarmid at his metaphoric word, what he was attacking was impurity - the impurity which surfaces in the absence of simply coherent - or, paradoxically enough in MacDiarmid’s view as we shall see, incoherent - belonging. The process of Scottish literary canonisation during the twentieth century exuded and excluded a great deal of “cosmopolitan scum,” and prioritised the “local” and “natural” rootedness of writers. This chapter considers the formation of the dominant, over-discriminating, essentialist Scottish literary canon-mould during the latter decades of the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century, amidst which construction the contribution of MacDiarmid was pivotal. It considers this canon-mould particularly in relation to the constrictions which it imposes upon freer evaluation of the circumstances in which literature is created. This task demands a somewhat diffuse approach prior to a tightening of focus upon my special period of interest, the long literary eighteenth century in Scotland running from the milieu of Allan Ramsay to the milieu of Walter Scott.

Consideration of the formation of modern Scottish literary canonicity ought to begin with

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of a small part of the material in this chapter appeared as “The Construction of the Scottish Critical Tradition” in Neil McMillan and Kirsten Stirling (eds), *Odd Alliances* (Glasgow, 1999), pp.52-65.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster* (Edinburgh, 1991), p.108.



Scotland's rediscovery, in the late nineteenth-century, of its "Celtic" identity. Paul Yves Pezron first uses the term "Celtic" to encompass Scottish elements of identity in 1703, but it is not until the late nineteenth century that Scotland attempts explicitly to reclaim its Celtic identity.<sup>3</sup> The seeds of this claim lie furth of Scotland, to begin with in the work of another Frenchman, Ernest Renan, whose fashionable, regionalising, post-Gallic empire work *Poetry of the Celtic Races* first appears in 1854. This work and romantic vacations spent in Brittany inspired Matthew Arnold to produce his famous lectures on Celtic literature in 1866 which were collected and published the next year as *On the Study of Celtic Literature*.<sup>4</sup> To an extent which remains today under-appreciated, the English poet and educationalist is a seminal figure in forming the modern literary and cultural description of Scotland. A central concern of these lectures is to define the racial characteristics of "English" poetry and Arnold proposes that this comprises "Saxon honesty" allied to an "energy" derived from "Celtic" and "Roman" sources.<sup>5</sup> In perhaps their most famous moment Arnold speculates that the Celtic component particularly informs English poetry's "turn for natural magic, for catching and rendering the charm of nature in a wonderfully vivid way."<sup>6</sup> These literary genetics are pursued in aid of bolstering a sense of British identity. Arnold's formulations have to be seen in the context of his desire for British social and cultural harmony which he felt to be uncertain in the intellectually volatile second half of the European nineteenth century. Arnold champions vernacular literary studies as a cheaply accessible repository of cohesive moral and social values. Facilitating this, however, meant that Arnold had to establish a long and complex cultural pedigree which would allow the academic study of English

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<sup>3</sup> "At the dawn of our national history the proper owners of this tongue [i.e. Gaelic], the Goidels or the Gaels shared with the Picts the country now known as Scotland. The Goidels never called themselves "Celts", nor did anyone apply the name to them until, in 1703, M. Paul Yves Pezron wrote his work on the people of Brittany, entitled *Antiquité de la Nation et de Langue des Celtes, autrement appelez Gaulois*. The publication of this book drew attention to the fact that the language of Caesar's Celts was related to the tongue of Wales, and, less closely, to that of the Scottish Highlanders, and the name "Celtic", which ought to have been reserved for Brythonic or British Celts of Brittany and Wales, came to be given to the Goidels as well." Robert S. Rait, *The Making of Scotland* (London, 1929), p.2.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* Volume 9: "Lectures and Essays in Criticism", edited by R.H. Super (Ann Arbor & Toronto, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.341.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.361.



literature something approximating the venerable credibility of the classical humanities, some of whose scholarly proponents were hostile to the new subject-area (hence Arnold's identification of the "Roman" as well as the Celtic contribution to English poetry).<sup>7</sup> Arnold, a thinker of huge influence, inspires a plethora of late Victorian and Edwardian literary commentators to seek the Celtic soul of Scottish culture, and distinguish it ever more sharply from Saxon culture. Influential studies during this period include John Ross's *Scottish History and Literature* (1884) which posits the "Celtic fervour and enthusiasm" lying behind Scottish nationality and literature.<sup>8</sup> John Veitch's *The Feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry* (1887) has a title clearly signalling his primary adherence to the Arnoldian Celtic grammar.<sup>9</sup> George Douglas's *Scottish Poetry* (1911) finds in Scottish writers sometimes too much of an "academic" direction associated with (Saxon) England in contrast to "a native energy, simplicity and spontaneity" found most triumphantly in the vernacular Scots poets of the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> In each of these three examples we find a telling and characteristic elision of highland and lowland Scottish identity so that fashionable Celticism surrounds Scottish culture.

Related to the new racial-literary theoretical context of Celticism in the late nineteenth century was the Scottish branch of the "Celtic twilight" movement. At the spearhead of the new Celticism in Scotland was Patrick Geddes. The title of his carnyx-sounding periodical, the *Evergreen* magazine (1895-6), nodded vigorously in the direction of the Arnold-avowed Celtic characteristic of "closeness to nature," and neatly recalled at the same time, one of Geddes' heroes, Allan Ramsay and his great re-energising Scottish medieval poetry anthology, the *Ever-green*, of 1724. This synthesising manoeuvre on Geddes' part is another nice example of the elision of "Celtic" and Scottish lowland identity and of the contemporary and the historical situations, which the Scottish intelligentsia was bringing about from

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<sup>7</sup> For the best modern summary of Arnold's project of instituting English literature in this context, see Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848-1932* (Oxford, 1983), pp.18-58.

<sup>8</sup> John Ross, *Scottish History and Literature* (Glasgow, 1884), p.2.

<sup>9</sup> John Veitch *The Feeling for Nature in Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1887).

<sup>10</sup> George Douglas, *Scottish Poetry* (Glasgow, 1911), see pp.66-72 & p.155.



the late nineteenth century. In his keynote essay to the first *Evergreen*, Geddes saw his own ventures as part of a very inclusive Celticism:

[...] Our new “Evergreen” may here and there stimulate some newer and younger writer, and hence beside the general interests common to all men of culture; it would fain now and then add a fresh page to that widely reviving Literature of Locality to which the kindly firesides of Thrums and Zummerzset, the wilder dreamlands of Galway and Cadder-Idris, of Man and Arran are ever adding their individual tinge and glow.<sup>11</sup>

Geddes hails the move toward the “Literature of Locality” and this clearly marks him out as something of a *fin de siècle* pre-modernist. The European pre-modernist critique of civilisation derived huge force from the magisterial work of James George Frazer and Sigmund Freud - both working in the same decade as Geddes was writing - which powerfully posited a damaging post-Enlightenment rationality that had caused the west to lose touch with more primeval and regionalised cultural formation. Geddes was so intent upon racialising a similar apprehension of new decentralised prerogative, however, that strange bits are stuck to his totem pole. We see this in the passage quoted above where the literary revival in the Celtic lands extends to the “kailyard” terrain of Barrie’s Thrums. In the same year in which Geddes was writing, in 1895, J.H. Millar launched his classic attack upon the hugely popular, parochial, kailyard (or cabbage-patch) fiction of Barrie and others.<sup>12</sup>

Aside from such, arguably, indiscriminatory sleight of hand there is a more general problem in Geddes’s approach as Andrew Lang was aware. In 1897 in *Blackwood’s Magazine* writing of the “Celtic renaissance”, Lang warned, “Races have been too long mixed, and the history of race is too profoundly obscure. When we bring race into literary criticism, we dally with that unlovely fluent enchantress, Popular Science.”<sup>13</sup> Late Victorian Scotland, however, can be seen swathing itself very comfortably in its new-found Celtic blanket of racial identity. The seamlessness of this garb can best be

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<sup>11</sup> Patrick Geddes, “The Scots Renaissance” in *Evergreen: A Northern Seasonal*: 1, Spring (London, 1895), p.131.

<sup>12</sup> J.H. Millar, “The literature of the Kailyard” in *New Review*, Volume 12 (1895), pp.384-94.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Lang, “The Celtic Renaissance” in *Blackwood’s Magazine* Vol DCCCCXXVI, February 1897, p.191.



seen perhaps, in the nation's cemeteries. In Glasgow's great "Necropolis", in particular, can be found a rash of Celtic crosses dating from the period and under these (rather luxurious, "popish" icons, as it would surely have been thought only a couple of decades earlier) are buried some of the most respectable citizens - a Lord Provost here, a police Chief Constable there - of douce, Presbyterian Glasgow.<sup>14</sup> This new aesthetic trend, aided and abetted by the emergent sensibilities of *art nouveau*, represented certainly a renewed indigenous cultural confidence in Scotland. It represented also, however, a rather indiscriminating homogenisation of Scotland's self-image in that it showed the rather facile adoption of the symbols of a culture (largely centred in the highlands) which the course of Scoto-British history since the union of parliaments in 1707, and even before, had done so much to actually eradicate. In this new Frankenstein's monster of highlands and lowlands shamelessly welded together, Scotland's vision of itself at this time belonged under Lang's epithet of "popular science."

In the early decades of the twentieth century Scotland's literary criticism also continued as Celtic-inspired "popular science." Among the sub-Arnoldian literary commentators of the Edwardian period is J.C. Smith who attempts to utilise the Celtic/Saxon dichotomy in his pamphlet, "Some Characteristics of Scots Literature" (1912). He writes:

If humour implies, as it seems to do, some perceived incongruity between points of view, then Scottish humour lies above all in the perception of incongruity between the romantic and the vulgar, the general and the personal, the sacred and the profane. Some of these differences, it is not to be denied, correspond to differences between the Celtic and Saxon temperaments, and in the clash of these temperaments Scottish humour finds one of its choicest fields.<sup>15</sup>

J.C. Smith here clearly appropriates Arnold's terminology of Celtic and Saxon difference for Scotland itself rather than, in Arnold's usage, for England/Britain. In this manoeuvre, along with his subsequent

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<sup>14</sup> A traversal of Glasgow's great "city of the dead" reveals, for instance, the likes of Alexander McCall (d.1888), former Chief Constable of the city, and W.R. Arthur (d.1897), former Deputy Lieutenant of Lanark and Glasgow and Lord Provost of the city, both buried under the Celtic cross.

<sup>15</sup> J.C. Smith, "Some Characteristics of Scots Literature" published for the Scottish Branch of the English Association (London, 1912), p.7.



identification of “intense vividness of detail” and a marked propensity for the supernatural in Scottish literature, J.C. Smith paves the way for George Gregory Smith’s rubric of “antisyzygy” in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919).<sup>16</sup> Gregory Smith’s book appears in the same year as the Treaty of Versailles is encouraging the self-confidence and cultural autonomy of smaller nations across Europe and, against this background, Smith is keen to define an essential and enduring *Scottishness*. In turns, a bewilderingly flippant and very serious writer (as though the embodiment himself of his thesis of manic Scottish instability), Smith identifies the central trait of Scottish history and literature in the formulation of “Caledonian Antisyzygy”. Under this label he signals the two alternating “moods” or the “polar twins” of the Scottish muse which are a realistic propensity, at its best a fine presentation of detail saved from “antiquarian” pedantry by a keen portrayal of “movement”, and a fantastic propensity.<sup>17</sup> In an oxymoronic configuration where these two propensities co-exist, often in a “sudden jostling of contraries”, the hallmark of Scottish literature is identified from the time of the medieval makars down to Robert Louis Stevenson.<sup>18</sup> Gregory Smith infers that this configuration is testimony to an enduring “medieval” outlook, encompassing both rationality and irrationality, where “the Scot, in that medieval fashion which takes all things as granted, is at ease in both ‘rooms of life’.”<sup>19</sup> Smith, then, argues for a sense of Scottish literary and cultural continuity not usually, argued for so strongly by commentators before or after him, given such largescale disruptions as the Reformation of the 1560s, the Union of crowns in 1603 and the Union of Parliaments in 1707. At the same time, however, Smith’s formulation contains within it cognisance of such cultural turbulence. At one point, for instance, he writes of, “the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability, which is another way of saying

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10 and *passim*; George Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London, 1919).

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Smith, see pp.4-27 (as well as the rest of his book) for Gregory Smith’s very diffuse description of the workings of “Caledonian Antisyzygy.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

that he has made allowance for new conditions.”<sup>20</sup> Smith couches the turbulent Scottish cultural mindset, then, in positive terms; he describes it even as a kind of creative dialectic:

The Scot is not a quarrelsome man, but he has a fine sense of the value of provocation, and in the clash of things and words has often found a spiritual tonic. Does any other man combine so strangely the severe and tender in his character, or forgo the victory of the most relentless logic at the sudden bidding of superstition? Does literature anywhere, of this small compass, show such a mixture of contraries as his in outlook, subject and method; real life and romance, everyday fact and things supernatural, things holy and things profane, gentle and simple, convention and “cantrip”, thistles and thistledown?<sup>21</sup>

Such questions, of course, are unanswerable: which literature and culture of the many varieties in the world is the most varied or complex? All and none of them is surely the correct answer.

Gregory Smith in the quotation above is working hard (and rightly, to some extent) to make creative and mental virtues out of cultural heterogeneity and the huge discontinuities in Scottish cultural history. In spite of clearly inheriting a critical lexicon for Scottish literature which can be traced back to Matthew Arnold, George Gregory Smith himself expresses some doubt in his book as to the force of a Celtic component (and, by implication also, then, an antithetical Saxon component) enduringly informing Scottish literature in English.<sup>22</sup> Instead, Gregory Smith, as we have seen, alights upon the “medieval” roots of the special contrariety he observes in the culture and literature of Scotland. Gregory Smith’s notion of Scotland’s enduring medieval configuration in Scottish life and literature is, however, dangerously anachronistic and exclusivist. One of the dangers it represents is the insistence on a more or less static (though paradoxically unstable) Scottish mindset; all too easily it excises from the Scottish cultural *mentalite* manifestly non-medieval, unantisyzygiacal Scottish expression. In a contemporary review of Gregory Smith’s book, T.S. Eliot wrote:

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19-20.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory Smith, see pp.27-9.



A book which contains no discussion of Scottish philosophy, which barely mentions the names of Hume and Reid, and only reports the personal dominance of Dugald Stewart in Edinburgh, does not pretend to be a study of the Scotch mind. It is only the Scotch mind in literature and belles-lettres that is charted.<sup>23</sup>

Eliot hints here at his unease over Gregory Smith's approach. In its premises, as Eliot no doubt realised, Gregory Smith's book *does* pretend to be a treatment of the Scottish mind. As Eliot also signals, Gregory Smith's treatment is unrooted in any real consideration of the historical mentality of Scotland. This is true in relation to the medieval mindset which Gregory Smith claims to find so enduring, the mindset of the Reformation, say, or the example the philosophically-literate Eliot picks out, the mindset of the Scottish Enlightenment. Gregory Smith's antisyzygy gestures towards both the history and "psychology" (or mindset) of Scottish culture, but provides no detailed and sensitively coordinated treatment of these things. What antisyzygy actually makes for is a moribund ideal where the deeply enduring Scottish outlook or mentality is essentially oblivious to intellectual and historical change except in a kind of constant reactive mania. The postulation of Scotland's quirky "medieval" character, to a great extent, sets the nation apart from the cultural history and development of the rest of Western Europe. Gregory Smith's cleverly loose derivative of Arnoldian racial literary identification which he moulds around the undoubted fact of frequent national turbulence, then, leads to an identification of Scottish culture and literature which is unusually eccentric.

Gregory Smith's logic ensures that he largely excises from the canon of "true" (i.e. antisyzygical) Scottish literary mentality two of the most significant shaping epochs in Scotland: the Reformation and the Enlightenment. He writes:

We call to mind the preaching and arguing Scot of the seventeenth century, who placed impossible barriers to the poet's free passage from the one to the other [of Scottish literature's two moods]; and the neo-classical Scot of

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<sup>23</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Was there a Scottish Literature?" in *The Athenaeum* August 1st 1919, p.680.

the eighteenth century, who while admitting that on occasion the supernatural and the natural might have, as it were, a drawing-room introduction, had no desire to promote their closer acquaintance. Neither of these attitudes represents the true feeling of Scottish literature [...] <sup>24</sup>

Certainly these two *milieux* in Scotland (as elsewhere) are not always as widely sympathetic to literature as they might be. The rather poor Scottish tradition in theatre is a result to some extent surely, of the barriers placed in its way by puritanical elements in the reformed Scottish church. Gregory Smith, with his characteristic wit, also rightly points to the sometimes rigid literary formulaicism of the *literati* amidst the neo-classical predilections of the Scottish Enlightenment. What Gregory Smith is doing, however, is locking the two *milieux* out almost completely. By definition, the two *milieux* represent, at best, a toppling over on to the rational side of the Scottish cultural psyche. For Gregory Smith, the period of “neo-classicism,” or Enlightenment, or the age of the “Northern Augustans” sees a resistance to creativity. (Gregory Smith’s introduction of the latter piece of terminology marks the first modern identification of Enlightenment Scotland as an alien, English orientation in culture.) The result of Enlightenment influence is that at a time “when other literatures were in a condition of flux, Scots clung to classical ideals.” <sup>25</sup> What we begin to glimpse here is Gregory Smith’s bias toward the Romantic movement as representing the period *par excellence* of literary imagination. (And it might be added that Gregory Smith’s conception of the “medieval” mind, at home in “the two rooms of life” looks not unlike some of the ideas of the medieval period thrown up by Romanticism - particularly in its Gothic tendencies.) Gregory Smith confirms his predilection as he takes cheer from the fact that Scotland at least helped in leading English literature “back to the fountains of Romance.” <sup>26</sup> Like the magi worshipping the godhead, Scotland contributes three “gifts” to the new English literary sensibility: a heightened awareness to nature (seen, most prominently, in the poetry of James Thomson); the historic, anti-classical materials of the ballads; and James Macpherson’s “Ossian”

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<sup>24</sup> Gregory Smith, p.37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.203.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.



poetry embodied by a re-emphasising of chivalric or heroic ideals.<sup>27</sup> Scotland, then, in its essential, touchstone nature of “antisyzygy” is predisposed toward creative imagination along medieval and Romantic lines (where both these sensibilities, it is clear from Gregory Smith’s treatment, take proper cognisance of non-rational spheres of experience). With the Enlightenment, however, immovable “neo-classical” rationality at home causes the migration of wilder loosely “natural” (a term which seems to be interchangeable with - though not an exact synonym for - “fantastic”) Scottish imaginative ideals. These migrate to where they are appreciated in the wider movement of Romance generally: in England and further afield.

Gregory Smith’s model is problematic in its obsessive local holism. The Romantic age can be read, in part, as a reaction against the ages of rationalism and Enlightenment which had predominated in Europe from the end of the seventeenth century. We see this reaction in the Scottish context in the proto-Romantic exemplars which Gregory Smith picks out. For Gregory Smith, however, these exemplars are seen not to provide much Romantic purchase in Scotland itself. They may be very widely influential in Europe, but count for little in Scotland. This though is a difficult claim to sustain so absolutely. Thomson, as we shall see, with his love of nature, was a poet very much admired by and influential upon Burns. The Ossianic spirit of heroism and the ballads contribute in no small measure to the hugely successful narrative poetry of Walter Scott. Unlike England - with Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron - it is true, there is not such a great outpouring in Scotland of Romantic genius in poetry. Scotland in the same period though, has two writers, Burns and Scott, of equal genius to the English Romantics, and equally receptive to the Scottish proto-Romantic influences which Gregory Smith identifies. If one were to play with numbers, the Scottish quotient of genius in this period is higher in proportion to that of England (and might be seen to be much higher if we press claims for Byron being half-Scottish). What Gregory Smith seems to be perplexed over is the way in which Enlightenment Edinburgh constitutes an enduringly powerful intellectual and cultural centre at a

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, see pp.155-185.



time when England has no such comparable centre. This can be seen to be true again when we think of the way in which the achievements of both Burns and Scott are centred around (in the case of the first even manipulated by) the Scottish metropolis: Burns in the “heaven-taught ploughman” laudation by Edinburgh salon-society, an image which he was never entirely to shake off; Scott with his very clear roots in the legalistic strand of Edinburgh culture which was so integral to the Enlightenment there.

One might ask, why the Scottish experience should be exactly the same as, or be governed by, the “normative” English experience? The answer, of course, is that it need not be, but Gregory Smith’s idolisation of the English Romantics, and most especially his perception of their unfettered creativity, leads him to ask why Scotland did not enjoy exactly the same kind of poetry. Burns and Scott, by the time Gregory Smith was writing in the early twentieth century, had both been largely excised from the central trunk of (English) Romanticism - mainly by dint of their perceived peculiar (introverted) Scottish interests in language and history. We see Gregory Smith pointing to these Scottish peculiarities in the two writers. Of Burns, Gregory Smith makes the claim, that, utilising local materials, “he made the best, the very best of what had been, and there the matter ended.”<sup>28</sup> Burns in his accomplishment as a literary artist “completed the edifice of Scottish poetry” and permitted no-one to follow, his genius confirming Scottish poetry in its historical habit.<sup>29</sup> Gregory Smith speculates that had Burns been less great, then Scottish poetry afterwards might have had the confidence to be more innovative. Strikingly humorous as always, Gregory Smith has it that “Orpheus Caledonius by looking back has been denied his Eurydice.”<sup>30</sup> Again we see Gregory Smith’s preoccupation with holism (and it is, as always, a paradoxical one). Burns uses up all the available literary (and presumably other cultural) materials of Scotland “and there the matter ended.” In one sense here, we might well argue that Gregory Smith is right in that the old modes in which Burns operated in such as the “habbie Simpson” stanza were

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p.135.

rendered largely obsolete and unfashionable by the new stanzaic vehicles of lyrical Romanticism. More generally, the internationalism of Romanticism, under the largescale forces of disruption in the western world which fed it, quite precisely traumatised and superseded older versions of unitary national culture or voice to some extent. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that attempts by many nineteenth-century writers to mimic the poetry of Burns were doomed to being highly anachronistic in form and in their insistence upon a simple, solid image of Scotland. Scotland was already becoming highly volatile and problematic even as Burns wrote. In the light of Gregory Smith's awareness of the bardolatry of Burns in the nineteenth-century, we can infer, he reads Burns, as having used up all the remaining scraps of Scottish material in a greedy, joy-riding act of speeding toward the terminus of poetry in Scots. Two general points of counterweight, however, should be borne in mind. On the one hand there is continuity in Scottish literature after Burns. We see this quite simply, for example, in the case of James Hogg, who is himself a formidable poet in Scots, but who, more pertinently takes the critique of the extreme Calvinist mindset found in "Holy Willie's Prayer" and elsewhere in Burns and writes around this theme one of the greatest of all Scottish (and perhaps European Romantic) novels, *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Also, even as he identifies - and favours - the internationalising impetus of Romanticism, which calls into question so many of the old semi-certainties about artistic location, Gregory Smith seems to wish Scotland's literature to retain some kind of tight continuity and coherence which cannot, in fact, be legislated for, according to his own model of literary history as it moves in the Romantic age.

We see Gregory Smith's dualistic urge in relation to the "age of romance" causing him to strike simultaneously a note of celebration and regret in relation to Walter Scott:

No-one has shown a wider knowledge and a deeper sympathy with the national life; no-one has understood so fully or expressed so happily the character of his countrymen. It is Scotland's good fortune that, by reason of his literary talent, his personality, and the opportunities offered in the early nineteenth century, he became the mouthpiece of Scotticism to the world of letters. His message has perhaps meant more, spiritually, to Europe than to



his native land...<sup>31</sup>

Again, then, Scotland provides for the development of European literature (in relation to Scott, presumably, the many great novelists who are inspired by his historical methodology), while regarding Scott's achievement as little in itself (so the implication goes). A simple objection can be immediately raised here. Scott inspired two fine contemporary novelists, John Galt and James Hogg. The achievements of these two writers, however, have only really come to light in more reliable and extensive textual editions during the twentieth century and as Scottish literary studies has developed as an area of scholarship generally. Gregory Smith is aware of both writers, but his scant references to Galt seem to suggest that he sees this writer as very much more minor than he was. If Gregory Smith provides no real discussion of particular Galt novels, which at their best in *Annals of the Parish* (1821) or *The Entail* (1823), say, can stand comparison with the very best of Scott, he seems not to be aware at all of Hogg's *Justified Sinner* (1824).<sup>32</sup> Quite simply, from the vantage point of 1919, Gregory Smith underestimates and does not know the strengths of Scottish literature, "at home," more widely during the time of Scott.

For Gregory Smith, what he calls the "historical habit" represents the simultaneous strengths and weaknesses of Scottish literature.<sup>33</sup> The brilliant creativity of Burns, Scott and others is fired by Scottish historical materials but these are ultimately used up in an age of increasing supranational cultural identity. There is, clearly, some general truth to this postulation. However, writing at a time when the recent achievement of Robert Louis Stevenson seemed isolated amidst the more widespread climate of the "kailyard", Gregory Smith read the disastrous recession of Scottish literature's attention to itself into a world-denying parochialism in the work of J. M. Barrie and others.<sup>34</sup> Gregory Smith was not aware, of course, that in a few years, partially inspired (ironically) by Gregory Smith's book the work of Christopher Murray Grieve ("Hugh MacDiarmid", who would "aye

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.274.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59 & *passim*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.277-8.

be whaur extremes meet”<sup>35</sup> ) would once again use the Scots language in an intensity and for serious purposes in poetry perhaps not seen since the time of Burns. Also, during the time of the “Scottish Renaissance” of the 1920s and ’30s the Scottish historical novel took on a new force in work by Willa Muir, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and many others (indeed, throughout the twentieth century the serious historical novel dealing with Scotland has superseded in quantity the Scottish historical novel of the nineteenth century). Gregory Smith is so thirled to the idea of an ideal and continuous literary and cultural system, however, that he fails to see the possibility for renewal and rehistoricisation - and indeed that discontinuity can be recovered from. Also, in a standard-setting manoeuvre for later Scottish criticism, he fails not only to recognise diachronic discontinuity, but synchronic, or contemporary discontinuity, so that, for example, when Scotland is seen to feature, simultaneously and in equally large emotional measure, both the neo-classicism of the Enlightenment and the proto-Romantic urges of poets turning their attention to nature, Gregory Smith can read only schism. Paradoxically, his canonisation of contradiction in the history of Scottish literary culture is one that actually attempts to force an unnatural skin of coherence, which he often finds breached, unsurprisingly, around Scottish literature and culture.

Christopher Murray Grieve and George Gregory Smith might, by the 1920s, express, respectively, very little explicit debt to the “Celtic Twilight” movement and doubt over Matthew Arnold’s formulation of “Celticism”, but they did not gainsay Celticism.<sup>36</sup> With Gregory Smith, as we have seen, the Arnoldian trope of “honesty” and “energy” with its dash of “natural magic” is transmuted into the Scottish coinage of “realism” and “fantasy”. If Grieve draws in his critical, aesthetic and nationalistic project upon the primitivist impulses of post-war modernism, he also draws on the ethnic Scottish primitivism he finds most readily to hand: that associated with Celticism. We see this

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<sup>35</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), ll.141-2.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory Smith says of the the fantastic propensity of “Caledonian Antisyzygy” which, as we have seen, he reads as a piece of medieval heritage, “the opinion, so popular with Renan’s and Matthew Arnold’s generation, that this whimsical delight is a Celtic heritage may or may not be true.” (*Scottish Literature: Character & Influence*, p.19).



very evidently in Grieve's adoption of the "Celticised" pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid. We see this in the Celticised frame of reference with which his poetry is replete in the 1920s and 1930s. It is apparent too in his stagey, magical-Celtic contextualisation for the revival of the Scots language. It is to the "gairmscoile" we are to go for lessons in a "language [that] rings/Wi' datchie sesames, and names for nameless things."<sup>37</sup> In 1927 we find MacDiarmid's crude racialism most explicitly to the fore in *The Pictish Review*, aptly enough, when he makes the claim that "ancient Gaelic and Scots culture has never merged with that of Saxon culture."<sup>38</sup> Here again, then, we find a typical act of elision in modern Scottish literary commentary. This act of separation of "Scots" culture from "Saxon" culture to form a solidarity with "Celtic" or "Gaelic" culture is part of an over-discriminating reflex in late nineteenth and twentieth century Scottish cultural nationalism. It has diffuse results in promulgating notions of Scottish culture and literature which have at their heart an identification of essential (though often disturbed) coherence and also, sometimes an over-emphasis upon this culture's primitivism.

MacDiarmid's erstwhile ally in the Scottish literary renaissance, Edwin Muir, is ultimately made uneasy by MacDiarmid's belief that Scottish culture, particularly with regard to the Scots language, lies dormant at the beginning of the twentieth century and can be resurrected in pristine form from its deep grave. For Muir, the problem of Scottish literary and cultural history is its entanglement and ultimate debasement within mainstream Protestant-Scottish and British history and he sets out to show this. To do so he adopts and adapts the model of Gregory Smith. The contradictory and ultimately perverse attempt to impose a sense of history upon Scottish literature which Gregory Smith undertakes, is logically developed by Edwin Muir in his *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (1936).<sup>39</sup> In this little book which has been so hugely influential upon literary critics

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<sup>37</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, "Gairmscoile" ll.80-1.

<sup>38</sup> "Towards a Scottish Idea" reprinted in *The Raucle Tongue and hitherto uncollected prose* Volume II, edited by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester, 1997), p.3.

<sup>39</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*, introduced by Allan Massie (Edinburgh, 1982).



and cultural commentators since, Muir accepts the general orientation of Gregory Smith's account of Scottish literature and culture where the understanding of disruption is crucial. However, he seeks a *more explicit historical understanding of this disruption and, at the same time, borrowing heavily from the critical climate of the time where T.S. Eliot was so influential, he laments this disruption as being much more problematic than Gregory Smith had found.* Muir borrows from Eliot the phrase "dissociation of sensibility" to encode a cataclysm in Scottish culture which occurs with the Scottish Reformation from the 1560s.<sup>40</sup> In stark contrast to the opinion of Gregory Smith, then, Muir has it that Scotland's problem is that it loses its "medieval" character. For Muir, Scottish Calvinism disrupts an organic medieval harmony in its puritanical hostility to the creative imagination and through opening the gate to the supremacy in Scotland of the English language by the adoption of the vernacular Bible. His central statement on this calamity is a breath-taking summation of the fatal fault-line in Scottish literature and culture:

For some time, more or less corresponding to the reign of James IV, Scotland had a major poetry, written in a homogenous language in which the poet both felt and thought naturally. That poetry never found its fulfilment in poetic tragedy, and for that and other reasons, some of them political, dwindled later into a sort of one dimensional folk poetry. The disintegration of Scottish poetry was accompanied by a disintegration of the Scots language, and both calamities, again, were brought about in part by political causes. Once the language was broken up, the old fusion between thought and feeling was lost and a far reaching dissociation set in, one of the most characteristic expressions of which was fantasy, which was an abortive and never quite serious attempt to achieve a synthesis between thought and feeling. This is roughly the stage which Scots poetry has reached today.<sup>41</sup>

Scotland, then, had previously, in medieval times, possessed a cultural psyche amenable to creative literature (poetry, in particular). But, though the "homogenous" language Muir speaks of in this period,

is an attractive idea, it is one which is simplistic in terms of historic socio-linguistics. (For instance,

<sup>40</sup> For T.S. Eliot's coinage of this terminology see his essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921). He means by his term the end of a process in English poetry during the seventeenth century where "the language became more refined [and] the feeling became more crude." (Eliot, *Selected Prose* edited by John Hayward (London, 1953), p.111.)

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.



what about the status of Latin as both a prominent literary and official language at this time in Scotland as elsewhere? Did it not interfere with Muir's ideal whole-language system?) We ought to notice too Muir's centralising elitism which sees poetry as dependent upon a healthy metropolitan power-centre. Once this centre is disrupted, "that poetry ... dwindled into a sort of one-dimensional folk poetry." This is a reading which finds echoes in many later critics who see, for instance, the poetry of the eighteenth-century revival in Scots as representing this dwindled remnant of a previously more fully-flexed literary system. With Muir we have the setting up of an *a priori* reading of the Scots language as inadequate as a literary language. It is unfortunate for poets like Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns that they should sometimes use folk-materials also. On account of using varieties of the Scots language and a lack of metropolitan, or "high" literary conditions these poets are read by Muir and many subsequent critics as automatically inferior. With Muir, language exists in an unceasing hierarchy which is not simply about how languages are perceived relatively within the context of cultural power-relations, but something which inheres in qualitative fashion within the pecking order. Thus expression in the Scots language must always be necessarily inferior once the hegemony of English is established.

The most revealing statement of Muir's notion of the holism of medieval Scotland is to be found in an essay he writes a little later on the great medieval makar, Robert Henryson:

It was one of those ages when everything, in spite of the practical disorder seems to have its place; the ranks and occupations of men; the hierarchy of animals; good and evil; the earth, heaven and hell; and the life of man and of beasts turns naturally into a story because it is part of a greater story about which there is general consent.<sup>42</sup>

In this prelapsarian period, we notice, life is essentially a sub-species of literature ("the story") rather than the reverse. This synthesis of life and story, since lost, is one of the many formulations of

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<sup>42</sup> Edwin Muir, "Robert Henryson" (1949) in *Uncollected Scottish Criticism* edited by Andrew Noble (London & Totowa, NJ, 1982), p.172.

bifurcation in the Scottish cultural mindset in Muir's *Scott and Scotland* (1936). Muir makes it clear that "life" itself, of which literary creativity is its crucial index, is ruptured in Scotland. Muir, explicitly inhabiting the terms of contradiction established by Gregory Smith, tells us what happens when life and literature are no longer part of a coherent, single system in Scotland:

What took its place was either simple irresponsible feeling side by side with an arid intellect, or else that reciprocally destructive confrontation of both for which Gregory Smith found the name of "the Caledonian Antisyzygy": a recognition that they are irreconcilable, and that Scottish life is split in two beyond remedy.<sup>43</sup>

Thus lobotomised, Scottish literature produces, for instance, Burns' "Tam o' Shanter" which is unsatisfactory due to its "wild irresponsible fantasy ungoverned by intellect."<sup>44</sup> Typical of post-Calvinist Scottish fantasy for Muir, this poem, in its resort to drunkenness for the context to - or explanation of - the other-worldly events experienced by Tam, is ruled by "a Protestant Pope of unreason."<sup>45</sup> Muir is at least as witty as Gregory Smith in his turns of phrase. Here he neatly indicates that the tension of Calvinist repression leads to unhealthy, explosive periods of alcoholic release by way of reaction. A truer piece of fantasy, it seems to be implied, would have not have included the escape clause of the drunken Tam which does not really allow for the fact that he might actually have experienced the forces of diabolism and witchcraft. We will be returning to "Tam o' Shanter" in our chapter on Burns, but for now we might just notice how easy it is for Muir to read literary exemplars such as this poem as representing fault in a bigger failed system. Almost any detail might be alighted upon as unsatisfactory in a particular work and might be held to represent a flaw in "thought" or "feeling." Why should drink not be the gateway to a fantasy world? Muir is altogether too absolutist in his pronouncements and too prescriptive of the conditions in which "healthy" literature can be

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<sup>43</sup> Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, p.36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.38.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p.62.



produced.

We might charge Muir, along with his unrealistically elitist metropolitan essentialism with regard to Scottish literature, of pessimistic Anglocentricity. Muir believes that Scotland's paucity in literature (and, in life) is shown up by what he identifies as the great "humanist" literary tradition of England. As a result of the Reformation, Muir (rightly) sees Scotland as lacking a modern tradition of dramatic literature. In England, by contrast, the late sixteenth century sees the development, crucially, of dramatic tragedy. For Muir this material makes for a vitally humanist mode in that "it confronts the poet immediately with a typical human situation, and compels him to work it out to an end."<sup>46</sup> This "working out" involves the poet in identifying with different sides in a debate or problem, and so achieving a well-rounded view. From tragic drama other similarly complex forms of poetry emerge in England, notably metaphysical poetry. In Scotland the dramatic urge is earthed in going into the ballads and other folk-modes which, in their partial, selective perspective ultimately lack fuller mechanisms for rendering the complexity of human existence.<sup>47</sup> Here, then, we see Muir's anglocentricity: he would wish Scotland to have everything which England has, and where it does not he reads deficiency. It is, of course, entirely valid to lament the fact that Scotland lacks the great dramatic and metaphysical poetry traditions of the Renaissance in England (though again scholarship through the twentieth century has subsequently taught us that the literature of the Renaissance in Scotland is much more substantial than was once thought). However, what Muir is doing is setting up the English literary tradition as too perfect an exemplar and in too smoothly continuous fashion. The well-rounded humanism he finds so well embedded in English literature and culture is also a gross simplification of the historic literary and cultural tensions of Scotland's southern neighbour. This combination of lament for Scottish tradition - or the lack of it - and simultaneous idealisation of English tradition is a reflex to be found time and time again in twentieth century Scottish criticism. The roots of this attitude toward seeing Scotland as "anti-

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, p.48.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.50; pp.52-5.

humanist” rest, probably, upon a stereotyping of the dour, Calvinistic Scottish character (which Gregory Smith heroically tries to leaven with his notion of its habitual hysteric reaction).<sup>48</sup> There may well be some truth in this identification of a part of the Scottish cultural character in some cases, but, as we shall see as a constant throughout eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Scottish literature, such a characterisation of Scottish culture is one which is constantly resisted in humanist reflexes as fully coiled and unleashed as any in English literature. This is something we see both in the reactions of moderate Presbyterians and others who represent Episcopalian and Catholic denominational strands in Scottish culture and literature.

In part two of *Scott and Scotland*, we see Muir working hard to establish the dour, anti-humanist stamp of Scottish culture and this requires some special pleading. Scott an Episcopalian, who is to be read against the wholesale deficiencies of his national culture, is not a Calvinist, or a Presbyterian. Muir, however, neatly finds a way of entrapping Scott whom he sees as indoctrinated with a homologous force to that of Calvinism: “the complex and exact creed of Scots law.”<sup>49</sup> For Muir, this “was not an adequate complement to Scott’s riotous imagination and violent feelings.”<sup>50</sup> Scott’s imaginative faculty falls on stony ground also because of his legalistically-primed allegiance to the British state which required adherence to the dismissal, in the name of progress, of a separate Scottish past. For Muir, as a result of this situation, Scott’s utterance in many of his novels is little more than onanistic where:

Scott is working out his conflicting allegiances to Scotland and England. But as that conflict was a thing of the past, and its solution had already been reached in the established order of the Union, his treatment of it was inevitably a little romantic in the bad sense; the main figure, the hero, is never seriously involved in all the calamities of his country; the actual theme

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<sup>48</sup> The dour Knoxian stereotype of the Scot is pervasive in Anglocentric British culture. In one of the most powerful Scottish rebuttals of the type, Smollett, as we shall see, makes sophisticated fun of it in the character of Lismahago in *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771). Belief in the type has never been entirely deflated, however, and is still virulent in the twentieth century channelled, for instance, in T.W.H. Crosland’s deeply racist *The Unspeakable Scot* (London, 1902).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p.83.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*



may be a national disaster, but to him it becomes as harmless as an escapade: an excuse, at most, for a set of exciting adventures, crammed with fights and escapes.<sup>51</sup>

An objection might be immediately raised here to Muir's depiction of Scott in terms of general western literary history. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century Scott was essentially thirled, as the eighteenth-century novel was (though often ironically, as in the case, say, of *Tom Jones*), to the fiction of the happy ending. The great novel of tragic endings for heroes and heroines was some way off in literary history as, until later in the nineteenth century, novelists did not really believe themselves to be engaged in any kind of high artistic mode. When Scott was writing, the virtuous hero had to come through his adventures physically unscathed. This is true for the character of Edward Waverley in *Waverley* (1814), but two general points (which I will amplify later) might be added to the novel's scenario. The first is that Fergus Mac-Ivor, the brave Jacobite commander in the novel, also provides a centre of very detailed heroic interest and he pays the full price for his part in his rebellion. Related to this scenario is the fact that Waverley, restored at the end of the novel to the safety of an English country seat is to be found there pacing in a countryhouse in implicit discontent. The "romantic" hero, as Scott is well aware, has escaped deep involvement and so this trajectory in his protagonist's adventures represents an act of ironic counterpointing. Scott is the inventor of the historical novel in that it is largely his invention to show characters in novels deeply scarred by the events of history. The romantic hero, Waverley, emerges from the novel an unsatisfactory creature (self-aware in this aspect as he paces the library). This figure emerging unscathed, Scott symbolically indicates, belongs to the world of books, or of pure romantic fictions. History involves casualties and this is what Scott in his novel shows, both in the loving depiction of the highland culture of Fergus Mac-Ivor, as well as in the case of Waverley himself, who is made unhappy by the British "progress" which demands that this highland culture be largely extirpated in the aftermath of the last Jacobite rebellion. Scott's sympathies, as Muir rightly divines, are divided. He realises that the modern, united Britain which he largely

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p.91.

approves of has been bought at enormous cost and he seeks to chronicle something of this cost. It is difficult to see what more Scott could have done with the facts of Scottish history, or with the situation of his central protagonist. On my reading, had he made Waverley endure death as a result of his latent Jacobite sympathies, something which would have been anachronistic in terms of the historical development of the novel-genre in the early nineteenth century, as I have suggested, then the point of Britain's unsatisfactory, bland modernity (in which lamenting identification we see Scott the Romantic artist) would actually have been made all the less forcefully.

As in the case of Burns, we see Muir all too facilely (and extra-historically) reading "whole-system" deficiencies into Scott. Scott, the inventor of the historical novel, and hailed as such by so many critics, is seen by the Scotsman, Muir, to be an inadequate fantasist (Muir's refinement of the essential Gregory Smith thesis never lurks far away). In a curious piece of doublethink on Muir's part, Scott, the writer who brings out the tensions of Scottish cultural history and who deals extensively with its various divisions in his fiction, is seen to shy away from the reality of his national context. The fact that Scott makes the romance-based novel evolve into a form which conveys the weight of (often traumatised) historical psyches is a particular detail of literary history which Muir fails to see with his *a priori* reading of the diseased state of the Scottish imagination. In this instance, ridiculously, where Scott is alive to and indicating the "problem" of the progress of both Scottish and British culture, Muir reads him as deproblematizing this progress through falling back all too glibly on the conventions of romance.

With Edwin Muir's influential critique of the Scottish cultural and literary sensibilities, we find confirmed and tightened the dehistoricisation begun by Gregory Smith. This is part of one of the great ironies of twentieth-century Scottish literary historical commentary. The drive by commentators to make Scottish literature cohere in its sociological and historical contexts leads to their identification of a literature which is unsatisfactory both in its inadequacies (for instance, its inability to operate within a



“homogenous language”) and in its seeming successes (for instance, Burns the great poet who is actually exhausting all too readily the materials available to Scottish poetry). There is a such comprehensive *running together of failure and (false) success in Scottish literature by critics like Gregory Smith and Muir* that Scotland emerges in a state of cultural dystopia. The presentation of Scottish literary history as a series of (at best) tiny, partial gains which themselves testify to overall loss becomes deeply inscribed in Scottish critical commentary. There is a huge irony in that the roots of this inscription are simultaneously Anglocentric (as we see in the lead provided to Gregory Smith and Muir by Arnold and Eliot) while, at the same time, commentators following the lead of Gregory Smith and Muir increasingly shut out some the influences upon Scottish literature which they read far too readily as alien, most especially anything which appears Anglocentric or worse Britocentric. This problem of “Britishness” in Scottish literature is something which I will be returning to frequently in the thesis which follows.

The too dominant agenda of searching for sociological coherence in Scottish literature is forged in the 1930s and '40s also by John Speirs. Speirs was the Scottish representative of the Leavisite “Scrutineers” who largely demanded that literature be responsible to geographic, historic and social place (yet again, then, we notice Scottish commentary tied to the coat-tails of the dominant English critical voice). Speirs’s *The Scots Literary Tradition* (1940) was (and is - if the checking out of this book from the university libraries of Scotland is any indicator) a powerful influence upon the study of Scottish literature (it has added power also in that most of this material was published first in the 1930s in *Scrutiny* magazine, where Edwin Muir would have found it to help inform his own views).<sup>52</sup> The shape of this book privileges literature in the Scots language and so deals with the medieval period, the Renaissance, poetry in Scots in the eighteenth century, “the Scottish ballads”, George Douglas Brown’s *The House with Green Shutters*, and the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid. In the preface to the 1962 edition of his book Speirs is aware of the inconsistency of including Douglas Brown while excluding

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<sup>52</sup> John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition: An Essay in Criticism* (London, 1940); revised edition 1962 [quotations are from this edition].

Walter Scott (since neither employs a main narrative voice in Scots - though perhaps do so in Scots-English - but both include a good deal of dialect in their characterisation). Speirs is candid that he excludes Scott because, though a fan in his boyhead in his mature reading, “I had discovered, to my distress, that the Waverley Novels did not stand the test of the great English, French and Russian novelists of the nineteenth-century.”<sup>53</sup> The logic here is strange. As Speirs himself admits of *The House with the Green Shutters* “I would not admit it to the highest rank as a work of the novelist’s art - to the rank, that is to say, of *Wuthering Heights* [...] its value as a work of art seems to me to depend on the value of the social criticism it implies.”<sup>54</sup> For Speirs, the centre of his treatment concerns utilisation of the Scots language in literature, but Douglas Brown’s novel is co-opted into his narrative because of its critique of the kailyard and its “indictment” of nineteenth century Scotland.<sup>55</sup> What we see here is a characteristic configuration in Scottish criticism: failure writ large (in the case of Scott) and success writ small where Scots (like Douglas Brown) realise and write about how baneful their culture is. Scott may well be inferior to a Bronte, a Proust or a Tolstoy in terms of “profound psychological or moral insight” (let us leave aside the problematics of the second of these categories in its Leavisite rubric), but Scott’s prior influence on all of these writers as the novelist taking the lead in showing how individual characters become seriously (as opposed to comically - largely the eighteenth-century novelistic configuration) enmeshed within strongly particularised and changing cultural history should not be so easily discounted.<sup>56</sup> Scott’s historic importance to the development of the novel though is not enough (and indeed must be downplayed by Speirs) because the “line of Scott” is found in the “overestimated” writer “Stevenson (not to speak of Barrie and John Buchan)” at a time when the more vital response to Scotland is being offered by George Douglas Brown.<sup>57</sup> Here we have a reiteration of the recessionist

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.142.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid* p.20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid* p.19.



narrative of twentieth century Scottish criticism in which Scottish literature records a fatally diminished scope, most especially as the nineteenth-century progresses.

By the end of his book, Speirs is explicit about this trajectory where in the twentieth century “what has gone wrong is that most Scottish people have lost consciousness both of their Scottish antecedents and of their European antecedents as having once been one.”<sup>58</sup> Again, then, there is a spectacular lack of wholeness. As the shape of Speirs book makes clear, the argument here rests on the case that a literature in Scots was part of a well-integrated medieval literature, but that later Scots usage operates in an increasingly less literary context so that it becomes largely exhausted during the eighteenth-century (in the face of which fact Hugh MacDiarmid’s twentieth-century poetic project can only be partially successful).<sup>59</sup> This is also why Speirs has no interest in acknowledging the debt which the nineteenth-century European novel owes to Scott. Individual achievement and influence upon Europe are meaningless in the face of essential and over-arching cultural malfunction in Scotland itself. Once again we see cultural despair in Scottish criticism over the fact that Scottish culture is almost perfectly imperfect. Linguistically incomplete and incompetent in itself, Scottish literature (as an index of Scottish culture) is disconnected from the line of European achievement. Once again we see an absolutist approach reading whole-failure system (where the only slight relief in the failure of that system is literary protest (*a la* Douglas Brown) which recognises and protests against that failure of system. As we shall see, this is the circular manoeuvre undertaken by a number of critics following Speirs where only writers who are explicitly critical of Scotland are taken seriously.

Perhaps the book which confirms the generalist tendency (or the prioritising of holism) of the twentieth century approach to Scottish literary history is Kurt Witig’s *The Scottish Tradition in*

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid* p.161.

<sup>59</sup> Speirs most explicit statement of the dwindling of Scottish literature is to be found in a review of several books (including, significantly, Edwin Muir’s *Scottish Journey*) entitled “The Contemporary Situation in Scotland” where he writes, “There has of course been no Scottish literature and no literature of any kind in Scotland since the eighteenth century. There cannot be a Scottish literature in the fullest sense unless there is in the fullest sense a Scottish speech.” (*Scrutiny* Vol V, No.2 (1936) p.188). For Speirs doubts about MacDiarmid, see *The Scots Literary Tradition* p.155-160.



*Literature* (1958).<sup>60</sup> This book is sectioned into three parts according to the metaphor of seasonal change, “Spring Tide”, “Autumn Tide” and “Another Spring?”, and so carries on the Arnoldian notion of Celtic closeness to nature. Wittig’s project is essentially to define further the modalities so widely applicable to Scottish literature detected by Gregory Smith. For Gregory Smith’s “fantasy”, Wittig prefers the “grotesque” (or “exaggeration”); for Gregory Smith’s busy “realism” he prefers formal intricacy.<sup>61</sup> Of this latter quality Wittig says, “[...] one can detect a certain affinity between the carved archways of Dryburgh, St Oran’s Chapel, Melrose and Elgin Cathedral and the intricate ornamentation of much Scottish poetry, especially the sonnets.”<sup>62</sup> Complicating Wittig’s portrait of Scottish expressive predilections though, is the pervasive quality of “direct statement” (which shades into the grotesque often in its aspects of “flyting”).<sup>63</sup> Wittig also promulgates the myth of the Scottish nation as an essentially Protestant nation in this quality of “direct statement.” We see this in his discussion of Barbour’s *Brus* where he talks of the poem’s relation to The Declaration of Arbroath and comments of this latter document that there is “a remarkable sentence in which the Scots lords argue with the Pope as Scottish Presbyterians were later to argue with God.”<sup>64</sup> Wittig’s book, probably more wielded by students of Scottish literature than any other critical history in the second half of the twentieth century, is a book with many shrewdly observed critical particulars but its guiding lines of reading the “grotesque” and “intricate ornamentation” (sometimes communed between by “flyting” energy) and of vaguely Celtic and vaguely Protestant primitiveness represents a ramshackle foundation upon which to write the literary history of Scotland.

In his relation to all of these characteristics, Robert Henryson is “perhaps the greatest of all

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<sup>60</sup> Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (London and Edinburgh, 1958).

<sup>61</sup> Wittig’s identification of the grotesque is diffuse in his book. His most concentrated view of it from “Christis Kirk on the Grene” down to Eric Linklater is to be found in *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* pp.329-30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>63</sup> For an example of such shading see Wittig’s discussion of Walter Scott, *Ibid.*, p.229-30.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.



[Scottish poets].”<sup>65</sup> Wittig sees Henryson on occasion in considering God using “a tone of intimacy that clearly foreshadows the Presbyterians and their daily reckoning with God.”<sup>66</sup> Henryson “shares the old wisdom of the folk, their poetry, proverbs, and lore.”<sup>67</sup> Henryson, Wittig concedes, “writes art poetry” but has also a “closeness” to “folk poetry” and this is “most evident in his many points of contact with the ballads; the stark tragedy, the use of contrast, the montage the grim humour, the drama. For Henryson is rarely the scenic artist [...] but presents, without transitions, speech and answer, picture beside picture, resolution and deed [...]”<sup>68</sup> For Wittig, then, Gregory Smith’s notion of the topsy-turvy Scottish literature pertains, and added to this, more explicitly than in any critic before, is the idea of Scottish culture as a small, “no-nonsense” culture resistant to the metropolitan guile of the outside world (most especially, that of Rome and England).

Wittig’s essentialist discussion of Scottish literature leads to all consuming passages of essentialist inclusiveness as he surveys the eighteenth century. For instance:

Other Scottish writers who belong to the common stream of British literature are William Falconer (1730-69) whose *Shipwreck*, the first long sea-poem in English, is neo-classical and long-winded, but shows an intense insistence on detail; Tobias Smollett with his full-blooded and grotesque robustness; and James Boswell, whose *Life of Dr Samuel Johnson* may be regarded as the first mature fruit of that preoccupation with character which we have already observed in Barbour, Henryson, and the ballads - not to mention the many “dramatic monologues” in Scottish poetry.<sup>69</sup>

Amidst the attempt to show how “Scottishness” still essentially coheres during the eighteenth century, Wittig is also aware of cultural tension which he reads in the linguistic situation. This leads him to make

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

claims, which do not sit at all easily with the diffuse facility he reads in eighteenth-century Scottish literature in the quotation above, as follows:

[...] whereas poetry is part of a living tradition, made up of symbols, allusions, values felt and recognised by the community out of which it grows, the Anglo-Scottish neo-classicism of the North Britons was primarily a deliberate intellectual attitude; and it is small wonder that Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns wrote good poems in Scots, but invariably bad ones in English.<sup>70</sup>

And:

Much of the eighteenth century Scots poetry embodies the tunes, verse forms, and rhythms of popular song and dance - a consequence of the fact that it was not so much literary as communal poetry: it grew out of the interactions between the individual and the community in the village pub or in the club at Edinburgh.<sup>71</sup>

With Wittig, then, the bifurcation in Scottish culture is finally confirmed in the eighteenth century as a fissure between the folk and the literary spheres (a fissure which his account is always hovering over in his constant concern with Scotland's resistance to predatory cosmopolitanism and the propensity for "direct statement" in the Scottish cultural psyche). In a flourish which brings all these things together and makes clear also Wittig's debt to Edwin Muir, he claims:

There cannot be any mutual response between a poet and his audience unless there is an antecedent community of feeling. The chief reason why the vernacular Scots poetry of the eighteenth century has so much more vitality than contemporary literary poetry is that it was much more deeply rooted in the national character and in the national culture. Many of its most obvious characteristics are purely traditional, and are not drawn from literature, but rather from the life of the living

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.



The claim that eighteenth century poetry in Scots is essentially “non-literary” and folk-orientated (and has to do with “direct statement”) is something that we will be putting under a great deal of scrutiny in the chapters which follow, but for the moment let us simply note the way in which the “antisyzygy” or “dissociation” in Scottish literary culture is finally worked out in Wittig as that between English (neo-classic) literary pollution and communally-rooted (folk) forms of expression in Scotland.

David Craig in his *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (1961) criticises the generalist tendency of Kurt Wittig.<sup>73</sup> He comments:

Forced Scotticising can be found daily in our belles-lettres, e.g. in the many writings which try to make out that an unusual sense of colour, or detail, or description is distinctive to Scottish painting, or literature, or architecture. [...] The tendency runs amok in Kurt Wittig's *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*. Dr Wittig, a German, never hesitates to distort, prune, explain away, or silently overlook whole sections of his subject, if that is the only way to fit it into his small model of the “truly Scots”.<sup>74</sup>

Craig is right to castigate Wittig in these terms, but he is guilty himself of as much essentialism as the man he criticises here. With Wittig's adoption of the terminology of bifurcation we see the continuation of an initially optimistic line in twentieth century Scottish criticism (where he is the heir to Gregory Smith and Hugh MacDiarmid - who both begin, at least, by attempting to make virtue and pattern from Scotland's jagged culture and literature). Wittig's optimism, however, as in the case of his critical forbear, Gregory Smith, is dented by the complexities of eighteenth-century Scottish literature. With David Craig we find a continuation of the pessimistic, Anglocentric line of Edwin Muir and the idea, particularly, that Scottish literary expression is incomplete when compared to English literary

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (London, 1961).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.310.



expression. Christopher Harvie has wittily said of Craig's comparative approach that this represents "the prosecution case, out of Marx by Leavis."<sup>75</sup> For Craig, Scotland lacks a "great tradition" after the fashion which F.R. Leavis postulates in English literature. What Scotland does have though, in "Scottish poetry and fiction between 1680 and 1830 [is] the literature which was possible in the conditions of life in Scotland at that time."<sup>76</sup> For Craig the Marxist, this literature represents often protest in the face of marginalisation - both class marginalisation and the national marginalisation of Scotland in the face of Anglification. He reads the "old communal culture" of Scotland as the mainspring of a Scottish literature in partial reaction to the Calvinist nature of the nation, and which finds itself increasingly as a mode of protest in the face of the urbanisation and embourgeoisement of Scotland during the eighteenth century. Thus it is, for instance, that drunken release in Burns' poetry forms a predominant note of dissent.<sup>77</sup> Time and time again, Scots poetry in the eighteenth-century sounds the "reductive idiom", or brings about satirical levelling which, while enjoyable in itself, is ultimately a limited, negative mode. Craig sees the formation of the "reductive idiom" in Scots poetry in a strange meeting of "countra wit" or the folk idiom with the Calvinist mindset, even as this poetry often criticises that religious mindset. He sees satirical poetry in Scots from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century in the following terms:

The style used [...] plainly draws directly on spoken, unliterary Scots. That kind of sceptical, ironic downrightness is in fact what became the standard idiom of Scottish poetry. [...] It is always present, suggesting a kind of norm of common-sense (what Burns called "countra wit"), even in the most abandoned comic flights. My point here is that it is through such processes in the sensibility, rather than in any outward censorship, that "Calvinism" mainly affected the deeper life of the country.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Christopher Harvie, "Industry, Religion and the State of Scotland" in Douglas Gifford (ed), *The History of Scottish Literature* Volume 3 (Aberdeen, 1988), p.24.

<sup>76</sup> Craig, *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.27-8.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

Craig with his Marxist notion of “literature as protest” and his Leavisite notion of a great tradition in English literature must ultimately condemn eighteenth century poetry in Scots, given its social and cultural impetuses:

The *form* of 18th century Scottish poetry tends to be incommensurate with wholeness of experience [...] The range of the forms used is rather restricting [...] A result of the taste for forms based on social festivities is to limit the kind of life, and the attitude to it, that can be expressed. Conviviality, the drink, music, and good fellowship of the pub, the fun and knockabout of the public holiday - such things form the situation and state of mind from which much of the vernacular poetry at least starts. One cannot but feel that it is at the expense of the more inward and settled and abiding concerns of the people.<sup>79</sup>

What Craig would seem to mean by his last statement is that the reaction of poetic conviviality does not provide a platform for adequately reflecting the always serious and sometimes tragic plight of “the people” in Scotland. In short, the supposed “folk” impetuses in the carnivalesque disposition of Scottish poetry are actually looked down upon.

If Scots poetry is seriously disengaged, then the other side of Scottish culture in the eighteenth century, that pertaining to the Enlightenment, is equally distanced from the centre of responsible reality. For Craig, the Enlightenment thinkers and intellectuals are essentially engaged in a project of establishing “polite culture”.<sup>80</sup> In relation to these men, Craig postulates “an alienation from things native”.<sup>81</sup> This is seen in the construction of New Town Edinburgh, in the purging of “Scotticisms” from the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment *literati*, and in the attempts to sponsor a literature very different from that of the “old communal culture”. Craig sums up:

[...] several generations of the “great Edinburgh” made a body of remarkably

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.40-71.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.63.



talented men, working and living together as a conscious intelligentsia who led their country in many fields of thought and professional work. Moreover they had a character and ethos of their own, distinctive in idiom and social attitude. The manners and idiom of their milieux did not feed a a polite literature of any quality, and this correlates with their anxious awareness of a powerful culture near by, very different from their own yet appealing to them as a model civilisation - a culture less tied than their own to a backward country and one, too, which had a much more articulate character and powers of expression [...]<sup>82</sup>

The Enlightenment *literati*, then, exercise a cultural programme of anxious politeness, where they try consciously to vie with the culture of England in developmental maturity. Craig is right, to some extent, to identify Scottish cultural anxiety in the period of Enlightenment, but as he also implicitly acknowledges, the activists of the Enlightenment are patriots of a sort. Why should they be tied to the old communal culture if it is as limited as Craig claims? Why should these men not experiment? For Craig, the aesthetic programme of the *literati* stands for irresponsible, inorganic development in the face of a rooted or organic culture which was already fatally incomplete. His treatment of the fiction of “the Age of Scott” simply confirms the bankruptcy of Scottish literature. As in the case of the Scots vernacular poets and the Enlightenment activists, the story is one of talent constrained by national and cultural circumstance. For Craig, it is only occasionally and incompletely in novels that deal with religion that early nineteenth-century Scottish fiction is sometimes successful. In a reprise of Gregory Smith’s “historical habit”, Craig has it that, “As we became absorbed into Britain, we naturally came to feel that if our culture had an essence, it lay now in a bygone idiom and habits” and this explains the lack of engagement, as he takes it, which Scottish fiction shows with its contemporary location.<sup>83</sup> By contrast:

The types of religion presented, the authors’ attitudes to them, do not always avoid the unintegrated or backward ideas of the past and of the whole life of the people which, as we have seen, prevailed in the 18th century and the age of Scott. Yet the fiction of religion has behind it a

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161.

dominating concern of the people, the main focus of their interests and energies in a pre-political age; and as a result these novels are alive, whereas the imitations of history and local life can do little more than supply material for the scholar.<sup>84</sup>

As in the case of the poetry of Burns, then, in the best religious fiction of the early nineteenth century we have reflected “the whole life of the people”, though according to Craig’s premise of overarching cultural inadequacy this “wholeness” is a limited, incomplete wholeness. The logic of Craig’s stance is, quite simply, incomplete.

Like so many critics Craig insists on a Scottish literature which is limited by national history and situation. In the most prosaic sense though, this is true though for all literatures in every country. The idea is moreover though, that Scotland is especially limited in literary terms and this is a notion which has a great deal of currency in twentieth-century Scottish criticism. It is an idea, however, which is largely based upon an idealisation of a holistic and coherent conception of literary culture (and often, as we have seen, a strong, though grandly and vaguely set out Anglocentricity). The fragmentary achievements of Scottish literature in the period of the long eighteenth century ought to be enough in themselves, very often, to allow identification of literary “success” and, as I will be arguing subsequently, the fragmentary nature of these literary artefacts is over-emphasised in the misidentification of the nature of Scots literary achievement, the literary achievement of the Enlightenment and the achievement of the Scottish novel during the early nineteenth century.

The work of David Daiches canonises a new piece of rubric in the Scottish critical tradition: that of “paradox”. Daiches’s *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth Century Experience* (1964) brings to bear the arsenal of assumptions developed by Scottish criticism during the twentieth century to demonstrate, even more fulsomely than Craig, the hollowness of Scotland’s most spectacular

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p.197.



milieu of cultural expression.<sup>85</sup> Many of the tensions and battles Daiches identifies in eighteenth century Scottish culture are, indeed, to be found. These involve the fight to establish a more moderate and culturally open Scottish Presbyterianism during the century, the drive toward cultural gentility and the trauma of the parliamentary union with England. In the light of such tensions which are especially bound up with mental and linguistic confusion, the Scots produce overblown versions of both feeling and thought:

If you talk and, as it were, feel in Scots and think and write in standard English, then your Scots is likely to be sentimental and self-indulgent and your English is likely to be highly formal and in some degree de-natured. The expository, historical, and philosophical prose of eighteenth-century Scotsmen is often very fine, because these are areas in which the formal discipline of a method of expression acquired at school was helpful. Scottish poetry, when written in English, was often (but not invariably) derivative and stilted, and when written in Scots was always in danger of being self-consciously humorous or low or "quaint". Eighteenth century Scottish literary criticism, which is almost entirely concerned with rhetoric, with the study of formal devices for stirring the emotions, is generally quite incapable of dealing with the more subtle and impressive devices of combining rational and emotional appeal to achieve richness of expression and tends to mistake floridity for eloquence, pathos for tragedy, and sentimental declamation for poetry. The reception of Macpherson's *Ossian* is evidence of this, or to take a more particular case, Henry Mackenzie's review of Burns' *Kilmarnock* volume in *The Lounger*, which praised some of the weakest and most sentimental of Burns' stanzas as being "solemn and sublime, with rapt and inspired melancholy."<sup>86</sup>

Thus, the "dissociation of sensibility" plaguing Scottish cultural expression is to be found most spectacularly consummated during the eighteenth century, in that period which Scots had so often previously boasted of as the "golden age" of Scottish culture. With Daiches's account the eighteenth century emerges as that period of Scottish culture and literature where the nation is engaged in rampant self-delusion. The paradox is that Scottish literature's seeming successes in the eighteenth-century emerge as almost entirely hollow and lacking in integrity.

<sup>85</sup> David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth Century Experience* (London & New York, 1964).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.21-2.



As with so many critics previously, including Gregory Smith, Speirs, Wittig and Craig, Daiches has many pertinent insights in the particular; indeed *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* is, in many ways, an excellent survey of many of the details in eighteenth-century Scottish literature and culture. Where his account should be mistrusted, however, is in its reflex of national mass-psychology (the fault so often in the twentieth-century Scottish critical tradition) and mass-judgement. In a familiar note, Daiches reads inadequate Scottish writing in both Scots and English in the eighteenth-century due to the lack of a whole (linguistic) mindset. Generally, either over-refined in English usage or crudely expressive in Scots usage, Scottish writers are unable to overcome the power-values associated with these languages - where English is the language of an unattainable (unnatural) cultural ideal and so is fruitlessly mimicked and where Scots lacks the indigenous range of resources to be a fully-flexed literary language. These are claims which we will be dealing with more particularly in much of the thesis which follows, but for now let us observe a general flaw in the Muir-Speirs-Craig-Daiches line of linguistic argument. It underestimates the way in which literary artists, if they have the confidence to write in the first place, can adopt and adapt and mix different languages and registers to suit their literary purposes. The breakdown of language around a thought/feeling axis represents not only inadequate sociolinguistics but bad literary linguistics too.

Daiches is entirely right to identify the problematic reception of Burns by Enlightenment *literati*. In point of fact, however, this is to do not with a national situation which inclines to sentimentality; it is to do with a European situation where the cult of the primitive noble savage holds sway. Scottish criticism and belles-lettres is also, at times, over-enthusiastic in identifying in the poetry of Ossian an essence of the poetic sublime and this has to do also with national anxiety to canonise an ancient Scottish poetic artefact; but this means precisely that Scotland leads the way toward the “new movement of romance”, as Gregory Smith might say. Particular faults and flaws there undoubtedly are in eighteenth-century Scottish literary taste but Daiches’s attempt to attach these to wholesale failure



in Scottish national psyche is misleading. It is quite extraordinary that Daiches sees eighteenth-century Scottish culture so expressively flawed. This is the century which produces both David Hume and Robert Burns. Daiches overburdens the achievements of both writers. Hume is the most successful essayist in mid-eighteenth century Britain (perhaps even Europe) in both philosophy and in elegance of prose-style. Daiches's reading of Hume's organic detachment, however, can allow this status only to be a secondary factor in assessment of Hume. Hume, then, could to an extent be described as MacDiarmid-like "cosmopolitan scum".

We see a characteristic Scottish critical over-problematisation in the case of Daiches's treatment of Burns. Given Burns's manifest "success" as a "Scottish" poet, Daiches has to find a formula for Burns's "genius". He says that "Burns's achievement represented a highly precarious balancing between a number of conflicting forces; it was a personal achievement and was not available for fruitful imitation."<sup>87</sup> There is a great deal of truth in this description. Burns's achievement was, undoubtedly, personally idiosyncratic to some degree and he did make capital out of somewhat "conflicting forces" including those of the eighteenth-century tradition in Scots poetry and the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment. That Burns achieved literary success in spite of the conditions of eighteenth-century Scottish culture is also arguable to some extent. This might be said, however, of so many writers in western culture over the last two hundred years or so (and probably before) as they attempt to surf the creative waves above treacherously pluralistic undercurrents. In Daiches's view though, Burns was not "fruitful" enough. Successfully escaping the restrictions of his unrooted national culture, he was not able to exemplify any artistic role-model for his fellow Scots. Burns's achievement, then, is sterile because it is so personal, though he could not really help this as a culturally under-nourished Scot. He must be consigned ultimately to the peculiar eighteenth-century Scottish limboland of "paradox" where both creativity and national culture are flawed not in particular ways, but in

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88. For a fuller reading of the critical assumptions of Daiches (and also Gregory Smith and Muir in relation to Burns, see Gerard Carruthers, "Burns and the Scottish Critical Tradition" in Kenneth Simpson (ed), *Love and Liberty* (East Linton, 1997), pp.239-47.



absolute ways.

With Daiches's work, it is depressing to see how little twentieth-century Scottish criticism has travelled from the days of Gregory Smith and Edwin Muir, whose wholesale conclusions about the system-failure in Scottish culture he largely echoes and finds most pertinent to eighteenth century Scottish literature. With the work of Andrew Noble we have the critic who is the most modern representative of Muir's reading of Scottish cultural wasteland and Daiches's reading of the construction of a "phony" culture and literature on the non-foundations of this wasteland during the long eighteenth century. For Noble, Scottish literature in the period 1780-1830 shows itself to be formally and thematically unprogressive due to social and cultural conservatism. In his essay, "Versions of Scottish Pastoral: the Literati and the Tradition 1780-1830" (1982), Noble claims that under the influence of Scottish Enlightenment, pro-Unionist thought, the situation arose where:

[...] the Scottish middle and upper classes evade the social realities of the poor and, even more disturbingly, enforce dogmatic political attitudes. [...] Perhaps the most significant proof of this is the ferocity with which Edinburgh's literary critics, in particular Jeffrey in *The Edinburgh Review*, assailed the new English Romantic poetry (especially that of Wordsworth) which sought to describe the conditions of deprivation and deracination among the host of rural poor. T.S. Eliot's wise remark concerning Wordsworth - "it is Wordsworth's social interest that inspires the novelty of form in verse, and backs up his explicit remarks upon poetic diction; and it is really this social interest which (consciously or not) the fuss was all about." - is nowhere more true than in the context of the early nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup>

According to Noble, Scottish inability to understand the Romantic movement, however, was not because the social circumstances in Scotland were so much different from those of England, but because of a wilful purblindness. The Scottish *literati* chose to promote anachronistic literary form (rather than the new forms of Romanticism) and a sentimentalised depiction of the rural poor in

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<sup>88</sup> Andrew Noble, "Versions of Scottish Pastoral: the Literati and the Tradition 1780-1830" in T. Markus(ed), *Order in Space and Society* (Edinburgh, 1982), p.266-7.



literature (in marked contradistinction to the realism of Wordsworth). As Noble claims, “Because of Edinburgh, the partial vacuum in Scotland resulting from the Union and the accident of rugged Highland landscape and a ‘primitive’ society within relatively easy access, perhaps no European society was more flooded by [a] lachrymose tide than Scotland.”<sup>89</sup> With Andrew Noble we have the working through of the line of Scottish cultural bifurcation which we find in Scottish criticism in terms of a divide between reactionary, anti-imaginative Scotland and humanist, creative England. Essentially, for Noble, the cultural and political powers that be in Scotland, have much more interest in policing creative literature than is the case in England. This extends from what he claims to be the false, sentimentalised pastoral visions (which seek to disguise actual social reality) in the hands of James Thomson, James Beattie and others, and in the insistence upon Burns as the “heaven-taught ploughman” to Walter Scott who “promulgated and vulgarised the economically progressive theories of the Scottish Enlightenment by embodying them in adventure stories.”<sup>90</sup>

A number of points can be made about Noble’s critique (though it is one which will be implicitly countered in the chapters which follow). We see familiar components to it: an idealisation of English Romanticism of a socially-charged kind which Scotland fails to replicate, the idea of the large falsity of Scottish literary culture through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century (especially in the case of Scott) and the notion of cultural vacuum which eighteenth-century Scottish intellectuals wilfully made worse for their own economic ends. This is a powerful battery of charges, but it is too complete a volley. It deals in quantities which are too large, such as the notion of a coherent, political English Romanticism. In point of fact, the responsiveness of Burns to the socioeconomic and political upheaval of his day is at least as great as that of Wordsworth only a little later. If Noble’s base definition of Romanticism is to do with realistic commentary upon the undoubtedly rapid changing conditions of the period 1780-1830, then Burns is a true Romantic poet. Burns may be less experimentally formal than

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.269.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263, p.269 & p.270.



Wordsworth, but his poetic bringing to bear of realistic (peasant) materials is which where Burns is, at least, as modally innovatory as Wordsworth. Also, the much vaunted formal experiments of Wordsworth and others are perhaps not particularly far-reaching, especially as before long the Romantic poets resort to classicised forms and modes instead of continuing experimentalism on an ever upward trajectory. The idea of Scottish intellectuals promulgating false pastoral images in pursuit of their own economic agenda of pretending that all is more stable in Scottish society and culture than it is, is one that contains some substance but it is a case overplayed by Noble. We shall see this to be the case more particularly as we survey a range of Scottish pastoral literature of the period in what follows (where Scottish pastoral literature is not the sinister phenomenon Noble implies), but for the moment let us simply question how effectively such manoeuvres can actually control so completely either the socio-cultural or the literary situation. Noble's model is very much a descendent of Muir's model of Scottish literary culture in being teleological and centrist. Everything has to run along culturally absolute lines in terms of what is properly responsive and healthy literature, which is largely dictated by the comparative model of England. Noble never really shows us how Scott propagandises the economically progressive ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment, except to follow the Muir line that because Scott writes adventure stories (with their presumably telling happy endings) then he is simply a spokesperson for the happy-ending Whig Protestant view of history. In short, his model of Scottish literary development, or its deficit in this respect, is too smooth or rounded. In the chapters that follow focusing quite precisely upon the construction of Scottish literature during the long eighteenth century we will be challenging Noble's view that Scottish literature is so politically compromised and routed so absolutely as he claims.

Alongside the dominant trunk of essentialist Scottish literary criticism, a number of commentators have provided alternative conclusions, sometimes using the same data of the problematics of unstable Scottish culture which we have alluded to time and time again so far. For instance, F.R. Hart has refreshingly highlighted the fact that Scottish criticism has too often let sociological judgement of identity get in the way of judgement of the literary artefact (an implicit charge



have been raising against the Scottish critical tradition in much of the foregoing treatment of this

chapter). Hart comments:

What David Craig has called a “swithering of modes” and others have named “antisyzygy” or “dissociation of sensibility” has consistently appeared as a modal feature of Scottish fiction. [...] Are such rapidly alternating and extreme responses to experience to be explained as cultural distinctiveness or cultural dissociation? Social anthropologists and psychologists may have the answers. For the literary historian, the fact is that they persist in fiction, and the problem is whether such switherings or radical conjunctions can be successfully assimilated into narrative art.<sup>91</sup>

With a similar instinct, Douglas Gifford has argued for a very fruitful mode in literary terms of “dissociated” Scottish fiction running from the time of Scott (supposedly for some critics, the last real period of “confident” Scottish literary utterance) to the present in Scottish fiction.<sup>92</sup> Kenneth Simpson, while investigating what he takes to be many of the shortcomings of eighteenth-century Scottish literature, comes to the possible conclusion: that if “uncertainty about the reality of self is one of the hallmarks of modern man, then from the eighteenth century the Scot has been decidedly modern” (and so suggests a possibility in direct opposition to Muir’s much-vaunted notion that Scottish culture is marked in its instability by immaturity).<sup>93</sup> Robert Crawford has taken this idea further arguing that a situation pertains in Scottish literature during the long eighteenth century where “a literature which could be seen as provincial [preserves] a sense of independence while being written in the language of another, dominant culture” and suggests that “such an issue is crucial to modern English-language writing world-wide [...] it emerges first, and is seen most subtly and constantly, in the literature of Scotland.”<sup>94</sup> Alongside this healthy scepticism toward the desirability for a “complete” or “stable”

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<sup>91</sup> F.R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel: From Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p.406.

<sup>92</sup> Douglas Gifford, “Myth, Parody and Dissociation: Scottish Fiction 1814-1914” in Gifford (ed), *The History of Scottish Literature* Volume Three: Nineteenth Century (Aberdeen, 1988), pp.217-259.

<sup>93</sup> Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot: The Crisis of Identity in Eighteenth Century Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1988), p.251-2.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford, 1992), p.4.

culture as the necessary prerequisite to creative literature, we ought to take on board the work of critics who have challenged the traditional historicity of Scottish literary development. The boldest of these have been John MacQueen and Murray Pittock. MacQueen has suggested that Scottish literature during the long eighteenth century importantly derived huge creative sustenance from the late seventeenth-century movement toward rationalism and later the Enlightenment, both of which impacted upon Scotland in common with much of the rest of Europe. His exemplars from Archibald Pitcairne to Thomas Carlyle represent a brilliant array of literary talent unhysterically considered in their intellectual contexts which counters the largely dystopian contextualisation of such literature by David Daiches.<sup>95</sup> Pittock has insisted in his work that running counter to the Whig Protestant view of British culture, unimpeded in progress from the establishment of the Hanoverian dynasty, is a strongly dissenting culture and literature which draws sustenance from the literary and intellectual culture surrounding the Jacobite cause. It is this culture which, in part, provides more buoyancy to Scottish literature than is sometimes thought.<sup>96</sup> Other important Scottish critics of the last thirty years, including Thomas Crawford and Cairns Craig (as well as a number of social and cultural historians) have attempted to lay emphasis upon the richness of Scottish literary culture from the eighteenth to the

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<sup>95</sup> John MacQueen, *Progress and Poetry: The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature* Volume One (Edinburgh, 1982); *The Rise of the Scottish Novel: The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature* Volume Two (Edinburgh, 1989).

