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Fostering an Irish Writers' Circle: a Revisionist Reading of  
the Life and Works of Samuel Thomson, an Ulster Poet  
(1766-1816)

A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow,  
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### Abstract

The Ulster poet Samuel Thomson (1766-1816) experienced a brief period of fame during the 1790s and early 1800s when he published three volumes of verse and became a regular contributor of poetry to Belfast newspapers and journals. Known in popular memory as the ‘Bard of Carngranny’, Thomson had been closely associated with many radical activists who participated in the 1798 Rebellion, although it has never been established if he himself took part in the armed rising. His earlier poems, many of which are written in the vernacular Scots language, celebrate and parody local life in the rural North of Ireland. This study examines Thomson’s significance as a literary artist; an initiator of literary discussion and correspondence; and the father of a Northern school of Irish poets who span the cusp where eighteenth-century Augustanism and first generation Romanticism meet.

Through the thorough examination of a range of evidence from published editions, public press and journal contributions, to the poet’s manuscripts, this study investigates Thomson’s work against the political, social, historical, and theological contexts which informed its composition. It attempts the first full reconstruction of Samuel Thomson’s life and career, paying particular attention to his correspondence and his last volume of verse, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806) which has rarely been scrutinised in any detail. It highlights Thomson’s desire to assume a bardic role as an enthusiastic young radical who identified cultural similarities between his corner of Ireland and Robert Burns’s Ayrshire. The thesis also traces his enduring political engagement. While Thomson’s political radicalism may have cooled during the Union period, it was substituted for a radical spiritualism that adopts some of the visionary traits of early Romantic poetry.

## **Abbreviations**

**The following abbreviations are frequently employed throughout this thesis:**

**DSL** – Dictionary of the Scots Language

**ECCO** – Eighteenth Century Collections Online

**PRONI** – The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

**QUB** – The Queen’s University of Belfast

**TCD** – Trinity College Dublin

## Introduction

Samuel Thomson (1766-1816), a native of the Presbyterian, Scots-speaking area of Carngranny, Templepatrick, in south Antrim was in his own lifetime a greatly respected poet and instigator of an early Romantic coterie of poets in the north of Ireland. A hedge schoolmaster by trade, his literary career was in many ways forged in the radical Belfast press which reflected enthusiasm for labouring class poetry, and was restrained by a nuanced national identity which he described as ‘IRISH all without [...] / ev’ry item SCOTCH within’,<sup>1</sup> reflecting both his birth and life in the north of Ireland and his Scottish vernacular language and ancestral heritage. His ascent to fame was bound up with the revolutionary fervour generated by the French Revolution and its political reception in Ireland, generating a ready-made audience of United Irish sympathisers and activists. A particularly literary version of vernacular Scots language had been raised to prominence by his celebrated contemporary, Robert Burns, with whom Thomson corresponded during the 1790s. The contemporary success of Burns, as a poet from a similar labouring class background who wrote verses on reformist and radical themes in a familiar tongue, encouraged Thomson to offer the Irish reading public a taste of his own verses and experience.

As Irish political circumstance and print culture became less favourable to radical poetry, Thomson adapted his strategy to target different audiences, creating alliances with and seeking advice from fellow radical poets while stylising his verses for a more moderate readership in the *Belfast News-Letter*. On the other hand, when the *Northern Star* press was bought up by the firm Doherty and Simms in 1797, Thomson pragmatically decided to publish his *New Poems* (1799) with this firm, keeping an eye out for opportunities that arose from the demise of radical Belfast. Upon the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘To Captain McDougall, Castle-Upton, with a copy of the author’s poems’ (1806), ll. 19-20, in Thomson, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects*, (Belfast: Smyth & Lyons, 1806; henceforward *Simple Poems*) pp. 84-86.

establishment of a left-of-centre, anti-Union journal, the *Microscope and Minute Literary Observer* (1799-1800), Thomson was one of the first poets to contribute verses for the eyes of polite, metropolitan Dissenters who looked toward the creation of a liberal education for the deserving in the Belfast Academical Institution. By the time the Reverend Hutchinson McFadden wrote to Samuel Thomson in 1807, he represented one of the more fervent fans of Thomson's final edition of poetry, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806), and also a changed audience.

Thomson's position in the postcolonial canon has been inevitably affected both by the historical context of the 1798 Irish Rebellion and his own position in relation to the United Irish movement, particularly in comparison with more radical poets of his circle. No evidence has emerged to prove that Thomson was an active rebel during the Battle of Antrim, although his sympathy for the United Irish movement's aims in its early stages is evident in his poetry, particularly in a piece called 'The Thoughtful Bard' (1792) which was seized along with the United Irish and *Northern Star* documents that came to be catalogued as the Rebellion Papers at Dublin Castle.<sup>2</sup>

The present author also seeks to remedy the critical embarrassment that surrounds Thomson's quest for literary patronage by examining Thomson's motivation in establishing relationships with patrons. It also identifies a nuanced trajectory within his poetry that was critical of the Ascendancy's abuse of power, but modified by a fear of what he regarded as Jacobin incitement of the poorly educated lower classes who were ill-equipped to govern. In part, his approach to patrons was a pragmatic response to his perception of a changing Irish print culture, which moved from publication by subscription to the support of more renowned literary philanthropists to further their cause. As will be discussed throughout the thesis, Thomson's relationship with patrons in a post-rebellion world is complex and reveals that Thomson's desire for Irish educational and artistic improvement was stronger than his distrust of the aristocracy.

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<sup>2</sup> Rebellion Papers 620/19/77. This overtly radical poem is dated from 'S. Thomson, Carngranney, 24 April 1792.'



Most critical examination of Thomson's work has focused on his early poetry, particularly that which is written in Scots, and little research has been conducted into his life post-1806. Although there is some evidence that Thomson's reputation carried on after his death in 1816, it is still the case that, with the exception of a heart-felt, six-page long elegy from the Donegore poet John Dickey, Thomson's demise was unacknowledged in the Belfast literary community. It is evident from the work of Robert Huddleston, a second generation vernacular poet, that Thomson had not been forgotten. Huddleston identified the critical neglect of the Scottish vernacular tradition in Ireland, commenting specifically on the work of Thomson, among others: 'Is there nothing that is worthy in Thompson, the Lyle-hill bard [...] Had [he] met the encouragement of the Scottish poets Hogg or MacNeill, who can tell where [he] might have landed, or what [his] exertions might have come to?'<sup>3</sup>

In the late twentieth century the first edition of Thomson's selected poetry was published by members of the Ulster Scots movement in Northern Ireland who paid tribute to what they regarded as Thomson's best poetry.<sup>4</sup> His poem 'To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton' (1806) has become virtually a mantra for the Ulster Scot's identity, being 'IRISH all without [and] / Ev'ry item SCOTCH within'. The poem is a fusion of an Romantic Scotland of the mind, based on his ancestral ties and his literary affinity with the nation, and a genuine connection with 'her lads an' lasses' based on his contact with Scottish fellow poets like Alexander Kemp, and Robert Burns during his famous journey to Scotland in 1794. Thomson was, of course, an Irishman who wrote most of his poetry prior to the Union of 1801 and, this study aims to argue, his patriotism gave way only to his Christian belief that his true allegiance was to the Kingdom of Heaven over and above any nation. Both Thomson's Scots cultural heritage and Irish patriotic

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Huddleston, *Poems on Rural Subjects* (Belfast: Smyth, 1844), Preface, p.xii.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Folk Poets of Ulster' in *The Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson, the Bard of Carngranny 1766-1816* (Bangor: Pretani Press, 1992); hereafter *Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson*, pp. ix-xxxii.

identity is fixed in his *oeuvre* and form an important part of his cultural and educational agenda.

Thomson must be given credit for prophetically voicing a hybrid identity, a form of which is culturally echoed in today's Northern Ireland, albeit in a British constitutional context that Thomson could not possibly have envisioned. The present author has, where possible, resisted classifying Thomson within a rigid national paradigm as his chameleon-like tendency to reinvent himself for various audiences complicates this. In short; a single, unified reading of Thomson is fruitless, as is the attempt to classify him in a particular genre. The danger of academic imperialism that haunts postcolonial literary criticism has provided no place in the canon for Thomson's culturally-complex, religious-themed poetry, which when read closely should invite the reader to question the historical stereotype of the cultureless Dissenting Protestant in Ireland.

The first chapter of this thesis examines the various critical and canonical reception of Thomson from first and second generation members of his circle to John Hewitt's recovery of the vernacular tradition in the twentieth century, and finally the present day work of Ulster specialists in Scottish and Irish literature. The chapter charts Thomson's exclusion from the Irish canon and his gradual emergence as one of the Ulster 'folk poets'. The burgeoning interest in Thomson's political work and vernacular skill in the 1990s is discussed, including the interest of Ulster-Scots language critics, Scottish literary critics and critics of the English labouring-class canon. The present study emerges from a new generation of revisionist scholars in Ulster Scots and Irish studies, with particular emphasis on Thomson's importance in facilitating a Romantic writer's circle.

Chapters 2 and 3 of the thesis seek to reconstruct a sense of Thomson's poetic agenda, addressing two of the most notorious claims about his work: first that he was a Burns imitator, and secondly that he was an initially enthusiastic reformist whose religious persuasion made him too conservative to write explicitly radical poetry. His decision to write much of his earlier poetry in vernacular Scots on labouring-class themes is looked at in Chapter 2, examining the influence of Robert Burns's success on his early

writing and how he created a bardic reputation for himself with many references to contemporary Scottish poetry, particularly Robert Burns and Robert Fergusson.

Chapter 3 reconstructs Thomson's early life and career, examining the relationship of the Scottish Enlightenment and religious radicalism to his work. In addition to this, Thomson's public print poetry of the 1790s is read closely, noting the discrepancies with published editions, and cross-referenced with the large body of correspondence from fellow poets, contained at Trinity College Dublin. The chapter cannot claim to solve the question that hangs over the degree to which Thomson participated in the United Irish Rebellion, but it attempts to clarify the nature of his political beliefs including his apparent disillusionment with the French Revolution.

The central core of the thesis examines the impact of the Anglo-Irish Union and Thomson's attempt to come to terms with an emerging British Empire. His fragmentary identity is negotiated through imaginative explorations of different types of 'union', including the sexual, and the fraternal. His deliberate cultivation of a quietist literary persona that was engaged in retreat is examined as a subtle attempt to rehabilitate his bardic position, since his legitimacy to express the opinions of his compatriots was undermined by the perception that most of them had been on the 'wrong side' of the rebellion. By 1799 the bardic identity was a politicised, even rebel, status which Thomson attempted to exploit by writing poetry that appears to be concerned only with local figures and events, while retaining a subtle dialogue with the political through fabliaux carefully coded with the Scots language. He thus develops the use of vernacular Scots from its association merely with rural County Antrim labouring-class settings to a language with national, political currency and the ability to convey Romantic resistance to authority and colonialism. Yet Chapter 4 also examines Thomson's engagement with a wider English-language canon from Chaucer and Shakespeare to the Dissenting poets Spenser and Milton, redressing the balance of previous criticism which has tended to focus on the Scots vernacular poems. Thomson not only demonstrates the extent of

the cultural influences of a wider British canon on his poetry, but begins to tap into a number of key currents of British Romanticism: from the dream visions of Spenser, to the Enlightenment philosophy of Adam Smith, to the passionate sensibility of Robert Burns's nature poetry.

Chapter 4 leads into Chapter 5 by suggesting that Thomson was successfully developing a number of distinctive voices in his poetry, particularly a satirical voice which adopts rhetoric from philosophical and increasingly Dissenting Presbyterian language. Thomson's satires against local figures and 'types' of social behaviour provide us with some of his most aggressive and characteristic work. This inspires him to generate more complex poetic creations which are capable of self-criticism and self-reflection as much as criticism of others. By contrast, Chapter 6 notes a very different tone in Thomson's final edition, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806), an edition which has suffered severe critical neglect. A religious experience in the early nineteenth century appears to drive his poetry toward the religious sublime. A range of his verse is closely scrutinised to examine his growing Romanticism expressed particularly through his religious verse, an element of his work that was appreciated by James Orr, the most successful Romantic poet of the circle. Upon examination of Thomson's life and work, it is strikingly apparent that so much of his characteristic satire, political and spiritual radicalism is informed by his Dissenting culture, and goes some way to explaining his uniqueness within the circle of his Ulster contemporaries.

The final chapter examines Thomson not simply as an individual poet but as a mentor who fostered poetic protégés, many of whom contributed to a unique Northern school of Irish poetry during the 'long' eighteenth century. The circle provided a home grown audience for Thomson's poetry and a support network of fellow poets who bolstered one another's reputations through the verse epistle and in public print. The chapter also attempts to offer some insight into the changing print culture of Ireland in the 'long' eighteenth century which became increasingly hostile towards poets from a rural, labouring-class background. In spite of a

growing middle class readership, several fellow labouring-class poets who shared in Thomson's political radicalism in the 1790s remain steadfast correspondents, particularly James Orr, the Bard of Ballycarry whose own reputation equalled, perhaps even surpassed, Thomson's. Although Thomson's cottage, known as 'Crambo Cave' after the Scots verse parlour game, has previously been recognised as a hub of fraternal print culture, this study is the first to examine in detail the Thomson correspondence alongside the poetry of Thomson and his circle, to establish Thomson's most enduring legacy as the father of a Romantic, Northern fraternity in the early Irish Romantic period.

Recent scholarship has rediscovered Thomson's central position at the heart of a literary coterie which had links to Robert Burns in Scotland and Robert Anderson the Cumberland Bard, with numerous intriguing secondary links including Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. Thomson has been regarded as a 'rhyming weaver', a disillusioned radical, and even a religious conservative, but this study seeks to create a space for a dynamic, chameleon-like poet who produced a number of works of genius, but whose self-assessment as a hybrid Irish and Scottish man of feeling challenges the tendency to anthologise poetry along rigid national lines. The argument combines poetic close reading and cross-referencing of historical evidence to re-envision Thomson's success as a poetic mentor who rode the cusp of the democratic, labouring-class enthusiasm of radical Belfast and re-invented himself to bring tasteful, romantic verses to a more metropolitan Irish audience. Thomson's bridging of the gap between the rational humanism of Augustan literature and the emotional, visionary spirituality of the Romantic movement makes him an important and complex case study in 'long' eighteenth-century literature as well as a complicating factor in postcolonial literary criticism. Thomson's pivotal position as the facilitator of poetic conversation in Ireland during one of the country's most turbulent historical periods deserves the detailed reconsideration that this thesis offers.

## Chapter 1

### Thomson: the Patrons and the Pundits

It is fair to say that the first critics of Thomson's poems were his fraternal contemporaries, James Orr and John Dickey, and while each preferred different aspects of Thomson's work, both agreed that Thomson made a significant contribution to Irish literature, with Orr describing this as being 'in the spirit of true repentance and of genuine poetry'.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the fact that Orr maintained high praise for the Romantic and religious elements of Thomson's *Simple Poems* (1806), later critics have tended to shy away from the volume and some have ignored it completely. There are several theories that may explain neglect of this particular volume, reflecting the selectivity of critical approaches to Thomson's work, in general. Most of Thomson's previous editors have considered his Scots poems to be superior to his English poems and since *Simple Poems* contains less content in Scots, it has been of less interest. Secondly, *Simple Poems* is sparser in political content and has been viewed as the product of a reclusive, depressive poet. The melancholic, solitary persona that Thomson adopts in *Simple Poems* has not been recognised fully as a Romantic literary persona. Thirdly, the spiritual content of the volume has been mistaken for defeatist conservatism, rather than a strand of Romantic transcendent spirituality. Fourthly, the mode of production of *Simple Poems* which appears to have relied on the engagement of a landed patron has tended to lessen Thomson's radical glamour as a poet of the people, where he is seen by some to have 'sold out' to the Ascendancy.

The relationship between the poet and his patrons was a mixture of Thomson's pragmatism and nuanced political attitude. An exchange between the poet and Mrs Margaret Thompson of Greenmount evinces that the poet

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<sup>1</sup> James Orr to Samuel Thomson, 24 May 1807, transcribed by Brian M. Walker from the original (now lost). Transcript in the John Hewitt Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Ulster Library.

enjoyed a measure of friendship with the lady of the house, and her tender tone highlights a patroness who had every good intention toward her poet, calling herself a ‘sincere friend’ and even supplying him with money for medicine during a severe bout of illness.<sup>2</sup> Her husband Mr Samuel Thompson was a founding subscriber to the *Northern Star* and a keen financial supporter of education and the arts in Ulster and would go on to support the education of promising young Dissenters in Belfast Academical Institution by procuring subscribers and by donating his own money to the establishment of the Institution. He wrote to Thomson to inform him that his wife ‘thinks very highly of the poem you sent,’ which refers to ‘Grateful Thanks for Wine and Music’, written on 25 May 1802 during one of Thomson’s many visits to Greenmount. The text is addressed ‘to Miss E.T, Greenmount, a very amiable young lady’ (1802),<sup>3</sup> conveying the poet’s pleasure to spend a day in the company of Margaret’s daughter Eliza, but Thomson makes clear that he does not envy the Thompsons’ social status. There is honest discussion of poverty and affliction with the double-edged statement by Thomson that ‘Twere impious, surely, to complain’ (l. 36).

The Muckamore Thompsons may have been landed, but it is important to remember that they were neither aristocracy nor members of the Anglican Ascendancy. The fact that the intractably anti-aristocratic James Orr voiced the opinion that Thomson’s poem to Miss Thompson was ‘good indeed!’ evinces that he had no objection to the Thompsons’ patronage, but rather he disapproved of Thomson’s acquaintance with a more eminent member of the aristocracy, John, Lord Templeton of Castle Upton; the landlord of the greater part of Templepatrick Parish, and a complex figure in the eyes of his tenants. Orr was perhaps perturbed by the Thomson’s changing style of address to Templeton in 1803, compared to the bold, even politically radical, applications

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Thompson to Samuel Thomson, 15 Jan. 1802, TCD MS 7157, f. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, p. 42.

for attention that he made in the 1790s, including ‘Stanzas Addressed to Lord Templeton’s on his Arrival at Castle Upton, after an absence of several years – with a copy of the Author’s Poems’ (1799).<sup>4</sup> Thomson adopted the voice of the local people, reminding the young aristocrat of his responsibilities within the Parish of Templepatrick. The poems coincided with many of Thomson’s biting anti-aristocratic satires in the *Northern Star* and may have been a last attempt to persuade Lord Templeton to appease the people. By contrast, Thomson dedicated his 1806 edition of poems ‘as a small testimony of sincerest gratitude, and truest esteem of his LORDSHIP’s most devoted, humble servant.’<sup>5</sup>

Following Thomson’s disappointed hopes in procuring a new cottage from Lord Templeton, Orr penned an ‘Epistle to Mr S. Thomson, Carngranny’ (1803) which counselled him against ‘implor[ing] on supple knee, / the proud folks’ patronage’.<sup>6</sup> Orr’s sentiments were doubtless inflamed because his United Irish activity had put him at odds with his own landlord, Richard Gervase Ker, an Anglican who identified with the privileged Ascendancy and had little sympathy for the almost entirely Scots-descended Presbyterian community of Ballycarry. However the Upton family’s legacy as staunch supporters of Presbyterianism,<sup>7</sup> including Lord Templeton’s financial assistance to the Seceder Presbyterian congregation of which Thomson was a member, may have persuaded Thomson that the tenants of Templepatrick could rebuild their relationship with a more sympathetic landlord. Moreover, like Mr Thompson of Muckamore, Templeton became a financial prospect for the Belfast Academical Institution initiative, ranking him along with Bishop Percy

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<sup>4</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 145-6.

<sup>5</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, ‘Inscription’, p. i.

<sup>6</sup> Orr, ‘Epistle to Mr S. Thompson, Carngranny’ (1803), *Collected Works* pp. 122-5.

<sup>7</sup> *OSM*, Vol. 35 – Parishes of County Antrim XIII (1833, 1835, 1838) – Templepatrick and District, p.110.



as a potential supporter of Irish arts and culture.<sup>8</sup> He was therefore no stereotypical Ascendancy landlord, suggesting that Thomson may have once again been ahead of his time in recognizing the nuances of Irish history.

Several of Thomson's *Simple Poems* (1806) demonstrate the growing influence of the Romantic movement, including religious transcendentalism that has only recently been recognised as Romantic. Thomson's frequent experimentations in genre also make him hard to classify at times. For example, his 1793 poems have been examined for their labouring-class or Burnsian reference; the *Northern Star* poems are mined for their political content; and his *New Poems* looked at in light of post-rebellion satire and lingering radicalism. By comparison, *Simple Poems* appears to have been bypassed by critics and anthologists, some of whom identify the growing religious tone of the volume, with pieces such as 'To His Guardian Angel' and 'To Ambrose in Heaven'. This trend appears to have begun as early as the mid-nineteenth century and a decision which was perpetuated by the next generation of 'weaver' poets. Samuel Thomson had by 1830 become all but a shadow in the memory of the Ulster *literati*, but as late as 1845 his influence can still be found in the poetry of Robert Huddleston, Bard of Moneyreagh.

Robert Huddleston's preface to *A Collection of Poems and Songs, On rural Subjects* showed that, as early as 1844, there was evident concern that the choice of Scottish vernacular forms in Irish poetry would be confused as imitation of the Scottish poets. This was exactly what happened in late nineteenth-century Irish criticism, particularly in the work of D.J O'Donoghue (1892-3) which, though it kept careful account of the poetic editions, offered only superficial and generalized criticism of the poets. O'Donoghue provided the first listing of Samuel Thomson's works in his *Poets of Ireland* where he

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Thompson, London, to Joseph Stevenson, 12 Dec. 1807, Belfast Academical Institution Papers, PRONI, SCH/524/7B/1/22 –.

also included an entry for '*Poems*, Belfast, 1797, 8<sup>o</sup>'.<sup>9</sup> O'Donoghue describes Thomson as 'a school master' who 'lived a secluded life in a cottage on the north side of Lyle Hill' and also mentions his visit to Burns in 1794. This was soon followed by the damning criticism that has been almost impossible to shake off since, 'It must be admitted, though, that the *dialect poets* too often slavishly imitated Burns.'<sup>10</sup> Carol Baraniuk has described the perpetuation of this tag in the popular imagination as indicative of 'arrogance and ignorance in equal measures', citing a Belfast-based Nationalist newspaper article which claimed, 'there is...virtually no literature originating in Ulster apart from the weaver poets, mainly James Orr of Ballycarry and he was a Burns imitator.'<sup>11</sup> MacLoughlainn's sweeping dismissal of Ulster literature was alarming both in its factual inaccuracy and as a sweeping generalization sadly indicative of the literary approach to Ulster during the 1990s that culminated in the virtual exclusion of the Ulster vernacular Scots poets from the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*.<sup>12</sup>

In the wake of partition, the question of what constituted Irish literature tended to be reinforced by a narrative which portrayed the postcolonial nation as the logical and inevitable outcome of political struggle. Of this school was Daniel Corkery whose essentialist criteria for Irish literature comprised the following three elements: '1) The religious consciousness of the people' 2) Irish

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<sup>9</sup> This additional poetic edition as quoted by O'Donoghue has, to my knowledge, never come to light and yet has been quoted by subsequent scholars including Linde Lunney and Philip Robinson, discussed below.

<sup>10</sup> D. J. O'Donoghue, 'Ulster Poets and Poetry', in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (second series), 1 (1895), 1, 20-22, (my emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> Brian MacLoughlainn, 'The Guid Guide to finding that elusive Ulster-Scots', *Irish News*, 26 September 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), 'In practice, the *Field Day Anthology* establishes its own master-version of history quite conventionally. It abounds in chronologies, periodisation and judgements as to 'what really happened'. ... Rather than liberating history into fiction, the anthology pegs literature to date, fact, event.' (p. 27).

Nationalism; and 3) The Land.’ This, in Corkery’s view, relegated ‘Anglo-Irish’ literature to colonial status and he thereby defined the Irish author as one who is a conflated figure of political nationalism, non-Ascendancy status, and Roman Catholicism (the obvious definition of Corkery’s ‘religious consciousness’).<sup>13</sup> By this criteria, Samuel Thomson only meets two elements – that of political nationalism (although it is fair to assume that this would not have equated to the predominantly Catholic, Gaelic nationalism prevalent in late nineteenth-century Ireland); and concern with the land – a defining and often missed concern of his writing. So what place is there in such a canon for a writer of Irish and Scottish roots who chose the medium of the English and Scottish tongues?

In the *Field Day Anthology*, Seamus Deane acknowledged the political nationalism of Protestant Ulster during the 1790s and the lingering of the Gaelic tradition in the Protestant communities, but he gives no sense in which Scots vernacular writing contributed to Irish cultural consciousness.<sup>14</sup> This state of affairs was sadly not remedied by the anthology despite its impressive five volumes and we find the Ulster poets wholly excluded save for two poems of James Orr, ‘The Irishman’ and ‘Song of an Exile’.<sup>15</sup> Likewise in all five volumes there appears to be no room for Samuel Thomson, in contrast to the subsequent anthologies of several of his poems in Andrew Carpenter’s *Verse English from eighteenth century Ireland*.<sup>16</sup> The *de facto* cultural critique that the

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel Corkery, ‘from: *Synge and Irish Literature* (1931)’, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature*, 5 vols, gen. ed. Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991-2002; hereafter *Field Day*), II, pp. 1008-1013.

<sup>14</sup> Aodh de Blacam, ‘from: *Studies* (1934)’ in *Field Day*, gen. ed. Seamus Deane, II, pp. 1013-1018 (p. 1016).

<sup>15</sup> Deane (gen. ed.), *Field Day*, I, p. 488-90.

<sup>16</sup> Again, just as the Field Day editors anthologized Orr under ‘Anglo-Irish Verse’, Carpenter showed a similar lack of sensitivity by anthologizing several of Thomson’s more dense Scots poems in an anthology dedicated to ‘Verse In English.’ There may be a sense, however, in which the poets who came to be described by John Hewitt as the ‘Rhyming Weavers’ have traditionally been seen as a coherent entity whereby the inclusion of one in a national anthology has been considered adequate in terms of representing this tradition of Ulster poetry.

*Field Day Anthology* represented in its exclusion of Ulster-Scots culture, whether intentional or not, has received some considerable criticism from Revisionists, so much so that one sociologist described the argument as ‘now so settled as to make the comparison of the two seem nearly perverse.’<sup>17</sup>

The survival of Thomson’s poetry, and that of the poets who followed him, is largely down to the interest of several Belfast literary antiquarians of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries, such as Thomas Carnduff and Francis Joseph Biggar. Biggar collected an extensive range of first editions of the poets and wrote of the tradition of the Ulster reading societies in the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*. Their work was galvanised by the landmark scholarship of John Hewitt (1907-1987) who based his M.A thesis on his study of what he termed ‘a period of surprising poetic activity on many levels – landed gentry, gentlewomen [...] schoolmasters, [...] as well as peasants and craftsmen.’<sup>18</sup> Concentrating on the Scots-settled counties of Antrim and Down, Hewitt compiled careful notes on the poets’ biographies, their links to one another, and their publishing habits, often by subscription. The list included Samuel Thomson, Francis Boyle, James Orr, John Dickey, Thomas Beggs, Hugh Porter, Robert Huddleston and David Herbison.

Hewitt’s thesis was published as a book in 1974 and in the foreword to the 2004 reprint Tom Paulin noted that the publication resonated in the poetry of Seamus Heaney who was beginning to compose poetry in a hybrid register, and such questions of linguistic heritage were becoming of serious interest to scholars.<sup>19</sup> As a result of Hewitt’s work, the poets came to be known as the ‘Rhyming Weavers’ in the twentieth century with a particular emphasis on their

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<sup>17</sup> Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001; henceforward *Deconstructing Ireland*), p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 2. Hewitt’s thesis was presented for the degree of Master of Arts at the Queen’s University Belfast in 1951.

<sup>19</sup> *Rhyming Weavers*, ‘Foreword’ (Paulin), p. vii.

braid Scots writing and local community subject matter. It is fair to say that the poets have since been seen as a cohesive, untaught, working-class entity in spite of their varied professions and class status and perhaps partly accounts for the almost token inclusion of the more prolific Thomson and Orr in Irish national anthologies.

Before the publication of *Rhyming Weavers*, Hewitt's re-discovery of the poets met with much interest in Ulster and beyond as he brought them to public attention through the media and popular magazines such as *Fabrics*, *Fibres and Cordage* which published material on the Linen industry in Ireland.<sup>20</sup> He received correspondence from a variety of people including Jeanne Cooper Foster, author of *Ulster Folklore* (1951), who wrote enthusiastically of her interest in the poets but warned Hewitt that 'I've often wished someone would compile an anthology such as you mention, but unless it's done within a few years, I'm afraid a glossary will be necessary for Ulster readers!'<sup>21</sup> Sam Hannah Bell, the noted Ulster writer and broadcaster, wrote to Hewitt from the British Broadcasting Corporation offices in Belfast, endorsing his recovery of these 'increasingly important' poets, given the 'rapidly disappearing [...] bloom' of the countryside.<sup>22</sup> Yet one of Hewitt's correspondents identified the importance of the movement from a different angle, drawing a comparison between the rhyming weavers of Ulster and their dialect-speaking counterparts in North West England, whose nonconformist education 'gave rise to a fine radicalism, deepened by the economic hardness of their lives.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See *Fibres, Fabrics and Cordage*, 15 (Belfast: 1948), 7-9.

<sup>21</sup> Jeanne Foster to John Hewitt, 3 November 1948, The John Hewitt Papers, PRONI D38/38/3/18.

<sup>22</sup> Sam Hannah Bell to John Hewitt, 1 Nov 1948, The John Hewitt Papers, PRONI D38/38/3/18.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Hewitt from Ronald M[?], 28 November 1950, The John Hewitt Papers, PRONI D38/38/3/18.

As a scholar committed to a Regionalist agenda, Hewitt was more inclined to follow the advice of Sam Hannah Bell quoted above, attempting to provide an account of simpler times. As he would elucidate in his essay, 'Regionalism; The Last Chance', Hewitt was engaged in a mission to revise the idea of national identity in favour of 'some smaller unit to which to give [one's] loyalty [...] the region; an area which possesses geographical and economic coherence, which has had some sort of traditional and historical identity and which still, in some measure, demonstrates cultural and linguistic individuality.'<sup>24</sup> Thus, Hewitt chose to anthologize the poets on the basis of their regional locality, particularly counties Antrim and Down, and prioritized poetry which recorded local life and custom in braid Scots. Hewitt only touches on the intellectual breadth of the poets, mentioning the Reading Societies only in the context of subscription rather than in the dissemination of ideas.<sup>25</sup>

A Regionalist approach did enable Hewitt however to examine the relationship of the 'weaver poets' to Scottish culture. Determined not to encourage the Burns-imitator accusation emanating from 'the uncritical custom of our older bookmen and antiquarians, who [gave] little evidence of having looked into the books with any care,' (7) he emphasizes that the influence of Robert Burns on the general imagination helped to promote 'the idea of the peasant poet as an acceptable role,' (1). He also pointed out that the poets were not just influenced by Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns, but also by more minor Scottish poets like Hector MacNeill and Robert Tannahill.<sup>26</sup> Drawing attention to the Ulster poets' use of Scottish stanza forms for their own purposes, Hewitt concludes that 'it would be fair to suggest that the Ulster Vernacular bards were

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<sup>24</sup> John Hewitt, 'Regionalism: the Last Chance' (1947) in *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt*, ed. by Tom Clyde (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), p. 122.

<sup>25</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, pp. 49, 47, 100, 98-99.

<sup>26</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, pp. 7, 1.

in much the same relationship to Burns as he had been to his predecessors, and were working free-handedly within the same tradition'.<sup>27</sup> This shrewd observation did justice to the creativity and independence of the Ulster poetic movement and would be recognized by later critics of English labouring-class poetry who would go on to emphasize Thomson's equal proficiency in the pastoral vein of the English tradition.

Although Hewitt claimed that there was 'no John Clare' among the Ulster poets, he does note the exactitude of detail of which Thomson was capable, 'Away from books then, his observation can be exact, 'The lapwing wallops o'er the bogs'<sup>28</sup> – from Thomson's poem 'March' (1799). (100) It is unsurprising, then, that Hewitt chooses three poems from Thomson's *New Poems* (1799) in which the poet concentrates more heavily on his locale than in previous work. This edition contains some of Thomson's most intricate political poetry, including the coded subtext of poems of such as 'To a Hedge-hog' (1799), possibly Thomson's masterpiece, and certainly his most anthologized poem.<sup>29</sup> Hewitt appears to have read it as a literal folk poem about a familiar creature, 'the full armouring of his observation, wit, and folk-consciousness, comes to the peak in his "To a hedge-hog", certainly his finest, most concentrated effort.' (101) Of course, in the truncated version of the poem presented in *Rhyming Weavers*, the elements of the poem that explicitly discuss the superstition surrounding the hedge-hog are omitted as well as the opening stanzas which skilfully mislead the reader to expect a classical Petrarchan sonnet or ode. There is no sense given by Hewitt of Thomson playing with genre and certainly not any radical subtext in the poem which the present author will discuss at length in chapter 4.

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<sup>27</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 100.

<sup>29</sup> 'To a Hedge-hog', *New Poems*, pp. 126-128.

The sheer scale of Hewitt's recovery cannot be overestimated; it was not until 2008 with the publication of Frank Ferguson's *Ulster Scots Writing: an Anthology* that any scholar even attempted a work of such comprehensiveness. There can be no doubt that Hewitt's scholarship provided a springboard for later scholars to explore Thomson's tutelage of fellow poets and his status as a poet who ought to have been better commemorated, and he also points out that Huddleston placed Thomson as a poetic successor in the tradition of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns.<sup>30</sup> (97)

The Ulster-Scots language revival of the 1990s brought about the re-publication of the works of Hugh Porter, James Orr and Samuel Thomson, largely through the work of Philip Robinson and J.R.R. Adams. The *Folk Poets of Ulster* series presented these poets as regional bards and continued in the tradition of Hewitt's 'Rhyming Weavers'. Robinson, a considerable scholar and Ulster-Scots writer in his own right, was aware of the larger significance of these poets, bringing out the political connections of Orr and Thomson with the United Irishmen but was careful not to make any unsubstantiated claims. The aims of the series editor appears to be twofold; first, to make such poetry accessible; and secondly, to foreground the poems 'written in Ulster-Scots rather than in standard English.'<sup>31</sup>

Undoubtedly the revival of interest in these poems owes a great debt to Robinson's and Adams' work but it could be argued that the focus of the volumes on poems of historical and social interest (rather than pure literary merit), and those written in Ulster-Scots, marginalized the majority of Thomson's poems, seventy-five per cent of which are written in standard English. Robinson's scholarly efforts in examining Thomson's work in public

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<sup>30</sup> Huddleston, who would merit being studied further as a poet in his own right, vehemently resented the implication that poets who wrote in Ulster-Scots were merely imitating the Scottish poets.

<sup>31</sup> Adams & Robinson, *The Folk Poets of Ulster*, 3 vols. Bangor: Pretani Press, 1992; thereafter *Folk Poets*. The series is comprised of the Country Rhymes of Hugh Porter (c. 1780-?), the Bard of Moneyslane, County Down; James Orr (1770-1816), the Bard of Ballycarry, County Antrim; and Samuel Thomson (1776-1816), the Bard of Carngranny, County Antrim.



print and poetic editions resulted in a thorough introduction with an invaluable, complete subscriber's list, compiled from the three original editions of 1793, 1799 and 1806.<sup>32</sup> It is fair to say that where he has been surpassed in terms of literary criticism, Robinson & Scott's work on Thomson's biography remains the most detailed and sophisticated to the present day. It is notable that Robinson & Scott were two of the first critics to draw attention to Thomson's prolific poetic output under his own name and a variety of pseudonyms in the *Northern Star* and *Belfast News-Letter*, including some of his more politically radical poems.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the editors' emphasis on the difficulty of pinning down Thomson's fluctuating political attitudes is substantiated with scholarly cross-referencing between poems published in the press and in the post-rebellion 1799 edition, highlighting the poet's own shrewd self-censorship. Rather than relying on Romantic suppositions, the editors adopted the caution of the historian, stating that 'Thomson's radical politics can only be assumed from the friendships he made, and not by any explicit political comment in his poems.'<sup>34</sup> The editors' tentative phrasing on the subject of politics is slightly misleading, as there is an abundance of implicit political discussion throughout all three editions of Thomson's poetry, often masquerading as pastoral or satire.

Robinson & Scott's work on the *Northern Star* also drew attention to other members of Thomson's circle and his extensive epistolary activity with brother poets, a fact that has become central to the present writer's understanding of Thomson's position on the literary stage of Britain and Ireland, at the centre of a Romantic coterie. In retrospect, given the tendency of Scottish critics to attribute the flowering of Ulster-Scots verse to the influence of Burns, it is notable that the editors did not over-emphasize the relationship

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<sup>32</sup> 'The Folk Poets of Ulster' in *The Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson, the Bard of Carngranny 1766-1816* (Bangor: Pretani Press, 1992); hereafter *Country Rhymes*), ix-xxxi.

<sup>33</sup> Robinson, *Country Rhymes*, xi.

<sup>34</sup> Robinson, *Country Rhymes*, x.

between Thomson and Burns but rather treated it as a poetic exchange between mutually-esteeming poets, presumably so as not to encourage the ‘Burns imitator’ label. However, at the same time, Robinson’s editorial choice of Thomson’s Ulster-Scots poems, which accounted for only twenty-four percent of Thomson’s *oeuvre*, ironically did little to discourage the charge of bardolatry.

The editors anthologized most of Thomson’s poetry in thematic groups which, though this gave some idea of Thomson’s preoccupying themes, ignored Thomson’s own intention in the ordering of his material, and ensured that poems with any local reference were grouped together as ‘folk’ poems with no category for political poetry. The choice of grouping also throws disproportionate weight on the question of patronage. In their discussion of the 1806 edition, the editors argue that, Thomson had ‘begun to lose the cutting edge’ which had made his early poetry so successful, though they admit that his decision to seek patronage almost doubled the number of subscribers to the 1806 edition, indicating that his readership did not consider him to have ‘forfeited his “bardship” of the rural peasantry.’<sup>35</sup>

Yet Thomson’s refusal to condone ‘radical excesses’ ultimately marks him out, for Robinson at least, as failing to achieve ‘the *vox populi*’, the factor that enables him to privilege James Orr as a more authentic ‘poet of the people’. Robinson made the claim that ‘the nearest that Orr himself came to *sycophancy* was in the title of his poem “The Glen ... in the estate of R. Gervas, Esq”’. The bulk of Orr’s subscribers – his real patrons – were the ordinary, local folk of East Antrim.<sup>36</sup> The dismissive description of Thomson’s patronage-seeking as a practice was presumably designed to foreground the figure of Orr as a man of independent mind, but it resulted in a presentation of both poets in irrevocably regionalist terms. As Carol Baraniuk has argued, it seems that the editor’s focus

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<sup>35</sup> Adams & Robinson, *Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson*, Introduction (Robinson & Scott), p. xv.

<sup>36</sup> Robinson, *Country Rhymes of James Orr*, Introduction, p. xxv, (my emphasis).

on regional audience and the vernacular Ulster-Scots language poems, co-opted Orr and Thomson into the Ulster-Scots culture and language movement of the 1990s.<sup>37</sup> Thomson's apparent failure to take up arms, his nuanced relationship with the aristocratic classes and his conservative theology thus relegated him in the eyes of the editors to silver medallist to Orr's gold in terms of poetic 'independence'.

Robinson and Scott's introduction to Samuel Thomson's volume concludes affectionately by establishing Thomson as the instigator of a movement which, unknown to him, eventually developed into a healthy Scots poetic tradition in nineteenth-century Ulster but, they argued, 'the case ought not to be overstated.'<sup>38</sup> Robinson and Scott's introduction was the first critical attempt to rebuild a sense of Thomson's character and personality, 'a serious man' who wrote poems with 'a humourous side.' Robinson alerted the reader for the first time to Thomson's satirical talent but his failure to connect this with the same strain of radical Presbyterianism that informs his comedic poems led to the editors' description of Thomson as 'conservative'. The present writer intends to clarify the often misunderstood nuances of conservative Presbyterian theology that has been confused with conservative politics in Thomson's work.

The revival of interest in Ulster and Scottish relations provoked a collection of essays called *Scotland and Ulster* (1994) in which Linde Connolly Lunney (1994) made brief discussion of Thomson. She proposed the theory that Enlightenment currents and interest in the vernacular poetry of Robert Burns were key factors in producing unprecedented interest in Scottish heritage among Scots descendants in Ulster. She pointed out the gap in scholarly attention with regard to Scottish migration to Ulster and the general amnesia reported in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs with regard to Ulster Scots and

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<sup>37</sup> Caroline Baraniuk, "'As native in my thought as any here'", A Revisionist Re-Reading of the Life and Works of James Orr: Poet, Patriot and Ulster-Scot', unpublished PhD thesis, presented at the University of Glasgow, October 2008; henceforward 'as native in my thought as any here'), p. 37

<sup>38</sup> Robinson & Scott, *Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson*, Introduction, p. xvi.

Scottish origins.<sup>39</sup> Having engaged with evidence of Thomson's Scottish reading, Lunney's scholarship provided a crucial insight into the Scottish sources found both in Thomson's volumes and correspondence but, since the scope of study was Scotland and Ulster, the study did not pay attention to the vast and prolific list of English Augustan writers who also influenced them. Billy Kay (1994) in the same volume quotes the well-worn 'Tho' I'm Irish all without, / I'm ev'ry item Scotch within' stanza from 'To Captain MacDougall, Castle-Upton' (1806) in order to demonstrate 'the strong dual nationality felt by the Ulster Scots', roots that 'go a lot deeper and have been nourished over the centuries by the proximity and consequent cultural interchange between Scotland and the North of Ireland.'<sup>40</sup> Kay was alluding to Thomson's somewhat prophetic recognition of the nuance of post-plantation Irish identity and his creation of a new category of Scotch-Irishman, but he did not develop his reading to take account of the separation implied between physical grounding and Romantic, spiritual identity.<sup>41</sup>

In the same year, the political significance of Ulster poetry was heightened by the seminal work of Mary Helen Thuente (1994) who made the first full examination of United Irish radical poetry during the 1790s. Thuente drew attention to the shortcomings of several anthologies of eighteenth-century literature and culture which omitted United Irish literary works and contexts.<sup>42</sup> Thuente's work invited a revisionist reading of patriotic United Irish verse in the United Irish struggle, but would have been enhanced had she identified Thomson and his immediate circle within this tradition. With reference to

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<sup>39</sup> Linde Lunney, 'Ulster Attitudes to Scottishness: the eighteenth century and After' in Ian S. Wood, *Scotland and Ulster* (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1994), pp. 56-70 (p. 57).

<sup>40</sup> Billy Kay, 'The Scots Ower the Sheuch' in Ian S. Wood, *Scotland and Ulster* (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1994; hereafter 'The Scots Ower the Sheuch'), pp. 88-96, (p. 88).

<sup>41</sup> Samuel Thomson, 'To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton, with a copy of the author's poems' (ll. 23-4), *Simple Poems*, p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Helen Thuente, *The Harp Re-Strung: The United Irishmen and the Rise of Literary Nationalism*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994; hereafter *Harp Re-Strung*), p. 251.