<sup>96</sup> Murray Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994); *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland 1685-1789* (London, 1997).



nineteenth centuries.<sup>97</sup> Notwithstanding such important work though, which is often not so much revisionist as simply behaving so as to retrieve more fully the actual texts and contexts in operation in the period, the overarching pessimism with regard to the fractured nature of Scottish literary culture during the long eighteenth century remains far from dispelled in the minds and courses of scholars and students of Scottish literature.

The chapters which follow represent an essay in literary criticism and history. They will deal more specifically with regard to Scottish literature of the long eighteenth century with many of the issues I have begun to raise here in relation to the limitations of the Scottish critical tradition. The period of the long eighteenth-century in Scottish literature - from Ramsay to the time of Scott - is a period chosen out of conventional convenience; it is a period identified by many previous commentators as representing that time when Scottish literature is most intensely ruminative and engaged with issues of national identity. I agree with such commentators that the period is superlative in Scottish literary history in this respect. I believe it to be that period when Scottish literature is most largely invented and is also inventive in response to external pressures. I seek to examine something of the history and also the aesthetic strength of these processes, free of the essentialism and pre-programmed despair which much of the foregoing chapter has been concerned to identify in much

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<sup>97</sup> Thomas Crawford writes:

For too long it has been customary to look only at the parts [of Scottish literature and culture], to see them as in irreconcilable opposition to each other, as yet another illustration of a historical myth -- that the Scottish *consciousness* [my italics] was disastrously split by the Union with England. (*Society and the Lyric* (Edinburgh, 1979), p.9).

Crawford's book goes on to demonstrate the ways in which Scottish song and, to some extent, poetry during the long eighteenth century ought to be seen as part of a common British corpus.

Cairns Craig has also attacked the Scottish critical obsession with cultural holism:

Particularly here in Scotland, where the pressure of a decrepit core is asserted to maintain the last vestiges of power, we should learn ways of reading our cultural past that do not make of it simply a botched version of English culture [...] We need a peripheral perspective that allows us to draw our own lines of filiation, within our own culture, between ourselves and the core cultures, but most important of all between ourselves and other peripheral cultures. (*Out of History* (Edinburgh, 1996), p.30).

Thus there are at least two projects of revisionism necessary in the face of the old-fashioned organicism of the Scottish critical tradition. The first of these involves drawing a more inclusive sense of Britishness for Scottish literature; the second involves seeing difference from the centre as marking a culture as potentially energised as any supposedly more "central" culture. My thesis will implicitly follow the spirit of both these projects, seeing them as not mutually exclusive.

previous Scottish criticism.



## Chapter Two. “Fashion of Words and Wit may Change./And Rob in part their fame”<sup>1</sup> : Allan Ramsay and the Formation of Poetry in Scots in the Early Eighteenth Century

Allan Ramsay (1684-1758)<sup>2</sup> is rightly seen as the primary shaping influence on eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. In Ramsay we find the establishment of *modi operandi* without the influence of which later poets such as Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns would have been very different poets, if poets at all. At the beginning of his poetic career we see Ramsay assembling materials in the context of the culture of Scoto-Latinity. After being lost from critical sight for over two hundred years, the rediscovery in the late 1970s by F.W. Freeman of a copy of Ramsay’s first-known published work, “A Poem to the Memory of the Famous Archibald Pitcairn, M.D.” (1713)<sup>3</sup>, provides crucial information about this under-recognised context. In this work we see Ramsay aligning himself with the complaints of anti-Unionist Jacobitism. Anti-Unionist Jacobitism, prominently marshalled in Scotland in the early years of the eighteenth-century by men such as Archibald Pitcairne (1652-1713) and Thomas Ruddiman (1674-1757), attempted to seize the cultural as part of the moral and political highground. It espoused neo-classicism in literature, not simply as part of the wide late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century (post-Restoration) revival of classicism, but as part of a high cultural tradition which had been specifically maintained in seventeenth-century Stuart-loyal Scotland by writers such as

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Ramsay, “1726, Verses on the last leaf of the Bannatyne Manuscript in the Advocates Library” (ll.9-10) reprinted in H. Harvey Wood (ed.), *Selected Poems by Allan Ramsay* (Edinburgh, 1936), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsay’s birthdate is sometimes given as c.1685, even after the work of Alexander Kinghorn and Alexander Law established the more likely date to be 1684 (see their commentary in *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Volume IV (Edinburgh & London, 1970), p.4 & pp.59-60). Commentary and criticism, generally, have been slow to mine the Scottish Text Society Edition of Ramsay, 6 vols (1951-74) under the editorship of J. Burns Martin and John W. Oliver and then Kinghorn and Law, for the information it provides about Ramsay’s cultural life. The editors’ introduction to the concluding volume ends: “In these volumes we present the raw materials, hitherto largely inaccessible, for future studies of Ramsay and his times” (p.xiii). Sadly, this mass of material remains remarkably under-utilised.

<sup>3</sup> F.W. Freeman and Alexander Law, “Allan Ramsay’s first published poem: the poem to the memory of Dr. Archibald Pitcairne” in *The Bibliothek* 9, No.7 (1979), pp.153-160.



William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) and Arthur Johnston (1587-1641).<sup>4</sup> Anti-Unionist Jacobitism was interested too in Scotland's medieval poetic heritage and especially when there was a dovetailing of the medieval with ancient classical production as in *The Aneados* (c.1513), the first major translation of a Latin poem into either Scots or English, rendered by the "makar", Gavin Douglas (c.1474-1522). Thomas Ruddiman, a painstaking publisher and editor, produced a celebrated edition of Douglas's work in 1710, and this exercised a potent influence on the Scots lexicon of Allan Ramsay.<sup>5</sup> Ruddiman's edition was a stimulation to Ramsay in his "Poem to Pitcairn" which he prefixes with a quotation from Douglas's *Aneados* and a prefatory verse-epistle in his "Easy Club" persona of "Gawain Douglass" to his fellow-club members. The quotation, "Sum zonder bene for reddy Gold in hand,/Sald and betrayit thay're native Realme and Land" shows Ramsay entering into the contemporary anti-Unionist idiom complaining of the supposed material greed and treachery of the Scottish peers who had helped bring about the union of the Scottish parliament with that of England and Wales in 1707. The recent literary precedents for this topos of Scotland betrayed included a Latin poem, *The Grameid* (1691) by James Philp of Almerieclose (c.1656-c.1713), a veritable compendium of the supposedly treacherous circumstances undermining the Stuart dynasty, and celebrating Scottish resistance to those who opposed the Stuarts in the seventeenth century down to the Glorious Revolution of 1689.<sup>6</sup> Also forming around the topos were a number of satirical squibs in the early eighteenth-century which transmitted the high cultural Stuart-loyalist mindset as witnessed in men like Philp to the street and to the context of trepidation in the face of a looming united parliament. For

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Drummond's pining pastoral welcome to Jame VI on his first visit to post-1603 Scotland, "Forth Feasting: A Panegyricke to the King's Most Excellent Majestie" (1617) (see *The Poetical Works of William Drummond* Volume I edited by L.C. Kastner (Edinburgh & London, 1913), pp.139-152) "prefigures the longing of eighteenth and nineteenth century sentimental Jacobitism for the sovereign in exile" (Gerard Carruthers & Sarah M. Dunnigan, "'A reconfused chaos now': Scottish Poetry and nation from the Medieval Period to the Eighteenth Century" in *Edinburgh Review* 100 (1999), [pp.81-94], p.86). The absence experienced by royalist Scots, then, predates that of British royalists more generally on the outcome of the English Civil War, as does the insistence upon high classical literary mores in the face of their often puritanical or low Protestant adversaries.

<sup>5</sup> See Douglas Duncan, *Thomas Ruddiman: A Study in Scottish Scholarship of the Early Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh & London, 1965), pp.166-167. Duncan's brief but incisive pointers in these pages to the influence upon Ramsay await much fuller consideration.

<sup>6</sup> James Philp of Almerieclose *The Grameid* edited by Alexander Murdoch (Edinburgh, 1888).



instance, Ramsay is likely to have known the anonymous “Verses on the Scots Peers” (1706) which charges the peers: “They sold the church, they sold the State and Natiōe,/They sold their honour name and reputatiōe” (ll.5-6).<sup>7</sup> Very cleverly, Ramsay taps into this mentality as he draws his poem’s prefatory tag from Scotland’s medieval past (though from a poem not explicitly about Scotland) just as men such as James Watson (d.1722) with his series the *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems* (1706, 1709 & 1711) were claiming the “makars” as cultural heritage essentially continuous with the Jacobite and anti-Unionist interests.

The “Poem to Pitcairn” demonstrates Ramsay’s awareness of the cultural resonances of Jacobite Latinity. He depicts Pitcairne, Aeneas-style, passing through the underworld where “[...] he Observ’d a Pool of Boyling Gold,/On which did float, those who their Country Sold (ll.33-4). This scenario taps into a wide British literary Jacobitism which had as its biggest exemplar John Dryden’s version of the *Aeneid* in 1697 where the banishers of the Stuarts are seen to be punished in Hades.<sup>8</sup> With regard to this cross-border Stuart-loyalty Dryden’s interest in the recent heroic iconography of Scotland should also be pointed out as seen in his translation of a Latin elegy of Pitcairne’s, “Upon the Death of the Viscount of Dundee (1689). Pitcairne hails Dundee:

Oh Last and best of Scots! who did’st maintain  
Thy Country’s Freedom from a Foreign Reign;  
New People fill the Land, now thou art gone,  
New Gods the Temples, and new Kings the Throne.  
*Scotland* and Thee did each in other live,  
Nor wou’dst thou her, nor cou’d she thee survive.  
Farewel! who living did’st support the State,  
And coud’st not fall but with thy Country’s Fate.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> James Maidment (ed), *Scottish Pasquils 1568-1715* (Edinburgh, 1868), p.385. The topos of Scotland being cataclysmically betrayed runs very deeply, going back at least as far as John of Fordoun’s *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (c.1370), of which its nineteenth-century editor comments, “It is remarkable that we seldom read of the Scots being overcome by the English, unless through the envy of lords, or the treachery and defeat of the natives taking them over to the other side.” Cited by Edward Cowan in “The Wallace factor in Scottish History” in *The Journal of Scottish Education*, Occasional Paper 1 (1997), p.7.

<sup>8</sup> See Howard Erskine-Hill, “John Dryden: The Poet and Critic” in Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *The Penguin History of Literature: Dryden to Johnson* (London, 1993), pp.29-30. & Murray G.H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 1994) especially pp.9-11 & pp.38-9.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by John MacQueen in *Progress and Poetry: The Enlightenment and Scottish Literature* Volume 1, p.2.



With Pitcairne, channelled in this instance probably via Dryden's translation to men like Ramsay who likely had a patchy knowledge of Latin, we see the rhetoric of national complaint and elegy which is transported from seventeenth-century Stuart-loyalism into the early eighteenth-century.<sup>10</sup> Ramsay mimics the elegant iambic couplets of this kind of verse in his "Poem to Pitcairn" and he includes in it also celebration of the royalist cavalier, Dundee (John Graham of Claverhouse (c.1649-89)) among the martial heroes of Scotland whom Pitcairne meets in the afterlife (l.95).

In "Poem to Pitcairn" Ramsay stages also the appearance of those more ancient Scottish warrior-icons, Robert the Bruce and William Wallace. To Bruce's questioning on the current state of Scotland, Pitcairne is scathing of those "Who mind their Interest more than great *Jove's* Glory" (l.76). He continues:

[...] we're plagu'd with *Whig* and *Tory*,  
About meer Triffles they make such a Pother,  
Still Damning and Devouring one another.  
So when E're ought's propos'd for *SCOTLAND'S* good,  
It's by a *Cursed Party* still withstood. (ll.77-81)

It might seem odd to have the Jacobite and (essentially) Tory Pitcairne complain about harmful party faction which includes the actions of Tories as well as Whigs, but as Daniel Szechi has shown the Jacobite cause sometimes employed a high-minded rhetoric of being disdainful and detached toward British parliamentary politics, and there was, of course, by this time a substantial party of Tories who supported the Hanoverian dynasty.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, though, such Jacobite-generated castigation of party-politics later becomes bound up with a wider expression of even-handedness and urbanity in identity on Ramsay's part. We see this in his "An Epistle to Mr James Arbuckle of Belfast, A.M." (1719), a physical and intellectual self-portrait.<sup>12</sup> Ramsay talks of his creed and avows that it is easier

<sup>10</sup> For Ramsay's scant acquaintance with Latin see his biography by Alexander M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law in their edition of *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Volume IV (Edinburgh and London, 1970), p.5.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Szechi, *Jacobitism and Tory Politics 1710-14* (Edinburgh, 1984), see especially pp.34-58.

<sup>12</sup> *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Volume 1, edited by J. Burns Martin and John W. Oliver (London & Edinburgh, 1951), p.212-16.



to say what he is “negatively” (l.96) and that he is “nowther Whig nor Tory” (l.98). He says that he is “a Christian,/Believing Truths and thinking free,/Wishing thravn Parties wad agree” (ll.107-9). These lines castigating disagreement express a sentiment going beyond mere patrician Jacobite distaste for party politics and point to a real world-weariness in the face of the internecine religious and political squabbling of early eighteenth-century Scotland and Britain. The telling factor here is that such sentiment should arise in a poem to a man such as James Arbuckle (1700-?34). The Ulsterman Arbuckle had been a student at Glasgow University and contributed to a volume of poetry, the *Edinburgh Miscellany* (1721), which collected together work by James Thomson, Robert Blair and other men who were Presbyterian in religion and Whigs in politics. Arbuckle was also a fellow-Shaftesburian philosophical thinker to, and a close friend in Dublin of, Francis Hutcheson, the “New Licht” Presbyterian minister who was such a harbinger of moderatism and a pioneer of the Enlightenment in Scotland.<sup>13</sup> In connections such as this we glimpse a widening circle marking out cultural *plein air* in early eighteenth-century Scotland after the bitter religious and political faction of the seventeenth century.

Even while writing “Poem to Pitcairn”, with its clear denunciation of the 1707 parliamentary union and its embroilment in the mindset of Jacobite Latinity, however, Ramsay certainly had in mind a wider cultural *mentalite* which he sought. Alexander Law is too confident in his judgement that the “Easy Club were no Jacobites”.<sup>14</sup> So delighted was the club with Ramsay’s “Poem to Pitcairn” that its members paid for its publication and it is inconceivable that the membership was unaware of the ideological nuances of the poem.<sup>15</sup> However, like Ramsay himself (a man who prudently absented himself from the “young pretender’s” court in Edinburgh when Charles Edward Stuart took control of

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<sup>13</sup> See William Robert Scott, *Francis Hutcheson: His Life, Teaching and Position in the History of Philosophy* [1900] (New York, 1966), especially pp.32-36 for details of the connections between Hutcheson and Arbuckle.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Law, “Allan Ramsay and the Easy Club” in *Scottish Literary Journal* Volume 16, Number 2 [pp.18-40] (November 1989), p.39. See also the response to this by Murray G.H. Pittock, “Were the Easy Club Jacobites?” in *Scottish Literary Journal* Volume 17, Number 1 (May 1990), pp.91-4.

<sup>15</sup> See the *Journall of the Easy Club* in *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Volume V, edited by Alexander M. Kinghorn & Alexander Law (Edinburgh & London, 1972), p.33.



the city in 1745), the Easy Club may well have been “bottle-Jacobites.”<sup>16</sup> Alongside Jacobite emotional allegiances, the membership drew inspiration from the model of the Spectator Club concocted by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. *The Journall of the Easy Club* regulated that “two of ye Spectators [i.e. the periodical] shall be read at every meeting.”<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to turn to *The Spectator* of July 31, 1712 where we find Addison complaining of attacks on misreadings of his journalism by “Party Zealots on both sides; Men of such poor narrow Souls, that they are not capable of thinking on any thing but with an Eye to Whig or Tory.”<sup>18</sup> Here, then, we find more affirmation of Ramsay’s anti-party stance and from a source which found Whig Hanoverian Britain a largely congenial place (at least in political terms). Addison and Steele had, variously, close literary associations with much less contented individuals, however, in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Britain such as Dryden, Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. The well-known concern of *The Spectator*, as mouthpiece of the new Augustan age, with elegant standards in writing and behaviour is part of a broad, non-political consensus among many and varied ideological individuals on the importance of maintaining the ancient cultural mores of the non-vernacular west in the continuing dynastic and religious uncertainty of early Hanoverian Britain. Such neo-classicism has been all too facilely circumscribed by some critics in the Scottish context, as in the case of David Daiches who sees it as representing the beginnings of a new bourgeois gentility opposing older aristocratic ideals in society and literature.<sup>19</sup> *The Spectator* was a hugely influential model in expression not only for the Enlightenment *philosophes* of Scotland such as David Hume and Adam Smith, as is so often stated, but was held dear too by men of Tory, Jacobite sympathies such as Allan Ramsay. Ramsay’s often cited change of Easy Club-pseudonym from “Isaac Bickerstaff” (Steele’s pseudonymous editor of *The Tatler*) to “Gawain Douglass” represents, certainly, an intensification of patriotic sentiment, but it does not register a spasmodic reaction against a culture

<sup>16</sup> See Nelson S. Bushnell, *William Hamilton of Bangour: Poet and Jacobite* (Aberdeen, 1957), p.72.

<sup>17</sup> Ramsay’s *Works* Volume V, p.8.

<sup>18</sup> *The Spectator By Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and Others* Volume 3, edited by G. Gregory Smith (London, 1907), pp.373-4.

<sup>19</sup> David Daiches, *Literature and Gentility in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982), p.1.



Ramsay had some sudden cognizance of as irretrievably “alien.”<sup>20</sup>

Ramsay’s “Poem to Pitcairn points us toward not only the Scottish anti-unionism associated with the Pitcairne circle of Jacobites, but also to that circle’s keen sense of scientific rationalism. Latterly, this feature of Jacobitism in the common (over-romanticised) impression of the movement tends to be overlooked. Jacobitism liked to think of itself as highly urbane and enlightened in contrast to the supposed superstition of puritanical, republican Protestantism.<sup>21</sup> In 1662 under the restored Stuart monarch, Charles II, the Royal Society received its charter to initiate a distinguished history of British scientific enquiry, and from this cue Stuart-loyalists down to the eighteenth-century venerated science. Archibald Pitcairne was a man in this mould, with an intense interest in mathematics and distinguished in medecine, a discipline in which he was made Professor at Leiden in 1692. We see Ramsay’s pronounced rationalism in his second published poem, “A Scheme and Type of the Great and Terrible Eclipse of the Sun” (1715), a poem which, while rather prettily describing the landscape in eclipse, mocks the peasantry in their superstitious and apocalyptic apprehensions of the event.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, given the place the piece holds in Scottish and British literature as an unusually realistic (and so commendably respectful) treatment of peasant-culture for its day, Ramsay’s great pastoral-drama, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725) is also a work which dismisses uneducated, peasant-tales of the appearance of the Devil and of witches out of hand as superstitious “whimsies” (V, I, l.75).<sup>23</sup> Significantly, this dismissal is put into the mouth of the Stuart-loyal cavalier, Sir William Worthy, returning to his Scottish estate with the Restoration of 1660. Jacobite rationalist intellectuals represent roots of the British and Scottish Enlightenments which remain overlooked in the dominant narratives of eighteenth-

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<sup>20</sup> Ramsay, *Works* Volume V, p.28.

<sup>21</sup> A classic reading in the wide European context of a kind of unholy alliance between a sceptical, cynical, *dilettante*, aristocratic culture and a rationalism which licensed the conveniently freethinking, Epicurean lifestyle of many aristocrats from the later seventeenth century is to be found in Paul Hazard, *The European Mind 1680-1715* [Paris 1935] ( London, 1973), pp.145-184.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsay *Works* I, p.197-99.

<sup>23</sup> *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Volume II, edited by J.Burns Martin and John W. Oliver (London & Edinburgh, 1953) pp.205-77.



century cultural change. This is particularly so in the Scottish case where we might supplement a traditional reading of the 1680s and '90s origins of Enlightenment, involving such usually invoked cultural landmarks as the publication by former Covenanter, James Dalrymple, 1st Viscount Stair (1619-95), of his *Institutions of the Laws of Scotland* (1681), and the reform of the Scottish universities initiated from the 1690s by Hanoverian-loyalist and devout Presbyterian William Carstares (1649-1715), by pointing to systematic advances in Scottish learning brought about by Jacobites. For instance, the Episcopalian minister Andrew Symson (1638-1712) produced his "Description of Galloway" (1684) which anticipates, to some extent, the great Enlightenment project of *The Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791-8) by more than a hundred years.<sup>24</sup> More famous Jacobites might also be pointed to, such as Sir Robert Sibbald (1644-1722), the founder-member of the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh in 1681. It is even more surprising that these roots are not usually cited as part of the scientific foundations of the Scottish Enlightenment when we consider the parallels between such men and the man who is usually seen as the first fully-fledged *philosophe* of the Scottish Enlightenment, Francis Hutcheson. As instances, both Pitcairne and Hutcheson had an intense fascination with mathematics and, in common with Ramsay and members of the Easy Club, Hutcheson shared an enthusiasm for *The Spectator* periodical, being particularly interested in its essays on culture and aesthetics.<sup>25</sup>

We can see Ramsay as part of a network (albeit more minor) mirroring, to some extent, the

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<sup>24</sup> See Stan A.E. Mendyk, *"Speculum Britanniae": Regional Study, Antiquarianism and Science in Britain to 1700* (Toronto, 1989), p.218, for details of Andrew Symson. Mendyk suggests that in men like Sibbald and Symson "[British] regional writers [brought] about a sort of "scientific enlightenment" ... providing the groundwork for the "real" Enlightenment of a later date (p.56). Mendyk's pioneering claim is carried out against an embryonic awareness of this relationship in mainstream Enlightenment studies. See, for instance, Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England" in Roy Porter & Mikulas Teich (eds), *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981), pp.1-18. Jane Rendall in *The Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment* (London, 1978) provides an extract from the journal of the Easy Club among her documents (pp.62-3) and makes brief mention of the contribution to the new learning by Jacobite Episcopals (pp.7-9), but the weight of her account clearly falls upon Whig Presbyterian roots of Enlightenment with much lengthier treatment of the likes of Carstares and Hutcheson. It is only with the work of David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1993), see especially pp.1-26, that a more balanced picture begins to emerge.

<sup>25</sup> See Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design* (1725) edited by Peter Kivy (The Hague, 1973); see this edition also for Hutcheson's *Reflections Upon Laughter* (1725) in which Hutcheson engages with Addisonian aesthetics.



consensual cultural framework of Augustan England which enmeshed very different ideological animals. This is seen in Ramsay's connections not only with Arbuckle, but in having for his literary patron from 1720 (and quite possibly earlier) the Whig Hanoverian Sir John Clerk of Pennicuik (1676-1755), one of those politicians who had acted as a commissioner for the bringing about of the union of parliaments.<sup>26</sup> In the broad context of early eighteenth-century Scottish culture, Ramsay would clearly see that where there was a Jacobite, Episcopalian such as George Lockhart of Carnwath (1653-1716) uncovering some of the shady pocket-lining deals smoothing the path of the union by which some Scottish peers undoubtedly gained, there was also an anti-Stuart Presbyterian such as Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun (1653-1716) speaking out against pro-union parties "bribing men to betray our liberty."<sup>27</sup> He would see also in Sir John Clerk, pioneering explorer and collector of the ancient artefacts and history of Scotland, a man whose historic pride in Scotland was equal to that of Thomas Ruddiman.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to note a manoeuvre by Ramsay in his poem "To John, Duke of Argyll" (1720) where the poet likens John, second Duke of Argyll (1678-1743), a soldier who had fought against the Jacobites in the 1715 uprising and who was a distinguished Hanoverian officer in campaigns in Europe, to Robert the Bruce.<sup>29</sup> Scotland is fortunate, says Ramsay, "Wha can at Bannockburn bauld Bruce display,/Or thee at Malplackae forcing thy way" (ll.19-20). Drawing on the Scottish foundation-myth of King Fergus, Ramsay includes Argyll as one of the "heroes" of this warrior "line" (l.8). For

<sup>26</sup> Ramsay, *Works* Volume IV, p.10. Issues such as the uncertainty over the precise dates of Ramsay's acquaintance with Clerk show how much a detailed modern biography of Ramsay is needed.

<sup>27</sup> See "*Scotland's Ruine*": *Lockhart of Carnwath's Memoirs of the Union* edited by Daniel Szechi (Aberdeen, 1995); and *Fletcher of Saltoun: Selected Writings* edited by David Daiches (Edinburgh, 1979), p.102.

<sup>28</sup> A good description of Clerk's patriotic cultural interests is to be found in Iain Gordon Brown, "Modern Rome and Ancient Caledonia: The Union and the Politics of Scottish culture" in Andrew Hook (ed.), *History of Scottish Literature* Volume II: 1660-1800 (Aberdeen, 1987), pp.33-48.

<sup>29</sup> Ramsay *Works* Volume III, edited by Alexander M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law *Ramsay* Volume IV (Edinburgh and London, 1961), p.341.

Ramsay by 1720, then, a relationship has been found between Scotland's ancient martial heroes and founders of historic liberty and a man one might have expected Ramsay to regard as the Hanoverian Unionist enemy only a few years before. Traditionally, such a shift in Ramsay's poetry would be read by Scottish criticism as pointing to his "crisis in identity"; but, more simply - in one sense- it might be read as Ramsay operating ecumenically in his patriotism. It represents a sophisticated manoeuvre showing Ramsay, patronised by Hanoverian and Scottish patriot, Clerk, allowing some plurality of continuity in Scottish patriotic identity. The poem itself, a "translation" of a Horatian ode, shows that Ramsay is alive to the way in which cultures are *translated*. It begins:

In British phrase his winsome Iliad speak  
Harmonious Pope wha made th'Inspired Greek  
shoud Son'rous sing what Bairns unborn shall Read  
O Great Argyle        (ll.1-4).

If Pope can ventriloquise Homeric achievement through a British voice for venerable effect, then the contemporary achievements of Britain can be shown to possess an even more credible thread of tradition, the ancient martial prowess of Scotland realised in the present by such modern war-heroes as Argyll, ancient clan-chief of the Campbells. Thus Scotland trumps England in its past and, at least, equals it in the present. Here we see a characteristically clever playfulness on Ramsay's part. The intensely patriotic Scottish poet attempts to make good, or to translate into gain, the loss of a more discrete Scottish identity by asserting an essential Scottish cultural continuity within the new British identity. This poem is one of the earliest instances of the propagandizing of the centrally potent Scottish component of eighteenth-century Britishness, and it is interesting that this should come from a man who was often explicitly anti-unionist. It is usual to point out the way in which post-1707 Britishness harnesses Scottish energy in its service, but what we might draw attention to here is just



how willing a partner “Scottishness” is in this project. This follows, paradoxically, from a very deeply embedded Scottish patriotism (wielding the Jacobite iconography of Fergus and the Horatian ode form associated with Stuart royalism, as well as Ramsay’s supremely confident Scots-English diction) which is working to outdo the English.<sup>30</sup> “To John, Duke of Argyll” operates skilfully in an attempt to harness the forward trajectory of the new Britishness of the early eighteenth century, but the weight of history is against its undoubted niceties. Had eighteenth, and perhaps even more so, nineteenth-century Britain, not embarked upon such a successful enterprise of imperial conquest, Ramsay’s poem (featuring a struggle against an early eighteenth-century France which was arguably more autocratic and imperial than Britain at this time) would be seen as a nicely cheeky piece of “one-upmanship”. As it is, it is the kind of poem that is all too easily appropriated into a narrative of “authentic” Scottish literary and cultural identity undermining itself in mental confusion. What I am suggesting is that it is actually a very sly poem as it implies, albeit perhaps half-jokingly, the cultural superiority of Scotland over England. This rhetorical gambit shows Scottish literature working in a witty, confident and accomplished manner, though subsequent British imperial history places it largely beyond the pale in the Scottish canon.<sup>31</sup>

“Poem to Pitcairn” is a poem which points to much about Ramsay’s cultural formation. It is sad, then, that it was lost for so long, and it is interesting that it is not included by the poet among his showpiece collection, *Poems*, of 1720. This omission is probably a matter of political caution on Ramsay’s part. Ramsay could be courageously outspoken against the puritanical Calvinist

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<sup>30</sup> Pittock *Op cit.*, p.24.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, this little-noticed poem is included in the selection of Ramsay’s poems edited by Kinghorn and Law for *The Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1974). This selection conforms, largely and unadventurously, to traditional Scottish critical predilections which incline toward excising anything that seems too Anglocentric or Britocentric, but it seems that in this case, commendably, the editors are unable to resist Ramsay’s consummate skill and wit in the piece.

culture of Scotland from which quarter poetic pamphlet-wrath was returned on at least one occasion (in “The Flight of Religious Piety from Scotland” which charges Ramsay with the moral corruption of the nation, and rails against his “Play-House Tools” (l.22), probably a reference to Ramsay’s unsuccessful attempt to establish a theatre in the capital in 1736, this venture again showing Ramsay in his pugnacious cultural activism).<sup>32</sup> However, for the collection of 1720 Ramsay probably omitted “Poem to Pitcairn” as too overtly anti-unionist for the southern audience for which his volume was largely intended. It contains nowhere any explicitly anti-union sentiment of the kind Ramsay was certainly still peddling in the 1720s.<sup>33</sup> “Poem to Pitcairn” shows something of the skill in standard English, the facility with the couplet and a neo-classicism, all of which are to the fore as Ramsay’s *oeuvre* develops. It demonstrates a cultural grammar also of Scoto-Latin allegiance, anti-Unionism, rationalism and the first and third of these things sit Ramsay very comfortably within the very wide culture of Augustanism (something which we see, especially, in England with the diversely political contributions to, and interpretations of, the notion of a new Roman republic - either submerged or realised - in the British present by pro-Stuarts like Dryden and Pope and Hanoverian loyalists like Addison and Steele during the milieu).

Ramsay’s most successful work as far as many twentieth-century critics are concerned is his series of mock-elegies. These very lively poems manifest for a commentator like David Craig, the quintessential “old communal culture” associated with pre-New Town Edinburgh.<sup>34</sup> Craig claims of Ramsay and others who deal with Old Town subject-matter, “they write in the manner of popular wiseacres, masters of repartee, in a language little different from that of the mass of their countrymen, not in that of an educated upper crust.”<sup>35</sup> This is precisely the kind of judgement that has curtailed the

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<sup>32</sup> Ramsay, *Works* V, p.313.

<sup>33</sup> We have one piece of evidence for Ramsay’s caution in this regard during the 1720s in that “A Tale of Three Bonnets” (1722), his most outspoken piece of anti-unionism, appeared, uncharacteristically without Ramsay’s name on the title-page (see *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Volume VI edited by Alexander M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Edinburgh and London, 1974), p.104.

<sup>34</sup> David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830*, pp.19-39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.19.



reading of the clever literary aspects of Ramsay in mock-elegy mode. At the same time it pays inadequate attention to the cultural wells Ramsay was drawing upon to frame his mock-elegies. Ramsay's mock-elegy format derives from Watson's *Choice Collection*, which features "The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan" attributed to a Scottish cavalier during the English Civil War, Robert Sempill of Beltrees (c.1595-c.1665), a companion-piece to the former, "Epitaph on Sanny Briggs" (author unknown, though possibly written by Sempill's son, Francis), and "The Last Dying Words of Bonny Heck, a Famous Greyhound in the Shire of Fife" by William Hamilton of Gilbertfield (1665?-1751). Again, in this collection, the prompt of the the pro-Stuart and Jacobite interests are evident. James Watson gathered together in his volume contributions from Jacobite Episcopalians including those by Sir George Mackenzie (1630-1714), "Bluidy Mackenzie" who ferociously pursued the Covenanters, Archibald Pitcairne and Andrew Symson.<sup>36</sup> Generally, it would be fair to notice, as many commentators have done, that the *Choice Collection* presents a wide, uneven range in Scottish poetic heritage. It contains nothing of the medieval makars unless "Christ's Kirk on the Green" (attributed to James V) is included, a great deal of seventeenth-century work by poets closely associated with the Stuart court, Alexander Montgomerie (c.1545-98), Robert Aytoun (1570-1638) and William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649), and a little of George Buchanan (1506-82). Given the appearance of "Christ's Kirk" and Montgomerie's "The Flyting betwixt Polwart and Montgomerie", it would be fair to say that the volume incorporates a substantial quantity of older Scottish poetry's physically farcical "low-style". The logic of this is clear. It speaks of a royalist, pro-Stuart, Episcopalian resistance to the Puritanism of Calvinist Scotland, and to some extent, to that of Britain more generally. Of the mock-elegies by Sempill and Hamilton, however, with the possible exception of bestial innuendo in "Bonny Heck" (where the dog talks of "my Puppies .../Which I gat on a bonny Lady (ll.79-80)), we find nothing of the intense scatological and sexual behaviour that is so apparent in Allan Ramsay's mock-elegies.<sup>37</sup> Scatology in the likes of "The Flyting betwixt Polwart and

<sup>36</sup> See *Watson's Choice Collection* edited by Harriet Harvey Wood (Edinburgh, 1977), Part I, pp. 17, 32, 36, 68, 135, 71; Part II, pp.71 ; Part III, p.56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Part 1, p.70.

Montgomerie” would, undoubtedly, have confirmed Ramsay in his depiction of bodily functions, but he might be seen, more profitably, as operating as part of a newly contemporary scatological idiom of Tory disgust in the early eighteenth-century found most obviously in print caricature in William Hogarth and in literature in Pope and Swift (though this literature is cognate with that found in the earlier Stuart-loyal poets).

Ramsay’s mock-elegy writing dates at least back to 1712, when a version of “Elegy on Maggy Johnston” is referred to in the Easy Club journal.<sup>38</sup> Thematically and modally, Ramsay’s mock elegies establish many of the keynotes which later sound resonantly in the poetry of Fergusson, Burns and others. Not least, these set in place the idea of the “Habbie Simson” stanza (later the “Burns” stanza) as a kind of Scottish cultural signature. In his “First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace” (1736), Pope writes of the respective national modes of England and Scotland, “One likes no language but the Faery Queen;/A Scot will fight for Christ’s Kirk o’ the Green” (ll.39-40).<sup>39</sup> At this point, then, to informed eyes the “Christ’s Kirk” stanza is seen as the Scots mode *par excellence* and, indeed, proves to be a durable form down through the eighteenth-century. It is the “Habbie” stanza, though an ancient European form maybe five hundred years old by the time Ramsay comes to it, which emerges as the most frequent eighteenth-century Scots stanza of choice under the influence of Ramsay. A poem to Ramsay of uncertain date, “An Habbyc on the Death of Allan Ramsay”, pays tribute in its last stanza to Ramsay’s establishment of the stanza-form:

Now, Whae’re quarrels wi’ my Verse,  
An says its nother Scots nor Earse,  
An gin the critics say its scarce  
good Elegiac,

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<sup>38</sup> Ramsay, *Works* V, p.10.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works* edited by Herbert Davis (Oxford, 1983) p.362 (ll.39-40).



I bid them a come kiss my A-se  
Its good Habbyac.<sup>40</sup>

Here, clearly, the writer identifies the fact that Ramsay has established a form and a mode (mock-elegy) which the Scots can call their own amidst other (linguistic) uncertainties.

For all its depiction of wild drunkenness (to the extent of featuring an inebriated narrator) Ramsay's first-known piece in Scots and in the Habbie stanza, "Maggy Johnston", shows its author displaying his credentials as a man of culture (in this sense it has a generally similar *modus operandus* to that of "Poem to Pitcairn").<sup>41</sup> The poem exemplifies extreme "wit", which was often a device registering aristocratic disdain for more puritanical cultural and political currents in this period. Wit, as a concept, had also been given powerful recent intellectual backing through its definition by John Locke in 1690 as the ability to relate unlike ideas.<sup>42</sup> We see a version of this definition as the poem sets up a very precise dialogue between mock-elegy and the elegy-form proper. Instead of the elegant hexameters or pentameters classically associated with elegy, we have the reelsome Habbie stanza with its tetrameters and trimeters. Instead of the reflective narrator casting a wide eye across cultural and universal terrain, we have the digressive drunk. Instead of lament for some venerable personage, we have lament for a pub landlady. In this series of reversals, however, we should notice the oblique presence of the man of "high" art, more than the man of "low" art.<sup>43</sup> This poem emerges, it is true, from the context of Old Town Edinburgh, but the communality which is featured is the communality of the Easy Club and its enjoyment of low class howffs, rather than any wider social communality. We ought to be aware of Ramsay's milieu in Britain, in the phrase of Maximillian Novak, as an "age of

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<sup>40</sup> Ramsay, *Works* IV, p.298.

<sup>41</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.10.

<sup>42</sup> See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1690] edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975) where Locke defines wit as linking like or unlike ideas: "For Wit lying most in the assemblage of Ideas, and putting these together with quickness and variety", Book II, Chapter XI (p.156).

<sup>43</sup> See, for instance, the critical misjudgement of Allan H. Maclaine that "Maggy Johnston" is "competent in style but lacking in subtelty and spark, it is a promising but relatively crude specimen of Ramsay's earlier verse in Scots", *Allan Ramsay* (Boston, 1983), p.27.



disguise".<sup>44</sup> Anonymity and satirical narrative personae were very much the order of the day in the early eighteenth century. In general terms, such propensities toward disguise arose from the politically, religiously and culturally turbulent times. Out of this uncertain, but discursively creative period emerges, for instance, Jonathan Swift's *Tale of a Tub* (1704) featuring a mad narrator. Ramsay's narrator in "Maggy Johnston" is a character in this spirit and it may be that Ramsay's poem draws general inspiration from the climate engendered by Swift's *Battle of the Books* (1697) dealing with the disjunction between classical literary mores and the seeming recession of the classical habit of mind in the turmoil of the seventeenth-century. Ramsay tends to be read rather too exclusively in his patriotic project of Scottish reinstatement, when he ought to be seen also (and at the same time) as part of a wider British project of reinstatement of neo-classical (or "Augustan") ideals (even as these are in "Maggy Johnston" being ironically reversed). While dealing with this point it is also worth highlighting Ramsay's interest in fables (of which he published a collection in 1722) which is a product primarily of a contemporary European interest in the genre (at the centre of which was the work of La Motte). The fable-genre is again pertinent to the "age of disguise", and it is no coincidence that the British vogue has its most important root in the hugely popular fables of a highly disaffected John Dryden in published in 1700.<sup>45</sup> Too often it is assumed, in the kind of reflex of which George Gregory Smith would have approved, that Ramsay's fables represent a continuation of medieval, Henrysonian fable.

Ramsay's contemporaneity is seen also in "Maggy Johnston" where he is imbibing the Lockean spirit of his times. Locke had very much put in place at this time the idea that humanity's frequently inaccurate perceptions or false associations of ideas provide a faulty sense of the world.<sup>46</sup> This idea is

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<sup>44</sup> Maximillian Novak *English Literature in the Age of Disguise* (Berkeley & London, 1977).

<sup>45</sup> See *The Poems of John Dryden* Vol IV edited by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), pp.1437-1758, for Dryden's fables modelled from the work of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio and Chaucer. This clearly backward-looking mode represents something of Dryden's cultural nostalgia for an age of pre-Reformation culture. Where Dryden knew the great English medieval poet, Chaucer, Ramsay knew very little of Scotland's greatest medieval writer of fables, Henryson. Dryden's recourse to fable for thinly veiled political purposes occurs in his "The Hind and the Panther" (1687) where the hind stands for the Roman Catholic church and the panther for the Anglican church. There is no equivalent to this religious and political comment in any of the fables produced by Ramsay.

<sup>46</sup> This is a theme throughout Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, but it features especially in Book II, Chapter XXXIII.



taken to a kind of extreme in the dizzily disorientated narrator of “Maggy Johnston”. The poem is not a recommendation to demotic hedonism, but is a reflex of disgust in the face of Calvinist Edinburgh of the early eighteenth century (though Ramsay, paradoxically, shares with this Calvinism a sense of man’s corrupt nature). Ramsay’s vision of corruption, however, is part of his mentality of eighteenth-century Tory Humanism. Paul Fussell has succinctly described this when he writes that “The humanistic obligation is to expose the full depths of human depravity, either by homily, satire or history.”<sup>47</sup> The drunken riot of the poem stands both in antipathy to the puritanism Ramsay perceived in his society and as a symptom of the cultural collapse which this puritanism was supposedly engendering. The poem ends bathetically with the line “O rare Maggy Johnston”, a transposition of Ben Johnson’s epitaph at Westminster Abbey. This, again, registers Ramsay’s cultural *mentalite* in the poem as Johnson was perhaps the most effective British literary castigator of puritanism in the seventeenth-century. “Maggy Johnston” stands as the first exemplar in a long line of Scottish literature demonstrating extreme and oppositional mores of constraint and release in behaviour which was to be followed through by Robert Burns and James Hogg. This diagnosis of Calvinist damage to the psyche, however, is found more explicitly in Ramsay’s oeuvre in a sister-poem to “Maggy Johnston”, “Elegy on John Cowper, Kirk-Treasurer’s Man” (published in 1718 though commemorating a subject who died in 1714).<sup>48</sup> This poem depicts the moral rigour of Calvinism as lying ultimately in puerile and sly appropriation of the sinfulness it explicitly condemns. Highlighting Calvinist hypocrisy and materialist corruption, it draws perhaps on Archibald Pitcairne’s character of Timothy Turbulent in *The Assembly* (1692), and looks toward the much larger scale portraits of this kind in Burns’ “Holy Willie’s Prayer” and James Hogg’s *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.<sup>49</sup> Given Pitcairne’s wielding of a grammar of contemptible puritanical literary character essentially derived from Ben Jonson, we should again notice Ramsay’s part in channelling a literary impulse across the border which the Scots adopt

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford, 1969), p.71.

<sup>48</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.14.

<sup>49</sup> Archibald Pitcairne, *The Assembly* edited by Terence Tobin (Lafayette, Indiana, 1972)



and make peculiarly their own.

“Elegy on Lucky Wood in the Canongate” (published in 1718 and marking the death of an individual during 1717) throws into sharp relief the unhealthy Bacchanalian carnality of “Maggy Johnston”.<sup>50</sup> From “Lucky Wood” (as well many songs collected by editors such as Ramsay and sung in men’s clubs and societies from Ramsay’s “Easy Club” to Fergusson’s “Cape Club”), eighteenth-century poetry in Scots derives a strong commendation of unrriotous, healthy, communal drinking and eating.<sup>51</sup> This strain is developed by Fergusson in poems such as “The Daft-Days”, “Caller Oysters”, “Hallow Fair” and “The Farmer’s Ingle”. It is carried on in the work of Burns in such as “The Twa Dogs”, “The Cottar’s Saturday Night” and even in lighter pieces such as “Scotch Drink” and “To a Haggis”. The expression of the civilised consumption of comestibles surely has its roots deep in ancient bucolic literature, but one might argue that during the eighteenth century this became something of a national Scottish mode (the pointed Stuart-loyal seventeenth-century roots of this celebration being found in William Drummond of Hawthornden’s, “Polemo-Middinia”).<sup>52</sup> The opening stanza of “Lucky Wood” shows that the piece contains a seriousness which is in no way diminished by the mock-heroics of the piece:

O Cannigate! poor elritch Hole;  
What Loss, what Crosses does thou thole!  
London and Death gars thee look drole

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<sup>50</sup> Ramsay, *Works I*, p.18.

<sup>51</sup> Davis D. McElroy provides a view of the more restrained communal celebration which featured in the literary clubs and societies of the eighteenth-century, including the Cape Club (*Scotland’s Age of Improvement: A Survey of Eighteenth-Century Literary Clubs and Societies* (Washington, 1969), pp.144-70). There was, undoubtedly, however, a more riotous side to such societies which Robert Fergusson depicts when he writes of the potential situation in the Cape Club: “though in Capehall he should goosified Spew/From peuking with Porter, no thirst can Enue” (*The Unpublished Poems of Robert Fergusson* edited by William E. Gillis (Edinburgh, 1955), ll5-6 [p.24]. The view of such clubs has been widened by Edwin Morgan’s illumination of the homoerotic elements present in a number of such clubs in his “A Scottish Trawl” pp.205-221 in Christopher Whyte (ed.), *Gendering the Nation* (Edinburgh, 1995), see especially pp.209-12. There is no doubt, then, that these clubs encapsulated a number of moods and types of behaviour as places both of constructive cultural behaviour or renewed cultural confidence in eighteenth-century Scotland, in line with McElroy’s reading of these institutions, and as places of male-centred relief. Both functions should be borne in mind if we are to keep before us a sense of balance in relation to eighteenth-century “conviviality” in the literary clubs of Scotland.

<sup>52</sup> The best translation of “Polemo-Middinia” is that by Allan H. MacLaine in his edition, *The Christis Kirk Tradition* (Glasgow, 1996). The poem is a compendium of the good potential fare swimming in the sea off Scotland.



And hing thy Head  
Wow, but thou has e'en a cauld Coal  
To blaw indeed. (ll.1-6)

Here we find complaint against the union yoked to complaint at yet another loss to Edinburgh culture. Ramsay explains in a footnote the significance of his poem's location: "The place of her residence being the greatest sufferer, by the loss of our members of parliament, which London now enjoys, many of them having there houses there, being the suburb of Edinburgh nearest the King's palace; this with the death of Lucky Wood are sufficient to make the place ruinous."<sup>53</sup> Ramsay himself categorised "Lucky Wood" as a "comedy", but it is important to notice, as so often the case with early eighteenth-century mock-heroic poetry, that the comedy is serious.<sup>54</sup> The first stanza rapidly essays the loss of indigenous sovereign and parliament, and also the last pathetic remnant of connection to a "fuller" Scottish culture with the death of Lucky Wood who has served the old parliamentarians. Canongate is now an "elritch" or ghostly "hole". It is a shadow of the place it once was, bereft of browster and drinkers. The locale is haunted not so much by Lucky Wood, but by the phantoms of Scotland's past cultural autonomy and by signs of previously vital life. In a nice piece of zeugma, which demonstrates Ramsay's Augustan credentials, "London and Death" bring sadness. The death being alluded to on the surface is that of the woman-browster, but underneath it is the death and emptiness of Scottish culture of which Ramsay is speaking.

In his poems of 1721, Ramsay distinguished "Lucky Spence's Last Advice" (1718) from his other "comick" pieces on the deaths of humble characters, as a "satyrick" work.<sup>55</sup> In this grouping the poem sits with such pieces as "Wealth, or the Woody: A Poem to the South Sea" and "Rise and Fall of Stocks: An Epistle to My Lord Ramsay". "Lucky Spence" like these very explicitly fiscally-themed poems casts a disapproving eye over the excesses of a dangerously domineering market-place. The

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<sup>53</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.18.

<sup>54</sup> See Ramsay's index to his *Poems* (1721); reprinted in Ramsay, *Works* I, p.264-5.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

poem shows Ramsay the innovator again, capitalising in Scots poetic form on a popular English satirical mode (again with strong roots in the work of Ben Jonson), which focussed upon the low-life of the urban setting. From the late seventeenth-century, there was an increased interest in the prostitute in particular in fiction, found in the likes of *The Whore's Rhetorick Calculated to the Meridian of London and Conformed to the Rules of Art in Two Dialogues* (1683).<sup>56</sup> Ramsay must have known this, or work very like it (a huge amount of material passed before him as a bookseller and the work remains to be done on what precisely he sold in the course of his trade). Ramsay's swiftness to the pulse in fully fleshed out satire via prostitute-personae is particularly noteworthy, as "Lucky Spence" predates Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) by several years.

The eponymous Lucky Spence is a brothel-keeper dispensing "good" advice on her deathbed to the whores of her house. She begins her discourse with a portentous groan and then riffs three times. Human appearance is undercut immediately, then, as Lucky Spence is portrayed as animal-like. As quickly, however, a sly equipoise is found by the madam as she addresses her "loving lasses" (l.7) in a phrase which simultaneously inhabits the terms of fond family-feeling and very precisely identifies the function of her working-girls. Euphemism and explicitness, then, are nicely yoked together in an oxymoronic style of the kind which was surely influential on Burns in his large-scale Scottish satires, "The Holy Fair" and "Holy Willie's Prayer". The conceit of the family is maintained as Lucky Spence expresses herself loathe to leave her girls (though clearly this is because they represent such a profitable business). With seeming magnanimity, however, she suggests to her girls that they should save for the time when neither the "face" (l.16) nor the "tail" (l.17) will attract any earnings for them. Underneath this seeming thinking beyond her own death, however, we should notice simply the continuation of the brothel-keeper's attitude to her girls as dumb animals. She dispenses other advice, particularly in the art of hypocrisy such as reporting clients who are slow to pay to the vigilance of the Presbyterian church. She also exhorts Christian stoicism in the face of the correction-house and rough handling at the hands of soldiers. This impious mimicking of Christ-like sermonising reaches its centre:

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of prostitution-satire in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see Ian A. Bell, *Literature and Crime in Augustan England* (London & New York, 1991), pp.92-146.



Nane gathers Gear withouten Care,  
 Ilk Pleasure has of Pain a skare;  
 Suppose then that they should tirl ye bare,  
                     And gar ye fike,  
 E'en learn to thole; 'tis very fair  
                     Ye're Nibour like.                      (ll.55-60).

“Lucky Spence’s Last Advice” is a condemnation of the market-driven crassness of early eighteenth-century Britain (with a particular side-swipe aimed at Scotland in its hypocritical Calvinism). Again, then, amidst a riotously comic or topsy-turvy scenario we should be very aware of Ramsay’s trenchant poetry of serious cultural complaint.

We see Ramsay engaged in serious cultural purposes also in his verse-epistles, a mode of poetry which was part of the Augustan armoury in the hands of Pope and others for demonstrating urbanity of outlook.<sup>57</sup> All too easily the verse-epistle in the hands of Ramsay, and perhaps especially later in Burns’s hands, has tended to be seen as an index of Scottish “homeliness” or “directness”; true, there is a great deal of localisation of poetic materials in the hands of these poets generally in this mode, but they are not trying to “dumbdown” literature *per se* (the verse-epistle mode *is* a literary mode, not some dissenting gesture from writing literature). Ramsay’s most famous set of poetic epistolary exchanges is with William Hamilton of Gilbertfield who rendered into English a version of Blind Hary’s *Wallace* (1722). Hamilton’s biography is scant. He contributed “Bonny Heck” to Watson’s *Choice Collection* and so may have had Jacobite sympathies. His *Wallace* was denuded of some of its medieval Catholic resonances (for instance, the appearance of the Virgin Mary becomes Dame Fortune in Hamilton’s version) and this may also point to what we have seen already, a cultural grouping of Stuart-sympathisers forging a *via media* between what it held to be extreme theological positions - the puritanism of Calvinism and the heavy devotionism of Roman Catholicism.<sup>58</sup> Whether,

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<sup>57</sup> This truism of eighteenth-century criticism is particularly well demonstrated in Peter Dixon, *The World of Pope’s Satires* (London, 1968), see especially pp.54-62, 109-21 & 147-52.

<sup>58</sup> William Hamilton of Gilbertfield, *Blind Harry’s Wallace* (Edinburgh, 1998); see Elspeth King’s introduction pp.xi-xxix.

Jacobitic or not, what Hamilton and Ramsay certainly attempt is to recreate something of a culture of modern creative literature in eighteenth-century Scotland. Hamilton's *Wallace* ought to be seen together with Ramsay's anthology of pre-1600 Scottish poetry, his *Ever-green* (1724), as representing a continuation of the medieval revivalism initiated by Watson and Ruddiman. However, apart from Ramsay's medieval confection, "The Vision" which he includes in *Ever-green*, the attempt to re-utilise the modes of Scottish medievalism is understandably patchy. The ancient (though in Scottish terms fairly recent seventeenth-century) vehicle of the "habbie" stanza is joined by utilisation of the "Christis Kirk" stanza (though Robert Fergusson uses this much more extensively and originally than Ramsay does) to establish the stanzaic signatures of poetic nationalism. Ramsay's Scots lexis is influenced also, as Douglas Duncan has made some initial efforts to suggest, by his reading of Ruddiman's edition of Gavin Douglas's *Aeneidos* (1710).<sup>59</sup> And it is possible to argue, as Kenneth Simpson has done, that the "flyting" mode is re-established in eighteenth-century poetry in Scots.<sup>60</sup> By and large, though, Ramsay's creative impulse is a "modern" one, as he takes from the example of Hamilton of Gilbertfield in "Bonny Heck" and Hamilton's later epistles to Ramsay, perhaps more than from anyone else, the license to write in an idiom of Scots (in many instances, it is true, close to the Scots which Ramsay and all social classes of Edinburgh would have used). It is credible to suggest that Ramsay's knowledge of an increasingly anglicised poetry in Scotland in the seventeenth-century, as he would see from Watson's *Choice Collection* and which he knew previously to be much more distinctively Scots in language as Ruddiman's publications and his labours for *Ever-green* demonstrated, inspired him, to some extent, to write self-confidently in Scots. However, Ramsay's adoption of Scots (largely a Scots-English) was, at the risk of entering into the critical vocabulary I decried in the last chapter, "natural" in the sense that it was a Scots wielded by men of culture like Hamilton of Gilbertfield who were untraumatised in the use of their own language and who, at the same time, were *au fait* with the most modern literary technology of early eighteenth-century Britain such as the verse-epistle.

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<sup>59</sup> Douglas Duncan, *Thomas Ruddiman*, p.166-7.

<sup>60</sup> Kenneth Simpson, "The Legacy of Flyting", *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXVI (1991), pp.503-14.



There is a very explicit nationalistic dimension to the verse-epistles between Hamilton and Ramsay (1719). The sequence opens as Hamilton hails Ramsay's poetic excellence. So good is Ramsay that:

Tho Ben and Dryden of renown  
Were yet alive in London Town,  
Like kings contending for a crown;  
                                  'Twad be a pingle,  
Whilk o' you three wad gar words sound  
                                  And best to gingle.       (ll.19-24)<sup>61</sup>

It is telling that Hamilton takes for his exemplars of poetic excellence Jonson and Dryden (seventeenth-century poets associated by the Scoto-Latinist Jacobite grouping with anti-puritanism and Stuart-loyalism). At the same time, Hamilton pays tribute to Ramsay the revivalist: "[...] thou consults thy dictionary/Of ancient words,/Which come from thy poetick quarry,/As sharp as swords" (ll.39-42). The comparison not with any ancient Scottish "makar" but with much more recent poets as part of a common British poetic heritage and the recognition of Ramsay the Scots-language revivifier highlights yet again that the poetic situation in early eighteenth-century Scotland is in formative flux.

Ramsay, in his answering verse-epistle, returns the compliment (the sequence is an inversion of a poetic "flyting" in its mutual back-scratching):

When I begoud first to cun verse,  
And could your *Ardry Whins* rehearse,  
Where Bonny Heck ran fast and fierce,  
                                  It warm'd my breast  
Then emulation did me pierce,  
                                  Whilk since ne'er ceast.

May I be licket wi' a bittle,  
Gin of your numbers I think little;  
Ye're never rugget, shan, nor kittle,  
                                  But blyth and gabby,  
And hit the spirit to a tittle,

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<sup>61</sup> Ramsay, *Works I*, p.115.

“Ardry Whins” is a reference to the location for Hamilton’s “Bonny Heck” and Ramsay’s praise for Hamilton’s stanzaic facility, of course, refers back to the model of Sempill’s “The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan”.<sup>63</sup> What we see here, then, is Ramsay’s acknowledgement of his poetic formation in which Hamilton’s Scots language, his energetic comedy (which has particular influence upon Ramsay’s mock elegies), and his usage of the “habbie” stanza for satire (as opposed to the serious lament of “The Piper of Kilbarchan”) all play a pronounced part informing Ramsay’s own poetic usage.

Ramsay goes on to place Scottish poetic heritage in a broader context:

The chiels of London, Cam, and Ox,  
Ha’e raised up great poetick stocks  
Of Rapes, of Buckets, Sarks and Locks,  
While we neglect  
To shaw their betters. This provokes  
Me to reflect

On the lear’d days of Gawn Dunkell.  
Our country then a tale cou’d tell,  
Europe had nane mair snack and snell  
At verse or prose;  
Our kings were poets too themsell.  
Bauld and jocose. (ll. 49-60)

Here Ramsay contrasts unfavourably the English literary present (the circle of Pope) to the Scottish medieval past which boasted such writers as the Bishop of Dunkeld, and, supposedly, James I (taken to be the author of “Christis Kirk on the Green”) and James V (to whom “The Gaberlunzie Man” was ascribed). We see that the dividing issue is also one of class and politics. Ramsay is (mock) contemptuous of the trivialities concerned in the likes of Pope’s writing (though Ramsay, in fact, had a huge admiration for the southern poet) and talks of these inconsequential things as having “raised up great poetick stalks.” Pope and the southern poets, then, are identified with the new market-driven

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.118; p.119.

<sup>63</sup> See *Watson’s Choice Collection* edited by Harriet Harvey Wood: “I ran alike on a’ kind Grounds,/Yea in the midst of Ardry Whines” (ll.37-8), p.69.



Britain centred in the south east of England of which Ramsay was, as we have seen, scathing. This conceit of different values (which, in reality, Ramsay knew very precisely to be a conceit since Pope's views on commerce and his disaffected Tory outlook were very similar to that of the Scottish poet) is nicely chosen as it allows Ramsay to contrast the mocking comedy of southern Augustan poets with a more straightforward seriousness (found in Gavin Douglas) and the unmediated folk humour pertaining in the work of the Stuart-monarchs. Here, yet again, we find Ramsay operating with pro-Jacobite, anti-Unionist predilections as he compares the pure Scottish past with the corrupt Anglocentric British present and venerates a Scottish medieval poetic culture which could encompass both high and low style (the latter seen especially in sovereign-authored poetry) and which boasted a Scots lexis which Ramsay vaunts throughout his verse-epistle. Ramsay derives great poetic purchase from these manoeuvres, in terms of simply working a good, humorous, nationalist conceit but ironically he has to some extent lost out by them in critical prosperity so that the Augustan sensibility and the influence of Pope in his work has tended to be read as cultural pollution. In relation to the verse-epistles to Hamilton themselves it results in oversight of the fact that Ramsay's innovation is to bring this witty, discursive Augustan mode to Scottish poetry, on the vehicle of the "habbie" stanza and essay - and to some extent remedy - the cultural void Ramsay is complaining of in his country in the early eighteenth-century.

It is revealing to turn to another verse-epistle exchange, that between Ramsay and the English poet, William Somerville (1675-1742). Somerville had written a laudatory piece to Ramsay on the publication of the second edition of the Scotman's *Poems* in 1729, and he and Ramsay entered into a dialogue upon the over-punctiliousness of some early eighteenth-century critics and the desirability of writing from inspiration.<sup>64</sup> Ramsay claims:

With more of Nature than of Art,  
From stated Rules I often start,

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<sup>64</sup> Ramsay, *Works* III, p.120-2 & p.122-4.

Rules never studied yet by me.  
My Muse is *British*, bold and free,  
And loves at large to frisk and bound  
Unman'cled o'er Poetick Ground.

I love the Garden wild and wide,  
Where Oaks have Plumb-Trees by their Side;  
Where Woodbines and the twisting Vine,  
Clip round the Pear-Tree and the Pine;  
Where mixt Jonckeels and Gowans grow,  
And Roses midst rank Clover blow,  
Upon a Bank of a clear Strand,  
Its Wimplings led by Nature's Hand;  
Tho' Docks and Bramble here and there,  
May sometimes cheat the Gardner's Care,  
Yet this to me's a paradise,  
Compar'd with prime cut Plots and nice,  
Where Nature has to Art resign'd,  
Till all looks mean, stiff, and confin'd. (ll.17-36).

Here, again, Ramsay aligns himself with a wide "British" culture, tapping into the *mythe* of ancient, indomitable liberty (of "being bold and free"). The Scots had this myth in place all the way back to The Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, at least, and the English from at least as far back as the signing of the *Magna Charta* in 1215. Ramsay is deft in activating this broad myth in his poem (he is carefully widening his poetic epithet after being hailed by Somerville in his epistle as a "Caledonian Bard" (l.1)) and he is also, at the same time, registering a British sensibility eschewing, given Ramsay's broadly Tory cultural and political outlook (which dislikes formulae and ideology), that side of the Augustan sensibility which is too rulebound in matters of artistic criticism. Ramsay, as we shall increasingly see, is a man who, as his poetic technique and influences show, is very much part of the British Augustan age, but who, at the same time, is part of a political and cultural debate where he does not believe the ideal Augustan order (because Hanoverian and market-driven) to be actually in place. In this light can be read the final lines of his verse-epistle to Somerville where he looks "To meet you on the River's Shore,/That Britons, now, divides no more" (ll.77-8). This seeming Unionism is not a manifestation of Ramsay's oft-identified "crisis of identity" but is to be read as Ramsay making



common cause with Somerville, the Tory country squire in the hope, if not exactly by now that the Stuarts might be returned to the throne, then at least a new British order might emerge even from the Hanoverian ashes where laudable men in broad political or cultural terms like Somerville and John, Duke of Argyll might provide new cultural leadership.<sup>65</sup>

Ramsay's cultural and poetic impulse in the early eighteenth century is as much one of modernisation as antiquarianism, though the former tends to be overlooked or even derided by critics. Sometimes this "modernisation" is transparently imitative as in the case of "The Battell: The Morning Interview" (1716) as it copies the mock-heroic mode of battling lovers from *The Rape of the Lock*.<sup>66</sup> Far from unskilful, it features a number of pretty rural scenes and sights. Its pastoral elements also link Ramsay to that contemporary literary theory which imported pastoral into the urban setting (Pope's "Windsor-Forest" (1704-13) is a good case in point).<sup>67</sup> The pastoral or eclogue setting, peculiarly associated with classical and ancient Augustan traditions and with its revitalised associations from the Restoration is strong in Scotland down to Fergusson and slightly beyond. As yet we await a full treatment of Scottish pastoral in the eighteenth century, but Ramsay can be seen in "The Battell", as he inserts amidst a tale of the congress of lovers a portrait of Edinburgh which has struck many critics as incongruous, doing something innovative as he attempts to pastoralise the Scottish capital:

Where *Aulus* oft makes Law for Justice pass,  
And CHARLES'S Statue stands in lasting Brass,  
Amidst a lofty Square which strikes the Sight,  
With Spacious Fabricks of stupendous Hight,  
Whose sublime Roofs in Clouds advance so high,

<sup>65</sup> See Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (Oxford, 1964), p.27, for diagnosis of Ramsay's crisis of identity supposedly becoming heightened by the aesthetic predilections of the early eighteenth century.

<sup>66</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.1.

<sup>67</sup> In "Windsor-Forest" we find the twin-city metropolis of London and Westminster referred to in the following terms:

Behold! Augusta's glitt'ring spires increase,  
And Temples rise, the beauteous works of Peace.  
I see, I see where two fair cities bend  
Their ample bow a new Whitehall ascend! (ll.375-8) (Alexander Pope, *Poetical Works* edited by Herbert Davis, p.48.

Generally, this kind of centring of the ordered metropolis in harmony with the surrounding locus amoenus of rural Britain is what is influencing Ramsay in his depiction of Edinburgh.



They seem the Watch-tow'rs of the Nether Sky;  
Where once Alas! where once the Three Estates  
Of *Scotland's* Parliament held free Debates:  
Here Celia dwelt, and here did Damon move,  
Press'd by his rigid Fate, and raging love. (ll.75-84)

Interesting things are going on in this pleasant poem. Ramsay is implying that Scotland is something of a palimpsest where, beneath the cultural torpor, greater potential lies (we see a note of such optimism in the detail of the statue of Charles II). There is implicit regret over the loss of the Stuart dynasty and the rest of Scotland's ancient body politic (its three estates). This backdrop of relegated Scottish culture leads to a particularly dissonant piece of Augustan mock-heroic pastoral love in the foreground of the poem. This dissonance, however, is not simply Ramsay losing control of heterogeneous materials, but can just as easily be read as a piece of extended irony where the poet is being quite pointed about the inability of the contemporary Scottish cultural climate to bear the weight of his chosen mode. In this reading, then, Ramsay is deliberately forcing the modern Augustan apparatus of urban pastoral on to early eighteenth-century Edinburgh to show up Scotland's cultural shortcomings.

If "The Battel" is a potentially more interesting poem than has been previously realised, this is certainly the case in two almost equally overlooked and much more skilful performances written by Ramsay which are strongly marked by the Augustan mentality, "Wealth, or the Woody" (1720) and "The Prospect of Plenty: A Poem on the North-Sea Fishery, Inscribed to the Royal Burrows of Scotland" (1720).<sup>68</sup> The first of these poems shows Ramsay's great skill as a poetic social satirist as it sustains the conceit of the natural world turned upside down by humankind's unnatural market appetites across one hundred and forty two lines in witty and polished Scots-English couplets. It begins by bidding "Thalia, ever welcome to this Isle,/Descend, and glad the Nation with a Smile" (ll.1-2). Thalia, the muse associated with comic and pastoral poetry, is, as Ramsay explains in a footnote, "the chearful Muse that delights to imitate the Actions of Mankind, and produces the laughing Comedy

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<sup>68</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.152 & p.158. It is astonishing that neither of these poems is included in Kinghorn and Law's most used anthology, *Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1974).



[...] That Kind of Poetry ever acceptable to *Britons*.”<sup>69</sup> We see the grammar of Augustanism here in the notion of explicitly calling on the correct muse, and so observing literary propriety, as part of the counterpointing of an early eighteenth-century Britain where decorum has been lost in the frenzy of stock speculation. If Britons can understand the correct order in the world of poetry then this might help them to see the national behavioural folly in the financial market-place. “Wealth, or the Woody” is a very confident address to Britain, by a Scottish Augustan poet, whose satirising of the South-Sea stock exchange scandal of 1719-20 (which reverberated throughout British politics into the 1730s), predates Pope’s treatment of the same subject in his “Epistle to Bathurst” (1732 ).<sup>70</sup> Again, then we might point to Ramsay being thematically ahead of his English contemporaries, though one should also point out that the kind of broad natural/unnatural terrain in Ramsay’s piece was precisely that most brilliantly traversed in the poetry of Pope which culminated in works such as his “Epistle to Burlington” (1731). In that piece, for example, Pope writes of the folly of man in trying win out over the natural seasons with his gold to create comfort:

Another age shall see the golden Ear  
 Imbrown the Slope, and nod on the Parterre,  
 Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann’d,  
 And laughing Ceres re-assume the land.<sup>71</sup>

Ramsay might, however, be seen as one of the minor British Augustans supporting Pope’s ultimate

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<sup>69</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.152.

<sup>70</sup> Given that Pope was one of the subscribers to Ramsay’s 1721 edition of *Poems* in which “Wealth, or the Woody” was included, his “Epistle to Bathurst” may well have been influenced by Ramsay’s poem. This influence may even have been quite specific in two instances. The closest lexical similarity is found between Ramsay’s “How Sand-blind Chance Woodies and Wealth bestows” (l.4) and Pope’s “What Nature wants, commodious Gold bestows” (l.21). There is perhaps again influence where Ramsay writes:

Imperial Gowd, What is’t thou canna grant?  
 Possest of thee, What is’t a Man needs want?  
 Commanding Coin, there’s nathing hard to thee (ll.123-5).

Pope’s possible echo this idea in “Epistle to Bathurst” is found in the following lines:

Gold imp’d by thee, can compass hardest things,  
 Can pocket State, can fetch or carry kings. (ll.73-7).

<sup>71</sup> *Pope: Poetical Works* edited by Herbert Davis (ll.173-6), p.320.

accomplishment in this strain, which is to be found most virulently in Pope's "Moral Essays" of the 1730s (among which the two pieces in Pope's style and manner mentioned above are to be numbered), in his own prosecution of such ideas at around the same time.

Ramsay's zeugmatic control of the natural/unnatural paradigm in 'Wealth, or the Woody' shows a true Augustan at work:

See frae yon Bank where South-Sea ebbs and flows,  
How Sand-blind Chance Woodies and Wealth bestows:  
Aided by thee [i.e. Thalia], I'll sail the wondrous Deep,  
And throw the crowded Alleys creep.  
Not easy Task to plough the swelling Wave,  
Or in Stock-jobbing Press my Guts to save:  
But naething can our wilder Passions tame,  
Wha rax for Riches or immortal Fame. (ll.3-10)

In pursuit of speculating on the stock-market, then, mankind shows a "wilder" (and so unnatural) passion. Mankind as "wilder" than nature is the ultimate conceit and this idea reverberates throughout eighteenth-century poetry from Pope and Swift and a little later in the prose of Johnson and Burke down to Robert Burns.<sup>72</sup> In Ramsay's poem the close metaphoric control quite brilliantly renders a world where the categories of human depravity and the natural way of things have become hopelessly intertwined. The critique is both carefully worked and politically explicit. The massive loss of value in the stocks of the South Sea Company in which the Walpole government had invested, and in which some of his ministers were looking for quite personal financial gain, represented a market-corruption implicating the highest levels of the British body-politic.<sup>73</sup> It was a scenario which seemed to bear out the belief of Ramsay and others in the disordering of values precipitated by the coming of Hanoverian power to Britain, and he leaves no-one in any doubt about the ideological responsibility for the situation: "Lang Heads they were that first laid down the Plan,/Into the which the Round anes headlang

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<sup>72</sup> See Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism: Ethics and Imagery from Swift to Burke* (Oxford, 1965).

<sup>73</sup> See Virginia Cowles, *The Great Swindle: The Story of the South Sea Bubble* (London, 1960), pp.160-173.



ran (ll.19-20).

Sarcastically inhabiting the original confidence of the South Sea projectors, Ramsay mocks the huge, misbegotten confidence of the projectors by comparing their schemes to one of the prodigious wonders of the natural world, the working of the Nile:

Like *Nilus* swelling frae his unkend Head,  
Frae Bank to Brae o'erflows ilk Rig and Mead,  
Instilling lib'ral Store of genial Sap,  
Whence Sun-burn'd Gypsies reap a plenteous Crap:  
Thus flows our Sea, but with this Diff'rence wide,  
But anes a Year their River heaves his Tide;  
Ours aft ilk Day, t'enrich the Common Weal  
Bangs o'er its Banks, and dings *Aegyptian Nile*. (ll.38-40)

Here we might arguably see a Scots voice drawn upon for its perceived ability to be cuttingly reductive; but, more important to note, is the confident voice of the Scots-language poet speaking in a wide range of reference which encompasses the most important political scandal of the day and which casts an eye culturally far and wide to make its point. Here is no ghettoised Scottish poet, but rather one as broad in outlook as any in Augustan Britain.

With a typically Augustan microscopic eye, Ramsay compares the stock-jobbers to midges (a very Scottish take on the much enduring eighteenth-century registering of moral disgust through portraying man as insect).<sup>74</sup> There is also a very Augustan urbanity in relation to the role of the poet:

This I forsee, (and Time shall prove I'm right;  
For he's nae Poet that wants the second Sight,)  
When Autumn's Stores are ruck'd up in the Yard,  
And Sleet and Snaw dreeps down cauld Winter's Beard;  
When bleak *November* Winds make Forrests bare,  
And with splenetick Vapours fill the Air:  
Then, then in Gardens, Parks, or silent Glen,  
When Trees bear naething else, they'll carry Men (ll.93-100).

Here Ramsay's narrator speaks as the voice of common sense (or common culture), as he gently mocks

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<sup>74</sup> Fussell, *Op cit.*, see especially pp.233-261.

the idea of the poet as mystic bard (in which stance we see yet again Ramsay voicing a cultured rationality) and suggests that the poet, in observing nature and reminding man that he is part of nature, brings a didactic store to which mankind ought to pay heed to. Such playfulness is superbly poised and this witty equanimity pertains to the ending also. Rather than finishing on the note of painting unnatural corruption as naturally punished upon the gallows, Ramsay daringly ends on a different note:

Unhappy Wretch, link'd to the threed-bare Nine,  
The dazzling Equipage can ne'er be thine:  
destin'd to toil thro' Labyrinths of Verse,  
dar'st speak of great Stock-jobbing as a Farce.  
Poor thoughtless Mortal, vain of airy Dreams,  
Thy flying Horse, and bright *Apollo's* Beams,  
And *Helicon's* wersh Well thou ca's Divine,  
Are nathing like a Mistress, Coach and Wine.

Wad some good Patron (whase superior Skill)  
Can make the South-Sea ebb and flow at Will,)  
Put in a Stock for me, I own it fair,  
In Epick Strain I'd pay him to a Hair;  
Immortalize him, and what e'er he loves,  
In flowing Numbers I shall sing, *Approves*;  
If not, Fox like, I'll thraw my Gab, and gloom,  
And ca' your Hundred Thousand a *sour Plum*. (ll.127-142)

The narrator confesses that his motivation in castigating the South-Sea Company scandal is one of jealousy; he wishes that he could get in on the act of playing the stock-market. What is poetic sensibility when compared to material wealth, he asks in the first stanza above. The really magical powers over nature belong not to the poet but to those who understand the ways of the market-driven world. The narrator offers to shift mode from “farce” to “epick” to celebrate any patron who can successfully invest something for him. The poet, then, offers to prostitute himself and his art in a final manoeuvre which registers a thoroughly corrupt society. After cleverly satirising the scandal the poem does (in a way which would strike its readership as entirely wise and credible when the poem was first published in Ramsay's *Poems* (1721), by which time the corruption of the South-Sea situation was plainly manifest), the narrator will fly in the face of his own wisdom for the sake of selfish, personal



gain. Again, then, we notice Ramsay satirising the comprehensive debasement of culture in early-eighteenth century Britain.

A companion piece to “Wealth, or the Woody”, “The Prospect of Plenty: A Poem on the North-Sea Fishery, Inscribed to the Right Honourable the Royal Burrows of Scotland” (1720) seeks to recommend a healthier basis upon which to build the wealth of the British nation: natural resources. As the poem claims, “Nae Nation in the Warld can parallel/The plenteous Product of this happy Isle” (ll.14-15). The poem is a celebration, particularly, of the Scottish sea and lochscapes, which ought to be harvested just as the traditional pastoral landscape is made to work for humankind:

[...] pastoral Heights, and sweet prolifick Plains,  
Tha can at Will command the safest Strains.  
Stand yont; for *Amphitrite* claims our Sang,  
Wha round fair *Thule* drives her finny Thrang,  
O'er Shaws of Coral, and the Pearly Sands,  
To *Scotia's* smoothest Lochs and Christal Strands. (ll.17-22)

The mention of Amphitrite, the wife of Neptune and Thule, supposedly an ancient Greek reference to Scotland's northern isles show Ramsay working hard to classicise and dignify the Scottish landscape.<sup>75</sup> As well as the classicised setting, we also have the careful portraiture of nature in the poem looks toward James Thomson's finely detailed observation of the flora and fauna of Britain in his *Seasons* (Thomson, as we shall see, was certainly influenced by Ramsay and it may be that this poem was an influence on Thomson's larger scale poetic project):

But Herrings, lovely Fish, like best to play  
In rowan Ocean, or the open Bay:  
In Crouds amazing thro the Waves they shine,  
Millions on Millions form ilk equal Line:  
Nor dares th' imperial Whale, unless by Stealth,  
Attack their firm united Common-wealth.  
But artfu' Nets, and Fishers' wyily Skill,  
Can bring the scaley Nations to their Will.

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<sup>75</sup> See Ramsay's footnotes to the poem, *Works I*, p.159.

When these retire to Caverns of the Deep,  
 Or in their oozy Beds thro' Winter sleep,  
 Then shall the tempting Bait, and stented String,  
 Beguile the Cod, the Sea-Cat, Tusk, and Ling.  
 Thus may our Fishery thro' a' the Year  
 Be still imploy'd, t'increase the publick Gear. (ll.27-40)

The sea around Scotland, then, presents a picture of ordered and bounteous nature, in contrast to the rugged, unfruitful image enjoyed by Scotland (especially in English eyes during the eighteenth century). If Britain only awakes to the "treasure" it has, especially around the Western Isles (which are signified by "Aebudan rocks"), it shall be exploiting something very tangibly desirable:

But dawns the Day sets *Britain* on her Feet,  
 Lang look'd for's come at last, and welcome be't:  
 For numerous Fleets shall hem *Aebudan* rocks,  
 Commanding Seas, with Rowth to raise our Stocks.  
 Nor can this be a toom Chimera found,  
 The Fabrick's bigget on the surest Ground.  
 Sma is our need to toil on foreign Shores,  
 When we have baith the *Indies* at our Doors.  
 Yet, for Diversion, laden Vessels may  
 Too far aff Nations cut the liquid Way;  
 And fraught frae ilka Port what's nice or braw,  
 While for their trifles we maintain them a'.  
*Goths, Vandals, Gauls, Hisperians, and the Moors,*  
 Shall a' be treated frae our happy Shores:  
 The rantin *Germans, Russians, and the Poles,*  
 Shall feast with Pleasure on our gusty Shoals:  
 For which deep in their Treasures we shall dive:  
 Thus, by fair Trading, North-Sea Stock shall thrive. (ll.52-69)

Thus *North-Sea* stock, its prodigious sea-harvest, stands in contrast to the *South-Sea* stock of the previous poem which is intangible and entirely notional. Britain's assets are nearer at hand than the nation realises. In this poem Ramsay performs the interesting manoeuvre of making a claim of right for Scotland as a locus of material potential for the good of Britain. The rather wild, watery climate of Scotland (on the face of it) is actually more promising than warmer (South-Sea) climes which are actually, as "Wealth, or the Woody" claims, more treacherous. Again we notice a confident range of



reference as the poem surveys a wide scene furth of Scotland and Britain and appeals for consideration of Scotland's natural bounty which is simultaneously primitive and deeply, plentifully nourishing. This appeal to the primitive strength of Scottish resources is part of a special pastoralised project which Ramsay and James Thomson were instrumental in initiating and a project which others, notably Robert Fergusson and, pre-eminently Robert Burns, were to continue in Scots poetry through the rest of the century.