Samuel Thomson and the Roughfort circle, Thuermer devoted a short paragraph to draw attention to Luke Mullan and Thomson's admiration for Burns and their promotion of his work in the *Northern Star*. Unfortunately, she relegated Thomson's political verse to a footnote, stating that '...none of Thomson's Northern Star poems appeared in any *Paddy's Resource*, and his conservative political opinions prevented him from writing songs such as those that appeared in *Paddy's Resource*',<sup>43</sup> perhaps a limited reading of the forms which political poetry took in the 1790s. It is only very recently that critics have begun to engage with a number of explicitly radical political poems published by Thomson in the *Northern Star* and the less obvious, subtly coded works that Thomson employed in his published volumes. It is possible that, in the eyes of some critics, Thomson's more radical efforts have been obscured by a mixed contribution of pastoral setting and political rhetoric, but more troubling is the neglectful lack of analysis given to several poems which obviously fuse elements of both, such as 'The Bard's Farewell' (1793).<sup>44</sup>

The slow engagement of Scottish literary interest in the poetic output of the Ulster 'vernacular' poets has been a surprisingly slow process, making Liam McIlvanney's engagement with the Ulster poets of the 1790s highly encouraging.<sup>45</sup> In the final chapter of *Burns the Radical* (2002), McIlvanney draws attention to the neglect that the Ulster poets have suffered, criticizing their omission from the *Field Day Anthology* and commenting that, 'This neglect of Ulster vernacular poetry is unfortunate, depriving us of an important window onto the cultural life of the period, and hampering our understanding both of Irish and Scottish radical connections and of the contemporary

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<sup>43</sup> Thuermer, *Harp Re-Strung*, p. 254n.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, 'The Bard's Farewell' (1793) in *Poems*, pp. 47-50; 'To the Cuckoo' (1797) and 'Epigram to a Proud Aristocrat' (1797), both in *New Poems*, pp. 157-158; 210.

<sup>45</sup> Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Tuckwell, 2002; henceforward *Burns the Radical*), pp. 224, 228, 222, 223, 225, 221, 226, 227.

reception of Robert Burns.’ (224) McIlvanney stressed that this neglect did not arise out of ‘artistic shortcomings’ but rather ‘with the tendency to organise the study of poetry along rigidly national lines.’ (228)

While this was, and continues to be, an admirable and encouraging argument, it was clear that in *Burns the Radical* at least, McIlvanney’s chief concern lay not with the Ulster poets, but with the radical reception of Burns by poets connected to the United Irishmen, specifically in order to highlight Burns’s status as an icon of ‘bardic’ and ‘politicized cultural nationalism.’ (222, 223) Drawing on the work of J.R.R Adams<sup>46</sup> and John Hewitt, McIlvanney highlighted the pre-existing tradition of Scots writing and voracious reading in Ulster, particularly the popularity of Allan Ramsay, but argued that it was Burns who ultimately ‘galvanise[d] the local Ulster verse tradition’ both in printed volumes and in the public press. (225) Drawing attention to the Scots verses of Samuel Thomson and James Orr, in particular, McIlvanney also pointed to the Scots radical verses of the *Northern Star* during the 1790s, and argued that ‘Burns was the inspiration and figurehead for a whole school of radical poets [...] who attached themselves to the United Irish movement [...] he was, in many respects, the tutelary poet of radical Ulster.’ (221)

McIlvanney subsequently made the generalizing claim that ‘the most conspicuous feature of the Ulster poets is their unrestrained bardolatory’, (226) citing Samuel Thomson’s ‘Epistle to Mr Robert Burns’ (1791) as an example of a ‘rapturous fan letter’ which culminated in his visit to the poet in Dumfries in 1794. Added to this were the examples of other members of Thomson’s circle, Alexander Kemp and Luke Mullan, and the concluding statement that ‘all the Ulster poets, to one degree or another, wrote in the style of Burns, adapting his poems as Burns had adapted those of Ramsay and Fergusson.’ (226, 227) This statement is bold not least because it somewhat contradicts the earlier

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<sup>46</sup> J.R.R Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster 1770-1900*, (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, Q.U.B. 1987; henceforward *The Printed Word and the Common Man.*).

acknowledgment of the more general influence of Scottish literature upon Ulster reading but also in its generalized claim that the Ulster poets, as a uniform bulk group, viewed Burns in the same way.<sup>47</sup>

The description of Thomson as a proponent of ‘unrestrained bardolatory’ is certainly open to dispute. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, Thomson’s ‘Epistle to Mr Robert Burns’ (1791) was no more ‘rapturous’ than the countless other epistles he wrote to brother poets in Ulster and, indeed, McIlvanney’s treatment of his early work appears ignorant of Thomson’s subsequent tutelary role at his own home to a wide circle of Ulster cotemporaries, including James Orr. Thomson was undeniably enthusiastic about Burns’s literary success and revelled in his acquaintance but the relationship was by no means as one-sided as it has often been presented.

It can certainly be claimed that Burns’s poetry exerted some political influence on Thomson in the early 1790s.<sup>48</sup> However, his more politically-radical correspondents such as James Orr make no mention of Burns at any point in their letters and other radicals, such as Aeneas Lamont and Luke Mullan, mention Burns mainly in a purely literary context. McIlvanney’s selective use of *Northern Star* sources in relation to Thomson and Kemp likewise obscured the role that these poets played in the dissemination of Burns’s work to the *Belfast News-Letter* and *Northern Star*. As will be discussed in later chapters, Kemp seems to have played some role in the public reception of Burns’s poetry in Belfast, feeding the newspapers with his compositions and sifting out aspects of his *oeuvre* with which he was uncomfortable.

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<sup>47</sup> Carol Baraniuk has disputed this claim convincingly in relation to James Orr of Ballycarry, (“as native in my thought as any here”, pp. 38-42.)

<sup>48</sup> See later discussion of Alexander Kemp’s reception of a poetic continuation composed by Thomson of Burns’s ‘The Twa Dogs’, where Kemp warns Thomson to ‘shun politics’, A. Kemp to S. Thomson, 9 May 1798, TCD MS 7257, f. 47.

Thomson seems less concerned with preserving the reputation of Burns, both praising and adapting his poetry for his own poetic agenda in the early years of his career but shifting to a more confident position in the mid-1790s where he was willing to write stinging parodies of his work, as well as satires on the work of a number of prolific poets such as Thomas Gray. McIlvanney discusses a most potent example of such a poem, the ‘Song for the Northern Star’ (1795) which effectively parodied Burns’s ‘The Dumfries Volunteers’ (1795); but although in a footnote he cites evidence that Thomson was the author, at the same time he resists this conclusion, possibly as it would have, to a large extent, undermined his argument of bardolatry.<sup>49</sup> McIlvanney argues that ‘for this poet, at least, bardolatry had its limits’<sup>50</sup> but it will be argued in detail in Chapter 3 that this poem does not represent disillusionment with Burns the radical ‘idol’, but is a key example of Thomson’s growing confidence in satirizing a number of prolific poets and public figures.

Yet in spite of McIlvanney’s relegation of the Ulster poets to a receptive and imitative role, his call for greater critical interest in the work of the Ulster poets should be recognized. His interest in Orr and Thomson is particularly evident, endorsing them as ‘by no means clumsy poetasters [...] significant, if minor, poets’ and acknowledging their familiarity with a wider corpus of Scottish literature. In a subsequent article, McIlvanney reminds his Scottish readership that ‘It may be that Scots have something to learn about their own culture from that Irish “Scotland” across the North Channel’ and that ‘the Scottish tendency to ignore the question of Ulster-Scots will begin to look increasingly short-sighted to scholars from elsewhere.’ McIlvanney here made

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Song for the Northern Star’, *Northern Star*, 2-5 November 1795. McIlvanney notes that the poem’s signature, ‘Lowrie Nettle. Lyle’s Hill. Oct. 26, 1795’ would suggest Samuel Thomson as the author but subsequently notes that the Scottish poet Alexander Wilson also used the pseudonym, ‘Laurie Nettle’. Although there is a Lyle Hill near Greenock, Scotland, it seems unlikely that Wilson would have been published in a Belfast newspaper from this address. The authorship of Samuel Thomson was later persuasively asserted by John Gray, discussed below.

<sup>50</sup> McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, p. 239.



a forceful case for the inclusion of Ulster-Scots literature in the study of Scottish cultural influence, in the hope that it might ‘complicate and illuminate our understanding of archipelagic identities in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.’<sup>51</sup>

It is thus encouraging that Gerard Carruthers specifically drew attention to James Orr and Samuel Thomson in the *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2007), setting the poets within the larger tradition of Scottish-Irish literary relations, particularly in their well-documented inspiration by Robert Burns.<sup>52</sup> As recently as 2009, Dr Carruthers reiterated that recognition of the Ulster poets along national lines is still a slow process. However he concludes that ‘given the trammelled complexities of the situation in this example [of Orr and Thomson’s Protestant nationalism], it may be best, one might (still somewhat provocatively) propose, that Orr and Thomson be reserved for courses in and anthologies of Ulster Scots, rather than Irish or Scottish writing.’<sup>53</sup> The national paradigm thus continues to present a challenge to anthologists and the present writer attempts to build on the refreshing approach of McIlvanney and Carruthers in the hope that a more detailed study of Thomson’s engagement with a number of identities may encourage a more effective study of Ulster poetry within the Scottish literary tradition while recognising, at the same time, that Thomson cannot be snugly appropriated as a Scottish writer.

The new radical perspective on Thomson was not lost on subsequent anthologists who sought to place him within the tradition of British labouring-

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<sup>51</sup> Liam McIlvanney, ‘Across the narrow sea: the language, literature and politics of Ulster-Scots’ in (eds.) Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan, *Ireland and Scotland: culture and society, 1700-2000*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005; henceforward *Ireland and Scotland*, pp. 203-226 (pp. 214-5).

<sup>52</sup> Gerard Carruthers, ‘Scottish-Irish Connections, 1707-1918’ in *the Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, (eds) Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning & Murray Pittock, (Edinburgh: 2007), p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> Gerard Carruthers, *A Critical Guide to Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2009), p. 175.

class poetry. Andrew Carpenter (1998)<sup>54</sup> provided a fresh perspective on Thomson's poetry by anthologizing him in *Verse in English from Eighteenth century Ireland*, recognising his place in an Irish canon and sparing him the label of Burns imitator by acknowledging a 'sprightly force and delight in language' comparable to that of Burns.<sup>55</sup> The title of the anthology is rendered somewhat ironic by the fact that Carpenter anthologised a number of Scots poems such as 'To a Hedge-hog', 'The Hawk and the Weazel, a Fable' and 'The Country Dance', as he noted, using 'Ulster-Scots' language, the instances of which were dealt with in the glossary. He does not allude to any political significance within Thomson's poetry in spite of anthologising two of Thomson's most radical poems. He, likewise, assumed that Thomson's poems were more homely and autobiographical than the evidence warrants; for example, the mysterious and symbolic 'Colley' in 'To a Hedge-hog' is footnoted as 'the poet's dog' without any evidence that Thomson ever owned a pet. Although Carpenter's discussion identified the use of the Scottish Standard Habbie verse-form in 'The Country Dance', he mistakes 'The Simmer Fair' as a straightforward description of a County Antrim fair, with no reference to the poem's place in the Scottish Christis Kirk tradition.

It might seem that it is in the hands of the critics of labouring-class poetry that Thomson's *oeuvre* has been most studiously examined and set within the context of a European-wide movement of poetry. Several critics such as Tim Burke, Bridget Keegan, and David Hill Radcliffe provide insightful criticisms of Thomson's poetry, ascribing an ambitious cultural agenda to the poet while acknowledging his radicalism both implicit and explicit. The one aspect of Thomson's work that has not received due attention is the influence of his Presbyterian social consciousness and his negotiation of

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<sup>54</sup> Andrew Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth Century Ireland*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998; hereafter, *Verse in English*), pp. 482-489.

<sup>55</sup> Carpenter, *Verse in English*, p. 482.

the eternal in his final 1806 edition. As with previous critics, this edition was eschewed for the two earlier editions.

Tim Burke's anthologizing of Thomson in volume three of the extensive anthology, *Eighteenth-century English Labouring Class Poets* (2003), recognises Thomson alongside Burns within a wider British pastoral tradition.<sup>56</sup> Although in his general introduction John Goodridge explains that the volume attempts to 'represent the range of labouring-class poetry in the English language and its dialect variants,' it remains unfortunate that the editors chose to use 'English' as the title's main adjective and further marginalising the Scots language to a 'dialect variant.'<sup>57</sup> In this anthology Tim Burke attempts to recover what Goodridge describes as the 'identifiable tradition' of poets 'on their own terms', thereby, in moving away from the stereotyped contemporary presentation of these poets.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, Burke provided one of the more advanced studies of Thomson's status as a landscape poet, acknowledging his debt to the same Augustan tradition by which Burns was also influenced.

His discussion of Thomson thus provides some remedy for the distorted rustic portrayal of the 'Rhyming Weavers' found in John Hewitt's criticism where the 'quest for authenticity', that is to say the assertion of independence, 'risks collaborating with the essentialist notions of class that denominate such poets in the first place.'<sup>59</sup> He claims to have anthologised Thomson on the basis of 'the petition that he made to be considered as a member of the rural labouring classes about whom and for whom he wrote' and his position as a transformer of Ulster poetry, but, despite acknowledging the political content of much of his public print productions, he still refers to him as a 'folk poet',

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<sup>56</sup> Tim Burke, (ed.), *Eighteenth Century English Labouring-Class Poets 1700-1800*, 3 vols, ed. John Goodridge, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003; hereafter *Labouring Class Poets*), III, pp. 261-266.

<sup>57</sup> John Goodridge (series. ed.), *Eighteenth-century English Labouring-Class Poets*, 3 vols., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; hereafter, *Labouring-Class Poets*), I, 'Introduction', p. xiii.

<sup>58</sup> *Labouring-Class Poets*, I, p. xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Burke, *Labouring-Class Poets*, III, xix.

Thomson is responsible for some key developments in the literary history of Ulster. His *Poems on different Subjects, partly in the Scottish Dialect*, published at Belfast in 1793, is the first ever volume of verse produced by an Ulster folk-poet. His work in this and later volumes, and in the pages of the *Northern Star* [...] are strongly (though not obviously) coloured by the political events that culminated in the Irish uprising of 1798.<sup>60</sup>

His anthologizing of Thomson's famous 1793 preface to *Poems on Different Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect* recognises Thomson's radical labouring-class poetic agenda. In addition, although he describes the poem 'The Bard's Farewell' (1793) as 'exceptional' in its direct reference to Irish linen import tariffs imposed by the British government, he identifies underlying radical themes in Thomson's later editions and acknowledges that any discussion of rural community in Ireland at this time was by implication political as a rallying point in the face of defeated rebellion.<sup>61</sup> It is here that Burke provides an interesting insight into the fraternal, homosocial conventions of Thomson's relationship with fellow local poet John Williamson by discussing the 'Acrostic to Damon' (1799) in some detail as a poem of erotic undertones. However, he is incorrect to claim that Thomson and Williamson both eschewed married life as by 1806 Williamson was married with children.<sup>62</sup>

In a subsequent article for the *John Clare Society Journal*, Burke expanded on his anthology entry for Thomson, exploring the poet's hybrid identity as an Irishman who enjoyed the fruits of literary traffic between the two islands. He was critical of Thuermer's *The Harp Re-Strung* in which 'Thomson was reduced to a footnote' and Thuermer's description of Thomson's poetry

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<sup>60</sup> Burke (ed.), *Labouring-Class Poets*, III, p. 261.

<sup>61</sup> Burke (ed.), *Labouring-Class Poets*, III, p. 263.

<sup>62</sup> In 'Epigram', lines 5-8, *Simple Poems* (1806), Thomson goaded Williamson: 'But Jack has got a wife by chance, / And children half a dozen; / Where he was friend and brother once, / He's now scarce half a cousin.' (p. 95.)

described as merely “rhetorical”.<sup>63</sup> He also criticized Philip Robinson and Ernest McA Scott’s choice of poems for the *The Country Rhymes of Samuel Thomson* as ‘the poems selected [...] do not represent the full range of his work, since the editors draw principally on his apparently un-political nature poems, and on his post-’98 publications when Thomson, whether from conviction or a more pragmatic *realpolitik*, did indeed largely sever what were former radical allegiances.’<sup>64</sup> Burke was the first critic to successfully examine the 1806 edition for radical poems and subtext, identifying the complex and intricate ‘To my Boortree’ (1806) but failing to read any Presbyterian significance into the poem, a theme which has been consistently omitted in critical treatment of Thomson’s poetry. This was in spite of Burke’s close readings of pastoral poems to demonstrate layers of symbolic radicalism, particularly in the discussion of trees and thorns. While his point holds that Thomson’s poems on the cutting down of thorns contain political significance, the point is somewhat laboured through his mistaken attribution of ‘Pastoral Elegy, to a Favourite Thorn on its being cut down’ (1793) to the post-rebellion edition *New Poems* (1799), thereby enabling him to explain it as ‘in coded fashion the wintry end of all that Paine’s “political summer” had promised.’<sup>65</sup> 1798 continued to be the undisputed, pivotal point of change in Thomson’s poetic *oeuvre*, a view that remained unchallenged until recently in Ulster literary criticism.<sup>66</sup>

By defining Thomson as a poet of hybrid identity, Burke was inspired to argue for a widening of the horizons of labouring-class poetry from ‘an almost exclusive “Anglo-Scottish” approach to include that of Ireland and a wider

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<sup>63</sup> Thuermer, *The Harp Re-Strung*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Tim Burke, ‘Poetry and Self-Fashioning in 1790s Ulster’, p. 35-49, (p. 38).

<sup>65</sup> Burke, ‘Poetry and Self-Fashioning in 1790s Ulster’, p. 41.

<sup>66</sup> See discussion of Frank Ferguson’s alternative proposition of the Act of Union as a pivotal point, discussed below.

‘pan-European tradition’. At no point did Burke dispute Thomson’s radicalism, demonstrating his ‘investment in multiple modes of personal identity’ as opposed to a vulgar, essentialist idea of nationalism that identifies only with Ireland, Scotland or Britain. From Burke’s discussion there was no sense in which the Ulster labouring-class poets were ‘bardolators’, rather the United Irish influence was given centre-stage, as a result of which he found that the poets ‘attempt[ed] to resist and re-imagine the distinctions of race, language, religion and class’ in 1790s Ireland.’<sup>67</sup> This, he argued, encouraged Thomson to write verse which probed the limits of social and poetic decorum, an idea that would subsequently be taken up in Bridget Keegan’s study of Thomson in relation to Queer theory.

Bridget Keegan (2004) as a fellow editor of *Labouring-Class Poets* attempts to rehabilitate the often-neglected pastoral verse through a ‘queer’ reading of selected poetry from John Clare, Janet Little and Samuel Thomson. In general, this fresh and thought-provoking approach to labouring-class poetry establishes successfully the illicit role that labouring-class poets assumed when adopting the persona of the leisurely Arcadian swain, previously considered the prerogative of the gentleman aristocrat whose ‘false ideology’ created an idealistic status-quo of labouring life.<sup>68</sup> By acknowledging this alternative form of radicalism, Keegan identifies Thomson’s ‘turn toward pastoralism in his later poetry’ as the reason for his exclusion from late-twentieth century anthologies of Irish literature ‘which foreground poems highlighting explicit claims for national rights.’<sup>69</sup> Tim Burke’s assertion that ‘[Thomson’s] later poetry is also particularly striking for its bold announcements of an intense friendship, with distinctly erotic connotations’ is echoed in Keegan’s assessment of the poem

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<sup>67</sup> Burke, ‘Poetry and Self-Fashioning in 1790s Ulster’, p.36.

<sup>68</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Bridget Keegan, ‘Romantic Labouring-class Pastoralism as Eco-Queer Camp’ in *Romanticism on the Net*, 36-37 (November 2004). <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/011134ar>> [accessed 25 February 2009]

envisioning 'the two men in terms of a commitment beyond the normal boundaries of heterosexual marriage.'<sup>70</sup> As this thesis will show, this homosocial element emerges fully only after the failed United Irish rebellion, though it has its roots in the early 1790s as evidenced by the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan, a Brother Bard.' (1791).<sup>71</sup>

Finally in this tradition, David Hill Radcliffe brings Thomson's poetry into the twenty-first century in his compilation of the electronic database project 'Spenser and the Tradition: English Poetry 1579-1830', which spanned the years 1987-2005. Radcliffe included six poems by Thomson, drawing on the 1793 edition, *Poems on Different Subjects*. The project was the first to examine Thomson's poetry within the tradition of Spenser and includes six early poems including the 'Second Epistle to Luke Mullan' (1791), written in the Spenserian stanza; the 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791) which mentions the poet's reading of Spenser; 'Damon an Thyrsis: a Pastoral'; the 'Dedication' to the 1793 edition; 'Elegy, the Cottage in Ruins' and 'Willy and Phoebe: a Pastoral.' (1793). Although the selection of poetry is confined narrowly to Thomson's earliest material, Radcliffe provided a concentrated look at the some elements of the edition which were normally passed over. In his commentary, Radcliffe described the opening pastoral 'Damon and Thyrsis' thus:

Whether accidentally or by design, [Thomson's] verses confound almost all the chief divisions in eighteenth-century pastoral poetry [...] at once realistic and "golden," beholden to Ambrose Philips and Alexander Pope, local and universalizing. While the format and topics of the poem are studiously conventional, Thomson also introduces enough particularity to make his verse distinctive.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Keegan, *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 93-97.

<sup>72</sup> David H. Radcliffe, *Spenser and the Tradition: English Poetry 1579-1830*, on <<http://198.82.142.160/spenser/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=38380>>, [accessed 26 March 2008]; (thereafter 'Radcliffe, *Spenser*.')

Describing Thomson as ‘an ambitious self-taught poet’, Radcliffe hesitated to accept Thomson’s ‘hyperbolic’ praise of Burns’s poetry at face value.<sup>73</sup>

Radcliffe examined both the Scottish and English influences on Thomson’s poetry including identifying echoes of Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Thomas Gray in ‘Elegy, the Cottage in Ruins. He also cross-referenced the poem with several contemporary compositions such as Southey and Leadbetter and referred to Thomson’s anthologizing of Crabbe’s *The Deserted Village* in ‘Poetical Blossoms’, the appendix at the end of *Poems* (1793).<sup>74</sup>

Building on Tim Burke’s examination of Thomson, Radcliffe brought to attention some of the less well-known poems, contradicting Terence Brown’s complaint that the Ulster poets were ‘frozen in statuesque Augustan impotence,’<sup>75</sup> but rather they recognized that the poets manipulated such frames of reference for their own strategies. By 2004, the only aspect of critical treatment missing from the labouring-class analysis was one of a theological, specifically Presbyterian, emphasis and, until this day, a general lack of interest in *Simple Poems* (1806).