We have seen Ramsay's patriotic poetic project emanating and operating in a number of locations. We have seen this, most especially, in his utilisation of the influence of the pro-Jacobite Scoto-Latinists and in his combination of the Scots language and Scottish situation with wider British Augustan predilections of the early eighteenth-century. These sites, I would claim, are much more pertinent to Ramsay's re-formation of Scots poetry at the beginning of the eighteenth-century than his often indentified "antiquarianism". His mock-elegies, for instance, as we have seen, look back to seventeenth-century Scottish poetry (and not, as is sometimes wrongly assumed, much earlier poetry in Scots), but in technique and outlook they are modern early eighteenth-century British productions (albeit at a time when the definition of Britishness remains contentious and not so anglocentric nor quite so securely Hanoverian, at least in cultural terms, as is sometimes assumed). Ramsay's antiquarianism is most famously channelled in his reprinting of "Christ's Kirk on the Grene" in 1718 to which he adds a third canto to the original two, and in his collections, *The Tea-Table Miscellany: A Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English* (1723-37) and *The Evergreen: A Collection of Scots Poems Wrote by the Ingenious before 1600* (1724).<sup>76</sup> The stanza-form of Christ's Kirk, which Ramsay used in only one other production, "Edinburgh's Salutation to the Most Honourable, My Lord Marquess of Carnarvon" (1720), does not seem to be one which Ramsay used with any great fluency.<sup>77</sup> As we shall see, this becomes much more a trusted and skilfully wielded vehicle by Robert Fergusson, and in relation to

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<sup>76</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.57; *The Tea-Table Miscellany: A Collection of Choice Songs, Scots and English* (Glasgow, 1871); *The Evergreen: A Collection of Scots Poems Wrote by the Ingenious before 1600* (Glasgow, 1874).

<sup>77</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.149.

“Christ’s Kirk” itself, Christopher Whyte has recently shown that “in the context of the “Christ’s Kirk” tradition as a whole, Ramsay’s contribution is an anomaly and represents a direction that the tradition was not to take.”<sup>78</sup> Whyte’s argument, essentially, is that Ramsay augments and interprets the poem as “a satire on boorish peasant customs” and in this glossing fails to appreciate the carnivalesque breaking of social barriers for a time of common humanity which is implied in the original poem and, indeed in the continuation of the tradition during the rest of the eighteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Whyte’s careful arguments are persuasive and provide us not only with additional evidence against Ramsay’s visceral populism, but also with a Ramseian gauge against which to measure the quality of the later festivity of Fergusson and Burns in the “Christ’s Kirk” mode.

With regard to *The Tea-Table Miscellany*, we see Ramsay inscribing a series of songs as plentiful in the English language as in Scots:

To ilka lovely British lass,  
 Frae ladies Charlotte, Anne and Jean,  
 Down to ilk bonny singing Bess,  
 Wha dances barefoot on the green.<sup>80</sup>

The language of love and song and women is Scots and English and is class-spanning as well. Ramsay is certainly being patriotic in *The Tea-Table Miscellany*, but that patriotism includes Scots-language patriotism as a subset of a wider British patriotism (again with the proviso that Ramsay’s Britain was one somewhat imaginably, at least, at variance with the values, which he often explicitly attacked, in the real Britain of the early eighteenth century). Ramsay’s inscription allows us to glimpse, again, the desire of the Tory for an organic, unified, ordered British cultural polity. We see this desire also in *The*

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<sup>78</sup> Christopher Whyte, “Bakhtin at Christ’s Kirk Part II: Carnival and the Vernacular Revival” in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXIX (1996), p.133; (pp.133-157).

<sup>79</sup> Whyte, “Bakhtin at Christ’s Kirk: Carnival and the Scottish Renaissance” in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXVIII (1993), p.202; (see pp.194-203 for Whyte’s full argument).

<sup>80</sup> *The Evergreen*, p.v.



*Evergreen* which is dedicated to James, fourth Duke of Hamilton and the Royal Company of Archers (which James headed). This honorary royal guard, which Ramsay became a member of, dated back to 1667, received its charter from Queen Anne in 1707, and had its roots in the King's Guard raised for Mary in 1561 and continued by James VI.<sup>81</sup> What we see yet again, then, is the entangled roots and continuities of Tory Royalism (membership of the company implied high Tory ideals). The royal ideal for Ramsay may well have been a returned Stuart-dynasty, but in its absence he, like many others, would be part of an apparatus which while formally (and perhaps to a large extent actually) loyal to the British dynasty of the day. What we see, then, is Ramsay's participation in a somewhat transmuted organisation, which attempts to keep alive the cultural liturgy of a previous, vanquished dynasty. (This represents a similar configuration to that of Scott in 1822 when he attempted, essentially under the guise of his fictional character Cosmo Bradwardine, to present George IV to Edinburgh in the garb of Charles Edward Stuart).<sup>82</sup>

Ramsay's preface to *The Evergreen* is notorious for its recommendation to cultural purity. He writes:

When these good old Bards wrote, we had not yet made Use of imported Trimming upon our Cloaths, nor of foreign Embroidery in our Writings. Their Poetry is the Product of Country not pilfered and spoiled in the Transportation from abroad.<sup>83</sup>

Quite simply, this is a ridiculous claim to make of some of the poets Ramsay then goes on to include in his anthology, such as William Dunbar and Robert Henryson who are steeped in the broad European and classical mores of their times. But the significance of Ramsay's polemical overstatement perhaps becomes clearer as his preface proceeds:

There is nothing can be heard more silly than one's expressing his Ignorance

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<sup>81</sup> See Gordon Donaldson & Robert S. Morpeth, *A Dictionary of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1977), p.8 & p.116.

<sup>82</sup> For a very useful discussion of this episode see, Iain Gordon Brown, "Scott in 1822: 'Fugelman of Royalty'" in *Scott Newsletter* (Spring 1996), pp.2-5.

<sup>83</sup> *The Evergreen*, p.vii.

of his native Language; yet such there are, who can vaunt of acquiring a tolerable Perfection in the French or Italian Tongues, if they have been a Fortnight in Paris or a Month in Rome: But shew them the most elegant Thoughts in a Scots Dress, they as disdainfully as stupidly condemn it as barbarous. But the true Reason is obvious: Every one that is born never so little superior to the Vulgar, would fain distinguish themselves from them by some Manner or other, and such, it would appear, cannot arrive at a better Method. But this affected Class of Fops give no Uneasiness, not being numerous; for the most part of our Gentlemen, who are generally Masters of the most useful and politest Languages, can take Pleasure (for a Change) to speak and read their own. <sup>84</sup>

There is not too much fear here over anglicisation, though, clearly, Ramsay is aware of this factor in the hands of “fops”. Rather there is confidence in the Scots language as part of the proper cultural armoury of the gentleman (I can find no other theoretical statement of this kind contemporaneous with Ramsay, and so the strong suspicion must be that he is singlehandedly positing this view). It is almost unfortunate that Ramsay comments are prefaced to a collection of medieval verse, as they show Ramsay confident that Scots could operate as a full poetic medium. He would have been buoyed in this view not only by the hundred of subscribers (including many Englishmen) to his showpiece edition of his works three years earlier, but by verse-epistles written to him in response to this volume. These included the lines by C. Beckingham:

Too blindly partial to my native Tongue,  
Fond of the Smoothness of our English Song;  
At first thy Numbers did uncouth appear,  
And shock'd th' affected Niceness of the Ear.  
Thro' Prejudice's Eye each page I see;  
Tho all were Beauties, none were so to me.  
Yet sham'd at last, whilst all thy Genius own,  
To have that Genius hid from me alone;  
Resolv'd to find, for Praise or Censure, cause,  
Whether to join with all, or all oppose;  
Careful I read thee o'er and o'er again:  
At length the useful Search requites my Pain;  
My false Distaste to instant Pleasure's turn'd,  
As much I envy as before I scorn'd:

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<sup>84</sup> *The Evergreen*, pp.x-xi.



And thus the Error of my Pride to clear,  
I sign my honest Recantation here.<sup>85</sup>

With responses such as this from England, Ramsay could be left in little doubt that Scots was a viable, modern poetic medium in the early eighteenth-century.

Ramsay would have found further license for his work in the contemporary literary theory of Britain. In a pathbreaking essay which is still too often disregarded as it flies in the face of much essentialistic Scottish criticism, Carol McGuirk centres Ramsay as an Augustan poet. She comments:

Augustanism did not always express itself in elaborate productions like *The Hind and the Panther*, *Cato*, and *The Essay on Man*: there were verse-forms "below" allegory, tragedy and "ethic epistle" in which a non-heroic, colloquial diction had its proper place. In using a selectively Scots diction in forms such as verse-epistle, pastoral and satire, Ramsay was emulating (and extending) the work of the popular London Augustans Matthew Prior and John Gay, who had pioneered in the use of English rustic diction to spice up the "lower literary kinds."<sup>86</sup>

Let us finish with some brief consideration of Ramsay's longest creative production, in the second order Augustan mode as McGuirk identifies it, the pastoral-drama, *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725).<sup>87</sup> This work has seldom received much detailed scholarly comment, perhaps because it is the kind of work which might seem to conform to the notion of antiszygy or crisis of identity. It features stock ancient romance scenarios involving foundlings and the return of the exiled lord and master in disguise and it observes the neoclassic dramatic unities of time and place. In plot-construction it is, truly, a not very remarkable piece. At the same time, it features a number of folk-songs and an often identified realistic use of the Scots language which, in places, cuts through more idealised pastoral conventions. Given these two mode-features - the neo-classic and the demotic - it might be read, then, as a typically

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<sup>85</sup> Ramsay, *Works* I, p.xxvii.

<sup>86</sup> Carol McGuirk, "Augustan Influences on Allan Ramsay" in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XVI (1981), p.98; (see pp.97-109).

<sup>87</sup> Ramsay, *Works* II, pp.205-77.

“confused” or a kind of “striving for authenticity” eighteenth-century Scottish production. However, if we are aware of Ramsay’s cultural agenda, in the way in which we have been charting it so far, we can apprehend its more coherent cultural and patriotic programme.<sup>88</sup>

Patie, the titular character of *The Gentle Shepherd*, is deeply at home (naturally enough since he belongs to the countryside) with the bucolic canon of Scottish folk-song. He apostrophizes:

Jenny sings saft *The Broom of Cowden-knows*,  
And Rosie ilts *The Milking of the Ews*;  
There’s nane like Nansie, *Jenny Nettles* sings;  
At turns in *Maggy Lauder*, Marion dings:  
But when my Peggy sings, with sweeter skill,  
*The Boat-man*, or *The Lass of Patie’s Mill*;  
It is a thousand times mair sweet to me. (Act II Scene IV, ll.69-75)

Patie though, is a man of wider cultural reference. His real father, unknown to Patie, is Sir William Worthy who has returned to his Scottish estate with the Restoration of 1660. To begin with, Sir William decides to reconnoitre the situation he is returning to in disguise and is told of his son’s reading habits by another character. Patie has been reading Shakespeare, Jonson, Drummond of Hawthornden and “Stirling” (William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, (1567-1640)), a canon of writers who can be identified variously with a cognate set of characteristics involving close association with the Stuart dynasty, an anti-puritanical attitude and a high Tory outlook (III, IV, ll.69-81). On his reading Patie is reported as saying, “With this [...] on braes I crack with kings” (l.81) He is, then, the man of facility and of widely embracing culture, at home with both folk and aristocratic expression. His literary education ensures that he is equipped to be rightfully revealed as Sir William’s heir, and allows him also to speak in Scots (with other shepherd and peasant folk) and in a more formal English when speaking to Sir William. This allows an interesting glimpse of linguistic attitude in Scotland. It points to the fact that it is not so much 1707 which precipitates linguistic self-doubt over Scots for men like Ramsay; this had been happening from at least 1603 and the Union of Crowns, as we see in impeccably English-

<sup>88</sup> The one excellent modern reading of the drama is to be found in Thomas Crawford, *Society and the Lyric: A Study of the Song Culture of eighteenth century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp.70-96.



writing poets, Drummond and Alexander. What is counterpointed by this fact, embedded in Ramsay's text, is that Ramsay is, if anything, initiating a new confidence in literary and folk Scots in the early eighteenth century. This is sourced, to some extent, in his awareness of the great medieval literary tradition in Scots. It emerges also, as we have seen, in the tradition of folk and comic poetry in Scots by seventeenth-century Royalists (something, clearly, which Ramsay is showing awareness of in *The Gentle Shepherd*). It is Ramsay himself, however, who almost singlehandedly modernises literary Scots by introducing it, in "broader" Edinburgh-dialect form in his mock-epistles and in Scots-English in pieces such as "Wealth, or the Woody". Quite simply no contemporary is using the Scots language in this range of contexts. In this we see the assembling genius of Ramsay and we see this facility for cultural engineering and forward-looking confidence (in spite of the backward-looking ideological and plot-elements) yet again in *The Gentle Shepherd*.

What allows Ramsay in his play to find a mode for his cultural and ideological predilections where what comes together are high Tory humanism, of the kind he had been schooled in by Pitcairne, Ruddiman and others, and a vernacular culture of hearty living (in his Edinburgh setting incorporating, at its best, the healthy communality of Lucky Wood's howff; in "The Gentle Shepherd" a rustic living of good food and song)? The answer is the emerging pastoral theory of the Augustan age. As Thomas Crawford has pointed out, Ramsay's play is constructed amidst debates involving Pope and Ambrose Philips (?1674-1749) over the status of pastoral depiction. Out of these debates emerges the likes of John Gay's burlesque, *Shepherd's Week* (1714) which, as Crawford observes, is "a curiously double-edged work which succeeded against its author's intention in showing that realistic poems and plays about countrymen and women who speak and sing in a rural dialect and work productively rather than 'pipe idly on oaten reeds', were an exciting and creative possibility."<sup>89</sup> This Augustan accident helped allow the writing of "The Gentle Shepherd" as it dovetailed perfectly with Ramsay's Scottish humanist and high Tory beliefs with their notion of a hidden cultural reality. One might very well suggest also

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.76-7.

that it is this accident which allows recognition of Ramsay's realistic, demotic satirical sketches of urban life which become so modally and linguistically influential in the unfolding of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots during the rest of the eighteenth century. What we have been charting are the diverse cultural and literary cross-currents which legitimate the writing of Scots poetry in the eighteenth-century. Anglo-Scottish tension surrounding 1707 is important in this development, but, as we have seen, it is far from being the clear leading factor, and rather than precipitating a "crisis of identity" it helps bring about a reformulation of literary identity which is not nearly so simply incoherent as is often thought. The foregoing chapter has allowed merely glimpses of the wider canonical status which Allan Ramsay might be accorded as a Scottish Augustan poet. The readings attempted here of Ramsay's ideological and creative status could easily be extended to reclaim a much more interesting figure than traditional Scottish criticism has allowed in its placement of Ramsay, essentially, as antiquarian poet of Old Town Edinburgh. For our purposes through the rest of this thesis, however, enough of this more expansively creative figure has been reclaimed to begin to posit a much less ghettoised Scottish literature at the beginning of the eighteenth century.



### Chapter Three: “My trembling muse your honour does address/That its a bold attempt most humbly I confess”<sup>1</sup> : James Thomson and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literary Identity.<sup>2</sup>

#### I

Eighteenth-century Scotland produced two poets of huge and lasting influence: James Thomson and Robert Burns. Indeed, of all Scottish poets, these two are probably the most important in international terms. However, while Burns, elevated by both popular and critical accord, has endured from his own day to the present as Scotland’s national bard, Thomson has seen his poetic stock in his native country sharply decline since his lifetime. Through the eighteenth century, Scotland was as enthusiastic about Thomson as anywhere and, indeed, the country’s penchant for public celebration of its poetic progeny was lavished upon him. In 1791 Burns penned his “Address To the Shade of Thomson, on crowning his Bust, at Ednam, Roxburgh-shire, with Bays” to be read at the event described in the poem’s title, sponsored by David Steuart Erskine, the eleventh earl of Buchan, a man who fancied himself a great patron of Scottish literature. Feeling oppressed by the pompous earl and his proposed occasion and having recently read, by way of preparation for his commissioned poetic task, William Collins’ finely crafted and intimate “Ode occasion’d by the death of Mr Thomson” (1749), Burns keenly sensed a disjunction between Buchan’s set-piece ceremony and the payment of proper tribute to Thomson. As a result he produced a piece which, while sincere in its homage to a poet he read voraciously, is somewhat limp.<sup>3</sup> It ends:

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<sup>1</sup> James Thomson, “A Poetical Epistle to Sir William Bennet of Grubbat, Baronet” [date unknown, though a juvenile piece] (ll.1-2) in *Liberty, The Castle of Indolence and Other Poems* edited by James Sambrook. (Oxford, 1986) [p.240]. It is interesting to note that as well as being a patron to Thomson in his early years, Bennet was a friend to Allan Ramsay, a fellow member of the Royal Archers (see *The Works of Allan Ramsay* Vol VI, *Op cit.*, pp.209-10). Once again, then, we see links and flexibility amongst a grouping of men supposedly at odds politically.

<sup>2</sup> A version of some of the material in this chapter was published as “James Thomson and Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literary Identity” in Richard Terry (ed.), *James Thomson: Essays for the Tercentenary* (Liverpool, 2000), pp.165-90.

<sup>3</sup> It is ironic that Burns was unable to attend the occasion celebrating the poet of *The Seasons* due to the pressures of the harvest-season and, given such real priorities, that Buchan had recommended to Burns that he ought to visit scenes of past Scottish literary and historical glory, most especially Thomson’s Roxburghshire, to revitalise his sense of his native landscape. (See *The Letters of Robert Burns* Volume II, edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson; second edition revised by G. Ross Roy (Oxford, 1985), p.102, p.106 & p.442. Hereafter referred to as *Letters of Burns*.)

So long, sweet Poet of the Year,  
Shall bloom that wreath thou well hast won;  
While Scotia, with exulting tear,  
Proclaims that *Thomson* was her son. (ll.17-20) <sup>4</sup>

Privately Burns vented a less stylized emotion against Buchan and his kind in a piece that in addressing Thomson is strikingly prescient of his own cultic elevation:

Dost thou not rise, indignant Shade,  
And smile wi' spurning scorn,  
When they wha wad hae starv'd thy life,  
Thy senseless turf adorn.--

They wha about thee mak sic fuss  
Now thou art but a name,  
Wad seen thee d-mn'd ere they had spar'd  
Ae plack to fill thy wame. --

Helpless, alane, thou clamb the brae,  
Wi' meikle, meikle toil,  
And claught th' unfading garland there,  
Thy sair-won, rightful spoil,-- (ll.1-12) <sup>5</sup>

In another instance of ostentatious celebration two decades earlier, the Cape Club of Edinburgh (including among its membership Burns's great predecessor in Scots poetry, Robert Fergusson) was wont to celebrate Thomson's birthday.<sup>6</sup> Into the early nineteenth century, Thomson continued to be seen as very special Scottish property as that self-appointed arbiter of his country's taste, John Wilson ("Christopher North"), claimed approvingly that the poet was particularly beloved by the nation's peasantry so that his work "lies in many thousand cottages." This represents an attempt, contrary to any hard evidence, to impose Thomson on a scant Scottish rustic bookshelf among the three other

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<sup>4</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* edited by James Kinsley, (Oxford, 1968), poem no.331.

<sup>5</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, no.332.

<sup>6</sup> See *Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume I edited by Matthew McDiarmid (Edinburgh & London, 1955), p.55.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Mary Jane Scott, *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot* (Athens, Georgia & London, 1988), p.7.



frequently cited staples of peasant-reading, the Bible, the work of David Lyndsay and Burns. Wilson attempts to fabricate the myth of Thomson's popularity among the peasantry in his *Noctes Ambrosianae* (1822-35). The following is a typically contrived interchange between the characters "Tickler" and "Shepherd":

*Shepherd.* I was ance lyin' half asleep in a sea-shore cave o' the Isle o' Sky, wearied out by the verra beauty o' the moonlicht that had keepit lyin' for hours in ae lang line o' harmless fire, stretching leagues and leagues to the rim o' the ocean. Nae sound, but a bit faint, dim plash -- plash o' the tide -- whether ebbin' or flawin' I ken not -- no against, but upon the weedy sides o' the cave --

*Tickler.* As when some shepherd of the Hebride Isles,  
Placed far amid the melancholy main!

*Shepherd.* That soun's like Thamson -- in his Castle o' Indolence. A' the hail warld was forgotten -- and my ain name -- and what I was -- and where I had come frae -- and why I was lyin' there -- nor was I onything but a Leevin' Dream.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth-century, however, the very wide conglomeration of admiration for Thomson, comprising the very diverse figures of Buchan, Burns and Wilson had all but evaporated.

Thomson's fall from favour was assured with the development of the modern Scottish literary critical tradition as already outlined in the first chapter. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century attempts of this tradition to separate out the "Celtic" and "Saxon" strains of Scotland leads to the excising of Thomson from the Scottish canon. George Douglas's *Scottish Poetry* (1911) refers to the poetry of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns when identifying what he takes to be the neo-Celtic qualities of "native energy, simplicity and spontaneity" and refers to cultural emigre, Thomson, when identifying what he takes to be a wrong-headed "academic" direction in eighteenth-century Scottish poetry which Douglas associates with "Saxon" England.<sup>9</sup> It is particularly ironic that

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<sup>8</sup> *The Tavern Sages: Selections from Noctes Ambrosianae* edited by J.H. Alexander (Aberdeen, 1992), pp.79-80.

<sup>9</sup> George Douglas, *Op cit.*

Thomson should lose out on his claim to a Celtic poetic gene given his contemporaneously recognised role in the formation of the idea of the ancient Celt/Briton in the eighteenth century. William Collins, in his elegiac ode to Thomson, directs attention to him in this way: “In yonder grave a Druid lies”; and Nathan Drake, writing in 1798, at a time when the “Ossian” craze was continuing to cause excitement in Europe, credits Thomson as playing an important part in the early dissemination of Celtic mythology.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, Thomson fails to be Celticised even on a second count, as Matthew Arnold’s notion of the Celtic sensitivity to nature does little to re-invigorate interest in his work in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The irony continues to heap up as, at around this time, several eighteenth-century Scottish Gaelic poets find renewed favour for their supposedly very “Celtic” treatment of nature. These include Duncan Ban Macintyre (1724-1812), Alexander MacDonald (c.1695-c.1770) and Dugald Buchanan (1716-68) and it is very obvious that all three of these poets draw heavily upon the influence of Thomson in their detailed description of flora and fauna and in their didactic methodology. We see an example of Thomson’s nature-detailing influence in Duncan Ban Macintyre’s “Summer Song”:

The seed, sown in its due time,  
draws sap from its own soil,  
the upward thrust from plain to point  
fills every granary full:  
the dappled crop grows lush, secure,  
thick-stalked and heavy-eared,  
the large grain with its brindled husk  
comes surging from the braired. (ll.591-98)<sup>11</sup>

Here we have nature observed and ordered in the manner established by Thomson.

The crude reading of a natural Celtic/unnatural Saxon bifurcation has formed a strong plank of Scottish literary canonicity throughout the twentieth century. To this infirm foundation critics have

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<sup>10</sup> *The Poems of William Collins* edited by Edmund Blunden (London, 1929), p.117; for details of Drake citing Thomson to this end in his *Literary Hours*, see Howard D. Weinbrot, *Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), p.496.

<sup>11</sup> *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* edited by Derick S. Thomson (Aberdeen, 1993), p.75.



added a series of related essentialist co-ordinates, against which James Thomson flounders to prove that he really is one of “Scotia’s sons”. Indeed, Thomson begins to be seen as one of the progenitors of a Scottish anti-canon shaped in the eighteenth century which eschews the Scots language and whose writers look to (and sometimes reside in) the English literary marketplace and feel largely comfortable, rather than feeling oppressed by the parliamentary union of 1707. Damingly, Thomson’s emigration to England comes to be seen not simply as meaning an accidental rubbing off of his Celtic-Scottish potential as a writer, but as a deliberate act of materialistic opportunism under the dispensation of the pristine new British state, a motivation in which many other Scots (according to popular and cultured English prejudice at the time, and much English-centred historical comment since) were to follow Thomson.<sup>12</sup> This portrayal gains its most forceful modern Scottish expression in Andrew Noble’s analysis of Thomson’s *The Castle of Indolence*:

This, to say the least, is a paradoxical creation. It is a poem by a Scotsman written in Spenserian stanzas with an equally contrived archaic vocabulary in praise of British social and political progress extending itself into the realms of a righteous imperial destiny. Hence the activity of the hero, “The Knight of Arts and Industry”:

Then towns he quicken’d by mechanic arts,  
And bade the fervent city glow with toil;  
Bade social Commerce raise renowned marts,  
Join land to land, and marry soil to soil,  
Unite the poles, and without bloody spoil  
Bring home of either Ind the gorgeous stores;  
Or, should the despotic rage the world embroil,  
Bade tyrants tremble on remotest shores.  
While o’er th’ encircling deep Britannia’s thunder roars.

Imperial prosperity without guilty blood on its hands certainly belongs more to the world of romance than reality. Thus Thomson’s deliberate choice of his medium. Aided by abandoning the tough specificity of his own Scottish language, his “mythic” poetry veers towards propaganda as it insinuated that the desires of the

<sup>12</sup> Exemplars of such commentary are notorious and legion from Swift’s condemnation of the Duke of Argyll’s supposed personal ambition at the court of Queen Anne (a portrait which Scott was concerned to counteract in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*) through the utterances of Samuel Johnston and down to the present day when a version of the ‘Jock-on-the-make’ myth is virulent amidst the concern at the number of Scots in high-ranking government positions in London.

establishment, of the propertied classes and the economic social theoreticians, are the reality of eighteenth-century Britain.<sup>13</sup>

Such charges of prostituted culture and artistry come no bigger. What follows here in the description of Thomson's Scottish background and his relationship to the poetry of his native land in the eighteenth century is an attempt to interrogate the claims of Noble and other critics hostile to Thomson's supposed divesting of his "Scottishness". As we shall see, Thomson illuminates, negotiates and works fruitfully with the complex possibilities in the Scottish cultural and literary identity of his day and is a substantive influence upon the critically much approved-of Scots poetry tradition of the eighteenth century. In short, Thomson is both very deeply and very creatively Scottish and offers a challenge to much of the dominant modern canonizing of Scottish literature and culture.

## II

Let us consider the cultural and literary background from which James Thomson emerged.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Scottish poetic compass was uncertain. Aside from Scottish folk-poetry and ballads (which some commentators, without much evidence, have suggested as influencing the young Thomson),<sup>15</sup> four sites of poetic production, together embodying some of the most profound tensions in Scottish culture, can be identified. These are: a Scottish Latinist/humanist literary heritage, which we have glimpsed already in the poetic formation of Allan Ramsay; Scots vernacular verse; Augustan verse in English rather slavishly mimicking the taste south of the border; and

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Noble, "Urbane Silence: Scottish Writing and the Nineteenth Century City" in George Gordon (ed.), *Perspectives of the Scottish City* (Aberdeen, 1985), p.66.

<sup>14</sup> James Sambrook in *James Thomson 1700-48: A Life* (Oxford, 1991) and Scott in *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot* both provide good accounts of Thomson in his formative years; the diverse cultural context of Scotland in this time, however, especially with regard to poetry, remains under-analysed.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, Mary Jane Scott, *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot Op cit.*, p.102-3, where Scott makes the not very convincing claim that Thomson's depiction of a "damp and foggy" winter in *The Seasons* is resonant of an analogously depicted hell in ballads such as "The Daemon Lover."



a mode of poetry, usually in English, which might be described as Calvinist pietism.<sup>16</sup> This was the bewildering Scottish poetic palette which the young James Thomson would know in his years at Edinburgh College (1715-25).

The Scoto-Latin or humanist strain was propagated across a wide political spectrum, including the pro-Unionist, Hanoverian-supporting, patrician Sir John Clerk of Penicuik and the anti-Unionist, Jacobite publisher Thomas Ruddiman. In spite of glaringly different political allegiances, such men had in common a cultural nationalism in which they sought to perpetuate a traditional Scottish commitment to the classic languages and ideas of the West, while at the same time asserting the distinctive and unconquerable independence of the Scottish nation. If Clerk seems ambidextrous in his combination of Unionism and Scottish patriotism, Ruddiman, an Episcopalian, was no less accommodating of a variety of possibilities in the Scottish identity. He is the producer both of an edition of George Buchanan, Scotland's great Renaissance Latinist and a Presbyterian stalwart and an edition of *The Aeneid* (1710), which had been translated into Scots by the last of the great medieval "makars", Gavin Douglas (c.1474-1522), Catholic Bishop of Dunkeld. Thomson's Latinisms, which were later to become so notorious may well originate in the very wide and dedicated context of Scottish humanism (and it may even be that the aureate texture often pointed to in Thomson's verse derived, in part, from his reading

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<sup>16</sup> My identification of these modes is based on research into the poetry collections of National Library of Scotland and, especially, *The Catalogue of the Scottish Poetry Collection* Vols 1 & 2 (in these volumes I have found some two hundred and fifty discretely published-items during the eighteenth century which belong under my rubric of "Calvinist pietism").

of the very aureate Scots of Douglas).<sup>17</sup>

More importantly, Thomson drew from the Scoto-Latinist context an emphatic sense of ancient Scottish racial virility. It was a common claim in the antiquarian and literary work of Clerk and in the poetry of pro-Jacobite anti-Unionists, such as Allan Ramsay (who was published by Ruddiman and who had Clerk for his patron), that the Romans had been unable to overcome the ancient Caledonians. For instance, in his thinly-disguised medieval “forgery”, “The Vision” (1724), Ramsay’s narrator moves from contemporary complaint to historical boast, “Throch feidom our freedom/Is blotit with this skore,/Quhat Romans or no mans/Pith culd eir do befoir (ll.11-14).<sup>18</sup> In a number of places in his mature career Thomson grafts this Scottish *mythhistoire* onto the life of an ancient Briton who is located unspecifically at large in a greater Britannia. For instance, in *The Castle of Indolence* (1748):

[...] Sir Industry then spread  
The swelling sail, and made for Britain’s coast.  
A sylvan life till then the natives led,  
In the brown shades and greenwood forests lost,  
All careless rambling where it liked them most --  
Their wealth the wild-deer bouncing through the glade;  
They lodged at large, and lived at nature’s cost;  
Save spear and bow withouten other aid;  
Yet not the Roman steel their naked breast dismayed (II, xvii).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The connecting of Thomson and Douglas comprises something approaching a battleground for those arguing over the essential continuities in the Scottish literary tradition. The two most extreme positions are represented by John Speirs and Mary Jane Scott. Speirs writes:

It may not have been an accident that the poet of *The Seasons* was like the poet [Douglas] of these Prologues [Douglas’s prefatory material to his translations of the books of *The Aeneid*], a Scotsman, but though a Scotsman Thomson was not a Scots poet. That in itself sets Thomson and Douglas so far apart as to make the comparison between them, sometimes recommended, of little help. Unlike Thomson’s Miltonic English, the unScottish elements in the literary language Douglas inherited, could not prevent him from being a Scots poet even in his summer. (*The Scots Tradition in Literature*, p.75). Scott, *Op cit.*, has argued most closely for the linguistic influence of Douglas on Thomson, see, pp.100-101 & *passim*, and indeed, for a Scots cadence generally in Thomson’s poetry (see especially pp.182-203). If Scott’s argument is perhaps sometimes rather forced, Speirs is too dismissive of the cultural connection. It seems implausible to me that Douglas’s adoption of the mantle of Virgil, a poet of the rustic north in relation to Rome (and on the fringes of the Celtic world in Romanocentric ethnic theory), did not point the way to Thomson’s deeply Virgilian poetic master-personae in *The Seasons*. This choice would be one which was especially resonant in the climate of classically-informed cultural nationalism for an early eighteenth-century Scot, given his nation’s relations with a more powerful, allied southern culture.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsay, *Works* III, *Op cit.*, p.81.

<sup>19</sup> James Thomson, *The Seasons & The Castle of Indolence* edited by James Sambrook (Oxford, 1986), p.193. [Subsequent references to this edition of these poems.]



Thomson here invests the wider (modern) British nation with an ancient Scottish pedigree of indomitability and purity. This allows the implication that ancient “Britannia” (rather than just ancient “Caledonia”) was never really part of the Roman world and so not subject to the cultural corruption which was held eventually to consume it. The idea dovetails with the theme of the moral superiority of Britain’s commonwealth over that of ancient Rome, prosecuted by Thomson in tandem with a number of contemporary writers (an idea which is especially marked in Thomson’s *Britannia* (1729) and *Liberty* (1735-6).<sup>20</sup> Thomson, then, bolsters from his Scottish mindset the mythic, worthy primitivism in which Britain liked to cloak itself from the beginning of the eighteenth century and this represents a huge act of racial ecumenicalism. “Sir Industry” arrives in the nation on the basis of a sound moral framework, and, while this narrative of rightful British progress can be read (and certainly later in the hands of others becomes) part of a ferocious strain of imperious and imperial British superiority, in Thomson’s hands, well in advance of the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution or British

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<sup>20</sup> For an excellent account of this tendency, see Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia’s Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.237-75.

overseas expansion, it stands for a strongly moral exhortation to honest, hard work and fairness.<sup>21</sup>

Thomson has also to be understood as emerging from a variegated cultural background where his beliefs are predicated upon the enmeshing of a confident Scottish humanism and a Real Whig outlook (which is strongly informed by the charitable, communitarian tendencies of Scottish Presbyterianism).<sup>22</sup>

Thomson, in this instance, is the new British Virgil as he hails from a far northern part of the commonwealth and brings from there a strongly independent voice proclaiming the “liberty” which his people had safeguarded in the face of assaults by ancient Rome and, indeed, later by the “Roman”

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<sup>21</sup> Thomson’s patriotic and moral mode begins to change in the hands of others within a few years of his death. This is particularly true in Scotland where imitators welded to his themes and style a xenophobia and a Protestant triumphalism alien to Thomson; see for instance, Rev. Robert Dysart Colvill, *Britain, A Poem* (Edinburgh, 1757). Paranoid, triumphalist, imperialist and xenophobic rhetoric drips from every page of Colvill’s piece, which is, however, executed with some metrical panache. For instance, he enjoins:

Britain awake! see hostile France is up,  
On ruin bent and brandishes her sword  
Which she has stained deep in kindred blood  
Ev’n now in silence, and in midnight shade  
She plans her schemes of conquest; having seiz’d  
Our strong out-holds, the bulwark of our trade,  
These gates by which our royal treasure pass:  
Our Indian provinces [...] ll.379-86. [p.19].

Earlier, Colvill glories in a litany of British “martial genius” which again exemplifies Colvill’s bloodlust, including a chilling celebration of the victor of Culloden and his troops which is very rare in Scottish creative literature even amongst Whig and pro-Hanoverian writers:

Fir’d by his country’s cause, thro fields of death  
The great immortal Marlborough rode,  
O’er France throughout with his foaming steed  
Dy’d in her richest blood. In later days  
This spirit rag’d in Tournay’s dreadful field,  
Before the roaming cannon unremov’d  
When matchless Cumberland, undaunted led  
His troops like lions, ardent for the fray  
Against unnumber’d foes. ll.213-20 [p.11].

Colvill’s work was published by Walter Ruddiman, a man who was to be a supporter of pro-Jacobite Tory, Robert Fergusson. This fact suggests yet again more than a little fluidity through the ideological spectrum of eighteenth-century Scotland.

<sup>22</sup> Thomson’s allegiance to the “Real Whigs” and the Scottish background to this remains incompletely understood. One scholar who has an appreciation of this context, but who places Thomson in it only in passing, is Caroline Robbins (see her *The Eighteenth-century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, MA, 1961). Robbins points to the low church, quasi-republican tendency in Thomson, whose reading of Milton she shrewdly acknowledges to be an important part of his Scoto-British cultural inheritance in his political formation. She sees as a hallmark of this Whig-Real Whig outlook a desire for greater rights of a greater number of people (pp.258-9). Robbins also rightly points to the importance of Thomson in the 1790s for an increasingly radical group of Whigs (p.220). This last point is excellently illuminated by John Barrell and Harriet Guest, “Thomson in the 1790s” in Terry (ed.), *James Thomson: Essays for the Tercentenary*, pp.217-46.



church. It is an inward-looking moral voice also, which seeks to recognise the concerns of the labouring masses, the backbone of the indomitable nation, as Thomson's anxieties about the vicissitudes suffered by the lower orders, seen throughout his poetry, make clear.<sup>23</sup>

The seemingly very different careers of Allan Ramsay and James Thomson are frequently pointed to as being indicative of the choices taken by Scots at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Ramsay is the father of the eighteenth-century Scots poetry revival (the second site of literary impetus mentioned above) and an important part of this position is comprised by his famed mock-elegies which combine a scurrilous sexual and scatological humour with a critique of the rapaciously commercial and culturally-iconoclastic Britain which Tories accused Whigs of creating. Fleetinglly, the young Thomson dabbled in this form in his one known Scots-language work, "An Elegy upon James Therburn in Chatto" (?1720/21).<sup>24</sup> In this lame piece Thomson ventures a slightly salacious depiction of Therburn, but his heart seems not to be in the kind of bawdy detail so enjoyed by Ramsay and he also evades the larger sociocultural comment which is such a feature of Ramsay's mode. In his mature poetry Thomson's satirical voice is a conventional (even hackneyed) and impersonal one, and from all biographical accounts this would seem to be in keeping with the conventionally moral and rather gentle nature of the man. There is an erotic undercurrent in *The Seasons* which suggests that Thomson was no prude but neither the explicit, full-bodied exploration so beloved by Ramsay in his work nor his pessimistic, high Tory, anti-calvinist frame of reference would have been likely to appeal to the sincerely Presbyterian Thomson. It is worth adding that Thomson, who would have sometimes spoken a very broad Scots, would have been much more used to reading (and so writing) literary English and probably even Latin than either the medieval Scots or Ramsay's new-minted Scots poetic idiom which he was becoming aware of in his Edinburgh years.

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, *Winter*, II.276-388, where the miseries of starvation, imprisonment and injustice for a variety of ordinary "Britons" is essayed.

<sup>24</sup> *Liberty, The Castle of Indolence and Other Poems* edited by James Sambrook (Oxford, 1986), pp.262-4. The poem cannot be dated with any certainty; see M.J. & P.Scott, "The Manuscript of James Thomson's Scots Elegy" in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XVII (1982).

We have already glimpsed a point of contact between Ramsay and Thomson in their use of Scottish humanism's primitivist patriotism. It is not only Thomson, however, who feeds this stance into a discourse of Britishness. As we have seen already, Ramsay in his "To John, the second Duke of Argyll" (1720), celebrating a staunch Hanoverian military commander who fought against the French with the Duke of Marlborough at Malplaquet in 1709. Ramsay yokes Argyll together with one of the greatest of all Scottish heroes. Scotland is fortunate "Wha can at Bannockburn bauld Bruce display,/Or thee at Mallplackae forcing thy way" (ll.19-20).<sup>25</sup> Tellingly, this poem directly influenced Thomson in one passage in *Autumn* (1730) when he portrayed another great Scottish patriot, Wallace, as the typological ancestor of Argyll.<sup>26</sup> For both Ramsay and Thomson, then, the martial proclivities of ancient Scotland and modern Britain operate in a continuum.

The points of difference and contact between Ramsay and Thomson are revealing of their national context. Early eighteenth-century Scots Scottish culture and literature are polyphonic and experimental. Ramsay and others writing poetry in Scots are confident innovators rather than marginalized revivers. They often assert the pure and *traditional* nature of their poetry "revival" (Ramsay to the extent of even fabricating its roots in "The Vision") but the literary choices they make result in a new poetic confection. Stitching together the patriotic ideals of Scottish humanism, Jacobite and Tory ideology, contemporary Scots *patois*, elements of the literary language and modes of sixteenth and seventeenth century Scotland (often only half-digested), elements from Scottish folk-poetry and also features of contemporary Augustan idiom, Ramsay and others fabricated a new "national" literature. For many Scots (including James Thomson), though, the vehicles and ideology of this mode

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<sup>25</sup> Ramsay, *Works* III, p.341.

<sup>26</sup> See *Autumn*, ll.894-938. In the contemplation of dead heroes such as Wallace and the consideration of whether this kind still exists, the poem answers itself:

Yes, there are such. And full on thee, Argyll,  
 Her hope, her stay, her darling, and her boast,  
 From her first patriots and her heroes sprung,  
 Thy fond imploring country turns her eye (ll.929-32).



would not necessarily seem authentically or naturally or the only way of being Scottish. Indeed, Ramsay's own espousal of a pan-British identity in "To Argyll" and elsewhere shows that Scots, particularly those cradled by Scottish humanism, were prone to try some of the different options of identity open to them in the early eighteenth century. Modern Scottish criticism has tended to deal with this fact in the case of Ramsay with the diagnosis of an "identity crisis" (which has tended to obscure Ramsay's polyglossic literary abilities) and in the case of Thomson's more harmonious-seeming Britishness with the inflexible conclusion that he treacherously assimilates himself to an unScottish identity. We see this when Thomson is berated by Scottish critics like Andrew Noble for utilizing the archaic and "English" Spenserian stanza-form in *The Castle of Indolence*, but Thomson's use of this stanza can be defended, not only on the grounds that it is a very good medium for the musical effects of his poem, but also *because* he is a Scot. Like Ramsay, Thomson, devoid of any absolutely enduring, authoritative, distinctively Scottish model, is free to indulge in acts of literary retrieval. He turns to Spenser for his model, however, not in a simple act of gratuitous appropriation but because reading *The Faerie Queene* was part of his formative literary experience, comprising as it did a seminal part of the British Protestant literary canon.<sup>27</sup> In common with a number of other poets, such as William Shenstone and Gilbert West, Thomson, in *The Castle of Indolence*, repopularises the Spenserian stanza, but it is the last of these who makes it resonate through subsequent British literature in a largescale production. His chivalric allegory, used as a vehicle for the exploration of the primitive co-ordinates of nationality, feeds the celebration of and anxieties over agrarian life (*The Seasons* is also influential here) in Robert Fergusson and Burns, in William Wordsworth and, later, influences the medievalism of John Keats and others.<sup>28</sup> Thomson, then, encourages a substantial manoeuvre of mythic and sociocultural reappraisal in Britain. Its hallmark is an examination of British roots antecedent to the strife of the seventeenth century and it is no accident that the plural

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<sup>27</sup> See Sambrook, *James Thomson 1700-48: A Life*, p.264.

<sup>28</sup> A very useful account of Thomson's influencing of later proto-Romantic and Romantic poets in this way is to be found in R.R. Argawal, *The Tradition and Experimentalism of James Thomson (1700-1748)* (Salzburg, 1981), pp.144-61.



sensibilities of an early eighteenth-century Scotsman should precipitate such a re-examination. Rather than simply practising “archaism”, Thomson is instrumental in revitalising the Spenserian stanza as a modal feature for the ages of sentimental and Romantic poetry.

Thomson’s *The Seasons* (1726-30) can also be discussed in the light of its author’s origins. Leaping to the defensive against those who would see this work as too Anglocentric in its setting, some critics have asserted that Thomson’s depiction of landscape is crucially informed by the location of his Scottish Borders upbringing. From Thomson’s early twentieth century editor, J. Logie Robertson, to Mary Jane Scott such claims have been pressed; but, apart from several places where the Borders locale is explicitly mentioned, these arguments are somewhat forced.<sup>29</sup> His poetic landscape is constructed from a wide but catholic range of classic Greek and Roman ideas about nature which are set in a largely Miltonic field of rhetoric and theocentricity and intensified by a Newtonian awareness. Thomson’s classicism is something grounded also in the Scottish humanist tradition and is not some English affectation. He is steeped in Milton owing to the fact that for two hundred years, an increasingly English-speaking Scotland had lacked any great writers of its own and the views of the dissenting Milton were (like those, broadly, of Spenser) largely in keeping with the Scottish Presbyterian background from which Thomson emerged.<sup>30</sup> And, as John MacQueen has observed, Thomson’s scientific precision, which is found in so much of his natural depiction, is partly the result of a Scottish university education much more receptive to Newtonian empiricism in the early eighteenth century than the academies of England.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, none of these features point to Scottish cultural purity but this is hardly Thomson’s fault. He *does* emerge from a culturally problematic (though far from disabled) national background and assemble the materials which are to hand to create his particular poetic vision.

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<sup>29</sup> See Scott, *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot*, pp.113-45; J Logie Robertson, *The Complete Poetical Works of James Thomson* (Oxford, 1908), pp.viii-xii.

<sup>30</sup> See Sambrook, *James Thomson 1700-48: A Life*, pp.36-7, 53, 62, 161, 173, 230-1 for Thomson’s steepage in Milton & p.86, p.161, 264-5 and 271-2 for his steepage in Spenser.

<sup>31</sup> See John MacQueen, *Progress and Poetry*, pp.56-65.



Some brief attention to two other sites of eighteenth-century Scottish literary production throw further light on Thomson's emergence from his native context. Among the less successful attempts at cultural promotion by the multifarious Sir John Clerk of Penicuik was his attempt to propagate a very mainstream type of Augustan poetry in English in Scotland. His *The Country Seat* (1726) is the most fully-flexed effort of his own and a number of other writers in this area in eighteenth century Scotland.<sup>32</sup> James Thomson and his literary collaborator, David Malloch (or Mallet), were asked for their appraisal of this piece in London in 1726 and were rather lukewarm to this text, though Thomson in a letter to Clerk, in dealing with this powerful and worthy cultural entrepreneur, can be seen choosing his words very carefully.<sup>33</sup> *The Country Seat* delivers 1,600 lines of detailed advice on how to construct a country house and park. It represents a blandly assured (though sometimes also blandly pleasant) rehearsal of urbane Augustan values and preoccupations of a kind which Thomson in his poetry (or indeed any major Augustan in theirs) was never so complacent about. Thomson is very obviously much wider in his poetic treatments of "improvement", paying attention, for instance, to the mortal condition of man in which is the ultimate reality of humanity no matter how well either wealth (which can be too well fostered) or gardens, or society generally, might be cultivated.<sup>34</sup> (Thomson shows too, an intense empathy with the plight of animals hunted by country

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<sup>32</sup> "The Country Seat" is to be found in several manuscript versions in the "Clerk of Penicuik" papers, West Register House, Edinburgh.

<sup>33</sup> See *James Thomson (1700-48) Letters and Documents* edited by A.D. McKillop (Lawrence, KA, 1958), pp.58-60.

<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, *Summer* where:

The quivering nations sport; till, tempest-winged.  
 Fierce Winter sweeps them from face of day.  
 Even so luxurious men, unheeding, pass  
 An idle summer life in fortune's shine,  
 A season's glitter! Thus they flutter on  
 From toy to toy, from vanity to vice;  
 Till, blown away by death, oblivion comes  
 Behind and strikes them from the book of life. (ll.343-9)

Such moralism (where we see the "Whig", Thomson, speaking out against excessive "luxury" much more explicitly than the "Tory" Ramsay does) is pervasive throughout Thomson's *The Seasons* and has to be weighed beside his injunctions to honest industry and the inculcation of prosperity in the nation.



gentlemen and this also indicates his distance from the mentality of Clerk.)<sup>35</sup> In short, Clerk's poem represents the kind of arcadian fantasy that indiscriminating Scottish critics have never been slow to attribute wrongly to Thomson in *The Seasons* or *The Castle of Indolence* in evidence of his supposed alien, reality-evading English Augustan cultural pollution.

A fourth literary site, which I have called "Calvinist Pietism", was the predominant genre of published poetry for much of the eighteenth century in Scotland. Mostly written by Scottish Presbyterian divines, such work was concerned to enjoin either melancholy attention to the sinful condition of mankind and/or sentimental attachment to God. (Representative examples of the maudlin and doom-laden genre include Samuel Arnot's *Eternity, A Poem* (1711) and James Craig's *Spiritual Life, Poems* (1727).)<sup>36</sup> Poetry had struggled in Scotland since the Reformation due to the puritanical influence of the Scottish church, but in the early eighteenth century a change in attitude was slowly happening. Against this background, poetry of Calvinist pietism arises, and against this background Thomson's early mentor and a man whom he acknowledged as a seminal influence upon the composition of *Winter*, church-licensate Robert Riccaltoun (b.1691), wrote poetry. Riccaltoun is far from being as lachrymose as most Scottish theologians writing poetry in this period, but in his work we find a typically anxious attention to the external world:

On the cold clift I'll lean my aking head,  
And, pleas'd with winter's waste, unpitying see  
All nature in an agony with me!  
Rough, rugged rocks, wet marshes ruin'd tow'rs,  
Bare trees, brown brakes, black heaths, and rushy moors,

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<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, *Autumn* (ll.426-469) for an intense physical description of the horror of the hunt (with its "murderous cry" (l.432)) from the stag's point of view. Such remarkable writing, where again we see Thomson in a proto-Romantic aspect, is the kind of mood for which Adam Smith (see note 52 below) disparaged Thomson.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Arnot, *Eternity, A Poem* (Edinburgh, 1711), which reads like a slight poetic reworking of the catechism of Calvinist terminology is dedicated to the town council of Edinburgh. This poem is an interesting artefact also in that it provides a glimpse of the "Whiggish" political-cultural control of Edinburgh, which we have seen Allan Ramsay reacting to. In the case of James Craig's *Spiritual Life, Poems* (Edinburgh 1727), it is instructive merely to list the first seven items of the contents: "Paradise; Or, A Wish for Heaven, The Summary" / "Advantage of Early Piety" / "The Secure Sinner Awakened" / "A Penetential Resentment" / "A Penetential Confession" / "A Plea of Faith for Pardon" / "Another Plea of Faith".



Dead floods, huge cataracts, to my pleased eyes  
(Now I can smile!) in wild disorder rise:  
And now the various dreadfuls combin'd  
Black melancholy come to doze my mind.<sup>37</sup>

As James Sambrook has rightly observed of *The Seasons*, “none of the interspersed passages of moral reflection has a Scottish [i.e. Calvinist] cast”, but Thomson’s close-focus attention to natural detail emanates perhaps as much as from the newtonian influence, as from a (usually) more positive reworking of the morbid attention to the external world found in the outlook of Calvinist pietism.<sup>38</sup> There are also various points in *The Seasons* where there is a darker underlying note comprising sudden reversals of fortune for dumb creatures and for mankind alike, and there is more than a hint that the world is not entirely to be trusted. In this connection we might compare the work of Thomson’s early colleague in the poetry anthology, the *Edinburgh Miscellany* (1720), the Rev. Robert Blair (1699-1746).<sup>39</sup> His hugely popular poem “The Grave” (1743) is a melancholy meditation on the transience of the physical world which is as luxuriously painted in its own way as *The Seasons*.<sup>40</sup>

I have been trying to assemble some sense of the variegated (and problematic) national culture which shapes Thomson’s poetic genesis. He draws on a store of primitivist patriotism and classical learning, both things taken from the repository of Scottish humanist scholarship and successfully transported to the south when he emigrates. As a classically-educated Scot he is able to make his important contribution to an Augustan age which is more truly *British* than is often thought. (It is unfortunate that both Scottish and English criticism has been blind also to Allan Ramsay the Scottish Augustan, since, with Thomson, he comprises an important corridor to the ages of neoclassicism and

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Riccaltoun’s “A Winter’s Day” is helpfully reprinted in Scott, *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot*, pp.297-99.

<sup>38</sup> Sambrook, p.36.

<sup>39</sup> *Edinburgh Miscellany, consisting of original poems, translations, & c. By various hands*, Vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1720).

<sup>40</sup> “The Grave”, written in Thomsonian blank verse, has a number of places in it where the *locus amoenus* is suddenly intruded by, or contrasted to man’s ultimate physical destination in the grave (see, for instance, where the lush summer scene (ll.94-110) is abruptly interrupted by intimations of the “dull grave” (l.111)) [George Gilfillan (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Beattie, Blair and Falconer* (Edinburgh, 1864)].



modern British culture.) Thomson's choice of literary materials is also informed by the fact that he is a Presbyterian, an identity which has been frowned upon by Scottish criticism in a crude version of the Weber-Tawney thesis, where Scottish Protestantism is read as putting itself unequivocally at the service of British progress and in the process helping to obliterate meaningful Scottish literary expression. The fact is, however, that what might look like more genuine Scottish cultural expression at the beginning of the eighteenth century (most notably the Scots vernacular revival in poetry) is as synthetically-placed as any other strand of the country's literary creativity at this time. To Thomson the Whig, and later the Real Whig, antipathy to the authoritarian high Tory and pro-Stuart principles espoused by a Thomas Ruddiman or an Allan Ramsay was a sincerely held position of more vital importance to what he took to be the central planks of his Scottish culture than the coincidental championing by the pro-Jacobite, anti-Unionists of a Scots poetry revival. (The triumphalist Whig-Protestant version of British history which essentially postdates Thomson, but which appropriates some of his rhetoric of Britishness, tends equally to obscure Thomson's concerns about constructing a virtuous commonwealth and to encourage the view that he is an unmitigated optimist with regard to the trajectory of British civilization.)<sup>41</sup> Part of a politico-religious culture, one of several historically aged strands of "Britishness" (often a dissenting liberalizing one), Thomson's English language, and his Spenserian and Miltonic frames of reference were unaffected literary choices associated with this culture. At the same time, Thomson's cultural background does present him with at least one problem.

The Calvinist hostility to poetry and to profane literature is something that provides a warped mode of

<sup>41</sup> Thomson has to be seen in his Whig context as part of a body of those who were firmly of the view that a limited constitutional monarchy had been put in place with the coming to the throne of the House of Hanover. Throughout his poetry Thomson is concerned to assert the historic trend away from autocratic rule in Britain. For instance, in *Liberty* Part IV he finds codifications for this idea such as his reference to "temper'd Monarchy" (l.791) and, when he talks of a trend set in motion with King John's signing of the Magna Carta, "Britannia's bounded kings" (l.902). Thomson sees dangers in the eighteenth century to the revived aspirations of pro-Stuart, high-church Tories (see, for example IV, ll.982-1070). In its recommendation to the House of Hanover to be on its guard against the Jacobites or those who would reconstruct a more authoritarian Hanoverian rule, *Liberty* deserves the label applied to it by A.D. McKillop, "dissident Whig Panegyric" (McKillop *Op cit.*, p.11). Thomson's poetic career can be seen as part of the trajectory of North Britishness usefully summed up by Colin Kidd: "North Britishness was a Scottish version of English Whig identity, based on a commitment to English constitutional history. North Britishness involved the appropriation of English Whig materials in an attempt to construct a more inclusive and properly British Whig culture" (Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993), p.214). Broadly this is true for Thomson (most especially thematically), but as this chapter has been suggesting indigenous Scottish materials inform Thomson's project also.



dominant religious poetry in eighteenth-century Scotland - a culture which can account for Thomson's emigration to England - but even here Thomson manages to extract from a native influence something to utilize to his own ends. It is from a Scottish culture which is both manifestly plural and problematic that James Thomson emerges.

### III

James Thomson's presence in Scottish literature has been seen as largely unhelpful. For some modern commentators such as Andrew Noble he encourages later Scottish writers, by his successful example, to mimic shamelessly the mores of English literature. Even worse, he is seen as a seminal inspiration to a loose line of eighteenth-century Scottish literary creativity which, in its supposed neglect of contemporary Scottish reality, is held to open the door for those notorious nineteenth-century literary vacuums of irresponsible fantasy, "tartanry" and "the kailyard". It is perhaps true that Thomson's sensitive landscape-painting helps precipitate the close and sometimes cloying treatment of Scottish natural surroundings in the likes of John Home's drama, *Douglas* (1756), James Macpherson's "Ossian" poems (1760-63) and James Beattie's poem, "The Minstrel" (1771-74) but, like the work of Thomson itself none of these texts represents simply a scenic escape route *out of* the real Scotland. Each of these texts is motivated by the concern that the primitive (or "uncivilized") moral and aesthetic sensibilities (things in their formulation which again show the influence of Thomson) ought to be properly regarded in the headlong rush toward "development" in contemporary Britain. For instance, as Howard D. Weinbrot has shown, the Ossian poems can be read as very much a post-Culloden phenomenon, which cautions against losing wholesale the "primitive" culture of the Scottish highlands.<sup>42</sup> As we shall see in a subsequent chapter, these texts are born out of a sensitive awareness to the delicacy of Scottish-British culture, and are precursors of Romanticism's reservations about the trajectory of modern society. The conservation of a particularly Thomsonian espousal of a primitive sensibility is more particularly seen, however, in the work of the two greatest Scots-language poets of

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<sup>42</sup> Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue*, pp.526-41.



the eighteenth century, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns.

Robert Fergusson (1750-74), a member of the Cape Club which held Thomson in such high esteem, and a Scots poet who, but for his tragically early death, might well have rivalled Robert Burns, left behind him a clutch of truly excellent poems. Strong features of his work include a very sharp eye for climatographical detail and a celebration of peasant life and the pleasant rudiments of this existence. Traditionally, Scottish commentators have seen such “realistic” concerns as entirely natural given their assumption of the strong roots of eighteenth-century Scots vernacular poetry in a direct and earthy folk tradition and other demotic sources, and it is only in comparatively recent years that the wider *literary* origins of the work of Fergusson and others have begun to receive a more studied attention. F.W. Freeman has pointed in greater detail than anyone to Fergusson’s indebtedness to the Scottish Latinist/humanist tradition as part of a wider network of the British Tory mentality.<sup>43</sup> Given the highlighting of this Tory *weltanschauung*, however, what Freeman underplays is the wider range of ideological strands participating in the Scottish humanist project and so “Whigs” such as James Thomson receive scant attention as disseminators of the largely conservative ideals of eighteenth century humanism. This is an oversight which dovetails with a long-standing distinction in eighteenth-century English literary studies which rather crudely opposes Tory humanists and optimists, usually Whigs, who welcome new trends of economic and cultural progress with much less reservation.<sup>44</sup>

Thomson’s influence upon Fergusson, including an impetus toward Fergusson’s finely drawn details of the natural environment and his portrayal of peasant life, has been undervalued. A

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<sup>43</sup> F.W. Freeman, *Robert Fergusson and the Scots Humanist Compromise* (Edinburgh, 1985).

<sup>44</sup> An extremely clear example of this overdriven distinction is to be found in Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (Oxford, 1965):

Against the humanist tradition running from Swift to Burke we must place the optimistic tradition [...] including writers like Addison and Steele, James Thomson, Samuel Richardson, Edward Young, Robert Blair, Mark Akenside, William Shenstone, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Chatterton and William Cowper. This other tradition, although it may draw some strength from classical literature, tends to operate as if the classics are largely irrelevant to the modern experience; regardless of its occasional quarrels with industrialism, it tends to draw its real strength from the new industrial and commercial evidence of the validity of the idea of progress. (p.22).



number of key depictions frequently associated with the ideals of Tory humanism are to be found in a beautiful passage of *Winter* (1726) and this passage, clearly, had a particular impact upon Robert Fergusson. Lines 572-645 of *Winter* encompass, in a wide panoramic sweep (a poetic movement in which Fergusson also was to specialize), the themes of sheltering in human company from the elements, looking for the underlying harmony of the world, patriotism, peasant virtue and the city swarming with folly and foppery. These themes comprise a compendium of Fergusson's major poetic themes, but, to take only one area of influence, part of the passage from *Winter* informs the fabric of one of Fergusson's greatest pieces, "The Farmer's Ingle" (1773) (a poem which is the major inspiration for Burns' "The Cottar's Saturday Night"). Lines 617-21 of *Winter*, "Meantime the village rouses up the fire;/While, well attested, and as well believed,/Heard solemn, goes the goblin-story round,/Till superstitious horror creeps o'er all", stand behind the telling of similar sensational stories in the homely cottage of Fergusson's poem (ll.59-63). It is interesting to contrast Thomson's generally indulgent treatment of the supernatural traditions of the country with the man who is more usually seen to be more obviously Fergusson's antecedent in the attention to the culture of the lower orders, Allan Ramsay. Ramsay, as we have seen, in this regard is much more of a rationalist than Thomson. Of larger importance to the anthropological exploration and cultural commitment of "The Farmer's Ingle" is the influence of Thomson's *The Castle of Indolence*. Thematically Fergusson takes from Thomson (*cf.*

Canto II, Stanzas LIII-LVIII)<sup>45</sup> the notion of the farming labourer as living the life of the healthy body and the healthy mind and forming the nation's martial backbone:

Frae this lat gentler gabs a lesson lear;  
Wad they to labouring lend an eidant hand,  
They rax fell strang upo' the simplest fair,  
Nor find their stamacks ever at a stand.  
Fu' hale and healthy wad they pass the day,  
At night in calmest slumbers does fu' sound,  
Nor doctor need their weary life to spae,  
Nor drops their noddle and their sense confound,  
Till death slip sleely on, and gi'e the hindmost wound.

On sicken food has mony a doughty deed  
By Caledonia's ancestors been done;  
By this did mony wight fu' weirlike bleed  
In brulzies frae the dawn to set o' sun:  
'Twas this that brac'd their gardies, stiff and strang,  
That bent the deidly yew in ancient days,

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<sup>45</sup> "Dumb too had been the sage Historic Muse,  
"And perish'd all the Sons of antient Fame;  
"Those starry Lights of Virtue, that defuse,  
"Through the dark Depth of Time their vivid Flame,  
"Had all been lost with Such as have no Name.  
"Who then had scorn'd his Ease for others' Good?  
"Who then had toil'd rapacious Men to tame?  
"Who in the Public Breach devoted stood,  
"And for his Country's Cause been prodigal of Blood?

"But should to Fame your Hearts impervious be,  
"If right I rede, you Pleasure All require:  
"Then hear how best may be obtain'd this Fee,  
"How best enjoy'd this Nature's wide Desire.  
"Toil, and be glad! Let Industry inspire  
"Into your quicken'd limbs her buoyant Breath!  
"Who does not act is dead; absorpt intire  
"In miry Sloth, no Pride, no Joy he hath:  
"O Leaden-hearted Men, to be in Love with Death!

"Better the toiling Swain, o happier far!  
"Perhaps the happiest of the Sons of Men!  
"Who vigorous plies the Plough, the Team, or Car;  
"Who houghs the Field, or ditches in the Glen,  
"Delves in his Garden, or secures his Pen:  
"The tooth of Avarice poisons not his Peace;  
"He tosses not in Sloth's abhorred Den;  
"From Vanity he has a full Release;  
"And, rich in Nature's Wealth he thinks not of Increase.



Laid Denmark's daring sons on yird alang,  
Gar'd Scottish thistles bang the Roman bays;  
For near our crest their heads they doughtna raise. (ll.28-45)<sup>46</sup>

Fergusson also follows Thomson in his usage of the Spenserian stanza and this represents an interesting cultural "interchange". He makes it the vehicle for a new "high" Scots production with his highly serious attention to the peasant theme and a Miltonic syntax which is something else he imbibed from Thomson. What we see, then, is part of the programme of the regeneration of Scots vernacular poetry in form and theme which Fergusson was accomplishing almost single-handed at this time. In a nice circle, the idea of the virtuous primitive patriot which Thomson had taken with him to England is re-imported back to Scotland along with an "English" poetic technology and these things are used to re-energize a strand of Scottish literature which some commentators have claimed to stand in complete antipathy to the literary and cultural sensibilities of James Thomson. Further sensitivity to the influence of James Thomson on Robert Fergusson ought to be required of future critics of Fergusson.

As we have seen already, Robert Burns (1759-96) expresses himself with great feeling regarding the poetic career of James Thomson and it is surely because of his own painful realization of the enduring difficulties of being a poet in Scotland (financially, with a disapproving church looking on, and having to make sense of a range of possible literary directions) that he sees his predecessor's emigre achievement as "helpless" and "sair-won". Burns, for his own part, was well aware of the greater poetic help, at least, at hand to him by the late eighteenth century, comprising not only the great Scots-poetry impetus of Ramsay and Fergusson, but also the artistic sensibility of James Thomson himself. (Along with Pope, these three Scottish writers make up the four poets whose influence is felt most largely in Burns.)<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it is the Thomsonian influence which presides over Burn's most important early attempts to articulate his creative self. In a letter to his former tutor, John Murdoch, in June 1783,

Burns locates his imaginative propensities, primed by his favourite reading, as a counterpoint to the

<sup>46</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, edited by Matthew P. McDiarmid (Edinburgh & London, 1956), pp.137-8.

<sup>47</sup> See the index to *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* Vol III edited by James Kinsley for this estimation.



humble reality he inhabits:

[...] the man whose heart distends with benevolence to all the human race -- he "who can soar above this little scene of things" -- can he descend to mind the poultry concerns about which the terrae-fillial race fret, and fume, and vex themselves? O how the glorious triumph swells my heart! I forget that I am a poor, insignificant devil, unnoticed and unknown, stalking up and down fairs and markets when I happen to be in them, reading a page or two of mankind, and "catching the manners living as they rise", whilst the men of business jostle me on every side, as an idle encumbrance in their way.<sup>48</sup>

Burns quotes *Autumn* (l.966) and associates Thomsonian "soaring" with both benevolence and objectivity of vision, though the appropriation of these qualities for himself is clearly delivered with a conceited pride. Burns is both adopting a Thomsonian persona in this passage (the use of the manneristic "terrae-fillial race", so typical of Thomson, confirms this), and, at the same time, he casts himself as a country character in *The Seasons* as he views himself at fairs and markets being jostled by the "men of business". What we have here is a very good identification of the significance of one of Thomson's master poetic strategies (casting a sympathetic eye widely over the world), an identification which may have been helped by Burns's reading of Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) where Smith, on the contrary, saw Thomson as overwrought in his attention to the misfortunes of others.<sup>49</sup> Looking with a minutely sympathetic eye at the world is something that Burns is very much drawn toward by Thomson.

Burns's most obviously Thomsonian work is "The Vision" (1784).<sup>50</sup> The poem is an attempt to make sense of the heritage of Scottish culture and Burns's own poetic vocation as it combines the "standard Habbie" stanza which he had picked up from Ramsay and Fergusson as indicating a Scottish cultural signatue, Ramsay's visionary topos found in his poem of the same name, and a panoramic and quasi-mystical view of the topography and achievement of Scotland which represents, more than

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<sup>48</sup> *Letters of Burns* I, pp.17-18.

<sup>49</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis, 1976), p.139.

<sup>50</sup> *Poems and Songs of Burns*, no.62.



anything, an importation of the methodology of the Thomsonian poetic eye. The narrator, alone after a hard day's farm-labouring and cursing his own useless propensity for writing verse, goes into a dwam and is awakened by Coila (the spirit presiding over Burns's native Kyle) who shows him in her robe a vision of the beauties of the Scottish landscape, some hints of its ancient Pictish and English-resisting history and its contemporary British martial, political, philosophical and poetic heroes. Coila shows him "the great Genius of this Land" (l.145), its "Arts" and "Arms" (l.149), so that Scotland is seen as a place of both thought and action. Its lush land is fertile in producing philosophers, poets (including Thomson), politicians and soldiers who contribute, clearly, to the wider British good. Scotland is presented, then, as a repository of staple cultural values which balance its material under-development where the narrator is "half-fed, half-sarket" (l.29). The narrator is assured also of his poetic role by Coila. In a Thomsonian flourish - *The Seasons* in miniature, as Carol McGuirk has observed<sup>51</sup> - Coila says that she has been watching over him:

"I saw thee seek the sounding shore,  
 "Delighted with the dashing roar;  
 "Or when the North his fleecy store  
     "Drove thro' the sky,  
 "I saw grim nature's visage hoar,  
     "Struck thy young eye.

"Or when the deep-green-mantl'd Earth,  
 "Warm-cherish'd ev'ry floweret's birth,  
     "And joy and music pouring forth,  
         "In ev'ry grove,  
 "I saw thee eye the gen'ral mirth  
     "With boundless love.

"When ripen'd fields, and azure skies,  
 "Call'd forth the Reaper's rustling noise,  
 "I saw thee leave their ev'ning joys,  
     "And lonely stalk,  
 "To vent thy bosom's swelling rise,  
     "In pensive walk. (ll.211-28)

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<sup>51</sup> Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (East Linton, 1997), p.40.

This locus amoenus sets the scene for the narrator to be told not to despair because he too is part of the nation's cultural fabric; he is a "rustic bard" (l.196) whose role is to sing the ways of the Ayrshire countryside.

Burns's facility to oversee and bring together the cultural landscape of his country in "The Vision" is analagous to the overview of the British cultural landscape, and its integral primitive elements in particular, which are such hallmarks of all Thomson's long poetry. Burns's synthesis of diverse poetic elements is a lesson which he also takes from Thomson in an act of instinctive logic while synthesizing diverse thematic elements. Burns the bard is observed by Coila in a Thomsonian seasonal landscape and this is a sly manoeuvre - perhaps more conscious than in the letter cited above - where Burns both soars above and looks down upon himself. His role as a peasant-poet is contextualised with direct recourse to Thomson (along with several other poets cited in the poem who promulgate the treatment of nature as a central concern) and so Burns constructs his location for himself in a distinctly literary gambit. Burns is in reality a peasant farmer but his poetic status as widely received rustic bard is largely allowed by the sympathetic attention to nature and the primitive sensibility precipitated so pre-eminently by Thomson. Clearly, it is with some craftiness that Burns manipulates the movement towards nature in eighteenth-century British literature. In a sense he takes advantage of his identity as a countryman to produce poems which are for the most part sophisticated literary works and it is Thomson, in large measure, who helps him to do this.

Numerous incidental and several larger examples show the substantial Thomsonian input to Burns's peasant sensibility. One of his earliest songs, "Song, composed in August" (c. 1776) draws on Thomson's sympathy for hunted animals, most especially on one passage in *Autumn*, as an integral part of a piece which makes plain the ambidextrous relationship of man as both pastor and exploiter of nature:



Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find,  
The savage and the tender;  
Some social join, and leagues combine;  
Some solitary wander:

Avaunt, away! the cruel sway,  
Tyrannic man's dominion;  
The Sportsman's joy, the murd'ring cry,  
The flutt'ring, gory pinion! (ll.17-24)<sup>52</sup>

Burns's treatment of the country often echoes very directly the phraseology and the sensibility of Thomson. Burns's sharp country eye, which is frequently adduced by critics and by legion popular commentary on Burns, often turns out to come from a Thomsonian source. For instance, "The Holy Fair" (1785) has a small example of this detail-painting which is so heavily schooled in Thomson. The narrator pictures a morning where "The hares were hirplin down the furs" (l.7) and this is drawn from Thomson's *Summer*: "And from the bladed field the fearful hare/Limps awkward" (ll.57-8). In one of the many examples of Burns imbibing what he took to be the essential Thomsonian spirit of "philosophic melancholy", a very fine use of nature contextualises the heavy circumstances of human life.<sup>53</sup> As Carol McGuirk has pointed out, perhaps the finest and certainly the most famous stanza in Burns's song, "Man was made to Mourn; A Dirge" (1785):

Inwoven with our frame!  
More pointed still we make ourselves,  
Many and sharp the num'rous Ills  
Regret, Remorse and Shame!  
And Man, whose heav'n-erected face,  
The smiles of love adorn,  
Man's inhumanity to Man  
Makes countless thousands mourn! (ll.49-56)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Poems and songs of Burns*, no.2; see *Autumn* ll.360-79.

<sup>53</sup> Burns highlights the phrase (used by Thomson in *Autumn*, l.1005, in a rather different way) in a letter of January 1788 to Agnes McLehose, to indicate what he takes to be sensitivity to the fragility of human happiness: *Letters of Burns* I, p.209.

<sup>54</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, no.64.

is based on some lines from *Winter*, which if made by Burns into something better, are based upon a very tender sensitivity toward promulgated by Thomson:

How many feel, this very moment, death  
And all the sad variety of pain;  
How many sink in the devouring flood,  
Or more devouring flame; how many bleed,  
By shameful variance bewtixt man and man (ll.327-31).<sup>55</sup>

The Thomsonian spirit of attending to the common man helps feed a strong anthropological technique in both Fergusson and Burns (which is not found in their great predecessor, Allan Ramsay) and is integral to some of Burns's most famous poems about his immediate environment. "The Cottar's Saturday Night" (1785-6), for instance, features a sharply-drawn portrait of the most humble but dignified and philosophical human activity amid a difficult natural environment.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps less directly drawn from Thomson, but even more importantly owing to his seminal influence, the notion of the Scottish peasantry as the moral and patriotic backbone of the nation which Fergusson, in "The Farmer's Ingle" had taken from Thomson's treatment of the British peasantry, is here passed to Burns and so a strong line of Scottish writers attending to popular culture is drawn right through the eighteenth century and plays a major part in the encouragement to the new focus of Romanticism on the peasant "margins" of society. The intense sentimental sympathy with one's fellow man and even one's fellow creatures which Adam Smith had found overdone in Thomson, was something over which Burns had no qualms. Indeed, Burns can pursue such sympathy to an injudicious degree, when he writes "To a Mountain-Daisy" (1786), ludicrously lamenting the fact that his plough has destroyed a

<sup>55</sup> McGuirk, *Op cit.*, p.168. McGuirk picks up a strong Thomsonian influence which had hitherto gone unnoticed despite James Kinsley's excellent commentary volume, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* Volume III (Oxford, 1968). Kinsley picks up many Thomsonian echoes across around forty poems but it seems that even he fails to be anything like exhaustive. and many influences are missed; for instance, to take one small example which I have noticed, "Tam o' Shanter" (1790) (*Poems and Songs of Burns* no. 321) pictures Tam's wife Kate "gathering her brows like gathering storm,/Nursing her wrath to keep it warm"; cf. "Of driving tempest is for ever heard:/Here the grim tyrant meditates his wrath" (*Winter*, ll.897-98).

<sup>56</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, no.72.



very common flower.”<sup>57</sup> Much more happy effects of a generally Thomsonian impetus are found in “To a Mouse” and “To a Louse”.<sup>58</sup> The first of these poems features a very unpeasant-like attitude to dumb beasts, which we have already seen Burns imbibing from Thomson, and a completing of the circle so that the plight of an animal registers the plight of man (the drawing out of what Ruskin would term “pathetic fallacy”, which is so notably absent from Thomson’s work). The mouse has lost its house under an unthinkingly deployed plough and the poet reflects upon the thoughtless actions of distant, uncaring landlords who can equally ruin the tenant farmer. Thomson, then, feeds Burns’s sensibilities of political protest and also, as we have seen in several examples above, a rather melancholy, morbid outlook, which, present in Thomson, is accentuated in Burns. If “Man was made to Mourn” represents a feeling rendition of the fragility of the natural condition and “To a Mountain-Daisy” provides an injudicious, silly version of it, “To a Louse” is one of Burns’s most deeply thoughtful and deeply felt treatments of mortality. The sympathy in the poem is extended, in mock-fashion to the conceited and unknowing woman upon whom the louse crawls while she is at church and, in an equally empty gesture, the presumption of the louse is berated. The poem resolves itself, however, with the sombre contemplation of the fact that the human world is simply part of the natural world and that it is humanity in its airs and graces which is presumptuous in attempting to separate itself off from the rest of the natural world. As is often pointed out, the most famous lines of the poem, “O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us/To see oursels as others see us” (ll.43-44), are a version of Adam Smith’s philosophical recommendation to objectivity and placing ourselves in the position of others. However, the very melancholy frame of reference in the poem which accompanies and, as I will argue subsequently, ironises such cool judgement derives from a line of sentimental engagement which has its origins in the poetry of James Thomson more than anywhere else.

Thomson’s influence upon the canonical Scots poets of the eighteenth century is much more

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<sup>57</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, no.92.

<sup>58</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, nos.69 & 83.

telling than is usually thought to be the case. The critical purblindness of Thomson's native land, however, has meant that we are only now in the early days of seeing Thomson's importance to the poetic project and persona of Burns, and the cultural vision of Fergusson. Equally, Thomson's complex and easily misunderstood identity as both a Scot and a Briton must be appreciated if we are to restore the poet to his proper native context and to understand his stature as the first truly British poet in modern history. In these senses, Thomson now presents an urgent challenge to the literary historians of both Scottish and English poetry.



#### Chapter Four. “ ’Mang men, wae’s-heart! we aften find/The brawest dress want peace of mind”<sup>1</sup> : Robert Fergusson and High Scots Cultural Complaint.

In the time between the writing of Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson (1750-74) the most extensive project in Scots poetry was that undertaken by Alexander Ross (1699-1784). His *Helenore, or the Fortunate Shepeherdess* (1768) is, at 4,154 lines, the longest poem in Scots of the eighteenth century. This dramatic pastoral poem is inspired, generally, by Ramsay’s *The Gentle Shepherd* but is, in many parts, much more realistic in its treatment of life in the country (and there is greater social realism also in its much more intensive dialect usage, pertaining to the North East of Scotland). For instance, the description of the aftermath of the birth of Helenore is quite graphic of both the physicality and folk-culture of the process:

Baith night an’ day, about the bony wean.  
The jizzen-bed wi’ rantree leaves was sain’d,  
An’ sicklike craft as the auld grandys kend;  
Jean’s papas wi sa’t and water washen clean,  
For fear her milk gat wrang fan it was green;  
Gryt was the care an’ tut’ry that was ha’en,  
Then the first hippen to the green was flung,  
And unko words therat baith said an’ sung,  
A burning coal with the hett tangs was ta’en  
Frae out the ingle mids, well brunt and clean,  
An’ thro’ the corsy-belly letten fa’.  
For fear the wean should be ta’en awa’.  
Dowing an’ growing was the dayly prayer,  
An’ Nory tented was wi’ unko care. (ll.94-107)<sup>2</sup>

This unjudging reporting of such custom, which is fairly typical of the poem, is something of a kind we find nowhere in Allan Ramsay (with his sense of gentlemanly superiority in relation to the “superstitions” of the folk). No serious work has as yet been done on the extent of the indebtedness of Burns to *Helenore* which he referred to as “precious treasure”.<sup>3</sup> However, Burns certainly recognised a

<sup>1</sup> “Ode to the Gowdspink” in *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II edited by Matthew P. McDiarmid, p.176, ll.21-2.

<sup>2</sup> *The Scottish Works of Alexander Ross* edited by Margaret Wattie (Edinburgh, 1938).

<sup>3</sup> *Letters of Burns* Vol. I, p.312.

kinship with Ross as a song-writer and in his folk mentality when he referred to him as “our true brother” and a “wild warlock”.<sup>4</sup>

We see Burns’s quite specific poetic debt to Ross as the latter talks about the genesis of his poetic sensibility in *Helenore*. He begins by agonising over the fact that he cannot hope to match *The Gentle Shepherd*:

O gin thou hadst not heard him first o’er well,  
When he got maughts to write The Shepherd’s Tale,  
I meith ha had some chance of landing fair,  
But O that sang, the mither of my care!  
What wad I geen, that thou hadst put thy thumb  
Upo’ the well tauld tale, till I had come,  
Then led my hand alongst it line for line!  
O to my dieing day, how I wad shine,  
An’ as far yont it as syn Habbie plaid,  
Or Ga’in on Virgil matchless skill displayed!  
An’ mair I wadna wiss. But Ramsay bears  
The gree himsel, an’ the green laurels wears. (ll.17-28)

To the poet-narrator’s sense of lack of worth, the muse, Scots appears and replies:

[...] “Your rough-spun ware  
Sounds but right douff an’ fowsome to my ear.  
Do ye pretend to write like my ain bairn,  
Or onie ane that wins beyont the Kairn?  
Ye’re far mistaen gin ye think sick a thought.  
The Gentle Shepherd’s nae sae easy wrought. (ll.37-42).

Here we find the model for that part of Burns’s “The Vision”, a poem we will consider in a later chapter, where the muse Coila assures the poet-narrator that he has a niche, though a humble one, among his nation’s poetic parthenon. Scots enjoins the narrator to know his place below that of Allan Ramsay and to proceed in “gueed auld Scots” (l.56). What we see here, then, is the eighteenth-century formation of that sensibility of primitive Scots poetry. What we also glimpse here, however, is the notion of the “high-culture” of poetry in Scots. Ross namechecks Gavin Douglas and this shows us

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



how sculpted awareness of a distinctively Scots poetic tradition was at the beginning of the century following the influence of the Ramsay-Ruddiman circle. In an alternative to line 26 above, the 1778 edition of *Helenore* reads “Or Christ’s kirk o’ the green was first essay’d”.<sup>5</sup> This shows Ramsay’s key dissemination of the literary history of Scots after him since he had produced, enlarged and popularised the poem to an ever-widening audience. It also shows an increasingly primitive turn to the eighteenth-century self-perception of Scots poetry since “Christ’s Kirk” is a “lower style” text than Douglas’s *Aenied*, the latter losing something of its significance, as a politically nationalist/Jacobite banner text after the mid-point of the eighteenth century. *Helenore*, then, is a text exemplifying the flux and tension in eighteenth-century Scots poetry. It is an ambitious story, often written with real poetic accomplishment, where Helenore sets off to free Lindy, kidnapped by barbarous highlandmen. If not quite epic in its scope, it is a pastoral adventure (where idealised landscapes collide with real cultural and material mores) which maintains the reader’s interest in the story to a greater extent than the set-piece cultural situations of *The Gentle Shepherd*. *Helenore* embodies that moment in the history of poetry in Scots where we have the peeling back of the classicised agenda and the movement toward a poetry in Scots which is seen, to some extent, standing apart from classical literary mode.

The process by which the gradual separation of Scots poetry from the mores of high literary expectation occurs is seen in the prefatory verses to the 1768 edition of *Helenore*. These were authored by James Beattie, Enlightenment philosopher and fellow North-Easterner to Ross. Beattie begins:

O Ross, thou wale of hearty cocks,  
 Sae crouse and canty with thy jokes,  
 Thy hamely auld warld muse provokes  
     Me, for a while,  
 To ape our good plain country folks  
     In verse and stile.

Sure never carle was half sae gabby,  
 E’er since the winsome days of Habby.  
 O mayest thou ne’er gang clung or shabby,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Scottish Works of Alexander Ross* edited by Margaret Wattie, p. 10.

Nor miss thy snaker!  
Or I'll call Fortune, Nasty Drabby,  
And say, Pox take her. (ll.1-12)<sup>6</sup>

Here we find one of the supposed leaders of Scottish Enlightenment cultural refinement actually vaunting the primitive delights of poetry in Scots. Beattie identifies a historical canon of such writing:

I here might gie a skreed of names,  
Dawties of Heliconian Dames!  
The foremost place Gavin Douglas claims,  
That pawky priest.  
And wha can match the First King James  
For sang or jest?

Montgomery grave, and Ramsay gay,  
Dunbar, Scot, Hawthornden, and mae  
Than I can tell; for o' my fay,  
I maun break aff;  
'Twould take a live-lang summer-day  
To name the half. (ll.73-84)

Critics have been wont to marvel at this seemingly rumbustious appreciation of the Scots literary tradition by the author of a list of "Scotticisms" to be avoided when writing.<sup>7</sup> However, I would suggest that Beattie's familiarity with this tradition is not, in fact, great. It is interesting that in the first of the latter two stanzas quoted above Gavin Douglas (though reduced to a "pawky priest") and "Christ's Kirk" ("by" James I) are to the fore. Beattie too is in receipt of the eighteenth-century shaped canon of older Scots poetry. He mentions other poets in the stanza which follows, but shows no real understanding of these. Indeed, what are we to make of the wholly-inadequate circumscription of Alexander Montgomerie as "grave"? All he knows of Montgomerie's work, we might infer from this adjective, is "The Cherrie and the Slae" (popularised in its appearance in Ramsay's *Ever Green*). Robert Henryson is, to modern eyes, noticeably absent from Beattie's list given his contribution to Older Scots poetry.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Scottish Works of Alexander Ross* edited by Margaret Wattie, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> *The Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* edited by John MacQueen & Tom Scott (Oxford, 1989). p.341 [see pp.338-42 for the entire poem].



Beattie's understanding of the tradition of poetry in Scots is limited. Ramsay's *Ever Green* had been the most powerful transmitter of literary Scots to the eighteenth century as is shown by Beattie's verses. Alongside this ultimately rather limited anthology (which contains little, for example, of the great corpus of Renaissance sonneteering in Scotland), Ramsay was the person most responsible for popularising songs in Scots in the early decades of the eighteenth century. The *Ever Green* anthology and Ramsay's own poetry emphasised the festive "Habbie" and "Christ's Kirk" modes and these elements, though poetically powerful in themselves, taken together with the reinvigoration of Scots song, confirmed the carnivalesque direction of poetry in Scots. The picture of Scots language expression which built up, then, was one which deprivileged more classical or "literary" models (to the extent that Ramsay's Augustan usage involving the "habbie" stanza is gradually lost to sight). One cannot be absolutely sure why this happens, but it is credible to suggest that it does so partly as a gesture of primitive defiance in the face of post-1707 British culture which brings into closer proximity for Scotland the often, though not always, refined cultural inflections of English Augustanism.<sup>8</sup> It is somewhat ironic that Ramsay should have precipitated this narrowing in the image of Scots poetry and song, since he, more than anyone, is the man who opens up new possibilities for poetry in Scots in the eighteenth century. Leaving aside Alexander Ross, however, if we look at the most accomplished poet in Scots between Ramsay and Fergusson, we find Rev. John Skinner (1721-1807) whose most accomplished piece is "The Christmass Bawing of Monimusk" (1739), a work very much in the

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<sup>8</sup> Under the influence of post-Romantic predilections, British criticism has been generally slow to move away from the overarching conception of Augustanism's veneration of the "polished" aesthetic artefact. As suggested above, primitivism may well have taken on a particular Scottish significance as a counter-strand to refined English cultural expression, but such a stance cannot be specifically and explicitly documented in the period. It exists perhaps in implicit, understated fashion in the likes of Ramsay's preface to *The Ever-green* which we have seen in a previous chapter and in some of the guiding principles of James Macpherson's Ossianic productions. It is surely the case, however, that the modern Scottish critical tradition has overemphasised primitivist counterpointing by Scottish literature in the face of English cultural encroachments. Recent work on the Augustan period also helpfully begins to break up the longstanding conception of the entire digestion of primitive/pastoral/folk elements in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century British literature (see Weinbrot, *Op cit.*, and Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca & London, 1991) for accounts of Augustan literary sensibility which highlight much more fluid debates and attitudes to aesthetic history and practice during the period than have been normally allowed). In the light of newer work on the Augustan period, the work remains to be done on the possibility that the Scots were tapping into a debate over ancient and modern, primitive and polished (with considerable doubt as to where the "classical" literary legacy was truly embodied) which cannot be seen in simple terms of Anglo-Scottish tension.



riotous “Christ’s Kirk” tradition. Like Ross, Skinner too found fame as a songwriter in Scots primarily.<sup>9</sup> I do not mean to criticise the efforts of Ross and Skinner *per se*, but their much narrower literary range when compared to that of Allan Ramsay confirmed a process where poetry in Scots seemed to be more ghettoised - and indeed more set in its historical ways - than it actually was.

It is only with the coming to light of Robert Fergusson that poetry in Scots during the eighteenth century can be seen to alter from its primary trajectory of decreasing literary scope. Fergusson’s poetic career begins, perhaps, with “Elegy on the Death of Mr David Gregory”, a poem he may have written aged only fourteen.<sup>10</sup> This mock-elegy, celebrating the life of a professor of mathematics at St Andrew’s University, features a lambasting of authority which was to become one of Fergusson’s poetic hallmarks. Among the attributes Gregory is “praised” for is his chastisement of idle football playing students who, having being formerly chased by the professor, now “winna get a sport sae braw/Sin Gregory’s dead” (ll.35-6). The poem in itself is rather insubstantial, but shows Fergusson’s skill in Scots and the “habbie” stanza and his absorption of the tradition of Ramsay’s mock-elegies (and Fergusson also shows a spark of his ability to extend the latter form in centring his poem on a highly respectable personage in a way which Ramsay had never done). The poem is interesting also in exemplifying Fergusson’s later predilections as a Scots poet which lie largely dormant for seven years. Between “Elegy on David Gregory” and the publication of “The Daft Days” in 1772, Fergusson wrote certainly one (now lost) Scots-language production in the “habbie” stanza, but his initial attempts at being a serious poet were in standard English and in universally familiar eighteenth-century “British” forms.<sup>11</sup> Too often commentators have excised these English-language poems from

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<sup>9</sup> Skinner’s songs include that standard of Scottish folk-music, “Woo’d and married and a’.” An Episcopalian clergyman who saw a fairly turbulent life which included the burning down of his church during the 1745 Jacobite rebellion, Skinner published his major work *An Ecclesiastical History of Scotland* (London, 1788). In a letter to Robert Burns in 1787, Skinner says that he “dabbled” in poetry but gradually gave it up writing songs for occasional amusement (see James Grant Wilson, *The Poets and Poetry of Scotland* Volume 1 (London, 1876), p.192). The best succinct account of Skinner’s career is to be found in George Douglas, *Scottish Poetry from Drummond to Fergusson* (Glasgow, 1911), pp.258-271. The patchy nature of Ross’s creativity is seen in the fact that the 1768 edition of his songs contains only nine items (seven in Scots and two in English) [see Wattie (ed.), *Op cit.*, pp.161-70].

<sup>10</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II edited by Matthew P. McDiarmid, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume I edited by Matthew P. McDiarmid, p.93.



serious consideration, along with the English-language poems which Fergusson *continued* to write after he had found his mature Scots voice. In several instances, however, Fergusson's English-language productions are very pertinent to the poet's development of voice and theme.

In early 1771, Fergusson published a triptych of pastorals in the *Weekly Magazine* published and edited by Walter Ruddiman (1719-81), the nephew of Thomas Ruddiman. The three pieces are divided by the logic of "morning", "noon" and "night" and so look toward the interest in the cycle of the day which Fergusson portrays so well in one of his most major pieces, "Auld Reikie", and his fine talent for natural observation found throughout his Scots corpus. The three pastoral-dialogues continue the eighteenth-century tradition begun in Ramsay and continued with Ross of bringing together Scotland and the pastoral landscape. In "Pastoral I: Morning" Damon and Alexis take part in an urban/rural dialogue:

DAMON.

Behold Edina's lofty turrets rise,  
Her structures fair adorn the eastern skies;  
As Pentland cliffs o'ertop yon distant plain,  
So she the cities on our north domain.

ALEXIS.

Boast not of cities, or their lofty towers,  
Where discord all her baneful influence pours;  
The homely cottage, and the wither'd tree,  
With sweet content shall be preferr'd by me. (ll.27-34)<sup>12</sup>

Here the town/country opposition is obvious enough, but we have the germ of the rancorous, culturally discordant Edinburgh and the idealised, primitive Scotland which Fergusson was to portray later in some of his best Scots productions. Damon pictures Edinburgh from a distance, organically integrated, as we see in the comparison of the city skyline to the Pentland hills. He also talks of "the cities of our north domain" which is another act of totalising awareness speaking of a dignified (and not necessarily Anglocentric) awareness of Scotland. This totalising poetic geography (in large measure imbibed from

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<sup>12</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.4-8.

James Thomson), which Fergusson specialised in, and which was something in which he influenced Burns, points to the confident, sweeping eye of Fergusson, something sometimes lost sight of in the standard critical emphases upon Fergusson, the town-poet and miniature-satirist of Edinburgh.

In "Pastoral II: Noon" we find the character of Corydon complaining against anti-Scottish feeling:

[...] Delia wanders o'er the Anglian plain,  
Where civil discord and sedition reign.  
There Scotia's sons in odious light appear,  
Tho' we for them have wav'd the hostile spear:  
For them my sire, enwrapp'd in curdled gore,  
Breath'd his last moments on a foreign shore. (ll.23-28)<sup>13</sup>

The note of Scottish martial pride here is a small example of continuity of a theme accentuated by Ramsay from his reservoir of anti-Unionist ideas, which is participated in by Thomson and which Fergusson carries on and which both Burns and the poems of "Ossian", as Charles Dibdin was to realise, pre-eminently play their part in broadcasting to the world. Matthew McDiarmid has claimed, since the poem was very contemporaneous to the expression of it, that the poem responds to the anti-Scottish feeling among some English Whigs, notably John Wilkes, around this time.<sup>14</sup> We see, then, the beginnings of Fergusson's voice of Tory complaint as he reads a Scottish situation made uncomfortable from without and uncomfortable within as a result of the "baneful influence" of the Scottish urban setting. Both of these aspects become keynotes in Fergusson's later work. The ideal Tory pastoral vision is one, then, that for Fergusson is very beset in the second half of the eighteenth century in Scotland.

Fergusson's "A Saturday Expedition" appearing in the *Weekly Magazine* in August 1771 is another poetic performance in English where Scottish topography becomes animated. Describing a holiday trip across the Forth to Fife with all the attendant sea-sickness and feasting which this entails, a

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<sup>13</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.8-12.

<sup>14</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume I, p.251.



new note intrudes amidst the gently satirical comedy:

Eastward along the Fife coast we stray;  
And here th' unwearied eye may fondly gaze  
O'er all the tufted groves and pointed spires  
With which the pleasant banks of Forth are crown'd.  
Sweet navigable stream! where commerce reigns,  
Where peace and jocund plenty smile serene:  
On thy green banks sits Liberty enthron'd,  
But not that shadow which the English youth  
So eagerly pursue; but freedom bought  
When Caledonia's triumphant sword  
Taught the proud sons of Anglia to bemoan  
Their fate at *Bannockburn*, where thousands came  
Never to tread their native soil again. (ll.76-88)<sup>15</sup>

It is Scotland, then, which is a "green and pleasant land" where "Liberty" and commercial plenty has been won after the defeat of the English. Again the hand of *emigre* Scot, Thomson, can be felt. The liberty which Thomson had boasted of as pertaining to the whole of Britain, is re-appropriated as a specifically Scottish phenomenon. We notice once again an interesting exchange of coinage between the two Scottish poets. It is, though, something of an elision of the historical facts to suggest that the eighteenth-century prosperity of Scotland rests on a battle won in 1314. As we shall see, Fergusson later in his poetry is not so convinced by either the quality of the Scottish economy or its political status in the eighteenth century. It is as though the young Fergusson is experimenting both in ideas and poetic form. The accomplished narrative flow of the unrhymed verse of this poem underscores a sense of the harmony it claims for the Scottish present. Fergusson later, largely though not absolutely (and his very premature death before his twenty-fourth birthday means that there really is no way of knowing what Fergusson might have gone on to achieve and in what medium), dispensed with the English language, if not "English" modes, when addressing the cultural topography of Scotland. Fergusson, I am suggesting, chose to write in Scots to make a national point, but not because he lacked facility in writing in standard English.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.21-25.



As in the case of Allan Ramsay, we still lack very adequate biographical information on Fergusson and the circles in which he moved. The Ruddiman connection, however, is suggestive of a continuity of the Scots-humanist cultural context. Fergusson is a much more neo-classical poet than Ramsay (and has a much surer grasp of Latin), and given his Tory and pro-Stuart sympathies we might well argue that the connection between Fergusson and Walter (nephew of Thomas) Ruddiman shows this context still in active operation promoting poetry in the vernacular.<sup>16</sup> However, it would be difficult to insist on this case in too pointed a fashion given the paucity of certain information about Fergusson and given the fact that Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine* published only one poem in Scots, James Beattie's aforementioned "To Alexander Ross" in its founding year of 1768, prior to Fergusson's "The Daft-Days" in January 1772.<sup>17</sup> It seems more likely, especially given Fergusson's own initial poetic couching of Scottish cultural commentary in standard English, that Fergusson himself came to "re-invent" the vernacular mode as the most forceful way of addressing the Scottish cultural issues which he wished to. Clearly, Walter Ruddiman encouraged Fergusson in his Scots poetry once he saw how good this was and he may well have done so with a sense of recognition of the eighteenth-century Scots-humanist heritage, but he himself had largely been involved in publishing English-language poetry by Scots both in his magazine and as a book-publisher and he probably thought that the high days of Scots poetry, embodied by Ramsay, were well and truly over. Fergusson, then, might be seen as largely a virtuoso reviver and this is borne out by the richer range of poetry, the reinjection of wider literary scope, in Scots which is to be found in Fergusson's oeuvre as compared to that of Ramsay.

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<sup>16</sup> A.B. Grosart records a number of anecdotes from Walter Ruddiman's daughter re the publisher's practical kindnesses to Fergusson. In one it is reported that Ruddiman had gifted two suits of clothes to the poet (see Grosart's *Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh and London, 1898), p.103). Walter would clearly have recognised Fergusson's lineage of Tory, pro-Stuart cultural poetics, and, *de facto*, in publishing the poet's work should some sympathy for this identity. However, Ruddiman's attitude was far from representing his hard and fast ideological principles; we see this to be the case when we consider that he published Rev. Robert Dysart Colvill, *Britain, A Poem* (Edinburgh, 1757), a poem of staunchly "Whiggish" and anti-Stuart principles [see Note 21 to Chapter Three above]. Walter Ruddiman's career and literary relations remain under-researched areas which might yield additional interesting information in the future on the cultural and literature of Scotland during the middle part of the eighteenth century.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume I, p.33.



“The Daft-Days” brings an astonishing new vision to the “habbie” stanza. Where Ramsay used this form for his mock-elegies and for elegant verse-epistles, we find Fergusson innovating in his poem by using it as a vehicle for serious scene-painting and reflection of a much more extensive kind. As never before in this poem “we see pastoral united with vernacular traditions,” as F.W. Freeman has remarked.<sup>18</sup> The poem is a mainstream eighteenth-century poem of Epicurean retreat couched in what we might call a “high-style” Scots language which is both somewhat new-fangled and historically resonant at the same time. In that essential sense of pastoral, where the rustic setting gives the cue to simple thought and action, the winter scene begets a sense of smallness and retreat in the human mind:

Now mirk December’s dowie face  
 Glours our the rigs wi’ sour grimace,  
 While, thro’ his *minimum* of space,  
                   The bleer-ey’d sun,  
 Wi blinkin light and stealing pace,  
                   His race doth run.

From naked groves nae birdie sings;  
 To shepherd’s pipe nae hillock rings;  
 The breeze nae od’rous flavour brings  
                   From Borean cave;  
 And dwyning nature droops her wings,  
                   Wi visage grave. (ll.1-12).<sup>19</sup>

The sense of personified, threatening nature here, however, is also one consonant with the order of nature. Saturnalian December’s stern presence is one that arrives rightfully according to the logic of the seasons and this measured rightful place is rendered in Fergusson’s well-paced assonance through the words “Now”, “dowie”, “glours” and “sour”. The sun is now confined to a “minimum” of space or time during the day, and this well-chosen Latinate expression alongside the fact that the sun is sleepy, or “bleer-ey’d”, sustains the sense of a natural, dignified, diurnal process. This effect is compounded in

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<sup>18</sup> F.W. Freeman, *Robert Fergusson and the Scots Humanist Compromise* (Edinburgh, 1984), p.173.

<sup>19</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.32-34.

the Miltonic ending to the first stanza where the main verb, “run”, is elegantly deferred until the very end of the line. Fergusson here is boldly placing the Scots language in a very refined setting linguistically. It is almost as though he is proving that the language can take the strain of the “high-style” flourishes (and this is perhaps true also of the way in which Fergusson collides the Scots participle ending, “blinkin”, with the English participle ending, “stealing”, in the same line so that the first of these words is utilised for its more homely connotations and the second for its more formal connotations where the friendly sun is overtaken by the stern, declining December day). There is a *panache* in the combination of all these effects which says that the poet in Scots can utilise a very varied palette.

In stanza two, the pastoral scene which Allan Ramsay had legitimated as a natural province in which “simple” Scots language could operate, is slowly banished so that we almost do not notice the transition from the Scots negative form to a Latinate expression so typically favoured in eighteenth-century neo-classical poetry in “nae od’rous”. Scots, however, is not entirely overcome and continues to flicker in the stanza where we find the Scots “Wi’ ” being immediately followed by the French “visage”. This flickering effect is continued in stanza three:

Mankind but scanty pleasure glean  
 Frae snawy hill or barren plain,  
 Whan Winter, ’midst his nipping train,  
                     Wi’ frozen spear,  
 Sends drift owr a’ his bleak domain,  
                     And guides the weir. (ll.13-18)

The sense of man being assaulted by the elements, and of summer being displaced by winter, is mimicked in the modulations of the language where humble Scots succumbs to a more Latinate, neo-classical, standard English. However, this should not be taken to reflect any kind of despairing cultural vision or battle on the part of Fergusson where “authentic” Scots is subsumed by English. Rather, Fergusson is playing with the register of Scots with its received associations of being, in James



Beattie's phrase "hamely", an association which Ramsay, in spite of his usage of Scots in Augustan settings, had done so much to set in place by exploiting the pastoral theory of Gay so that Scots developed a powerful identity as a rustic diction.<sup>20</sup> Fergusson exploits the rustic, especially the summer-pastoral associations of Scots by placing it alongside the "seriously" descriptive or melancholic contemporary capabilities of English prosody (there is a hint in the opening stanzas of the poem of the kind of descriptive scene-setting of Goldsmith in "The Deserted Village" (1770) and there are echoes - perhaps even slightly mocking echoes - of the foreboding rhetoric so beloved by the mid-eighteenth century "Graveyard" school).<sup>21</sup>

The overcoming of the Scots pastoral scene outside should naturally lead to a retreat to the "homely" shelter, and, at first, it looks as though this is happening as this potential shelter,

Edinburgh, is addressed in vigorous, unfussy Scots:

<sup>20</sup> This point represents another critically under explored aspect of eighteenth-century Scottish literature. On the one hand this is surprising since it might seem to provide succour to theories of Scottish literature emphasising its primitive identity. On the other hand it is easy to see why an account of the primitive strand in eighteenth-century Scottish literature as a contemporary innovation should be overlooked, since this would involve making connections with English literature which so much essentialist Scottish criticism attempts to eschew. John Gay's part in the intertwining of ballad and folk culture with more "mainstream" literature, most obviously in *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), and Gay's influence upon Scottish literature has been surprisingly little explored (the one real exception being Thomas Crawford, *Society and the Lyric Op cit., passim.*). This has been an especially wasted opportunity since, considering that Gay was an admirer of and subscriber to Allan Ramsay's work, the story is almost certainly one of two-way cultural transaction. The blindspot toward Gay also underplays Ramsay's contemporary context as a writer of poetic fables since this was a genre in which Gay also excelled. Yet again, with Gay and Ramsay taken together, we glimpse a British-wide engagement with a "classical" past which was far from being entirely neo-classical, engaging as it did with the "folk" tradition (and it is instructive to remember also that Gay was part of Addison's *Spectator* circle so that, again, we see not only "polished" cultural values - the usual and dominant stereotype of this circle's sensibility - being asserted in "mainstream" Augustan Britain).

<sup>21</sup> In "The Daft-Days", "The Farmer's Ingle", "Hame Content" (*The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, p.157-60) and other poems, Fergusson's scene-painting of the rural folk and their environs has its closest parallels in the work of Oliver Goldsmith, a writer much admired by Fergusson. A brief extract from "The Deserted Village" makes plain this influence:

How often have I paused on every charm,  
The sheltered cot, the cultivated farm,  
The never failing brook, the busy mill,  
The decent church that topt the neighbouring hill,  
The hawthorn bush, with seats beneath the shade,  
For talking age and whispering lovers made.  
How often have I blest the coming day,  
When toil remitting lent its turn to play. [*The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith* Vol IV edited by Arthur Friedman (Oxford, 1966), ll.7-14.]

Here we find most clearly the genesis of the note sounded by both Fergusson and Burns, as we shall see, which celebrates the Scottish rural life as something noble in identity. The note of foreboding as to the changing way of country life in "The Deserted Village" is also one which Fergusson perhaps transplants so as to inform his deep foreboding at the vulnerability of the ordinary folk in the city-setting.



Auld Reikie! thou'rt the canty hole,  
 A bield for mony caldrife soul,  
 Wha snugly at thine ingle loll,  
           Baith warm and couth;  
 While round they gar the bicker roll  
           To weet their mouth.       (11.19-24)

As in the case of Allan Ramsay's "Lucky Wood" there is a clear delineation of healthy celebration in communal (almost communion) drinking by the "souls" who take refuge from the elements in the city.

F.W. Freeman describes very well the primal dignity of the scene:

The poet's "canty hole" (1.19) is like the cave to which the first communities sought shelter, and it, being the proper refuge for a "caldrife soul" (1.20), is Auld Reikie, symbol of traditional Scotland; a magnification of the Scots rural cottage, with a snug "ingle".<sup>22</sup>

The inhabitants enjoy their Yule-day holidays with food, drink and a good nature: "Then, tho' at odds wi' a' the warl' / Amang oursell's we'll never quarrel" (11.37-8). The "world" or Nature's winter may beset the community but the people have one another as comfort. The narrator calls for music:

Fidlers, your pins in temper fix,  
 And roset weel your fiddlesticks,  
 But banish vile Italian tricks  
           From out your *quorum*,  
 Nor *fortes* wi' *pianos* mix,  
           Gie's *Tulloch Gorum*.   (11.42-48)

This cry against the foreign and call for the native is somewhat ironic. Clearly, given his famous friendship with the Italian tenor, Tenducci, Fergusson did not object to Italian music *per se*, but did dislike "the distortion of native songs by over-elaborate re-arrangements in the Italian style" which were part of an increasing musical trend during the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> However, as "The Daft-Days" itself shows, he is not afraid to blend different styles with their different associations. We might argue

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<sup>22</sup> Freeman, *Op cit.*, pp.175-6.

<sup>23</sup> A. Kinghorn & A. Law (eds) *Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, p.201.



that this is neither unconscious self-contradiction or conscious self-irony on Fergusson's part. Rather he is using the fabric of poetic registers in the way we have described above to render a world which is *properly layered with different strata of cultural values*. In the earlier part of the poem we see the *natural* interplay of such values. Both poetic registers, Scots and neo-classical, collaborate to portray a realistic picture of the inevitable turning of the year from a playful summer to a sonorous winter. With the stanza above, we begin to realise that there are, however, interminglings of different cultural voices which are not so healthily contained. The genteel appropriation of Scottish fiddle-music is, in fact, a "vile" degeneration of that music. This point is made implicitly in the next stanza:

For nought can cheer the heart sae weil  
 As can a canty Highland reel;  
 It even vivifies the heel  
                                     To skip and dance:  
 Lifeless is he wha canna feel its influence.    (ll.49-54)

This is not, as some might be tempted to read it, an ironic mimicking of those who attempt to be pretentious about folk-music. "Vivifies" is a word used not to underscore such pretensions, but to *insist on the "high" function of this musical celebration as part of the properly communal retreat from the elements*. This attitude is confirmed in the next stanza:

Let mirth abound, let social cheer  
 Invest the dawning of the year;  
 Let blithesome innocence appear  
                                     To crown our joy;  
 Nor envy wi' sarcastic sneer,  
                                     Our bliss destroy.                    (ll.55-60)

The "mirth" and "social cheer" "invest", or bless the new year. We have here, then, a deep and sacred function being argued for the festivities of the people. And these are couched in the dominant standard (English) poetic diction of Fergusson's day.

The interference in the properly-ordered world, as Fergusson sees it, comes from an alien

(genteel) refinement which is not to be confused with the neo-classical vision which, in the Tory Fergusson's view, operates in symbiosis with the Scots vernacular world. If there is interference from the top end of the cultural scale - the genteel artificers in music - then there is also a cruder form of interference threatening to disturb the cultural peace:

And thou, great god of *Aqua Vitae*!  
Wha sways the empire of this city,  
When fou we're sometimes capernoity,  
Be thou prepar'd  
To hedge us frae the black banditti,  
The City-Guard. (ll.61-66)

The city-guard, unemployed highland troops policing Edinburgh, represent, like the Italianised Scottish musical arrangements, cultural debasement (and the link is made very directly in referring to these highlanders as "banditti"). The celebrations of the people, which the narrator admits can turn a little ill-natured (though not desperately so, as the coinage "capernoity" makes plain), are menaced by an intrusive, unsympathetic alien force yet again.

The "Daft-Days" shows us a curiously shadowy and under-developed world in some ways. The celebrators of the holidays are not brought into a graphic foreground (in the way that say, the revellers in that arch poem of Scottish festivity, "Christ's Kirk on the Green" are). Equally, we have only the briefest mention of the city-guard, though one which ominously ends the poem. The title of the poem is also not entirely consonant, it might seem, with its contents. "Daft days" was the supposedly derogatory term applied to the pagan, or papistical winter festivities by the disapproving Calvinists, and carries, clearly, for the Calvinist mindset, a notion of licentious release. The term is perhaps not a Calvinist coinage, however, as the earliest coinage in *The Scots National Dictionary*, is attributed to the Catholic bishop, John Leslie, in 1561 (though conceivably this dating speaks of a tug-of-war between Catholic and Calvinist for use of the term). Certainly, for Fergusson, the term is one that accords with festivities which are largely natural *and* sacred celebrations. There is, to be sure, some



gentle irony, as in the translation of the Gaelic “water of life” for whisky into the Latin, “Aquae Vitae” which in the city “sways” (meaning to rule and also to cause to stagger). But this is realistically to acknowledge that the blend of the human and the sacred can never be made perfect. This gentle note of comedy, however, is a world away from the more full-throated carnivality and sensuality of the tradition of “Christ’s Kirk on the Green.” With “The Daft-Days” we have a poem of the eighteenth-century Scots revival which is a site of dissonant energies. Formally this is so in the blend of Latinate neo-classicism and Scots (this though, represents a creative opening up of Scots poetry in being more fully-flexed in eighteenth-century British idiom than anything attempted by Ramsay). Thematically, this is so in Fergusson’s protests against an advancing gentility in Scottish music and related to this, with regard to an Edinburgh society, generally, which is not allowed to be “natural” in its celebration of life and humanity. “The Daft-Days” is a delicate poem reflecting a virtuoso performance by a Scots language poet, and, in spite of the implicit cultural confidence in this performance, reflecting a line of Tory discontent with eighteenth-century Scottish society, which in its general outlook can be traced back to Allan Ramsay.

Fergusson’s “Fashion” (1772) appeared in the *Weekly Magazine* a month after the “The Daft-Days”.<sup>24</sup> It shows Fergusson taking up a “favourite theme of the Augustan moralist” where luxury is undermining the nation.<sup>25</sup> In this poem it is the nation of Britain which is under threat:

Britons, beware of Fashion’s luring wiles:  
On either hand, chief guardians of her power,  
And sole dictators of her fickle voice,  
*Folly* and dull *effeminacy* reign;  
Whose blackest magic and unhallow’d spells  
The Roman ardour check’d, their strength decayed,  
And all their glory scatter’s to the winds.  
Tremble, O Albion! for the voice of fate  
Seems ready to decree thy after-fall  
By pride, by luxury, what fatal ills

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<sup>24</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.35-37.

<sup>25</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, p.256.

Unheeded have approach'd thy mortal frame!  
 In thy fair garden? Hasten 'ere their strength  
 And baneful vegetation taint the soil,  
 To root out rank disease, which soon must spread,  
 If no bless'd antidote will purge away  
 Fashion's proud minions from our sea-girt isle. (ll.68-84)

Such lines show Fergusson very competent in Shenstonian mode (the fluency in Fergusson's verse here is the equal in accomplishment to much early Shenstone) and shows his aptitude in particular for unrhymed verse (Fergusson's musical effects in his poetry, generally, are much more reliant on assonance and alliteration than on rhyme). The lines are interesting too in setting out a series of themes - fashion, luxury and pride - which are the stock-in-trade of so many eighteenth-century moral writers that Fergusson translates to a Scots poetry context. Perhaps the watermark theme of much of Fergusson's work might be described as a horror at degeneracy, and we find this in the lines above where the fashion "disease" undermines the "soil" (or the cyclical natural order) of Britain. Fergusson is here the British writer just as Allan Ramsay sometimes addressed the wider British cultural scene, and in the wider context of his poetry, we see him traversing between his "English" poetry and his "Scots" poetry in his ideas. The unifying factor is his Tory outlook, which suspects the "progressive" dynamic of eighteenth-century Britain that he sees doing damage both to Scotland and Britain. In saying this, however, these traversals bring Fergusson more and more to focus on a Scottish and Edinburgh situation which he knows so particularly and to which he brings a Scots-language idiom chosen as the appropriate accenting of this reality. This choice is not simply because Scots is more "natural" or "direct", as Hugh MacDiarmid famously claimed in relation to Fergusson, but because it is precisely an accent - which is not to say that an accent is an inconsequential thing - which operates as part of a wider enmeshed network of elements which *include* the standard topoi, inflexions and formal modes of eighteenth-century poetry in Britain.<sup>26</sup> Fergusson's Scots accent and usage is certainly part of a shared language with his everyday contemporaries, but he turns to this language, not because it comes more

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<sup>26</sup> See Hugh MacDiarmid, "Robert Fergusson: Direct Poetry and the Scottish Genius" in Sydney Goodsir Smith (ed.), *Robert Fergusson 1750-74* Edinburgh & London, 1952), pp.51-74



easily to him. His facility in “English” writing was an equally accomplished and comprehending one, and this is seen in his “English” inflexions amidst his “Scots” verse. Fergusson was a literary man before he was a “natural language” man, and his Scots accented verse, both in vocabulary and in mode (for instance, the “habbie” stanza) is part, obviously enough, of an allegiance to place and a venerable Scots-Tory humanist tradition, channelled primarily to Fergusson through Ramsay.

In “Elegy on the Death of Scots Music” published in March 1772 we find Fergusson again utilising the “habbie” stanza for a non-comic narrative purpose and a neo-classical Scots usage.<sup>27</sup> As in “The Daft-Days” and “Fashion” we find complaint against cultural degeneration, and, as in the first of these poems, this claim of degeneration is particularly pointed at Scotland. This is a good point at which to urge caution over Fergusson’s often read “nationalism” or to put it more accurately the “anti-Englishness” which is sometimes read into his verse. Kurt Wittig is typical here as he reads “Elegy on the Death of Scots Music” as “as much a criticism of Anglo-Scottish poetic diction as it is a lament for Scots music.”<sup>28</sup> Truly, Fergusson attaches himself to anti-unionist political sentiment and invokes, as this poem shows, what we would call today a cultural nationalism, but it is facile to read these attitudes as standing *against* English literature or culture *per se*. The poem complains familiarly against gentility in Scots music:

Now foreign sonnets bear the gree,  
And crabbit queer variety  
Of sound fresh sprung frae *Italy*,  
A bastard breed!  
Unlike that saft-tongu’d melody  
Which now lies dead. (ll.49-54).

It would be useful to know more about the precise debate on music, if any, that Fergusson was here tapping into. I have been able to find nothing of this in the periodicals of the day, and it is a curious fact that the fiddler, William MacGibbon, whose absence Fergusson laments in his poem (l.37) should have

<sup>27</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.37-39.

<sup>28</sup> Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, p.179.

been particularly accomplished in the music of the Italian composer Corelli.<sup>29</sup> What, then, is happening? MacGibbon, it is fairly obvious, stands for the kind of figure transmitted to him by Hamilton of Gilbertfield's "The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan" and Ramsay's "Elegy on Patie Birnie." This is a received line which Fergusson is drawing upon in the poem. The recently lost MacGibbon is a figure of convenience for the extension of this line. Fergusson laments also the dearth of songwriters and music in Scotland as he recalls such predominantly English-writing poets as William Hamilton of Bangour (1704-54) "The Braes of Yarrow" and Robert Crawford (d.1733) whose "Tweed-Side" are alluded to (ll.27-8). The dead musical tradition which Fergusson bewails, then, is not purely a Scots-language lyric one. This fact undercuts Wittig's reading of the poem and also F.W. Freeman's similar contention that there is a deliberately ironicising tension in the poem between Scots neo-classic pastoral and English neo-classic pastoral.<sup>30</sup> There is no more standard neo-classic pastoral prosodiser than Crawford.<sup>31</sup> We should note also that the Scots music tradition "which now lies dead" is "saft-tongu'd" (something again which argues against Freeman's reading where he sees Fergusson using "the Standard Habbie mock elegy form for reductive effect"<sup>32</sup>). The primitive simplicity pertaining to Scots music is not, in the first instance, something rough and bombastic. The opening of the poem sets the lamenting scene:

On Scotia's plains, in days of yore,  
When lads and lasses *tartan* wore,  
Saft music ran on ilka shore,

<sup>29</sup> See David Laing's introduction to *Stenhouse's Illustrations of the Lyric Poetry and Music of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1853), pp.xcv-xcvi.

<sup>30</sup> Freeman, *Op cit.*, pp.172-3.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Crawford (?1695-?1732/2) was the author of "Cowdieknowes" and "Tweedside". The latter English-language song is vastly superior to any of his few Scots works such as "Bush abune Traquair" and "Doune the Burn, Davie." It is interesting that Burns produced an improved version of the latter work (Burns, *Poems and Songs* no.427). Crawford was a contributor to the *Tea-Table Miscellany* under the signature "C." During the eighteenth century "C" had often been thought to be Robert's elder brother, Colonel George Crawford, but the true attribution was firmly established by Robert Burns with his interest in the archaeology of Scottish song. (See Robert Chambers (ed.), *Life and Works of Robert Burns* IV (Edinburgh, 1937), p.378 for the most enlightening glimpse of this episode; see also Gerard Carruthers, "Robert Crawford" in the *New Dictionary of National Biography* [forthcoming].)

<sup>32</sup> Freeman, *Ibid.*, p.172.



In hamely weid;  
But harmony is now no more,  
And *music* dead.

Round her the feather'd choir would wing,  
Sae bonnily she wont to sing;  
And sleely wake the sleeping string,  
Their sang to lead,  
Sweet as the zephyrs of the spring;  
But now she's dead. (ll.1-12)

Clearly, the concept of Scots music is here set in a natural context. As in "The Daft-Days" the poetic well-spring of cultural health is the imagery of nature. And this (pastoral) imagery with its "lads", "lasses" and "zephyrs" is a fairly standard eighteenth-century British idiom. Further corroboration of the fact that Fergusson is not simply indulging in an opposition which depends largely on Anglo-Scottish tension comes in the epigraph Fergusson chooses for his poem. For this, he draws on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, "Mark it Caesario; it is old and plain,/The spinsters and the knitters in the sun,/And the free maids that weave their thread with bones,/Do use to chant it." A very general opposition, then, is posited between past and present in a pan-British context.

Scots music hitherto has existed in "hamely weid", but this "hamely weid" is corroborated by the idiom of pastoral, not interrupted or disturbed by it. The key to the theme, structure, and ultimate mode of the poem, I would suggest, lies in Fergusson's identification that "harmony is no more". The harmony established in the opening of the poem is that of the Scots language and the neo-classic pastoral register in poetry. (This is a rather complex effect where the ostensible subject-matter, music or song and the complaint against the degeneration of musical harmony, is underscored by a harmony of linguistic or poetic registers.) What is being complained against is fragmentation where *different* parts of the whole, are *all* now in a defunct state. Fergusson complains that the malaise spreads beyond pastoral song:

At glomin now the bagpipe's dumb,

Whan weary owsen hameward come;  
 Sae sweetly as it wont to bum,  
     And *Pibrachs* skreed;  
 We never hear its warlike hum;  
     For music's dead. (ll.31-36)

There is, then, a variety in Scots music (it is not to be taken as a monolithic whole) which has been lost for some reason. As in "The Daft-Days" the note of something sinister undermining the true well-adjusted musical culture is made (deliberately?) sinister by being sourced in fairly vague terms. In so far as there is an explicit "villain" in the poem it is the "sound fresh sprung frae *Italy*". Again as in *The Daft-Days*", there is a nice linkage around the notion of disparate Italian (or at least Roman) elements. The poem ends on a note of national pride familiar with Allan Ramsay and others:

O SCOTLAND! that cou'd yence afford  
 To bang the pith of Roman sword,  
 Winna your sons, wi' joint accord,  
     To battle speed?  
 And fight till MUSIC be restor'd,  
     Which now lies dead. (ll.61-66)

Clearly, Fergusson here is drawing upon the vocabulary of anti-unionist, nationalist pride which we have seen already in others in the earlier eighteenth century. The insinuation is that Scots music is being undermined through the torpor of the Scottish people. The poem ends with a call to arms which implies that it will only be through rousing itself from false (unnatural), easy, luxury that the situation can be retrieved. "Elegy on the Death of Scots Music", then, is a general Tory complaint against the progressive culture of the eighteenth century, which implies (in its cultural signature of the "habbie" stanza and elsewhere) that much of the ruination of Scotland follows from the union. But, at the same time, it has nothing to say about any supposed intrusion of English culture in Scotland. It is very important to make this distinction if we are to understand Fergusson's rhetoric of complaint, and, simultaneously, the way in which he was refurbishing Scots poetry according to the most contemporary idioms of eighteenth-century poetics. It is in this holding together of cultural complaint



and poetic innovation that we see a true paradox of eighteenth-century Scottish literature, of the kind that we might reasonably expect to be exemplified in good literature.

Written around the same time as “Elegy on the Death of Scots Music”, “The Rivers of Scotland: An Ode” demonstrates Fergusson’s desire to celebrate the Scottish topographical and cultural landscape in neo-classic style.<sup>33</sup> This ambitious sequence, set to music (now lost) by the conductor and composer, John Collett, is very much part of Fergusson’s patriotic project:

Let England’s sons extoll their gardens fair,  
Scotland may freely boast her gen’rous streams,  
Their soil more fertile and their milder air,  
Her fishes sporting in the solar beams.  
*Thames, Humber, Severn*, all must yield the bay  
To the pure streams of Forth, of Tweed, and Tay. (ll.120-5)

What we see here is part of the comparative dialogue between Scotland and England mounted also in the eighteenth century, as we shall see, by Scots such as John Home and Tobias Smollett. This comparison in the eighteenth-century derives double force in being premised both in economic or resource terms and in aesthetic terms. The topos of the river as central to Scottish experience places Fergusson in touch with a Scottish Stuart-loyal poetic tradition which can be traced back to Robert Ayton (1569-1638) and Drummond of Hawthornden.<sup>34</sup> Fergusson, then, is both very much man of the present, where he is playing his part in demanding mutuality of respect between post-Union England and Scotland and a poet drawing on a Scots-humanist heritage which we have considered already as informing the eighteenth century more fully than is sometimes thought. Each country has its material resources (the fruits of the soil, on the one hand, the fruits of the water, on the other). Each landscape also has a distinct place in classical conceptions of nature. If England, clearly, is to be identified with the peaceful pastoral setting, Scotland has a cognate setting in abundance in its water since the stream or brook is

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<sup>33</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.40-46.

<sup>34</sup> See Gerard Carruthers and Sarah M. Dunnigan, “ ‘ A reconfused chaos now: Scottish Poetry and Nation from the Medieval Period to the Eighteenth Century’ ” *Loc cit.*, pp.85-6.

such a predominant emblem in pastoral literature generally. Scotland's plenitude of water in its rivers and coasts allows Fergusson to capitalise upon Britain's increasing self-image in the eighteenth century as an independent island-nation. Since this image obviously depends on water, Scotland can be placed at the centre of this conception:

Now *Lothian* and *Fifan* shores,  
Resounding to the mermaids song,  
Gladly emit their limpid stores,  
And bid them smoothly sail along  
To Neptune's empire, and with him to roll  
Round the revolving sphere from pole to pole;

To guard *Britannia* from envious foes,  
To view her angry vengeance hurl'd  
In awful thunder round the world,  
And trembling nations bending to her blows. (ll.27-36)

Rather like Allan Ramsay in "To John, Second Duke of Argyll" we see Fergusson here fusing together in a continuum the fearsomeness of Scotland and England. He paves the way for this by addressing *Jove*:

"Since from the void creation rose,  
"Thou'st made a sacred vow,  
"That *Caledon* to foreign foes  
"Should ne'er be known to bow." (ll.95-98)

Implicitly, the claim is that Scotland and England are equal partners. This must be the case since Scotland cannot be defeated by military might. This dovetails with the anti-unionist implication that Scotland is only defeated by treachery, a claim made elsewhere by Fergusson as well as by Ramsay. This claim does not, perhaps, sit very easily with Fergusson's extolling of "Britain" in "The Rivers of Scotland." It does not, in other words, make smooth political sense. As with some of Allan Ramsay's work, it makes for a case of real-life flux, it might be argued, though "The Rivers of Scotland" is a smooth and accomplished *poetic* performance. Political loyalties were being reconfigured and



reconjugated throughout Scottish literature during the eighteenth century, which is a hardly surprising fact, but notwithstanding such flux, Scottish literature itself continues to be innovative in the face of such flux and, indeed, reflect it. Scottish criticism, traditionally, often speaks as though the reflection or the embodiment even of such real flux in identity automatically represents some kind of artistic defeat, a position which is open to question.

“The King’s Birth-Day in Edinburgh” (1772) has been one of Fergusson’s most readily canonised poems.<sup>35</sup> As David Daiches describes it, “this is a full-bloodied performance in the Scottish tradition of poems of popular revelry”.<sup>36</sup> Such over-arching comment is, however, deceptive. In his poem, and subsequently in what might be called Fergusson’s sequence of calendar poems (which begins with “The Daft-Days”), Fergusson extends the technique of Ramsay, found in the likes of “Maggy Johnston” where celebration of the appetites stands in dissonant relationship to the civic commonweal. It is interesting that the poem takes for an epigraph, “Oh qualis hurly-burly suit, si forte vidisses” from Drummond of Hawthornden’s macaronic “Polemo-Middinia” (c.1645). Fergusson, then, is signalling himself as part of a pro-Stuart, Scottish humanist lineage. Drummond’s poem was one which had featured in Watson’s *Choice Collection* as part of that signalling of anti-puritanical, but simultaneously cultured Scotland. Implicitly, “Polemo-Middinia” in its conflation of low-style Scots and Latin presents a dissonant world of disorder and such dissonance stands precisely at the centre of Fergusson’s poem. Not exactly macaronic in itself, “The King’s Birth-Day” shows that hallmark of Fergusson’s poetry: mixture or collision of modes. Where in the case of “The Daft-Days” or “Elegy on the Death of Scots Music” mixture of modes works toward a largely harmonious tone (even in the face of thematic complaint), in “The King’s Birth-Day” collision of modes to register chaos is the aim. We see such collision in the opening stanza:

I sing, the day sae aften sung,

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<sup>35</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.52-55.

<sup>36</sup> David Daiches, *Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1982), p.50.

Wi' which our lugs hae yearly rung,  
 In whase loud praise the Muse has dung  
     'A kind o' print;  
 But wow! the limmer's fairly flung;  
     There's naething in't.           (11.1-5)

We have here an immediately bathetic effect where the conventional tropes of poetic "singing" and the "muse" are undercut by the obviously low-style usage of "lugs" which are to be filled with this sound *and this well-spring of inspiration. The muse becomes, again in low-style usage, a "limmer" or "wench", whose previous efforts to put this day into print represent a kind of (womanly) deceit.*

In stanza two the narrator talks of London as harbouring the same kind of "joys" (1.7) as Edinburgh on this day where "blind and cripple,/Foregather aft, O fy for shame!/To drink and tipple" (11.10-12). What is established even further, then, is a pathetic gathering affecting metropolitan Britain. In stanza three the "muse" is entreated not to speak from the heights of Parnassus (which has, classically, a peak which is the province of Dionysus). Instead of Dionysian or Bacchanalian wine-consumption though, the muse is plied with whisky so as to supply the appropriate poetic lens through which to view the ensuing occasion of the king's birthday on the fourth of June. A mock-epic *or drunken epic vision then unfolds. It quickly becomes apparent why whisky is the appropriately presiding spirit for the day since it features the larger than life presence of the highlanders comprising Edinburgh's city-guard. In stanza six the narrator lampoons the guard's Gaelic inflections and sets up the idea of their incompetence in maintaining law and order:*

Oh willawins! Mons Meg, for you,  
 'Twas firing crack'd thy muckle mou;  
 What black mishantar gart ye spew  
     Baith gut and ga'?  
 I fear they bang'd thy belly fu'  
     Against the law.   (11.31-36)

"Willawins" and "mishantar" ventriloquise the voice of the guard as they strive ineffectually to combat disorder. Fergusson imagines also their overloading of the great gun, Mons Meg, amidst the



eighteenth-century festivities (though the exploding of the canon in this way was actually something which had happened in 1682 when James VII visited Scotland's capital).<sup>37</sup> The cartoon-like explosion of the barrel of the gun, however, is accompanied by a noticeably sinister metaphor. If the guard cannot control - and indeed, may even be responsible (as militia) for - the over-loading of the tribute-gun, then they can control nothing. The "banging" of the canon's "belly fu'/Against the law" implies rape, and so the most serious disorder or crime against society. What we begin to glimpse, then, is the black-comedy of the poem (where Fergusson is perhaps consciously working against the conception of Bacchanalian comedy and a darker comedy is instead presided over by the intoxicating effects of whisky). This is a society which is actually incapable of proper festivity.

We see dissonant elements, again, ironically brought together as we are told that the "blue-gown bodies" (l.49) are as proud in their "clouted duddies" (l.51) as the magistrates of the city. For a start this brings to the poem an awareness of a debased element (to complement the debased cultural element of the formerly formidable clansmen, the city-guard, now reduced to being an urban police-force). The "blue-gowns", or king's bedesmen, were old soldiers granted the privilege for past military service of begging and eligible to receive alms, especially on royal occasions. In Edinburgh, these men now resemble "scar-craws new ta'en down frae woodies" (l.50). The world, then, is turned upside down. What should be respectable - in general, the writ of regal and civic law - is not and so the populace is licensed to add to the chaos with ill-placed fireworks and using dead cats as weapons of assault. The poem ends bathetically:

Next day each hero tells his news  
O' crackit crowns and broken brows,  
And deeds that here forbid the Muse  
                    Her theme to swell,  
Or time mair precious abuse  
                    Their crimes to tell.

She'll rather to the fields resort,

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<sup>37</sup> Kinghorn and Law (eds), *Poems By Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, p.202.

Whare music gars the day seem short,  
 Whare doggies play, and lambies sport  
                     On gowany braes,  
 Whare peerless Fancy hads her court,  
                     And tunes her lays.       (ll.85-96)

What is often too little realised by critics of Fergusson's work is a note of very real eighteenth-century disgust. We see it in the ending to "The King's Birth-Day in Edinburgh" where the mismatch between the regal dignity and genuine celebration ideally implied by the title is undercut by the riotous events which unfold in the poem. As the ending showing Fergusson does not simply enjoy these events, though he may enjoy them to some extent as a kind of poetic justice. Instead, he obliquely points to a chaos in the *hoi polloi* brought precipitated by misrule from above. The only conclusion can be that the Hanoverian King, George III, and the city-fathers of Edinburgh (the Edinburgh magistrates are yoked in empty pride with the blue-gowns, as we have seen) preside over an inadequate cultural scene. The tradition of festive mock-heroic poetry in Scotland from the medieval period to the eighteenth century, which critics have been so concerned to celebrate as a vital vein of Scottish culture, is here seen in rather jaundiced operation.<sup>38</sup> Fergusson shows us misbegotten carnivality, where everything is small, mean and squalid. The jaunty "habbie" stanza here is part of a falsely bright tone implicitly adding to the disgusting scenario. The lack of cultural health on the festive occasion is registered throughout by a predominantly reductive method and the final stroke where the poetic muse cannot bear to inhabit Edinburgh and "resorts" to the pastoral tranquility of the countryside.

"Hallow-Fair" (1772) is another of Fergusson's "calendar" pieces where he is doing interesting, mode-twisting things with a received vehicle of Scottish poetic festivity.<sup>39</sup> The comment of David Daiches that "the poem follows in the ["Christ's Kirk"] tradition in its lively descriptions of individual

<sup>38</sup> Typically, that arch-essentialist proponent of this line of Scottish poetic joviality, with the strong implication that it is anti-hierarchical, Allan MacLaine has recently edited, *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots Poems of Folk Festivity* (Glasgow, 1996). A useful volume in itself, this book's introduction argues "a democratic bias" (p.xiii) in the work of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns in their festive-poetry which is an all too-inclusive and politically insensitive label for much of the work of each of these poets in this mode.

<sup>39</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.89-95.



encounters” is both true and inadequate as a summative comment.<sup>40</sup> The poem is a subtle portrait of a country occasion, for the most part very different in the tenor of its festivity from the drunken revels of “Peblis to the Play” or “Christ’s Kirk”. The poem utilises the “Christ’s Kirk” stanza in an original eighteenth-century work in a way that Allan Ramsay does not. John Skinner, with his “The Christmass Bawing of Monimusk” (1739) had made an extensive original production in the stanza about a holiday in his North-East locality, after Ramsay had repopularised the stanza-form but had merely utilised it for “extending” the ancient “Christ’s Kirk on the Green”.<sup>41</sup> Though Skinner’s piece deserves more modern attention than it has hitherto received, it is Fergusson who (uniquely) in the eighteenth-century does new things with the mode.<sup>42</sup> This innovation begins subtly in the first stanza of “Hallow-Fair”. Let us compare its opening to the opening stanza which follows of the medieval version of “Christis Kirk on the Grene”:

Was nevir in Scotland hard nor sene  
 Sic dansing nor deray,  
 Nowthir at Flakland on the grene  
 Nor Peblis at the play,  
 As wes of wowaris, as I wene,  
 At Christ’s Kirk on ane day.  
 Thair come our kitteis weschin clene  
 In thair new kirtillis of gray,  
 Full gay,  
 At Christis Kirk of the Grene. (ll.1-10)<sup>43</sup>

Fergusson’s opening stanza to “Hallow-Fair” runs:

At Hallowmas, whan nights grow lang,  
 And starnies shine fu’ clear,  
 Whan fock, the nippin cald to bang,  
 Their winter hap-warms wear,  
 Near Edinbrough a fair there hads,

<sup>40</sup> David Daiches, *Robert Fergusson* (Edinburgh, 1982), p.64.

<sup>41</sup> Allan MacLaine (ed), *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots Poems of Folk Festivity*, (Glasgow, 1996), pp.69-79.

<sup>42</sup> See Christopher Whyte’s path-breaking discussion of Skinner’s piece in “Bakhtin at Christ’s Kirk Part II: Carnival and the Vernacular Revival” in *Studies in Scottish Literature* XXIX (1996), pp.133-157.

<sup>43</sup> Allan MacLaine (ed), *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots Poems of Folk Festivity*, p10.

I wat there's nane whase name is,  
 For strappin dames and sturdy lads,  
 And cap and stoup, mair famous  
 Than it that day. (ll.1-9).

The tidying up of the rather brittle ten-line stanza of “Peblis to the Play” and “Christis Kirk” in nine lines had been brought about by Allan Ramsay. Fergusson follows this new ordering, as John Skinner had also, and utilises it for an opening which is altogether less breathless and excited. He follows the precedent in “Christ’s Kirk” of portraying those about to celebrate in appropriate clothing, but there the similarity ends. In Fergusson’s poem, the focus has been changed from a summer celebration to a winter one. His scene-setting is much more graphic than in the medieval poem as the chilly prettiness of the November night is rendered with measured alliteration and rhythmical care. Gone is the giddy fervour found in “Was nevir in Scotland hard nor sene/Sic dansing nor deray”. Fergusson’s celebrators are sensibly attired in their “hap-warms”, and the overall sense is of people more thoughtfully in respectful harmony with their natural environment. The winter festivities bring “browsters rare” (l.14) with their “gude ale” (l.15). “Country John” “rins after meg [...] an’ sappy kisses lay on” (ll.21-2). Such elements of harmonious, good-country health (signalled also by the “strappin dames and sturdy lads”) are gradually seen to be beset by predatory forces. To begin with there is perhaps some irony in this as the narrator takes on a (mock) disapproving voice:

Here chapmen billies tak their stand,  
 An’ shaw their bonny wallies;  
 Wow, but they lie fu’ gleg aff hand  
 To trick the silly fallows:  
 Hegh, sirs! what cairds and tinklers come,  
 An’ ne’er-do-weel horse coupers,  
 An’ spae-wives fenzying to be dumb,  
 Wi’ a’ siclike landloupers,  
 To thrive that day. (ll.28-36)

The notion of people out to exploit their fellow-humans at the fair, however, is a mixed one. Overall, it is not entirely unnatural. In the first instance, we might argue, this shows Fergusson’s Tory conception



of the innate “corruption” of humanity.<sup>44</sup> At the same time though, much of this bad behaviour is essentially of the peccadillo kind unless one is of a puritanical perspective (hence the mock-disapproval I am arguing for). There is some mockery at any very portentous condemnation of the people at the fair:

Without, the cuissers prance and nicker,  
An’ ower the ley-rig scud;  
In tents the carles bend the bicker,  
An’ rant an’ roar like wud.  
Then there’s sic yellowchin and din,  
Wi’ wives and wee-anes gablin,  
That ane might true they were a-kin  
To a’ the tongues at Babylon,  
Confus’d that day. (ll.64-72)

What we have again with the fearsome Old Testament frame of reference is a condemnation of the people as the narrator inhabits the heavy-handed attitude of the authorities of Edinburgh. Gradually in the poem the really threatening disorder is revealed to be the violence of the city-guard until in the second last stanza we have an earnest address to the people:

Good fock, as ye come frae the fair,  
Bide yont frae this black squad;  
There’s nae sic savages elsewhere  
Allow’d to wear cockade.  
Then the strong lion’s hungry maw,  
Or tusk o’ Russian bear,  
Frae their wanruly fellin paw  
Mair cause ye hae to fear  
Your death that day. (ll.100-108).

The folk are “good” and at risk from a “savage” and “wanruly” police in a stanza which carries a thoughtful weighting untypical of the “Christis Kirk” genre of festivity. “Hallow-Fair” depicts no carnivalesque suspension and overturning of authority for the day, but rather a situation where this

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<sup>44</sup> See Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism*, pp.70-83 for this particularly Tory conception in eighteenth-century thought.

authority will do all it can to stamp upon any attempt by the people at festive release. The poem is an innovatory piece in the “Christ’s Kirk” mode in being a poem of real social protest, rather than of straightforward comic observation of a holiday which is so typical of the genre.

Fergusson continues his innovation in the “Christ’s Kirk” mode in “Leith Races” (1773).<sup>45</sup> As in “The King’s Birth-Day in Edinburgh”, the tenor of the poem is bitterly mock heroic. The seriousness underlying the poem is signalled as the poem opens in a pretty scene-setting akin to “Hallow-Fair” and bringing on to the stage a figure who is more than simply the usual girl dressed in her finery for the anticipated festivity of a holiday:

In July month, ae bonny morn,  
When Nature’s rokelay green  
Was spread o’er ilka rigg o’ corn,  
To charm our roving een;  
Glouring about I saw a quean,  
The fairest ‘neath the lift;  
Her een ware o’ the siller sheen,  
Her skin like snawy drift,  
Sae white that day. (ll.1-9)

The woman turns out to be the allegorical muse-figure of “Mirth”. She identifies herself:

“I dwell amang the caller springs,  
That weet the Land o’ Cakes,  
And aften tune my canty strings  
At bridals and late-wakes:  
They ca’ me Mirth; I ne’er was kend  
To grumble or look sour,  
But blyth wad be a lift to lend,  
Gif ye wad see my pow’r  
An’ pith this day.” (ll.28-36)

The narrator agrees to accompany Mirth to Leith Races near Edinburgh, but she immediately disappears from the poem. As in “The Kings Birth-Day in Edinburgh”, the muse, the implication is,

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<sup>45</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.160-167.



will not be able to function in the environs of the Scottish capital. The rest of the poem reveals a great deal of “sourness” on the holiday which is alien to true Mirth which is associated as she attests with freshness and health in an idealised simply robust Scotland (“the Land o’ Cakes”) and the seriously holy but festive occasions of weddings and funerals. Instead, the scene at Leith stands in diametrical opposition to the environment of Mirth. For instance, we see a very shoddy form of “celebration”:

The browster wives thegithir harl  
A’ trash tha they can fa’ on;  
They rake the grounds o’ ilka barrel,  
To profit by the lawen:  
For weel wat they a skin leal het  
For drinking needs nae hire;  
At drumbly gear they take nae pet;  
Foul water slockens fire  
And drouth thir days. (ll.100-108)

The “foul water” here clearly stands in opposition to the “caller springs” associated with true mirth or celebration. Mirthfulness in the poem is actually a sham, and this notion of shoddiness of reality masked by shallow appearance is a theme which runs through the poem. We see it prosecuted with vehemence as Fergusson depicts the city-guard with a Swiftian savagery having their “whisky-plooks” shaved from their faces in honour of policing the day of racing (ll.63-66). We see it as the poem turns to a weightier stratum of society:

Around whar’er ye fling your een,  
The haiks like wind are scourin’;  
Some chaises honest folk contain,  
An’ some hae mony a whore in;  
Wi’ rose and lily, red and white,  
They gie themselves sic fit airs,  
Like Dian, they will seem perfite;  
But its nae goud that glitters  
Wi’ them thir days.

The Lyon here, wi’ open paw,  
May cleek in mony hunder,  
Wha geck at Scotland and her law,

His wyly talons under;  
 For ken, tho' Jamie's laws are auld,  
 (Thanks to the wise recorder),  
 His Lyon yet roars loud and bawld,  
 To had the Whigs in order  
 Sae prime this day. (ll.136-153)

It is a typical theme of eighteenth-century British satire that appearances, especially pertaining to the supposedly socially superior, are deceptive. This is prosecuted obviously enough in the first of the two stanzas quoted above. The succeeding stanza though, brings this idea into a particularly Scottish locus. The Lyon King at Arms is charged with prosecuting any false bearing of heraldic colours, and Fergusson clearly signals that it is the Whigs who will have the wrath of the Lyon brought down upon them. This piece of bombast may be informed by the fact that the Lyon Clerk Depute at this time was a Tory friend of Fergusson's, but it is not so much the political reality that is important as the making of a powerful poetic polemic.<sup>46</sup> Moving from the very standard gambit of picturing a colourful, solid world where the respectable consort with prostitutes, the deceiving world is quickly extended to include a society where the Whigs are associated with disorder and are implicitly, like the prostitutes, in a place of authority that they ought not to be. Fergusson's usage of "Whig" here derives, obviously, from a Tory allegiance in a decade of British politics (like every decade during the eighteenth century) when the Tories and Whigs were locked in fierce party combat. In the Scottish and Edinburgh contexts, of course, "Whig" carried the perjorative connotations of puritanical Calvinism. We see argued yet again in "Leith Races" that the disorder so disapproved of by frequently puritanical city-fathers of Edinburgh in the eighteenth century is a product of their failure to provide a healthier culture for the ordinary people.

Fergusson's "Christ's Kirk" sequence of poems ends with "The Election" (1773).<sup>47</sup> In some ways this poem is the most "traditional" of Fergusson's poems in the genre. It features a sharply

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<sup>46</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, p.295.

<sup>47</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.185-191.



delineated set of characters (when in “Hallow Fair” and “Leith Races” the revellers are much more shadowy presences, almost as though to signal the absence of a truly full cultural life). For instance, we have Souter Jock and Cooper Will recalling the foregrounded tradesmen of the original “Christ’s Kirk on the Green”. We also have a much tighter focus upon the drunken doings of such characters, so that the poem is Fergusson’s piece of most active energy in the “Christ’s Kirk” form. In “Leith Races” a good deal of space is taken to describe the city-guard who are supposedly simply part of the circumscription of the festival (though in this disordered world they take up centre-stage). In “The Election”, though the city-guard are a presence only in the satirical epigraph to the poem, “Nunc est bibendum, et bendere Bickerum magnum;/Cavete Town-guardum, Dougal Geddam atque Campbellum”, and so these men are present only as shadowy bogey-men. An off-stage technique, generally, is the *modus operandi* of the poem. We see no positive political values in the poem and instead see only politicians plying electors with drink and bribing them. Such activity renders these politicians something akin to the cairds, chapmen and browster wives of Fergusson’s other poetry. The entire scenario becomes a festive occasion (yet another diseased one) as Fergusson collides the energy of a medieval mode of Scottish festive poetry with a supposedly modern event (an eighteenth-century election). In this collision we see another instance of Fergusson translating the Scottish poetic past into the present. In his subtle act of refurbishment in “The Election” we again obliquely glimpse the poet’s Tory politics in his premise that supposed modernity can be seen through the lens of medieval behaviour (with the implicit barb that the progressivist beliefs of eighteenth-century British Whigs are erroneous).<sup>48</sup> Again, then, we see Fergusson the political conservative and sly poetic innovator.

Often in Fergusson’s poetry we witness a town versus country division. This, of course, is another standard rhetoric in eighteenth-century poetry. As we have seen though, with Fergusson this

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<sup>48</sup> My reading sees Fergusson engaged in a poised, delicate poetic action which is quite typical in his work; it shows that human nature, in all its folly, is essentially unchanging. My reading here is primed by Fussell *Op cit.*, pp.70-83 (“The Deformity of Man”); and by Nicholas Rogers’s illuminating study, *Whigs and Cities: Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole and Pitt* (Oxford, 1989), see especially pp.13-132 for the description of the Whigs’ belief in the efficacy of the city in securing a power base in opposition to the country-oriented Tories (Rogers mentions Fergusson *en passant* as part of the Whig-Tory dialogue over the city, pp.371-2).



has particular purchase as Edinburgh emerges sometimes as a rather sinister place. In “Auld Reikie” (1773), we continue to find what is something of a love-hate perspective from Fergusson toward the Scottish capital.<sup>49</sup> This is a hugely ambitious poem as it charts the sights and sounds of Edinburgh through the cycle of a day across three hundred and sixty six lines of Scots-language couplets. Even as it demonstrates a fine documentary eye, however, it is a poem which is deeply reflective. There is nothing comparable in the work of Ramsay, or later Robert Burns (unless one includes the much more dramatic narrative verse of “Tam o’ Shanter”) in terms of such fully-extended and highly serious poetry in Scots. As with Fergusson’s “Christ’s Kirk” “sequence” of poetry, we are dealing in the case of “Auld Reikie” with the bold inventiveness of a virtuoso literary artist. What we find here is a Scots-language poetry in no way ghettoised as it casts an eye across a wide range of contemporary Edinburgh experience, and, indeed, dissects something of the historical palimpsest of the Scottish capital. In one, over-arching sense Hugh MacDiarmid is right to hail Fergusson as a writer of *grosstadpoesie*, or poetry of city life, in that Fergusson is profoundly aware of the city in deeply anthropological terms in “Auld Reikie”.<sup>50</sup> In another sense we must be careful with applying such a term to Fergusson’s work in the poem, since, in the received usage drawn on by MacDiarmid, it applies vitally to a sense of alienation in the face of modern urban development. This potential label, in fact, represents a telling test site with regard to the traditional location of Fergusson in Scottish criticism, which likes to depict the poet as a man suffering increasing cultural disempowerment. Fergusson, living well before the really expansive “urbanisation” of Edinburgh during the nineteenth century and living in the decade before the more radical feelings and vocabularies of political dissent unleashed by the French Revolution, however, is not really a poet *alienated* or disempowered by the city as such in the classic romantic sense. There is a rather facile gesture in Scottish criticism which likes to depict Fergusson as a proto-radical, almost an alienated class-warrior, and as the poet of a rather rough and ready Edinburgh. This view though amounts to not reading seriously enough Fergusson’s cultural location as it becomes apparent in “Auld Reikie”.

<sup>49</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.109-120.

<sup>50</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, “Robert Fergusson: Direct Poetry and the Scottish City”, p.65.



For a start, the title of the poem itself is not necessarily to be read as indicating a couthy, cosy folk-allegiance to place. The epithet dates back in recorded use to the reign of Charles II, and it may be quite deliberate on Fergusson's part that he is utilising the name with precisely a Stuart-loyal resonance, in the face of those cultural elements clearly apparent in the city of his poem of which he does not approve.<sup>51</sup> Fergusson's Auld Reikie is a tense place though he begins by lauding it as a place of jolly retreat. It is a place of shelter where "couthy chieles" (l.3) "blythly gar auld Care gae bye" (l.5). The poet addresses Edinburgh:

O'er lang frae thee the Muse has been  
 Sae frisky on the simmer's green,  
 Whan flowers and gowans wont to glent  
 In bonny blinks upo' the bent;  
 But now the leaves a yellow die,  
 Peel'd frae the branches, quickly fly;  
 And now frae nouthur bush nor brier  
 The spreckl'd mavis greets your ear;  
 Nor bonny blackbird skims and roves  
 To seek his love in yonder groves.  
 Then, Reikie, welcome! (ll.7-17)

Edinburgh, then, which is in work like "The King's Birth-Day", or "Leith Races" (a poem written later than "Auld Reikie") an inappropriate place for the muse now welcomes her back. Autumn grips the landscape and the appropriate place for mankind now also is the town. Town and nature exist, ideally, in a harmonious relationship, something which is seen in touches such as the description, "Now morn, with bonny purpie-smiles,/Kisses the air-cock o' St Giles" (ll.23-4). Moving from the skyscape view,

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<sup>51</sup> My reading, then, sees Fergusson entering into a debate over different types of city. Fergusson's ideal is that identified by F.W. Freeman of the Tory Humanist conception of the city as neo-primitive "shelter" (*Op cit.*, pp.174-7). Freeman says of "Auld Reekie":

Indoors we find a mirror image of the outdoor conflict in the opposition of formidable determinist forces and humanist ideals, as vital and natural to survival as protection from winter's cold. Fergusson in attempting to combat modernity, goes back to first principles, describing his ideal city, his receptacle of civilisation, in stark terms. he is like the social historian Lewis Mumford who discerns

... in the rites of the cave the social and religious impulses that conspired to draw men finally into cities, where all the original feelings of awe, reverence, pride and joy would be further magnified by art, and multiplied by the number of responsive participants. (p.175).

however, to the life of the humans on the ground, the narrator acknowledges the human pollution found in the “stinking air”, though there is little disgust in this observation and there is even a light philosophic touch (which again is a recurrent aspect of the poem): “But without souring nocht is sweet”. What we have in this poem is a series of oppositions of the kind which generally fascinated Fergusson. These include summer/winter, night/day and reality/appearance. In “Auld Reikie”, however, the poet makes less dramatic use of these to show a world generally more subtly, more gently even, disharmonious than is usual for Fergusson.

In the poem Fergusson observes the maids, the gossips, the men-of-business and the lawyers during the day, and the overarching satire is gentle as smells and gossip are metaphorised, “Edina’s sons mair eithly share/Her spices and her dainties rare” (ll.47-8). There is no point pretending that the human existence of Edinburgh is naturally pretty, it is instead naturally human with all the physicality and busy-bodiness that this entails. As night comes, the narrator observes the prostitutes and there is an attempt at explicit didacticism:

Whoredom her trade, and vice her end.  
But see wharenow she wuns her bread,  
By that which Nature ne’er decreed;  
And sings sad music to the lugs,  
'Mang burachs o' damn'd whores and rogues. (ll.89-93).

This is a note in Scots poetry, of “mainstream” eighteenth-century didactic verse carried off with great facility, which had been absent in Scots vernacular since Allan Ramsay’s “Wealth, or the Woody”. For all the thrusting metrical and lexical facility, however, there is, rather than a true didacticism, a sad fascination in the scene here. The “sad music” of the whores implies a measure of sympathy from a poet who was very much attuned to the musical art.<sup>52</sup> When the narrator turns attention to the “macaronies”, there is also a hint of sympathy in his description of them as a “feckless race” (l.103) who do not realise the potential violence of the city at night. Even the “bruisers” who dispense much of

<sup>52</sup> Fergusson’s prodigious singing ability is recorded by all the biographical accounts of the poet; see for instance M.P. McDiarmid in *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume I, p.184.



this violence are dealt with not entirely unsympathetically, as we are told that “aft the hack o’ honour shines/In bruiser’s face wi’ broken lines” (ll.111-12). There is an understated, but unmistakeable, human *tenderness here, for the pathos of these men.*<sup>53</sup> There is a broader, more philosophic, observation of Edinburgh in “Auld Reikie” than in any other of Fergusson’s works. There is a certain irony in the fact that critics tend to read his poetry of festive-release as “spontaneous” and “sincere” when this poetry is more culturally considered and pointed when compared to “Auld Reikie”, which is a rather formal kind of verse, in spite of the “dialect” that peppers it, and, at the same time, a very personal and sincere production as Fergusson sprinkles his hometown, warts and all, in subtle, understated sympathy. “Auld Reikie” has in common with a poem such as “The King’s Birth-Day in Edinburgh”, high, or “standard” literary overtones as it describes a variegated (including a demotic) cultural scene.