In spite of labouring class critics’ efforts to demote Burns to one of a catalogue of literary influences, Burns remained a primary source of interest to one Ulster critic. Dr. John Gray in an article for *Studies in Scottish Literature* (2004) treated Thomson from an historical, Burnsian perspective, following up Linde Lunney’s work on the Thomson correspondence. A distinguished scholar and former Librarian of the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, Gray drew upon his extensive knowledge of the library’s Burns collection and the *Northern Star* newspaper. In addition to this evidence, he followed on from Linde Lunney’s

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<sup>73</sup> Radcliffe, *Spenser* on <http://198.82.142.160/spenser/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=38379>, [accessed 26 March 2008].

<sup>74</sup> Radcliffe, *Spenser* on <http://198.82.142.160/spenser/TextRecord.php?action=GET&textsid=38382>, accessed [26 March 2008].

<sup>75</sup> Terence Brown, *Northern voices: poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), p. 16.



detailed examination of almost every epistolary reference to Burns in the Thomson correspondence, arriving at a more actively radical picture of Thomson. Gray asserted that, rather than taking literary inspiration from Burns, Thomson actually attempted to engage Burns in United Irish politics through the *Northern Star*, an approach which shed more light on the biography of the poet and contributed to bringing him out of the 'folk poet' category.<sup>76</sup>

Dr. Gray challenged Robinson & Scott's biographical information, substantiated by a fascinating sweep of Thomson's correspondence, but the excellent details of Thomson's circle is distorted by the overwhelming Burnsian focus of the article and several superficial readings of the poetry which tend to contribute further to the Burns imitator label. Whereas in his aforementioned discussion of Thomson, David Hill Radcliffe acknowledged the sophistication of Thomson's neoclassical preface to *Poems* (1793) in its engagement with the pastoral tradition, Gray described the same as 'overblown classical mode', attributing this prefatory pose not with Spenser's 'Shepherd lad who seeks no better name,' but, mistakenly, with Robert Burns' 'Caledonian Shepherd.'<sup>77</sup> The scant attention afforded to the 1806 edition was dispensed with in the quotation of one line from 'Sonnet to my Flute' (1806) to justify the idea that all that was left of Thomson by 1806 was the 'low murmurings of a broken heart', ignoring the poem's persona and, indeed, the subsequent forty-six poems in the edition which bear little influence of Burns.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the implication of this treatment is that Thomson suffered a dip in creativity as a result of lost faith in Burns's radical politics, an idea following on from Liam McIlvanney's *Burns the Radical* in spite of Gray's shrewd allusion to inconsistencies in Scottish critics' tendency to portray an 'immaculately radical Burns'. In spite of a

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<sup>76</sup> John Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster: From Adulation to Disaccord', *Studies in Scottish Literature*, vol. 34 (2004), ed. G. Ross Roy, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 2004; hereafter 'Burns and His Visitors from Ulster'), pp. 320-334.

<sup>77</sup> Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p. 321.

<sup>78</sup> Gray at no point attempts to elucidate the reasons for the shift in direction in *Simple Poems*, nor does he attempt to explain the curious absence of Burnsian reference after 1796.

detailed footnote indicating Thomson's 'propensity for nettling' other poets, Gray read Thomson's ironic epitaph on Burns in 'The Ayrshire Rose' (1796) as a bona fide, 'ludicrously overblown account of Burns's arrival on the literary scene.' Any point to be made about Thomson's sophisticated satirical abilities was thus undermined, and it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the author views Thomson's poetry as little better than Burns imitation.

It should be emphasized that, with 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', we are left with a very successful piece of Burns criticism, as Gray debunks the myth of 'an immaculately radical Burns', and as such it is a timely and valuable reassessment. However, the reader cannot help feeling that, by the same token, the article represents an opportunity squandered in that selective details of the valuable Thomson correspondence are hung on a framework of purely Burnsian and political interest, rather than explored fully with reference to Thomson's literary *oeuvre*. The alternative might have resulted in a solid case for reading the poet as an example of a variety of literary and political influences, beyond the figure of Burns.

Carol Baraniuk in her doctoral thesis presented to the University of Glasgow, on the subject of James Orr of Ballycarry, makes mention of Thomson in a detailed, Revisionist context, crediting him for his role in facilitating Orr's poetry and encouraging him to publish his verse. Through an expert examination of Orr's *Cherrie and the Slae* poem 'Epistle to Mr. Sam Thomson' (1803), Baraniuk examines the esteem that existed between the two poets, and the importance that Thomson held for Orr as a friend and brother poet. It is often surprising that, although Orr remains the most widely studied of the Ulster poets he has actually been anthologized on fewer occasions and in a much narrower context than Thomson. Whereas Orr's work tends to be included in Irish anthologies, albeit in a limited manner, Thomson has been an object of interest to critics of English labouring-class poetry, critics of Spenser, and several Irish anthologies from the *Faber Book of Irish Verse* to Patricia Craig's *The Ulster Anthology* (2006). It raises the interesting question of why

the two poets have been focussed upon by different schools? Orr's fascinating biography as an Irish patriot and sometime exile has perhaps made his appropriation by Irish literary critics easier, although in a highly selective fashion. By contrast, Thomson has been more easily appropriated into an Augustan or Proto-Romantic context.

Baraniuk's revisionist re-reading of the life and works of Orr elucidates persuasively the complexity of Orr as a bardic Irish writer, adding an unprecedented level of scholarship which explores his engagement with Enlightenment ideas and Romantic poetic currents, thus, setting the scene for a revisionist reading of poets within his circle. As Baraniuk's thesis foregrounded the work of Orr, Thomson inevitably often formed a point of comparison and there was still an overwhelming sense that Thomson was the silver medallist to Orr – whom Baraniuk describes as 'the *enfant terrible* of Thomson's circle who thundered from the columns of the *Northern Star* and turned out on 7 June 1798.'<sup>79</sup> That said, her thesis provides a crucial point of comparison between the poets but also a sense of Orr, in some ways Thomson's poetic successor, taking the next generation of Ulster poetry in the new direction of the Romantic movement.

With regard to Thomson, Baraniuk's thesis and the sterling research behind it set an important precedent for a detailed re-reading of the Ulster poets in much more detail and demonstrated fascinating and compelling results of such a study. In particular, Baraniuk stated clearly that 'while Burns's popularity in Ulster is undisputed and of long standing, the actual significance of the encouragement he provided to Ulster-Scots writers, particularly Samuel Thomson, during the 1790s, remains to be thoroughly investigated.'<sup>80</sup> From these remarks, even in passing, a more hard-headed picture of Thomson

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<sup>79</sup> Baraniuk here follows Orr's biographer, McDowell who in his 'Sketch' of Orr's life, suggested that Orr's contributions to the *Northern Star* under a pseudonym 'obtained for him a significant degree of notice.' (McDowell, 'Sketch' in Orr, *Collected Works*, p. 187.)

<sup>80</sup> Baraniuk, "as native in my thought", p. 161.

emerged with a clear sense of literary agenda. Baraniuk's reading of 'To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton' (1806) as 'a defining work for Thomson' concludes that Thomson viewed himself as a Scottish writer; an identification which put him at odds with Orr whom Baraniuk argues is 'an Irish writer and [...] unquestionably how he should be viewed today.' It is therefore still more evident that the details of Thomson's biography and poetic output invite a deeper investigation of his identity in the context of his chameleon-like tendency to resist categorization.<sup>81</sup>

Frank Ferguson (2008) in his *Ulster Scots Writing: an Anthology* attempted for the first time to bring together a selection of three hundred years of writers who express territorial belonging to Ulster.<sup>82</sup> The anthology not only considers the relevance of Ulster Scots literature to Irish literature and post-colonial criticism but also built on and revised Scottish critics' consideration of Ulster literature as diaspora literature. In this anthology the group known as 'the weaver poets' are split up and treated chronologically as individual studies with a clear intention of showing the breadth of each writer's *oeuvre*. Whereas this method of categorization places Thomson early in the study, it also highlights a wealth of pre-existing Ulster Scots literature, particularly religious texts which would have a profound influence on Thomson as a Presbyterian poet. Ferguson's choice of five Thomson poems attempted to afford the poet a broader treatment of themes and style across his three editions; selecting not only his best-loved works (such as 'The Simmer Fair' (1793) and 'To a Hedgehog' (1799) and, crucially, providing an unprecedented and sophisticated commentary on these works); but also some lesser-known standard English pieces such as 'A Peripatiae' (1806) and 'To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton; with a copy of the Author's poems' (1806).

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<sup>81</sup> Baraniuk, "as native in my thought", p. 192.

<sup>82</sup> Frank Ferguson, *Ulster Scots Writing: An Anthology*, Four Courts 2008, p. 1n.

In a subsequent article, Ferguson set an unprecedented course by examining in detail Thomson's 1799 volume *New Poems on a Variety of Different Subjects*, outside of the post-rebellion context, but rather viewing it as a response to the impending Anglo-Irish Act of Union. Ferguson clearly did not subscribe to the idea of Thomson as a poet in decline during this period and drew attention to a self-fashioning Thomson who employed a misleading prefatory guise as a poet in retirement. Examining him alongside his contemporary William Hamilton Drummond, a former United Irish supporter-turned middle-class intellectual, Ferguson explored how both poets reacted to the Anglo-Irish Union of 1801 and demonstrated how 'Thomson was keen to shatter the readers' expectations of a pastoral idyll in his treatment of Irish nature' and concluded that 'in later stages of his literary career his manipulation of Scots vernacular and British Augustan forms suggest a coded and covert language in his poetry that allows him to safely make pronouncements on the contemporary situation in Ireland.'<sup>83</sup>

This approach resists setting Thomson's poetry against a blunt political or national framework but examines how the poet explored the concept of union in a variety of different ways in 'cultural, religious, scientific and philosophical terms that complicate our understanding of north of Ireland Presbyterian reactions to the events of the 1790s and 1800s.'<sup>84</sup> Ferguson was thus the first critic to treat Thomson within the context of his Presbyterianism, a powerful motivating factor that will be developed in considerably in this thesis. Showing how this religious allegiance impacted upon the political allegiance to Britain that was expected of Thomson in the nineteenth century, Ferguson pointed out that the question of Hiberno-Caledonian identity became central. This theory provides an intriguing explanation for Thomson's constant

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<sup>83</sup> Frank Ferguson, "The third character": 'The articulation of Scottish identities in two Irish writers', in (eds.) Frank Ferguson and James McConnel, *Ireland and Scotland in the Nineteenth Century*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009; henceforward 'The articulation of Scottish identities'), pp. 62-75, (p. 69).

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

negotiation of this highly complex identity in his poetry from the beginnings of his career in 1791, specifically in his employment of Scots verse forms and vocabulary in the discussion of Irish concerns and cultural heritage.

It is hoped that the approach taken in this thesis will provide an impetus for future scholars to liberate Thomson from the bondage of past criticism which perceived a poetic decline over Thomson's three editions, notably in line with the 'decline' of the Irish revolutionary movement. While some critics have dehistoricized Thomson, others have viewed his verse as the slave of history rather than a discourse that is actively engaged with current and recent events. Ferguson's article allows for a different and more complex discussion, building on Tim Burke's brief analysis of multiple concepts of 'union' while at the same time, resisting the idea that Thomson's engagement with types of Union was merely a response to the failed 1798 rebellion. In his discussion of Thomson's political 'apostacy', Ferguson identified a key new direction in his comparison of Thomson and Drummond to the Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, who had been accused of the same abandonment of radical principles by their younger successors. While it is likely that Thomson's political opinions may have become more conservative in the 1800s, he argued that his 'intimations of union with Scottish identity [...] act as imaginative and figurative alternatives to the official Act of Union.'<sup>85</sup>

Thus for the first time a Romantic strain has been identified in Ulster writing, whereby Thomson sought to deal with the trauma of a national identity that was thrown into question by the Act of Union, a strain which the present study proposes to discuss in detail. The later poetry of Samuel Thomson which has been so neglected will be focused on and the challenging theological contexts teased out. It is hoped that the image that persists in the popular imagination of Thomson's literary decline might be revised and his true originality and poetic importance established.

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<sup>85</sup> Ferguson, 'The articulation of Scottish identities', p. 66.

## Chapter Two

### Revising Robert Burns for Ireland: Thomson and the Scottish tradition

In *The Printed Word and the Common Man*, the late Northern Irish scholar J.R.R. Adams gave an account of popular culture in Ulster between 1700 and 1900, emphasizing that there was a clear tradition of enthusiasm for Scottish literature in the North of Ireland, fostered by a large Scots-speaking population, many of whom had emigrated to Ireland in the first half of the millennia and during the Plantation.<sup>1</sup> The origins of this tradition owe somewhat to an oral history of Scottish song in Ulster, evinced in Thomson's setting several of his ballads to popular Scots songs like 'Humors o' glen'.<sup>2</sup> According to Adams, the constant circulation of Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* in Ulster, printed at least nine times between 1721 and 1800, demonstrates a personality of contemporary literary force succeeded only by Robert Burns.<sup>3</sup> Well before the contemporary popularity of Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns's vernacular verses, Ulster readers were devouring Alexander Montgomerie's *The Cherrie and the Slae*, printed in Belfast in 1700, and an *Ulster Miscellany* of poetry, published in 1753, contains several early Ulster-Scots poems, published long before Burns's birth.

Although Professor Adams' study presents considerable evidence that Scots vernacular 'dialect' poetry was particularly fashionable in Ulster throughout the eighteenth century, the language was gradually supplanted by the English language of the Ascendancy and, by the nineteenth century, it had

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man: Popular Culture in Ulster 1700-1900*, (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, QUB, 1987), pp. 175-181.

<sup>2</sup> 'Willy Sings "Grizzy's Awa"', *Simple Poems*, pp. 74-76.

<sup>3</sup> Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was very swiftly re-printed in Belfast, in a pirated edition, (James Magee, 1787) after its appearance in Scotland in 1786.

become a rural language of the countryside.<sup>4</sup> Since the vogue of Scots in Irish poetry coincided with the height of Robert Burns's popularity in the 1790s, a period of revolutionary zeitgeist throughout the British isles, the Ulster Scots poets of the 1790s have been irrevocably associated with Burns's legacy:

Ulster-Scots poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been rather dogged by its supposed slavishness to the Scottish bard. True, Burns is an important influence but in poets like Samuel Thomson (1766-1816) and James Orr (1770-1816) we find very distinctive voices, whose critical reception previously as "rhyming weaver poets" has served unfairly to emphasise their supposed bardolatry and obscure their brilliant originality.<sup>5</sup>

Thomson's deep engagement with wider British literary traditions has been obscured in recent years by claims of the Ulster poets' 'unrestrained bardolatry' in relation to Robert Burns.<sup>6</sup> While Scottish critics' recognition of an Ulster vernacular tradition in the 1990s is still warmly welcomed, a new generation of Irish critics, such as Frank Fergusson and Carol Baraniuk, while acknowledging the influence of Scottish literature on Ulster poetry, have challenged the idea of Thomson and Orr's dependence on Robert Burns. Although this chapter focuses on Thomson's participation in what has traditionally been called the 'Scots vernacular tradition',<sup>7</sup> it should be emphasized that the contemporary works from Scotland as a whole played a

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Robinson, *Ulster-Scots: A Grammar of the Traditional Written and Spoken Language* (Belfast: Ullans Press, 2007), pp. 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'Review of *Ulster-Scots Writing: An Anthology*, ed. Frank Ferguson' in *The Innes Review* 61.1 (2010), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, The Catholic Historical Association), p. 104.

<sup>6</sup> Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, p. 226.

<sup>7</sup> This common expression is slightly misleading in its application to the eighteenth-century preoccupation with literature written in the Scots language, since it was a literary version of the spoken language of the Scottish people. Likewise, although Thomson came from a Scots-speaking Irish community, his use of the Ulster dialect of Scots is highly literary, reflected in contrast to his fluid personal letters in standard English.



significant role in his writing. Thomson is notably influenced by the English language writing of Scots like Michael Bruce, whose pastoral poems to the cuckoo inspired Thomson's United Irish allegory, 'To the Cuckoo' (1799), discussed in the following chapter. Thomson also refers in 'The Year in 12 Fits' (1799) to James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1727), and he is notably indebted for his pre-Romantic inspiration by James Beattie's *The Minstrel* (1771 & 1774), notably written in standard English.<sup>8</sup>

This thesis as a whole seeks to provide an alternative conclusion to Thomson the Burns 'bardolator' and, in this chapter, I will re-examine the influence of the Scottish vernacular tradition on Thomson's construction of himself as a bard, as well as his response to this tradition by adopting a variety of stanza forms for his own local Irish context and radical cultural project.

Burns's more politically-radical poetry undoubtedly provided the Irish radical movement with inspiring verses,<sup>9</sup> yet it is misleading to argue that Burns's appeal in Ulster can be traced merely to his political radicalism. The publication of Burns's verses in the Belfast press is contemporaneous with an explosion of interest in national poetry and language, particularly Shakespeare,<sup>10</sup> and the enthusiasm for Burns's work in the wake of his death was moderated by comparisons 'with some of the finest in our language, if we except those of Milton and Shakespeare.'<sup>11</sup> Burns's image as a radical poet was also easily sanitised in the post-Union period, as the editors of the more conservative *Belfast News Letter* edited his biography. Having been an early promoter of Burns's verse in the 1790s radical press, Thomson attempted to

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<sup>8</sup> 'To the Cuckoo' (1797) and 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin, a Pastoral' (1799), Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 157-9; 32-54. See discussion of *The Minstrel* in Chapter Five.

<sup>9</sup> McIlvanney notes that these included 'Bruce's Address to his Troops at Bannockburn' (*Northern Star*, 21-24 October 1796) and 'Is there for honest Poverty' (*Northern Star*, 19-22 October 1795), (p. 232).

<sup>10</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 15-18 Jan. 1796.

<sup>11</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 22-26 Aug. 1796.

reintroduce a controversial Burns love poem into the *Belfast News-Letter* in 1803. This poem, which the *News Letter* entitles 'Love Letter', was a fragment of a poem which James Kinsley titles 'Passion's Cry' (1793).<sup>12</sup> The biographical content on Burns was heavily amended by the *Belfast News Letter*'s editor, in order to emphasise that the poem in question was addressed to Burns's wife Jean rather than to the married subject of an Edinburgh flirtation, Mrs Agnes 'Clarinda' McLehose.<sup>13</sup>

Although John Hewitt emphasised that the Ulster poets had been 'in the same relationship to Burns as he had been to his predecessors' by 'working free-handedly within the same tradition',<sup>14</sup> Irish critics have not always been careful to discourage the Burns imitation myth. Dr. John Gray has contributed much to the biographical study of Thomson, especially in highlighting his ability to challenge Burns in verse. Gray highlighted Thomson's authorship of 'O Scotia's Bard, my muse, alas!' (1795), written as a direct parody of Burns's 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion threat' which was published in the *Northern Star*.<sup>15</sup> However, in his criticism of Thomson's verse tributes to Burns, particularly the 'Elegy on Burns' (1796), Dr Gray was too eager to read the poem as sycophantic panegyric. In fact, most of the poem is written from the perspective of 'thy country's Sad genius' whom Thomson envisions as 'beckon[ing] to Ayr', bewailing the loss of her bard.<sup>16</sup> Thomson imagines Scotland bewailing the loss of her national bard, "Oh Burns! My harmonious child, / My darling, forever, adieu!" Here he is not articulating his own personal

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<sup>12</sup> James Kinsley (ed.), *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; hereafter *Poems and Songs*), II, pp. 709-711. The original manuscript, written in Thomson's hand and submitted to the *Belfast News Letter*, can be found in a miscellaneous collection of poems, some by Thomson, Luke Mullan, and the Hope family, in Trinity College Dublin MS 7252/5.

<sup>13</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 25 June 1802.

<sup>14</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Discussed in detail in the following chapter.

<sup>16</sup> John Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', pp. 320-334.

loss, as Gray argues, but ventriloquising the personified Scotland, and voicing his recognition of Burns as a national, not provincial, bard.<sup>17</sup> A number of Gray's statements, such as 'his entire *raison d'être* and standing depended on Burns,' suggest that he over-estimates Thomson's emotional debt to Burns. Ironically, such phrases reinforce Professor McIlvanney's sweeping assertion that 'all the Ulster poets, to one degree or another, wrote in the style of Burns.'<sup>18</sup> Both critics' pre-occupation with Burns's influence on Irish poetry leads them to neglect the historical antecedents of Thomson's work in an Ulster Scots vernacular tradition, evinced clearly in the example of the *Ulster Miscellany*. Likewise, in his dismissal of Thomson's 'maudlin panegyric overdrive', Gray fails to recognise Thomson's engagement with proto-romantic elegy and Graveyard school poetic antecedents.<sup>19</sup>

In sending a verse epistle to Robert Burns in 1791, Thomson declared both empathy with Burns's promotion of Scots as a medium for poetry, and their shared cultural themes; particularly Burns's satire of the 'the hypocritic [sic] senseless crew' who gather at the kirk.<sup>20</sup> Like Burns, Thomson desired to create a recognisable poetic landscape full of individuals drawn from his own experience, as opposed to the nameless objects of Thomas Gray's poetry who attract the sympathy of a socially-superior speaker. Like many poets of the 1790s, Thomson was influenced by Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), but, as with his use of Scottish stanzas and verse forms, he transformed Gray's landscape through his rustic parody, 'The Roughfort Fair' (1799). In the 'Roughfort Fair' (1799)<sup>21</sup> he satirises Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' (1751) and re-invents the nameless fixtures

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<sup>17</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 174.

<sup>18</sup> *Burns the Radical*, p. 227.

<sup>19</sup> Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p. 331.