From lines 161-194, the narrator reflects on death, as the opposition upon which so much of the frenzied life-activity he has been observing is predicated. The morbid images of the grave and the *afterlife* in these lines owe something to the currency of the graveyard school poetry found in Robert Blair’s “The Grave” (1743), or Edward Young’s “Night Thoughts” (1742-5). In spite of so much being made of Fergusson’s supposed descent into religious melancholia as a prelude to his early death, the morbidity in this section of “Auld Reikie”, though a genuine reflection of the shudder of morbidity the narrator projects the people feeling, co-exists alongside another note. There is a certain detached, *affectionate, mock-heroic puncturing of these morbid nightmares in the poem in the depiction of the ambivalent society of Edinburgh with its co-existent festivity and religious fear.* We see this as the narrator looks on indulgently as on a child amidst a nightmare:

Whan Sybil led the Trojan down  
To haggard Pluto’s dreary town,  
Shapes war nor thae, I freely ween,  
Cou’d never meet the soldier’s ein.      (ll.191-4)

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<sup>53</sup> Edwin Morgan makes the suggestion that Fergusson was interested in the “bruisers” with something of a homoerotic eye. If this is the case it further undermines the image of Fergusson, author of “direct poetry”; see Edwin Morgan, “A Scottish Trawl” (pp.207-10) in Whyte (ed.), *Loc cit.*

When the poem moves to lovers and others walking out on an afternoon in the city, we turn to the past historic splendour of the capital of Scotland. Underneath the present, there is a well-trodden and to be lamented past which extends to the whole of Scotland:

To Holy-rood-house let me stray,  
And gie to musing 'a day;  
Lamenting what auld Scotland knew,  
Bie days for ever frae her view:  
O Hamilton, for shame! the Muse  
Would pay to thee her couthy vows,  
Gin ye wad tent the humble strain,  
And gie's our dignity again:  
For O, waes me! the thistle springs  
In domicile of ancient kings,  
Without a patriot to regret  
Our palace, and our ancient state. (ll.273-84)

The standard, digressive tactic of mid-eighteenth century didactic poetry here allows Fergusson to display his nationalism to good effect. The broken, fragmented, human tide which is depicted in "Auld Reikie" includes the tide of history which can have as a baneful effect the confusion and loss also of national identity. Scotland's lost identity lies all around the present in the symbols of a now absent Scottish royalty and in a poignant irony, that national emblem, the thistle, is now all too literally a weed. It may be that there is a subtly implied slur on the present Hanoverian monarchy, but whether there is or not, one certain effect of this image, in keeping with the rest of the poem, is that Edinburgh "reality" is now almost too (falsely) or literally vivid. There is an absence of coherence in large symbolic identity and culture underneath the activity of the capital. And Fergusson chooses to explain this as he re-energises poetry in Scots with a performance which shows the vernacular operating amidst a text which is as contemporary as any poetic performance in eighteenth-century Britain in its energy of scene-essay and lament for a transient world.

Fergusson shows himself to be at the cutting edge of British poetic modernity again in "The Farmer's Ingle" (1773), a poem which holds a key place in demonstrating Fergusson's cultural ideology



and an important place in the invention of Scottish literature in the eighteenth century.<sup>54</sup> Fergusson adopts and adapts the Spenserian stanza for this depiction of the essential Tory ideal of primitive virtue as the backbone of the nation. As we have seen already, something of this latter ideal is informed by the influence of the “Whiggish” James Thomson and Fergusson’s choice of the stanza-form may also have been prompted by Thomson’s “Castle of Indolence”. The opening stanza demonstrates, once again, the great scene-painting ability of Fergusson:

Whan gloaming grey o’er the welkin keeks,  
 Whan Batie ca’s his owsen to the byre,  
 Whan Thrasher John, sair dung, his barn-door steeks,  
 And lusty lasses at the dighting tire:  
 What bangs fu’ leal the e’enings coming cauld,  
 And gars snaw-tapit winter freeze in vain;  
 Gars dowie mortals look baith blyth and bauld,  
 Nor fley’d wi’ a’ the poortith o’ the plain;  
 Begin my Muse, and chant in hamely strain. (ll.1-9)

In theme and archaic (Spenserian) stanzaic-mode, “The Farmer’s Ingle” sees Fergusson rooting his notions of conservative virtue in the countryside. In this poem he is one of the harbingers of the agrarian theme in Romanticism. Writing after Goldsmith’s “The Deserted Village” and before Crabbe had produced his “The Village” (1783), Fergusson, like these writers, is both a keen painter of country-habits (and nature generally), and, again like these poets, he is part of the sentimental, proto-Romantic age in seeing the agrarian scene as a place of expansive social feeling, in opposition to the odious rationality of the urban setting. “The Farmer’s Ingle” is a hymn of praise to the robust life of physicality and feeling in the country way of life. Fergusson like many eighteenth-century writers (his fellow-Scot and Tory, Tobias Smollett, is a good example) was often disgusted by the diseased body (and mind) which required “modern” cures.<sup>55</sup> We see Fergusson in this mode in two neatly joined didactic stanzas:

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<sup>54</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.136-140.

<sup>55</sup> An excellent brief identification of Smollett’s revulsion in the face of urban neurosis (through the eyes of his character Matt Bramble) is to be found in Paul Gabriel Bouce, *The Novels of Tobias Smollett* (New York, 1976), pp.207-9.

Frae this lat gentler gabs a lesson lear;  
 Wad they to labouring lend an eidant hand,  
 Nor find their stamacks ever at a stand.  
 Fu' hale and healthy wad they pass the day,  
 At night in calmest slumbers does fu' sound,  
 Nor doctor need their weary life to spae,  
 Nor drogs their noddle and their sense confound,  
 Till death slip sleely on, and gi'e the hindmost wound.

On sicken food has mony a doughty deed  
 By Caledonia's ancestors been done;  
 By this did mony wight fu' weirlike bleed  
 In bruilzies frae the dawn to set o' sun:  
 'Twas this that brac'd their gardies, stiff and strang,  
 That bent the deidly yew in antient days,  
 Laid Denmark's daring sons on yird alang,  
 Gar'd Scottish thistles bang the Roman bays;  
 For near our crest their heads they doughtna raise. (ll.19-45).

Simple, wholesome food is the nutritious basis upon which Scotland's threatened independence has been defended in the past. The luxury of the eighteenth-century, enjoyed by the "gentler gabs", is debilitating. Nowhere is Fergusson explicit about it, but he would not need to be for his eighteenth-century audience would easily draw the inference that this age of luxury and supposed progress is the age also when "Caledonia" has lost its political independence. We can contrast this rural existence also with the urban experience as it is depicted in much of Fergusson's poetry. We find sacredness and sinning in a moving combination:

The couthy cracks begin whan supper's o'er,  
 The cheering bicker gars them glibly gash  
 O' simmer's showery blinks and winters sour,  
 Whase floods did erst their mailins produce hash:  
 How Jock woo'd Jenny here to be his bride,  
 And there how Marion, for a bastard son,  
 Upo' the cutty-stool was forced to ride,  
 The waefu' scald o' our Mess John to bide. (ll.46-54)

As in "The Daft-Days" we have the "bicker" symbolic of a truer communion than these people



experience in the condemnatory Scottish kirk. The Calvinist minister is referred to as “Mess John”, in an epithet which would horrify such a clergyman, so that the people visit upon him terms of opprobrium as the suitable poetic justice for his typically harsh censoriousness of the people’s morality. This community accepts its imperfections, its bastards, unhysterically. Unlike the case in Allan Ramsay’s poetry, we see also an indulgent attitude toward the ghost stories which the people tell. A grandmother tells stories of goblins, warlocks and ghosts, and the narrator instructs us:

O mock na this, my friends! but rather mourn,  
Ye in life’s brawest spring wi’ reason clear,  
Wi’ eild our idle fancies a’ return,  
And dim our dolefu’ days wi’ bairnly fear;  
The mind’s ay cradled whan the grave is near. (ll.68-72)

This poem presents the life of the country in a way which is more realistic and less idealised in pastoral terms than the depiction of country folk by Allan Ramsay. It is also much less sentimental, as we shall see, than Burns’ “The Cottar’s Saturday Night” which is modelled on “The Farmer’s Ingle”. We find many aspects of Fergusson’s poetic project coming together. Thematically we see his nationalism, his Tory beliefs in primitive virtue (and the simultaneous acceptance that people are not perfect, and ought not to be harshly condemned for not being perfect), and the coalescence of these thematic areas makes for a particularly early example in literary history of nationalist recourse to the primitive (though, as we shall see, this is something which is precipitated in Scotland under the influence of the Enlightenment). Fergusson’s primitivism is not in keeping with the Enlightenment location of primitivism, as we shall see presently, but in general *literary* terms the movement of “Ossian” provides a context in which added credibility is added to Fergusson’s location of the unmediated primitive virtue of the “uncivilised” folk. There is, for example, no “gentle shepherd” in the poem. It is populated by a social world at the apex of which stands the tenant-farmer:

Peace to the husbandman and ’a his tribe,  
Whase care fells ’a our wants frae year to year;  
Lang may his sock and couter turn the gleb,



And baulks o' corn bend down wi' laded ear.  
 May Scotia's simmers ay look gay and green,  
 Her yellow har'sts frae scowry blasts decreed;  
 May a' her tenants sit fu' sung and bien,  
 Frae the hard grip of ails and poortith freed,  
 And a lang lasting train o' peaceful hours succeed. (ll.109-117)

Here we have the ground being prepared in Scotland for the achievement of Robert Burns, and his reception as a virtuous ploughman-poet, something very mixed in its results for the reading of Burns. We find here also the ground being prepared for the fresh directions of the Romantic imagination, in its demotic, anti-urban, and anti-rational interests. We find all of these things in a poem which is carried out with huge metrical skill and which uses the Scots language for very weighty themes.

Much more successfully than Allan Ramsay, a not inconsiderable achievement in itself, Fergusson welds the formal traditions and vernacular language usage of eighteenth-century Scots poetry to wider currents in contemporary British poetry, most especially the apprehension at social and agrarian displacement and change which was beginning to be voiced by Oliver Goldsmith and others.<sup>56</sup> The received idioms of anti-Unionist and anti-Whig complaint combine in Fergusson's poetry with a rather melancholic eye, which marks him out as a very interesting poet of the age of sentiment. One might well sense a very personal melancholy in his work, perhaps typically pertaining to a man in his early twenties, the force of which is not, then, so much to be explained simply by his cultural outlook.<sup>57</sup> Clearly, Fergusson does enunciate the view that Scottish culture is beset but, paradoxically, amidst his complaint over the ruination of Scottish culture and polity, there is a huge innovating talent in

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<sup>56</sup> F.W. Freeman discerns in Fergusson's work an unease over agricultural improvement; Freeman makes a persuasive case, see especially where he argues "An Eclogue" [*The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.85-9] is one of the poet's earliest satires responding in part to the exuberances of Hume and his associates, who insisted that "men sink into indolence, lose all enjoyment of life" where there is no demand for superfluities (p.57); however, anxiety over agrarian improvement can hardly be said to be a theme writ large in Fergusson's work.

<sup>57</sup> "Ode to the Gowdspink" [*The Poems of Robert Fergusson* Volume II, pp.176-8], one might hazard, is Fergusson's most personal poem. Generally, the narrator compares his life to that of an imprisoned song-bird, though it is not entirely clear why the narrator feels his life constrained. A well-written though not entirely thematically consistent poem, this poem is sometimes read as pertaining to Fergusson's - and by extension - Scotland's cultural condition; however, there is absolutely no evidence in the text, nor any reasonable possible explication of inference therein, for making the leap to seeing the poem as a piece of national complaint.



Fergusson keeping poetry in Scots vital and forward moving during the 1770s.

## **Chapter Five. “Rugged her soil, and rugged was her shore,/yet she gained a name/That stands unrivall’d in the rolls of fame”: The Anti-Canon of the Scottish Enlightenment.**

For twentieth-century Scottish literary historians and critics, as we have seen, the Scottish Enlightenment represents a highly problematic cultural milieu. However, from the time of the Enlightenment in Scotland down to the early twentieth century, it was frequently seen as embodying a “golden age” or a “renaissance” in national culture.<sup>1</sup> David Hume (1711-76) notoriously remarked in the early-mid stages of this period, “Is it not strange that at a time when we have lost our Princes, our Parliaments, our independent Government, even the presence of our chief Nobility, are unhappy in our Accent and Pronunciation, speak a very corrupt Dialect of the Tongue which we make use of; is it not strange, I say, that in these Circumstances, we shou’d really be the People most distinguish’d for Literature in Europe?”<sup>2</sup> Hume, the brilliant empirical sceptic habituated to flying in the face of received wisdom, rejoiced in this remark that contemporary Scottish literary culture (by which he meant written intellectual articulation very generally, especially the historical and philosophical insight and expression in which the Scottish Enlightenment excelled), was not reliant upon any kind of organic political or cultural constitution. In 1771, however, a friendly correspondent of Hume’s, the novelist Tobias Smollett, had his Anglo-Welsh character, Matthew Bramble, proclaim Enlightenment Edinburgh “a hot-bed of genius” and so countered, in a precise metaphor, Hume’s perception of an unrooted cultural and intellectual brilliance.<sup>3</sup> Writing of the period in 1815 Walter Scott has his awed fictional English hero, Guy Mannering, receive cards of introduction, casually dispensed by the Edinburgh lawyer, Pleydell, at some point in the 1770s, “ ‘To David Hume.’ ‘To John Home.’ ‘To Dr Ferguson.’ ‘To Dr Black.’

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion of “the Enlightenment in Scotland” is a surprisingly recent phenomenon, the first commentator explicitly to see eighteenth-century Scotland as an important satellite of European Enlightenment in terms of using the label, “Scottish Enlightenment”, being W.R. Scott in his *Francis Hutcheson* (1900); see especially pp.258-70.

<sup>2</sup> *The Letters of David Hume* Volume I edited by J.Y.T. Greig (Oxford, 1969), Letter to Gilbert Elliot of Minto ( 1757) p.255.

<sup>3</sup> Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* edited by Lewis M. Knapp (Oxford, 1984), p.233.



‘To Lord Kaimes.’ ‘To Mr Hutton.’ ‘To John Clerk of Eldin.’ ‘To Adam Smith.’ ‘To Dr Robertson.’,”<sup>4</sup> thus reprising the point made by an English visitor in the 1770s that he could “stand at what is called the Cross of Edinburgh, and can, in a few minutes, take fifty men of genius and learning by the hand.”<sup>5</sup> Down to the early twentieth century Scotland continued to rejoice in its strangely homogenous eighteenth-century progress in intellect and expression. For Henry Grey Graham, cataloguing in his classic study of 1908, the prodigious galaxy of its men of letters, “the eighteenth century stands out so markedly in all respects apart from other periods as to form no unnatural division in Scottish history in its social, industrial, religious, political and literary life.”<sup>6</sup>

The confident, intellectually-charged culture of the Scottish eighteenth century though, had been condemned in the early nineteenth-century while its influence was still very much in evidence. John Gibson Lockhart (1794-1854), an Anglo-Scot educated at Oxford University, has his Anglo-Welsh character, the eponymous Peter Morris of *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (1819), complain in direct contrast to his fellow-fictitious national compatriot, Matthew Bramble:

The most remarkable literary characters which Scotland produced last century, showed merely [...] the force of her intellect, as applied to matters of reasoning. The generation of Hume, Smith, & c., left matters of feeling very much unexplored, and probably considered Poetry merely as an elegant and tasteful appendage to the other branches of literature, with which they themselves were more conversant. Their disquisitions on morals were meant to be the vehicles of ingenious theories - not of convictions of sentiment. They employed, therefore, even in them, only the national intellect, and not the national modes of

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* (Edinburgh, 1999) edited by P.D. Garside, p.226.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in E.J. Cowan & R. Finlay, *Scotland Since 1688: Struggle for a Nation* (London, 2000), p.32.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Grey Graham, *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), p.1.

feeling.<sup>7</sup>

In identifying a dissociation between thought and feeling, Lockhart here anticipates those twentieth-century Scottish literary critics who argue that there is a disastrous bifurcation at the heart of eighteenth-century Scottish culture. Lockhart, part of the Tory grouping of *Blackwood's Magazine*, was motivated in framing this judgement in response to the inadequate appreciation of English Romanticism and particularly the poetry of Wordsworth which he found in the Whig-centred *Edinburgh Review*.<sup>8</sup> The Edinburgh Reviewers, were, for Lockhart "the legitimate progeny of the sceptical philosophy of the last age."<sup>9</sup> Lockhart detects in these men part of a "tendency [toward] popular criticism among a nation which had become very fond of scepticism" and a culture where "all are readers, and so few are scholars."<sup>10</sup> A decade earlier in 1809, the Romantic poet Byron had attacked this late-Enlightenment Scottish culture which he perceived similarly in his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers", a poem which was also written in response to hostility against his work in the *Review*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to His Kinsfolk* (Edinburgh & London, 1819) Volume III, p.360.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Morris complains that due to the influence of Francis Jeffrey and the other reviewers of the *Edinburgh Review*:

The reading public of Edinburgh do not criticise Mr Wordsworth; they think him below their criticism; they know nothing about what he has done, or what he is likely to do. They think him a mere old sequestered hermit, eaten up with vanity and affectation who publishes every now and then some absurd poem about a Washing-Tub, or a Leech-Gatherer, or a Little Grey Cloak.

(*Peter's Letters* II, p.117.)

<sup>9</sup> *Peter's Letters* II, p.128. [erroneously labelled page "228"]

<sup>10</sup> *Peter's Letters* II, p.130.

<sup>11</sup> In "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers", Byron sarcastically has Caledonia's goddess suggest that the martial propensities of the Scots are now (in the persons of the Edinburgh Reviewers) more subtly channelled through the pen, and "o'er politics and poesy preside" (l.500). To Francis Jeffrey she says:

For as long as Albion's heedless sons submit,  
Or Scottish taste decides on English wit,  
So long shall last thine unmolested reign,  
Nor any dare to take thy name in vain.  
Behold a chosen band shall aid thy plan,  
And own thee chieftain of the critic clan. (ll. 502-7) *Byron: Complete Poetical Works* edited by Frederick Page; revised by John D. Jump (Oxford, 1970), p. 119.



Coleridge too weighed in against the intellect of early nineteenth-century Scotland in a lecture of 1811 or 1812, writing of “the crying sin of modern criticism [...] [where] the reviewer may show how much wiser, or how much abler he is than the writer [...] This style of criticism is at the present moment one of the chief pillars of the Scottish professorial court [...]”<sup>12</sup> Writing in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829 in his essay “Signs of the Times”, Thomas Carlyle, strongly under the influence of German Romanticism, protested against what he referred to as an increasingly “mechanistic” European culture which he saw as the legacy, largely, of late seventeenth-century rationalism and the Enlightenment. Of the Scottish Enlightenment he says, “The last class of our Scotch Metaphysicians had a dim notion that much of this was wrong; but they knew not how to right it. The school of Reid had also taken from the first a mechanical course, not seeing any other.”<sup>13</sup> Carlyle here is identifying the flaw, as he saw it, in the Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid, where, in reaction to Hume’s sceptical philosophical response to the phenomena of experience, Reid sought to argue that experience was made sense of by the human mind through an objective faculty, or a common sense. For Carlyle, the neophyte of German transcendentalism, the human ordering of experience was much more comprehended through a series of highly subjective syntheses of experience in the mind and where the imagination, therefore, had much freer reign as a faculty.

It is important to realise that it is in the aftermath of Romanticism, as we see in the responses briefly just surveyed, that the culture of Enlightenment Scotland, stretching from the eighteenth into the nineteenth centuries in its tightly organised structures of philosophical “schools” and periodical journalism, begins to be frowned upon. It is important to note also a coincident, increasing English or Anglo-Scottish animus against the milieu of Scottish Enlightenment. This animus is emphatically confirmed in the work of Henry Thomas Buckle in his ambitious study, *The History of Civilisation in England* (1857-61). For Buckle, the eighteenth-century thinkers of Scotland are only to be admired with

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<sup>12</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *Collected Works* Volume 5 edited by R.A. Foakes (Princeton, New Jersey, 1987), p.463-4.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Selected Writings* edited by Alan Shelston (London, 1986), p.68.



serious qualification. Buckle's chief qualification is that Scotland has an overwhelmingly theocratic culture (the worst historical instance in Europe aside from Inquisition Spain) where "the intellectual history of [the] country in the seventeenth century is almost entirely the history of theology".<sup>14</sup> The eighteenth century Scottish intellectuals, though men of real achievement, are ultimately disabled against this Scottish background, which Buckle sees their age continuing to be thirled to, where the unshakeable assumption is "that God has given us first principles."<sup>15</sup> As a result Scottish thinkers remain resolutely "deductive" in their methodologies in contrast to the "inductive" intellectual inquiries undertaken elsewhere:

That the inductive philosophy is even more marked by its secular tendencies than by its scientific ones, will be evident to whoever observes the epochs in which it has been most active, and has possessed most adherents. Of this, the history of the French mind, in the eighteenth century, affords a good instance, where, after the death of Louis XIV., we may clearly trace the growth of an inductive method, and the subsequent overthrow of the Gallican church. In England, too, the rise of the Baconian philosophy, with its determination to subordinate ancient principles to modern experience, was the heaviest blow which has ever been inflicted on the theologians, whose method is to begin, not with experience, but with principles, which are said to be inscrutable, and which we are bound to believe without further difficulty. And I need hardly remind the reader, that scarcely was that philosophy established among us, when it produced those bold enquiries which quickly ended in the downfall of the English church under Charles I.<sup>16</sup>

For the resolute atheist and proto-socialist thinker, Buckle (amongst the admirers of whose work was George Bernard Shaw; Shaw saw his *History of Civilisation* as essential complementary reading to Marx<sup>17</sup>), the "Scotch intellect", then, is vastly inferior to the historical intellects of those twin-engines of modern secular democracy, France and England. Specifically how the achievements of David Hume, Adam Smith and their fellow Scottish thinkers could have been greater if not handicapped by their

<sup>14</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle, *On Scotland and the Scotch Intellect* edited by H.J. Hanham (Chicago & London, 1970), p.238.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.239-40.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.236-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, see H.J. Hanham's introduction, p.xxii.



“deductive” national intellectual background, Buckle does not specify. The important pattern to notice, however, is the absolutist condemnation of Scotland as a reactionary, clerisy-riddled culture, where real intellectual and cultural progress is essentially impossible.

Buckle’s attacks on the Scottish Enlightenment along with the Romantic censure of the early nineteenth century Scottish critical mind, set in place the historical assumptions that we find not only in much Scottish history narrated on the basis of an Anglocentric historiography during the twentieth century, but in modern Scottish literary criticism too. The two most influential examples of this are to be found in the work of David Craig, and David Daiches. Craig in his *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (1961) finds that “The 18th-century *literati* - David Hume, Adam Smith and their set - belong to the first intelligentsia that grew up in modern Scotland.”<sup>18</sup> “Modern” Scotland is post-1707 Scotland where desire to vie with the nation’s new constitutional partner, England, means that the eighteenth-century “*literati*” (a word which in Craig’s usage takes on special, derogatory connotations for the first time in Scottish criticism) strive “to cultivate ‘politeness’, ‘elegance’, depreciation of the ‘low’, to a peculiarly intensive degree, for they were themselves anxious to get clear of the backward life which pressed them so close.”<sup>19</sup> Anxiety to appear cultured involves dispensing with the Old Town “communal culture” which Craig associates with the Scots poetry revival in the eighteenth-century; the “enthronement” of a largely southern “Augustan-type culture” in Edinburgh including the neo-classical design of the New Town as the “Athens of the North”; the over-punctilious adoption of the English language (against which the notorious lists of “Scotticisms”, Scots corruptions to be avoided in written English, compiled by David Hume in 1752, Sir John Sinclair in 1782 and James Beattie in 1787, are to be seen), and all these changes help bring about a rarified class-division where there is “a split between the standpoint of the cultivated Scotsman and the mass of life in his country”

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<sup>18</sup> Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830*, p.40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

and, generally, “the alienation from things native” among the *literati*.<sup>20</sup>

Christopher Harvie has wittily described Craig’s approach to Scottish literary history of this period as “the prosecution case, out of Marx by Leavis.”<sup>21</sup> We see how apt this description is in Craig’s facile assumption of an ideal holistic culture (at the centre of which notion, for Craig, stands creative literature - after the early twentieth century liberal arts credo of F.R. Leavis) which is disrupted by the proto-bourgeois reflexes of cultural specialisation and consciousness among the Edinburgh *literati*. We ought also to be cautious too of Craig’s romantic frownings upon the New Town development which, quite simply, was an attempt to create new, less cramped and more hygienic conditions amidst a rapidly growing urban population. Equally, Craig’s model of a huge cultural faultline is blind to what are, in fact, more subtle complexities in Scottish cultural identity and expression. Such is the case of the “Augustan” reflexes which we have explored already in the Scots poetry of Old Town dwellers Ramsay and Fergusson, and which are far from being simply alien, English pollutants. Even the “Scotticisms” issue which Craig highlights is not quite so simple as it appears. Truly, the compilation of such lists implies a certain degree of anxious cultural conditioning, but, at the same time, it can be argued that this awareness of language was simply understandable in the light of the fact that the major writers of the Scottish *literati* in this period looked (successfully for the most part) to a southern book-market much larger than that of Scotland. For Craig, like Buckle before him, Scotland is unquestionably culturally under-developed prior to the eighteenth-century, and what “development” it does achieve is, as a result, largely misguided because of the cutting loose from what cultural expression rested in natural or organic formation in Edinburgh/Scotland. (It is here we see a different emphasis between Buckle and Craig, though one that is inconsequential in the sense that both commentators read misguided confidence in the Scottish Enlightenment whether the milieu is blind to the limitations imposed by its Calvinist or Anglo-aping basis).

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40 (see pp.19-39 for Craig’s delineation of “the old, communal culture” of Edinburgh); p.49; p.55; p.55; p.63.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Harvie, “Industry, Religion and the State of Scotland” in Douglas Gifford (ed), *The History of Scottish Literature* Volume 3: Nineteenth Century, p.24.



For David Daiches also, in a very similar vision to that of Buckle, the Scottish Enlightenment outlook is fatally compromised:

[...] none of the *literati* except David Hume, possessed either the imaginative genius that would provide a focus for a literary revival or the philosophic depth and subtlety to construct an intellectual position that could vie with Calvinism in strength and logic and provide an alternative philosophy of life.<sup>22</sup>

The “paradox”-in-chief of eighteenth-century Scottish culture is that the seeming speedy development and fame of this culture, especially the Enlightenment branch, was set against the background of limiting, anti-imaginative forces, including, crucially, the puritanically moral outlook of Scottish religion. The compact of eighteenth-century Scottish intellect and religion can be seen, particularly, in the literary critical interests of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers where:

[...] if, following the lead of Francis Hutcheson, the pioneer of the Scottish Enlightenment, they also held that ethical standards can be explained by the presence of an innate ‘moral sense’ in man, then rhetorical and psychological criticism becomes also moral criticism, for moral criticism is regarded as a form of sensibility [...] This is all part of the movement which historians of European literature term sentimentality and which was by no means confined to Scotland. But it lodged itself more deeply in Scotland than elsewhere, because of the division between the Scottish head and the Scottish heart that history had already produced.<sup>23</sup>

To many of the points of criticism against the Enlightenment raised by Craig, Daiches and others we will return. For the moment, however, it is important simply to note the way in which all these critics read seriously rooted (or unrooted) cultural incapacity which the Enlightenment cannot resist and, indeed, which this milieu often exacerbates. Undeniably, there *are* many tensions and opposing forces in eighteenth-century Scottish culture, but the rapid appropriation of these to such absolute categorisations as those pertaining to a nation’s “head” and “heart”, and to those of “natural” and

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<sup>22</sup> David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: the Eighteenth Century Experience* (London & New York, 1964). p.45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.82.



“unnatural” intellectual and emotional energies and to the notion of an ideally holistic culture represents a dubious commentary. Standing behind such commentary are the post-Romantic predilections which frown upon the neo-classicism and rationalism of the Enlightenment age generally. Unfortunately added to this in the Scottish context is the Anglocentric view that Scotland was essentially unenlightened before the Union with England in 1707 so that the spectacular intellectual energies of eighteenth-century Scotland must be, in large part, chimeric.<sup>24</sup> An absolutist blanket of cultural condemnation thus envelopes the milieu of Enlightenment in Scotland (as well as its eighteenth century more generally) so that the expression of the Enlightenment is read as alien to Scotland and alien also to an idealised notion of what constitutes true cultural and intellectual expression. Such views pay inadequate respect both to the distinctive cultural capital of eighteenth-century Scottish culture and literature, and, at the same time, dangerously and erroneously separate - much more than is warranted - Scottish cultural development from similar historical developments which are contemporaneously taking place across western Europe (and including even those going on in a British-wide context).

The Scottish Enlightenment has been dismissed virtually as cultural anti-matter. In literary and cultural terms it has been seen as a pole of anti-canoncity encompassing anglicisation, narrow bourgeois morality and the most formulaic neo-classicism and overdoses of both scepticism and sentimentality as opposed to “true” cultural and imaginative vision. While there are certainly localised exemplars of Enlightenment-sponsored expression where, for instance, an obtrusive moralism or prescriptive neoclassicism makes this expression less than it might otherwise be, this is not the whole story. Indeed, as I have been suggesting in the survey above and in relation to the Scottish literary critical tradition generally, the problem is, very precisely, the search for a “whole” or normative (usually English) story. The treatment of Scottish culture in the eighteenth-century as part of a (fractured) organism is a treatment particularly primed by Anglocentric assumptions, leading to the *a priori* condemnation of the

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<sup>24</sup> For an interrogation of this attitude see Craig Beveridge & Ronald Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp.16-50. For a persuasive reading of the sixteenth and seventeenth century roots of the Scottish Enlightenment see David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp.1-143.



Scottish Enlightenment, so that specific faults are facilely translated into overarching fatalities and so that seeming cultural success is presented as a sham. In the light of this last tendency, we might view the essays of David Hume. Hugely admired in their own day for their English prose style and trenchant philosophical analysis, and enduring today in these features, they are not widely accepted into the Scottish literary canon or courses of Scottish literature (in the way that much more minor writing and intellectual talents than Hume such as Addison or Steele might be taught as “journalistic” essayists on eighteenth-century courses in English literature).<sup>25</sup> Hume’s pride in Scottish literature’s superiority in 1757 included rightful cognisance of his own pre-eminent abilities not only in the Scottish context but, and especially, also in the British context. Simplistically though, on the basis of Hume’s adoption of a scrupulously acquired written style of “Standard” English (the treachery of which is confirmed in the fact that he continued to speak a rather broad Scots dialect in everyday life), his essays are excised from the Scottish canon. Hume’s pride in Scottish literature pre-eminence might also have included alongside himself the very recent figures of James Thomson (whose *The Seasons* (1726-30) is the most enduring poetic project alongside the work of Pope in the first half of eighteenth-century Britain) and Allan Ramsay (whose fame as a song-writer and pastoralist as we have seen, was wide in the British-wide context). With Hume, Ramsay and Thomson, Scotland had three authors, though very different, who had some “greatness” about them. Hume’s essays, his historical and philosophical analyses, Thomson’s poetic essays on nature, and Ramsay’s work in Scots, or perhaps more properly, Scots-English, represent a range of achievement which show Scotland widely resourceful in its expressive strategies in the early eighteenth-century. Readings of fractured national culture as the determiner of this variety are grudging, over-discriminate readings which obscure the enduring influences and vibrancies of these writers in literary history and the rich variety of Scottish literary expression.

Hume would have been wrong if he had in mind also William Wilkie’s *The Epigoniad* published

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<sup>25</sup> It is very obvious that Addison and Steele are accepted for their literary merit in English literary history; a useful point of reference in this regard is that the pair feature in that pillar of canonicity in the second part of the twentieth century, the ‘Critical Heritage’ series: *Addison and Steele* edited by E.A. Bloom and L.D. Bloom (London & Boston, 1980).



in the same year in which he made his remark and which he strongly admired.<sup>26</sup> Of this epic-poem, Kenneth Simpson rightly remarks that it is “neo-classical to the point of pedantry”.<sup>27</sup> Ranging through six thousand sonorously Miltonic lines, the poem relates the heroic actions surrounding a second siege of Thebes (thus carrying forward the epic Greek history of Homer). The epithet conferred by Hugh Blair upon Wilkie of “the Scottish Homer” highlights the ridiculously inflated conception of Wilkie’s project.<sup>28</sup> The western epic canon is notoriously thin, consisting, after the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, of *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon English, which, like its Greek precedents, is forged at a time of real ethnic bloodshed and coagulation, and the *Chanson de geste* in twelfth-century France which incorporated a great deal of local legendary material, especially relating to the feudal composition of France and its conception of itself as a Christian kingdom focussed by the Crusades. To these we might add, in the Scottish context and in more minor key, Blind Hary’s *Wallace* (c.1477), a less successful exemplar, but one which, nonetheless, derives force from the legendary materials surrounding the Scottish wars of independence with England. Leaving aside the epic translations of Gavin Douglas and John Dryden (though both of these also were energised by strong senses of, and wrestling with, cultural tensions within the milieux of the respective “translators”), the only successful epic of the “modern” age in literature is John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) which was composed amidst the ferment of seventeenth-century revolution in theology and politics. Eighteenth-century Scotland, for all its cultural tensions, had no need of a “Scottish Homer”, especially one who wrote not out of either local or universal legend and archetype (the staple materials of epic), but who provided, as Wilkie did, a series of set-piece episodes in heroic emotion, which were largely repetitive strains of the heroic sensibility.<sup>29</sup> Wilkie, while a competent writer (whose skill as a versifier is equal, say, to William Hamilton of Gilbertfield in his Anglified translation of *Wallace* (1722)), simply brought no apprehension of cultural

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<sup>26</sup> William Wilkie, *The Epigoniad: a poem in nine books* (Edinburgh, 1757).

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot* (Aberdeen, 1988), p.85.

<sup>28</sup> Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* 2nd edition, corrected (London 1803), p.135.

<sup>29</sup> See Simpson, *Op cit.*, pp.86-9.



tensions deeply located in eighteenth-century Scotland, so as to provide a work which might have worked, thematically or formally, as an “epic”.

Like Wilkie's *Epigoniad*, John Home's play, *Douglas* (1757), represents another significant eighteenth-century attempt to invent Scottish literature. Scotland's notorious dearth of drama, stemming from the puritanism of the Scottish Reformation, meant that the nation had few native models upon which to build during the eighteenth-century. However, Scots showed a particular appetite for writing for the stage during the eighteenth century. This is true of Allan Ramsay with his *The Gentle Shepherd* which, as we have seen, features a version of Scottish history and community according to the predilections of pro-Jacobite, Scots humanism and the contemporary taste for the pastoral. Together with James Thomson's *Tancred and Sigismunda* (1745), a very standard tragedy of the age which features in *Tancred* another noble primitive, and Ramsay's play, Home's *Douglas* shows the Scottish dramatist attempting to bring together the cosmopolitan present and the primitive past.<sup>30</sup> Each of these plays might conceivably be read as indicating the anxiety of the Scottish writer to square the backwardness of the Scottish situation with a more mature literary modernity associated with the neoclassic drama of England and France. At the same time, however, this “modernity”, by neoclassic definition, involved antiquarianism. Modern neoclassicism and antiquarianism made for the warp and woof, generally, of much eighteenth-century British and French literature and so this pattern is far from representing an exclusively Scottish situation.

The general eighteenth-century “anxiety of influence”, involving debate over the ancient and modern, is given an extra edge in its Scottish scenario in *Douglas*. The prologue written for the London performance of the play begins:

In antient times, when Britain's trade was arms,  
And the lov'd music of her youth, alarms;  
A god-like race sustain'd fair England's fame:  
Who has not heard of gallant PIERCY's name?

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<sup>30</sup> See Percy G. Adams (ed.), *The Plays of James Thomson* (New York & London: 1979), pp.82-178

Ay, and of DOUGLAS? Such illustrious foes  
 In rival Rome and Carthage never rose!  
 From age to age bright shone the British fire,  
 And every hero was a hero's sire. (ll.1-8).<sup>31</sup>

Ancient England and Scotland have heroes to rival those of ancient Rome and Carthage and in this analogy we see two things. In the terms of reference we see the neoclassical, or Augustan, predilection of eighteenth-century Britain and we also see these brought to bear on the ancient enmity between Scotland and England. This enmity is classicised as an anaesthetising prelude to eliciting sympathy for a Scottish hero, Douglas, who is from the canon of Jacobite martial iconography. Clearly, Home is attempting to bring about the acceptance of Scottish history in the face of traditional English antipathy. Not only this, but given Home's own heroic record of fighting on the government side against the Jacobites in the 1745 rebellion, we see a writer upon whom the bitterness of internecine British war could not be lost; and one who generously carries an appeal only a decade later for the understanding of a bloody, clannish culture - the ancient Borders culture - where the analogy with the highlands was all too obvious.<sup>32</sup> Here, and in the rest of the play, we see a reflex which anticipates the project of Walter Scott (who was likewise interested in both the history of the highlands and the borders) of presenting Scottish history in dramatised form to a wide British audience and appealing for a degree of cultured empathy. In the prologue to the Edinburgh edition Carthage has been replaced by Athens as analogy for Scotland:

In days of classic fame, when Persia's Lord  
 Oppos'd his millions to the Grecian sword,  
 Flourish'd the state of Athens, small her store,  
 Rugged her soil, and rocky was her shore,  
 Like Caledonia's: yet she gained a name  
 That stands unrivall'd in the rolls of fame. (ll.1-6)

It is significant that these lines for Scottish consumption cite Athens which is the cradle of the later,

<sup>31</sup> John Home, *Douglas* edited by Gerald D. Parker (Edinburgh, 1972). All subsequent references are to this edition of the play.

<sup>32</sup> The best account of Home's biography remains Walter Scott's "Life and Works of John Home" for the *Quarterly Review* June, 1827; reprinted in Scott's *Prose Works* Volume 19 (Edinburgh & London, 1835), pp.283-367.



greater Greek civilisation and site Scotland, therefore, as the same, potentially, in relation to the new Britain. Out of unpropitious circumstances can come great things. Once again we have the literary *conceit*, which we see in Ramsay and Thomson, of Scotland taking the lead in the new-minted eighteenth-century civilisation of Britain.

Where *Douglas* is interested in something of the dynamic of Scottish and British history, it is actually vague and imprecise in its immediate historical detail. We see this especially in the threatened Danish invasion of Scotland which is no actual invasion in particular, but represents a generalised offstage situation of alarm in which Scotland and its protagonists exist. That the Danes are not really the issue is clear as Lady Randolph, the tragic heroine, complains:

War I detest: but war with foreign foes,  
Whose manners, language, and whose looks are strange,  
Is not so horrid, nor to me so hateful,  
As that which with our neighbours oft we wage.  
A river here, there an ideal line,  
By fancy drawn, divides the sister kingdoms.  
On each side dwells a people similar,  
As twins are to each other; valiant both;  
Both for their valour famous thro' the world.

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Thus fall the prime of either hapless land;  
And such the fruit of Scotch and English wars. (Act I, ll.121-9 & 137-8)

The most obvious recent "Scottish-English" war was the Jacobite turmoils of 1745-6, and the author of *Douglas*, a participant in these on the Hanoverian side is, then, well-placed to make a magnanimous claim of mutuality between Scotland and England. The Scots are not just unruly and rebellious, but have a history as venerable as that of England (their ancient heroic exploits against the likes of the Danes, involving in the play a significant cohort of Scottish warriors from that hot-bed of Jacobitism, "the Grampians", have to be taken account of along with more problematic, recent martial exploits). This point is reinforced by the invocation of the legendary and ambiguous "borderlands" English figure of Percy in the London prologue alongside Douglas. It may also be a quite conscious choice on the part of

Home to alight (albeit loosely) upon an English ballad, “Gil Morice” (the story of a son killed by his mother’s husband, who, in ignorance of the true facts of the relationship, has mistaken the son for a lover), as a story-source for his play.<sup>33</sup> The English too have their significantly tragic internecine stories of human nature, where shocking killing has taken place. The blood-letting “barbarity” of the Jacobite highlanders (or, indeed Cumberland’s bloodletting lesson to the rebellious highlands in the aftermath of Culloden) is not unique in human culture. Lady Randolph’s lines certainly reveal a politically unionist frame to the play, but in the text’s gathering up of the materials of English ballad of hot-headed violence and venerable Scottish martial pedigree, *Douglas* is a play which is not simply anglocentric or unionist; rather represents an effort to be truly, or in mediating fashion, “Britocentric”.

*Douglas* caused great controversy in its day with over fifty pamphlets for and against it following its first Scottish production in December 1756.<sup>34</sup> Most generally, conservative elements of the Scottish presbyterian church objected to the play, especially when, during 1757, members in Edinburgh for the General Assembly chose to see the play being performed in preference to attendance at assembly sessions.<sup>35</sup> At least one antagonist saw the play not simply in terms of the generalised dangers of the immoral stage, but as tending “to encourage the monstrous crime of suicide” in its treatment of the tragic Lady Randolph, the centre of pathetic interest for the audience.<sup>36</sup> If its neo-classical regularity, most apparent in its close observation of the unities, tends modern critics toward stressing its conservatism, we should be aware that *Douglas* in its own day provoked reactions of fascinated horror and sensationalistic interest. We see in the initial production of the drama a dedicated cultural compact of Enlightenment philosophers and moderate churchmen. Henry Mackenzie tells us

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<sup>33</sup> “Gil Morice” is most widely broadcast at the midpoint of the eighteenth century by Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765), and so Home is seen, to some extent, anticipating or, at least, participating in the new trend of interest in the folk poetry of Britain. It is not known for certain how and where Home first encountered the poem.

<sup>34</sup> See James S. Malek’s introduction to his edition of *The Plays of John Home* (New York & London, 1980), p.xi.

<sup>35</sup> See Richard Sher, *Church & University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp.157-70.

<sup>36</sup> Malek, *Op cit.*, p.xi.



that preliminary “rehearsals were attended by that literary party who were the constant companions of the author, and then the chief arbiters of taste in literature in Edinburgh -- Lord Elibank, David Hume, Mr Wedderburn, Dr. Adam Ferguson, and others including Alexander Carlyle.”<sup>37</sup> Home had attempted to persuade David Garrick to produce a version of his play in 1749, but Garrick had turned it down.<sup>38</sup> We see a concerted effort by the Edinburgh *literati* to produce the play in opposition, then, both to the puritanically inclined element of the Scottish church and also the most select theatrical palate in mid-eighteenth century London.

David Hume, in particular, sought to champion Home’s drama, dedicating his *Four Dissertations* (1757) to Home whom he claimed possessed “the true theatric genius of Shakespeare and Otway, refined from the unhappy barbarism of the one and licentiousness of the other.”<sup>39</sup> The “unhappy barbarism” of Shakespeare, for Hume, was probably his liberty-taking with Aristotelian unities which a number of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers disliked when wearing their hats as literary critics.<sup>40</sup> Otway’s “licentiousness”, one might infer, would be his close physical observation of humankind which he derived largely from his adaptations of Racine. One cannot dismiss entirely, then, the oft-identified narrow platform of aesthetic practice which the Scottish Enlightenment encouraged. The literary and cultural space which men like Hume sought to mark out was, on the one hand, one refusing to bow to the wishes of the Scottish Kirk, and, on the other, one which sought to be unimpeachable in its understanding of civilised literary values. Undoubtedly, Hume with his famous dictum, “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office to serve and obey them,” and Adam Smith promulgating his sensibility of sentiment provided a context where

<sup>37</sup> Henry Mackenzie, “Account of the Life of Mr John Home” in *The Works of John Home* (Edinburgh, 1822), Volume I, p.37-8.

<sup>38</sup> Scott *Prose Works* 19, p.309.

<sup>39</sup> David Hume, *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757), p.iii.

<sup>40</sup> The most notorious example of the Scottish Enlightenment distastes for Shakespeare’s theatrical incoherence is to be found in Adam Smith berating Shakespeare for intruding comical interlude in the grave scene in *Hamlet* in Smith’s Lecture 21 in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, edited by J.G. Bryce (Indianapolis: 1985), p.122.

pathetic sentiment could be particularly approved of in mid-eighteenth century Scotland.<sup>41</sup> However, in their headlong rush into theories of the tension between “thought” and “feeling” in Scottish culture, critics tend to forget that pathetic drama was far from being confined to Scotland, so that William Hazlitt was later to remark of the period of Otway, Lee and Rowe that British tragedy during the mid-eighteenth century “seemed almost afraid to know itself”.<sup>42</sup> *Douglas* has suffered not only from being part of the age of pathetic mannerism in British drama, but for being Scottish and so seeming to exemplify an arid rationalism in form and an extreme sentiment-wringing scenario characteristic of the supposed Scottish inability to balance thought and feeling. The cry of “Whaur’s yer Wullie Shakespeare noo?” apparently shouted at the opening night of *Douglas* in Edinburgh (though the story actually sounds apocryphal), encapsulates (and perhaps mischievously caricatures) the national pride and tragic emotion which this play is often taken to display in overbearing measures.<sup>43</sup>

*Douglas* is not a great work of art though in its writing, in common with all Home’s work, there is, manifestly, considerable poetic skill at work.<sup>44</sup> The play was also a considerable success and in England and America, as well as Scotland, for one hundred years.<sup>45</sup> Leaving aside the subsequent success of the play, what was it that might have caused excitement over it in its initial impact? Clearly, the play was seen as something of an aboriginal Scottish curiosity, a fact which seems strange to modern eyes given its appearance of rigid formulaicism to the point of dramatic torpor in realism. In fact, the very static nature of *Douglas*, so often remarked upon, is due, perhaps, not simply to neoclassical over-scrupulosity, but also to the careful presentation of material which, in its day, was rather novel. The opening note of the play is one of pathetic fallacy, a note which is sustained

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<sup>41</sup> David Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* edited by Ernest C. Mossner (London, 1984), p.415.

<sup>42</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Complete Works* edited by P.P. Howe (London, 1934), Volume XVIII, p.303.

<sup>43</sup> *Autobiography of the Rev. Dr. Alexander Carlyle* (Edinburgh, 1860), p.311.

<sup>44</sup> Reviewing the play in *The Monthly Review* (May 1757), Oliver Goldsmith although seeing the play overall as tending to “mediocrity” also “perceived some dawnings of genius in [its] Writer” *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith* Vol I edited by Arthur Friedman (Oxford, 1966), p.11.

<sup>45</sup> Malek, *Op cit.*, p.ix-x.



throughout the rest of the play in unrelenting measure. Lady Randolph declaims, "Ye woods and wilds, whose melancholy gloom/Accords with my soul's sadness, and draws forth/The voice of sorrow from my bursting heart" (II.1-3). Lady Randolph's centrality to the drama feminises the reception of the harsh cultural story which she has to tell. She has been raped and married after the loss of her husband, Lord Douglas, in battle, by his younger brother, Lord Randolph. She has also lost her child by her first husband, whom she fears also now to be dead. Lady Randolph is a suffering heroine whose mind, if not so deeply beset metaphysically as that of Hamlet, has suffered greater anguish. In most ways a conventional female figure, lamenting the loss of family and the tribulations of war, she also speaks as a figure of sensibility and in this sensibility we see the contemporary eighteenth-century critique of a male-world which marginalised the feelings of the heart. This harshness results in her eventual suicide after her husband has slain her newly-discovered son and here, as in so many instances of the play, we find a Shakespearian echo. If Shakespeare's Ophelia probably commits suicide while in a hoodwinked state of mind, Lady Randolph certainly kills herself and does so under the strain of harsh blows over which there is no mistake. There is a revealing interchange between Lady and Lord Randolph. The former says to the latter:

In my extreme distress I call'd on thee,  
Thee I bespake, profess'd my strong desire  
To lead a single, solitary life,  
And begg'd thy Nobleness, not to demand  
Her for a wife whose heart was dead to love.  
How thou persisted after this, thou know'st,  
And must confess I am not unjust,  
Nor more to thee than to myself injurious. (I, II.61-68)

The latter replies:

That I confess; yet ever must regret  
The grief I cannot cure. Would thou wert not  
Compos'd of grief and tenderness alone,  
But had'st a spark of other passions in thee,  
Pride, anger, vanity, the strong desire  
Of admiration, dear to woman kind;

These might allay thy grief,  
As meeting tides and currents smooth our firth. (II.69-75)

Lady Randolph, at the play's opening, speaks of being in tune with nature; here Lord Randolph argues that she is out of tune with nature in lacking the full gamut of "womanly emotion". This is actually a rather complex thematic interchange which is all too readily passed over by modern critics. The play amounts to an interrogation of the production of extreme sensibility even as it invites in its audience the primary response of feeling pathos. There is an interchange between the eighteenth-century climate of sensibility and a past which, on the face of it, is brutally alien (though as the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion showed one which is actually not all that alien) to the eighteenth century. One of the most interesting things about the play which is rarely commented upon is its characterisation, particularly with regard to gender. Lord Randolph is largely a decent man, though he has behaved according to the somewhat shocking mores of his age in his "rough wooing" of his wife. If he is one example of a character "trapped" within his times and social status or role, Lady Randolph is another trapped character. Time and again, references abound to the untrustworthy nature of women, which she is taken to embody (at least by Glenalvon).<sup>46</sup> The crucial instance in this regard, of course, is the manipulation of her maternal love for Norval, the long-lost son she thought dead, but he having been sheltered and brought up as a peasant, has now arrived to fight in the Scottish cause. The dastardly Glenalvon, coveting both Lady Randolph and the possessions of his kinsman, Lord Randolph, suggests to Lord Randolph a carnal motive in his wife's mysterious fondness for the young man (the reason for which she understandably keeps hidden amidst all the male aristocratic intrigue). A world treacherous to female finer feeling and full of misogynistic and brutal male power is the scenario essayed. Under the codes of "medieval" chivalry a much more duplicitous and uncertain world lurks.

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<sup>46</sup> The nicest example is to be found in Glenalvon's speech where he says:

[...] Honey'd assent,  
How pleasing art thou to the taste of man,  
And woman also! flattery direct  
Rarely disgusts. (III, II.357-60).



We see a world in *Douglas* where good faith often comes to nothing. Norval, unaware of his true identity as heir to the Douglas/Randolph estates, explains his initial arrival to Lord and Lady Randolph:

[...] I disdain'd  
The shepherd's slothful life: and having heard  
That our good king had summon'd his bold Peers  
To lead their warriors to the Carron side,  
I left my father's house, and took with me  
A chosen servant to conduct my steps; -  
Yon trembling coward who forsook his master.  
Journeying with this intent, I past these towers,  
And, heaven-directed, came this day to do  
The happy deed that gilds my humble name. (Act II, ll.66-75)

At one level, it is clear that good breeding will out; however, this hackneyed, "Gentle Shepherd" plot-line is ultimately disengaged in that it is finally questionable how truly Norval's path can be said to have been "heaven-directed." He may have stumbled on his rightful, noble kin, but this fact leads also to his undoing as he is killed in a melee as Glenalvon challenges Norval on the pretext of defending Lord Randolph's marital honour. "Heaven-directed" Norval is destroyed very clearly through darkly motivated human agency. Lady Randolph's bleak, experienced outlook on the ways of men (of human society, but especially of the male gender) is confirmed in her son's death. Her servant, Anna, reports her end to a now chastened Lord Randolph who admits the culpability of the male interference in her life :

Anna.

She ran, she flew like light'ning up the hill,  
Nor halted till the precipice she gain'd,  
Beneath whose low'ring top the river falls  
Ingulph'd in rifted rocks: thither she came,  
As fearless as the eagle lights upon it,  
And headlong down.-

Lord Randolph.

'Twas I! alas! 'twas I  
That filled her breast with fury; drove her down  
The precipice of death! Wretch that I am!

Anna.

O had you seen her last despairing look!  
Upon the brink she stood, and cast her eyes  
Down on the deep: then lifting up her head  
And her white hands to heaven, seeming to say,  
Why am I forc'd to this? she plung'd herself  
Into the empty air.

(Act V, ll.326-42)

It is interesting that the arch-act of impiety in Christian culture should be treated so sympathetically by a Scottish minister of religion, something which did not go unremarked by those hostile to Home's play.<sup>47</sup> It is also interesting to note that in 1755 David Hume produced an essay, "Of Suicide", more or less suppressed for many years in English, which pronounced that "Suicide may often be consistent with our duty to ourselves [where] age, sickness or misfortune may render life a burthen."<sup>48</sup> Half-joking, Hume declared in his will that the only real disagreement he and his friend Home had had was over the respective merits of port and claret, and it may be that in the convivial conversations enjoyed between the two men the theme of suicide featured and that their opinions chimed (this is certainly true if the evidence of *Douglas* is anything to go by).<sup>49</sup> Hume would certainly have admired Home's play as least as much for its treatment of suicide as a noble act, as much as for its neo-classical elements. It may be that the disjunction or confusion of "thought" and "feeling" so frequently identified by critics in the aesthetic tendencies of the Scottish Enlightenment might be best seen as the wider swirl of the cultural ferment of the age (in which Scottish thinkers undoubtedly provided key impetuses). In the description of Lady Randolph's self-annihilation we have the surrender of self in the face of an unreasonable world, but one which, as the sympathy of the reader or audience might well agree, is a fully sensible act. Finding the slings and arrows visited upon her by humankind to be so unnatural, she throws herself, quite precisely, into the wildness of nature. This represents one of the aspects of the

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<sup>47</sup> See *Sher Op cit.*, pp.74-9.

<sup>48</sup> David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis, 1987) edited by Eugene F. Miller, p.588.

<sup>49</sup> For contemporary vilification of John Home for his play involved associating his beliefs with those of David Hume (see *Sher, Church & University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985), p.76).



play which identify it as a proto-Romantic text. The reasonable arrival at the primacy of emotions or the passions, the principle of which, again, David Hume is such a proponent, is a proto-Romantic current which the play confirms. The gothicism frequently identified in the play is not solely due to its antiquarian featuring of towers, mountains and ancient battles (though these things are part of it), but belongs also to the portrayal of a gloomy, unjust world where true feeling is often thwarted or confounded by the more voracious appetites of other individuals. Clearly, sympathy is sought (and historically, in the long theatrical run of *Douglas*, granted) on behalf of Lady Randolph. We should not discount the contemporary impact of the drama, resulting as it did from what we might call the radical side of Scottish Enlightenment thought, and being, as the play was, such a visibly exemplary text of the British proto-Romantic age contributing to the emphasis upon the passions which was such a part of the developing literary atmosphere from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.

For all that *Douglas* has perhaps not aged so well, it was in its time a formative text, drawing inspiration both from Scottish Enlightenment thinking and practice, as contributions to the production of the finished text by Hume, William Robertson, Robert Blair, Alexander Carlyle and others attest.<sup>50</sup> (These collaborators, featuring some of the most prominent of the Edinburgh moderate clergy again, show that Scottish culture and the Presbyterian believers of Scotland were clearly not so constrained by unopposed Calvinism, as has been argued by Buckle and others.) *Douglas* is a play which manifests also an embryonic historical and antiquarian reclaiming of the province of border-lore, which Home's admirer, Walter Scott, later, was to develop much further. Its focus upon the crucial, primitive passions, as well as its insistence upon the interest of ancient Scottish history and culture, ought to be at least as emphasised as the play's formal neo-classicism. *Douglas* is an inter-state text in both Scottish and British literary history as a new confidence is seen emerging in native ("gothic") materials (for Home not only Scottish historical materials, but the materials of Shakespeare, which had been

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p.75.



persistently frowned upon down to this time).<sup>51</sup> *Douglas* is not a great work of drama, but it is a very commendably forward-looking text in exemplifying a confidence in native (British) materials as a means of saying something about human nature and feeling. Drawing upon the inspiration of Scottish Enlightenment thinking, it is not so much a deficient Scottish text, as an expansive British text helping to define the aesthetic sensibilities of the age.

The “Ossian” poems of James Macpherson during the 1760s represent an even bolder Scottish experiment than Home’s *Douglas* with antique subject-matter collided with the predilections of the age of sensibility. Macpherson’s prose-poem productions (the translations, he claimed, of oral material from third and fourth century bards in “Erse,” or Gaelic, in the highlands of Scotland), also fit awkwardly into the Scottish canon. They have been particularly condemned as a falsification of the “true” Celtic poetic heritage of Scotland, and, to some extent, this charge carries weight. It does so in that the presentation of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760) and the two longer “epics”, *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), are claimed too fervently to be authentic by not only Macpherson, but also by Scottish Enlightenment activists such as David Hume and Hugh Blair. Blair writes in the preface to *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* that:

There can be no doubt that these poems are to be ascribed to the Bards; a race of men well known to have continued throughout many ages in Ireland and the north of Scotland. [...] And tradition, in a country so free of intermixture with foreigners, and among a people so strongly attached to the memory of their ancestors, has preserved many of them in a great measure incorrupted to this day.<sup>52</sup>

David Hume writes of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, in a curious piece of wishful-thinking, perhaps (in a draft-letter in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow), “I have heard all or most of them in the Erse language

<sup>51</sup> The notorious example of Adam Smith already identified, was, of course, part of the long neoclassical critical taste in Britain, which saw Shakespeare as rather unrefined, from Dryden down to the changed attitudes found in the Romantic period and particularly, perhaps, with William Hazlitt. It is not, as some critics seem to imply, that Scottish Enlightenment literary thinkers are particularly reactionary. *Douglas* shows neoclassicism actually beginning to breakdown in Scotland, to some extent, as part of the changing literary sensibility of the second half of the eighteenth century in British literature generally.

<sup>52</sup> James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works* edited by Howard Gaskill (Edinburgh, 1996), p.5.



long before Mr. Macpherson was born.”<sup>53</sup> The assertion by Blair and by Hume of the cultural purity of Macpherson’s productions is, ironically, the criterion upon which Macpherson’s productions come to be excised from the Scottish canon subsequently. The championing of the poems by such activists is representative of that impetus of the Scottish Enlightenment identified, by Kenneth Simpson and others, which is too eager to vie with the English (and, indeed, as we see here in the case of the Ossian poems, the Irish) in terms of demonstrating a venerably ancient culture.<sup>54</sup> We see the priority of this creative antiquarian reflex in the fact that Enlightenment activists, such as Blair and Hume, took no notice of the very strong renaissance in eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry. This could be seen particularly in the work of Alexander MacDonald (c.1695-1770) and Duncan Ban Macintyre (1724-1812), both of whom wedded the contemporary British idiom of close observation of nature to the landscape of the *gaelhealtachd*.<sup>55</sup> Had Enlightenment activists wished to hail such poetry, however, little of it was actually available in accessible editions to the anglophone of the time.<sup>56</sup> Generally, however, in spite of its actual modernity, Gaelic poetry was obviously tainted by association with the Jacobite highlands. Ironically, then, rather than alight upon a modern but deeply-rooted Scottish poetic culture, the Scottish Enlightenment chose in favouring Macpherson’s productions a very experimental phenomenon, very “constructed” in the meshing of its antiquarian and “age of sensibility” predilections.

The Ossian poetry became something of an Anglo-Scottish debating ground, each side in this

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<sup>53</sup> See a manuscript fragment of a draft letter by David Hume (unpublished in the Mitchell Library, OL1, p.26; see Gerard Carruthers, “A Draft Fragment of a Letter by David Hume on the Ossian Controversy” in *Notes & Queries* December 2001 [Forthcoming]).

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Simpson, *Op cit.*, pp.43-50.

<sup>55</sup> The anthology edited by Derick S. Thomson, *Gaelic Poetry in the Eighteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1993), demonstrates in the selection of poems by these and other poets how brilliantly Gaelic poetry at this time combined traditional gaelic metre and settings with an ever more sharply particularised natural detail in common with much British poetry of the time.

<sup>56</sup> The only significant publication in book-length form from the *Gealhealtachd* in the period is MacDonald’s *Ais -eiridh na sean chanoin Albannaich; no An nuadh oraria ice* (Clo-bhuailt ‘ann Dunneidiunn: 1751), which did, however, feature a preface in English.



debate fiercely taking up arms. It was notoriously lambasted by Samuel Johnson who remarked, according to James Boswell, "I look upon M'Pherson's *Fingal* to be as gross an imposition as ever the world was troubled with. Had it really been an ancient work, a true specimen of how men thought at that time, it would have been a curiosity of the first rate. As a modern production, it is nothing."<sup>57</sup> On the second point, at least, Johnson was wrong. If Scottish Enlightenment activists were too enthusiastic in their promotion of the works of Ossian, they were, at the same time, harnessing a trend which ran centrally through eighteenth-century British poetry. In his "Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, considered as the Subject of Poetry" (1754), William Collins enjoined John Home, to whom the poem was dedicated, to write poetry immersed in the heroic and supernatural lore of the gaelhealtachd. Collins instructs Home:

At Ev'ry Pause, before thy Mind possesst,  
 Old Runic Bards shall seem to rise around  
 With uncouth Lyres, in many colour'd Vest,  
 Their Matted Hair with boughs fantastic crown'd  
 Whether Thou bidst the well-taught Hind repeat  
 The Choral Dirge that mourns some Chieftain brave  
 When Ev'ry Shrieking Maid her bosom beat  
 And strew'd with choicest herbs his scented Grave<sup>58</sup>

Here we find a blueprint for much of the incident in the Ossian poems (and a possible influence also upon the complexion of Home's *Douglas*). Home, of course, famously urged Macpherson to publish his texts, and so we see, alongside the more famous cross-border antagonism, a quite precise channel of Anglo-Scottish co-operation which was spurred by an urge which countered, to some extent, the neoclassic impetus of the eighteenth-century. This primitivist urge emanated, in fact, from a British Augustan reading of the decadence of ancient Greek and Roman "civilisation" and sought to uncover a nativism prior to interference from Greco-Roman culture. We see something of this in the *mythehistoire* of the unconquerability of the Scots in the face of the Romans (which we have seen James Thomson

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<sup>57</sup> James Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* edited by Peter Levi (London, 1983), p.303.

<sup>58</sup> *The Works of William Collins* edited by Richard Wendorf & Charles Ryskamp (Oxford, 1979), p.57 (ll.40-6).



translating as a feature of the British nation generally). Interest in Celts, Jews and Druids earlier in the eighteenth century is joined at mid-century, perhaps after the safe sanitation of the Jacobite highlands, by interest in the Scottish Gaelhealtachd.<sup>59</sup> The popularity of the Ossian poems in admirers such as Goethe and Napoleon Bonaparte also attests to the fact that the poems were not simply an exclusively Scottish eccentricity. The poems served their purpose in communicating (alongside other texts such as the poetry of another initially fervent Ossian admirer, Thomas Gray) a strong note of melancholic alienation, which, up to a point, opposed neoclassicism. The Romantic movement refined and, in a sense, outmoded such melancholy in a poetry of a more concrete contemporary reaction of alienation in the face of the tremors of western political culture and industrial progress accelerated from the latter part of the eighteenth century.<sup>60</sup> The Ossian poetry was both backward-looking and modern (or in combination of these attributes, primitivistic) in its eighteenth-century context. The two major epics, *Fingal* and *Temora*, are largely continuations in the notes of heroism, melancholy, noble savagery and communing with nature established in *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, but, very obviously, attempt more coherent narratives in charting respectively the stories of the heroic king who was father to Ossian and the cradle of the first “Irish” kings of Scotland. They are though, arguably less readable than *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*, not just owing to the wide differences in length, but precisely because of the “fragmentary” nature of the first collection. The voice of the bard and the events of which the narrative voice speaks in the text of the initial Ossianic profusion, is both rooted and dislocated at the same time, a conjunction from which the text derives much of its power.

Amidst the fragmentariness of the text, Hugh Blair and others were anxious to validate the authenticity of the poems. Blair argued for this upon the basis that the “spirit and strain of the poems”

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<sup>59</sup> An excellent account of this process is to be found in Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue*, pp.359-553.

<sup>60</sup> It is an obvious point, but bears repeating that the “Ossian” poetry predates the fullscale disruptions of American and French Revolutions and the onset of real Scottish industrial urbanisation. The poems, then, while ultimately feeding the alienated aesthetic stance of Blake and others ought not to be chastised for failing to respond to the most deep-rooted cultural traumas of slightly later in the period.



and their “manners,” their “obsolete diction” (certainly not recognisable from the literary productions of the gaelhealtachd in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries), their predating of clanship, and their predating too of the establishment of Christianity in Scotland (which had arrived in the fifth century).<sup>61</sup> Alongside this “evidence,” Blair makes the further conjecture that “there is ground to believe that most of them [the fragments] were originally episodes of a greater work which related to the wars of Fingal”; and speculates that the bardic tradition pertaining to the clans has continued to hand these poems down, mostly orally.” Clearly, what is going on in the “Ossian” poems is a deep exploration of Scottish historical identity in a conjectural project that seeks to see Scottish origins free of the cultural weight of Anglophone, or Scots-Anglophone even, Christianised identity which lay at the root of Scottish modernity. Simultaneously, there is in the parameters which Blair delineates, an attempt to circumvent the awkward, rebellious recent history of “Clannish” highland society. The “primitivism” of the project is one which seeks to be even-handed in turning the clock back not only in terms of pre-Scottish history, but of pre-British history also. Charting this “primitivist” project in the *Fragments*, reveals an anthropological and literary experimentation which demonstrates again the inventiveness and, indeed, the contemporaneity (though in an especially paradoxical case) of eighteenth-century Scottish literature which has all too facilely been gainsaid in the past.

The opening piece in *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* is a dialogue between the warrior Shilric and Vinvela, a woman of melodious voice. This “dialogue”, however, is conducted across a distance as each speaker senses the presence afar of the other. What we see here, it can be suggested, is the primitivised mysticisation of the pastoral eclogue form, (the dialogues of the *Fragments* may even in this respect have influenced Robert Fergusson in his “The Ghaists”<sup>62</sup>) and there are no recognisable

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<sup>61</sup> James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p.5-6.

<sup>62</sup> See *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* II, pp.141-45; the dialogue in this piece between George Watson and George Heriot represents the lamenting voices in the wildenreness of two (albeit not martial) Scottish heroes. The mood and tone of Fergusson’s poem, might, generally, recall the work of “Ossian,” though Fergusson criticism has failed to say anything about this possible influence.



antecedents for such a manoeuvre in eighteenth-century British literature. Vinvela's function is to enmesh Shilric with the landscape as she pronounces:

My love is a son of the hill. He pursues the flying deer. His gray dogs are panting around him; his bow-string sounds in the wind. Whether by the fount of the rock, or by the stream of the mountain thou liest; when the rushes are nodding with the wind, and the mist is flying over thee, let me approach my love unperceived, and see him from the rock. Lovely I saw thee first by the aged oak of Branno; thou wert returning tall from the chace; the fairest among thy friends.<sup>63</sup>

Such writing sets much of the tone for the entire Ossianic oeuvre. The presence of the ancient warrior shimmers between an ancient physical landscape and a human presence made intangible by being so deeply a part of that landscape. Leaving aside the arguments over how much of a prior Gaelic spirit Macpherson might be imbibing, one can begin immediately to suggest the pivotal place which Macpherson's work is occupying in eighteenth-century British literature. The dialogue of pastoral love is transmuted, via extensive pathetic fallacy, into the sublime (a category upon which Edmund Burke had pronounced in a treatise only three years before).<sup>64</sup> The Ossianic moment in the literature of the British Isles is the moment when the taste for reconstructing the ancient ruins of the landscape is translated into literary mode and in the Scottish and highland context this takes on a peculiar resonance. Ultimately, the Macpherson texts can be read as repositing - to some extent the re-positioning - of the voice of the Gaelhealtachd. The voice of the highlands is that which is to be reinstituted after the suspicion over and proscription of highland culture in the wake of the Jacobite uprisings. This voice is *to return carrying a sense of loss, which is ostensibly over the distant, legendary exploits of third and fourth century Gaeldom, but which, as many commentators have realised, is as much about the vanquishing of eighteenth-century highland exploits.*<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p.7.

<sup>64</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (London, 1757).

<sup>65</sup> See Weinbrot, *Op cit.*, pp.530-547.

Shilric's first response to Vinvela in the first of the *Fragments* is again highly pertinent to the entire Macpherson project:

What voice is that I hear? that voice like the summer-wind. ----- I sit not by the nodding rushes; I hear not the fount of the rock. Afar, Vinvela, afar I go to the wars of Fingal. My dogs attend me no more. No more I tread the hill. No more from on high I see thee, fair-moving by the stream of the plain; bright as the bow of heaven; as the noon on the western wave.<sup>66</sup>

This is the voice of the soon-to-die warrior who somehow hears the melodious, lamenting, melancholy voice of his earthly lover (who is perhaps now about to kill herself or who at least dies heartbroken in her grief, as the second fragment makes clear). All human substance is being shaken off and sublime emotion reigns supreme. It is this disembodiment (or delocalisation) of voice to which Scottish criticism has often objected in Macpherson's work. Scottish criticism has sought out for approval what it takes to be the real "historical" voice of Scotland, and it finds this triumphantly (and fairly exclusively) in the strongly satirical, anti-unionist, sharply social voice of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. A number of Scottish critical impulses, then, operate to suggest that Macpherson's work is sham and not so much as a counterfeiting of ancient Gaelic culture (though this adds to the disapprobation too), but as artificial to the eighteenth-century socio-political Scottish context.

The non-contemporary scenario, the strangely dislocated humanity and the rarified nature of the Macpherson project, generally however, are things to be understood not simply as contemporary negation (in relation to the contemporary literary positivity of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots). In recent years the rooting of Macpherson's work in the Episcopalian, humanist culture of Aberdeen (where Macpherson attended university) by Fiona Stafford and the modern focussing of the context to the poems of the Scottish Enlightenment (perhaps most notably by Kenneth Simpson) have begun to

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<sup>66</sup> *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p.7.



provide a sense of the historical priorities of Macpherson's work.<sup>67</sup> The dovetailing of these two sites of literary influence upon Macpherson argue something beyond the traditional critical view of the "Ossian" poems as mere escapism, the roots of the misty "tartanry" designed to produce a Scotland which is all image and no substance so as to facilitate the easy appropriation of "wild" Scotland into "civilised" Britain. And we notice this "positivity" in the cacophany of voices, or the palimpsest of voices, which is often entailed in the poetry. In Shilric's response to Vinvela above, there is something almost of the knowing, self-reflexive note as he asks, "What voice is that I hear?" The melancholy voice of Vinvela, which is at the same time melodious, is also the bardic voice, the voice of the bard Ossian himself in a sense (it is in such knowing self-reflexiveness that we see an instance of eighteenth-century narrative sophistication giving the game away as to the provenance of the poetry). Beyond this of course, it is also the voice of Macpherson. In this chain of voices, in this chain of attentive listening, where the sublime is somewhat paradoxically transmitted, we find, perhaps, the cultural keynote of the Enlightenment historical project. This project primed by the histories of David Hume on the progress of modernity in Britain, was to be increasingly primed, following Macpherson's work by William Robertson's attention to and "savagery" of the Americas in his *History of America* (1777) and by Adam Ferguson's *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), and involved a recognition that the much-vaunted Enlightenment cosmopolitanism must take cognisance of the supposed culturally primitive. This involved not simply the charting of stages of civilisation from barbarity to civilisation by Ferguson, Adam Smith and others, in simple progressivist assumptions, but the recognition that there was loss involved in this process. The Macpherson project is early testament and primer to this apprehension, and shows that side of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, which rather than being historically unresponsive is historically sensitive. The nobility and cultural beauty of the lost, pre-Christian race of Erse warriors speaks of an anti-neoclassical sense of history. (It is perhaps unfortunate that this anti-neoclassical project should be increasingly "classicised" in Macpherson's

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<sup>67</sup> Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage* (Edinburgh, 1988), see especially pp.6-39; Simpson, *The Protean Scot*, *Op cit.*, pp.41-69.



forging of coherent epics in *Fingal* and *Temora*, prompted by the deeply neoclassical mindset of Hugh Blair.) As much as to Rousseau's idea of the "noble savage", the apprehension of the historic primitive state in British literature is related to the eighteenth-century debate in British society over the supposed progress of the nation (and this was accentuated in the Scottish context, if perhaps too some extent by the union of parliaments, then certainly by the sharp awareness of the decimation of the highlands).<sup>68</sup> This deep uncertainty in the British nation (primed by the dynastic and political certainty stemming from the seventeenth century) was accompanied, somewhat paradoxically, by a crumbling of the neo-classical certainties in which, for a time, one side of British Augustan culture took refuge. There is perhaps not too much to be gained by the debate over how "Whiggish" or alternatively crypto-Jacobite Macpherson was in either explicit politics or implicit cultural sensibilities. A writer like Tobias Smollett, a Tory but essentially Hanoverian in politics and a man deeply imbibing much of the agenda of the Scottish Enlightenment, could write his bitterly complaining poem, "The Tears of Scotland" (1751), in a sense of outrage over the treatment of the highlands in the aftermath of Culloden (a fact which again shows Enlightenment intellectuals not simply looking to airbrush the recent highland past out of existence).<sup>69</sup> What we should note, in terms of ideology is the way in which the primitivist agenda, sourced so strongly in Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, comes from explicitly "Whiggish" quarters rather than from the cradle of poetry in Scots (to be identified with Tory humanism). Without the influence of James Thomson and a pool of British sentimental, primitivist writing in which Ossian Macpherson was a palpable presence, the constructions of the primitive found in Fergusson and Burns, and so approved of by traditional Scottish criticism, would not have proceeded in the way that they did. The story of eighteenth-century Scottish literature is a story of ideological vocabularies operating fluidly in cross-currents. Generally, a sense of regret and loss, from these varied sources, pervaded eighteenth-century Scotland, even as this was a period of confident cultural reconstruction. We see this

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<sup>68</sup> For a good discussion of this point see the introduction to Howard Gaskill (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh, 1991), pp.1-18.

<sup>69</sup> Tobias Smollett, "The Tears of Scotland" in *Smollett's Scotland* edited by Louis Stott (Dunblane, 1986), pp.7-13.



in the poetry of Ramsay and Fergusson and we see it in the work of Macpherson.

One might even suggest a high degree of literary maturity and possibility in the period stemming precisely from the warp and woof of loss and reconstruction. As Macpherson's fragment V asks:

Who can reach the source of thy race, O Connal? and who recount thy  
Fathers? Thy family grew like an oak on the mountain, which meeteth the  
end with its lofty head. But now it is torn from the earth. Who shall  
supply the place of Connal?<sup>70</sup>

The *Fragments* are full of this note of melancholy regret for a vanquished race. And yet Enlightenment historical empiricism in tandem with the "inner sense" philosophy of Francis Hutcheson and the Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid provided a basis for reconstruction of the lost voice. The first of these things held that people were products of their environment so that something of the sensibility of a people could be retrieved from their surroundings, in the case of the "Ossian" poems the landscape of the highlands.<sup>71</sup> As fragment V attests, almost in the fashion of a call and response, "The wind sighs through the grass; and their memory rushes on my mind." This sincere impetus to retrieve lost but retrievable memories perhaps as much as the desire to collect supplementary material encouraged Macpherson on his highland tours after the success of *Fragments of Ancient Poetry*. Macpherson was the one, unnamed and so almost like a bard himself, who would "recount the fathers" and reach the "source of the race." The philosophical "school" of Hutcheson and Reid, in the broadest terms, rooted in Scotland the notion of an essentially unchanging model of human virtue and sensibility. Notoriously, Francis Hutcheson had fallen foul of the Glasgow presbytery in 1731 for attesting that unChristianised

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<sup>70</sup> *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, p.89.

<sup>71</sup> See Francis Hutcheson, "Morality and the Moral Sense" extracted in Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment: an anthology* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp.117-142 for the most accessible account of Hutcheson's formulation, essentially, of the soul. See the same volume, pp.264-71, for Reid's capacity of common sense and also for the aesthetic response of this sense to the human and natural environment. It is clear that Reid's thinking here, is part of the same philosophical outlook inspiring the Ossian poetry (see, Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp.26-34 for a comparison of Reid's thought and the ossianic sensibility).



pagans might win salvation through their innate moral sense.<sup>72</sup> The “school of Reid”, which Carlyle saw as ultimately limited even although it was critical of the mechanistic (Humean) model of causality and human behaviour, held the primacy of common or objective vision in the face of associationist and subjectivist eighteenth-century accounts of human behaviour. This was one strand which interwove with the doctrine of sympathy which Adam Smith and others were promulgating from the late 1750s so as to license the primitive in particularly accentuated terms in Scotland.<sup>73</sup> Scottish philosophical roots represented a cosmopolitanism which also vouchsafed a respectful primitivism which underpinned the Ossianic performances.

It is sometimes remarked, and with some justification that the Scottish Enlightenment’s search for the “primitive” and genuine poetry of Scotland, which the Ossian case so well demonstrates, overlooked in the process the “genuine” poetry of Scotland. This “genuine” poetry would include the work of Robert Fergusson or the work of eighteenth-century Gaelic poets. For the Enlightenment, however, the work of Fergusson was not a historical problem in the same way. Fergusson was not a “primitive” poet (this is one of the understated but insistent assumptions of much Scottish criticism, as we have seen). Fergusson belonged to a partially different context, Scots Humanism, and was recognisably a university educated poet steeped in the most modern poetic technology of the day. The question ought to be asked: what help could the Enlightenment have given to Fergusson? The idea of Fergusson *needing* help rests on the romance surrounding the poet’s untimely death and the myth promulgated by Burns of the gentry with their “whunstane hearts” refusing to lift a finger to help the poet (something, ironically, based upon his own experiences of an Edinburgh salon society too keen to proffer advice to Burns himself on the direction of his poetry).<sup>74</sup> The Ossian project seemingly confirms (though it predates many of) the fully-flexed philosophic predilections of the Enlightenment *literati* of Scotland. However, it does so no more than the formal construction of the work of Ramsay

<sup>72</sup> See W.R. Scott, *Francis Hutcheson*, *Op cit.*, pp.22-30.

<sup>73</sup> For a concise discussion of primitivism see Murray Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain* (London, 1997) pp.126-30

<sup>74</sup> Burns, *Poems & Songs*, edited by James Kinsley, *Op cit.*, no.126.



and Fergusson conformed to much of the agenda of the Scots Humanist strand and particular “rebuilding” of national culture. It should be added that as well as affirming certain Enlightenment ideas about the immutability of human nature, there was also in the Ossian poems and the *literati* support for them, a very real attempt to understand difference in a long-distant sensibility (alongside those elements taken to represent immutability in human nature).

There is an attempt to enter deeply into the way of “heroic” way of thinking of the ancient Erse tribes in many places. For instance, in fragment VIII:

Oscur stood forth to meet him; my son would meet the foe. But Fingal came in his strength, and smiled at the vaunter’s boast. They threw their arms around each other; they struggled on the plain. The earth is ploughed with their heels. Their bones crack as the boat on the ocean, when it leaps from wave to wave. Long did they toil; with night, they fell on the sounding plain; as two oaks, with their branches mingled, fall crashing from the hill.

This is typical of the largescale “pathetic fallacy”, or the sublime, in which Macpherson’s productions indulge. What we see here and elsewhere is the intense attempt at sympathy, where psychology and environment are intertwined, but where we have also a lost monumentally heroic sensibility. In the collision of all of these things we see part of the new proto-Romantic or sentimental impulse in culture and literature. Macpherson’s productions sit at the interface of the old and the new. Eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism, with its respect for the primitive including reaction against neo-classicism, begins to help forge a new literary impulse involving intense engagement with environment, and particularly here of course with nature, and a consuming, heroic apprehension of the world which was to be refined a little later in full-blown Romanticism.

A second element worth generally remarking upon is the morality of the Macpherson poems. Two aspects in particular go against the reading of these productions as rather staid Enlightenment product. The first of these is the attitude to women, which commentators such as John Dwyer have



seen to be deeply conservative in the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>75</sup> In fragment XV, for instance, we find Morna stabbing Duchommar to death as she rejects his love and then Duchommar stabbing Morna in return. This is something shocking for the eighteenth-century reader since it goes beyond a lover's suicide pact. Dark forces are being charted, and these are in keeping also with the interest in Edinburgh salons in female folk singers and their ballads describing equally dark and "unChristianised" behaviour".<sup>76</sup> This is a side of the Scottish Enlightenment sensibility which remains undercharted but it is clearly there in Macpherson's productions. Equally, a second facet in the poems is suicide, upon which David Hume had discoursed so clinically and eloquently in one of his essays. The poems open up a whole realm of Enlightenment interest which goes beyond the simple notion of conservative "virtuous discourse" which so many critics have taken for the dominant note of Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy and literary production. The Ossian poems show an experimental and reconstructive manoeuvre in eighteenth-century Scottish literature which is as responsive to the pressures of history and modernity as the poetry of, say, Ramsay and Fergusson. Their non-canonicity for the Scottish critical tradition seriously under-reads the warp and woof across the entire literary culture of the eighteenth century in Scotland which was making the nation a melting point for both the processes of historic retrieval and mainstream progress in the literary history of the time, not only in Scotland but in Britain and through much of Europe.

Like *Douglas* and the poetry of Ossian, James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771-74), is a poem often seen as part of the Enlightenment-inspired Scottish anti-canon. Like *Douglas* and the Ossian poems, it is seen as being too self-consciously literary. The fact that *The Minstrel* takes the writing of poetry as its theme is seen as typical of over-pedantic Enlightenment-led Scottish literature which cannot simply surrender itself to the creative act. As well as naively discounting a sophisticated self-

<sup>75</sup> See John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh), 1987), pp.117-140.

<sup>76</sup> Strangely, it is little remarked in accounts of eighteenth-century literary history that much of the Scottish ballad revival between the work of David Herd and Walter Scott takes place under the aegis of Scottish Enlightenment women such as Anna Gordon [Mrs Brown] (1747-1810), daughter of an Aberdeen University Professor and a Fife Church of Scotland minister.



reflexive manœuvre in pursuit of a spurious “sincerity”, this critical attitude seriously discounts the fact (long-recognised by critics with less of an agenda) that the poem as a significant proto-romantic literary impulse which influences, for instance, William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*.<sup>77</sup> Beattie, a disciple of Thomas Reid’s common sense philosophy, published *The Minstrel* a year after the publication of his *Essay on Truth* (1770), an attack on the sceptical philosophy of David Hume and others. He identified Humean scepticism to be:

[...] a frivolous, though dangerous, system of verbal subtilty, which it required neither genius, nor learning, nor taste, nor knowledge of mankind, to be able to put together; but only a captious temper, an irreligious spirit, a moderate command of words, and an extraordinary degree of vanity and presumption.<sup>78</sup>

History has been harsh on Beattie’s work as a philosopher given its reaction to Hume. Undoubtedly Hume’s metaphysical perception was greater than that of Beattie and his historic importance in the development of western epistemology is vast. Beattie’s philosophic project, like that of Thomas Reid, has to be understood, however, in its own cultural terms not as simply reactionary and unimaginative (if we remember David Daiches’s pronouncement that only Hume, among the Enlightenment *literati* possessed a large imagination). Rather, Beattie’s outlook is to be seen as part of that movement in eighteenth-century cultural history toward validating a universally accessible imagination and it is in this reflex that we see Beattie the proto-romanticist. *The Minstrel* highlights this impetus. Book I of the poem, published in 1771, has a preface which spells out his rationale:

The design was, to trace the progress of Poetical Genius, born in a rude age, from the first dawning of fancy and reason, till that period at which he may be supposed capable of appearing in the world as a MINSTREL, that is, as an itinerant poet and musician:- a character which, according to the notions of

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<sup>77</sup> For a reading of Beattie’s influence upon Wordsworth see Everard King, *James Beattie* (Chicago, 1976), pp.52-64.

<sup>78</sup> Sir William Forbes, *An Account of the Life and Writings of James Beattie* Volume I. [1806] (Bristol, 1997), p.131 (from a letter to Dr Blacklock, 9th January 1769).

our forefathers, was not only respectable, but sacred.<sup>79</sup>

Again, then, in Scottish literature we find the Enlightenment predilection for reasoned understanding, combined with anti-neoclassic bardic interest. The development of this bardic figure from Ossian, through Beattie's protagonist, Edwin, and, as we shall see later in Robert Burns, is one which demonstrates simultaneously the somewhat mannered antiquarianism of Enlightenment cultural construction and its modernity in breaking down the barriers of patrician (Greco-Roman) notions of literary authorship and ownership.

Beattie's antiquarianism in *The Minstrel* involves adoption of the Spenserian stanza in which he finds a "gothic" quality (again the vocabulary confirms the anti-neoclassic purpose).<sup>80</sup> The Spenserian stanza is, perhaps, more important in eighteenth-century British literature than is sometimes realised. As we have seen, Thomson's utilisation of the stanza in *The Castle of Indolence*, a choice predicated by his immersion in the British Protestant canon is later utilised by Robert Fergusson in "The Farmer's Ingle". Fergusson utilises the stanza at a time when Beattie's *The Minstrel* has brought this into vogue as never before in Britain (Beattie's poem, like *Douglas* and the Ossian poems is hugely successful in its own day in a British-wide context) and it may be that, although there are no apparent echoes from Beattie in Fergusson's poem, the mode and the theme of the recommendation to the life of the simple soul, generally, influenced the Scots-language poet.<sup>81</sup> The later utilisation of the Spenserian stanza by Keats and Byron (who explicitly acknowledges Beattie's influence in its utilisation) give testimony to useful and prolonged re-energisation of the stanza into the early nineteenth century and Beattie's part in mainstream, missionary Scottish and English literary

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<sup>79</sup> George Gilfillan (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Beattie, Blair and Falconer* (Edinburgh, 1854), p.1. All subsequent references to *The Minstrel* are to this edition (pp.1-38).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> For a useful discussion of Beattie's contemporary literary importance and its subsequent decline, see Joan H. Pittock, "James Beattie: A friend to All" in David Hewitt and Michael Spiller (eds.), *Literature of the North* (Aberdeen, 1983), pp.55-69.



history.<sup>82</sup>

We see the “anti-modern” stamp of the narrator in stanza one as he scorns what he takes to be the modern, eighteenth-century spurs to literary endeavour, “Ambition”, “Fame” and “Fortune”. By contrast this will be, according to stanza two, a tale of one, Edwin, for whom his desires were for “Health, competence, and peace. Nor higher aim/Had he whose simple tale these artless lines proclaim.” Beattie wishes to write in “Gothic” and “artless” fashion, and one aspect of the continuing eighteenth-century neoclassic impulse, the pastoral impetus, is clearly in keeping with these aims:

Fret not thyself, thou glittering child of pride,  
That a poor villager inspires my strain;  
With thee let Pageantry and Power abide:  
The gentle Muses haunt the sylvan reign;  
Where through wild groves at eve the lonely swain  
Enraptured roams, to gaze on Nature’s charms:  
They hate the sensual and scorn the vain,  
The parasite their influence never warms,  
Nor him whose sordid soul the love of gold alarms. (I, Stanza 4)

We see Beattie here striking a Goldsmithian note and the proto-romantic impetus widens to embrace a Gray-like notion of humankind as part of nature. In stanza five the birds, in the humble rural landscape Beattie is painting, are seen to “sing what Heaven inspires, and wander where they will!” This foreshadowing of the commendable poetic practice of Edwin demonstrates a close relationship between humankind and nature’s “wilder” side. Nature is not, as it may stereotypically be seen in earlier eighteenth-century art, biddable and bountiful:

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 woe.  
With gold and gems if Chilean mountains glow;  
If bleak and barren Scotia’s hills arise;

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<sup>82</sup> Byron, G.G., Preface to Canto 1, “Childe Harold” *Byron: Complete Poetical Works* edited by John D. Jump (Oxford, 1970), p.179.

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, Stanza 6)

Scotland is not materially perfect, with its barren hills, but now, twenty-five years after the Jacobite rebellion, it is a peacable land, in contrast to the material plentitude and avarice abroad in Chile. What we see here is a considered Enlightenment primitivism valuing the simple attributes of peace and freedom under the British dispensation in contrast to what Beattie reads, implicitly, as the rapacious, expansive dynamism of (Spanish) imperialism. One can easily point to historical *naivete* here in Beattie's understanding of the British imperial enterprise both within and beyond the British Isles, but the values he is promulgating are anti-imperial and tap into a discourse of "freedom" which is a highly significant part of the trajectory of increasing democracy in the western world in the latter part of the eighteenth century. So much, then, for the reading of Enlightenment cultural activists as simple propagandists for unreflecting mercantile, industrial and imperial British progress.

Edwin is a Scottish bard, located in a familiar cultural landscape of:

A nation famed for song and beauty's charms;  
Zealous, yet modest; innocent, though free;  
Patient of toil; serene amidst alarms;  
Inflexible in faith; invincible in arms. (I, Stanza 11)

Here we find Beattie encompassing some of the familiar "contradictions" of Scottish cultural history, praising the nation's achievement in folk-song, a capacity famed since the pioneering work of Allan Ramsay, its indomitable martial ability (a trope, as we have seen, forged first under Jacobite predilections though gradually in the eighteenth century made more universally Scottish) and its "zealous" Presbyterianism. With Beattie, then, we have the first literary exemplar where these disparate attributes are explicitly seen as homogenous, and in this and other regards, Beattie represents a kind of John the Baptist harbinger to the coming of Robert Burns, who is seen, with some justification, to exemplify a peasant, Presbyterian songster.



However, in spite of the health of his native culture, Edwin, as he goes through childhood, is something of a misfit:

In truth he was a strange and wayward wight,  
Fond of each gentle, and each dreadful scene.  
In darkness, and in storm, he found delight:  
Nor less than when on ocean-wave serene  
The southern Sun diffused his dazzling sheen,  
Even sad vicissitude amused his soul:  
And if a sigh would sometimes intervene,  
And down his cheek a tear of pity roll  
A sigh, a tear, so sweet, he wish'd not to control. (I, Stanza 22)

The minstrel, then, is a veritable child of fine feeling, instructed by nature and by common sense, in a way which has a close relation to the epistemology of Reid and Beattie.<sup>83</sup> We learn of Edwin that:

The truth sublime his simple sire had taught:  
In sooth, 'twas almost all the shepherd knew.  
No subtle nor superfluous lore he sought,  
Nor ever wish'd his Edwin to pursue.  
"Let man's own sphere," said he, "confine his view;  
Be man's peculiar work his sole delight."  
And much, and oft, he warn'd him to eschew  
Falsehood and guile, and aye maintain the right,  
By pleasure unseduced, unawed by lawless might. (I, Stanza 28)

Edwin's childhood awe in the face of nature is essentially a sound instinct but has to be regulated. He has to "confine his view", in humility, to the sublime reality of humankind and nature, and not go chasing after the minutiae of metaphysical understanding. We are told:

One part, one little part, we dimly scan  
Through the dark medium of life's feverish dream;  
Yet dare arraign the whole stupendous plan,  
If but that little part incongruous seem.  
Nor is that part perhaps what mortals deem;  
Oft from apparent ill our blessings rise.  
O, then, renounce the impious self-esteem,  
That aims to trace the secrets of the skies:

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<sup>83</sup> Beattie, of course, was very much a disciple of Reid's and an enemy of Hume's in philosophy as is witnessed by his *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1771).

For thou art but of dust; be humble, and be wise.

Thus Heaven enlarged his soul in riper years.  
For Nature gave him strength and fire to soar  
On Fancy's wing above this vale of tears;  
Where dark cold-hearted sceptics, creeping, pore  
Through microscope of metaphysic lore;  
And much they grope for Truth, but never hit.  
For why? Their powers, inadequate before,  
This idle art makes more and more unfit;  
Yet deem they darkness light, and their vain blunders wit. (I, Stanzas 50-1)

Humanity is of limited understanding and falls easily into confusion in attempting to be sophisticated with the truth (and in these stanzas we see a fairly obvious attack upon the metaphysical system of Hume). It is here that we see Edwin's anti-intellectual and pro-imaginative stamp. The "secrets of the skies" which Edwin holds in such awe, are to be wondered at and accepted rather than impiously dissected. This perspective allows Edwin to let "Fancy" loose describing "a thousand wondrous forms" (I, Stanza 53); and this imaginative propensity in Edwin is channelled ultimately into a very appropriate predilection for song which is healthy, celebratory, pious, and sometimes melancholy (as a function also of proper piety).

Beattie's much less successful second book of *The Minstrel* published in 1773, charts the final completion of Edwin's maturity. For all that the second part of the poem maintains the notion of upholding common sense and avoiding sophistry, it contains what looks to be an anti-Enlightenment theme as cosmopolitan exploration is eschewed:

But sure to foreign climes we need not range,  
Nor search the ancient records of our race,  
To learn the dire effects of time and change,  
Which in ourselves, alas! we daily trace.  
Yet at the darken'd eye, the wither'd face,  
Or hoary hair, I never will repine:  
But spare, O Time, whate'er of mental grace,  
Of candour, love, or sympathy divine,



Whate'er of fancy's ray, or friendship's flame is mine. (II, Stanza 2)

In Book 2 Edwin meets a "sage" who dispenses to him good advice and he confirms this anti-cosmopolitan note. Edwin enters into a dialogue with the sage where he commends a time of ancient human virtue before recorded history with all its tales of heroes and tyrants:

"Sweet were your shades, O ye primeval groves!  
Whose boughs to man his food and shelter lent,  
Pure in his pleasures, happy in his loves,  
His eye still smiling, and his heart content.  
Then, hand in hand, Health, Sport, and Labour went.  
Nature supplied the wish she taught to crave.  
None prowled for prey, none watch'd to circumvent;  
To all an equal lot Heaven's bounty gave:  
No vassal fear'd his lord, no tyrant fear'd his slave.

"But ah! the Historic Muse has never dared  
To pierce those hallow'd bowers: 'tis Fancy's beam  
Pour'd on the vision of the enraptur'd bard,  
That paints the charms of that delicious theme.  
Then hail, sweet Fancy's ray! and hail, the dream  
That weans the weary soul from guilt and woe!  
Careless what others of my choice may deem,  
I long, where Love and Fancy lead, to go  
And meditate on Heaven; enough of Earth I know." (II, Stanzas 38-9)

The sage sympathises with this imaginative idealisation, but recommends to Edwin the consideration of other qualities including the contemplation of the ills of history (stanza 42), "science" (stanza 43), "polity" (stanza 44) and ultimately "philosophy" "to curb Imagination's lawless rage" (stanza 45). The poem ends with Edwin properly instructed by the sage so that he becomes a more balanced thinker:

Enraptured by the hermit's strain, the youth  
Proceeds the path of Science to explore.  
And now, expanded to the beams of truth,  
New energies, and charms unknown before,  
His mind discloses: Fancy now no more  
Wantons on fickle pinion through the skies;  
But, fix'd in aim, and conscious of her power,

Aloft from cause to cause exults to rise,  
Creation's blended stores arranging as she flies. (Stanza 56)

Greater philosophic reasoning, which seems largely to be an increased capacity for empirical observation, improves Edwin's imagination and so his mind becomes suited to the fully-fledged pastoral minstrel which he becomes by the end of the poem.

Beattie's *The Minstrel* is a skilful poetic essay charting an interesting proto-romantic moment. It charts the growing tendency toward the primitive literary impulse and affirms this impetus to a large extent. However, it is also a text-book "not-quite-romantic" poem as it cautions against untutored imagination alone. There is a certain amount of instruction to be obtained from "the skies", but ultimately this must be refined with "science" or learning. We see in the poem strong attempts being made by a Scottish Enlightenment activist to affirm the imagination in proto-democratic fashion, though with an ultimate wariness over the potential abuse of the imagination (which was primed by Beattie's reaction to the imaginative "sophistry" of Hume). This cautious proto-romanticism which, even in its undoubted limitations, helps facilitate the movement from neoclassicism toward increased imaginative freedom in Britain ought not to be read (as it is read so often in, paradoxically enough, post-romantic critiques of the Scottish Enlightenment), as a wholesale Scottish reaction against the imagination. Such an overarching reading dislocates Beattie's *The Minstrel* from its significant place in British literary history (of which Scottish literary history is a part).

Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) is often taken by critics to be another antisyzygical Scottish literary artefact manifesting a movement of the text into unrestrained feeling (in a much more extreme exemplar than the Ossian poems). Truly, it is the most extreme example of the European literature of sentiment, sympathy and sensibility where the capacity to feel is dealt with as a defining relationship between the protagonist and the world. Richardson's championing of refined sensibility in his novel *Pamela* (1740) as an essential building block of benign human society draws on



philosophic discussions earlier in the century by the Earl of Shaftesbury on the necessity of benevolence. Mackenzie is similarly primed in such philosophy and also by the Scottish philosophical context. Francis Hutcheson's moral sense philosophy, principally involving the idea that altruistic feeling is innate to humankind, is strongly influenced by Shaftesbury, and the work of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson is built upon to some extent by the common sense philosophy of Thomas Reid (which suggested, in opposition to Humean scepticism, that humans shared a common, objective apprehension of reality) and the doctrine of sympathy developed by Adam Smith.<sup>84</sup> This emphasis upon shared feeling in the Scottish Enlightenment stands in opposition, as Shaftesbury's philosophy had so importantly done, to the Hobbesian assertion of humanity's selfishness. That this philosophic battleground should become so important in the age of increasing economic individualism is not surprising. Rather than simply being the mirror to optimistic, freemarket individualism, as Ian Watt's classic thesis has it, the eighteenth-century novel in Britain too debated this new seemingly less communally-coherent society which was being constructed.<sup>85</sup> And, as we shall see, this is especially the case in the work of Henry Mackenzie and Tobias Smollett. What makes for the peculiarly overwrought feeling manifested in *The Man of Feeling*, however, is another strand of Enlightenment interest in melancholy and madness. The reasons for this are obvious enough in that in its interest in what made someone socially connective, the European Enlightenment naturally sought to understand what made an individual socially disconnective.<sup>86</sup> This is so obviously the terrain of Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* that we should pause before making the traditional judgement that the novel is simply a recommendation to unrestrained feeling.

<sup>84</sup> See Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) in R. Beanblossom (ed), Reid, *Inquiry and Essays* (Indianapolis, 1983), see especially 103-26 for a summation of this sense; see Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis, 1976), especially pp.87-98 for Smith's conception of sympathy. For a useful account of the entire network of sympathy and sense see John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions* (East Linton, 1998).

<sup>85</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1957).

<sup>86</sup> For an excellent account of this side of Enlightenment interest, see John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988), pp.201-240.



Henry Mackenzie was a practical, hard-headed lawyer who could express in his journalism warning against sentimental indulgence. In his periodical, *The Mirror* of April 25, 1780, he writes:

Let me warn at least where I cannot remedy. [...] there are bounds beyond which virtuous feelings cease to be virtue; that the decisions of sentiment are subject to the controul of prudence, and the ties of friendship subordinate to the obligations of duty.<sup>87</sup>

Mackenzie even mocks extreme sentiment. In *The Lounger* of October 21st, 1786, in the narrator-persona of Barbara Heartless, he ridicules Mrs Sensitive, "At our house I saw her once in the greatest distress imaginable, from the accidental drowning of a fly in a creampot."<sup>88</sup> *The Man of Feeling* is full of incidents where its central character, Harley, has trouble in identifying true feeling. We see this, for instance, as a young London buck instructs him in the high society of the city to which he is new:

The conversation, as they walked, was brilliant on the side of his companion. The playhouse, the opera, with every occurrence in highlife, he seemed perfectly master of; and talked of some reigning beauties of quality, in a manner the most feeling in the world. Harley admired the happiness of his vivacity; and opposite as it was to the reserve of his own nature, began to be much pleased with its effects. (p.25)<sup>89</sup>

Here, the phrase "the most feeling in the world" is being used sardonically as Harley later finds out that the young man has been a footman, an exciseman and a pimp. At first Harley is resentful at the deceit, but later changes his mind:

But he corrected himself, by reflecting, that he was perhaps as well entertained and instructed too, by this modest gauger, as he should have been by such a man as he had thought proper to personate. And surely the fault may be more properly imputed to that rank where the futility is real, than when it is feigned; to that rank, where opportunities for nobler accomplishments have only served to rear a fabric of folly, which the

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<sup>87</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *Works* Vol. V (Edinburgh, 1808), p.17.

<sup>88</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *Works* Vol. VI (Edinburgh, 1808), p.303.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* edited by Brian Vickers (Oxford, 1987), p.25; all subsequent references are to this edition.



untutored mind of affectation, even among the meanest of mankind can imitate with success. (p.29)

Harley, is, if a man of (true) feeling, not a “man of the world” as we notice the practical reality of how susceptible he is to appearances.<sup>90</sup> On reflection he has the sophisticated idea that the young charlatan is the symptom of a larger and more disturbing social malaise (and this theme of a thoroughly diseased society is something the novel is concerned to prosecute). This instance of reflection, however, is an all too rare moment in Harley’s conduct, as the “sights” of cultural and moral injustice which he increasingly encounters overwhelm him, so that by the end of the novel he is totally enervated (and, in this enervation, he dies attempting impotently to express his love for a woman). In other words, he is a man hideously ill-equipped to counter the bad faith and feeling he observes in the world other than with an opposite and extreme reaction of over-wrought tears and breast-beating.

Harley becomes almost an automaton as, in one instance, he responds to a story of blatant injustice where a man is press-ganged on Christmas eve in front of his family, which is narrated by the victim, Edwards. As Edwards recounts how he was manhandled by the press, “Harley started with a convulsive sort of motion, and grasping Edwards’ sword, drew it half out of the scabbard, with a look of the most frantic wildness. Edwards gently replaced it in its sheath, and went on with his relation” (p.91). The fragmentary nature of *The Man of Feeling* mirrors a fragmentary world full of little vignettes of woe, but this episodic mode also highlights the naivete of Harley who is swept along on a tide of emotion and who stumbles from one situation to another.<sup>91</sup> Feeling in the world the novel presents to us is trashed and traduced, as Harley encounters a landed squire who has pimped his own sister (chapter xix), Bedlam presented as a tourist attraction (chapter xx), and the pathetic tale of Edwards ripped from the bosom of his family due to the unreasonable demands of a new breed of

<sup>90</sup> Mackenzie’s novel might best be seen as part of a two-volume enquiry, as its corollary is Mackenzie’s novel, *The Man of the World* (1773), whose central character is Harley’s polar twin, a completely selfish rogue. For an account of the novel see John Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp.154-60.

<sup>91</sup> For a discussion of the episodic mode of the novel as emblematic of Mackenzie’s empirical methodology (with the implication, then, that the novel is not simply sensation-seeking for its own sake) see John MacQueen, *The Rise of the Historical Novel* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp.1-8.



agriculturally improving landlords (chapter xxxvi). The most extensive episode of the novel involves Harley's encounter with Miss Atkins who has been ruined by the dastardly George Winbrooke, a man who has affected the most cultured chatter and libertarian principles to seduce and then abandon the young woman (chapters xxvi-xxix). Chapter xxvi where Harley meets Miss Atkins is entitled "The Man of Feeling in a Brothel" and how Harley has come to be in such a place is never explained. Either there is a secretly sinister side to Harley (for which there is no evidence elsewhere in the novel), or what is being suggested is that people like Harley are tossed around the world uncontrollably. Harley brings about the reconciliation of Miss Atkins and her scandalised father and carries out other acts of practical benevolence, but he is ultimately a somewhat ineffectual character dying in the emotional effort of finally revealing his love for Miss Walton. Harley belongs with a set of characters including those he encounters in Bedlam, comprising a man obsessed with the theory of comets, a man obsessed with the stock-market (having been unluckily ruined by stock-speculation) and a man obsessed with the *minutiae of prosody in the classics*. In short, we see a group of characters overwhelmed by one impetus. Harley too suffers from an overbearing impetus in his oversensitive feeling. Truly, he is morally correct to despise the cheats and selfish-people who have destroyed others, but Harley is an extreme opposing and corrective pole to such behaviour. He is not himself a character recommended to the reader for imitation (as some readings of the novel would have it).

The reader might well be able to share in Harley's sympathy for the unfortunates who come before him, but the reader is also invited to be amused at Harley's intense "unworldliness". The *dialectic of the novel is one between extreme selfishness and extreme sensibility, where never the twain shall meet*. Individual sympathy is also largely impotent because of the vast interests behind the avarice of the world. We see this in relation to the sequence of events set off by Edwards' landlord who ruinously increases his rents so as to fund so-called "improvement" and in the case of the virtuous Indian who is cruelly tortured by Edwards' officers in the attempt to extract from the Indian his



supposed hidden treasure.<sup>92</sup> Edwards aids the man in escaping and is punished for this act by being turned out of the garrison to die in the wilderness. In turn, however, the old Indian comes to the rescue of Edwards. This naturally transacted benevolence and shared sense of justice, cutting across cultures, is an obvious enough Enlightened theme; it leads, in a chapter ironically entitled, “The Man of Feeling Talks of What he does not Understand”, to Harley’s most forensic explication of an issue. He dissects the British imperial enterprise on the grounds of inhumanity:

‘Could you tell me of some conqueror giving peace and happiness to the conquered? did he accept the gifts of their princes to use them for the comfort of those whose fathers, sons, or husbands, fell in battle? did he use his power to gain security and freedom to the regions of oppression and slavery? did he endear the British name by examples of generosity, which the most depraved are rarely able to resist? did he return the consciousness of duty discharged to his country, and humanity to his fellow-creatures? did he return with no lace on his coat, no slaves in his retinue, no chariot at his door, and no Burgundy at his table? - these were laurels which princes might envy - which an honest man would not condemn!’ (p.103)

Here we have the voice of an alienated (proto-romantic) individual, though couched, certainly, in the rhetoric of a man at law. There is here a deep scepticism toward the supposed civilisation (couched interestingly in its neoclassic clothing) of British imperial enterprise. Harley represents the man of primitive feeling (awkwardly) socialised. The man of raw, virtuous feeling is out of place in modernity as is made abundantly and comically clear throughout the novel. Harley is the ultimate product of Scottish Enlightenment scepticism on the individualistic culture of eighteenth century society with its pretence of order. The novel shows how awkward it is to recover the primitive state of humanity (though this state shows through from time to time in the overflow of benevolence in the novel) in presenting such an awkward, alienated central protagonist. The question for the reader is why should this character appear so ridiculous and the invidious society he encounters seem so unremarkable? Harley, the man of sensibility, is the primitive set loose in the modern world. *The Man of Feeling*, then, is not simply an unintentionally overstated sentimental novel which evades reality (and so in both

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<sup>92</sup> Mackenzie’s novel is first read as an economically-responsive text by Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, pp.142-7.



of these features conforming to the traditional critique of Scottish Enlightenment sponsored literature as bungling both the mental and the material fabric of real life). Rather, it is a playful text asking deep questions about the culture of late eighteenth-century Britain. It may well be a somewhat eccentric text, but this is precisely because it manifests the sense of dissonance felt by Enlightenment intellectuals over the psychology of humanity, essentially benevolent, that they were charting and the aggressively “progressive” British culture in which they operated.”<sup>93</sup>

Tobias Smollett’s *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) is a text, as we have seen, vaunting the fine qualities of the Scottish Enlightenment. It is also one of the greatest eighteenth-century novels espousing the theme of the relativity of perception. In this facet, one might suggest that the text conforms more to the philosophically sceptical views of Smollett’s friend David Hume rather than the common sense philosophical views of Reid and others which essentially trust the everyday apprehension of objective reality.<sup>94</sup> A keynote statement in this respect is made by Jerry Melford when he claims, “I am, however, mortified to reflect what fragrant injustice we every day commit, and what absurd judgement we form, in viewing objects through the falsifying medium of prejudice and passion” (p.332).<sup>95</sup> Jerry’s Humean insight at this moment is both true and brilliantly ironic. He is referring to an actor, “Wilson”, whom he has objected to in his pursuit of Jerry’s sister, Lydia. Wilson, in fact, is more of an actor than Jerry has thought in being, in fact, a man of a good (country-gentry) family and of means. Once this truth is revealed he has no further objection to the courtship, though of course Jerry’s “prejudice and passion” of outlook are not swept aside but merely confirmed in his class-snobbery.

Smollett’s novel is an innovative epistolary novel featuring, unusually, five letter-writers. The

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<sup>93</sup> Here, I follow the thesis at large in Dwyer’s *Virtuous Discourse*.

<sup>94</sup> See Donald Bruce, *Radical Doctor Smollett* (London, 1964), pp.209-12, for an interesting setting up of this connection.

<sup>95</sup> References are to Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* edited by Lewis M. Knapp (Oxford 1984).



apprehension of these characters embarked upon a tour of Britain collide, conflict with and qualify one another in a welter of subjectivity demonstrating a world of shifting, untrustworthy apprehensions. This is seen especially as the touring party reaches Scotland. Matt Bramble, the Tory squire leading his sister, niece, nephew and servant out of Wales and through the rest of Britain, says of the prospect of entering Scotland, "I think it is a reproach upon me, a British freeholder, to have lived so long without making an excursion to the other side of the Tweed." (p.66) If the Oxford-schooled representative of middle Britain, a man well educated (and a man also of robust common sense as we see in numerous incidents) confesses his ignorance over a substantial element of the eighteenth-century British state in which he is one of the enfranchised elite, others are spectacularly ignorant. His sister Tabitha believes that in Scotland there is nothing to eat but oat-meal and sheep's heads (the logic of the situation that where there are heads there must be bodies) escapes her until she is actually in the country. Her servant, Win Jenkins, conflates the town she has just been in, Haddington, with the capital to locate herself in "Haddingborough" (p.155). Southern misapprehension of Scotland is channelled also through Jerry. A character, as we have seen, who can be blinded by his own prejudice, Jerry is not blind to the prejudices of others (this is one of the fascinating elements of Smollett's technique in the novel where characters can be alternately self-deluding and insightful so that the reader has to work to remain active in the discrimination of the truth). He observes that "What, between want of curiosity and traditional sarcasms, the effect of ancient animosity, the people at the other end of the island know as little of Scotland as of Japan" (p.214). At the same time as arriving at such an objective conclusion as to southern prejudice toward Scotland, he can go comically further. He records:

If I stay much longer at Edinburgh, I shall be changed into a downright Caledonian - My uncle observes, that I have already acquired something of the country accent. The people here are so social and attentive in their civilities to strangers, that I am insensibly sucked into the channel of their manners and customs, although they are in fact much more different from ours than you can imagine - That difference, however, which struck me very much at my first arrival, I now hardly perceive, and my ear is perfectly reconciled to the Scotch accent, which I find even agreeable in the mouth of a



pretty woman - It is a sort of Doric dialect, which gives an idea of amiable simplicity (p.221).

This statement is at once contradictory. These Edinburgh people are supposedly very different from those in the south, but as Jerry makes this claim, he also reports that he is easily acclimatised, not only to the “manners and customs” which he does not actually specify but also to the Scots language. The point is not that he has actually “gone native” in some very profound way, but that there was little substantial difference between the polite society from which he has come and the polite society of the Scottish capital. He even goes so far as to observe the decorous “simplicity” of Scots in the mouths of those women (of a similar class to himself) with whom he comes into contact so that the categories of *primitiveness and sophistication become curiously indistinct*.

If the differences between Scotland and England can be exaggerated by the prejudiced, Scotland is not without a distinctiveness which Smollett is keen to explore. Smollett has Matt Bramble impressed by Enlightenment Edinburgh as well as by the thriving industry and commerce of late eighteenth-century Glasgow, but, as well as this distinction of Scottish achievement, the novel does not shy away from showing the less advantageous side of the country. We are made aware in the novel that, in general, the peasantry of Scotland appear more materially impoverished than that of England and Wales. We are also shown the situation of the highlands where, in a chillingly pre-Clearances glimpse, Bramble comments that “There is no want of people in the highlands” (p.253). What Bramble refers to as the “patriarchal” system (the clan system), he sees as the pre-feudal backwardness of the area ensuring that bloody conflict can flare up on the most tenuous of passionate circumstances. In wishing this system to be replaced, Bramble (or Smollett) speaks with that Enlightenment voice which is most coolly rational in its idea of improvement with little thought to the deep and traumatic cultural affects of such change. With chilling precognition also, Bramble remembers the martial competence of the highlands during the 1745 rebellion and comments, “When disciplined they cannot fail of being excellent soldiers” (p.253) (and this some years before the highland regiments of the British army represented a



systematic strategy of ensuring peace at home and British muscularity overseas). Bramble has a further suggestion for the improvement of the highlands:

It cannot be expected, that the gentlemen of this country should execute commercial schemes to render their vassals independent; nor, indeed, are such schemes suited to their way of life and inclination; but a company of merchants might, with proper management, turn to good account a fishery established in this part of Scotland - Our people have a strange itch to colonise America, when the uncultivated parts of our own island might be settled to greater advantage. (p.256)

Bramble speaks as the voice of Enlightenment improvement, alongside the fact that he is a traditional Tory who expresses his sense of community responsibility (especially toward the poor) on a number of occasions in the novel. This balancing of two politico-economic impetuses, which historians of the eighteenth-century (and perhaps Scottish literary historians particularly) have tended to see as more properly antagonistic, highlights not so much “antisyzygy” in a Scottish Enlightenment novelist (Bramble is essentially the mouthpiece for Smollett in the views expressed above), but a demonstration of the complex realities which eighteenth-century thinkers were digesting and attempting to make sense of. Similarly, it is somewhat misleading to enquire whether *Humphry Clinker* is a unionist or a nationalist text (it is usually taken to be unionist by Scottish critics). It displays the same pattern of general patriotism and accommodation to the reality of Britain which we often find in the Scottish Enlightenment, but it is more explicit than most Enlightenment texts in its historical particularisation of the negative effect of the union. We see this as Bramble surveys Edinburgh:

The castle hill, which extends from the outward gate to the upper end of the high-street, is used as a public walk for the citizens, and commands a prospect, equally extensive and delightful, over the county of Fife, on the other side of the Frith, and all along the sea-coast, which is covered with a succession of towns that would seem to indicate a considerable share of commerce; but if the truth must be told, these towns have been falling to decay ever since the union, by which the Scots were in a great measure deprived of their trade with France. (p.233)

Here we find economic complaint which chimes with that uttered by Robert Fergusson around the same



time, but which in the case of Smollett is much more graphic and less impassioned. Riotously comical and scatological though *Humphry Clinker* often is, it operates at times also in the prose-style of the most clinical social history and geography.

Where Smollett brings together his strong sense of the ridiculous and his commitment to empirical fact we find the character of Obadiah Lismahago. Lismahago is, first of all, dressed in stereotypical clothing. Jerry calls him “a self-conceited pedant, awkward, rude, and disputacious” (p.190), and in seeming self-affirmation of this fact Lismahago himself claims to be descended from covenanting stock. Lismahago reveals another side to his character, however, as he champions the poetry of Allan Ramsay, and gradually reveals a cultural breadth belying the narrow stereotype of the religiously-fanatical Scot. He makes a quite remarkable speech which is little commented upon by critics:

When a South and North-Briton (said he) are competitors for a place or commission, which is in the disposal of an English minister or an English general, it would be absurd to suppose that the preference will not be given to the native of England, who has so many advantages over his rival. - First and foremost, he has in his favour that laudable partiality, which, Mr. Addison says, never fails to cleave the heart of an Englishman; secondly he has more powerful connexions, and a greater share of parliamentary interest, by which, those contests are generally decided; and lastly, he has a greater command of money to smooth the way to his success. For my own part, (said he) I know of no Scotch officer, who has risen in the army above the rank of a subaltern, without purchasing every degree of preferment either with money or recruits; but I know many gentlemen of that country, who, for want of money and interest, have grown grey in the rank of lieutenants; whereas very few instances of this ill-fortune are to be found among the natives of South Britain. - Not that I would insinuate that my countrymen have the least reason to complain. - Preferment in the service, like in any other branch of traffic, will naturally favour those who have greatest stock of cash and credit, merit and capacity being supposed equal on all sides. (p.239-40)

This is a slyly ironic speech. It begins with Lismahago showing that he is a modern man of British



identity with his references to North and South Britain (and so expressing an equal and objectified identity - through the mutual relativity of location of the polar parts of the country). Lismahago, however, is modern also in seeing through the shortcomings of the increasingly commercial, freemarket age (in his critique of the lack of meritocracy in the army he applies a sophisticated Tory reading of Whig notions of the increase of opportunity for ability under the conditions of liberal economics). As well as revealing a deeply Tory mindset, consonant to some extent with the views of Bramble, Lismahago also points to the maintenance of old-fashioned patronage, founded in the case of the example he is concerned with, on national, anti-Scottish prejudice.

Lismahago's function is to unsettle preconceptions of the age (even as to begin with, disarmingly, he seems in his character to promise a parade of crank Scottish identity). He is a deeply sceptical character (a version in some of his utterances of David Hume and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers) who highlights the contradictions not only of Scotland, but, more widely, of Britain. He shows that enlightenment and opportunity exist for the Scot and for the Briton; just as both, but especially the Scot, can be subject to prejudiced perspective and backwardness. Lismahago exemplifies these contradictions in his own ragged, impoverished appearance which houses such a very lively, eighteenth-century intellect. Honed by overseas military experience in the British army, Lismahago offers not only the spectacle of the "Enlightened primitive" in his own person, but also through his narrations of his sojourns among the American Indians. These Indians are scandalised by the irrationality and irreverence of French Catholic missionaries:

when they taught that the Supreme Creator of Heaven and Earth had allowed his only Son, his own equal in power and glory, to enter the bowels of a woman, to be born as a human creature, to be insulted, flagellated, and even executed as a malefactor; when they pretended to create God himself, to swallow, digest, revive and multiply him *ad infinitum*, by the help of a little flour and water, the Indians were shocked by the impiety of their presumption. (p.231)

Francis Hutcheson's assertion in the early decades of the century that heathens had a sense of morality



is attested by the episode above.<sup>96</sup> The point of the passage is not simply an attack on Catholicism from the point of view of a Scottish Protestant, but is, of course, something much wider since the *sacrifice of Christ is essential also to reformed Christianity*. The examination of the supposedly primitive and the supposedly enlightened is called into question throughout the novel, not least as the supposed primitive, Lismahago, narrates the story of other primitives with an enlightened panache. *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* marks that moment in eighteenth-century Scottish literature where the interest of the Scottish Enlightenment (and also the Enlightenment generally) in reassimiliating the primitive nature of mankind reaches its most cosmopolitan point. Its interrogation of notions of the “primitive” and the “civilised” is something that we see a little later in the century in the work of Robert Burns.

The neo-classical side of the Scottish Enlightenment is, in many ways, overborne in Scottish literature by its primitivist project. Undoubtedly, this primitivism is partly a result of Enlightenment awareness of the perception of Scotland within the post-1707 British state, and what Scottish Enlightenment activists and writers do is to legitimise the “primitive”, or largely untutored (or non-neoclassical) mindset as a truly cosmopolitan capacity informed by the universality of feeling and rationality. Truly, not all the literary attempts to encode this have worn well in their mannerism, but even in the case of *The Man of Feeling*, we see a text which is part of the forward-loaded trajectory in literary history looking toward the insights of Romanticism and away from the earlier more rigid dispensations of “Augustan” or “neo-classical” aesthetics in Britain and elsewhere. In Scottish literary history, the “struggle” in texts like *The Man of Feeling* or *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* to encapsulate a changing aesthetic and cultural scene, as well as the fact that they come from the pens of writers experiencing a heightened Scottish social and historical turbulence means that such texts are read as confused rather than informed. It is somewhat strange that such *responsive* texts have been read sometimes as being precisely *unresponsive*. The traditional reading of unresponsiveness in these texts,

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<sup>96</sup> Hutcheson’s belief in this regard rested on his doctrine of the “inner sense”; see W.R. Scott *Francis Hutcheson*, pp.57-95 for the social and intellectual background to Hutcheson’s thinking here.



however, is the result of a misidentified, narrowly politicised essentialism which tragically refuses to recognise a whole swathe of the developing Scottish literary and cultural psyche during the eighteenth century. Those *Enlightenment texts* (written all by individuals schooled in or active in the Scottish Enlightenment) which we have looked at have been dismissed all too readily by much mainstream Scottish criticism when these are patriotic, according to their lights, and innovative and progressive in terms of mainstream British and European literary history.

## Chapter Six. Robert Burns: "Doing honour to our language, our nation and our species."

Robert Burns (1759-96) published his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* at Kilmarnock in 1786.

Henry Mackenzie reviewed the volume in *The Lounger*, and found in Burns's work the "surprising effects of Original Genius" and a "Heaven-taught ploughman".<sup>1</sup> Curiously, such judgements are both cued and contradicted by Burns's preface to the "Kilmarnock edition" when he writes:

The following trifles are not the production of the Poet, who, with all the advantage of learned art, and perhaps amid the elegancies and idleness of upper life, looks down for a rural theme, with an eye to Theocritus or Virgil. To the Author of this, these and other celebrated names, their countrymen are, in their original languages, "A fountain shut up", and "a book sealed." Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule, he sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language.<sup>2</sup>

Burns's modesty topos here is consciously undercut by his accomplished syntax and by the fact that he knows the canons of literature. He knows that there is venerable precedence in Theocritus for writing about the everyday lives of humble pastoral folk and that Virgil was intensely interested in the folk who till the soil as the starting-point for the epic progress of the Roman people.<sup>3</sup> As his preface gathers momentum, the mere rustic bard waxes even more lyrically:

It is an observation of that celebrated Poet, whose divine Elegies do honour to our language, our nation, and our species, that 'Humility has depressed many a genius to a hermit, but never raised one to fame.' If any Critic catches at the word *genius*, the Author tells him, once and for all, that he certainly looks upon himself as possesst of some poetic abilities, otherwise his publishing in the manner he has done, would be a manoeuvre below the worst character, which, he hopes his worst enemy will ever give him: but to the genius of a Ramsay, or the glorious dawns of the poor unfortunate

<sup>1</sup> Henry Mackenzie in *Lounger* 9/12/1786; reprinted in Donald Low (ed.), *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage* (London & Boston) [pp.67-71], p.68.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786); reprinted as *The Kilmarnock Poems* edited by Donald Low (London, 1985), p.175.

<sup>3</sup> Taken together, Virgil's epic, the *Aeneid*, and his *Georgics*, on the cultivation of the soil circumscribe his notion of great national progress sprung from a humble basis.



Fergusson, he, with equal unaffected sincerity, declares, that, even in his highest pulse of vanity, he has not the most distant pretensions. These two justly admired Scotch poets he has often had in his eye in the following pieces; but rather with a view to kindle at their flame, than for servile imitation.<sup>4</sup>

Burns here begins by quoting William Shenstone (so again confirming his grasp of the most knowing eighteenth-century literary viewpoint) by way of disarming “apology” for the production of his volume. Swiftly thereafter, Burns moves to assert his “poetic abilities”, actually challenging the critics, in time-honoured eighteenth-century fashion, to run the rule over his work. This confidence is compounded as he next expresses his inspiration in, but not his exclusive modelling upon, Ramsay and Fergusson.

In his preface, Burns indicates an eighteenth-century Scottish poetic sensibility which heterogeneously encompasses respect for classical canonicity, the self-conscious honesty and self-conscious artistry of the English poet Shenstone (the whole preface has something of the air of well-worked Shenstonian “artifice”), and a native Scottish tradition in the Scots language which carries the imprimatur of Ramsay’s “genius” and Fergusson’s “glorious dawning.” These impetuses show the multiplicity with which Burns is comfortable as an eighteenth-century Scottish man of letters. This fact is especially seen in the fact that the “Scotch poets” represent one, Ramsay, whose “genius” (and so canonicity) is easily asserted, and another, Fergusson, who is described in terms of being a very progressive, innovative influence (signalled in his “dawning”). As Mackenzie’s review shows, he is alive to Burns’s diversity (though he struggles to reconcile all of it), and it is not until the end of the review that his philanthropic motivation in emphasising Burns’s lowly station is revealed: to find the funding that will prevent Burns from emigrating to the West Indies.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.175-6.

<sup>5</sup> See Mackenzie, *Op cit.*: “[...] I have learnt from some of his countrymen, that he has been obliged to form the resolution of leaving his native land, to seek under a West Indian clime that shelter and support which Scotland has denied him. But I trust means may be found to prevent this resolution from taking place” (p.70-1). Mackenzie’s practical motivation for emphasising, indeed over-emphasising, Burns’s humble station is too often overlooked, in the urge to read Mackenzie’s trope solely as a piece of cultural engineering consonant with the aesthetic predilections of the late Scottish Enlightenment.

From the very beginning Burns's "literary" status has been a ground of contention. The extremely censorious attitude of Hugh Blair as Burns prepared *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* for its Edinburgh edition of 1787 represents the narrowest response of a contemporary literary authority to Burns's work. Blair thought that some of Burns's pieces were "too licentious", both with regard to scripture and in the depiction of moral behaviour (especially in the case of the latter in the "Love and Liberty" sequence which Burns thought of including in the "Edinburgh edition").<sup>6</sup> Blair wished Burns "to preserve the fame of Virtuous Sensibility, & of humorous fun, without offence."<sup>7</sup> If Blair doubts the "full" (i.e. properly regulated) literary sensibility of Burns, James Macaulay in 1787 questioned, precisely, Burns's claim to being a "Heaven-taught ploughman":

But still for a' the blast that's made,  
I doubt you are some sleekit blade,  
That never handled school or spade,  
Or yet the pleugh,  
Unless it were to hae it said -  
An' that's enough:

For by the scraps o' French an' Latin,  
That flung athort your buik fu' thick in,  
It's easy seen you've aft been flitting  
Frae school to school;  
An' nae thanks to your head an' wittin'  
Tho' you're nae fool.<sup>8</sup>

Macaulay was alive to the rather thin "deception" which accompanied Burns coming before printed notice. Curiously, however, as much of the cult of Burns attests, the view of Burns as simple rustic speaking from the heart (and sometimes from other parts of the body) is one that has passed from the mouths of Edinburgh *literati* of the eighteenth century to the many bardolators who survive down to

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<sup>6</sup> Hugh Blair, Undated Notes (1787) printed in Low (ed.), *Op cit.*, p.82.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> James Macaulay, "Rhyming Epistle to Mr. R-B-, Ayrshire" in *Edinburgh Evening Courant* 23/6/1787; reprinted in Low (ed.), *Op cit.*, p.83 (pp.83-5).



the present day.<sup>9</sup> The peculiar compression of Burns from Blair to bardolators in later ages is one added to by the twentieth-century Scottish critical tradition in its pursuit of essential (non-English) and beleaguered purity of voice in Burns and other eighteenth-century Scots language poets. It is only really since the 1990s that a plethora of criticism has begun to point the way toward an appreciation of Burns that reads the creative possibility in the diversity and complexity of impetus in Burns's work.<sup>10</sup> What follows in this chapter seeks to build upon the appreciation of Burns as a writer flexing his creative muscles at a time of bewildering cultural transition in Scotland and in the western world more generally.

The "Kilmarnock edition" begins with "The Twa Dogs: A Tale", which was probably composed for the volume as a showpiece opener.<sup>11</sup> It is a text, in octosyllabic rhyming couplets across 238 lines of satirical didacticism, which is at once recognisable in belonging to the mainstream of eighteenth-century British poetry. The sheer confidence of Burns in this mode is striking as he enmeshes in it the use of the Scots language, drawing on the antecedent of Robert Fergusson (on whose "Mutual Complaint of Plainstones and Causey in their Mother-tongue" (1773) the poem is most obviously, though loosely, modelled).<sup>12</sup> The opening note of the opening poem of the "Kilmarnock edition" is an interesting one for a poet whose sense of realism is so often vaunted: "Twas in that place

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of this issue see Richard J. Finlay, "The Burns Cult and Scottish Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" in Kenneth Simpson (ed.), *Love and Liberty: A Bicentenary Celebration* (East Linton, 1997), pp.69-78. See also Nicholas Roe, "Authenticating Robert Burns" in Robert Crawford (ed.), *Robert Burns & Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp.159-179.

<sup>10</sup> The landmark study in twentieth-century Burns studies is Thomas Crawford, *Burns: A Study of the Poems and Songs* (1960); reprinted James Thin: Edinburgh, 1978. The very wide-ranging identification of Burns in his literary and cultural context established by Crawford in his book is followed by four notable collections which have rapidly opened up and widened the terrain on which Burns is seen: R.D.S. Jack & Andrew Noble (eds.), *The Art of Robert Burns* (Totowa, N.J., 1982); Kenneth Simpson, *Burns Now* (Edinburgh, 1994); Simpson (ed.) *Love and Liberty Op cit.*; and G. Ross Roy (ed.), *Studies in Scottish Literature* Volume XXX (1999). The collections edited by Simpson both derive from his pioneering series of annual Burns conferences at the University of Strathclyde (1990-the present). This series has represented the biggest set of transactions in Burns scholarship ever, an exchange in ideas which has been at the forefront of the welcome opening out of Burns studies.

<sup>11</sup> *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* 3 volumes, edited by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1968), Poem no.71. "The Tale of Twa Dogs," says Gilbert Burns, "was composed after the resolution of publishing was nearly taken." (cited in Kinsley Volume III, p.1104).

<sup>12</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* II, pp.122-6.



o' Scotland's isle/That bears the name o' auld king Coil" (ll.1-2). Scotland, mythically, has become an island, one of whose native kingdoms is Burns's native Coil, or Kyle. A deliberately blinkered *Scotocentric* sense of geography is established, then, to be activated later in the fullness of the poem's themes. The reduction of the geographic sense is accompanied by a fabular reduction of participants in a dialogue about humanity to dogs. These dogs are a gentleman's dog, Caesar, a ploughman's dog, Luath (and this ploughman, a "rhyming, ranting, raving billie" (l.24) is, clearly, Burns himself). The choice of Luath, from Macpherson's Ossianic productions is an interesting one. Burns appropriates what he takes to be yet another transparently fictitious element for the fabric of his poem and this prevasive sense of unreality is put into service toward forming an ironic counterpoint to the unbelievability of the real (human) world as the two dogs combine to unravel this throughout the rest of the poem.

The world of the dogs, ironically, is more coherent than the world of humanity:

Nae doubt but they were fain o' ither,  
 An' unco pack an' thick thegither,  
 Wi' social nose whyles snuff'd an' snowket:  
 Whyles mice and modewarks they howket;  
 An' worry'd ither in diversion;  
 Till tir'd at last wi' mony a farce,  
 They set them down upon their arse,  
 An' there began a lang digression  
 About the *lords o' the creation*. (ll.37-46)

The natural behaviour of the two dogs, consorting together and exploring the world with "social nose" contrasts with the divisive self-seeking, unsociable behaviour of the pretentious "lords of the creation".<sup>13</sup> Thus a keynote of Burns's *oeuvre* is struck: the *unnatural* behaviour of mankind to be repeatedly held in dialogue with the truly natural world. Caesar's opening speech draws attention to his master's accumulation of wealth compared to the starving peasant-farmer (ll.47-70). Luath's response is to say that, truly, the cotter-folk are beset by disadvantage, but that they are resilient and "maistly

<sup>13</sup> We perhaps here see something of the influence of Henry Mackenzie upon Burns. Notoriously, Burns had worn out two copies of *The Man of Feeling* and wrote "Harley rouses all the God in man" (See Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, p.14). The extreme sympathy extended to the animals in "The Twa Dogs" is both a satirising of mankind's frequent failure in sympathy, while at the same time, redressing the balance (albeit in comic mode) through the poet's exemplification of sympathy first to the dogs and, by extension, to humanity more generally.



wonderful contented" (l.84). We have, then, a reiteration of Fergusson's couching of a sturdy peasantry in "The Farmer's Ingle" and elsewhere. Caesar talks of the laird's factor verbally insulting and poinding the gear of the poor-folk when the cannot pay their rent. To this, Luath replies:

They're no sae wretched's ane wad think;  
Tho' constantly on poortith's brink  
The dearest comfort o' their lives,  
Their grushie weans an' faithfu' wives;  
The prattling things are just their pride,  
That sweetens a' their fireside.

An' whyles twalpennie-worth o' nappy  
Can mak the bodies unco happy,  
They lay aside their private cares,  
To mind the Kirk and State affairs;  
They'll talk o' patronage an' priests,  
Wi' kindling fury i' their breasts,  
Or tell what new taxation's comin  
An ferlie at the folk in LON'ON

As bleak-fac'd Hallowmass returns,  
They get the jovial, rantin kirns,  
When rural life, of ev'ry station,  
Unite in common recreation;  
Love blinks, Wit slaps an' social Mirth  
Forgets there's care upo' the earth. (ll.111-129)

Here we find the assertion of the family bond of peasant society gathered around the ingle and the festive occasion, and an unsentimental assertion that these people, fired by cheap ale, find the energy to argue over politics and religion. The intellectualism of the people debating the complex patronage issue, and informed presumably by newspapers, of the wider world (including London), in the face of which they are sceptical, speaks of a literate, independent-minded Ayrshire Presbyterian folk which Burns knew from his own background. We find also, however, in the many graftings of Fergussonian influence in the poem, the importation of a *joie de vivre* which goes against the stereotype of the popular Presbyterian mindset through much of the eighteenth century. Certainly, Fergusson's "The Farmer's Ingle" shows a peasantry which might be Presbyterian enjoying the simple pleasures of life, but the

folk are certainly not explicitly so. In Burns's poem, Hallowmas causes the peasantry to "Unite in common recreation" as they love, show wit and enjoy "social mirth". In a reprisal of Fergusson's "The Daft-Days" (see "The Twa Dogs", ll.129-138), the folk are happy in Winter in their enclosed community while the forces of deceit are without, as some middleman, perhaps a tenant-farmer, seeks to impress his overlord by increasing the rent of the cottar's holding in line with improved methods of agricultural yield.<sup>14</sup> The result is the driving out of the small cottar, and Luath laments that the landowners, in whose name this is done, are of necessity in the dark over such events since they are sometimes members of parliament serving the greater good of Britain. The worldly-wise Caesar replies that party politics makes members of parliament mere yes-men, and that parliamentarians spend their time simply enjoying London and even debauching "at Vienna or Versailles" (l.159).

Ceasar speaks with impassioned condemnation of the politicians who act not "For Britain's guid! for her destruction!/Wi' dissipation, feud an' faction!" (ll.169-70). Here we find a familiar note of complaint from a Scottish poet, which can be traced back to Allan Ramsay. Britain is tearing itself apart in "faction" fuelled by the immoral, self-interest of politicians. Burns brings to this long-standing, hackneyed theme, however, his personal awareness of destructive social and economic influence. It is impossible not to bring to an informed reading of the poem a strong awareness of the near-bankruptcy of Burns's father, William, a small farmer, squeezed during the 1780s by the forces of improvement on land owned by absentee landlords, involved in politics in the south.<sup>15</sup>

"The Twa Dogs" is a bitter satire questioning where the true cultural health of the commonwealth actually lies. Under the veneer of order, rendered in the poetic simulacrum of polished couplets (which is so typical of eighteenth-century prosody in "urbane" verse), it delivers a searing

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<sup>14</sup> See Kinsley (ed.), Volume III, p.1106.

<sup>15</sup> See James Mackay, *Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp.67-9 & 112-18 for the financial travails of William Burness. Mackay's is the most measured biography to have been written regarding the known facts of the life of Robert Burns and his associations.



indictment of a society which is actually irresponsible at the top. The fantastic elements of talking animals and mythical geography are emblematic ultimately of the benighted state in which Scotland, and indeed Britain actually exists (these fantasies parody the supposed credulity of the peasantry in the eyes of thier social superiors whom they can actually see through). Burns draws on the resonances of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots to frame an opposition to the dissolution stemming from the upper echelons of the body politic (and economic) in a humble, basically decent Scottish presbyterian peasantry. Burns's first poem in the "Kilmarnock edition", then, draws on various poetic and cultural wells for a highly coherent literary performance which ironically counterpoints the critique of socio-political malaise made in the text.

The second poem in the "Kilmarnock", "Scotch Drink", sees Burns parody his own nationalism. Again the poet draws inspiration from Fergusson through an ironic re-writing of the latter's "Caller Water" (1773).<sup>16</sup> Taking the "habbie" stanza as well-established cultural signature of Scottishness, the poem proceeds in drunken bombast to assert the superiority of "Scotch" whisky over foreign beverages. As with the ranting, vaunting persona of the narrator, however, "Scotch" is a rather ambiguous commodity. To begin with, the drink is presented as panacea:

Thou clears the head o' doited lear;  
 Thou chears the heart o' drooping care;  
 Thou strings the nerves o' Labour-sair,  
                     At's weary toil;  
 Thou even brightens dark Despair,  
                     Wi' gloomy smile.       (11.31-6)

For all the benefits of the drink, however, the drunken, digressive narrator in chauvinistic mode ought to make us suspicious. Real problems close to home are all too readily cast aside, while he descends into xenophobia:

Wae worth that *Brandy*, burnan trash!  
 Fell source o' monie a pain an' brash!

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<sup>16</sup> Kinsley (ed.), Poem no. 77.

Twins monie a puir, doylt, drunken hash  
 O' half his days;  
 An' sends, besides, auld *Scotland's* cash  
 To her warst faes. (ll.85-90)

This warning of Scotland losing money is undercut in the next stanza by the narrator enjoining "poor, plackless devils like myself" (l.93) to attend to this lesson. The implication must be either that he has been poor all along and so there is a deeper, native cause to his poverty, or that his nationalism is the result of having being prone himself to drinking foreign alcohol. Either way, the narrator does not recommend himself as a wise man. The poem ends also on a disingenuous note:

Fortune, if thou'll but gie me still  
 Hale breeks, a scone, an' *whisky gill*,  
 An' rowth o' *rhyme* to rave at will,  
 Tak a' the rest,  
 An' deal't about as thy blind skill  
 Directs thee best. (ll.121-6)

This is the kind of topos of simple pleasures which ought not to be taken at face value. The performance foregoing the final stanza has shown "blind skill" as the narrator rambles through all the ills of life and comes up with the solution to all of these as imbibing whisky. The poem actually represents a subtler version of the type of dramatic monologue which Burns delivers in "Holy Willie's Prayer" (which was already written at this time). Placed after "The Twa Dogs", with its politically-literate beasts, the poem with its thesis of whisky as panacea cannot, of course, be taken seriously.

"Scotch Drink" is followed in the "Kilmarnock" by "The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer to the Right Honourable, The Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons".<sup>17</sup> The poem represents an ironically confused situation, like "Scotch Drink", but with more direct political purchase. The author's "earnest cry and prayer" is clearly undercut from the very first stanza:

Ye Irish lords, ye knights an' squires,  
 Wha represent our Burgh an' Shires,

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<sup>17</sup> Kinsley (ed.), Poem no. 81.



An' dousely manage our affairs  
In Parliament,  
To you a simple Bardie's pray'rs  
Are humble sent. (ll.1-6)

These lines refer to the confused political situation where "Irish Lords had Scottish seats in Parliament, while the eldest sons of Scottish peers remained ineligible".<sup>18</sup> The poem is also written against the backdrop of the Wash Act of 1784 which had increased the excise duty on whisky exported to England, which the narrator claims is destroying the whisky industry. Scotland, then, is thoroughly controlled from without. Forlornly, the narrator entreats the (Irish) politicians to tell the story:

Paint Scotland greetan owre her thistle;  
Her mutchkin stowp as toom's a whistle;  
An' d-mn'd Excise-men in a bussle  
Seizan a stell,  
Triumphant crushan't like a muscle  
Or limpet shell.

Then on the tither hand present her,  
A blackguard Smuggler; right behind her,  
An cheek-for-chow, a cluffie Vintner,  
Colleaguin join,  
Picking her pouch as bare as Winter  
Of a' kind coin. (ll.37-49)

There is here real complaint that Scotland is losing out in the context of the British state, but the situation is far from simple. There is an allegorical flatness in "Scotland greetan owre her thistle" and as a vulnerable female generally. We know that no-one in the sophisticated (indeed corruptly sophisticated) body-politic will be moved by such images (and so, of course, does Burns). This is nicely acknowledged as the narrator avows his own lack of eloquence:

Some o' you nicely ken the laws,  
To round the period an' pause,  
An' with rhetoric clause on clause  
To mak harangue;  
Then echo thro' Saint Stephen's wa's

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<sup>18</sup> Kinsley (ed.), Volume III, p.1139-1144 for a thorough elucidation of the political background to the poem.

What we find here, of course, is Burns ironically foregrounding his own skill "to round the period an' pause", which he knows can do no practical, political good (his poem is ultimately a disgusted, empty gesture). Rhetorical debate is precisely what so many Scottish parliamentarians are caught up in:

Dempster, a true-blue Scot I'se warran;  
 Thee, aith-dealing chaste Kilkerran;  
 An' that glib-gabbet Highland Baron,  
                     The Laird o' Graham;  
 And ane, a chap that's d-mn'd auldfarran,  
                     Dundas his name.  
 Erskine, a spunkie norland billie;  
 True Campbells, Frederick an' Ilay;  
 An' Livistone, the bauld Sir Willie;  
                     An monie ithers,  
 Whom auld Demosthenes or Tully  
                     Might own for brothers.

Arouse my boys! exert your mettle,  
 To get auld Scotland back her kettle!  
 Or faith! I'll wad my new pleugh-pettle,  
                     Ye'll see't ot lang,  
 She'll teach you, wi' a reckan whittle,  
                     Anither sang. (ll.72-90)

Even Dempster, a man Burns admired for his championing of the small farmer, is caught up in the "glib-gabbet" chatter of a parliament which does no practical good.<sup>19</sup> What we have here is Burns mimicking the catalogue of Scottish martial glory found, for instance, in the work of Ramsay, though the litany of distinguished Scottish names is now part of an entirely impotent political catalogue doing nothing for Scotland. The narrator threatens violence:

An' L--d! if ance they pit her till't  
 Her tartan petticoat she'll kilt,  
 An' dirk an' pistol at her belt,  
                     She'll tak the streets,

<sup>19</sup> Kinsley (ed.), Volume III, p.1139-1144.



An' rin her whittle to the kilt,  
I' th' first she meets! (ll.96-101)

This threatened highland rage, however, is an energy similarly misdirected to Scottish parliamentary energy, as one of the stanzas in the “postscript” to the poem makes clear:

But bring a Scotchman frae his hill,  
Clap in his cheek a Highland gill,  
Say, such is royal Georgie's will,  
An' there's the foe,  
He has nae thought but how to kill  
Twa at a blow. (ll.163-8)

There is a hint of Fergusson's “black banditti” as Burns brings out the logic of a highland martial prowess cleverly harnessed by Britain in a way no-one had so trenchantly identified before him. A particularly bitter conclusion ends the poem:

Scotland, my auld, respected Mither!  
Tho' whyles ye moistify your leather,  
Till whare ye sit, on craps o' heather  
Ye tine your dram;  
Freedom and Whisky gang thegither,  
Tak aff your dram! (ll.181-6)

“Freedom and whisky gang thegither” represents here a note of despair rather than real defiance. We see in “The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer” the old symbols and motifs - healthy fare and martial prowess being reached for by the narrator and being found to be unavailable in the new, complex reality of eighteenth-century British politics. Burns's nationalist poetic impulse imbibed from Ramsay and Fergusson is a mode replayed in an ironic tongue in this instance to expose the inadequacy now of the old national iconography of the earlier eighteenth century.

It is a remarkable fact that Burns, the arch-satiriser of Scottish Presbyterianism, simultaneously does a great deal to establish the representation of the integrity of the simple Presbyterian values of the peasantry. Truly, Burns response to Presbyteranism was complex. First of

all, he was in receipt of historic traditions of Scottish Calvinist indomitability as we see when he celebrates the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643:

The Solemn League and Covenant  
Now brings a smile, now brings a tear.  
But sacred Freedom, too was theirs:  
If thou'rt a slave, indulge thy sneer.<sup>20</sup>

These lines, written in 1794, show Burns's increasing awareness of a disparate Scottish cultural identity. Placed alongside his more frequently-vented "sentimental Jacobitism", they help show Burns's empathy with a multifarious Scottishness in a manner which Ramsay or Fergusson could never have done. We see Burns (in the highly-charged political context of the 1790s) praising the tenacious principled stand for which the Covenanters suffered throughout the religious wars of the seventeenth century (and so in the vanguard of the literary rehabilitation of a strand of Scottish identity which was later to be dealt with sympathetically by Hogg, Galt and, to a lesser extent, Scott).<sup>21</sup> Burns's ambidexterity and the deep pluralism of his surrounding culture is also shown with regard to Scottish Presbyterianism. When Burns became, predominantly, a song-writer and collector from around 1789, the traditions of Jacobitism were a particularly rich repository of material, but we should be aware also of another tradition of song, the bawdy tradition, in which Burns can be seen to be involved with the publication in 1799 (three years after the poet's death) of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*. It is clear from this volume that Burns was in receipt of traditions of folk-comment in Ayrshire which cut through the usual puritanical tincture which Presbyterianism was given. For instance, we see this in a song known to have been collected by Burns, "Errock Brae", featuring a stanza on denominational sexual appetites:

A Prelate he louns on before,

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<sup>20</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, no. 512.

<sup>21</sup> The background to Burns's extraction of the Presbyterian identity as a meaningful and positive one, in the face of his inherited Scots poetic tradition which, in the figures of Ramsay and Fergusson, was so obviously hostile to the traditions of Presbyterianism has begun to be elucidated by Liam McIlvanney in his " 'Sacred Freedom': Presbyterian radicalism and the Politics of Robert Burns" in K. Simpson (ed.), *Love and Liberty*, pp. 168-182.



A Catholic behin',  
But gie me a Cameronian,  
He'll mow a body blin'.<sup>22</sup>

It is very useful to be reminded by such material that Burns's own work on the notion of Calvinist hypocrisy was part of a wider, counterweighting culture of such commentary in Presbyterian Scotland.

If Burns's satire on Presbyterian practices of worship and mindset, "The Holy Fair", could be frowned upon by the moderate churchman and literary critic, Hugh Blair, it is as well that he did not cast his eyes on "Holy Willie's Prayer".<sup>23</sup> This latter poem was not published in Burns's lifetime (being excised also from the first collected edition of his works in 1800). It is a seminal satire on Calvinism in Scottish literature, being "written in the language of the 'saints' - that improbable amalgam of biblical English and colloquial Scots which was characteristic of the Covenanter and the Presbyterian Evangelical."<sup>24</sup> This mimicry extends to a brilliant psychological portrait of Calvinist hypocrisy, much more fully-extended than anything found in Archibald Pitcairne or Allan Ramsay. It is a character-study related to the cool apprehension of Hume and others of Calvinist fanaticism and it perhaps represents also an extremely deliciously mischievous kind of "sympathy", the doctrine which Burns had imbibed from his reading of Adam Smith.<sup>25</sup> The presumptuous pride of Willie, which is hugely inflated and resoundingly hollow, is effortlessly essayed in the first five stanzas:

O Thou that in the heavens does dwell!  
Wha, as it pleases best thyself,  
Sends ane to heaven and ten to h-ll,  
A' for thy glory.  
And no for ony gude or ill

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<sup>22</sup> *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799) edited by G. Ross Roy (Columbia, 1999), "Errock Brae" p.12.

<sup>23</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, no.53. "Holy Willie's Prayer" was withheld from the first collected edition Burns in *The Works of Robert Burns* edited by James Currie (Liverpool, 1800). It was first published in pamphlet form in 1799 or 1800 and did not appear until in any collected edition of Burns until 1810.

<sup>24</sup> Kinsley (ed.), III, p.1048.

<sup>25</sup> See Carol McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era* (Georgia, 1985), which remains one of the very few specialised, rather than generalised, book-length studies of Burns in his context. McGuirk's study points toward a more widespread imbibing by Burns of Smithsonian sympathy than is usually taken to be the case (see especially pp.58-64, 83-7 & 90-3).

They've done before thee. -

I bless and praise thy matchless might,  
When thousands thou has left in night,  
That I am here before thy sight,  
For gifts and grace,  
A burning and a shining light  
To a' this place. --

What was I, or my generation,  
That I should get such exaltation?  
I, wha deserv'd most just damnation,  
For broken laws  
Sax thousand years ere my creation,  
Thro' Adam's curse.

When from my mother's womb I fell,  
Thou might hae plunged me deep in hell,  
To gnash my gooms, and weep, and wail,  
In burning lakes,  
Where damned souls roar and yell  
Chain'd to their stakes. -

Yet I am here, a chosen sample,  
To shew thy grace is great and ample:  
I'm here, a pillar o' thy temple  
Strong as a rock,  
A guide, a ruler and example  
To a' thy flock. -- (ll.1-30)

There is here a confident satirical force with which no previous eighteenth-century writer had targetted Calvinism. It features a ventriloquism which is an ironic Smithsonian act of "putting oneself in the place of another" and is informed by the Enlightenment interest in psychology generally, so that it extends into a series of witty double entendres where Willie is actually boasting of his physical, rather than his spiritual, prowess.<sup>26</sup> The protagonist is alluding to his erection, or his "ample" "rock" or "pillar" or

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<sup>26</sup> For Adam Smith's keynote statements of sympathetically putting oneself in the place of another see, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, 1982), pp.12-13; 21-2; 51-2. See also John Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, pp.18-19 for the positing of Burns being influenced by Smith's discussion of duty in the third book of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "If we saw ourselves in the light which others see us, or in which they would see us if they knew all, a reformation would be generally be unavoidable." These lines provide a means for reading "Holy Willie's Prayer" which simultaneously contains some sympathetic understanding for Willie as well as moral disapproval.



“ruler.” The false rationality of Willie, in its theological garb of the creation myth and the notion of grace, is systematically revealed as a mask for barely suppressed, gross appetites. “Holy Willie’s Prayer” is a poem ultimately tapping into both the satirical panache of the eighteenth-century tradition of poetry in Scots and the psychological insight of the Scottish Enlightenment. It is a product too, we might infer, of the scurrilous, bawdy verse on religious practice native to Ayrshire. It is also, in part, a product of the satellite Ayrshire Enlightenment circle whose life had helped give rise to the real-life circumstances surrounding the poem.<sup>27</sup> “Holy Willie’s Prayer”, then, shows Burns wielding and synthesising various strands of a diverse Scottish culture to create what is for many people the greatest comic poem of serious comment ever produced in Scotland.

On very similar themes to “Holy Willie’s Prayer”, but infinitely more palatable for inclusion in the “Kilmarnock”, is “The Holy Fair”.<sup>28</sup> The close oxymoronic effects in mode and language which Burns operates in the former poem are present also in the latter. “The Holy Fair” was written after “Holy Willie’s Prayer” and represents a much subtler, more considered handling of the same Calvinist mindset. Written in the “Christis Kirk” stanza-form so as to provide a carnivalesque vehicle for the scenario, it is modelled on Fergusson’s “Hallow-Fair” (1773), a poem in the same form which shows the peasantry congregating to enjoy a winter festive occasion. “Hallow-Fair” is one of Fergusson’s poems celebrating a healthy peasantry in the midst of genuine (non-urban) communal enjoyment. In “The Holy Fair”, a communion field-gathering of the kind popular in eighteenth-century lowland Scotland, sees Burns deriving huge ironic purchase against the work of Fergusson, in that his “hallow” fair is explicitly religious (unlike the pagan, or Catholic November festivity of his predecessor’s poem), and follows that operation in Fergusson’s other poems where disordered, darker “festivity” is charted.

<sup>27</sup> The poem’s origins in the attempts by the “auld licht”, William Auld to persecute Burns’s culture landlord, Gavin Hamilton through the presbytery of Ayr and the involvement of their friend, the lawyer Robert Aiken in defending Hamilton, and the ultimate circulation of the poem in manuscript form by these men to others in their class, demonstrates the network of modern-thinking men willing to enjoy the satirisation of older, more superstitious ways. (See Robert Burns, *Selected Poems* edited by Carol McGurk (London, 1993), pp.200-202 for an excellent description of the episode.)

<sup>28</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, no. 70.

The movement of the poem is typical of the original “Christis Kirk” poem in moving from a scene of great order and beauty in human deportment to one of chaotic ugliness. Burns’s opening *though*, shows not an ordered urban or social scene, but, in a flourish which owes a debt both to James Thomson’s nature-painting and Fergusson’s opening scene in “Leith Races” (which probably also owes a debt to Thomson), an ordered natural scene:

Upon a simmer Sunday morn,  
 When Nature’s face is fair,  
 I walked forth to view the corn,  
 An’ snuff the callor air.  
 -- The rising sun, owre Galston Muirs,  
 Wi’ glorious light was glintan;  
 The hare were hirplan down the furrs,  
 The lav’rocks they were chantan  
 Fu’ sweet that day. (Stanza I)

Instead of the usual real-life pretty lasses of the “Christis Kirk” original to be met in all their finery, the narrator meets three allegorical lasses. The first of these is the well turned-out Fun, analogous to the meeting of Fergusson’s narrator with “Mirth” in “Leith Races” (1773). As in the case of Mirth in “Leith Races”, gentle fun will be over-written with riotous appetite in the course of the poem. Burns introduces two additional allegorical figures in his poem, who turn out, in their sombre dress, to be “Superstition” and Hypocrisy”. Fun invites the narrator to go along with her to Mauchline Fair where they will be able to laugh at the other two figures. Thus the psychological fabric of the poem is set in motion, as it these repressed and repressive figures which are to be the object of satire, rather than the motley crew of whores, adolescents and weavers (with their traditional penchant for riot) who inhabit the poem alongside the gentry and the divines who are primarily to be ridiculed. Amidst this tumultuous carnivalesque crowd, there is one blink of natural virtue:

O happy is that man, an’ blest!  
 Nae wonder that it pride him!  
 Whase ain dear lass, that he likes best,



Comes clinkan down beside him!  
 Wi' arm repos'd on the chair-back;  
 He sweetly does compose him;  
 Which, by degrees, slips round her neck  
 An's loof upon her bosom  
 Unkend that day. (Stanza XI)

In a deliberate usurpation of the religious terminology, it is the young lover who is "blest" and what we see here is the emergence of Burns's contribution to the idea of the natural virtue of the common man which is fed both by the influence of Fergusson in his depiction of the virtuous peasantry and the Scottish Enlightenment's championing of virtuous, primitive sensibility.

More typical of the scene is the riotous or animalistic behaviour of the religiously inclined. This begins with the preachers themselves:

Hear how he clears the points o' Faith  
 Wi rattlin an' thumpan!  
 Now meekly calm, now wild in wrath,  
 He's stampin, an' he's jumpan!  
 His lengthen'd chin, his turn'd up snout,  
 His eldritch squeel an' gestures,  
 O how they fire the heart devout,  
 Like cantharidian plaisters  
 On sic a day! (Stanza XIII)

Beneath, or perhaps on top, of the religious demeanour, the "true" human being is revealed even in its repression shows. The metaphor of the cantharidian plaster, used to combat the pox, wittily comments upon the relationship between the supposed spiritual scourge of the flesh, pointing to the actually different "drawing out" of sin which the obsessive, "Hell-fire" sermons led to.<sup>29</sup> Such traditional peddlers of the word frown upon modern, moderate preachers:

What signifies his barren shine,  
 Of moral pow'rs on reason?  
 His English style, an' gesture fine,

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<sup>29</sup> See McGuirk (ed.) *Op cit.*, p.218.