<sup>20</sup> 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791) in Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 85-88.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Roughfort Fair' (1799) in Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 96-101.

of Gray's poem as 'rustics behaving badly'. The swain 'plodding his weary way' against Gray's harmonious fading landscape is replaced by Thomson's drunken weaver, tumbling over his linen loom as he 'stagg'ring seeks some private place to puke.' (l. 8) As the loom was a valuable piece of equipment at the centre of the weaving economy, Thomson's drunken 'wabster' certainly does not advocate the respectful toil found in Gray's poem.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent verses in Thomson's Epistle to Burns praise 'The Twa Dogs' and 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' (1785), both of which pay tribute to the labouring class poor. According to Thomson, the latter poem 'fairly tak's the shine' (l. 40), revealing his justifiable delight with Burns's rehabilitation of the labouring class Presbyterian patriarch in the poem which 'regrounds [the Spenserian stanza] in Protestant culture.'<sup>23</sup> Though Thomson admired Burns's literary vision, he was confident enough to challenge Burns's representation of the lower classes in the landscape, offering his own perspectives on rural life in the North of Ireland, creating a space for a more conservative Presbyterian culture. Thomson might, therefore, be seen to revise Burns's representation of the community, as opposed to merely echoing or imitating.

In addressing Robert Burns in a Scots verse epistle, Thomson appears to have identified that Burns was contributing to a zeitgeist of distinctively Scottish poetry that had not been equalled since 'Allan Ramsay blythly ranted'; although he notes elsewhere that the short career of 'Thrice famous [Robert] Fergusson' showed the potential of Scottish poetry.<sup>24</sup> Thomson cited Burns as the epitome of contemporary Scottish poetry, the 'Sweet Scottish Bard' (l. 1)

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<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Orr, '1798, Before and Beyond: Samuel Thomson and the Poetics of Ulster Scots Identity' in Frank Ferguson & Andrew R. Holmes, *Revising Robert Burns and Ulster: Literature, religion and politics c. 1770-1920*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009; hereafter '1798, Before and Beyond'), pp. 106-126.

<sup>23</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'The Ordination', a paper delivered at the Mitchell Library, 13 May 2009. Dr Carruthers refers to the poem's reception in the context of 'long-standing cultural coinage of Presbyterianism as uncultured, as something to be scoffed at by the English and by Scottish Episcopalians for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.'

<sup>24</sup> 'Second Epistle to Luke Mullan (1791), in Samuel Thomson, *Poems*, p.93.

who ‘deserves to wear the bays’ (l. 4), a line which the Victorian Ulster poet Robert Huddleston echoed in his own tribute to Thomson, “‘but still the bay my Thompson [sic] wears’ (‘, l. 128).<sup>25</sup> A second example of an apparent Ramsay-Fergusson-Burns tradition is implied in the citation of the laurel image, a key example of which features in *The Laurel Disputed* (1791),<sup>26</sup> a poem by the Renfrewshire bard Alexander Wilson which envisages a poetic contest between Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson:

Allan, I own, may show far mair o’art,  
 Rob pours at once his raptures on the heart;  
 [...]
 In Allan’s verse, sage sleekness we admire,  
 In Rob’s, the glow of fancy and of fire [...] (ll. 216-222)

Wilson, the third Scottish poet and creator of the fictional scenario, effectively enters into this competition as a third element, simultaneously paying tribute to his predecessors and writing himself into their creative legacy. Thomson’s accolade for Burns of ‘bard’, instead of ‘minstrel’ for example, implies a deep responsibility on Burns’s part to compose poetry that contributes to the Scottish sense of national identity. In writing a poetic tribute to Burns, Thomson was not merely flattering but also indicating his own sense of legitimacy to compose poetry as Burns’s Irish bardic counterpart. Huddleston likewise used the example of Thomson as a mirror for his own poetic career, much in the same way as Burns used the memory of Fergusson and imbued it with self-reflective references to Edinburgh’s neglect of her poets.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Elegy to [...] Thompson’, line 128, in Huddleston, *A Collection*, pp. 107-114.

<sup>26</sup> ‘The Laurel Disputed’ (1791) in *The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson*, 2 vols, ed. The Reverend Alexander P. Grosart, (Paisley: printed by Alex. Gardner, 1876), II, pp. 17-23, (p. 23).

<sup>27</sup> See Burns’s elegies on the death of Robert Fergusson: ‘Epitaph. Here lies Robert Fergusson, Poet’ (1787), and ‘On Fergusson’ (1787), *Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley, I, pp. 322-333.s

Thomson recognised himself as a hybrid product of a Dissenting Irish culture, referring to Scotland as the land ‘where our forefathers had their homes’,<sup>28</sup> and by claiming this heritage he was consciously identifying with self-improvement, literacy, and the Enlightenment philosophy of the Scottish Universities, exemplified by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), the Ulster-born Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow.<sup>29</sup> Yet the inspiration of the Enlightenment was tempered by Romantic interest in the language of the common people, which in Thomson’s case was the vernacular Scots diction which he mixed among his English language poetry. Thomson’s choice of a ‘hame-bred’ muse dressed ‘in costume Scotch o’er bog and park’<sup>30</sup> was a pragmatic choice that went beyond mere linguistics, referring to a distinctly Irish inspiration expressed not only through vernacular language, but through verse forms such as the Standard Habbie and Christis Kirk stanzas, which had by Burns’s time become staples for vernacular verses.

Thomson’s decision to place the Ulster-Scots vernacular so centrally in his debut volume, *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793), was both a ‘cultural declaration of independence’<sup>31</sup> and an attempt to capitalise on Burns’s bardic vocation as poet of Scotland. One of Thomson’s earliest published poems in the Belfast newspapers, ‘The Simmer Fair’ (1792), discussed below, includes a subtitle ‘in the manner of Burns’<sup>32</sup> which has often been read as a blatant intention to imitate, but it is not clear if the ‘manner’ refers to a choice of similar linguistic form, stanza form, subject matter, or a combination of three.

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<sup>28</sup> ‘To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton, with a copy of the author’s poems’ (1806), line 2, *Simple Poems*, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Elaine MacFarlane, *Ireland and Scotland in the Age of Revolution*, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> ‘To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton, with a copy of the author’s poems’ (1806), ll. 23-4, *Simple Poems*, p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Ivan Herbison, *Language, Literature and Cultural Identity*, (Ballymena: Dunclog Press, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Northern Star*, 1 Sep. 1792.

Thomson had to be confident that it would appeal to his readership both local and national, seeking to strike a balance between realism and literary convention. Burns's depiction of Ayrshire folk culture included many recognisable scenes from life in County Antrim, particularly those relating to the Presbyterian religious politics and the culture of holy fairs. Thomson had been brought up in Lyle Hill Seceding congregation, which was not only the first Seceder congregation to be established in Ireland, but it enjoyed a particularly close links with Scotland. The congregation had broken away from the Synod of Ulster in 1745 and issued a call to the Scottish minister Isaac Patton to lead them. Thomson was brought up in this independent, theologically-conservative strain of Presbyterianism, marked by Patton's politically-radical rhetoric, calling for 'for the purging of the blood that lay unpurged, on the throne of Britain.'<sup>33</sup>

Thomson's use of Scots was not simply restricted to popular, comedic popular set pieces, set in a communal rural setting—too hastily attributed by some to imitation of Robert Burns—but also addressed more serious issues: philosophical, the sentimental, and the national. 'The Simmer Fair' (1792)<sup>34</sup> was published in the Northern Star newspaper on 1 September 1792, and was composed in the Scottish Christis Kirk verse form:

T'inspire the bardie at this time,  
                   Apollo be't thy care,                   [*Apollo, let it be your duty*  
 That he in Norland, measured rhyme,  
                   May sing the *Simmer-fair*;  
 Whar monie folks together hie,                   [*Many people take*  
                   *the road*  
                   Baith married anes an' single,  
 Auld age and youth, wife, man an' boy  
                   A' hobbling intermingle

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<sup>33</sup> Isaac Patton quoted by James Hope in 'Memoir of James Hope' in R.R Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*, (J. Duffy: 1846), p. 226.

<sup>34</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 26-31.

In crowds this day. (ll. 10-18)

Thomson shared with Fergusson, Ramsay's successor in the Scots vernacular revival, an enjoyment of revelry, moderated by a distrust of urbane luxury. Burns, raised as a Calvinist Presbyterian in Ayrshire, used the stanza to satirize the ineffectuality of the fanatical and moderate wings of his Presbyterian religion in 'The Holy Fair' (1786). Thomson, writing 'The Simmer Fair' within five years of Burns's poem, takes the stanza back to an earlier manifestation and adds his own particular Enlightened moral emphasis on it; on one hand, arguing that individuals must exercise freedom of choice while, on the other, ensuring that the pendulum has not swung too far by emphasising the real and dangerous consequences of giving in to luxury and excess. It is noteworthy that the scene of the poem is distinctively Irish, situated 'on auld Hibernia's northern side' (l. 1), but Thomson's use of Scots was an appropriate choice of expression for his Antrim fair-going characters, reflecting the 1838 Ordnance Survey findings regarding the Antrim people that 'Their accent idioms and phraseology are strictly and disagreeably Scottish partaking only of the broad and coarse accent and dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland.'<sup>35</sup>

Although the poem is marketed 'in the manner of Burns', Thomson shows the influence of the tradition's roots in Allan Ramsay in his *Christ's-kirk on the Green* (1718), itself a reworking of an original Christis Kirk medieval poem attributed to James I, *Peeblis to the Play*. In this way, Thomson attempted boldly to write the latest poem in a distinctly Scottish tradition, trading on an assumed knowledge of Christis Kirk among his readership, and giving it a new Irish setting. The opening stanzas present the reader with figures not untypical of *Peeblis to the Play* including the communal, festive scene with

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<sup>35</sup> A. Day, P. McWilliams and N. Dobson, (eds), *OSM*, p. [?]



a distanced narrator.<sup>36</sup> Carol Baraniuk emphasises that Thomson has clearly transferred the setting to Ireland, commenting that he ‘handles the form with ease’, and ‘in a sense, returns to the genre’s roots, energetically recording a peasant’s outing to the the fair.’<sup>37</sup> However, her conclusion that Thomson, unlike Burns, ‘is content to compose a traditional *Christis Kirk* poem’ which is ‘fairly unadventurous [...] and does not attempt anything approaching the sophistication of Burns’s religious satire in “The Holy Fair”’ invites some qualification.<sup>38</sup> As will be demonstrated below and in the following chapter, Samuel Thomson turns the *Christis Kirk* stanza to a variety of themes, including a coded political fable and a controversial address to his landlord, Lord Templeton. Even within this early poem, the subsequent stanzas of ‘The Simmer Fair’ leave little room for literary idealisation; Thomson’s poem is perhaps less sentimental than it is snobbish in that it satirizes the tendency towards loutishness that accompanied the mixing of the labouring classes at such events, with a particular jibe at the weaving community highlighted by his reference to being ‘threatened within an inch of his life for introducing the weavers of T—p—k into The Simmer Fair.’<sup>39</sup> There are also several anti-Whig sentiments expressed against the ‘coaxin’ trash’ of the city pedlars, who often tricked women and children into buying their goods.

Thomson inserts references to real people in his community, reflecting on the fact that the traditional subject matter of the *Christis Kirk* form has real relevance for the community in which he lives. Thomson therefore makes the stanza his own and plants it in the tradition of his own community. The attendees may be well dressed, but the narrator undercuts them with a dramatic

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<sup>36</sup> Allan MacLaine (ed.), *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots Poems of folk festivity*, (Glasgow : Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1996), introduction.

<sup>37</sup> Baraniuk, “as native in my rhought”, p. 223.

<sup>38</sup> Baraniuk, p. 226.

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Country Dance’, *Poems*, p. 63.

account of a weaver and cobbler coming to blows, developing into an irresistible community scrum where ‘monie a ane, for ither’s cause, / gets bouk an banes weel paiked.’<sup>40</sup> The scene is made distinctly humorous by Thomson’s capture of dialect as the combatant declares, ‘Your poor, insipid worthless bouk<sup>41</sup> / shall in yon gutter spraul!’

But hark! A wabster on the brig,  
Some how displeased a suttor  
Wha takes him in the wame a dig  
An ca’s him “creeshy bluttor”...  
(55-58)

The cobbler’s insult to the weaver of ‘greasy fool’ is reminiscent of Allan Ramsay’s *Elegy on Patie Birnie* (1721),

He caught a crishy Webster loun  
At rankling o’ his deary’s gown,  
And wi’ a rung came o’er his crown,  
For being there;  
But starker thrums got Patie down,  
And knoost him sair.  
(67-72)

Yet while drawing on Ramsay and Burns, Thomson also challenges his Scottish forebears in both humour and seriousness. In recounting the flirtations of couples in the tavern, Thomson abruptly undercuts the list of local names, ‘Much yet remains unsung, I swear, / right monie odd relations, / Descriptions that wad tire your ear, / And far outreach your patience,’ (118-121) which it is tempting to read as a jibe against Robert Burns for his countless stanzas in ‘Hallowe’en’ (1785)<sup>42</sup> recounting his characters’ various encounters with the Deil. He employs a similar technique in ‘The Country Dance’ (1793) which

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<sup>40</sup> ‘And many a one for another’s cause gets body and bones well thrashed’

<sup>41</sup> ‘body’

<sup>42</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, I, pp. 152-163.

appears to complement Burns for his ‘bonie silken stile’ which allows ‘Description [to] flow at will, / In numbers smooth as oil’, but Thomson declines to follow in his footsteps, apologizing to the reader, ‘But here I’ll ask my reader’s leave’ to offer instead a moral against fornication.

Thomson’s rendering of the Christis Kirk stanza in a real historical setting is heightened when we consider the historical context of Templepatrick’s fair days. Thomson’s advertisement of ‘The Simmer Fair’ identified that it was ‘in the manner of Burns’,<sup>43</sup> but a contemporary account demonstrates that holy fairs were not simply Burnsian literary models, but summer sacraments known as the Lyle Fair, held by Thomson’s own minister, the Reverend Patton, where two ministers preached at either end of the green and ‘tents, for all kinds of refreshments, were erected on the sides of the neighbouring highway: and drunkenness and folly profaned the day of rest.’<sup>44</sup>

Though Thomson may have recognised the truth in Burns’s imaginative account of sacramental events, he has no intention of following Burns’s mode of religious satire. Baraniuk identifies Thomson’s building up of excess upon excess, moving from a fight scene to the alehouse, but the ‘easy-going acceptance of drunkenness, violence and extra-marital sex’ that she identifies in the ‘perfect conclusion [...] of a spot of hogmagandie’<sup>45</sup> is deliberately supplanted by an abrupt and dark ending, which describes the result of fornication on one young woman: ‘But some I wat at nine month’s end, / Wi’ hopeless dole an’ care, / when geer’s a wrang, that winna mend/ shall min’ the Simmer Fair, / An’ curse that day.’ (ll. 149-153) In this sense, by comparison with Burns’s ‘The Holy Fair’, Thomson’s poem is more radically realistic and concerned with human suffering, in that it acknowledges the reality of the

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<sup>43</sup> *Northern Star*, 1 September 1792.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Montgomery, ‘Outlines of the History of Presbyterianism in Ireland’, *The Irish Unitarian and Bible Christian*, 2 (1947; hereafter ‘Outlines’), p. 231.

<sup>45</sup> Baraniuk, p. 226.

descent into excess. By comparison, Burns's narrator of 'The Holy Fair' states that the festivities 'May end in Houghmagandie' but it is reserved for 'some ither day', rather than something which is actualized or has disastrous consequences for the human beings involved.<sup>46</sup>

It could therefore be argued that Thomson's poem is not designed as an entertaining and affectionate community portrayal and, in choosing not to follow Burns's development of the genre in 'The Holy Fair', he instead focuses on a serious warning to uneducated, young women not to be beguiled by men. He upbraids Burns for his light-hearted attitude to the abuse of the sacramental, and, rather than returning the stanza to a more traditional subject-matter, he is revising the 'tradition' within the context of 'orthodox' Irish Presbyterian religious belief and practice. Thomson sows the seed of the Christis Kirk stanza in an Irish context, which he would later develop for Irish political purposes in the 'The Hawk and the Weasel' (1796), discussed below.

If 'The Simmer Fair' might be read as part a poetic exercise in proving his mettle on a par with Burns, Thomson takes his poetic agenda further by creating a Christis Kirk poem specifically for the local dance at Habbie's barn in Templepatrick with embedded references to the contemporary Irish political situation. 'The Country Dance' (1793)<sup>47</sup> which, adhering more loosely to its Christis Kirk verse form than in 'The Simmer Fair', is a glorious celebration of a Presbyterian community at play. Having referenced his friends, Luke Mullan and Jack Williamson, the poet invokes a further fraternal reference in his positive appraisal of Burns's sentiments, adding a stanza from the 'Epistle to James Smith' (1786) as his header quotation, 'ye douce folk that live by rule [...] your hearts are just a standing pool, / Your lives, a dyke!' Having jibed the threatening weavers, the poet promises to 'drap the silly theme at ance' and

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<sup>46</sup> 'The Holy Fair' (1785), ll. 242-3, *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; henceforward, *Poems and Songs*), I, p. 129-137.

<sup>47</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 63-9.

return to a more traditional description that will please ‘the merry maids an’ swains’ (ll. 14-15), borrowing a reference from Thomas Gray and rendering it in Scots: ‘Aurora fair had quat the plain’ (l. 19). Thomson’s poem is not to be a scene of rustic simplicity and ‘useful toil’; the rustics gather at Habbie’s public house to dance and to forget about the daily toil, ‘A few short hours to ease their min’ / O warl’y moil an’ care’ (ll. 25-26).

Thomson’s image of the villagers ‘scourin’ down the dykes’ (l. 28) deliberately tramples underfoot the Burnsian image of the ‘douce fok who live by rule’ in the poem’s epitaph. Tonight there is no stultified, puritan, monoculture in this Irish Presbyterian townland but instead, an air of excitement, conveyed in his description of the scurrying masses, who frighten the livestock and cause the dogs to bark. The image of ‘their as hearts light as corkwood’ (l. 33) echoes Allan Ramsay’s cosmic description of Phoebus’s head in *The Vision* (1724), which is ‘licht as cork’ (l. 254).<sup>48</sup> The image of ‘corkwood’ is then skilfully rhymed with the middle Scots expression ‘stark-wood’, to convey the extremes of insanity displayed by the masses. Using Ulster-Scots vocabulary, Thomson’s poem creates an atmosphere of familiarity and immortalizes the entertainment that his ‘*rural group*’ (l. 37) enjoys, such as ‘hap-step-an’-loup’ (l. 39) before the fiddler summons the ‘*halewar*’ (l. 42) or the ‘whole group’ to dance. All strands of humour among the participants are encapsulated here from those who ‘are come to crack an’ joke, / An’ toy among the lasses’ (ll. 55-56) to those ‘as thrawn wi’ spleen an’ scorn / As they’d been fed on curses’ (ll. 61-62). The distanced narrator will not be drawn into the action and is unconvinced of female propriety as his ‘maidens muster a’ their airs’ (l. 66), implying a dangerous artifice. As he observes the dancing bodies carefully, the narrator forewarns the reader, in no uncertain terms, of trouble to come:

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<sup>48</sup> A.M Kinghorn and A. Law (eds), *Poems by Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson*, 6 vols, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1974), III, pp. 80-95.

Ah! simple young things, ay beware  
O' lurking INCLINATION!  
The clergy say, whan hobblin' there,  
Ye're wabblin' temptation  
To ane anither. (ll. 69-72)

From this point on, the action becomes sexualized, as ‘Lads nimbly ply’d their rustic heels, / An’ maidens pegh’d an’ panted –’ (ll. 75-6) and the usual coupling process is in full swing, as ‘Willy in the neuk unseen / Kiss’d *Meg* as sweet as honey’ (ll. 79-80). The crescendo of excitement witnessed by the narrator gives way to a political ejaculation from poet himself:

Kings may roll in state, an' Lords  
 Enjoy their ill-got treasures;  
 Compar'd to this their wealth affords  
 But superficial pleasures,  
 Such happiness with pomp an' prise,  
 Is seldom ever seen,  
 As here with rural swains abide,  
 In countra' barns at e'en,  
 On sic a night. (ll. 82-90)

The historical context of ‘The Country Dance’ lies in the kindling revolutionary period in Irish politics, following the success of the French Revolution. As so often with Thomson’s deft ability to mask his politics, this stanza, slipped in to a traditional Christis Kirk poem, alters the poem’s significance entirely toward political commentary. Thomson is anything but a poet imitating his Scottish forebears; he manipulates the Scottish stanza form for Ireland’s revolutionary concerns, particularly the United Irishmen’s challenge to tyrannical monarchy and the Protestant Ascendancy landlords.

The next stanza reveals another strand of the poet's agenda. He goes on to relate the tragic tale of 'Poor simple Maggy' (l. 102), possibly the 'Meg as sweet as honey' mentioned earlier, who is taken advantage of sexually by 'Dick, that squintin' (l. 10) black-guard'. As the reference to 'Squintin' Dick comes after coded allusions to Thomson's friends Jack and Luke, and the

Templepatrick weavers'; it is possible that 'The Country Dance' may have served, in part, to prick the conscience of the offender, or at least to allude to their activities among a knowing readership. Even if this is not the case, the character Dick serves as a type, highlighting the fact that mentally-handicapped, vulnerable girls in the community had been taken advantage of by men.

Thomson was not a religious pedant; rather, he saw it as a moral, bardic duty to highlight the dangers of excess, pointing out that women may enjoy dancing and flirtation, there are real, physical consequences involved for them if they are seduced. As the narrator flashes forward nine months, we see a pitiful picture of Maggy, the eighteenth-century equivalent of a working single mother, rocking her baby to sleep while she spins. The Scots words provide a sense of understatement which offsets the sentimentality: Maggy is 'the scoff o' ilka chiel, / Forgrutten pale an' shabby', the full emphasis of which is that she is 'derided by every fool' and 'woebegone with weeping'. The narrator warns his female audience in their own tongue not to trust themselves to the company of any man who talks of '*strae* or *bourtray neuks alane*'.<sup>49</sup> The conflation of the political and the moral in Thomson's poem becomes clear in the final stanza as the narrator comments, 'Here, far remov'd from city's strife, / With pleasure gilds the shepherd's life', making clear that the joys of the Country Dance are but a covering on or façade of what is a harsh and exploitative existence with constant 'fear of skaith' or injury. Thomson skilfully manipulates the traditional celebration of excess in the Christis Kirk stanza both to capture the reader's imagination and sympathy for characters like the young single mother Maggy, and, through his strong authorial presence, infuses a sense of political and moral realism into the Christis Kirk form.