Are a' clean out o' season.  
 Like SOCRATES or ANTONINE,  
 Or some auld pagan heathen,  
 The moral man he does define,  
 But ne'er a word o' faith in  
 That's right that day. (Stanza XV)

The crass "auld lights" in religion identify "English style" as decadent and, curiously, with the pagans, Socrates and Antonine. The traditionalists, then emerge as both culturally anti-modern and anti-classical. "New licht" religion is identified by Burns with the Enlightenment ideal of "moral powers", with its clear roots in the philosophy of Francis Hutcheson.<sup>30</sup> Opposed to this is the "faith" of the traditionalists insisting merely on the agencies of belief and grace and holding to the doctrine that in the divine economy man can affect nothing. The "auld lights", then, stand for an unchanging world, and the traditional filed-communions represent, on their part, an attempt to mimic this immutability. Their *cordon sanitaire*, however, is breached. As well as the new moderate men of the church with whom they now have to share their platforms, the people themselves dissent from the harsher strictures of the Calvinist mindset with its strictures against the dangers of the flesh. Their challenge to the traditionalists is much more comprehensive than that of the moderates:

How mony hearts this day converts,  
 O' sinners and o' lasses!  
 Their hearts o' stane, gin night is gone,  
 As saft as ony flesh is.  
 There's some are fou o' love divine;  
 There's some are fou o' brandy  
 An' monie jobs that day begin,  
 May end in Houghmagandie  
 Some ither day. (Stanza XXVII)

The "communicants" here are resistant to the Biblical "reason" of the "auld lights" and take the more liberal message of the moderates to an extreme. The insistence of the moderates upon "love" rather than "faith" is satirically confirmed in the indulgence of the flesh by the people. Thus, neither side of the

<sup>30</sup> See Broadie (ed.), *The Scottish Enlightenment: An Anthology*, pp.117-21 & 130-2 for Hutcheson's key-statements on the "moral powers".



church makes any difference to the behaviour of most of the people, which is at least as enduringly carnal as the old "Christis Kirk" poem itself.

A number of things about "The Holy Fair" are interesting with regard to Burns's cultural vision. First of all there is the use of the Scots poetry tradition which is used, in the "Christ's Kirk" stanza form, as an implicit bulwark against the assumption that Calvinism is in control of Scotland, or at least Ayrshire. We find in the poem also a refinement of Fergusson's attitude to the celebrations of the people, which tends to be either wholesome or, at the other extreme, badly out of control. In "The Holy Fair" we find a similar diagnosis to that often made by Fergusson, where the people's bad behaviour is licensed by the maladministration of their lives by those socially superior to them. However, with Burns, while the ideal (expressed in Stanza XI) of a happy, loving union between man and woman is held up, the more hedonistic side of human behaviour is in itself not merely the result of Calvinist repression, but something, more naturally produced. Throughout his poetry, and perhaps in a way unparalleled in any poet in Europe contemporaneous with Burns, there is an insistence upon man as part of the natural world. In general terms, this is cued by the influence of the Enlightenment and the Scots poetry tradition of the eighteenth-century with its undespairing Tory outlook on the corruption of humanity, but the extreme hold, as we shall see, which this vision had on the poet must be taken ultimately as a personal predilection of outlook more than anything.

If we see a subtle adaptation of the outlook of Fergusson in "The Holy Fair", we see also a comment which we might find surprising in that it is glided over by a poet of the eighteenth-century Scots revival. In the poem the Scots language is the property of the "auld lights", or the culturally backward. We can argue that, in antisyzygical terms, Burns himself has not properly added up the pros and cons of his prevailing cultural outlook. It might also be suggested that the line on "English style" indicates that Burns himself is not against the English language *per se* and such a view is clearly supportable not only from his own stylish letters in English, and the fact that he is steeped in English

poetry but also in his own productions in English and Scots-English which show his resort to the language as a powerfully creative medium. However, within the context of the reading of “The Holy Fair” which I have been suggesting, we might also suggest that the unremarked line on “English style” and its implication that the “auld lights” are upholders of the Scots tongue, we can proffer a different reading to that which sees Burns unthinkingly including English among a progress which is crassly resisted by the forces of reaction. Burns, in the poem, concedes nothing to the “auld lights”. They think they are in control, but they are not. Just as the people wrestle from them at the field-gathering a different “register” of love, so Burns in this poem is going to wrestle from the forces of religious reaction, the Scots language and use it in a poem attacking these. For the acultural “auld lights”, there is no subtle discrimination among what they regard as the vanity of culture with the result that their outlook throws out the garbled conjunction of Socrates and Antonine. Socrates, of course, is a major architect of western thought, and Antonine is the architect of a wall to divide Scotland and England (even as Antonine is listed among the condemned, his wall, presumably, is a good thing in theory as a bulwark against “English style”). There is, then, an indiscriminating mindset being diagnosed amongst the “auld lights”, which is equally ignorant of the universal of cultural knowledge and human nature.

Where Burns is scathing about the “official” church in “The Holy Fair” he is famously respectful toward peasant Presbyterian piety in “The Cotter’s Saturday Night”.<sup>31</sup> This poem must be seen within the agenda of eighteenth-century primitivism which is fed from the various sources of James Thomson, Robert Fergusson and the Scottish Enlightenment generally. It belongs too to the wider context of proto-Romanticism through the inspiration of English poets like Thomas Gray, from whom Burns takes the epigraph for “The Cottar’s Saturday Night”. This epigraph praises the “useful toil” and the “homely joys and destiny obscure” of the peasantry.<sup>32</sup> What we begin to notice, then, is

<sup>31</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, no. 72.

<sup>32</sup> Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
 Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,  
 The short and simple annals of the Poor.



the way in which Burns' poetry in its intense attention to the everyday rural setting is the consummation of a widely spread eighteenth-century poetic aspiration to turn away from the urban, and toward a supposedly more settled, quasi-mystical setting. Burns's "realism", however, in a poem like "The Holy Fair" is frowned upon by Scottish *literati* like Hugh Blair, while the reality of "honest toil" of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" in tandem with its quasi-mystical peasant location is, for Blair, to be commended.<sup>33</sup> Burns, when not quasi-mystical enough and when showing peasant behaviour at its most riotous is far from being a proto-Romantic (where the high mode of Romantic treatment of the peasant might be seen in the rather lachrymose productions of "The Solitary Reaper" and "Michael" by Wordsworth). Instead, Burns brings to the peasant scene he portrays the urban realism he had imbibed from Ramsay and Fergusson, which is not to imply that his peasant scenes in, say, "The Holy Fair" are unreal or that the urban setting is somehow more real. Simply, it is to suggest that he imports to his depiction of rural life a methodology honed in Edinburgh, by his poetic predecessors, which Burns then newly applies to the peasant location of Ayrshire.

As we have seen in the case of James Thomson, one of the reflexes of "Augustanism" (perhaps especially what we might term Scottish Augustanism in that the line can be followed through Robert Fergusson and James Beattie), is the attempt to seek out a genuine "British" antiquity in poetic mode as part of the project to supplant what the pessimistic side of Augustanism reads as the decadence and degeneracy of eighteenth-century British culture. Following Thomson, Beattie and Fergusson, Burns alights on the archaic Spenserian stanza for "The Cotter's Saturday Night". The poem is inscribed to the solicitor, Robert Aiken, and begins:

My lov'd, my honour'd, much respected friend,  
 No mercenary Bard his homage pays;  
 With honest pride, I scorn each selfish end,  
 My dearest meed, a friend's esteem and praise:  
 To you I sing, in simple Scottish lays,  
 The lowly train in life's sequestered scene;

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<sup>33</sup> Hugh Blair, Undated Notes (1787) printed in Low (ed.), *Op cit.*, p.82.

The native feelings strong, the guileless ways,  
What A\*\*\*\* in a Cottage would have been;  
Ah! tho' his worth unknown, far happier there  
I ween! (Stanza I)

This apostrophe is not without its contradictions. Its elevated feeling, bardic sensibility and eschewing of reward from a patron (which, incidentally, Aiken was in securing a large subscriber's list so that the "Kilmarnock edition" could be published) is, as we have seen, in the work of Beattie, largely the construction of a wide eighteenth-century project (in which the activists of the Scottish Enlightenment were important) of moving away from the neo-classical sensibility which is central to Augustanism in its earliest, most urbane urges. In the work of Beattie, Burns and others we see the movement away from Augustan neo-classicism toward the movement of sentiment or sensibility, in which primitivism is so integral. Burns, then, is riding the poetic currents of his time as he participates in a poetic project of simplicity which is far from being insincere, but which is over-stylised when held up against his fusion of the Scottish rural scene with the urban traditions of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. Perhaps the most glaring contradiction in the opening stanza is the bardic desire for anonymity given what Burns's fame was to become. Undoubtedly, as Kenneth Simpson has argued, Burns was an adept and consummate role-player, and in the opening to "The Cotter's Saturday Night", Burns shows his ability to do so in the most approved poetic fashion of the day.<sup>34</sup> We also see, however, Burns's quiet propensity to eighteenth-century Scottish innovation, as he declares himself to be delivering "simple Scottish lays". This claim jars somewhat to modern ears, but what Burns may in all justification be alluding to is the stanza form (which in the usage by Thomson, Beattie and Fergusson had been appropriated by the Scots, to some extent) and the cleancut, descriptive language which represents a continuation of Fergusson's "high-style" usage of Scots-English to address the elevation of humble reality.

"The Cotter's Saturday Night" has been appropriated within the sentimentalised image of

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<sup>34</sup> See Simpson, *The Protean Scot*, p.185-218 for Kenneth Simpson's very astute reading of Burns's ability to throw his voice.



Burns as the simple, virtuous country poet promulgated by a certain breed of bardolators, and critics have perhaps reacted to this image in discounting the poem as a less worthy Burnsian production which manifests the classic Scottish conflict in identity. However, it is a sophisticated and well-written production which attempts both veracity in its depiction of the peasant culture it deals with and to provide for this a poetic setting which is appropriately, co-relatively serious and dignified. The hardships of the peasant farming-life (or man versus nature), which are seen in all their weariness, are counterbalanced by the depiction of peasant family-life:

With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet,  
           And each for other's weelfare kindly spiers:  
 The social hours swift-wing'd, unnotic'd fleet;  
           Each tells the uncos that he sees or hears.  
 The parent's partial eye their hopeful years;  
           Anticipation forward points the view;  
 The mother, wi' her needle and her sheers,  
           Gars auld claes look amaist as weel's the new;  
 The Father mixes a' wi' admonition due. (Stanza V)

This family after the day is done and the hardship of their labours manifests "joy unfeign'd" (with the implication that sometimes, perhaps in "politer" society, such emotion is affected). The unconscious sociability (seen in the their "social hours swift-wing'd") of the family is more innocent and valuable than in some other places in society. Their family life is circumscribed in the classic Enlightenment discourse of sensibility, but there is nothing condescending in this manoeuvre. Rather, the peasant family is the natural, untutored repository of such feeling.

From the cradle of family love springs. The poem plots a course through the peasant cultivation of nature and their cultivation of family to intimations of ruined love. Given Burns's own biography, one stanza is somewhat amusing:

If there, in human form, that bears a heart --  
           A wretch! a Villain! lost to love and truth!  
 That can, with studied, sly, ensnaring art,

Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?  
 Curse on his perjur'd arts! dissembling smooth!  
 Are Honor, Virtue, Conscience, all exil'd?  
 Is there no Pity, no relenting Ruth,  
 Points to the parents fondling o'er their Child  
 Then paints the ruin'd Maid, and their  
 distraction wild! (Stanza X)

Here is Burns in "man of feeling" mode castigating duplicitous "perjur'd arts", which in another mood he celebrates:

O leave novels, ye Mauchline belles,  
 Ye're safer at your spinning wheel;  
 Such witching books, are baited hooks  
 For rakish rooks like Rob Mossgiel  
 Your fine Tom Jones and Grandisons  
 They make your youthful fancies reel;  
 They heat your brains, and fire your veins,  
 And then you're prey for Rob Mossgiel.<sup>35</sup>

Judged by the standards of real-life and of his sentiments regarding free-love in a number of poems and songs, perhaps most stridently in his "Love and Liberty" sequence, Burns is at best protean and at worst a hypocrite.<sup>36</sup> However, the contradiction in Burns's attitude needs the explanation of Burns's historical project as a Scottish poet of the eighteenth-century. He works sincerely hard in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" to bring to the peasant scene the predilections of both recent Scottish and British poetry's genuine exaltation of the ordinary folk, and the cognate primitivism encouraged by the Enlightenment. From both of these sources Burns is primed to combine the simple goodness and dignity of the folk with appropriately elevated sentiment and form (which the Spenserian stanza represents, even as it is championed by Beattie and others as a "gothic" vehicle). If elsewhere in his corpus Burns breaches the artifice of such representation with the depiction of "earthier" peasant behaviour and modes, such as the simple ballad-style folk-song, he has to work through the necessary literary history. That is to say, Burns must play his part in licensing the legitimacy of the peasant

<sup>35</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.43 (pp.42-3), ll.1-8.

<sup>36</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.84.



theme, which is in his immediate forbears in Scots poetry essentially a Tory pastoral ideal, so that he can move to being part of a literary age where such “realism” becomes more possible (and it is surely as a result of Enlightenment “social science”, generally, that this greater “realism” and movement away from previous pastoral ideal becomes more possible in “mainstream” literature). However, it should be noted that such demotic realism is only partially accepted and continues to be resisted in the legacy of the reception of Burns. The attempt by some amateur bardolators to insist on Burns in “Cottar’s Saturday Night” mode as being the true peasant-poet shows how difficult it is for the Burns who deals joyously and frankly with sexual passion in “Love and Liberty”, *The Merry Muses* and elsewhere to be acceptable to many members of the “peasant” community itself. As with D.H. Lawrence or Lewis Grassie Gibbon, it is only in comparatively recent years, in the age of “popular” culture, that Burns has begun to seem much less shocking in such attributes. Burns was an important poet ushering in the Romantic age, with its stream of radical politics and more truly committed folk-study; however, Romanticism also features, especially in poetry and music, an ultimate reinscription of “high-art” practices in mode and theme which is perhaps not seriously challenged until the twentieth century.

In “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” we see Burns in “folk-mode” which is derived from Robert Fergusson. He celebrates the cotter’s “simple board,/The healsome Porritch, chief of Scotia’s food” (Stanza XI). Here, unlike in “Scotch Drink” or “To A Haggis”, Burns is in serious nationalistic mode.<sup>37</sup> In many respects “The Farmer’s Ingle”, to which “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” is indebted is the superior poem, but in its anthropological aspects the latter reaches to places which Fergusson never does. We see this in the poem’s respect for and celebration of the populist Scottish Presbyterian

<sup>37</sup> One of Burns’s most famous poems, “To A Haggis” continues Burns’s habit of ironically skewing his eighteenth-century Scots poetic heritage such as he does here with the vaunting of fine Scottish fare inherited from Ramsay and Fergusson:

Is there that owre his French ragout,  
Or olio that wad staw a sow,  
Or fricassee wad mak her spew  
Wi’ perfect sconner,  
Looks down wi’ sneering, scornfu’ view  
On sic a dinner? (ll 25-30)

Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.136.

identity:

The chearfu' Supper done, wi' serious face,  
They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;  
The Sire turns o'er, with patriarchal grace,  
The big ha'-Bible, ance his Father's pride:  
His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,  
His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;  
Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,  
He wales a portion with judicious care;  
'And let us worship God!' he says with  
solemn air.

They chant their artless notes in simple guise;  
They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim:  
Perhaps Dundees' wild warbling measure rise,  
Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy of the name;  
Or noble Elgin beets the heaven-ward flame,  
The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays:  
Compar'd with these, Italian trills are tame,  
The tickl'd ears no heart-felt raptures raise;  
Nae unison hae they, with our Creator's praise. (Stanzas XII-XIII)

Here we have a character study of the Scottish Calvinist mindset, diametrically opposed to that of "Holy Willie's Prayer". It represents a wholly new note in Scottish literature resulting from the adaptation of the eighteenth-century Scots poetry tradition. In "The Farmer's Ingle", Fergusson vaguely traces the indomitable pedigree of the peasantry in their wars against the Danes; essentially, then, there is an elision where other conflicts, most notably with the English, are written out (it is interesting to consider, in fact, that John Home in *Douglas* does not elide such conflicts to the same extent as Fergusson does in "The Farmer's Ingle"). With Burns the historical legacy of the Scottish people in "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is much more concrete, as he foregrounds the heroic struggles of the "martyrs", or Covenanters, which were so enmeshed with Anglo-Scottish tensions through the seventeenth century. We see adaptation of Fergusson's notion of "vile Italian tricks" also, as Burns transmutes this into a conventional swipe at the pomp and ceremony of Catholicism. With Burns, then, we see a much more forcefully exultant celebration of peasant culture than had appeared anywhere



before in Scottish literature, as he draws inspiration from but surpasses previous practice in eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. He does the same also with the anthropological and historical enquiry into Scottish Presbyterianism sponsored by the Enlightenment.<sup>38</sup> In short, Burns is extending the methods and modes of his received eighteenth-century Scots poetry and Enlightenment influences and extending the canon of Scottish history and identity in his poetry. Burns ends "The Cottar's Saturday Night" with one of the strongest statement of demotic patriotism which Scottish literature had ever seen:

From scenes like these, old Scotia's grandeur springs,  
 That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad:  
 Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,  
 'An honest man's the noblest work of God.'  
 And certes, in fair Virtue's heavenly road,  
 The Cottage leaves the palace far behind:  
 What is a lordling's pomp? a cumbrous load,  
 Disguising oft the wretch of human kind,  
 Studied in arts of Hell, in wickedness refin'd!

O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!  
 For whom my warmest wish to heaven is sent!  
 Long may the hardy sons of rustic toil,  
 Be blest with health, and peace and sweet content!  
 And o may Heaven their simple lives prevent

<sup>38</sup> There are two points to be made about the "rehabilitation" of Scottish Presbyterian identity during the eighteenth century. Firstly, in general terms, as has been emphasised in studies such as those by Richard Sher, *Church & University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1985) and David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1993), Scottish Presbyterian churchmen were very obviously taking a strong lead in the new disciplines, including the new objective historiography of the eighteenth-century. Allan cites the view of J.K. Cameron, "that the Enlightenment flourished in Scotland at the hands of so many of its church leaders is probably in large measure due to its intellectual heritage" (p.219). Such emphases, building upon the work of George Davie, suggests a different self-image and actual cultural reality among Scottish Presbyterian intellectuals in the eighteenth-century from that image projected, as we have seen, of the dour, fanatical Calvinist Scottish kirk. A second point is that the Scottish Presbyterianism was modernising itself and moving away from the older "Whig" identity of the seventeenth century. Colin Kidd sums up very well the fresh new cultural mentality within the Scottish Presbyterian identity:

Mid-eighteenth-century Scottish Whig culture underwent a fundamental transformation which had devastating effects on the ideas of Scottishness held by the educated political nation -- the lawyers, lesser gentry, academics, divines and literati who were to be the backbone of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century European nationalist movements. Traditional Scottish whiggism expired almost simultaneously with Jacobitism of the serious, non-sentimental kind. Liberated from the narrow exigencies of bipartisan discourse, Scottish whig literati were able to absorb the devastating criticisms levelled by Father Thomas Innes at the myths of Fergusianism, and to appreciate that these left a serious dent in the Buchanite tradition. The major advances of the Scottish Enlightenment in historical sociology completed the post-Buchanite disenchantment of Scottish Whig culture. Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past*, p.97.

[For description of the new less partisan climate of eighteenth-century Scottish cultural ideology see also Colin Kidd, "The Rehabilitation of Scottish Jacobitism" in *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol LXXVII, 1:203 (April, 1998), pp.58-76.]



From Luxury's contagion, weak and vile!  
 Then howe'er crowns and coronets be rent,  
 A virtuous Populace may rise the while,  
 And stand a wall of fire around their much lov'd Isle.

O Thou! who pour'd the patriotic tide,  
 That stream'd thro' great, unhappy Wallace heart;  
 Who dar'd to, nobly, stem tyrannic pride,  
 Or nobly die, the second glorious part:  
 (The Patriot's God, peculiarly thou art,  
 His friend, inspirer, guardian and reward!)  
 O never, never Scotia's realm desert,  
 But still the Patriot, and the Patriot-Bard,  
 In bright succession raise her Ornament and Guard! (Stanzas XIX-XXI)

Tom Crawford makes an over-arching judgement of the poem when he says, "[...] in "The Cotter", Burns's favourite measure is exchanged for the complicated Spenserian stanza which he does not handle really well even in the best sections."<sup>39</sup> The last three stanzas of the poem quoted above give the lie to this view. They show the poet handling and adapting a huge amount of Scottish and other cultural information in the smoothest of prosodic streams. The Fergussonian opening of demotic patriotism to stanza XIX extends to pick up on contempt for the aristocracy (Burns's first explicit, forceful expression of this in the "Kilmarnock"). Deftly, however, he immediately alludes to Pope's "An Essay on Man" ('An honest man's the work of God') as part of the procedure of verifying his demoticism from the most respectable of eighteenth-century literary sources. The technique of enmeshing demotic sentiment with high culture continues so that by this point in the poem Burns has forsaken any Scots vocabulary at all. He weaves within a very elegant syntax and use of the Spenserian stanza, the notion that the "pomp" of the aristocracy is a burden, not in conventional terms of being a responsibility, but as a burden upon the rest of humanity which is reverentially disarmed from seeing that the aristo is often a "wretch" (where the "pomp" is the portable bundle of the wretch or the tramp) "studied in the arts of hell". It is here that we perhaps begin to see Burns's early politics aligned to the insights of

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<sup>39</sup> Crawford, *Op cit.*, p.174.



reforming Whigs in the latter part of the eighteenth-century.<sup>40</sup>

The final two stanzas seize the moral highground. In stanza XX, this is done in very conventional terms as the poem rails against “Luxury’s contagion” and appeals for a “virtuous populace”. In a serious version of a manoeuvre familiar from “The Two Dogs”, the stanza ends with the notion that Scotland is an island whose population might “stand a wall of fire” around it. This phrase shows Burns again inhabiting “the language of the saints”, but in a serious fashion very different from such usage in “Holy Willie’s Prayer.” What this glimpse shows is Burns’s subscription at this point in his life to the political and religious compact of “Presbyterian radicalism” (in Liam McIlvanney’s term<sup>41</sup>). Scotland now is to be the notional isle of a Presbyterian Scottish nation, and this note of nationalism is intensified in the final stanza which invokes the Wallace myth in a way that finally wrestles this away from its Jacobitic associations earlier in the eighteenth century. Wallace becomes fully by implication, in his anti-authoritarian role, a proto-Presbyterian hero. Burns associates himself with this “patriot” by defining himself a “patriot-bard”. A “bright succession”, or a continuity is suggested from Wallace through the Presbyterian sensibility of Scotland and down to the contemporary moment in Burns’s expression of a noble, primitive Scottish identity.

The other great set-piece poem alongside “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” in the “Kilmarnock” edition is “The Vision”.<sup>42</sup> Both poems have in common an attempt, if not actually to produce epic poetry, to take hold of an epic historic vision of the multifarious Scottish identity. As in “The Cottar’s Saturday Night” the scene deals with the end of a day of honest toil for the peasantry. The narrator is

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<sup>40</sup> See *Letters of Burns* I, where in an accompanying letter with “O sing a new song to the Lord” [Kinsley, no.260] to the printer of the *Morning Star* (25/04/1789) Burns says “I am a little tinctured with Buff and Blue [the colours of the whigs] myself”. (p.403). Burns’s politics remains a highly contentious area and his radical siding with the oppressed, although often outspoken, has to be set against out and out support for the Tory party in the early 1790s (see Norman R. Paton, *Scotland’s Bard* (Fareham, 1998), pp.101-9).

<sup>41</sup> Liam McIlvanney, “ ‘Sacred Freedom’: Presbyterian Radicalism and the Politics of Robert Burns in Simpson *Love and Liberty* especially pp.168-74.

<sup>42</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.62.

somewhat detached and dispirited, however, as he goes to take solitary rest “Ben the Spence, right pensivelie” (ll.11-12). He contemplates his wasted life so far, where he has spent his “youthfu’ prime,/An’ done nae-thing,/But stringing blethers up in rhyme/For fools to sing.” (ll.21-24). Had he used his time more wisely, he might have had good money from working in a bank. Instead, he is “half-mad, half-fed, half-sarket” (ll.29-30). Falling into a dwam, the narrator receives a vision of a woman whose appearance is described in the following terms:

Green, slender, leaf-clad Holly-boughs  
Were twisted, gracefu’, round her brows,  
I took her for some Scottish Muse,  
By that same token;  
And come to stop those reckless vows,  
Would soon be broken. (ll.49-54)

The woman has appeared just as the narrator is about to forswear poetry forever and this sexy creature is at once an acknowledgement by the narrator that there is something vital, primitive, pagan almost in his muse which he cannot disown. She turns out to be Coila, the muse of Burns’s native Kyle and she grants the narrator a vision of the topocultural reality of Scotland. Coila hails the narrator in his location within this landscape:

‘All hail! my own inspired Bard!  
In me thy native Muse regard!  
Nor longer mourn thy fate is hard,  
Thus poorly low!  
I come to give thee such reward,  
As we bestow.

‘Know, the great Genius of this Land,  
Has many a light, aerial band,  
Who, all beneath his high command,  
Harmoniously,  
As Arts or Arms they understand,  
Their labours ply.

‘They Scotia’s Race among them share;  
Some fire the Sodger on to dare;



Some rouse the Patriot up to bare  
 Corruption's heart:  
 Some teach the Bard, a darling care,  
 The tuneful Art. (ll.97-114)

Here we have the reflex in Burns's poetry toward self-definition. He, the narrator or Burns, is a "bard" and Burns attempts to reinforce this point with the division of "The Vision" into "Duan First" and "Duan Second" after the fashion of an example from "Ossian".<sup>43</sup> Along with this association with the ancient Gaelic bard he combines the "habbie" stanza, so reinforcing his Scottish cultural signature. These two elements, of course, sit heterogeneously as Burns attempts to present something of a coherent picture of Scotland.

We see the familiar myths of "Arts and Arms", but both of these aspects are altogether more complex in the later eighteenth-century:

Hence, Fullarton, the brave and young;  
 Hence, Dempster's truth-prevailing tongue;  
 Hence, sweet harmonious Beattie sung  
                   His "Minstrel lays";  
 Or tore with noble ardour stung,  
                   The Sceptic's bays. (ll.121-6)

"Arts" now include the work of Whig member of parliament for Forfar, George Dempster, a man active in benignly improving the agriculture and fisheries of Scotland.<sup>44</sup> As for "Arms", William Fullarton was a soldier, but is best remembered in his role as a parliamentarian. (Curiously the reference to Fullarton was dropped for the Edinburgh edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* in 1787, which perhaps suggests that Burns did not feel himself to be entirely in control of a satisfactory set of emblematic

<sup>43</sup> See Macpherson's "Cath-loda: A Poem" [Gaskill (ed.), *The Poems of Ossian*, pp.305-320] which contains topographical description of the Orkneys and the airy hall of Cruth-loda, which perhaps ironically counterpoints the narrator's humble room at the beginning of "The Vision."

<sup>44</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs III*, p.1080.

figures for his depiction of Scotland in his first version of "The Vision".<sup>45</sup>) What the poem shows is that eighteenth-century Scotland is now not so easy to contain within the myths of old. In spite of the adoption of the "habbie" stanza, implying homage to Ramsay and Fergusson, the two Scottish poets explicitly praised are James Beattie and James Thomson. Clearly, Burns is attempting to have his narrator inhabit the primitive, untutored territory which Beattie helped to idealise in "The Minstrel" and in the stanza above we see also the tagging on to this ideal of Beattie's philosophic work countering David Hume. In standard terms, then, Hume's work is seen to represent a needless intellectual sophistication.

Burns's couching of emblematic mythology in the poem is replete with a not entirely intentional irony. This is especially so in the (unintentional) distance between writer and narrator. If the poem is intended as a largely serious definition of poetic mission for Burns himself (though, of course, the poem does have humorous undertones), it cannot finally succeed. Quite simply, the poet knows too much. We see this in the hard work he is undertaking in cultural engineering. Stitching together the "bardic" overtones and undertones that he does and colliding this with the "habbie" stanza brings a new reflex to eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. Robert Fergusson could use the same stanza-form for pastoral purposes in a number of his works, but the designating of the stanza as pertaining to the rural bard is Burns's own invention and he designs this so most explicitly in "The Vision". Notwithstanding Burns's brilliant literary performances in the stanza in pieces like "To A Louse", "To A Mouse" and "Death and Dr Hornbook" (in fact, to some extent, because of productions like these with their "peasant" focus), the "Burns" stanza, as the "habbie" comes to be known, comes to be presumed to be an essentially primitive "peasant" vehicle, the preserve of Ayrshire almost, when its thematic development during the eighteenth-century had been as a largely urban vehicle in Edinburgh. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this innovation by Burns, but the problem has been that this rural resetting of the "habbie" alongside Burns's primitivism has played its part in leading much Scottish literary

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



criticism toward identifying the essential “simplicity”, or supposed rather unliterary attributes of Scots poetry, generally, in the eighteenth century.

Burns (and, indeed, Coila) knows too much also of contemporary British poetry, as she says to the narrator:

‘Thou canst not learn, nor I can show,  
To paint with Thomson’s landscape-glow;  
Or wake the bosom-melting throe,  
                    With Shenstone’s art;  
Or pour, with Gray, the moving flow,  
                    Warm on the heart.           (11.199-204)

At this point, of course, Coila has the ability not only to survey Scottish culture but English culture also. It is as though the notion of a self-contained Scotland (which Burns flirts humorously with in “*The Twa Dogs*” and grasps passionately in “*The Cotter’s Saturday Night*”) has evaporated as the poet gives free rein to his pen. In this light also, we might suspect that the stanza above is not merely activated as a modesty topos. We see the lie being given to Burns’s self-confessing lower order skills in such writing in “*The Vision*” as:

‘When yellow waves the heavy grain,  
The threat’ning Storm, some, strongly, rein;  
Some teach to meliorate the plain,  
                    With tillage-skill;  
And some instruct the Shepherd-train,  
                    Blythe o’er the hill.           (11.133-8)

In this and many other places in the poem, Burns shows that he can “paint with Thomson’s landscape glow”; not only this, but, as the elegant sweeping flow of the poem shows, he is adept too at incorporating Thomsonian didacticism sprung from landscape observation. Burns is not being mischievous in his denial of such capabilities however; the overall tenor of the poem is too serious for that. He seems determined to map out his bardic poetic mission, vouchsafed as this was by the predilection of Scottish Enlightenment activists such as James Beattie. A poem of huge skill, “*The*

*Vision*” is ultimately confused. to say this, however, is not simply to lapse into the received vocabulary of the Scottish critical tradition, from which I have been so concerned to dissent. Rather, it is to acknowledge a key fact about Burns’s location and the history of Scottish literature more generally. By the end of the eighteenth-century, the old myths of coherent nationhood for Scotland - as for elsewhere - are becoming more difficult to inscribe. In the face of a world of increasing intellectual and cultural ferment where the American Revolution had traumatised Britain’s sense of itself, in the face of disorientating agrarian and economic change in the second part of the eighteenth-century in Britain and, a little later, the French Revolution there was an increasing internationalisation of culture. This internationalisation and macroeconomic revolution superceded, to a large extent, the narrow vocabulary of national identity which might have had some purchase in earlier eighteenth-century when a Scottish poet had to contend merely with the complexities of the new British constitution. At the same time, as we shall see, these movements allowed Robert Burns a new vocabulary of political and cultural analysis. We see Burns in “The Vision” make a kind of final attempt to make coherent sense of a Scottish cultural location. By the late eighteenth-century this was impossible. The poem is a sincere, commendable and skilful attempt to identify the essential heart of Scotland in a pastoral, rural and patriotic reality. At once unrealistic, this scenario is also part of the necessary Scottish working out of complexity of nationhood and a part of the impetus of proto-Romanticism, where the older, idealised pastoral vision which had pertained earlier in the eighteenth-century makes way for much greater rural veracity in depiction so that the genuine economic and social attributes of this locus can be dealt with.

“The Vision” sees Burns quite explicitly working out his poetic mission and the final stanza actually sees Coila anointing this mission for the narrator:

‘And wear thou this’ - She solemn said,  
And bound the Holly round my head:  
The polish’d leaves, and berries red,  
Did rustling play;  
And, like a passing thought, she fled,



These lines cap a strange poem whose tone, on an initial reading, is difficult to gauge. The poem has attributes which we might describe as both near-comic and near serious; it is also strained between the humble location of the “bard” and the pride in such a clear sense of mission and ability. Of course, the expressed bardic capability in the poem is actually undermined by the display of poetic knowledge and writing ability from the sphere above the merely bardic. We see something of this disjunction also in the final stanza where the pagan ceremony of Coila wreathing the head of the narrator indicates ultimately something more than mere conference of traditional, eighteenth-century received bardic status. There is a hint not so much of the conferred place in the hierarchy of poetic pantheon (as “The Vision” seeks overall to establish), but of a mission which is much more wilfully primitive and self-directed. We can read this of course with the hindsight knowledge of Burns’s full corpus including genuinely authentic (as well as sometimes politely doctored) folk-song, and bawdy and iconoclastic authority-mocking verse generally which establishes Burns as a radical new poetic energy at the end of the eighteenth century.

We see Burns clarifying his poetic status in several other poems, which do not manifest the strange cultural palimpsest of “The Vision.” In “Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet”, Burns again transmutes received material from earlier eighteenth-century poetry in Scots.<sup>46</sup> The epistles between Allan Ramsay and William Hamilton are mimicked in a veneer of sociable, digressive chatter, but Burns’s epistle is ultimately of a different order. We see this, for instance, in Stanza V:

It’s no in titles nor in rank;  
 It’s no in wealth in Lon’on Bank,  
     To purchase peace and rest;  
 It’s no in makin muckle, mair:  
 It’s no in books; it’s no in Lear,  
     To make us truly blest;  
 If Happiness hae not her seat

<sup>46</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.55.

And centre in the breast,  
We may be wise, or rich, or great,  
But never can be blest:  
Nae treasures, nor pleasures  
Could make us happy lang;  
The heart ay's the part ay,  
That makes us right or wrang.

The poem is, to some extent, very conventional in recommending the simple life; however, this is not from the point of view, as in the case of Allan Ramsay, of the proto-bourgeois, comfortably-off businessman. Ramsay's epistles are, in any case, much more about the comfortable plentitude he enjoys in his life. Burns's poem features a realistically depicted poverty picturing the peasant at times lying "in kilns and barns at e'en,/When banes are craz'd, and bluid is thin" (Stanza II). The poem, then, is far from inhabiting the traditional urbane terrain of the eighteenth-century verse-epistle. The conventional idea of titles and wealth in London banks not necessarily leading to happiness is implicitly contrasted with the poverty described, and the poem takes on a bite which, while not quite class-anger, diagnoses a world of "natural nobility" which has nothing to do with "actual" nobility. (In the lines "The heart ay's the part ay,/That makes us right or wrang" we have the confirmation of this idea.) The poem shows the advancement of Burns's primitivism which draws on the cult of sensibility (which the Scottish Enlightenment does so much to promulgate) and the formation, out of this philosophy, of Burns's poetic location. Burns is to be the poet of the emotions and love as he invokes the name of Jean (Armour):

O how that name inspires my style!  
The words come skelpan, rank and file,  
Amaist before I ken!  
The ready measure rins as fine,  
As Phoebus and the famous Nine  
Were glowran owre my pen.  
My spavet Pegasus will limp,  
Till ance he's fairly het;  
And then he'll hilch, and stilt, and jimp,  
And rin an unco fit:  
But least then, the beast then,



Should rue this hasty ride,  
I'll light now, and dight now,  
His sweaty, wizen'd hide. (Stanza XI)

This final stanza of "Epistle to Davie" shows Burns's positing of his muse as against high culture. First of all in the logic of the narrative, he should not be able to get so far as he does creatively. It is only *as if* "Phoebus and the famous Nine" were coming to his aid. Rather than Pegasus, his vehicle for causing the fount of creativity to flow is a veritable workhorse, limping and sweating. Implicitly, the bounds of inspired propriety are breached in the narrator's runaway writing. The narrator's muse is situated within his hardworking peasant locus. Here again, then, we see Burns extracting his primitivist license to validate the work of a peasant-poet; though, of course, in doing so he yet again displays his knowledge of the codes of classical and eighteenth-century Scots creativity.

"Epistle to Davie" is one of several verse-epistles in the "Kilmarnock" where Burns marks out a notional poetic space for himself. In "Epistle to J. Lapraik" we see him humorously, but sincerely, hail a fellow Ayrshire writer, John Lapraik.<sup>47</sup> The literary exchanges between Burns, Lapraik and others demonstrate the awakening, enthusiastic poetic culture of Ayrshire, and of rural Scotland generally shaking off a very deep, demotic Calvinist hostility to poetry only a little earlier in the century.<sup>48</sup> In the fourth stanza of his "Epistle to Lapraik" Burns addresses Lapraik's capabilities with hyperbolic humour:

I've scarce heard ought describ'd sae weel,  
What gen'rous manly bosoms feel;  
Thought I, 'Can this be Pope, or Steele,  
Or Beattie's wark,'  
They tald me 'twas an odd kind chiel  
About Muirkirk. (ll.19-24)

Burns knows, of course, that Lapraik's kind of poetry is very different from (and inferior to) those

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<sup>47</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no. 57.

<sup>48</sup> See, for instance, the case of John Wilson (1720-89) who was made to burn his poetry before taking up his appointment as schoolmaster to the parish of Greenock. (Wittig, *Op cit.*, 184; and, for a more extended treatment, Gerard Carruthers, "John Wilson" entry in *New Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [forthcoming]).

writers he names. Writers all of whom he admires, Burns is beginning to establish a difference from them for Lapraik and himself. He defines himself:

I am nae Poet, in a sense,  
But just a Rhymer like by chance,  
An' hae to Learning nae pretence,  
                    Yet, what the matter?  
When'er my Muse does on me glance,  
                    I jingle at her.

Your Critic-folk may cock their nose,  
And say, 'How can you e'er propose,  
You wha ken hardly verse frae prose,  
                    To mak a sang?  
But by your leaves, my learned foes,  
                    ye're maybe wrang.  
What's a' your jargon o' your Schools,  
Your Latin names for horns an' stools;  
If honest Nature made you fools,  
                    What sairs your Grammars?  
Ye'd better taen up spades and shoals,  
                    Or knappin-hammers. (ll.49-66)

In a neat reversal, Burns suggests that some of those from humble (even peasant) backgrounds should be poets, while some educated people would be better undertaking manual labour. For the narrator, the key to creativity is nature:

Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire,  
That's a' the learning I desire;  
Then tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire  
                    At pleugh or cart,  
My Muse, tho' hamely in attire,  
                    May touch the heart.

O for a spunk o Allan's glee,  
Or Fergusson's, the bauld an' slee,  
Or bright L\*\*\*\*K's, my friend to be,  
                    If I can hit it!  
That would be lear eneugh for me,  
                    If I could get it. (ll.74-84)



Burns, as in so many of the poems in the "Kilmarnock" declares himself to be the "poet of nature." It is no wonder, then, that Henry Mackenzie should confer on him the epithet of the "Heaven-taught ploughman"; equally it is no wonder that James Macaulay is suspicious of Burns's claims to primitive art. What we see in the stanzas above is a number of literary references which sit slightly oddly with the poetic credo being engendered. For a start, we have the very conventional contempt for "critics", so typical of urbane eighteenth-century verse and found in Pope, Ramsay and many others as they attempt to map out their own freedom of poetic space in an age which sometimes clung too prescriptively to neoclassic regularity. It is a strange fact that the mention of Ramsay and Fergusson does not strike many modern critical eyes as somewhat odd. This fact shows how successful Burns has been in his agenda of remoulding the assumptions underlying the status of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. As we have seen, Burns's two great predecessors are very literary poets, but here we see them being appropriated in the name of primitive Scots poetry. Their natural propensities are seen in Ramsay's essential quality of "glee" and Fergusson's of slyness. For these poets, for whom he successfully proselytises in the later eighteenth-century, as for himself, Burns establishes a set of primitive credentials which ultimately impede consideration of eighteenth-century Scots poetry as a very literary poetry. Burns helps to canonise Scots poetry in a kind of general wrapping of folk-impetus which feeds the rather one-dimensional location of all three poets by the Scottish critical tradition. This is one self-lacerating side of the two-edged sword with which Burns validates his claims to be a poet worth listening too even though he comes from an unpropitious class and nation.

Burns's first "sustained" poem in Scots, marking the beginnings of his inspiration by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson employs, is published in the "Kilmarnock". "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie" in which Burns can be seen yet again to bring together and play off against one another disparate cultural elements. The poem collides the mode of mock-dying testimony and mock lament, which is transmitted to him from Allan Ramsay and perhaps even David Lyndsay (as well as

following in the mould of Fergusson's "The Sow of Feeling"), and the world of Enlightenment thought.<sup>49</sup> The dying Ewe dispenses advice to the peasant-herd, Hughoc, to be passed on to her master, her son and her daughters. She wishes her master to follow the new practises of enclosure, where sheep are kept in hedged fields rather than being tied with "wicked strings o' hemp or hair!" (l.20). Mailie is at once knowing in her economic modernity and sheepishly stupid in relating economic motive to kindness.<sup>50</sup> Her exhortation to (unwicked) practices is morality after the event, or the moral dressing of an amoral situation in comforting clothing. The whole poem works according to this model in featuring a herded animal protagonist as the mouthpiece of a moral disquisition. It represents the start of Burns's brilliantly satirical exposing of a human world supposedly morally superior to the beasts, but, in fact, more unnaturally and cynically rapacious of nature. Mailie goes on to recommend that her son and her daughters mind that they remain always in respectable company. In a neat zeugmatic language of the kind in which Burns excels, she wishes her daughter to mix only 'Wi' sheep o' credit like thysel!' (l.56) Seemingly talking about abstract moral worth, Mailie is recommending, of course, that the ewe maintains itself as a valuable commodity for its owner, the farmer.

"Poor Mailie's Elegy" is the first of Burns's satires against man through the device of dealing with animals who have human characteristics and pretensions thrust upon them. Two of Burns's most trenchant pieces in this mode, "To a Mouse" and "To a Louse" are featured in the "Kilmarnock" edition. "To a Mouse" involves a series of complex interchanges between man and dumb beast which simultaneously promote and question the universality of the Smithian concept of sympathy.<sup>51</sup> In response to the situation of turning up a fieldmouse in its nest with the plough the narrator begins his address:

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,

<sup>49</sup> *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* II, pp.130-1.

<sup>50</sup> See Simpson *The Protean Scot*, pp.189-90 for a witty discussion of Mailie's Enlightenment reading.

<sup>51</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.69.



O, what a panic's in thy breastie!  
 Thou need na start awa sae hasty,  
 Wi' bickering brattle!  
 I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,  
 Wi' murd'ring prattle!

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion  
 Has broken Nature's social union,  
 An' justifies that ill opinion,  
 Which makes thee startle,  
 At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,  
 An' fellow-mortal! (ll.1-12)

The intense sentimentality of this opening, in which the mouse's actual "vermin status is irrelevant to [the narrator's] transcendent response to its suffering", is clearly not the typical attitude of a working ploughman.<sup>52</sup> The mouse, of course, should run away in the face of the ploughman. She ought not to expect the tenderness of response in the opening line where the narrator sees her as both pretty and innocent. The "poet of nature" is once again interestingly new-fangled in emphasising a feminised nature in the face of a rapacious human interference. The concept of "mother-nature" may be an ancient one, but Burns in the late eighteenth century is pointing to a vulnerably feminine nature which he apprehends to be under threat from an attitude of aggressively progressive mankind which is previously unparalleled. The second stanza introduces the voice of sociability which casts doubt upon humanity's propensity to sociability. It "nature" as opposed to "man" which boasts a "social union". Man is the disruptive force in his "dominion". The ploughman and the mouse are identified with one another in a quite startling moment of literary history which shows Burns to be in the vanguard of the new Romantic response to the natural world. Man is not so separate from the world of the nature and of the beasts though he hoists himself so in a manner which undermines humanity. Burns's negotiations, then, are complex. Ploughman and mouse are "fellow-mortals", and mankind's controlling aspirations have of them something almost of a malicious compact with the supernatural (in an attempt to be immortal, or godlike). It is clear that this situation is primed by the biography of the Burns's family and the near

<sup>52</sup> McGuirk, *Robert Burns and the Sentimental Era*, p. 10.

ruinous experiences of his father at the hands of a demanding landlord.<sup>53</sup> The final two stanzas of the poem concretise the theme of fickle human forces which are chillingly denuding of the vulnerable person:

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,  
In proving foresight may be vain:  
The best laid schemes o' Mice and Men,  
Gang aft agley,  
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!  
The present only toucheth thee:  
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,  
On prospects drear!  
An' forward, tho' I canna see,  
I guess an' fear! (ll.37-48)

Man too is at the mercy now of forces which are bigger than himself. He is rendered more like a beast than ever before, paradoxically, in the face of a progress which is bringing about a fissure in human empowerment, where some have great power and others have none. The stripping away of humanity is registered in tragic terms in the final stanza as the narrator explains that human desolation is, in fact, worse than the desolation of the likes of a mouse since humanity has an intellectual capacity for reasoning the future. The new confusing circumstances of agricultural improvement and other forces of progress now confound that capacity, or cheat it even in its capricious power. The human capacity for "sociability", exemplified throughout the poem in the extension of the language of sympathy for an exemplar of nature's vermin, is contradicted by the circumstances of "man's inhumanity to man" to which it obliquely refers.<sup>54</sup> "To a Mouse", then, is a masterfully oxymoronic poem in its very mode demonstrating another aspect of Burns's primitivist capacity to throw huge doubt into the progressivist trajectory of eighteenth-century life.

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<sup>53</sup> See Mackay *Op cit.*, pp.89-100.

<sup>54</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.482.



"To a Louse" complements "To a Mouse" in again ventriloquising emotional resonances for nature which shockingly interrogate the place of humanity in nature's economy.<sup>55</sup> This time the narrator seemingly lacks sympathy with the dumb animal:

Ha! whare ye gaun, ye crowlan ferlie!  
Your impudence protects you sairly:  
I canna say but ye strunt rarely,  
Owre gawze and lace;  
Tho' faith, I fear ye dine but sparely,  
On sic a place.

Ye ugly, creepan, blastet wonner,  
Detested, shunn'd, by suant an' sinner,  
How daur ye set your fit upon her,  
Sae fine a Lady!  
Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner,  
On some poor body! (ll.1-12)

The effect of the opening is to emphasise the separation of humanity from nature in the opposition of louse and lady. This separation, however, is masterfully two-edged as the louse is from the start seen to be created in human terms where it is "impudent" and a "sinner". The insect, of course, has no knowledge of such man-made concepts and so these very concepts are slyly called into question. It is, in fact, the woman who is seen in all her finery to be actually presumptuous. Where the louse is breaching the propriety of hierarchy (seen as the narrator claims it should seek its dinner on some "poor body"), it is actually humanity, which the woman emblemises, that creates such a notion of order. The poem is very deeply about the construction of the world. The narrator observes the pretty woman who is in church in all her proud finery presumably to be noticed. All of this represents misdirected attention, as instead of apprehending God the humans are conscious of one another. Not only this, but the final concentration of perspective falls upon an insect, so that we have gone from the sublime to the lowest of the low. The louse carries with it a number of received ideas including that of

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<sup>55</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.83.

man as insect and it is also, perhaps, akin to the worm of the grave. Burns is tapping into orthodox Christian ideas, then, in his use of the louse, but ultimately one can argue for a scepticism toward religion in the final stanza :

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us  
To see ourself as others see us!  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us  
An' foolish notion:  
What airs an' gait wad lea'e us  
And ev'n Devotion. (ll.43-8)

If humanity could see itself properly as part of the animal kingdom (occupying the same space as the louse), it would be less pretentious and give up, perhaps even on the idea of a responsive God (which is implied in the act of "devotion"). This, I believe, is the most explicitly atheist reflex in Burns's poetry. It is interesting too that the line "to see ourself as others see us" is so clearly derived from Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.<sup>8</sup> This ability to mutual recognition, as the basis of human society, it is implied is absent (not least because of the hierarchies we create so that pretty, respectable peasant girl, Jenny, is above the beggar - the fact that the louse, rightly, refuses to recognise). If we could see ourselves as others see us, pretension, especially the pretension to construct the world (which in the attempt is merely the construction of appearances) might leave us and we would situate ourselves properly as part of the perishable world. "To a Louse" is a philosophical vignette, which raises radical, uncomfortable questions about the world and humanity's mastery over and just apprehension of it. It would be going too far to say that it contains any kind of radical political agenda, though there are implications, of course, for class-construction. There is an element of proto-class complaint which hovers under the surface throughout the "Kilmarnock" edition and beyond, but the precise extent of Burns's formal political complexion remains a matter of some conjecture, which has

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<sup>8</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael & A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis, 1976), in Book III, "On Duty", p.78.



been entered into with rather foolish enthusiasm over the years.<sup>57</sup> What we see in poems like the three “nature” poems just dealt with is Burns the man of the Enlightenment, generally cognisant of economic, psychological and anthropological thinking in which many Scottish thinkers were particularly involved.<sup>58</sup>

One mini-masterpiece by Burns, which should be mentioned here, appears in the expanded “Edinburgh” edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* of 1787.<sup>59</sup> This poem, “Death and Dr Hornbook. A True Story”, sees Burns’s agenda of apprehension in the face of supposed progress and cultural advance (themes which are so powerfully present in “To a Mouse” and “To a Louse”) and his most witheringly explicit statement on modernity. The last two poems written in the “habbie stanza” carry upon this vehicle themes of agricultural upheaval, predicated by the circumstances of the times, and a bleak, radical questioning of the world of humanity. These poems, then, arise out of the circumstance of Burns’s pressurised primitivist status toward the end of the eighteenth-century and encompass a largeness of specific theme for which neither Ramsay nor Fergusson make the “habbie” (or any other stanza-form) the vehicle. With “Death and Dr Hornbook” Burns seems to be more recognisably back to operating with the thematic traditions passed down to him by his predecessors in eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. It features a drunken, digressive narrator, after the fashion of Ramsay’s narrator in “Maggy Johnston”, who details a grotesque, comic encounter with death. The whole point of this poem, however, is the very serious one that the time for an allegorised version of death is over and that humnaity is into a much scarier age of threat. In this facet, we have Burns’s most dystopian vision of his contemporary surroundings (along with another piece, “Address of Beelzebub”, which did not appear in print until 1818).<sup>60</sup> The poem begins with masterful prevarication over the

<sup>57</sup> For the additions to the “Kilmarnock” edition in the “Edinburgh” edition see the helpful appendix in Low (ed.), *The Kilmarnock Poems*, p.184.

<sup>58</sup> Burns’s additions for the “Edinburgh” edition are usefully listed in Low (ed.), *The Kilmarnock Poems* (Appendix B).

<sup>59</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.55.

<sup>60</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.108.

status of the truth:

Some books are lies frae end to end,  
And some great lies were never penn'd:  
Ev'n ministers they hae been kenn'd,  
In holy rapture,  
Great lies and nonsense baith to vend,  
And nail't wi' Scripture.

But this that I am gaun to tell,  
Which lately on a night befel,  
Is just as true's the Deil's in hell,  
Or Dublin city:  
That e'er he nearer comes oursel  
'S a muckle pity. (ll.1-12)

Comically, of course, the "truth" of the narrator is undercut from the beginning, and yet amidst the narrow-minded anti-Irish prejudice that the devil should be in Dublin is the "truth", also from a Presbyterian source, of scripture which demands that humanity is wary of death and the day of reckoning which can come at any time. However, it is the allegorical or scriptural figure of death who is very precisely undermined in this poem. The narrator meets death and, at first, ridiculously says he will kill him should he act in a threatening fashion:

It spak right howe - 'My name is Death,  
But be na fley'd.' - Quoth I, 'Guid faith,  
Ye're maybe come to stap my breath;  
But tent me, billie;  
I red ye weel, tak care o' skaith,  
See, there's a gully!' (ll.49-54)

This drunken comedy which foreshadows the relationship of Hornbook to Death, however, soon gives way to politer converse where Death laments that he is in danger of being put out of "trade" (l.77), because of the activities of one Hornbook who is now practising medicine. Death complains that Hornbook is usurping his traditional role as omniscient agent of the supernatural:

'Ev'n them he canna get attended,





Scottish Enlightenment thinking<sup>62</sup>). Instead “Death and Dr Hornbook”, written after the “Kilmarnock” had published these poems represents Burns’s final silent appropriation of the “habbie” stanza as part of his set of old-fashioned, folk signals implicitly qualifying the modernity the poem critiques. To some extent, this tendency runs counter to the trajectory of the ever-more heavily “literary” use for the stanza for which Ramsay and Fergusson had found for it. “Death and Dr Hornbook” is, of course, also a skilful literary piece, but it represents a moment where Burns is seen to be most consummately moulding himself as a poet taking cognisance of age-old folk-wisdom (in this manoeuvre we see where Burns can best be claimed to be a proto-Romantic).

In another performance in the “Kilmarnock”, Burns had also done something similar to his adoption of mode in “Death and Dr Hornbook.” In “Halloween” he utilises the “Christis Kirk” stanza, as Fergusson had done in several performances, to feature the holiday festivities of the ordinary folk. Burns in “Halloween”, however, delves into, and indeed celebrates the pagan superstitions of the people of the country with a fulsomeness which represents an entirely new note in eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. The poem is prefaced by words of explanation on the “account of the principal charms and Spells of that Night [Halloween], so big with Prophecy to the Peasantry in the West of Scotland.”<sup>63</sup> Burns also tells the reader that this “striking part of the history of Human-nature, in its rude state, in all ages and nations [...] may be some entertainment to a philosophic mind, if any should honor the Author with a perusal, to see the remains of it, among the more unenlightened in our own.”<sup>64</sup> Burns, then, takes the anthropological license of the Enlightenment mindset to feature customs which were anathema to the mainstream (especially Calvinist) Christian mindset of Scotland. As with Burns’s involvement in bawdy verse, his detailed foregrounding of supernatural lore in “Halloween” shows a Scotland in which

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<sup>62</sup> Davie’s most succinct account of this aspect of the Scottish Enlightenment is to be found in his “The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense” (The Dow Lecture to the University of Dundee, 1972). Davie’s view is that the Scottish Enlightenment had a core suspicion of progress in the form of modern specialisation as potentially alienating or “atomising” (p.5) of society.

<sup>63</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.73.

<sup>64</sup> Low (ed.), *The Kilmarnock Poems*, p.55.



ancient, primitive customs pertained below the surface of the official culture of the nation. In the poem itself there is none of the overarching, enlightened comment of the preface to circumscribe the activities of the peasants as they chant, cast spells and indulge their folk-memory. The only hint of such glossing comes in the final stanza, which is typically unhorrorified at the pagan celebrations:

Wi' merry sangs, an' friendly cracks,  
I wat they did na weary,  
And unco tales, an' funnie jokes,  
Their sports were cheap an' cheary:  
Till butter'd So'ns, wi' fragrant lunt,  
Set a' their gabs a steerin;  
Syne, wi a social glass o' strunt,  
They parted aff careerin  
Fu' blythe that night.      (Stanza XXVIII)

That word, "social", shows the investment Burns place in such festivities which are presented as a beacon, not of evil, but of human spirit amidst the dreich reality of winter. Here speaks a powerful voice soaked in both the eighteenth-century Scots poetry tradition and the Enlightenment.

For Burns, the really dangerous devil is not the traditional cosmic Devil, but demonic forces created by mankind. This is most especially the case in the circumstances of the eighteenth-century as rapacious forces interfere with the lives of the people. Burns's most explicit and most political couching of protest in the face of the depredations of authority is to be found in "Address of Beelzebub."<sup>65</sup> Written in highly polished tetrameter couplets (a strong mode in both Scots and English satirical verse throughout the eighteenth century), the poem attacks the Earl of Breadalbane. The president of the Royal Highland Society frustrated "the designs of five hundred Highlanders who, as the Society were informed by Mr McKenzie of Applecross, were so audacious as to attempt an escape from their lawful lords and masters whose property, they are, by emigrating from the lands of Mr Macdonald of Glengary to the eilds of Canada, in search of that fantastic thing - Liberty -".<sup>66</sup> This is

<sup>65</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.108.

<sup>66</sup> McGuirk (ed), *Selected Poems*, p.128.

the interesting pre-Clearances scenario of which Burns writes. His sardonic couching of “liberty” as “fantasy” is an identification of the watchword-idea of Scottish identity as it runs all the way through Scottish poetry from Barbour’s *Brus* (c.1377), with its battlecry of “freedom”. There may be within this conjunction a reworked trace of the Scottish bitterness over the Darien scheme (and futile overseas projections generally, which, as we have seen, Allan Ramsay satirised). The sense of disjunction is capitalised upon in the poem as Burns gives vent to his talent for dystopian outlook (a capacity never emphasised enough by Burns criticism, but which we have seen to be powerfully present in “Death and Dr Hornbook”). Beelzebub, or Satan addresses Breadalbane (whose name is conveniently close to the epithet Burns chooses for the Devil):

Long life, my lord, an’ health be yours,  
Unskaith’d by hunger’d Highland boors!  
Lord grant nae duddie, desperate beggar,  
Wi’ dirk, claymore, or rusty trigger,  
May twin auld Scotland o’ a life  
She likes - as Butchers like a knife! (ll.1-6)

The brutally direct comparison in lines 5-6 is followed by explicit praise for the heroes of the American Revolution whom the would-be emigrants would have been in danger of following:

[...] up amang thae lakes an’ seas,  
They’ll mak what rules and laws they please:  
Some daring Hancocke, or a Frankline,  
May set their Highlan’ bluid a ranklin;  
Some Washington again may head them (ll.11-15)

It is interesting to note that aside from in his letters, Burns later taps into the vocabulary of the French Revolution only very obliquely, as in works such as “Scots Wha Hae”; drawing upon the American



Revolution, Burns is much more direct in vaunting its principles of “freedom” and “liberty.”<sup>67</sup> In the lines above we have a note of protest against what has been going on in the highlands, which has only a distant relative in Ramsay’s “Tartana, or the Plaid” and which exhibits a sympathy and an awareness for the beset highlander completely absent from the work of Fergusson (who is writing, of course, well after Culloden). The nearest one can find to such outrage at interference in the highlands is to be found in Tobias Smollett’s poem, “Tears of Scotland”. Implicit in the reference to “Highlan’ bluid a-ranklin” is the idea of the potential, dormant rebellious capability of the highlanders. This is a note which is paralleled only really in Home’s *Douglas* and (much more implicitly) in the “Ossian” poems. Clearly, Burns is in sympathy with this highland spirit which, if crushed at home, might well rekindle elsewhere. (The total depiction is one of the highlander hounded to the ends of the earth by the powers that be in Britain.) Burns goes on to have the Devil express to Breadalbane that he is right to treat the highlanders like animals, devoid of any rights. He advocates keeping them as virtual slaves and employing the females as prostitutes in Drury Lane. The poem ends:

Go on, my lord! I lang to meet you,  
An’ in my ‘house at hame’ to greet you;

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<sup>67</sup> See this work, or “Robert Bruce’s March to Bannockburn”, for instance, for the stanza:

Lay the proud Usurpers low!  
Tyrants fall in every foe  
Liberty’s in every blow!  
Let us Do — or Die!!!

(Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.425, ll.21-5). The conjunction of “tyrant” and “liberty” in a song ostensibly about the fourteenth-century wars of independence is unmistakeably the vocabulary of 1790s radicalism influenced by the French Revolution. Burns’s “Ode [For General Washington’s Birthday]” (1794) shows that he saw, albeit retrospectively perhaps, the republican cultural and political grammars of the American Revolution as essentially one and the same with that of the French Revolution:

No Spartan tube, no Attic shell,  
No lyre Eolian I awake;  
’Tis Liberty’s bold note I swell,  
Thy harp, columbia, let me take.  
See gathering thousands, while I sing,  
A broken chain, exulting, bring,  
And dash it in a tyrant’s face!  
And dare him to his very beard,  
And tell him, he no more is feared,  
No more the Despot of Columbia’s race.  
A tyrant’s proudest insults braved,

They shout, a People freed! They hail an Empire saved. (ll.1-11) (Kinsley (ed.), no.451).

Wi' common lords ye shanna mingle:  
 The benmost newk, beside the ingle  
 At my right hand, assign'd your seat  
 'Tween Herod's hip, an' Polycrate,  
 Or (if you on your station tarrow)  
 between Almagro and Pizarro;  
 A seat, I'm sure ye're weel deservin't;  
 An' till ye come - your humble servant,  
 Beelzebub. (ll.53-63)

What we have here is Burns knowingly placing Breadalbane among the litany of awful dictators and tyrants, which the Scottish Enlightenment intellect so hated (as we see in Beattie's "The Minstrel" with its hatred of the political state of affairs in South America). In these final lines Burns masterfully substitutes the convention of urbane gentility in the idea that Beelzebub will entertain the Earl at his home. Instead of the country seat, however, we have Satan's more earthy "house at hame" with its chimney-nook. This voice is the voice of the man from the country speaking with effective plainness. This narrative voice pertains throughout, but is, of course, politically and culturally knowledgeable in its range of reference and in its accomplished setting within the context of the couplet. Here, again, then we see that Burns's primitivism involves a blend - sometimes a harmony between sometimes a tension therein - involving his primitive location as Scots peasant-poet from Ayrshire and his location actually within a mainstream British cultural primitivism and literateness as an educated poet of the eighteenth century.

Both The "Kilmarnock" and "Edinburgh" editions of Burns's poems follow the pattern of various volumes of Ramsay's work, most notably, the 1721 edition and the 1773 and 1779 editions of Fergusson's work in publishing poems with a number of songs toward the end of the volume. This is indicative of a general pattern in British literary culture, as inspired by Gay as by Ramsay, whereby songs, especially folk-songs, became fashionable. Burns's vast work in folk-song, which lies outwith the scope of this chapter was, then, not entirely a continuation of a tradition within Scots poetry of the eighteenth-century (though to some extent this tradition was given impulse by Ramsay and Fergusson),



but is rather a new impetus in quantity of work pursued by Burns and the vast editorial labours he invested in it. Burns's work in this direction, like that in his adopted and adapted "habbie" stanza, however, has yet again given strength to the tendency to see Scots poetry of the eighteenth century as more generally, or essentially, folk-rooted than it is.

We see Burns in typically ambivalent mode - as he pursues both his primitivist project and a work of outstanding literary polish in "Tam o' Shanter" (1790).<sup>68</sup> That favoured mode of much satirical and narrative eighteenth-century British poetry, the tetrameter couplet, is utilised to relate a supernatural tale of witches and ghosts, which is both suitably fast-moving and full of thoughtful reflection. Edwin Muir's pronouncement upon the poem, which we have considered already, where thought and action are supposed to be so disjunctive is, simply invalid. Rather, the poem is an essay in how human thought (or thoughtlessness) and (seeming) action can become profoundly interlocked. The story of Tam o' Shanter's alcohol-fuelled encounter with demons and his resulting "wild ride" where he is fleeing for his life represents the protagonist's false subjective reality which is brilliantly shown in its psychological detail throughout the poem. Tam sits at in the pub loath to go home:

Whare sits our sulken sullen dame,  
Gathering her brows like gathering storm,  
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.                    (ll.10-13)

Nature is couched in feminine terms so that the stormy wheather outside is equated with the mood of Tam's wife Kate, waiting at home for him to return. Tarrying at the pub, Tam finds his landlady flirtatious and is regaled by stories of the supernatural by his friend, Souter Johnny. When Tam eventually sets off for home his secret fears and desires are activated in a stealthy vision of scantilly-clad dancing witches in Alloway kirkyard. He has a somewhat unhealthy attitude to woman and this is highlighted (it is one of the paradoxes surrounding Burns, given his notorious biography, that he is so good at undermining the typically misogynistic male psyche in his work). Instead of going home to his good and loving wife who has even, as the lines above show, a certain propensity for passion, Tam

<sup>68</sup> Kinsley, *Poems and Songs*, no.321.

loiters with intent and is eventually chased by the witches as his hidden observing presence is revealed. His cry of, “Weel done Cutty-Sark” (l.189), as the comely girl Nannie dances with the witches, is something approaching the orgasmic. Chased home, Tam and his horse, another female component, Maggie, narrowly escape the wrath of the hellish brood. The only damage done is that a clasping hand of a witch removes Maggie’s tail. What the poem satirises is Tam’s fear of the feminine and the demonic visions of the feminine which his mind, in its immaturity, creates. The loss of the tail (of a female-horse) represents a pseudo-castration which is particularly mocking. Tam does not actually use his member in any kind of “manly” fashion, intent as he is on his onanistic, wife-evading exploits among femininity. What we have then is traditional folk-materials, involving witches and midnight orgies, knowingly psychologised by Burns.<sup>69</sup>

As well as drawing upon compelling, withering psychological insight into its central protagonist, the poem also casts a sympathetic eye upon Tam and his location. We see this in that passage which is the most notorious, clumsily anglicised (as some critics suppose):

But pleasures are like poppies spread,  
 You seize the flow’r, its bloom is shed:  
 Or like the snow falls in the river,  
 A moment white - then melts forever;  
 Or like the borealis race,  
 That flit ere you can point their place;  
 Or like the rainbow’s lovely form  
 Evanishing amid the storm. -  
 Nae man can tether time nor tide;  
 The hour approaches Tam maun ride (ll.59-68)

As Tam drags himself away from the pub to set off home, his drinking moments are couched mock-heroically as natural “pleasures”, when, of course, these are unnaturally induced. The narrator mocks Tam also as his setting out for home is couched as an epic journey. Ultimately, however, there is (laughing) sympathy for Tam in an “official”, heroic, English-couched vision of a transient world in

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<sup>69</sup> For the most modern reading of gender psychology in the poem see Sarah M. Dunnigan & Gerard Carruthers, “Two Tales of Tam o’ Shanter” in *Southfields* 6.2 (2000), pp.36-43.



these lines which actually accords with his own experiences as these unfold. Uncertainty of vision, even as Tam himself is culpable in this, is a universal human situation. Burns is not switching flatly between *Scots and English, the folk-view and the literary voice*. He is harmonising these in a very democratic fashion according to his predilections as a “primitivist” writer who has, at the same time, a wide knowledge of the tropes and *modi operandi* of British literature generally. Each of these two opposing worlds is equally benighted and this is part of a wide scepticism underpinning the poem. The smooth surface of the text is undermined by this fact of uncertainty which the careful reader must take into account if he or she is not to fall into the same trap as Tam of simply seeing witches and demons. “Tam o’ Shanter” ultimately comments upon the fragility of the worlds we construct for ourselves and the difficulty of maintaining true perception. In this implicit, carefully thoughtful theme we have another great work of the Scottish Enlightenment, as well as a great work of the eighteenth-century primitivist project. Indeed, the poem exemplifies the coming together of the eighteenth-century tradition of Scots poetry and the Enlightenment through the dovetailing of primitivist predilections in each of these cultural strands, which Robert Burns so brilliantly brings together. Burns in this poem as elsewhere represents a powerful re-homogenisation of Scottish literature at the end of the eighteenth century.

## **Chapter Seven. "Circumstances which the Author has not been able to persuade himself to retract or cancel": The Scottish Novel in the Early Nineteenth Century.**

In many ways the Scottish novel of the early nineteenth century represents the final fruit of the literary peregrinations of eighteenth-century Scotland. On the one hand, the reconstruction of Scottish literary identity by Ramsay, Fergusson and Thomson represents a programme of re-establishing Scottish literature which, in spite of often strongly-signalled nationalist characteristics, is significantly connected to wider British currents in literary history. On the other hand, a programme of primitivism, contributed to also by each of those writers just mentioned, is most forcefully channelled by writers associated, broadly, with the Scottish Enlightenment and by Robert Burns and equally propels the forward trajectory of Scottish literature. In these eighteenth-century wrestlings with literary identity, there is a kind of backwards and forwards movement placing Scottish writers at a sharp cutting-edge of the new formations and new traumas in British identity and literature. The movement from the Augustan age, through the age of sensibility and into the Romantic age (each of which involves ambivalence with regard to the notion of a literary centre) can be charted in Scotland as in England. Scottish literature follows a very similar trajectory to that of English literature in this sense, and for better or worse these movements are, if anything, registered all the more sharply. The early nineteenth-century Scottish novel represents that site where Scottish literature builds most confidently upon the apprehensions of colourful and difficult Scottish identity forged during the eighteenth century, and that site where the explicable instabilities of that identity are most rejoiced in as showing a Scotland whose experiences are dramatic confirmation that it is part of the modern world rather than a quaint backwater.

### **I**

One writer has done more than Robert Burns to promulgate the image of Scotland to itself and to the wider world and that is Walter Scott (1771-1832). Scott's own identity has a great deal to do with this fact. With a love of his ancestral borders, his first significant publication is his *Minstrelsy of the*



*Scottish Border* (1802-3) set in motion the association of the borders with the Scottish ballads when, in fact, a much greater repository of such material was to be found in the North East.<sup>1</sup> This bending, intentional or otherwise, of material which he also sometimes “improved” in prosodic function or phraseology represents Scott’s first act of re-creation which was to be the hallmark of his career as a writer and cultural activist. His career as an original poet in the early 1800s writing long narrative poems such as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) and *Marmion* (1808) also feature Scott’s antiquarian interests. Part of the Romantic age’s interest in heroism and chivalry, or a time (unlike that which had developed since the eighteenth century with its largescale forces of commerce and wholesale revolutions technological and political) when one strong-willed individual might apparently take control of affairs around him. His career as a poet, however, was according to his own admission superceded in popularity by the narrative poems of Byron.<sup>2</sup> An admirer of Byron and other innovative poetic practitioners of the Romantic period, we might well infer, however, that Scott did not much care for the acerbic iconoclasm of Byron and others such as Shelley as they looked at and satirised a decadent cultured and ruling class. Scott was more thoroughly a Tory than any of the other major writers of the period, and, at the same time, a scion of Enlightenment Edinburgh with its strong legal culture. From both these sites his antiquarianism was fired, and, arguably, was heightened by his national identity in general. More even than Burns, Scott was the recipient of “traditional” and “modern” strains of Scottish culture and identity which became much more entwined in him than in any previous Scottish writer. At the High School of Edinburgh it is interesting to note that Scott won a school-prize for his translation from the *Aeneid* (his first known literary activity) and though, by all accounts, not hugely talented in Latin, he shared the Scottish pride in the classics. It was perhaps from the influence of such men as his classics teacher, Dr Dalzell, who claimed that Presbyterianism had threatened Scotland’s competence in the classics that Scott was primed as a Tory in cultural terms. This Toryism is actually

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<sup>1</sup> See David Hewitt (ed), *Scott on Himself* (Aberdeen, 1980), p.25.

<sup>2</sup> See Allan Massie, *The Ragged Lion* (London, 1994), p.20.



less clear, though more prosaically explicit in Scott's political life.<sup>3</sup> The intertwining of the Scottish legal system and patriotic antiquarianism which had been so visible during the earlier part of the eighteenth century had become less obvious as time had worn on. If Scott was much more like Thomas Ruddiman in temperament than David Hume (Ruddiman's successor as librarian at the Faculty of Advocates), he nonetheless shares with Hume a progressive, Enlightened outlook oversetting Tory emotions. This is perhaps best exemplified in Scott's finest short story, "The Two Drovers" (1827) where Robin Oig MacCombich kills his English cattle-droving friend, Harry Wakefield, after an unfortunate dispute over cattle-grazing, which is the fault of neither but of extraneous factors.<sup>4</sup> Although killing his friend in traditional and honourable (or time-honoured) Highland fashion by stabbing him after the Englishman has bested him in unarmed pugilism, the new-fangled (to Robin's eyes) British law must take its course and Robin must hang. Traditional mores, then, must give way to a new empirical legal dispensation whose writ must cover the whole of Britain.

If Scott's attitudes to the superseded culture of the Highlands in "The Two Drovers" and in our major focus of concern here, *Waverley* (1814), are the kind which have seen him frowned upon as a moderniser (in perjorative terms), he was, of course, far from lacking affection for traditional cultures. Inspired by the late eighteenth-century British and Scottish literary contexts, these saw him come under the spell of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* (1765) and Enlightened antiquarianism generally, which sought to balance its apprehension of progressive modern moral formation with the recovery of the genuine, primitive moral sensibility of more marginalised contemporary and historic cultures. This process of sympathy, of which we have seen something in the last two chapters, reaches its most intense site with the Scottish novel in the early nineteenth-century, and Scott is at the forefront of this activity. Scott undoubtedly charted in his fiction the way in which "progress" destroys more traditional cultures and it is this dynamic of observing cultural (and ultimately economic) modernisation which has

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<sup>4</sup> "The Two Drovers" in Douglas Gifford (ed.), *Scottish Short Stories of the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1975), pp. 19-46.



led, on the one hand to Scott being applauded by the Marxist critic, Georg Lukacs for his grasp of modernity, and, on the other, to some critics arguing that Scott is little more than an apologist for the increasing centralism of the British state.<sup>5</sup>

Scott's first novel, *Waverley*, has an introductory chapter which begins with the narrator explaining the choice of his hero's name:

The title of this work has not been chosen without the grave and solid deliberation which matters of importance demand from the prudent. Even its first, or general denomination, which was the result of no common research or selection, although according to the example of my predecessors, I had only to seize upon the most sounding and euphonic surname that English history or topography affords, and elect it at once to the title of my work, and the name of my hero. But alas! what could readers have expected from the chivalrous epithets of Howard, Mordaunt, Mortimer, or Stanley, or from the softer and more sentimental sounds of Belmour, Belville, Belfield and Belgrave, but pages of inanity, similar to those which have been so christened for half a century past? I must modestly admit I am too diffident of my own merit to place an unnecessary opposition to preconceived associations; I have, therefore, like a maiden knight with a white shield, assumed for my hero, WAVERLEY, an uncontaminated name, bearing with its sound little of good or evil, excepting what the reader shall hereafter be pleased to affix to it (p.33).<sup>6</sup>

Here, from the very start, we see Scott (via the narrator) reflecting upon the process of historical fiction. He is going to forego "euphonic" historical coinage and instead seek out a different kind of resonance in the name "Waverley." Symbolic in the time-honoured traditions of the British novel over the previous one hundred years, the name also represents the insertion of a much stronger psychological emphasis than is usually found in previous novels. Scott has moved from his own strongly-featured chivalric protagonists of his narrative poetry to a much less certain individual character. The name Waverley may be "uncontaminated" in terms of association, but in a larger sense it is precisely *contaminated*. The solid sureness of previously invoked romantic historical names has gone

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<sup>5</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (Cambridge Mass., 1981), pp.37-9.

<sup>6</sup> Quotations are to the edition of *Waverley* edited by Andrew Hook (London, 1972).

to reflect a much more confused consciousness, and this confused consciousness is emphatically identified with Englishness. Confused Englishness will play on a Scottish, particularly Highland, stage and represent a kind of remade English, as opposed to Scottish primitive character.

The novel is dedicated to “the Scottish Addison”, Henry Mackenzie, but it is not so much Mackenzie’s accomplished stylistic qualities (whether actual extant or not) from which Scott takes his cue, but in the shaping of a more historically-focused “man of feeling” than Harley is in the character of Edward Waverley (if the name is resonant with any previous protagonist it is surely with Harley). There is a certain irony and also a genuine historical ecumenicism in Mackenzie and Scott re-creating the primitive character in the shape of English protagonists. If Mackenzie’s Harley is clearly the product of the age of sentiment and sensibility, Scott’s Waverley is a character conforming much more to a fully-flexed Romantic agenda. This is so in that the traumas (characteristic of the primitivist construction of character) which beset Waverley’s mind are much more to do with a deep uncertainty, not simply about the duplicity of humankind, but about the nature of culture itself, particularly a culture with strongly-defined national co-ordinates. To some extent, in the aspect of representing (obliquely) a traumatised culture, Macpherson’s Ossian poetry is the most prescient text of Scott’s concerns in *Waverley*, but where the Ossian poetry is shrouded in ancient fog, the scenario of Scott’s novel is set in a time which is only “sixty years since.” There is an immediacy to Scott’s novel in that it raises awareness of a historical reality which postdates the British Union of 1707. Many commentators have clamoured to claim that Scott’s treatment of the Highlands and of Jacobitism is an evasive manoeuvre, designed to transform a very real threat to the new and growing British consciousness into merely colourful romance, but it is at least as arguable that in drawing attention to the rebellion of 1745, he



doing precisely the opposite.<sup>7</sup> Scott is the first Lowland writer to turn explicitly to 1745 as a scene in which Lowland Scots and English face questions of identity. The pattern which emerges is one where British identity is won out at the expense of a much more secure, unreflecting Highland identity, and this in itself represents a hugely innovative approach to recent British experience.

As David Hewitt has observed, “the nature of fiction is seldom his [Scott’s] overt subject.”<sup>8</sup> However, Scott’s first novel is his most explicitly thoughtful about what he is doing in his fiction. His introductory chapter, whose innovatory stature tends to remain overlooked, is essentially an essay on the new fiction (which may not be solely his invention when we consider Jane Austen whose *Sense and Sensibility* had appeared in 1811 raising some of the fraught questions of psychological displacement to be found in *Waverley*). Scott is part of a new fictional dispensation as he shows in a key passage:

By fixing, then, the date of my story Sixty Years before the present 1st November 1805, I would have my readers understand, that they will meet in the following pages neither a romance of chivalry, nor a tale of modern manners; that my hero will neither have iron on his shoulders, as of yore, nor on the heels of his boots, as is the present fashion of Bond Street; and that my damsels will neither be clothed ‘in purple and in pall’, like the Lady Alice of an old ballad, nor reduced to the primitive nakedness of a modern fashionable at a rout. From this my choice of era the understanding of the critic may further presage, that the object of my tale is more a description of men than manners. (pp.34-5)

Broadly, here, Scott is claiming to be a realist (indeed is helping create the new realist mould in nineteenth-century fiction). He pointedly claims to be eschewing romantic legend, as he invokes the “old ballads”, in which he himself had had (and retained) such an interest. His realism will deal with something old, which is very different from “modern manners.” His site of interest can be found only

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Noble, for instance, sees Scott’s treatment of Jacobitism as being motivated in the following terms: “In direct proportion to his fear of violence breaking out in his own society, Scott’s fiction displays an increasing need to stress the terror of regressive violence. In *Waverley* the insurrectionary Highland anti-hero is finally, safely framed in a pleasingly nostalgic portrait” [“Urbane Silence: Scottish Writing and the Nineteenth-Century City” in George Gordon (ed.), *Perspectives of the Scottish City* (Aberdeen, 1985), p.78].