It is in the radical political context that Thomson takes the Christis Kirk stanza far beyond its traditional use, in order to pass political comment on

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<sup>49</sup> Straw or secluded spots in the yew trees.

Ireland's constitutional position. In his Scots poems, however, Thomson demonstrated greater subtlety and skill within the Christis Kirk form, but his choice of language and the ode form in poems like 'To a Hedge-hog' (1799)<sup>50</sup> has inevitably, though unfairly, added further to the myth of bardolatry. More significantly, he demonstrated the ability to accommodate a sense of political ambivalence. The poet often plays upon the more ancient meanings of Scots words, often resulting in double-entendre, trusting to the knowing reader to interpret the poem. His poem 'The Hawk and the Weasel, a Fable' (1796) was printed in the *Northern Star*,<sup>51</sup> and republished as 'The Hawk and the Weazel' in *New Poems* (1799) in a slightly edited version.<sup>52</sup> The poem is a very unusual version of the Christis Kirk stanza used by his Scottish poetic predecessors. Rather than celebrating a community scene, the poem appears to be a classic moral tale against wishing ill on one's neighbour. Yet the poem contains a subtext that is more radical still, which in the context of his masterpiece 'To a Hedge-Hog', shows Thomson's discovery of his skill in this genre for covert political writing. The choice and timing of publication, of 1796, anonymously under the place name 'Lyle' in the *Northern Star*, suggests that the poem was intended not as a simple morality tale against gossip but to follow in the tradition of the radical publication *Politics for the People* (1794-5) in which animal fables such as 'The Frog's Concern, a Fable' were frequently deployed on the front cover of *Hog's Wash* in order to set a critical tone against monarchical misgovernance.<sup>53</sup>

By virtue of its genre, the beast fable requires of its reader the ability to decode several layers of meaning. When one scratches the surface of

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<sup>50</sup> 'To a Hedge-hog' is discussed at length in the following chapter.

<sup>51</sup> *Northern Star*, 7-10 March, 1796.

<sup>52</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>53</sup> *Politics for the People, or a salmagundy for swine*, 2 vols, vol. 1, no. 3, (London: printed for D. I. Easton, 1794-5' hereafter *Politics for the People*), pp. 25



Thomson's poem 'The Hawk and the Weazel' (1796), it becomes evident that it is a deeply subversive poem, turning the idea of natural order on its head. The poem opens as the female heroine Lizzie 'hie'd' to town on business one day and spots a strange creature by a 'cairn' playing on 'the heath beskirted green' (l. 5). The Tory Humanist ideal of beauty misplaced that underpins poems like Robert Fergusson's 'On Seeing a Butterfly in the Street' is subverted by Thomson. Rather than expressing concern for a beautiful pastoral creature in a hostile setting, Thomson celebrates the right of the outwardly ugly and crafty weasel, mistaken by the girl for the devil, to defend its right to freedom in its native landscape. Pastoral disharmony and an ugly side of mother nature is shown up as the misunderstood weasel is subjected to an assault by a physically superior bird of prey. The poem is an early manifestation of the common motif of deceptive outward appearances in Thomson's poetry, often represented by an underdog or despised creature who gets the better of a physically stronger aggressor.<sup>54</sup> The position of the creature 'sportin at a cairn' (l. 4), a pyramid of stones to mark the burial place of the dead, suggests that the creature is dancing on graves and Lizzie at first mistakes the cunning creature for 'the Diel ... at freaks' (l. 9). However, our narrator tells us that it is merely a 'whiteret' or weasel playing 'wi' monie a wheel', freely sporting about its native landscape. Lizzie witnesses the weasel snatched up into the air by a passing 'gled', or kite, but before she knows it, the bird, now described as a 'goss' (goshawk) falls from the sky, with severed throat: 'his thrapple ate in twa' by the weasel (l. 17). The Scots word 'thrapple' can mean either 'throat' or 'windpipe', as in 'The Simmer Fair' (1792) where Thomson's cobbler grabs the weaver by the 'hairy thrapple'; but it can also mean 'laugh', implying that the bird of prey is a gluttonous rascal whose laugh at the expense of his prey is literally cut short.

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<sup>54</sup> The following chapter discusses how this theme is developed further in *New Poems* (1799) through the preface which invites the reader to examine the poet's cottage carefully 'for here no treason lurks' and finds its most critically acclaimed icon in the 'rougher subject' of the hedgehog in 'To a Hedgehog' (1799).

The final stanza of Thomson's poem now describes the bird as a 'hawk', alluding to the bird's unnatural ability to adopt a number of threatening guises, a clear signal of allegory. The reader is encouraged to question who or what is represented by the bird of prey? The struggle between liberty represented by the weasel and despotism embodied in the hawk appears to play on the millenarian subculture that had grown up among politically-radical Covenanters and Calvinists who often believed that the French Revolution portended to the downfall of the powerful Antichrist and the end of time. Thomson's political poetry was characteristically too subtle to specifically reference millenarianism, but he may have noted that the editors of the *Northern Star*, the publication to which he contributed, occasionally pragmatically suspended the newspaper's rational radical agenda to appeal to millenarian audiences.<sup>55</sup> The bird of prey is an especially prevalent image in Thomson's poetry; the 'Epistle to James Glass' (1797) identifies the more economically-powerful classes as 'These buzzards o' the creation / Wha chasin' modest merit still, / Frae shore to shore, frae hill to hill / Extend their devastation.'<sup>56</sup> The radical significance of the weasel's victory over a gentrified or bourgeois aggressor would not have been a moral lost on the *Northern Star* readership:

The weazle aff in triumph walks,  
                   An' left the bloodless glutton,  
 A warning sad to future hawks  
                   That grien for weazel's mutton.  
 So reprobates, that spitefu' cross,  
                   Decree their nibour's ruin,  
 Are aften forc'd, like foolish goss,  
                   To drink o' their ain brewin',  
 Wha says its wrang.<sup>57</sup>                   (ll. 19-27)

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<sup>55</sup> David Hempton & Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890*, (London: Routledge, 1992; hereafter *Evangelical Protestantism*), p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> 'Epistle to the Reverend James Glass A.M' (1797), lines 17-20, *New Poems*, pp.150-153.

<sup>57</sup> When the poem appeared in his second volume of 1799, Thomson amended the final line to 'And just it is', (*New Poems*, p. 213).

The devilish guise of the weasel is misleading and although the bird of prey appears to make a successful abduction, its ruin lies ‘halfway at the sky’ (l. 13), at the height of its success. In a scene reminiscent of the socially inferior *sans-culottes* beheading King Louis XVI, the weasel beheads the aggressor, subverting the ‘natural order’ in a bid to control its own destiny. The Scots word ‘gled’ means both kite and ‘one of greedy disposition’,<sup>58</sup> rendering the final stanza’s comparison of the gled to those who ‘dicree their nibour’s ruin’ (l. 24), reminiscent of Britain’s attempts to control Ireland economically by sanctioning her exports. It is possible that Thomson intended the fable to be a general warning to any power that directed its foreign policy against a weaker nation, thus implying criticism of France’s turn toward the Terror, and thereby presenting the poem’s audience with an alternative view to the *Northern Star* editors’ passionate commentary on the ‘tyrannical’ British war against France. Not only could the fable be turned to political devices but it could offer a multiplicity of potential interpretations to cover the bard’s liability, or indeed encourage the readership to revise their assumptions about good and evil in *realpolitik*. The poem remains one of the most sophisticated uses of the Christis Kirk stanza which, as the following chapter discusses, Thomson would go on to use the stanza in a spirited address to the local landlord.

At the time of composing these early poems, Thomson was a dedicated reader of the Belfast radical press, particularly patriotic verse in the pages of the *Northern Star*. While Belfast patriots were encouraging the revival of Irish music through the harp festivals, the promotion of the Scots tradition could have been a further string to the bow of the United Irish project of cultural nationalism, a tradition to which Thomson was ready to contribute. The bardic persona that permeates Thomson’s early work can be traced back further than

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<sup>58</sup> Dictionary of the Scots Language, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk>, accessed 14 October 2010.

Burns to the influence of Robert Fergusson's own celebration of Scottish cultural elements. 'Jamie's Drone' (1793)<sup>59</sup> celebrates the 'melting sounds' and 'heavenly airs [that] 'Twould make a priest forego his prayers' (ll. 9-11) of a home-grown musician, apparently personally known to Thomson, and presents a challenge to the idea of what constitutes home-grown national music and, by implication, national identity. The poem demands the reader's attention, 'Attention lend, ye rural train', (l. 1) as he sends forth his poem in 'hame-spun, knotty verse' (l. 4), an appropriately earthy form for his audience.

The poem plays with the reader's expectations by drawing on the familiar language of Robert Fergusson's 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music' (1772), forming an answer to the idea implied in Fergusson's poem that traditional, national music was being replaced by fashionable, continental forms. He begins by echoing Fergusson's complaints against the 'crabbit queer variety / Of sound fresh sprung from Italy', the 'bastard breed' of Italianate song,<sup>60</sup>

Then why to Italy ye gents?  
 'Tis barefac'd like, and e'en a shame,  
 'Mang beardless loons to waste our rents,  
 When better music's had at hame. (ll. 13-16)

Unlike Fergusson's poem, 'Jamie's Drone' is not a lament for national music but, rather, quite the opposite. Writing for the *Northern Star* during the wake of the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, Thomson was aware of efforts to establish an Irish national musical history. By declaring Jamie's talent superlative in comparison to the most eminent Irish and Scottish traditional musicians, Thomson immortalizes the names of these local fiddlers and pipers in verse

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<sup>59</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, p. 54-56.

<sup>60</sup> 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music', lines 51-52, *Robert Fergusson: Selected Poems*, ed. James Robertson. (2007, Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000; hereafter *Selected Poems*), p. 58.

without any reference to continental music, described in Thomson's favourite Fergussonian phrase, as 'anti-melody' (l. 15):

McLaughlin \* now may spare his brags  
 An' that he's cow'd may frankly own:  
 McDonnell† too, may slit his bags,  
 An' bing sou-la to Jamie's drone.

(ll. 17-20)

While he satirizes their individual quirks, Thomson immortalizes five individual musicians of local importance.

Just as Fergusson eulogizes Scots music 'in hamely weed' (l. 4) and answers Mr J.S.'s Epistle 'in hamespun rhyme',<sup>61</sup> Thomson celebrates Jamie's drone in 'hame-spun, knotty verse' but the implication of Thomson's poem is that he reads more into Fergusson's meaning than what he implies at face-value. Fergusson may appear to criticise Italianized musical fashion for supplanting Scottish traditional melodies but Douglas Dunn identifies the repeated refrain 'dead', rhymed eleven times, as a 'tongue-in-cheek deliberation of mock mode as much as plagency pressed from the demise of Scots music.'<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Thomson's argument that 'ye Fiddlers, Pipers a', / Or Highland bred or Irish fellows, / Maun ever dare to cheep or bla' / But break your bows an' burns your bellows' (ll. 37-40) is not an argument against traditional music, but rather an assertion that modernization of the traditional is not necessarily a negative process. National music is not dead because 'this British Pan \* of modern days' (l. 38) is keeping it alive, rendering the 'bards exulting cra' / bout Orpheus, and Eolian Harps' (ll. 5-6) unnecessary in the wake of enthusiasm for a 'modern' form of music. The 'airy screed o' Jamie's drone' (l. 48) immediately invokes Fergusson's reference to Highland '*pibrachs* skreed' (l.

<sup>61</sup> 'Answer to Mr J. S.'s Epistle', line 22, *Robert Fergusson*, ed. Robertson, p. 74.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas Dunn, 'Auld Brecks and Daft Days' in Robert Crawford (ed.), *Heaven-taught Fergusson: Robert Burns's favourite Scottish Poet*, (Tuckwell Press, East Linton: 2003; hereafter *Heaven-taught Fergusson*), p. 53.

34) but, by contrast, Thomson's reference explaining that 'the hero of the Poem was an Englishman,' effectively removes music from this national paradigm, suggesting that Jamie's national origin by no means impairs him from playing good 'rustic' music. In addition to promoting the career of a fellow artist, 'moder' Jamie' the piper, perhaps Thomson felt that the new definition of Irish music was too prescriptive. In 'Jamie's Drone', Thomson appears to be resisting the conservative antiquarian attitude toward traditional national music, arguing that the rustic lovers of music (of whom he is a representative) do not need to hold to a purist idea of national music, but rather, they desire to enter into dialogue with the modern era.

'Elegy on R— I—' (1793)<sup>63</sup> is a double-edged poem of celebration and satire, both immortalising a leading figure in traditional music, while censuring the religious hypocrisy of certain community members. Robin/Rab, was evidently a much-beloved social character whose fame was solidified by the public service he offered in his fiddling music. Thomson does not spare the reader the physical detail of the fate the befalls the dead piper, comparing his lively presence while alive, to the grave; and in doing so, capitalizes on the potential of the Habbie stanza's final tetrameter to facilitate a sting in the tail, masked by the lilting skip of the rhythm:

Poor Rab, that erst was heard to play  
 Wi' lively screed,  
 Is ruthless flung to worms a prey  
 Among the dead! (ll. 9-12)

Here Thomson maximizes on a strain of Ulster-Scots black humour that employs rhetorical advantage in satirising the discomfort of the audience which, in some case, is composed of outsiders. He is aware of the potential of poetic form to create a distinguishable attitude of speaker to audience; in this case, the poet is aware of the horror that mixing high and low tones, amplified by the

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<sup>63</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 23-25.

Habbie stanza's skipping rhythm, would likely excite in the 'Northern lasses' (l. 7) addressed.

As Thomson's describes Rab's fiddle playing, the accelerating rhythm of the stanza speeds along with the dance, mirrored in the 'clatter' of the Presbyterian community, who level their moral judgements against Rab.

Thomson's sarcasm is audible in the exclamatory 'O fye!' as he assures the concerned Sabbath-keepers, described contemptuously as the 'cantin' core' (l. 64), that they need not fear, 'now pithless lies that artfu' arm / That taught the nice extended thairm, / Wi' music's silver magic charm, / to thrill sae clear' (ll. 55-58), suggesting that the joy brought to young and old far surpassed the odd indiscretion of playing for money on the Sabbath. The poet silences the critics in the final stanza, 'He's dead an' burry'd! – let him lie' (ll. 61), and to allow God to deal with any aspects of 'misconduct' (l. 62). Thomson's final line echoes the voices of those who are keen to judge Rab but, by the same token, he manipulates the traditional elegiac end note which reminds the audience of their own mortality, 'He has an awfu' judge on high / To come before!' (ll. 65-66). The moral of the elegy has a biblical flavour, playing the Templepatrick 'cantin' core' at their own game, warning them to 'judge not that ye be not judged'.<sup>64</sup>

Burnsian satire of religious hypocrisy was particularly resonant in the North of Ireland, where disputes within the Scottish church were taken up with equal, and sometimes greater, fervour. Thomson's privileged reception in 1797 of a dictated manuscript of Burns's 'Holy Willie's Prayer' (1785) revealed to him a more radical side of Burns's religious satire.<sup>65</sup> Although Thomson and Kemp were unsuccessful in their attempts to have the fragment published in the Belfast newspapers, the fragment appears to have influenced Thomson's own

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew 7:1 (KJV), *Bible Gateway*, < <http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/King-James-Version-KJV-Bible/>>, [accessed 20/11/2010].

<sup>65</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 17 Dec. 1797, TCD MS 7257, fol. 43.





The cheek o' youth;  
 And gars fause preachers aften rive,    [*causes; attack*  
 And hide the truth.

Thomson's speaker not only condemns himself but shifts into standard register, to remark more generally on how those oppressed by the rich still hold their oppressors up as role models:

The fact is plain to half-shut eyes,  
 However some their minds disguise;  
 The wealthy man all ranks do prize  
                   As meritorious,  
 And equally the poor despise,  
                   As base inglorious.    (ll. 31-6)

The implication is that the poor are conditioned to despise *themselves* and that all ranks secretly aspire to the rich man's status.

Thomson's own frustration with his status as an impoverished poet finds its voice in at this point as the speaker comments that if a 'man o' genius' is 'duddy' or ragged, he will not be taken seriously by anyone, let alone the rich. There are hints of Robert Fergusson's parody of the macaronic Edinburgh citizen as the speaker critiques 'the veriest stupid dunce, / Clad *a la mode*', commenting that he will be classed a 'man o' merit'. As the register relaxes back into braid Scots, the poet's voice retreats back into the speaker who hopes his 'auld acquaintance' now see that it would be unfit to be 'on equal terms' or 'to joke thegither.' The poet utilizes the final Habbie couplet in order to inject the sting of the speaker's malice; just as he assures himself of the inevitability of his family's 'spitefu' dart / O ranklin' envy', he gives rise to his own spite, voiced in the final couplet: 'But this I don't regard a f—t, / 'Twill ne'er surprise me.' The spite of the taylor is revealed as he complains of his own family as a 'sneakin' pack and poor' – a quotation from Allan Ramsay's 'Mouldy

Mowdiwart; or the last speech of a wretched miser'<sup>68</sup>, here used to refer to his relations who 'mak' [him] sconner' or shrink away in disgust:

I'm sure my daddy does perplex me,  
 My brither's visits sadly vex me,  
 My mither too, wi' kindness racks me,  
     Auld stinkin' smoaker;  
 I often wish when she distracts me,  
     The devil choak her.

The quotation from Ramsay reinforces the idea in the reader that the speaker of 'A Peripatiae' is slowly unravelling his own miserly character. His spleen grows with every stanza into frenzy until he utters his final wish: for a storm to blow all who distract him deep into Lapland snow so that he can sing in peace. Given Thomson's cantankerous personality which was referred to humorously by his correspondents, it is possible that the poet makes a sly, parodic reference to himself, thankful that no reversal of fortune is likely to happen to him and ever encourage him to utter such spite. Consistent with the satirical tradition, the poem may make local references, but it still retains a universal moral against the accumulation of riches, and the power of money to corrupt.

Turning to the private sphere, Thomson captures Scots vernacular dialogue to characterise, and to an extent satirise, the apparently frequent experience of domestic dispute. In creating a realistic private discussion amongst two friends over a drink, he developed the sociability of food and drink motif that pervades Robert Fergusson's *oeuvre* in poems such as 'Sandie and Willie, an Eclogue'. Fergusson's poem discusses the theme of the unhappy marriage from the perspective of two ploughmen: Willie, the sympathetic friend and Sandie, a recently married man who is unhappy with his wife.<sup>69</sup> He

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<sup>68</sup> Allan Ramsay, *The ever green, being a collection of Scots poems, wrote by the ingenious before 1600*, (Edinburgh: printed by Mr. Thomas Ruddiman for the publisher, at his shop near the Cross, 1724), p. 35.

<sup>69</sup> Fergusson, *Poems on Various Subjects; in two parts*, (Perth: printed by R. Morison, Junr. for R. Morison and Son, booksellers; and sold by J. Murray, London, 1788-89; hereafter *Poems*), II, p. 2.

transforms Fergusson's smooth, regular iambic pentameter into 'Davie and Sawney: an Ale House Eclogue' (1799) a piece of dark humour, quickened by the pace of the tetrameters:

By *chance* or *fate* it maksna' whether,  
*Davie* an' *Sawney* met thegither;  
 Syne after ithers welfare speering,  
 To which the muse gied little hearing;  
 Each having three pence he coud spare,  
 Agreed a wee to bother care,  
 An' try ae haf an hour to be happy,  
 Out o'er a glass o' reaming nappy.<sup>70</sup> (ll. 5-12)

Though a member of a Seceding Presbyterian congregation, Thomson enjoyed the communal properties of whiskey and here identifies the comforting properties of the drink that enable the two men to talk openly and personally to one another. Davie begins by informing Sawney that he has heard careless talk about Sawney's marital happiness, conveying local gossip and wisdom in the same sage tone:

I hope, however, that a wrangs  
 Are set to rights, when clatterin' tongues,  
 That waur than rankest poison kill  
 Good character, now rest them still. (ll. 33-36)

Through the use of onomatopoeia such as 'clatterin'' to describe the careless and noisy gossip, Thomson emphasises the dense and guttural tones of Ulster-Scots register. Davie's wisdom, 'if nae ane wish'd ye waur than I', is understated, and he addresses Sawney as 'boy', a familiar Ulster address which can be either friendly or deliberately reductive. Thomson's skilful alliteration complements the tightness of the form, carried by the meter, drawing the reader along with the pace of the story.

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<sup>70</sup> 'Davie and Sawney: an Ale House Eclogue', *New Poems*, pp. 58-66, (p. 58).