<sup>8</sup> David Hewitt, “Walter Scott” in Douglas Gifford (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature* Volume III (Aberdeen, 1988), p.70.



sixty years before the supposed date of the narrative: they are within living memory and reveal “men” rather than “manners.” In other words the narrative will not focus upon quaint customs now only romantically familiar to the reader, but to recognisable human behaviour. Here we see the Enlightenment-educated Walter Scott, who believes (in orthodox primitivist terms) that the human condition is similarly psychologically explicable from age to age. The narrative will speak of “those passions common to men of all stages of society, and which have alike agitated the human heart, whether it throbbed under the steel corselet of the fifteenth century, the brocaded coat of the eighteenth, or the blue frock and white dimity waistcoat of the present day” (pp.35-6). We find here, then, that Enlightenment view which while it might believe in “stages of society”, in classic Smithian or Fergusonian terms, is far from subscribing to the simple notion of human progress. “Romance after the Enlightenment”, in F.R. Hart’s phrase, must involve the recognition that the old-fashioned and outmoded-looking mores of past society cloak a more or less accessible human nature. One of the apprehensions of Romanticism (where it accentuates a tendency which develops through the Enlightenment) is that receding historical times and marginalised cultural characters are realistically, psychologically available to “modernity” and in this apprehension Scott shows his Romanticism.<sup>10</sup>

The narrator of *Waverley* playfully but seriously continues to prime the reader in the opening chapters. At the end of chapter five, in discussing the family formation of Edward Waverley he enters into a topos of apology:

I beg pardon, once and for all, of those readers who take up novels merely for amusement, for plaguing them so long with old-fashioned politics, and

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<sup>9</sup> F.R. Hart, *The Scottish Novel: From Smollett to Spark* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p.18.

<sup>10</sup> Edwin Muir classically sees Scott as decidedly not a Romantic writer, as we have seen. One of the best modern reappraisals of Scott as a Romantic writer is to be found in Duncan Forbes, “The Rationalism of Sir Walter Scott” in Harry E. Shaw (ed.), *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott: The Waverley Novels* (New York, 1996). Paradoxically, this occurs as Forbes defends Scott in the following terms: “The romantic interpreters are inclined to make too much of Scott’s lack of formal education and of his voracious reading of romances as a young man” (p.87). What Forbes highlights is a very digressive cultural mindset in Scott, both deeply imaginative and empirical, so that, for instance, “In 1790 when he was nineteen, [Scott] wrote a paper on the origin of the feudal system, which he submitted to Dugald Stewart and read to the Literary and Speculative Society” (p.87).



Whig and Tory, and Hanoverians and Jacobites. The truth is, I cannot promise them that this story shall be intelligible, not to say probable, without it. My plan requires that I should explain the motives on which its action proceeded; and these motives necessarily arose from the feelings, prejudices, and parties of the times. I do not invite my fair readers, whose sex and impatience give them the greatest right to explain of these circumstances, into a flying chariot drawn by hippogriffs, or moved by enchantment. Mine is an humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his Majesty's highway. Such as dislike the vehicle may leave it at the next halt, and wait for the conveyance of Prince Hussein's tapestry, or Malek the Weaver's flying sentry-box. Those who are contented to remain with me will be occasionally exposed to the dulness inseparable from heavy roads, steep hills, sloughs, and other terrestrial retardations; but, with tolerable horses and a civil driver (as the advertisements have it), I engage to get as soon as possible into a more picturesque and romantic country, if my passengers incline to have some patience with me during the first stages. (p.63)

If Scott is later the "wizard of the north", in his first novel he is keen to reveal the components of the contradictory chemistry he is providing. He follows the motif of the journey, as it were in a typical novel of the eighteenth-century, pointing out, however, that this journey must make sense rather than being simply for "amusement". He responds to the idea that the politics of the first part of the eighteenth-century are now mere fusty half-memories. In doing so Scott implicitly acknowledges how quickly the old party-faction of Britain has given way (by "1805") to larger subsequent political struggles involving America and France, and how the rapid modernising tendency in eighteenth-century Britain, generally, has led to a culture seemingly transformed out of all recognition. At the same time, he suggests that the imagination of Britain has not entirely caught up with this change. In this first instance, the British mindset lacks an adequate historical faculty if it is so estranged from comparatively recent politics (the politics which we have seen in the context of Scottish literature so centrally important to discussions of identity). In utilising the metaphor that his, the narrator's, vehicle is a "humble English post-chaise", as opposed to some magical vehicle pertaining to the fashionable tales of the Arabian nights, he mocks the notion that only the outward-looking or international tendency will bring the modern reader into contact with interesting and exotic material. The reader *ought* to wonder at



the colourful political and other mores in the recent past of his (or even her) own country of Britain: here too there is a kind of strangeness, and a strangeness which is all the more shocking for comprising the recent native past. Through the narrator, Scott both registers the trauma of recent British and international progress and points to the fact that this trauma has led to a kind of amnesia. The “modern” mind as a result, searches for “picturesque and romantic country” (and the narrator promises soon to provide this for the reader), and this is an escape from reality to some extent. The narrator will take the reader into a “romantic country”, but this will be no pleasure-trip; rather it will be an uncomfortable journey into the (forgotten) roots of British modernity. The passage above is among the most extraordinary Scott was ever to write. It simultaneously recognises modern Britain with “his Majesty’s highway standing as a proud symbol of Britain’s efficient communication network (this network having been properly completed by the military in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellion) and the desire sponsored by Romanticism (though with many popular and less intellectually-engaged offshoots) for an alternative or exotic realm for the imagination to occupy in reaction to the new Britain of technological consummation. The passage is also that place where Scott is most instinctively knowing that he is entering into a new fictional territory. The narrator may couch the narrative in terms which imply it to be a boring antiquarian narrative and to partake too much also of the old-fashioned vehicle of the novel in the device of a journey, but history is what is going to be brought vividly to life, as the sphere of “men” rather than “manners” and the journey is going to be re-treaded as an intense psychological journey for both the main protagonist, Edward Waverley and for the reader also.

Scott continues to suffer under the diagnosis that he fails to be contemporary, so that even a modern critic as astute as Katie Trumpener opines that Scott’s method “privileges the perspective of antiquarian narrators over that of historical participants, for the intellectual complexity of the act of historiographic assembly potentially exceeds the psychological complexity of historical experience



itself.”<sup>11</sup> If Trumpener’s view can be challenged anywhere by Scott’s practice it is in *Waverley* above all other of his works. Indeed, in *Waverley*, Scott is explicitly aware of the problem to which Trumpener alludes. The novel is one which is particularly and ironically framed. The last moment of the fifth chapter is a footnote commenting upon the prelude to the action which begins properly with chapter six:

These Introductory Chapters have been a good deal censured as tedious and unnecessary. Yet there are circumstances recorded in them which the author has not been able to persuade himself to retract or cancel. (p.63)

The narrator here operates under the guise of pedantic, antiquarian editor and this prefatory disguise makes for a framing device along with the final “active” scene of the novel in chapter seventy one where Edward Waverley considers a new portrait in the library of Tully-Veolan:

It was a large and spirited painting, representing Fergus Mac-Ivor and Waverley in their Highland dress; the scene a wild, rocky, and mountainous pass, down which the clan were descending in the background. It was taken from a spirited sketch, drawn while they were in Edinburgh by a young man of high genius, and had been painted on a full-length scale by an eminent London artist. Raeburn himself (whose Highland chiefs do all but walk out of the canvas) could not have done more justice to the subject; and the ardent, fiery, and impetuous character of the unfortunate Chief of Glennaquoich was finely contrasted with the contemplative, fanciful and enthusiastic expression of his happier friend. Beside this painting hung the arms which Waverley had borne in the unfortunate civil war. The whole piece was beheld with admiration and deeper feelings. (p.489)

Mac-Ivor and Waverley have been briefly united in the cause of Jacobitism, and in the portrait they are, as it were, united forever. The reality of the cultural struggle of Jacobitism, the grim determination, is caught in Fergus Mac-Ivor and, by contrast, the romance, or “fancy” is to be found in Waverley. Both characters are drawn according to the empirical methodology of Raeburn portraiture, with its combination of realism and romance (in this methodology we see the influence upon the fabric of ideas

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<sup>11</sup> Katie Trumpener *Bardic Nationalism* (Princeton, 1996), p.152. Trumpener’s view also takes inadequate account of Scott’s playful narratorial methodology in *Waverley* and elsewhere in his fiction. For a good description of this methodology, see Harry E. Shaw, “Scott’s Daemon and the Voices of Historical Narration” in Shaw (ed.), *Op cit.*, pp.109-20.



which underpins the novel in its totality). Waverley, inhabiting the library uneasily and nervously at the end of the novel, realises that something tangible had passed from the world with the passing of the old Highland mentality of honour and clanship. Whether it was in the right or in the wrong is irrelevant (it is merely “unfortunate”, or on the wrong side of history). It is not the “romance” of the Highlands which has stayed with Waverley entirely and in dominating fashion. Rather his former romance (which he observes in the depiction of himself in the portrait) has now mostly given way to the former reality of Mac-Ivor and his struggle.

There may well be a certain relief in Waverley that the danger of the unruly, Catholic Mac-Ivor and his tenacious struggle to the death are now passed; however, there is also an awareness of loss (which we see in the repeated watchword of “unfortunate”); Scott, the Tory, is not the propagandist of the progress of Whig Hanoverian Britain,<sup>12</sup> but the man attempting in his novel, as empirically as a Raeburn, to depict what actually happened in recent Scottish history. The Jacobites had been vanquished and Scott refrains from commenting upon the actual justice or otherwise of their cause. They are simply the losers and are to be regretted not simply for the colour or romance of their cause, but because of more tenacious qualities such as their hardiness and sense of kinship. In real-life Scott went too far in attempting to reinvent George IV as Bonnie Prince Charlie when he stage-managed the garish tartan outfit of the king in his visit to Edinburgh in 1822. What this piece of cultural engineering represented, however, was not simply the attempt to smooth out the divisions of fairly recent British and Scottish dynastic conflict, but was much more of an attempt to be even-handed about British and Scottish identity. The Jacobite side had been defeated, but it ought not to be cast off altogether in the spirit of party-politics.<sup>13</sup> Gauche though Scott’s handling of the affair was, it was an attempt (as much

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<sup>12</sup> For the most informed reading of Scott as anything but a narrow “Tory” creatively, see Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland’s Past*, pp.255-67. My reading of *Waverley* is very much influenced by Kidd’s argument that: “As a historian of Scotland his principal achievement was a mythopoeic encapsulation in the *Waverley* novels (1814-32), of the mid-eighteenth-century sociological and antiquarian deconstruction of Scotland’s much vaunted historical identity” (p.256).

<sup>13</sup> See Iain Gordon Brown, “Scott in 1822: ‘Fugelman of Royalty’ ” in *Scott Newsletter* (Spring 1996), pp.2-5 for the most revealing account of this episode.



of the even-handedness in sympathy is in *Waverley*) to operate according to the old-fashioned Tory ideal of eschewing faction as we have observed in the likes of Allan Ramsay. Enlightenment empiricism in historicism and portraiture as the twin-engines of the psychology of the novel provides realism rather than romance and highlights the susceptible, primitive, romantic disposition of the Englishman, *Waverley*, being fired by the events surrounding the Jacobite rebellions.<sup>14</sup> The framing of the novel with, at the outset, seeming antiquarian prolixity and, at the end, romantic portraiture (which is only partly romantic and in the case only of Edward *Waverley*) represents an ironic awareness that the past cannot be tidily depicted according to mere facts (which need where humans are involved psychological underwriting) and that the past remains problematic in that the removal of features of the past involves, often, deep human loss. The warning against romance is a warning about not taking history seriously enough. Indeed, Scott comments very profoundly on how the contemporary mindset creates romance out of fact when he says that “the most romantic parts of this narrative are precisely those which have a foundation in fact” (p.493). People turn toward a romantic mentality, as *Waverley* does, when they fail to comprehend reality.

Scott implicitly warns us throughout the novel neither to romanticise nor dismiss the past, though, at the same time, he understands why these attitudes occur:

There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century, or little more, has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland. The effects of the insurrection of 1745 - the destruction of the patriarchal power of the Highland chiefs - the abolition of heritable jurisdictions of the Lowland nobility and barons - the total eradication of the Jacobite party, which, averse to intermingle with the English, or adopt their customs, long continued to pride themselves upon maintaining ancient Scottish manners and customs - commenced this innovation. The gradual influx of wealth, and extension of commerce, have since united to render the present people of Scotland a class of beings as different from their grandfathers as the existing English are from those of Queen Elizabeth's time. (p.492)

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<sup>14</sup> A fine account of Edward *Waverley*'s disorientation, and of the disorientation of the reader (and not solely the Scottish reader) as analogous to *Waverley*'s experience, see Marilyn Orr, “Real & Narrative Time: *Waverley* and the Education of Memory” in Shaw (ed.), *Op cit.*, pp.165-81.



How can Scottish identity remain the same under such economic and cultural tumult? It cannot and this is what Scott desires to show us, while at the same time emphasising that this past consists of real men and women. Misunderstanding comes through disconnection and this in turn can lead to Romance. Significantly, Waverley brought up under the guidance of his cautious, though Stuart-loyal Uncle Everard, identifies most with his family ancestor, the crusader Sir Wilibert (a figure predating even Elizabethan times). Edward Waverley struggles for much of the novel with the powerful alternations of romance and reality which impact upon him. His determination to be a soldier is in part implicit reaction to his retiring uncle and attempted atavism. The atavistic urge, however, is confused by the figures of inactive custodian of traditional Waverley family loyalty, Everard, and his more active father, Richard, boldly questing in politics, returned as Whig member of parliament for the borough of "Barterfaith" (p.7). The past or traditional allegiance, then, is blocked off, mothballed even, and the present is problematic. This pattern which pertains throughout *Waverley* is one registering the trauma of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British identity where rapid historical change has created great problems for the contemporary mind's sense of its own history. In delineating this problem, Scott shows himself to be a highly sensitive Tory historian, and not the evader of history and of the contemporary situation as diagnosed by Edwin Muir.

As the passage quoted above makes clear, Scotland is at the cutting-edge of the British experience, which is why the Englishman, Edward Waverley, is taken to that country. Edward's military career in dull commercial Dundee in the unattractive Whig Hanoverian army perpetually suspicious of those beyond the city walls is a culture-shock to the romantic Waverley who had nurtured himself with tales of armed chivalry in the service of a clearly noble cause. His ensuing accidentally outlawed state (which denies him clearcut chivalric identity) never really allows him a clear sense of purpose as he becomes entangled with the Jacobites. His feelings amidst these peregrinations, in fact, are constantly confused, as we see on the eve of the Battle of Prestonpans:



The Highlanders, 'thick as leaves in Vallambrosa,' lay stretched upon the ridge of the hill buried (excepting their sentinels) in the most profound repose. 'How many of these brave fellows will sleep more soundly before tomorrow night, Fergus!' said Waverley, with an involuntary sigh.

'You must not think of that,' answered Fergus, whose ideas were entirely military. 'You must only think of your sword and by whom it was given. All other reflections are now TOO LATE.' (p.336)

Waverley's seeming sensitivity here is actually the perpetuation of his romantic outlook. He sees the clansmen "buried" in their sleep. Their "repose" though is as far from representing a realistic depiction of their violent (and scattered) end, just as the tomb of Sir Wilibert is a rather sanitised encapsulation of the travails of its occupant. Waverley is still reflecting (or poeticising), when as Fergus tells him the time now is simply for action and loyalty to the cause. Edward gradually realises that Fergus and his sister Flora have used the romance of the Highlands and its customs to seduce him to their cause. Romance is no substitute for either thought or, perhaps, true blood allegiance to a cause, which he with his disrupted family history cannot have. His daydream adventuring, however, is now coming to an end, though ironically his act of saving Colonel Talbot represents a true act of chivalry in rescuing a man he has known to be kind to him and deserving of his allegiance. This confirms the narrator's claim at the outset that he will take us into the real arena of "men" and not of "manners." Universalist in his psychology, Scott shows us that the human act need not be constrained by (difficult) history but that nobleness of soul transcends the ages and remains available in the contemporary setting. In this configuration in the novel, and elsewhere in his work, Scott shows himself to be most truly the child of the Enlightenment, considering the difficulties of the Scottish/British past and genuinely respectful of this past, while, at the same time, refusing to concede that the present is different in its essential human reality. Scott, the sensitive Tory and the sensitive product of Enlightenment thinking, is not, then, a "waverer" himself, but a man refusing to bow to the kind of pessimistic, neo-dystopian reading of Scottish/British culture which is all too readily adopted by Scottish thinkers, from the Jacobite propagandists of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir in the twentieth century.



Romance and realism co-exist throughout the novel. The categories are never entirely easy to sort out, most especially for *Waverley*. Amidst the most intense passages of landscape description in the novel, which according to some critics, are to be read almost as Scott's own unrelenting hypnotised and hypnotising perspective, reality jars the scene. We see this as Fergus's man, Evan Dhu, attempts to seduce Waverley's mind with the grandeur of the scene:

'This,' said Evan, 'is the pass of Bally-Brough, which was kept in former times by ten of the clan Donnochie against a hundred Low Country carles. The graves of the slain are still to be seen in that little corrie, or bottom, on the opposite side of the burn - if your eyes are good, you may see the green specks among the heather. - See, there is an eagle, which you Southrons call an eagle - you have no such birds as that in England - he is going to fetch his supper from the Laird of Bradwardine's braes, but I'll send a slug after him.'

He fired his piece accordingly, but missed the superb monarch of the feathered tribes, who, without noticing the attempt to annoy him, continued his majestic flight to the southward. A thousand birds of prey, hawks, kites, carrion-crows, and ravens disturbed from the lodgings which they had just taken up for the evening, rose at the report of the gun, and mingled their hoarse and discordant notes with the echoes which replied to it, and with the roar of the mountain cataracts. Evan, a little disconcerted at having missed his mark, when he meant to have displayed peculiar dexterity, covered his confusion by whistling part of a pibroch as he reloaded his piece, and proceeded in silence up the path. (135-6)

Evan Dhu's attempts to entrance Waverley, with the majesty of both landscape and Dhu's own prowess comically backfire. He is left lamely whistling a pibroch in a feeble attempt to recapture the previous mood, while all around the disturbed birds add to the sound of the waterfalls in seeming derision. Amidst the humour though, there is also truth as Evan Dhu's attempted sly orchestration becomes apparent and there is the further delineation of the fact that beneath the supposedly still and settled surface of the Highland scene there are those ready to make a great disturbance. The imagery of the unsettled birds is particularly interesting. They are depicted almost as a swarm of insects, that image so beloved by eighteenth-century satirists as they wrote about the very worldly schemes of men. There is obvious symbolism between the carnivorous birds and the Highlanders. The clans too are



ready to rise with a ferocity which is of the Highlands in its hawk-likeness and which is ambiguous in its insect-like swarming. Here, again, Scott refrains brilliantly from explicit judgement of the Jacobites, but captures something merely of their power, which can be seen as ambivalently romantic or plaguesome. If Evan lacks dexterity of shot, Scott does not in a depiction which is certainly not that of the static romantic depiction with which Scott has so often been charged.

With *Waverley*, Walter Scott helps bring the curtain down on the somewhat static depiction of Scottish identity which had been broadcast in the eighteenth-century. In this he follows in the footsteps of Robert Burns (who had dextrously rehabilitated Scottish Presbyterian identity and utilised Jacobite patriotism for more contemporary political struggles during the 1790s). The instability Scott recognises, and scrutinises through the lenses of Enlightenment intellect and Romantic sensibility shows not so much a merely confused Scottish cultural identity but an appropriately difficult *modern* identity in Scotland which had been entangled since at least the early decades of the eighteenth century. He leads the way in showing to his contemporaries, such as John Galt and James Hogg, the purchase to be derived from colliding romance and realism, and past and modern outlooks. While showing that there is a certain explicable immutability of human nature to be discerned in historical events, Scott shows that these events are to be retrieved from mere fantastic or legendary depiction and to be sympathised with against the modern conceit that men and not just manners have changed beyond all recognition.

## II

John Galt took as his initial model for *Annals of the Parish* (1821), Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).<sup>15</sup> However, Galt's work is far from being a slavish tribute to the earlier novel, but is instead a translation of its basic scenario to a very different time and culture. Written sixty years before *Annals of the Parish*, the *Vicar of Wakefield* is a fairly standard eighteenth-century novel featuring an

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<sup>15</sup> Quotations are to the edition of *Annals of the Parish* edited by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1972); for Galt's statement that his novel was inspired by Goldsmith see his *Literary Life, and Miscellanies* (Edinburgh, 1834), I, p.152



innocent clergyman whose personal vicissitudes are dramatic and almost totally beyond his control. In refurbishing Goldsmith's basic scenario in his own novel, Galt might almost be heard to agree with Scott's sub-title to *Waverley* that it is "sixty years since." *Annals of the Parish* begins in 1760 and covers a span of fifty years of the Church of Scotland ministry of Micah Balwhidder. Like Goldsmith's Primrose, Balwhidder is centred amidst forces bigger than himself, which he is far from entirely understanding. A crucial difference in Balwhidder's case, however, is that these forces represent some of the biggest traumas ever to western culture including the Industrial, American and French revolutions. No-one can easily comprehend these forces, the novel implies, while, at the same time, the psychological effects upon those who experience them is deep. *Annals* is an advance upon the eighteenth-century novelistic notion of a capricious fate bouncing protagonists around, in that it shows not merely individual uncertainty but much greater cultural uncertainty, which while localised within the Ayrshire parish of Dalmailing and its surroundings, is a condition, clearly, of Britain more widely.<sup>16</sup>

*Annals of the Parish* features a historical and psychological particularity less dramatic in many ways than either of Scott or Hogg. Galt throughout his oeuvre is much more the chronicler of "domestic" reality and in this shows something of a kinship with Jane Austen, an area of interaction which has been seldom remarked upon.<sup>17</sup> The same quiet delineation of (fairly) securely located character amidst turbulent outward circumstances marks the work of Galt in *Annals*, just as it does Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), for instance. The year of 1814 is a crucial one for Galt and for *Annals of the Parish* especially perhaps since it provides for him the dual inspiration of Scott and Austen. Galt had begun *Annals* in 1813, but by the time it had been finished eight years later, it owed much more to

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<sup>16</sup> For a good account of Galt's universalist Enlightenment concerns, see P.H. Scott, *John Galt* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp.34-

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<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Butler gives a good account of Scott and Austen as very different kinds of writer. For Butler, Scott is the more radical plotter of socially and culturally disruptive events, whereas Austen is more conservative producing usually in her fiction a kind of "fable." (See Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford, 1982), pp.108-120. A potential line of argument which has not been pursued critically is that Galt brings to the Scottish historical novel pioneered by Scott, a fabular structure in his tight focus upon family situations, as is seen in *Annals of the Parish* and elsewhere such as *The Provost* (1822), and *The Entail* (1823), and that this is influenced by Austen. If this line were pursued, it might well highlight even further the radical magnitude of Scott's fiction as highlighted by Butler and Kidd.



the observation of social mores pioneered by Austen and to the eye for the sweep of cultural change by Scott than to Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*. In the most general terms also (which one simply cannot pin down with absolute precision), the novel owes a great deal to the psychological terrain of Scott and Austen in their charting of the collision of the individual mind with seismic shifts in history and culture. Galt's novel also brings to *Annals* a closer, more intimate inspection of the Presbyterian mindset than Burns had provided in his work. Burns, in a largely single-handed fashion, re-energises interest in this mindset beyond the merely flat characterisation which had preceded him earlier in eighteenth-century Scottish literature. As we shall see, both Scott and Hogg are interested in the fanatical Calvinist which Burns explores in "Holy Willie's Prayer." With Hogg, and perhaps with Scott also, however, this fanatical mindset takes on a larger stature beyond its merely comic circumscription as we find in Burns's depiction. Galt responds, in *Annals*, to Burns's subtler location of the Presbyterian mindset in "The Cottar's Saturday Night" with its strong sense of communitarian values. He operates also from within the knowledge and culture of the modern Presbyterian mindset, which had been so powerful amidst Scottish Enlightenment thought and which had spawned, for instance, *The Statistical Account* in the 1790s and the witty, knowing cultural observations of Alexander Carlyle (1722-1805), published posthumously in his *Autobiography*.<sup>18</sup> Both of these examples may have been generally held in mind by Galt for *Annals of the Parish* as he constructed a mindset in Micah Balwhidder which is much less knowing of the world and so highlighted, implicitly, the seachange which the Scottish Presbyterian mind was undergoing elsewhere from 1760-1810.<sup>19</sup> This methodology of gently satirising an outmoded Presbyterian outlook to show that this mindset is actually changing in the wider world represents a very subtle reclamation of the Scottish Presbyterian character for literary purposes, using, as it does, the old-fashioned outlook of Balwhidder not only to show that this particularly is superseded, but to show that any "parochial" view (implying both the scriptural and the local) is traumatised during the

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Carlyle of Inveresk, *Autobiography* (Edinburgh, 1860).

<sup>19</sup> Studies by Dwyer, Kidd and Sher *Op cit.*, all highlight this profound change in Presbyterian culture in eighteenth-century Scotland. Bearing these studies in mind, we very much see Balwhidder as a subtly antiquated character: moderate and yet not entirely modern.



huge cultural and political changes of the late eighteenth-century. We are invited to laugh at Balwhidder, but this laughter is tempered with sympathy (if we are careful readers), for a man attempting to say *something about rapidly shifting circumstances which are too rapid for any single mind of the moment to comprehend.*

We see the clash of the microcosmic and the macrocosmic from the very beginning of the novel in 1760. Balwhidder says in his “introduction” to his “annals”:

In the same year, and on the same day of the same month, that his Sacred Majesty King George, the thrid of the name, came to his crown and kingdom, I was placed and settled as the minister of Dalmailing. (p.1.)

We see here Balwhidder’s sense of self-importance, but something else is registered. As he situates himself in relation to his monarch, we have Balwhidder attempting to locate a coherent sense of polity and community where concentric circles of order are in place in the commonwealth. From the beginning, then, a sincere (though not never totally alert), sense of order and community informs Balwhidder’s mindset as well as a comical, culturally deluded tendency. It may also be that Galt is gently making another point in the yoking together of the start of Balwhidder’s ministry and the reign of George III. If George eventually goes totally mad in a very pressurised historical period for the British state, Balwhidder’s mental state is, sometimes in spite of itself, a faithful reflector of the reality of his times throughout fifty long years.

Balwhidder’s mind is somewhat disjunctive with the times, but it is a mind itself being confronted by curiously modern forces from the start. To begin with, his induction as minister to Dalmailing is on the basis of being appointed by a patron against the will of the congregation. He is, then, part of a changing kirk system in the eighteenth-century.<sup>20</sup> Like so many events which are to ensue, Balwhidder himself is thrust into the parish and disturbs it. There is a certain amount of double-

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<sup>20</sup> For a useful short account of this changing system see Christopher Harvie, “Industry, Religion and the State of Scotland” in Gifford (ed.), *History of Scottish Literature* Vol III, pp.23-42.



thinking, which is actually subtler than out and out hypocrisy in Balwhidder's mindset. In the introduction to his annals he assures "my young friends no to lend your ears to those that trumpet forth their hypothetical politics, but to believe that the laws of the land are administered with good intent till in your own homes and dwellings you feel the presence of the oppressor" (p.3). He is oblivious to the fact that he has been thrust amidst his people's dwellings because he believes ultimately in the working out of providence. The fact that he is now, at the end of his ministry, held (genuinely) in some affection by his flock licenses his own initial personal disruption of the parish. As he says in the final paragraph of his introduction:

I now sit down, in the evening of my days, to make up, to the end that I may bear witness to the work of a beneficent Providence, even in the narrow sphere of my parish, and the concerns of that flock of which it was His most gracious pleasure to make me the unworthy shepherd. (p.4)

There is in such utterance a subtler version of Burns's depiction of the Calvinist character in "Holy Willie's Prayer." Balwhidder manifests the Calvinist belief in the controlling hand of God, or the working out of Providence, and sees his longevity as pastor to Dalmailing a sign of this Providence. If it had not been good for the parish, he would not have been there so long. A logical psychological depiction though the seemingly confident Balwhidder is in this respect, he can also be read, in the light of the subsequent events we are about to have reported to us, as representing a much more insecure mindset. In retrospect we can read his assertion of his own stable position through the hand of Providence as a tiny centre of continuity amidst a world, and indeed a parish, which is manifestly not stable. There is an element in his mindset of that Calvinist outlook also which does not trust the world in all its mutable duplicity, but which trusts only the word of God, whose mouthpiece he is.

As Kenneth Simpson has suggested, *Annals of the Parish* is a long essay in the "ironic self-revelation" of Balwhidder.<sup>21</sup> This self-revelation happens in a number of ways including the

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<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Simpson, "Ironic Self-Revelation in *Annals of the Parish*" in C. Whatley (ed.), *John Galt 1779-1979* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp.64-91.

unconscious emphases and ordering of events which Balwhidder gives to the events of his ministry. We see this, for instance, in the fact that the widow, Mrs Malcolm, is mentioned more than the three Mrs Balwhidder's put together. Clearly, she is the love of his life, but, it seems, Micah never attempts to woo her in any of the interregnums between his marriages. Instead he puts her on a pedestal, emphasising her personal saintliness. This occurs most notably in Chapter XXV (1784), sub-titled "a year of sunshine and pleasantness", where Balwhidder comments on the brevity of his remarks for this year, "[...] when we enjoy most, we have least to tell" (p.114). This is a year when nature is kind and where Balwhidder records several marriages, including a materially fortunate one for one of Mrs MacIcom's daughters. In this uneventful, settled year his thoughts stray to providing his portrait of Mrs Malcolm, in which we see the struggle by Balwhidder to put this lady in perspective:

[...] but though a person of a most slender and delicate frame of body, she was a Judith in fortitude, and in all the fortune that seemed now smiling upon her, she never was lifted up, but bore always that pale and meek look, which gave a saintliness to her endeavours in the days of her suffering and poverty. (p.114)

Balwhidder here is caught between the description of Mrs Malcolm's properly pious demeanour and outlook and his physical attraction to her. Indeed, in an act of sublimation these two aspects are somewhat conflated in the passage above. It is perhaps the case that Balwhidder is genuinely in religious awe of this forbearing woman (though this awe is clearly heightened by his more wordly attraction). He perhaps feels unworthy of this woman, and this may be why he seems not to attempt to install her as his wife. Equally it may be the case that he feels, in orthodox Calvinist fashion, that in this small community giving vent to his powerfully passionate feelings (even in the context of wedlock) would be somewhat scandalous. As readers, we can never decide on such matters for sure since the very fact that the narrative is Balwhidder's leads to a certain opacity in motivation. This is the clever subjective trick which Galt so frequently manages in *Annals of the Parish*. In this sense of muddying motivation the closer one apparently gets to the mind of the protagonist, Galt is again much more like



Jane Austen and the new movement toward a more highly sophisticated psychological novel in the early decades of the nineteenth century than he is like Walter Scott. Well-worked psychological insight in the manner of Jane Austen combines in Galt with the historical and psychological interests of post-Enlightenment Scotland to provide a text which is nicely balanced between cultural and personal exposition and uncertainty. Less explicitly psychologically dramatic in these traumatised terms than either Scott's *Waverley* or Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Galt's novel is one that in its creative vision goes well beyond the rather overworked terminology of "theoretical history" so often utilised with regard to Galt's work.<sup>22</sup>

We can read Balwhidder's sense of duty and self-denial also in his second marriage. The second Mrs Balwhidder's relentless improvement of the domestic economy troubles him:

Often could I have found it in my heart to have banned that never-ceasing industry, and to tell Mrs Balwhidder, that the marriage was made for something else than to make napery, and bittle blankets; but it was her happiness to keep all at work, and she had no pleasure in any other way of life; so I sat many a night by the fire-side with resignation; sometimes in the study, and sometimes in the parlour, and as I was doing nothing, Mrs Balwhidder said it was needless to light the candle. Our daughter Janet was in this time at a boarding-school in Ayr, so that I really was a most solitary married man. (p.113)

Micah Balwhidder could not ask for a more "dutiful" wife in the matter of gathering gear. Micah though is to derive little sensual pleasure from his wife, and he enjoys from his spouse little empathy toward his vocation. His attempts at retreat and contemplation (clearly an essential practice for a man of the cloth) are seen to be superfluous by his wife and to be stinted of the support of light which is necessary for her only in more utilitarian pursuits. Emblematically, the relationship of the Balwhidders represents that of the changing nature of society, commerce and industry. The rise of commerce, embodied by the second Mrs Balwhidder, is superceding an older less utilitarian version of community.

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<sup>22</sup> This term has its origins in Dugald Stewart's "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith" (1811) where he writes of Smith's dealing in "theoretical or conjectural history." (see Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* edited by D.D. Raphael & Andrew Skinner (Indianapolis, 1980), p.287.



Mrs Balwhidder's work makes the home function more perfectly, but also more coldly. As well as seeing his daughter efficiently sent off to boarding-school in the ever-prospering county-town of Ayr, Balwhidder is also deprived of his son, Gilbert, whom Balwhidder tells us on several occasions is a merchant in Glasgow. Progress, then, is radically changing the older pattern of the family and of the community. Balwhidder's home and family are run more efficiently, but are also ruptured. In the case of Gilbert we see this most starkly as the son is, like any son of the manse down to (and perhaps beyond) the nineteenth-century, a man notable for not following in the footsteps of his father's calling. Symbolically, when we consider his rather chilly second marriage (which in the passage quoted above renders Micah a somewhat comical monkish figure) and given that it is Mrs Malcolm's son who becomes a minister, Balwhidder is culturally infertile. For this reason, that Balwhidder is a man at the centre of bewildering cultural change, we can have sympathy for him. The older values of Presbyterian community which he sincerely believes in are conservative and easily criticised on some fronts, but are also values which speak for senses of family and community which are being rapidly undermined during his tenure of Dalmailing.

Whether he entirely knows it or not and whether or not he entirely faces up to the fact, Balwhidder's "annals" are an attempt to make sense of the changing world around him. His initial aim though is to turn to the orthodox writing terrain of many a British Protestant divine from the seventeenth down to the eighteenth century:

[...] as I was sauntering along the edge of Eglesham-wood, looking at the industrious bee going from flower to flower, and the idle butterfly, that layeth up no store, but perish ere it is winter, I felt as it were a spirit from on high descending upon me, a throb at my heart, and a thrill in my brain, and I was transported out of myself, and seized with the notion of writing a book -- but what it should be about, I could not settle to my satisfaction: Sometimes I thought of an orthodox poem, like *Paradise Lost*, by John Milton, wherein I proposed to treat more at large of Original Sin, and the great mystery of Redemption; at others, I fancied that a connect treatise on the efficacy of Free Grace, would be more taking; but although I made divers beginnings in both subjects, some new thought ever came into my head, and the whole summer passed away, and nothing was done. I therefore



postponed my design of writing a book till the winter, when I would have the benefit of the long nights. (p.28)

Balwhidder here, writing in 1764, stands at the end of an old world and the beginning of a new one. Recently bereaved by the death of his first wife (for whom he composes a tomb-stone inscription of lachrymose pietistic verse, indicating an eighteenth-century poetic phenomena we have glimpsed already in our chapter on Thomson), Balwhidder is intent upon a time of reflection. He views nature in Thomsonian didactic fashion and he thinks to write an epic Miltonic poem. He is a man complacently comfortable with the world and the canon of British Protestant poetry and outlook. His Presbyterian mindset, however, in spite of being a relatively modernised eighteenth-century outlook (mediated as it is by creative texts) encompassing the natural world and the divine economy in holistic perspective, is soon to be shaken. At the personal level this is seen in Balwhidder's marriage to his second wife, the industrious Miss Lizzy Kibbock (who denies him the candlelight which would be necessary for any of his literary undertakings), which follows the succeeding year in 1765. Ironically, his major piece of writing is his journal which, instead of being about any universal didactic or theological theme such as he would liked to have undertaken in another form, is about a much more mundane subject-matter, his parish of Dalmailing. Ironically also though, this focus does actually provide him with a great deal of purchase upon the changing face of Scotland and, indeed, the world. Contemplative allegorical poetry or didactic nature poetry of the pure Thomsonian kind are not modes amenable to the conveyance of the rapid physical and community change which his journal shows so well. In Balwhidder's very mode of journal-writing, which is historical writing of a kind, the deep change in Scottish culture and literature is registered.

Balwidder's old certainties of attitude are constantly shaken, but sometimes, seemingly, reaffirmed throughout *Annals of the Parish*. We see this as Balwhidder observes change sponsored from above in the case of Lord Eaglesham's building of the new toll road. The character of the improver, however, is not morally impeccable, as Eaglesham himself acknowledges in admitting to Balwhidder he

has his mistress living with him:

‘I fear I dare not ask you to come to the castle,’ I had heard of his concubine, and I said, ‘In saying so, my lord, you show a spark of grace, for it would not become me to see what I have heard; and I am surprised, my lord, you will not rather take a lady of your own.’ He looked kindly, but confused, saying, he did not know where to get one; so seeing his shame, and not wishing to put him out of conceit entirely with himself, I replied, ‘Na, na, my lord, there’s nobody will believe that, for there never was a silly Jock, but there was as silly a Jenny,’ at which he laughed heartily and rode away. But I know not was in’t, I was troubled in mind about him, and thought, as I was riding away, that I would never see him again [...] (p.105)

Eglesham does indeed die, and the reader must wonder if Balwhidder does indeed have some prophetic foresight. Alternatively, however, Balwhidder may be lying to himself about his foreboding. In his meeting with his lordship the minister has failed in his duty to chastise the former (perhaps out of simple class deference in the man who has been imposed on the parish in the first place through the patronage system). Worse than this dereliction of duty, perhaps, Balwhidder makes light of Eglesham’s transgression referring to him in cosy folk-terms as a “silly Jock”. Balwhidder may well feel retrospective guilt over his interchange, even though it speaks not only of failure of duty (if it does do so), but of the changing face of the Presbyterian church during the eighteenth century. In his lack of thunderous moral outrage, as in so much else, Balwhidder, is, if not exactly a moderate churchman, a man who certainly exemplifies the fact that the old ways of the kirk are changing. Balwhidder is confused, or at least not entirely certain, about his own identity as he begins his introduction to his journal by emphasising the hand of providence in his ministerial incumbence and invokes the constancy of the covenanters, but in his first entry proper, 1760 the year of his induction, he admits to having been placed by the patron. The jarring attempt to put together such disparate mindsets as those of the pro-Patronage party of the eighteenth-century and the seventeenth-century Covenanter, and his vague appeals to patronage do not show simple hypocrisy on Balwhidder’s part but a man at the centre of



turbulent times and intellectual currents from the beginning of his ministry.<sup>23</sup> It is no surprise that he should struggle to rebuke a man he regards with genuine affection and whom he sees as an instrument of beneficial change (or even providence) in his parish.

We are never quite sure if Balwhidder is a follower of providence or a believer in progress and neither is he. In 1763 he records the death of the doited teacher Patrick Dilworth as “a great relief for my people for the heritors could no longer refuse to get a proper schoolmaster” (p.23). Similarly, when the Breadland House is burnt down, and in the process Girzy Gilchrist is killed, Balwhidder says it was “a catastrophe that proved advantageous to the parish” (p.37). The fire turns out to be an advantage as Mr Cayenne takes over the estate and turns it to modern farming methods. With the death of another teacher, Sabrina Hookie, in 1800 Balwhidder records the fact that:

[...] we could better spare her than we did her predecessor; for at Cayenneville there was a broken manufacturer’s wife, an excellent teacher, and a genteel and modernized woman, who took the better order of children.  
(p.171)

What we see in this last example is an expanded school, now encompassing in the parish the “better” class of children as well as those from less prosperous backgrounds, is Balwhidder apprehending that the long-held Scottish Presbyterian ideal of proper parochial education is actually happening.<sup>24</sup> This is brought about through the agency of a victim of industrial progress (which is now silently apparent to Balwhidder at the beginning of the nineteenth-century). Here, as in the other examples, Balwhidder might be read as having a cool, slightly cynical attitude to death, or alternatively his sense of the providential nature of so many of the deaths he sees, where these have good effects coing out of bad happenings, can be seen as representing an orthodox Christian outlook.

Balwhidder tries sincerely to see the world in theological terms, but his theological view is

<sup>23</sup> For a useful account of the patronage controversy see T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830* (London, 1969), pp.345-8.

<sup>24</sup> Notoriously, the Knoxian ideal of a school in every Scottish parish did not become reality until the middle of the nineteenth century.



weak. We see this especially with the coming to prominence in the parish of Mr Cayenne with whom we are told, “some of the ancient families, in their turreted houses, were not pleased” (p.128). Cayenne, clearly, represents the rise of the new monied bourgeois class. He is a man who has made his money in North America, but who has returned to Scotland after the revolution to establish a cotton-mill in the environs of Dalmailing. (Cayenne represents a man easily riding and adapting to the currents of the rapid changes in the western world.) In 1788 Cayenne’s cotton-mill workers begin to form debating societies under the influence of mounting events in France. These men do not like Balwhidder’s preaching as it seems to them to represent the establishment viewpoint of accepting totally one’s station in society as divinely ordained. There is a certain hypocrisy in this as Balwhidder has invested in Cayenne’s business and his shares do well so that he is led to comment of 1788, “there was a visible increase among us of worldly prosperity in the course of this year [...]” (p.129). By 1792, however, Balwhidder is suspected by some of the church heritors of having sympathies with the “levellers” and others inspired by the politics of the French Revolution. We have no explicit reason from Balwhidder’s account as to why this should be the case, but the inference must be that his sermons are attempting to respond somehow to the times and exuding something which can be taken as sympathy for the radicals. This is perhaps why in the following chapter, for the year 1793, we have Balwhidder preaching against the revolutionaries in France. We are not given the details of his sermon, but we are given the details of the dream he has preceding it. He pictures himself standing in “the tower of an old popish kirk” and observing from it the graves giving up their dead (including crowned and ennobled heads). This great commotion eventually gives way however:

But while I looked, the vision was changed, and I then beheld a wide and dreary waste, and afar off the steeples of a great city, and a tower in the midst, like the tower of Babel, and on it I could discern written in characters of fire, “Public Opinion”. While I was pondering at the same, I heard a great shout, and presently the conquerors made their appearance, coming over the desolate moor. They were going in great pride and might towards the city, but an awful burning rose, afar as it were in the darkness, and the flames stood like a tower of fire that reached unto the Heavens. And I saw a



dreadful hand and an arm stretched from out of the cloud, and in its hold was a besom made of the hail and the storm, and it swept the fugitives like dust; and in their place I saw the church-yard, as it were, cleared and spread around, the graves closed, and the ancient tombs with their coats of arms and their effigies of stone, all as they were in the beginning. I then awoke and behold it was a dream.

This vision perplexed me for many days, and when the news came that the King of France was beheaded by the hands of his people, I received, as it were, a token in confirmation of the vision that had been disclosed to me in my sleep, and I preached a discourse on the same, and against the French Revolution, that was thought one of the greatest and soundest sermons that I had ever delivered in my pulpit. (p.143)

We see a number of inflexions here in Balwhidder's imagination. Standing in his dream in an "old popish kirk", the minister is aware of being himself suddenly keeper of a challenged doctrine (just as he would interpret, in orthodox Presbyterian terms, the superceded older faith of Scotland). He is also somewhat confused in his dream as to whether he is witnessing the day of judgement or the fracturing of the world's people in the parable of Babel. Are the radical events of the 1790s, the predicating factor for his dream, a coming of justice to the corrupt world, or a another manifestation of the fallen world falling further? The imagery of Balwhidder's dream becomes particularly entangled as "the babel" is that of "Public Opinion" which implies widespread communication, but which is associated in the biblical metaphor with inability to communicate. Finally, in a conclusive but not reassuring end to the dream, the hand of God throws a besom at the marauders who are attacking the city and normality returns. Balwhidder is actually at a loss as to how to interpret his dream. The Old Testament overtones are clear enough, but he is now at a total loss as to how these are to be applied. It is almost with some relief (we see this signalled in the concentration of the terror of the dream and the paucity of detail with regard to his sermon) that he can alight the next day as an easy interpretive key upon the news of the execution of the French monarch. His nocturnal disturbance can be easily written off as pertaining to France (with its Popish kirk) and not to circumstances nearer to home. French wickedness begets French wickedness merely as a salutary moral tale for Protestant Britain.



Balwhidder's convenient avoidance of his dream, however, is not to last, since the day after his sermon he witnesses Mr Cayenne, now a justice of the peace, interrogating two weavers accused of agitating for greater democratic rights:

[...] they were brought in, and he began to ask them how they dared to think of dividing, with their liberty and equality principles his and every other man's property in the country. The men answered him in a calm manner, and told him they sought no man's property, but only their own natural rights; upon which he called them traitors and reformers. They denied they were traitors, but confessed they were reformers and said they knew not how that should be imputed to them as a fault, for that the greatest men of all times had been reformers. -- 'Was not,' they said, 'Our Lord Jesus Christ a reformer?' -- 'And what the devil did he make of it?' cried Mr Cayenne bursting with passion; 'Was he not crucified?' I thought, when I heard these words, that the pillars of the earth sunk beneath me and that the roof of the house was carried away in a whirlwind. The drums of my ears crackit, blue-strans danced before my sight and I was feign to leave the house and hie me home to the manse, where I sat down in my study, like a stupified creature awaiting what would betide. Nothing, however, was found against the weaver-lads; but I never, from that day, could look on Mr Cayenne, as a Christian though surely he was a true government-man. (p.143-4)

Balwhidder's nightmare is replayed, then, in real, waking life as the world is rendered upside down. Cayenne, the man of settled authority turns out to be crassly unChristian, and the Paineite artisan agitators are the pious contemplators of holy writ. The disjunctions of his saturday-night dream are realised much more clearly in the disjunction between impious authority and pious agitation. The possibility that the agitations of the 1790s might be righteous, something latent in his dream but pushed to one side in his subsequent sermon, is now seemingly realised. Balwhidder's mind has been subject to a cacophany of Old Testament imagery, notions of traditional authority, political rhetoric and news of reform and revolution and he has witnessed the material discomforts of many of his flock. He cannot put all this comfortably together in his dream (though he pretends to do so afterwards) and he most certainly cannot put all this together in reality as the case of Cayenne and the weavers show. We see



that Balwhidder's mind is conforming to that psychologically-charged version of the imagination (or the power of perception) which is to be associated with Romantic conceptions of the mind. Keith Costain has pointed to Galt's belief in the view of perception, as formulated by Scottish common sense philosophy, which mistrusts the imagination; but here Balwhidder exemplifies a much more organic experience of the mind at work as it draws together various associations, experiences and rubrics and attempts to make some coherent sense of these sense-data.<sup>25</sup> Balwhidder is made to acknowledge, though not explicitly (the aware reader has to draw this out) that the seeming stability of his station and outlook is not actually so stable. The instability emerges not only from modern-fangled circumstances, but is latent in old (historical) circumstances also. We see this to be so in the fact that hovering behind the experience of both the dream and of the weavers in that Balwhidder's religion (with its Covenanting forebears whom he venerates) is associated with the challenge to supposedly settled authority and is persecuted. What we have hinted at, then, is that the older mindset which Balwhidder exemplifies, to some extent, is far from being superceded, though Balwhidder does not entirely have the courage or the conviction to explore how relevant to modern times part of his own historical identity in mindset might be. Balwhidder's character ends up being an essay in the complexities of the historical and contemporary Scottish identities. Like Scott's *Waverley*, *Annals of the Parish* confirms a highpoint in Scottish literary awareness of the flux of identity.

### III

James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) can be read as an exemplary text supposedly featuring the split in identity, which had been accelerating in modern Scottish history. Diagnosing the baneful effects which extreme Calvinism might have upon the mind, the novel holds in opposition to this powerful Scottish mindset an alternative rational, perhaps anglicised, Enlightenment voice which often smugly attempts to dismiss the Calvinist's account of the

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<sup>25</sup> See Keith Costain, *The Scottish Fiction of John Galt* in Gifford (ed.), *History of Scottish Literature* Vol III, pp.107-124.



world. In such a bald reading of the structure of the book, Scotland might emerge with an unusable (Calvinist) past and an unpropitious (unimaginative) modernity. However, such a crude reading of the essential configuration of the novel is only sustainable if we idealise, as Scottish criticism has so often done, notions of complete and healthy culture. *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is one of the most outstanding examples in Scottish literature of making creative gain out of culturally problematic materials; but it goes much further than this in problematising also the perceptions of the reader (and of humanity generally) so that a tantalising textual vision emerges where the Calvinist master-trope of the deceitful and evil world might actually be true. The book is a contorted and contorting text which, in this way, resists not just Scottish aspiration toward wholeness of vision, but humanity's wholeness of vision generally.

It is clear, as John Wain and others have asserted, that Hogg's *Confessions* draws on the literary lineage of satire against the Calvinist psyche, which we have observed already, and most especially Burns's "Holy Willie's Prayer".<sup>26</sup> However, as well as taking cognisance of Hogg operating within this "anti-Calvinist" tradition, we ought to be aware of a wider picture, which has begun to emerge in our treatment of Burns. As we have seen, Burns begins to win some respect, or some license for the cultural respectability of the Calvinist, or the Presbyterian mindset. This happens both in his celebration of the simple piety of the ordinary Presbyterian folk and, more fleetingly but powerfully, in his paean to the Scottish Covenanters. By the end of the eighteenth-century, then, the predominant Scottish Protestant identity is coming in from the cold and it is important to realise that this is something which provides license to Hogg's novel. Clearly, something new is stirring in early nineteenth-century Scottish literature as Hogg becomes involved in a kind of literary struggle with Walter Scott over the representation of the Covenanters. Scott's powerful portrait of the fanaticism of the seventeenth-century Scottish Calvinist mindset in *The Tale of Old Mortality* (1816) presented a heroic but wild or brutally-minded set of Scottish Calvinists (very analogous, in fact, to his treatment of

<sup>26</sup> Quotations are from the edition of *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* edited by John Wain (London, 1983).



the Highlander in *Waverley*). He also shows a Royalist, high-church cause ranged against them which features at its head a morally dissolute king in the person of Charles II. However, in his depiction of Claverhouse, or John Graham, Viscount ("Bonnie") Dundee (celebrated by Allan Ramsay in his "Poem to Pitcairne"), we are presented with an essentially fair, chivalrous figure whose values are precisely not fanatical.<sup>27</sup> Hogg responded to this portrait of Claverhouse and Royalist martial behaviour, generally, in its treatment of the Covenanters in *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1822). Hogg shows instead the wanton cruelty and misapprehension waged against the Covenanters, a perception which he had imbibed from his own borders' upbringing with its oral traditions of the "martyrs of the Covenant". This represents an interesting interchange in Scottish literary history. Scott in his portrayal holds to the notion (much in the tradition of Allan Ramsay) that the Scottish Tory, royalist mindest of the seventeenth-century was a cultured, moderate one. At the same time, his exploration of the Calvinist mindset in the frightening idealistic characters of Burlington and Mucklewrath though somewhat one-sided (especially in the epithetically caricatured case of the second-named character) is, at least, an advance upon the cowardly, unprincipled mindset of Holy Willie. What Scott is doing, in fact, is participating, to some extent, in that much more ecumenical appraisal of Scottish identity which begins explicitly in Scottish literature in the work of Burns. If, in Hogg's probably just view, Scott underplayed the fanaticism deployed against as well as by the Covenanters, Scott at least helps make this historic mindset a player on the literary (rather than only the folk) stage and, ultimately, paves the way to an extent for the serious exploration of this mindset in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

*Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is a much more serious exploration of the doctrinal abuses which might accrue from the Calvinist mindset. Like Burns, Hogg suggests that the extreme Calvinist mentality warps the concept of grace, or to put it most simply, harmony with God, in the tenet of predestination. The notion of being chosen, or one of the elect, predicated upon the logic that God is all-knowing and can see all time, can, indeed, Hogg suggests lead to a kind of megalomania. With Robert

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<sup>27</sup> Walter Scott, *The Tale of Old Mortality* edited by J.H. Alexander (Edinburgh, 1993), see especially pp.132-46.



Wringhim, however, the reader is invited ultimately to view a much more pitiful dissolute site than is the case in the comically-reduced Holy Willie. The trajectory of Robert's descent has something of a tragic magnitude about it, as his mind is inflated and deflated by circumstances which are not entirely of his own moral making, but which pertain to a cultural and family environment he finds bewildering. A situation which is close to Hamlet's swithering of "to be or not to be" is encapsulated in Wringhim's oxymoronic identity as a "justified sinner". Wringhim's behaviour which, possibly, includes rape and a series of murders might not be thought - at first sight - to make him a character for whom the reader can feel sympathy, but the intensity with which he is by turns certain and uncertain in his actions make him a character who embodies the ultimate human nightmare of not being able to attach any value or meaning to his life.

In the brief third part of the novel, where the editor intrudes for a second time after the relation of the sinner's version of the events of Wringhim's life, the editor comments upon the Wringhim's supposed slaying of his brother and his story generally:

That the young laird of Dalcastle came by a violent death, there remains no doubt; but that this wretch slew him, there is to me a good deal. However allowing this to have been the case, I account all the rest either dreaming or madness; or, as he says to Mr Watson, a religious parable on purpose to illustrate something scarcely tangible, but to which he seems to have attached great weight. (p.241)

The editor is made uneasy in the material he is communicating, both in his own words and in those of the sinner, to the reader. He realises that the Wringhim's story can be taken as delusion or "religious fable", but he cannot warrant it to be truthful as "in this day, and with the present generation, it will not go down, that a man should be daily tempted by the devil, in the semblance of a fellow-creature" (p.242). For the editor also though, the fact that the sinner's story is so lucid, at least in its theological implications, means that he must work harder to assert Wringhim's madness. His favoured solution for the writer of the sinner's manuscript is "that he was a religious maniac, who wrote and wrote about a deluded creature, till he arrived at that height of madness, that he believed himself the very object whom



he had been all along describing” (p.242). And yet for all his unease, the editor is drawn to the manuscript since he supposedly publishes a facsimile version along with his own account of the story (here we see the paradoxical impetus of the Enlightenment, as its universality in rational enquiry takes account also of folk mythology and belief; it is here that we see the cultural interface which helps, generally to precipitate Romanticism).

The uncertainty surrounding the provenance and reliability of Wringhim’s story is clearly crucial. We have in this uncertainty something stronger than the usual playfulness of the eighteenth-century novel, where the hollow assertion of the truth of the tale, generally, is a wry anti-romance component of the genre. In *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the foregrounding of the dubiousness of the story becomes a much more localised issue of Scottish cultural identity. Notwithstanding the editor’s doubts about the sanity of the sinner and the possible disrepute it may bring upon the Scottish Presbyterian church (“Should it be thought to attach discredit to any received principle of our church, I am blameless” (p.241)), he desires to publish his book. He exemplifies the burgeoning antiquarian and folkloristic tradition of the early nineteenth-century, in which Scott, Hogg and others participated so fully. Through the periodical press, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* and elsewhere, the short story, it might be argued, is invented by the desire from the metropolis for titillating stories.<sup>28</sup> Tales of Scottish history and the supernatural fulfill this need admirably, providing curiosities of an appropriate length for the modern mass-market. *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is a kind of enlarged version of the material which Hogg was publishing in shorter form. This may have to do with the fact, as Douglas Gifford argues, that the novel represented a kind of literary defiance of those *literati* of the day who looked down upon the “Ettrick Shepherd” as merely a quaint curiosity.<sup>29</sup> In his other longer fiction such as *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* where the seemingly ghostly is to be explained as the nocturnal

<sup>28</sup> It is arguable that, to some extent, the modern short story is partly invented through the existence of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. The demand for tales of local colour and antiquarianism is ultimately a product of Enlightenment sociological and historical interest. Here again, then, we see the Enlightenment (particularly the Scottish Enlightenment) feeding the Romantic age.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg* (Edinburgh, 1976), pp.9-30.



travails of the necessitously secretive Covenanters, or in *The Three Perils of Man* (1823), where real witchcraft is taken simply as part of an older world, the situation of the supernatural is uncomplicated.<sup>30</sup> In *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the editor is tantalised by the story-material he has obtained in spite of his expressed reservations over both its truth and the state of mental health of its communicator. Indeed, he becomes infected himself, as it were, by the Sinner's account, so that his own account, in spite of its attempt to retell (in advance) the story in the manuscript in a rational fashion, actually contributes to the assertion of a possible supernatural explanation of events. For example, as the editor is carried along with events, he describes Robert as "a devilish-looking youth" and as a "hellish-looking student" (p.46). His many contributions to the supernatural mood are a brilliantly ironic comment upon his mindset. The late Enlightenment-mindset is infected by the material it attempts clinically to handle. The hysteria, which features in the novel as a possible explanation for accounts of the "witnesses", Bell Calvert and Mrs Logan, who see Robert accompanied by an accomplice (the devil, Gil-martin) in the murder of his brother, George, is perhaps seeping through the editor's account. As part of his comment upon the tradition of supposedly veracious supernatural lore in Scotland, the editor cites James Hogg reporting that the grave (supposedly of Wringhim) is discovered and opened years later by two men, when it is found that the corpse has not corrupted. Hogg's account, according to the editor, "bears the stamp of authenticity in every line; yet, so often have I been hoaxed by the ingenious fancies displayed in that Magazine (*Blackwood's*) [...]" (p.234). Hogg, implicitly, is commenting upon the easy appropriation or consumption of such material in *Blackwood's* and elsewhere. He wishes to problematise that consumption. For all the evidence that Hogg actually believed in fairies and demons, this belief is ultimately not particularly relevant.<sup>31</sup> The important point is that in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* he is out to highlight the condescending but needful psychological state which makes such material so popular with his fellow-antiquarians and folk-lorists and with the modern reading public. In spite of himself, the editor collaborates in the supernatural texture of Wringhim's story. Hogg is probably postulating a need for such an "other-

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27-8.



worldly” dimension even in the (supposedly) modern mindset. What he is also doing, however, is constructing a text which is actually duplicitously uncertain and which, in fact, mirrors the fraught Calvinist apprehension, which lies at the root of Robert Wringhim’s problems, where the fallen world is the devil’s place and where deceit is entwined around every seeming fact. The novel not only has an oxymoronic title, but a deeply oxymoronic structure and texture. The beginning of the first sentence of the editor’s narrative, “it appears from tradition as well as some parish records still extant” (p.29) sets the scene for duplicitous entanglement of modes of knowing.

What we have in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is both an ironic reassertion of an extreme Calvinist world-view of the world as the devil’s place and a simultaneous positing of a Presbyterian character which is very different from that of the main protagonist in the novel. We see this different Presbyterian character in John Barnet, the servant of Reverend Wringhim, the Calvinist minister who is mentor to Robert and his mother. Mr Wringhim enquires of his servant if he believes the rumours that he, the minister, is in fact father to Robert:

‘Tell me, dare you say, or dare you think, that I am the natural father of the boy?’

‘Ye canna hinder me to think whatever I like, sir, nor can I hinder myself.’

‘But did you ever say to any one, that he resembled me, and fathered himself well enough?’

‘I hae said mony a time, that he resembled you, sir. Naebody can mistake that.’

‘But, John, there are many natural reasons for such likenesses, besides that of consanguinity. They depend much on the thoughts actions and affections of the mother; and, it is probable, that the mother of his boy, being deserted by her worthless husband, having turned her thoughts on me, as likely to be her protector, may have caused this striking resemblance.’

‘Ay, it may be, sir. I couldna say.’

‘I have known a lady, John, who was delivered of a blackamoor child, merely from the circumstance of having got a start by the sudden entrance of her negro servant, and not being able to forget him for several hours.’

‘It may be so, sir; but I ken this; - an I had been the laird, I wadna hae ta’en that story in.’

‘So, then, John, you positively think, from a casual likeness, that this boy is

my son?’

‘Man’s thoughts are vanity, sir; they come unasked and gang away without a dismissal, an’ he canna help them. I’m neither gaun to say that I *think* he’s your son, nor that I think, nor that I think he’s *no* your son: sae ye needna pose me nae mair about it.’ (p.116-17)

John Barnet here validates, to a large extent, the views of the Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid. Barnet’s thoughts are seated in a logical constitution, or common sense, which this humble man possesses.<sup>32</sup> He is literate and knows his scriptures, but he is not overburdened by these, unlike the extreme Calvinist mindset of Wringhims senior and junior. His thoughts come essentially from within rather than from an external source in the first instance. Thought in Barnet’s depiction above is a faculty which he cannot, in a sense, control. At the same time, he concedes, in orthodox Calvinist rhetoric, that “man’s thoughts are vanity”, or in other words, compared to the thoughts or understanding of God, man knows nothing. What John is saying is that he refuses publically to judge the case which Wringhim puts before him. He is determined to be unlike the Pharisaical Wringhim:

‘Ye are just the Pharisee, sir, that gaed up wi’ the poor publican to pray at the Temple; an’ ye’re acting the very same pairt at this time, an’ saying in your heart, “God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, an’ in nae way like this poor misbelieving unregenerate sinner, John Barnet.”’ (p.116)

Here we have a moderate Presbyterian mindset played off against a more extreme Calvinist “elected” mentality. The more moderate mindset does not presume to have the entire truth at his disposal, only his common sense and scripture which he realises can be extrapolated for iniquitous moral purposes.

We see this as Barnet says to his master:

‘Here stands the poor sinner, John Barnet, your beadle an’ servant-man, wha wadna change chances wi’ you in the neist world, nor consciences in this, for ten times a’ that you possess - your justification by faith an’ awthegither’ (p.116).

Though a minor character in the novel who is promptly dismissed for his impertinence, John is aware

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<sup>32</sup> See Reid, *Inquiry into the Active Powers* in *Philosophical Works* Vol I edited by William Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1863), pp.36-9.



of his own sinfulness, and as well as his limited moral nature, a limited ability in thought. He is the kind of character who very much validates George Davie's reading of Common Sense philosophy as an epistemology rooted in Scottish Presbyterianism. With considerable ironic purchase, Barnet refuses to answer Wringhim definitively one way or another with regard to the question of Robert's paternity. This is emblematic of the novel overall, where definitive interpretation of whether the main events are supernatural or imagined is impossible. This humble apprehension of uncertainty is very different, obviously, from the seeming certainty of Wringhim elder and younger that they are part of the elect. At the same time, as we certainly see in the case of Robert, the burden of being one of the elect combined with otherwise seeing the world as a place of uncertainty, leads to a rupturing of his apprehension. The uncertainty which he ends up inhabiting, where he is not sure whether he is accompanied by the grace of God or by the Devil, represents an unnecessarily heightened sense of good and evil. Hogg's portrait of the Presbyterian character is, on the one hand with both Wringhim the elder and younger, a depiction of one of the bogey-men of Scottish culture passed down ever-more powerfully through the eighteenth-century. On the other hand with Barnet, we have the counter-reality of the sensible, robustly pious Presbyterian. In both of these characterisations, Hogg is following in the footsteps of Robert Burns, but, in both cases, there is much more concerted effort than we find with Burns to point these characters toward a modern application.

In *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Hogg involves the Scottish Presbyterian character with very contemporary problems of epistemology and culture. The novel might be read as an "allegory" in a very wide sense, in pointing to the difficulty of maintaining any kind of integrated vision or identity in an increasingly changed modern world. This is perhaps the ultimate logic behind the fact that the reader is made to undergo an uncertain experience mirroring that of Wringhim himself. In other words, what we are not dealing with in the novel is a solely Scottish experience of fraught identity, in which as for commentators later like Edwin Muir, Calvinism has comprehensively fissured the Scottish psyche. In support of this wider context, we might mention John MacQueen pointing to the way in which the



notion of the *doppelganger* was particularly current around the time that Hogg's novel appeared in the work of Romantic writers such as Shelley.<sup>33</sup> What we have with *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, in spite of its seventeenth-century setting is a very contemporary novel. As in the case of Walter Scott, we find Hogg using the historical novel to respond to the conditions through which Scotland and Britain have passed in the preceding one hundred and fifty years or so to have become the complex and culturally turbulent place it is in the early nineteenth century. Hogg's novel, like the Scottish historical novel generally in the early nineteenth century and beyond (down to the fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson, Neil Munro, Neil Gunn and many others) has recourse to the events of Scottish history as primarily a means of focussing upon ruptures which both originate in and resonate with turbulences furth of Scotland. It is entirely credible to suggest that Scott, or perhaps Scott, Galt and Hogg taken together ought to be seen as the prime progenitors of historical fiction for Europe and the western world. In a sense the Scots have some of the best historical metaphors for dealing with the increasingly shifting political, cultural and social realities during the lifespans of the Blackwoodians. It is important to add, however, that the turbulence which they codify and comment upon is far from being purely Scottish but is bound up with turbulence in British cultural history more generally.

Hogg revisits the internecine British as well as Scottish religious and cultural conflict of the seventeenth-century, which, for instance, Allan Ramsay and other anthologists are very alive to at the beginning of the eighteenth century. He also tracks something of the movement from Enlightenment to Romantic ideology. We have seen already the Common Sense character of John Barnet and commented upon the antiquarian energies of the editor in the novel which marks this character out as a late-Enlightenment character. Taking Douglas Gifford's hypothesis about the dimension of the personal career experiences of Hogg being implicitly present in the novel, we might argue that the figure of the editor stands as a type of Walter Scott figure. In collecting a border manuscript and editing and commenting upon it, the editor does exactly what Scott does in his border "raids" for his *Minstrelsy of*

<sup>33</sup> John MacQueen, *The Rise of the Historical Novel* (Edinburgh, 1989), p.235.



*the Scottish Border*. The attempt to bring rational order to the tale, we might even suggest, which ends in failure represents a species of folk-iconoclasm such as Hogg's mother suggested that Scott's collecting endeavours would end in.<sup>34</sup> In setting up a thwarted simulacrum to Scott's labours in the novel, Hogg reveals himself to be a truer or, at least, a more radical Romantic artist than Scott.

The editor's account while failing to offer a full, circumscribing explanation for the events of the novel is nevertheless a brilliant piece of psychological extrapolation. Robert Wringhim's personal growth is fully charted. His uncertain origins, supposedly the son of Colwan, the Laird of Dalcastle, but possibly the actual son of the Calvinist minister whose name he adopts as, at the very least, his spiritual father; and the apparent "saintliness" of his mother, which has obviously been undermined if she has indeed, as is widely supposed, committed adultery are the unpropitious family circumstances in which Robert is raised. Added to this his official biological father, Dalcastle, and his brother George are presented to him as unsaved reprobates by his mother and by Reverend Wringhim. Hogg's comedy is simultaneously broad and subtle as on the Dalcastle's wedding night, the new Mrs Colwan refuses to enter the marital bed before extensive prayers are said. The laird's response which seems so crass to his wife is a typical piece of Hogg's writing in the novel where the microcosmic beautifully captures the thematic macrocosmos in the novel:

'Prayers, Mistress! Lord help your crazed head, is this a night for prayers?'

He had better have held his peace. There was such a profound torrent of divinity poured out upon him, that the laird became ashamed, both of himself and his new-made spouse, and wist not what to say: but the brandy helped him out.

'It strikes me, my dear, that religious evotion would be somewhat out of place to-night,' said he. 'Allowing that it is ever so beautiful, and ever so beneficial, were we to ride on the rigging of it at all times, would we not constantly be making a farce of it: It would be like reading the Bible and the jest-book, verse about, and would render the life of man a medley of absurdity and confusion.' (p.32)

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<sup>34</sup> Gifford, *James Hogg*, p.25.

Here the laird's initial crassness (since for any supposed Christian any night is a night for prayers) is countered by his wife's "torrent of divinity" (in a typical piece of oxymoronic writing). His shame registers awareness that he has been actually crass and is also a very delicate (even though brandy-aided) moment of the awareness of human sinfulness. He is ashamed at having momentarily turned his wife into a less than rational, or, indeed, too-sensual creature (which he apprehends, disturbingly, in her torrent of divinity). This awareness leads him to attempt a more subtle kind of argument in which he suggests that the scriptures and the fallen, or human world represent two spheres which, logically, must comprise a kind of disjunction. We have here a very interesting psychological diagnosis of a different type of Presbyterian mindset to that of the "Holy Willie" kind. We might think, as the laird speaks of "the Bible and the jest-book" of Burns's bawdy or sensual side - especially the poems and songs of *The Merry Muses* - and be aware yet again that the mainstream, everyday Presbyterian individual in Scotland was far from being a puritan.<sup>35</sup> Turning life into "a medley of absurdity and confusion" is precisely what Robert Wringhim does to himself and this phrase represents the very deliberate fabric of the novel so that the reader is unsure whether he is reading a real religious story or a fictional tale, a tragedy or perhaps a farce.

The idea of the double or doppelganger has its roots in folk-culture, including the Scottish ballads and songs which formed part of Hogg's cultural heritage (alongside Presbyterian orthodoxy). The Romantic period, however, spawns a much more "mainstream" interest in the double.<sup>36</sup> Hogg's Wringhim has at least in common with the Romantic interest in Prometheus also, the fact that he is condemned to eternal affliction and punishment. Wringhim, of course, is not a hero and may well be suffering psychological rather than actual torments; however, he may also be, in a characteristic Hogg manoeuvre, a Scottish variation upon a Romantic trope. Wringhim's story is a *bildungsroman* charting

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<sup>35</sup> Catherine Carswell, *Life of Burns* (Edinburgh, 1987) p.40.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Millar, *Doubles* (London, 1976), pp.17-39.



the growth of an individual into early (and soon snuffed out adulthood). This kind of story has Scottish antecedents, of course, in the age of sensibility with Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*. It also has a loose prototype in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* where oversensitivity to environment leads essentially to the central protagonist creating his own perceptual environment. There is a strong tendency toward the kind of *bildungsroman* in the age of sensibility and Romanticism which shows a mismatch between formation of character and ultimately mature experience of the world (a pattern we find even in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*). *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* is both a reprisal of the Romantic tendency in *bildungsroman* and an ironic version of this, since Robert Wringhim's adult experiences, while disjunctive in themselves, are explicable in the context of his upbringing.

Robert Wringhim's experiences in childhood are almost too clearly linked to his traumatised adulthood. We see this, for instance, in his persecution of McGill at school. This boy is academically more gifted than Wringhim so that the latter is driven to attack and destroy his credibility in front of their school-teacher. His name resounds, clearly, in the later appearance of Gil-Martin, whom Wringhim at first describes as his "guardian angel", but whom he later believes to be the Devil. The similarity in the names, then, implies that Wringhim might have conjured Gil-Martin up out of guilt over his earlier actions so that he might be properly chastised. The similarity between the name and a number of similar names in folk-culture (such as Gil-Moules, a synonym for the Devil) also implies a localised generation of the character of Gil-Martin by Wringhim.<sup>37</sup> Robert's behaviour at the tennis-match in Edinburgh is also instructive. He deliberately obstructs the game being played by his brother, George, to the extent that he is bloodied and bruised by the ball wielded by the players. In spite of George's initially kind entreaties to his brother to step aside, Robert insists upon his "martyrdom", or publically suffering for his faith, supposedly, in a pale version of the chastisement enjoyed by those persecuted Scottish Calvinists of the early seventeenth-century whom he would have been taught to venerate. Robert has a powerful creative mind which is shown even as it is ridiculed and undermined. In this

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<sup>37</sup> See Gifford, *Op cit.*, p.123.

conjunction we see the Romantic version of the imagination, which, being replayed within an extreme Scottish Calvinist type, is ironised to some extent. If one definition of Romanticism involves the bringing together the tragic and the comic, then *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* conforms to this configuration. It may be the case, as his whole career might be taken to demonstrate, that Hogg had a tendency toward mockery of literary mores he saw developing around him, but this is not entirely, though it may be to some extent, a national reaction against “English” Romanticism. (we see his typical mockery of a (Scottish) man of literary pretension in the treatment of the editor in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*). It is quite clear, however, that Hogg is reutilising the “bogeyman” figure of the Scottish puritan in a very modern mode. Wringhim may well be predicated psychologically in earlier texts such as “Holy Willie’s Prayer”, but Hogg is the writer who makes the extreme Calvinist character-type a modern and, paradoxically, a fully primitive character for whom the reader might have some sympathy (at least the sympathy of recognition in understanding one version of his story to result from a set of family expectations which overburden him). Wringhim’s story is the tragic, typically Romantic tale of a man struggling to comprehend a reality, which is obscured for him by the near-Blakean dissociation brought about by tight ideological structures. What we have in the final analysis, then, is a re-energisation of the Scottish past for the contemporary western literary moment. This act in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* shows Hogg to be, alongside Burns and Scott, the most energetic and translator of Scotland’s literary and cultural past to a much wider present.



## **Conclusion.**

The foregoing thesis has sought to demonstrate that Scottish literary creativity during the long eighteenth century is less constrained by debilitating cultural and national circumstances and is more catholic in its connections than more traditional critical approaches to this literary milieu have allowed. The flat-footed model of linguistic, political and cultural split with which so much Scottish criticism and literary history has been underwritten takes too little account of the cultural and creative freedom actually enjoyed by writers during the period. The folk-biased or populist-biased reading of poetry in Scots during the eighteenth century follows from a too narrow agenda of cultural nationalism and under-reads each of Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns. Such a reading undervalues the literary and cultural resources actually available to these writers, while at the same time cutting off their British lifeblood. These writers take much of their pulse from wider currents in British poetry of the day, including Augustanism, pastoralism, and the movement of sensibility. We can chart through the three poets this movement between wider literary milieu so that we move, in orthodox fashion from neo-classicism to proto-Romanticism. Each of these three poets combine these currents with a specifically Scottish accent, or set of accents since, as we have seen, we move, in the case of Ramsay, from the stressed identity of allegiance of the Stuart cause to Burns with a re-emphasising of Presbyterian identity. This movement in Scottish identity is far from smooth, since as we have seen Ramsay can celebrate figures and ideas associated with the Hanoverian Whigs, and no-one is more scathing of Scottish Presbyterianism at its Calvinist extreme than Burns. Ramsay, Burns and Fergusson never reach any absolute coherence in literary or political identity (though Scottish criticism has tended idealistically to over-emphasise the absolute value of such coherences); but in cultural terms these writers are all to be seen as deeply Scottish (and perhaps, ultimately, as deeply British) in wrestling with and, indeed, in making creative capital from their complicated locations nationally and in history. When James Thomson is considered in his influence on Fergusson and Burns and in terms of his own vexed, but creatively capitalised Scottish and British identities, we find a much more expansive sense of



Scottish eighteenth-century poetry than standard critical accounts are usually comfortable with.

The Scottish Enlightenment has been too facilely written off as Anglocentric or Britocentric and as comprising, overwrought formations of sentiment and rationality. However, the cosmopolitan project of the Enlightenment can be seen to provide a number of enabling tools in psychology, anthropology, philosophy and historical perspective, generally, to Scottish literature. We see these influences come to bear particularly on Burns, Walter Scott, John Galt and James Hogg. However, we should be aware also of the Enlightenment as a site of deep and necessary cultural debate in Scotland which, while sometimes tending toward prescriptivism in its critical gestures, sponsors too a primitivism that informs texts such as the “Ossian” poems, Home’s *Douglas*, Beattie’s “The Minstrel”, Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* and Smollett’s *Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. This primitivism plays an important part in the new mood of sensibility generally, but it also begins to widen the space of - and in which - writers like Burns and Scott can celebrate and explore Scottish identity. Primitivism, more than anything else, is what allows Burns to reclaim the Presbyterian identity and also the “peasant” identity as valid thematic sites and what allows Scott to reclaim the highland identity as a valid thematic site of Scottish culture, when previously, for various reasons, these identities had been lost as respectable cultural locations. Burns and Scott, then, do a great deal to help Scotland remember its past. At the same time, the wider tensions and turbulations in European identity which these and other writers such as Galt and Hogg are aware of allows the featuring of fraught and unstable identities which show Scotland to be partaking of a complicated identity which is a much wider phenomenon than merely Scottish, or even British. When we chart Scottish literature through the long eighteenth-century all the way from Ramsay to Scottish fiction of the early nineteenth century we find a largely normal creative history which makes great creative capital from a Scottish voice in dialogue with the problematics of Scottish, British and European history. It is only religious, national and cultural sectarianism which stands in the way of more wholeheartedly reclaiming the entire *oeuvre* of inventive and invented Scottish literature during the long eighteenth-century as Scottish



literature which proceeds overwhelmingly with talent, craftsmanship, historical sensitivity and in good faith.

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