Thomson's characterisation of Sawney and Peggy foregrounds the humorous kailyard gender stereotyping of an emasculated husband subordinated by a domineering wife:

I hae a wife o' Satan's get,  
 Frae tophet sent to keep me het;  
 The heaviest losses I hae shar'd  
 Are light as naithing, when compar'd  
 To this unfeeling strumpet's clamour –  
 Her girning and eternal yawmour,  
 When by my fire I'd rest a wee,  
 Hath my house nae hame to me. (ll. 43-50)

Rather than offering comfort to his hen-pecked friend, Thomson gives Davie a long stanza in which he happily remarks that he has 'a wife o' wives the best' (l. 52) in Lizzie, and in spite of his description of her as 'just the pillar o' my life' (l. 54), as he begins to list her various qualities, the reader soon notices that they amount to her usefulness in keeping the family in order, and taking care of domestic chores quickly and efficiently! This is a marked departure from Fergusson's 'Sandie and Willy' in which the poet is content in allowing Sandie to bemoan the various shortcomings of his wife; in contrast, Thomson's Sawney is forced to hear Davie's living example of the perfect wife. In his speech Davie presents himself as wise and orthodox, uttering a number of aphorisms such as 'Be patient, Sawney, silly man, / Is but a worm, his days a span' (ll. 202-203), but this cold comfort may come too late for the reader who has listened to his insensitive boasts of his wife's domestic competence. The comic image that Thomson presents of Peggy running 'bare legit' to her sister's house in order to badmouth the neighbours over copious food and drink, goes far beyond Fergusson's tea-obsessed wife, and makes an excellent contrast with Sawney's empty stomach when he returns home from work to a house locked up and, to add insult to injury, his wife refuses to cook for him:

She'll aiblins say --- nae doubt yer hungry,

And frown and stare at me right angry;  
 While I, without meat, light or fire,  
 Wi' care and hunger sore bestead,  
 In silence graip the way to bed,  
 Which aft indeed I get unmade. (ll. 87-92)

Thomson is completely in control of the dialogue, building upon this pathetic picture of Sawney who, having crept hungry to bed 'wi' sighs and tears' (l. 93), begins to reveal his character through his own speech, rising with anger and finally admitting that he regrets marrying Peggy for money (ll. 97-100). As Davie continues to gloat upon his success in fathering a perfect brood of seven children, the dialogue reveals more about Peggy and Sawney's family woes, particularly as Davie begins comparing his situation with Peggy and Sawney's childlessness. This must excite a degree of sympathy in the reader for Peggy, as Davie attributes her restlessness to childlessness, further restricting the role of woman, and rendering Peggy as an example of the unsuccessful and discontented woman who has failed to fulfil her marital role. Davie's final boast of Lizzie is that she 'says the greatest boast she'll ever have ay, / Will be to trig the weans and Davie' (ll. 141-142); her joy consists only of caring for others. Thomson's approach to married life presents the reader with an ambiguous image of the perfect woman.

Both Fergusson and Thomson consider philosophically the human loss of control but in marked contrast to Fergusson's Willie, Thomson's Davie does not counsel Sawney to pray to 'tell the laird, / For he's a man weel versed in all the laws' (ll. 107-108),<sup>71</sup> but tells him that the world is 'Beneath the Devil's brazen paw, / He thol'd, like you, a woman's jaw.' (l. 164-5), controversially putting Sawney in sympathy with the Devil, against woman! With the dismissal of the female muse at the beginning of the poem, Thomson manipulates the guttural tones of Ulster-Scots to create a masculine environment in which his

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<sup>71</sup> Fergusson, *Poems*, II, p. 5.

male characters reveal their true attitudes, inviting readers to make their own sympathetic response.

Thomson was not content to reserve the vernacular for comedy, nor simply to parry Ramsay, Fergusson, and Burns. When exploring and challenging Enlightenment social theory, and particularly in relation to the impact of poverty on the rural labouring classes—the centre of his radical political impulse—he appears to feel most confident using Scottish models. Furthermore, by contrast to previous assessments, it can be argued with confidence that Thomson's proficiency in Scots verse was propelled by the death of Burns rather than curtailed by it. To an extent, the end of Burns's poetic career in 1796 created a gap in the market for Scottish vernacular, enabling Thomson to move from reacting against the work of Burns in poems like 'O Scotia's Bard, my Muse alas!' (1795) – a parody of Burns's 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat'—to examine Irish political and social themes through the Habbie stanza in 'To a Hedge-hog' (1799). Following Burns's death in 1796, Thomson engaged with the political philosophy of one of Burns's most famous poems, 'The Twa Dogs' (1786) to create a poem which was a philosophical triumph. 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin, a Pastoral inscribed to my Rhyme-composing Brother, Mr Alexander Kemp' (1799), is by far Thomson's longest and most ambitious poem, combining the imagined voices of Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns, and Beattie, and incorporating them within a poetic competition, much like Alexander Wilson's *The Laurel Disputed*, mentioned above.<sup>72</sup>

A series of footnotes to the text denote the identity of each poet so that Allan is identified as Ramsay, Damon as Fergusson, Sylvander as Burns, and Edwin as Beattie.<sup>73</sup> Setting the scene on 'a shining day in flow'ry June, / When mountains, groves and vales were all in tune,' the poet introduces Sylvander

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<sup>72</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 32-54.

<sup>73</sup> 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin, a Pastoral' (1799), *New Poems*, pp. 32-56, (p. 32).

(Burns) and Edwin (Beattie) as ‘twa delightful swains, / As ever pip’d on Caledonian plains, / Sowing their sonnets to the season gay.’ Joined by Allan (Ramsay) and Damon (Fergusson), Edwin proposes a song competition in which he will judge the spontaneous poetic compositions of his predecessors. Thomson thus adopts the voice of each poet in turn, beginning with Ramsay, offering a characteristic composition from each. Although he attempts to emulate each poet, he moulds their output to his own philosophic agenda, focussing mainly on his often-favoured anti-luxury motif. Thus Ramsay sings ‘The Bee and the Wasp, a Fable’ in which the industrious bee triumphs over the ‘thieving’ and opportunistic wasp, described as finding safety in selfishness, ‘A safety Nature ne’er design’d’. Beattie praises Ramsay’s efforts but counsels him to ‘quat the heathenish for your native fays!’ (l. 123) and to abandon neoclassical models for the folklore of his native Scotland. Fergusson is then called upon to offer further verses featuring his ‘moving’ pastoral character Corydon who laments for his dead companion, Alexis. Beattie’s reaction is emotional, ‘I love thy music’ (l. 250), but he is keen to summon Sylvander (Burns) to offer his ‘enchanted lay’ which ‘As wild as Ossian’s own, sublime it rolls away.’ (l. 253-4), setting the affective emotional tone of *The Poems of Ossian* as the apex of poetry.<sup>74</sup>

It is in this poem that Thomson famously provides a continuation of Burns’s ‘The Twa Dogs, a Tale’ (1785).<sup>75</sup> Burns’s ‘The Twa Dogs’ takes inspiration, in part, from the dialogues of Fergusson, in which humble poverty is pitted against sophistication and manners. Caesar, an aristocrat’s pet, and Luath, a poor man’s collie, socialise together in spite of their class differences, demonstrating how the animals are more virtuous than their owners. The twist of Burns’s poem comes as Luath rejects Caesar’s sympathy for the poor man;

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<sup>74</sup> ‘Colmal, an Eclogue’ (1793), one of Thomson’s rare prose efforts, is based on the Ossianic narrative and clearly attempts to achieve a tone of rhetorical sensibility which can be traced in the speakers of later prose pieces, ‘Juliet, an Elegy’ and ‘A Nocturnal’ both (1799), discussed in Chapter Six.

<sup>75</sup> Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, pp. 137-145.

as he argues, the poor man is happy because the most important things he can hope to enjoy is rest after toil and the company of family.

Thomson had sent a fragment of Sylvander's tale—his continuation of Burns's poem—to Alexander Kemp, a Scottish poet resident in Coleraine, who had also made an acquaintance of Robert Burns during the late 1780s. In addition to a mutual acquaintance with the now-deceased Burns, Kemp and Thomson had also introduced many of Burns's pieces into the Belfast newspapers, and had formed their own acquaintance through a series of sonnets published under the pseudonyms 'Albert' and 'Alexis' in the *Belfast News Letter*.<sup>76</sup> 'The Twa Dogs' was a mutual favourite of Kemp and Thomson and so a continuation of its political sentiments to reflect on contemporary Irish radical politics seemed an appropriate project for Thomson who was still intent on building a reputation within the Scots tradition. As Sylvander begins his tale, the reader ventures in midway through the dogs' dialogue, as if the piece is a continuation of the previous conversation as 'recorded' by Burns. Each competitor is introduced by *Edwin*—James Beattie—the author of *The Minstrel* (1771) being an appropriate invigilator for the poetic competition, having been described by Thomson as 'Sweet Edwin [...] o' bards the best'.<sup>77</sup> *Edwin* (Beattie) charges *Sylvander* (Burns) with continuing his tale.

The reader is informed that the dogs are discussing 'simple man, again, the lord o' the creation' (l. 263), but Thomson begins by allowing Caesar directly to question the justice of man's dominion over animals on the basis of 'this boasted reason, human pride' (l. 290), concluding that there is no difference between man and beast, save two legs. The poet reminds the reader of the absurdity of the situation, as Luath's takes Caesar down a peg or two, reminding him that his life of leisure allows for such philosophical enquiries. Luath's speech soon reveals that he is dissatisfied with the 'cotter snools' who feed him, suggesting that Thomson's collie himself may have become

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<sup>76</sup> Belfast News Letter, 7 Aug. 1, 8, 11 Sep. 1797.

<sup>77</sup> 'Lines from Damon', l. 18, *New Poems*, p. 110.



dangerously embourgeoised; far from the Burnsian admirer of the noble savage. In contrast to Burns's Luath, Thomson's collie appears to eschew pride in rural virtue, detailing bitterly the many insults and sufferings he endures and claims he would give anything to swap lives with Caesar: 'I'd gie my tail, but onie strife, / To niffer hames wi' you for life' (ll. 327-328). Thomson performs a particularly interesting intertextual experiment in allowing his version of Caesar to point out the discrepancy between the Luath with whom he now converses, and the Luath of his previous discussion (as imagined in Burns's poem): 'I thought ye had been [...] as independent as a lark', (l. 334).

Caesar does not pretend to complain of his lot, refusing to even countenance swapping places with his 'lick-plate ... petty rogue' (l. 340) companion, professing that he 'maist as soon be Hornie's cat' (l. 342). Caesar goes on to espouse a theory much more radical: that virtue is no more common in one class of life than in another:

And Happiness and fair Content,  
Are no to onie station pent –  
Content an' Happiness the same,  
Just in the bosom hae their hame.  
Suppose we somewhat different are,  
But a' the difference hide and hair,  
We're form'd o' ae congenial mind,  
The disinterested, social kind;                    (ll. 357-364)

Luath criticizes the 'peace-destroying yelps' of the 'vulgar, glutton, mungrell whelps' (ll. 377-378) in the church, mill and market-place. These lines, a post-1798 addition to the original manuscript, show Thomson implicitly accusing the emergent mercantile classes of encouraging the labouring classes to rise up during the Irish Rebellion. Thomson's Caesar and Luath appear to have arrived at a concept of virtue which is more Christian than civic republican, and both are implicitly critical of the misleading application of Rousseau's philosophy of the noble savage by the revolutionary masses, evaluating that this state of habitation is every bit as unobtainable as Rousseau had himself admitted.

The discussion between Caesar and Luath has taken a distinctly theological turn, betraying the poet's own excited moral indignation that a virtuous heart does not necessarily merit reward on earth:

This human life is but a farce,  
Where honest actors are but scarce.  
To see each wealthy blockhead thrive,  
And o'er the tap o' merit drive;  
And tho' the worthy are but feant,  
To see them pine in rags and want;  
To see that adoration given  
To paltry gold, man owes to heaven;

(ll. 455-460)

Thomson's Luath is less of a philosophical collie, not content to say that God wills that some are poor and others are rich, but expresses deep anger at the sinful behaviour of those who hoard wealth. Yet Luath does not deny the role of collective sin, attributing the gap between the divine and human to original sin and the fall from Eden, yet at the same time, he argues that sin has reached its culmination in the contemporary 'every day practis[e]' (l. 467) of avarice.

Alexander Kemp, who was the recipient of some extracts of the original poem, evidently interpreted the poem as seditious, warning Thomson to 'shun politics' in his future works.<sup>78</sup> Yet it is notable that, in the finished 1799 version, it is Caesar who appears to moderate the radical Luath, suggesting that Thomson intended a rather different subtext to be understood; namely, that the sage advice of the aristocracy is still of some value. The fact that Thomson puts pseudo-theological arguments into the mouths of his dogs takes the poem to a level beyond what Burns' achieves in 'The Twa Dogs' and, in any case, demonstrates that he was prepared to revise Burns's social commentary significantly for his own political context.

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<sup>78</sup> Alexander Kemp to Samuel Thomson, 9 May 1798, TCD MS 7257, f. 47.

The dogs' dialogue reveals some surprising common ground between the labouring class and aristocracy and is key in revealing the heart of Thomson's political philosophy in the wake of the Anglo-Irish Union. Specifically, the poem divulges the poet's consciousness that the true class strife lay between men like himself, who were to form the radical masses of 1798, and an emergent bourgeoisie, which in its refusal to pass on the benefits of class mobility, is in itself a common enemy to both the poor man's colley and the aristocrat's pet. Here Thomson imbues his Caesar with an apparently Cobbettian world view, in which he modifies his snobbish, anti-aristocratic sentiments towards apportioning blame to corrupt mercantile classes who have succeeded only in narrowing the opportunities for the rural classes to better themselves:

The *Poor*, who make the multitude,  
 Untaught and vulgar, squalid, rude:  
 The poor, who still the piper pay,  
 Are left, alas! To grope their way,  
 Instinctive, thro' the cheerless fog  
 Of Ignorance, in Slavery's bog!  
 Immers'd in darkness, Learning's sun  
 Doth never blink their minds upon.

(ll. 486-493)

According to Thomson, the fault lies ultimately in poor education, which allows avaricious people, notably clergy, who 'can't write worth a *spittle* [...] dare to prostitute the pen' (ll.524-526) to take advantage of others. Thomson appears to advocate strictly meritocratic principles rather than simply calling for a levelling of society; as Luath implies in his sub-Popean last word on 'Dullness' (l. 528), it is not for the rabble to seize power by force of arms, as this results in 'these conflicts' (l. 530) which, notably, extend further beyond Ireland alone to the whole of Britain:

Hence Science blushes, in a rage,  
 And Dullness stupefies the age.  
 Hence all these feuds and hellish broils,  
 These conflicts that afflict our isles;  
 There are exceptions – what the matter,  
 The cause is – *people know no better*.

(ll. 527-532)

The poet leaves the reader with the comic scene of the dogs' sudden recollection that it is supper time, elegantly reminding the reader of the absurdity that such a conversation should occur between two animals, while at the same time, marking the sophistication and relevance of their arguments.

Although Thomson's reworking of the 'Twa Dogs' forms only one section of the entire poem 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin'—the other three sections being written in the voices of Ramsay, Fergusson and Beattie—it is the most exceptionally enlightened in its attention to the moral discourse of the Enlightenment and its application to the Irish political and education system. Having ventriloquized four Scottish poets, Thomson clearly demonstrates that Burns's labouring-class radicalism sets him apart as Scotland's greatest poet. At the same time, he shows clear independence of Burns as he turns 'The Twa Dogs' on its head by allowing his version of Luath to reveal the bitter reality of poverty and the class envy that inevitably accompanies it. The fact that this discussion is undertaken by two dogs heightens the poet's concern that Enlightenment philosophy can be dangerous when it falls into the hands of the uneducated, as Luath points out, both the aristocracy and the masses themselves will be sacrificed in the cause of their bourgeois leaders, motivated by greed and desire for their own advancement. The poet is critical of the governing classes, while sympathizing with the poor, but it stresses that the reformist must take a nuanced view; Thomson rejects false pride in poverty, recognizing its full horror, but he refuses to condone the overthrow of the aristocracy to achieve liberty. The message of the poem is that universal merit is to be found in men of all classes, effectively echoing

Burns's universal brotherhood sentiments of 'a man's a man for a' that.' This poem perhaps more than any other demonstrates Thomson's proficiency in using the vernacular to write himself into the tradition of his literary models while at the same time revising it for his own Irish agenda.

### Chapter Three

#### ‘For you, wi’ all the pikes ye claim’: Patriotism, Politics and the Press

Prior to the 1990s, the political dimension of Thomson’s poetry was summed up in John Hewitt’s largely unsubstantiated claim that, in comparison to James Orr’s activity as a United Irishman, Thomson’s ‘sympathies had been with the other side of rebellion’.<sup>1</sup> What did it mean to sympathise with ‘the other side’? Did Hewitt imply that Thomson was a peaceful reformist, or did he actually believe that by 1798 he was an outright loyalist? The latter implication is discredited by Robinson and Scott’s review of Thomson’s frequent contributions to the *Northern Star* newspaper, in addition to a wide circle of United Irish connections and subscribers.<sup>2</sup> From the profile of the *Northern Star*, is difficult to overstate the powerful influence that the radical press brought to bear in rural areas:

The *Northern Star*, “the first and most significant newspaper” of the United Irishmen, was also not above making use of prophecies old and new “to appeal to the cruder beliefs of the lower orders” and to exploit the apocalyptic mood in the countryside in promotion of their political cause.<sup>3</sup>

Though at first glance, Thomson appears to have eschewed political discussion, tending to celebrate the present rather than the past, to present the Irish landscape as productive rather than victimized, it is perhaps his later celebration of a very particular Presbyterian religious consciousness that stands as a challenge to Daniel Corkery’s reductive criteria for Irish literary themes, ‘1) The religious consciousness of the people’, implicitly Roman Catholicism; 2) Irish Nationalism; and 3) The Land.’ With one or

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<sup>1</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Country Rhymes*, pp. ix-xxxi.

<sup>3</sup> Myrtle Hill, ‘Millennial Expectancy in Late 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Ulster’, in *Protestant millennialism, evangelicalism and Irish society, 1790-2005*, eds. Gribben and Holmes, eds., (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006; hereafter *Protestant millennialism*), p. 39.

two notable exceptions, there is little of the didactic or explicit political rhetoric that is often found in many of the more openly radical *Northern Star* poems and songs which were often republished in United Irish-organized publications such as *Paddy's Resource*; rather, Thomson employed sophisticated symbolism in celebration of rustic virtue and the national landscape which has often been misread as escapism or even conservatism. Thomson's political attitude has been described as ambiguous and fluctuating, originating in enthusiasm for the French Revolution, expressed in a number of political poems published in the *Northern Star*, with the general consensus that his radicalism gradually cooled as the Revolution took a bloody turn, ending in disillusionment with the rise of Napoleon. If this is indeed the case, Thomson would fit the pattern of the first generation of English Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose youthful revolutionary fervour gave way to disillusionment with the product of the French Revolution, Napoleonic Imperialism. A further comparison with the Romantic poets demonstrates a common use of Neoclassicism for radical purposes which are, again, apparent from a closer look at Thomson's apparently innocent pastoral contributions to the newspaper.

This chapter seeks to explore an hitherto unanswered question in the biography of Samuel Thomson, relating to the exact nature of his politics. Although this thesis undertakes a thorough examination of Thomson's public print poetry and personal correspondence during the 1790s, it cannot claim to solve the question of whether or not Thomson actually 'turned out' to fight in the Battle of Antrim on 7 June 1798, though he may well have been involved. However, drawing on the evidence to hand, it attempts to build a picture of Thomson's likely attitudes and possible motives, attempting to tease out the nature of his radicalism, examining his religious commitment to contractarian Presbyterianism, Real Whig reformism, and Enlightenment philosophical values of individual merit.<sup>4</sup> This, in itself, presents us with a complex combination of radical values that traverses the

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<sup>4</sup> McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, p. 17.

spectrum of eighteenth-century Presbyterian identity. Like most of his moderate United Irish contemporaries, Thomson expressed civic nationalist sentiments, even outrage against the oppression of free speech and Irish industry, but in spite of some poems which could be viewed as radical incitement to violence, there is no evidence that Thomson explicitly advocated, nor took part in, armed rebellion. In fact, a piece of correspondence which has not been cited by previous scholars suggests that even while Thomson was publishing poetry of an openly radical voice, he was also expressing his private reservations that the United Irishmen campaign might turn toward bloody physical force, and that he was considering emigration to America.

It has also been alleged that Thomson abandoned radical political comment entirely after the failure of the 1798 Rebellion, and that his poetic use of vernacular Scots declined in line with his composition of religious verse which has been judged inferior to his earlier writings. In particular, Robinson & Scott (1992) cite Thomson's 'Answer to Paine's *Age of Reason*' (1799)—a savage parody of Paine for what Thomson perceived to be Deist views—concluding that the poem was 'unrestrainedly conservative'. This conclusion neglects to take into account the nuanced strains of radicalism among the Presbyterian supporters of reform. It also does not take account of the fact that religious republicanism was often more powerful than Lockean contract theory among more theologically-conservative political radicals within the United Irishmen.<sup>5</sup> This chapter thus examines Thomson's Presbyterianism in order to question whether one could still be radical in politics and 'conservative' in theology.

The tendency to miss elements of political incitement in Thomson's verse is, in part, due to a narrow interpretation of the form which such poetry might take. Thomson's absence from the United Irish radical songbook *Paddy's Resource* led to Mary Helen Thuente's note in her

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<sup>5</sup> Ian McBride, "When Ulster Joined Ireland": Anti-Popery, Presbyterian Radicalism and Irish Republicanism in the 1790s', anti-popery, Presbyterian radicalism and Irish Republicanism in the 1790s', *Oxford Journals: Past and Present*, 157, pp. 53-93, <<http://past.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/157/1/63.pdf>> [accessed 6 October, 2008], p. 66.



otherwise groundbreaking survey of United Irish radical song, that '[Thomson's] conservative political opinions prevented him from writing songs such as those that appeared in *Paddy's Resource*'.<sup>6</sup> Kevin Whelan narrows the definition of United Irish poetry further by stating that 'art for the United Irishmen was a mould, not a mirror or a lamp, hence the overtly didactic tone of all their productions.'<sup>7</sup> A different conclusion has been reached by critics of English labouring-class poetry who revise the work of Thomson in the light of similarities with the English Romantics. By reconsidering the less didactic poems of Thomson that appeared both in the Belfast radical press and in his published volume *Poems on Different Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect* (1793), Tim Burke argued for a re-evaluation of United Irish poetry to include the 'complex affiliations and identities—national, socio-economic, and sexual—that a broad-based United Irish agenda could absorb.'<sup>8</sup>

Finally, as a precursor to Chapter Five, this chapter examines the covert methods by which Thomson addressed political concerns after the failed Rebellion of 1798, demonstrating that political hopes were still alive, and that it is the Union of 1801, rather than the 1798 Rebellion, that forms more of a significant turning point in his writing. Through a revisionist reading of Thomson's political poetry, this chapter calls for the reassessment of the accepted view of Irish radical poetry as didactic popular song and ballad. It seeks to widen the definition to include the medium of 'high culture' book poetry and Dissenting religious rhetoric, and in turn, to explore the wider context of radical poetry and hybrid identity throughout the British isles during this period.

Following the successful reception of his verse epistle to Robert Burns by none other than its subject, Thomson was intent on making poetry his vocation by becoming one of the first contributors to the *Northern Star's*

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Helen Thuente, *The Harp Re-strung*, p.245n.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity 1760-1830* (Cork: Cork University Press and Field Day, 1996), p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Burke, 'Poetry and Self-Fashioning in 1790's Ulster', p. 47.

‘Muse’s Corner’, supplying the *Star* with a copy of his ‘Epistle to Mr Robert Burns’ (1791) which set out his own poetic agenda as a labouring-class poet. He occasionally wrote directly to the printer of the *Star* John Rabb but also passed letters and poems through his book dealer Robert Callwell.<sup>9</sup> Gillian O’Brien notes the extent of the *Northern Star* audience in Ulster from the literate Belfast classes to illiterate labourers in ‘reading parties’ throughout the province.<sup>10</sup> Such meetings, involving collective reading and discussion of the *Star*’s content and editorial, were viewed by the government with deep suspicion, particularly where they encouraged vigorous political debate among the members. The Four Towns Bookclub at Roughfort Cross near Templepatrick, of which Thomson, Orr, Mullan and James Hope were members, contained many United Irishmen and Freemasons in its membership. The position of Thomson within these fraternal organisations has never been clear and there is no written evidence of his membership; however, his support of the Volunteering movement;<sup>11</sup> his unyielding activities in the *Northern Star*; his position as close confidant of United Irish members;<sup>12</sup> and internal poetic evidence suggests he was at the very least a supporter of the movement, if not an active member.

Thomson’s close friend, the Ballycarry mason and poet James Orr, signs off a letter of 1807, ‘Yours fraternally’, a common masonic closing, and the majority of Thomson’s correspondents in the 1790s use the word ‘fraternal’ in their letters and verse epistles. Masonic activity among the labouring classes in the North of Ireland tended to become popular alongside the establishment of the Volunteers,<sup>13</sup> a movement that counted

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert Callwell to Samuel Thomson, 18 May 1793, TCD MS 7257, f. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Gillian O’Brien, ‘Spirit, Impartiality and Independence: the *Northern Star* 1792-87’, in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 13 (1998), pp. 7-23, (p. 17).

<sup>11</sup> Thomson at one time requested a System of Volunteer Exercise from one David Clyde who appears to be a local man in his neighbourhood, (David Clyde to Samuel Thomson, [undated], TCD MS 7257, f. 83.)

<sup>12</sup> These include James Orr of Ballycarry, weaver and poet, and John Rabb, printer of the *Northern Star*, both of whom were exiled to America.

<sup>13</sup> Ian McBride, “‘When Ulster Joined Ireland’”, p. 64.

among its members at least three of Thomson's close friends, and Thomson personally solicited a 'system of exercise', presumably for local use.<sup>14</sup> His circle of correspondents included Aeneas Lamont, the typesetter for the radical *Northern Star* newspaper and a Belfast Volunteer who had worked in the newspaper business in Revolutionary America. Notably, while in America, Lamont corresponded with fellow masons of high rank, such as Dr. Benjamin Franklin, who perhaps epitomises the political impact of freemasonry in Revolutionary America.<sup>15</sup> A further clue emerged following Lamont's death in 1803, when Mrs Lamont wrote to Thomson, referring to a conversation she had with 'your brother' who confirmed that Thomson '[kept] a school'.<sup>16</sup> With no existing correspondence between Thomson and a sibling, nor any poetic or biographical mention, it might be surmised that Mrs Lamont referred to a masonic connection. These facts amount to the suggestion that Thomson was at the centre of a sophisticated community of masonic brethren throughout County Antrim and Belfast, which perhaps fostered his labouring-class fraternal identity.

His desire to move to Belfast and his apparent intention of involving Robert Burns in the work of the *Northern Star* indicates that he was an active player in the 'moral force' years of the United Irish movement.<sup>17</sup> It is also possible that there exists a political dimension to the relationship between Thomson and Burns. Citing a compelling range of evidence, John Gray argues that the communication between Thomson, Burns, and the *Northern Star* printer John Rabb at the time of Thomson's visit to Burns in Dumfries suggests that Thomson attempted to involve Burns in the politics

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<sup>14</sup> David Clyde to Samuel Thomson, [undated], TCD MS 7257, f. 83.

<sup>15</sup> Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p. 326. For reference to the letter see Dorothea Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 1 August 1804, TCD MS 7257, f. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothea Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 1 August 1804, TCD MS 7257, f. 85.

<sup>17</sup> Thomson wrote to John Rabb on several occasions: notably, in 1793 to ask his advice on relocating to Belfast, presumably to be closer to the action; and later, in 1794 to ask him to open a correspondence with Robert Burns and to forward him copies of *The Northern Star*. (John Rabb to Samuel Thomson, 5 June 1793 & 14 March 1794, TCD MS 7257, ff. 172b, 175.)

of Ulster, requesting Rabb to forward the newspaper to Burns.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to confirm that Thomson's reasons were political rather than literary, as his primary motivation in forwarding the *Northern Star* may have been to allow Burns access to the Muses Corner, thereby directing the attention of a celebrated contemporary to Thomson's own published work. Nevertheless, as most of these poems were political in content, a political motive remains a distinct possibility.

Although he belonged to the Calvinist Seceder sect, he defied many of the commonplace attitudes of the Seceder leadership, though this was common for many of the laity.<sup>19</sup> Like his fellow congregation member James Hope, Thomson appears to have been an active Volunteer in spite of the condemnation that 'worldly affairs' attracted in certain Seceding presbyteries.<sup>20</sup> Hope was also deeply uncomfortable with his minister's anti-popery rhetoric that sometimes characterised Patton's sermons.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, his enthusiasm for radical politics often appears moderated by their compatibility with his religious beliefs and, as such, may have restricted his enthusiasm for the physical force tactics of the United Irishmen in the later 1790s. Although there is no historical evidence that he joined his United Irish friends on Donegore Hill at the Battle of Antrim, there remains a curious and unexplained gap in his personal correspondence during this period suggesting that he deliberately kept a low profile. Shortly after this period appeared his second volume of poetry, *New Poems on Various Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect* (1799) with notable

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<sup>18</sup> Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', pp. 322-333. Gray draws his conclusion from the fragments of Currie's list which include Thomson's references to 'the state of Ireland', combined with his declaration that in 'the overthrow of the rag' he 'sticks by the Northern Star'. Gray here draws on his own extensive research into the contemporary battle for readership fought out between the *Northern Star* and the more established *Belfast News-Letter*. See John Gray, 'A Tale of Two Newspapers' in John Gray and Wesley McCann, *An Uncommon Bookman: Essays in Memory of J.R.R. Adams*, (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 1996), pp. 175-98.

<sup>19</sup> McBride, "'When Ulster Joined Ireland'", p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> McBride, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> James Hope quoted in 'Memoir of James Hope', R.R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*, (Ireland: J. Duffy, 1846; henceforward *The United Irishmen*), p. 226.

avoidance of direct political comment. As later pieces of social commentary such as ‘The Beggar Wife’ (1803) demonstrate, Thomson’s interest in political and social topics appears never to waver, but after the destruction of the *Northern Star* by loyalist troops in 1797, Thomson showed his ability to check the radical voice that pervades his final poems for the *Star* press, ‘Epigram to a Rank Aristocrat’ and ‘To the Cuckoo’,<sup>22</sup> in order that he could continue to write for the more moderate audience of the *Belfast News-Letter* from 1797-8. However, as Chapter Four will demonstrate further, the poetry which he composed during this time, published in *New Poems* (1799), demonstrates a considerable number of political references in *New Poems*, some of which appear to show a reluctant radical, broken and repentant of the consequences of rebellion but, more frequently, his radicalism resurfaces in defiant verses, heavily coded in Scots, which respond to a period of political change and an impending Act of Union with Britain.

Aside from political ideals, Thomson was a pragmatic man who demonstrated a bold ability to cash in on topical themes and the popularity of others to promote his own verse. As Chapter 2 mentioned, Thomson and Alexander Kemp assumed the credit for introducing new verses of Robert Burns into the *Belfast News-Letter* and Thomson, in partnership with Luke Mullan, announced an ill-fated attempt to produce a joint publication *Poems Upon Different Subjects, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, advertised in the *Star* intentionally on the same day as William Magee’s second volume of Burns’s poems.<sup>23</sup> In 1792 the *Northern Star* provided an opportune medium for the young, idealistic, patriotic Thomson to give an open-minded audience a taste of his verses, but Thomson’s commitment to the newspaper amid the sedition trials of its proprietors in 1794 demonstrates a considerable degree of commitment also to the publication’s values. The newspaper attracted its fair share of negative Government attention and its

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<sup>22</sup> Both poems are published together in the last surviving edition of the *Northern Star*, May 15-19<sup>th</sup> 1797.

<sup>23</sup> *Northern Star*, 26-29 June 1793.

printer John Rabb was forced to flee to South Carolina in 1795 following charges of sedition.<sup>24</sup> From 1794, Thomson exercised greater caution in protecting his identity by adopting a series of pseudonyms, and maintained his loyalty to the newspaper, contributing poetry and occasionally letters to the newspaper from its beginnings in 1792 to the very last issue of 15 May 1797 when the press was destroyed by the loyalist Monaghan Militia.

Thomson had not long published in the *Northern Star* before his verses began to excite considerable public attention. One correspondent, calling himself ‘A FRIEND TO GENIUS’, wrote to the newspaper ‘to call forth a suitable degree of public attention to a young man in this neighbourhood, Mr. Samuel Thomson.’<sup>25</sup> Thomson had, at this point, contributed no less than seven items to the newspaper. Most of these initial contributions were not explicitly political but the explosion of pastorals, such as ‘The Contented Shepherd’ (1793), demonstrates an implicit radicalism that played on the promotion of labouring-class identity in addition to Paine’s recognisable ‘political summer’ motif.<sup>26</sup> The shepherd ‘Collin’ emphatically praised the values of the poor in the countryside, criticizing those who ‘for perishing wealth / Should e’er like the exile be driven’, and extolling the poor to stick by their native country rather than to comply with British colonial projects abroad. The poet makes a swipe at ‘all ye lordlings of *birth*’, taunting them with a sneer, ‘how vainly expectant ye roam!’ and warning them that ‘if *happiness* dwells upon earth, / it is with *contentment at home*.’ (ll. 53-6) The country aphorism masks a more typical contemporary radical rhetoric which might invite the reader to infer that the ‘lordlings’ occasionally present in Ireland do not belong in this landscape and ought to return to where they came from. But Thomson’s earlier reference to ‘the Indies [...] / and rich mines of Peru’ (ll. 29-30) foreshadows

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<sup>24</sup> Michael Druery, *Transatlantic Radicals: and the Early American Republic*, (Lawrence, Kansas: Kansas UP, 1997; henceforward *Transatlantic Radicals*), p.117. Thomson received several updates on Rabb’s welfare from Aeneas Lamont, Lamont to Thomson, TCD MS 7257, ff. 74, 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Northern Star*, 31 July – 3 August, 1793.

<sup>26</sup> Tim Burke refers to ‘Paine’s “political summer”’ in ‘Poetry and Self-fashioning in 1790s Ulster’, p. 41.

the characteristic nuance that pervades his political discussion. Rather than deploying Jacobin rhetoric against the aristocracy as a whole, the poet makes a Real Whig appeal to the absentee landlord who travels the world at the beck and call of Imperial Britain to turn greater attention to his seat. Admittedly, Thomson must have been aware that the radical core readership of the *Northern Star* had more extreme views on the subject of the Ascendancy, but the republication of 'The Contented Shepherd' in Thomson's first volume, *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793), took this same poem to a wider audience that included his own landlord, Lord Templeton, who did not return to Templepatrick until 1795 after a long absence.

Thomson seized the opportunity of offering a welcome note to Lord Templeton, speaking on behalf of the residents of Templepatrick, which demonstrates not only his sense of bardic vocation in speaking on behalf of the non-enfranchised labourers of his townland, but also the bold and confident subtext of his 'advice' poem which suggests that the success of his lordship's transition from England to Ireland will depend entirely on his decision to govern well:

Frae wisdoms law, seraph truth,  
By which as yet ye stand ay,  
May nae deceitfu' wanton mouth  
Presumptive, dare to bend ye,  
I humbly pray. (ll. 5-9)

The lilting rhythm and internal rhyme scheme of the Christis Kirk stanza may evoke connotations of innocence, particularly since the stanza was traditionally associated with the carnivalesque peasant gatherings such as that which we find in 'The Simmer Fair' (1792), but the content of the poem constitutes serious political advice to the landlord. Having expressed concern that Templeton should not be led astray, the poet emphasises the reliance of tenants on their landlord, claiming that 'your gay presence back again / Has to mysel' restored me' (ll. 12-13). He goes on to note Templeton's love of London, drawing attention once more to the problem of landlord absenteeism – the factor which drives the bard's plea, 'O! wad ye

henceforth stay at hame / Content wi' your ain' ha' (ll. 28-29). Thomson increases his familiarity with Templeton, wishing that a speedy marriage might encourage him to settle and, finally, comes to the crux of his plea: '[...] may ye drive corruption hence, / Wi' fraud an' dissipation' (ll. 48-49). His final lines carry what a post-1798 readership might regard at best as an unfortunate pun on the phrase 'turn out'—the term used of the insurgents who would go into battle on 7 June 1798—and at worst a foreboding warning of the possibility of a rising: 'I'll yet turn out in fashion, / An be as trig a toun perchance, / As onie in the nation / Some future day.' (ll. 51-54).

Evidently the landscape and its governance were central concerns to Thomson's agenda as the Bard of Carngranny, and values that he often pursued through the neoclassical motif of pastoral virtue.<sup>27</sup> 'The Contented Shepherd' was followed with several other literary experiments such as 'Sonnet to Love' (1793), an imitation of the Petrarchan sonnet which was published during a time of much political discussion over war with France. Thomson clearly did not intend to become the *Northern Star*'s literary hack, eschewing direct discussion of politics at this stage and preferring to embed political comment in pastoral and rural scenes. Yet the 'retreat' into pastoral could often present the perfect platform for national and political concerns. A hint of underlying political discontent can be found beneath the surface of several apparently Augustan poems, such as the glorification of a former way of rustic life in 'Elegy, the Cottage in Ruins' (1793),<sup>28</sup> published in the *Northern Star* on 17 April 1793:

Thrice happy state! Unknown to scepter'd kings,  
A bliss, which wealth, or power but seldom knows,  
Content unsullied, as the crystal springs  
Whose limpid water thro' the landscape flows. (ll. 25-28)

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<sup>27</sup> The accolade of 'Bard of Carngranny' appears to have been passed down in popular usage, but the first reference to it appears in Robert Huddleston's poetic tribute to Thomson, 'Elegy to the Memory of the Amiable and Departed Thompson, Rural Bard [of] Carngranny' (1844). The editors of the *Folk Poets of Ulster Series* (1992) describe Thomson as the 'Bard of Carngranny', based on popular legend and their decision to anthologise poems which celebrate the landscape and people of Carngranny, mostly written in vernacular Scots.

<sup>28</sup> *Poems*, pp. 44-47.



Compared with the state of the monarchy, the rustic life that once inhabited the cottage is portrayed as uncorrupted, emphasised further by the pastoral image of the landscape nourished by crystal springs, which implies that it is the rural poor, not the wealthy, whose toil ensures the fertility of the native landscape. There is also the implication of the water as an unstoppable force of purity which ‘unknown to scepter’d kings’ remains untamed and beyond aristocratic government. Within several stanzas, the speaker’s voice begins to lament the passing of the scene, ‘Now all extinct! As if they ne’er had been-- / Both *spence* and *kitchen* gloom a cheerless waste.’ (ll. 35-6) In addition to a Romantic preoccupation with the ruin which carries connotations of emigration and clearance, the poet betrays an antiquarian interest in the cottage structure, cataloguing the Scots-named ‘*spence*’ or parlour and the layout of the garden ‘with every needful *root* and wholesome green’ (l. 38), referring to the self-sufficiency of the family on potatoes and green vegetables. The imagery of flowing streams and crystal fountains is Romantic in itself, serving as a metaphor for free-flowing creativity and here the fundamental message that the spirit of the people is very much alive and well and will be renewed.

Likewise, ‘Ode to the Cuckow’<sup>29</sup> (1793) was published on the 29<sup>th</sup> May under the pseudonym ‘Thenot’, a shepherd from Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar*, and the choice of Spenserian source material provides an allegorical model.<sup>30</sup> The poem appears to be a simple pastoral about a summer visiting bird, but Thomson’s energetic, sensuous language is carefully crafted with imagery reminiscent of Paine’s ‘political summer’. This imagery conveys an allegorical sense of a new season dawning upon Ireland with green pastoral imagery symbolic of Erin and references to a season of industry, song, confidence, and youth, ‘Young beauty once more on the woods, / Unfolds her gay mantle of green’ (ll. 5-6). Thomson skilfully employs assonance to produce a mouth-watering picture of Spring

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<sup>29</sup> *Northern Star*, 29 May – 1 June, 1793.

<sup>30</sup> Thomson develops his Spenserian sources in *New Poems* to produce the epic poem ‘A Winter Night’s Dream’ (1799), discussed in the following chapter.

as the native Irish birds sound ‘their wild pipes / [...] with varied soft melody’ (ll. 9-10) and ‘the wild bee does wantonly wing, / A culling from every young flower / The balmy delights of the spring.’ (ll. 14-16). Vincent Newey draws attention to ‘a flourishing tradition of reference to the labouring classes as “active” bees, in contrast to the idle drones who battened upon their forced produce [...] several other examples are present from radical literature, including one from Tom Paine himself’, a fact that sits well with the Painite ‘political summer’ imagery identified by Tim Burke in ‘The Contented Shepherd’, mentioned above.<sup>31</sup> Thomson had by now acquired a significant reputation as an articulate poet and began to contribute under the fictitious signatures ‘Colinet’ and ‘Thenot’, both shepherds drawn ultimately from Virgil’s first *Eclogue*, itself a highly politicized literary source and one recognizable in eighteenth-century labouring class poetry.<sup>32</sup>

Even Thomson’s most passionate polemic in the *Northern Star* is framed by strong literary sensibility, ensuring that literary control of subject matter was not sacrificed to political faction. Amid the radical polemic of the *Northern Star*, Thomson submitted finely crafted sonnets on the subject of love, many of which were emulated by his readers.<sup>33</sup> Personal loss was likewise conveyed in sentimental elegies such as ‘Pastoral on the Departure of Corydon’ (1793), referring to the emigration of a dear friend and fellow poet, the poverty-stricken weaver Luke Mullan.<sup>34</sup> A previously unexamined letter from an emigrant friend in New England establishes the fact that Thomson, had at least considered emigrating to America to improve his economic prospects in the wake of repression in Ireland. His correspondent, James Dalrymple, a noted subscriber to Thomson’s volumes, appears to

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<sup>31</sup> Vincent Newey, ‘Keats, history, and the poets’ in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; henceforward *Keats and History*), p. 192n.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Epistle to Robert Burns’ (1791), line 33, *Poems*, p. 86. Thomson tells Robert Burns that he read Virgil and Homer in translation.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Sonnet to Love’ and ‘Sonnet to Sleep’, *Northern Star*, 24-27 July, 1793; 14-17 August 1793.

<sup>34</sup> *Northern Star*, Sep 25-28, 1794.

have recently emigrated himself and warns Thomson that Ireland will unlikely be freed without bloodshed:

Dear Sam, I [...] am glad to hear of your and my friends health but very sorry to perceive the dismal state of your country [...] Indeed it appears to me much blood will be spilt before you enjoy political freedom and whether it is worth the sacrifice you in Ireland must judge. [...] some time hence I may be able to hold you out more Temptations to attract you Westward.<sup>35</sup>

Of course voluntary emigration was a very different prospect from that of other radical friends who were forced to flee Ireland for America during the 1790s.<sup>36</sup> There was a notable movement of emigration to the Carolinas among Seceding Presbyterians between 1729 and 1790, a trend which possibly encouraged Thomson to consider a voluntary emigration, though with little immediate prospect of return, this was little short of exile.<sup>37</sup>

In a political climate which was becoming increasingly hostile to ideas of liberty, he chose to confront the reality of exile in his ‘Elegy. The Bard’s Farewell!’ (1793).<sup>38</sup> Thomson’s title demonstrates his intention to speak on behalf of a beleaguered community, describing himself as ‘bard’, calling to mind the historical figure of the Celtic bards and even more recent literary figures such as Macpherson’s Ossian, the last survivor of his people. Although not published in the *Northern Star*, Thomson’s ‘Colmal, an Eclogue’ (1793) is among a group of feminine voiced poems with some reference to abandonment and political exile. Here Colmal laments the death of Norval in battle at the hands of the sons of Lochlin. By contrast ‘The Bard’s Farewell’ is full of thundering rhetoric and radical polemic. The first lines of the opening stanzas are addressed to Ireland, ‘much-loved

<sup>35</sup> James Dalrymple to Samuel Thomson, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1797, TCD MS 7253/8 fol.5.

<sup>36</sup> Thomson received several updates on Rabb’s welfare from Aeneas Lamont, Lamont to Thomson, TCD MS 7257, ff. 74, 80.

<sup>37</sup> David Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland: with annals of their congregations*, (Belfast: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1950; hereafter *The Seceders in Ireland*), p. 174.

<sup>38</sup> Thomson, ‘Elegy, The Bard’s Farewell!’ (1793) published in the wake of war with France in the *Northern Star*, 31 Jul – 3 Aug, 1793.

native land!’ (l. 1); ‘dear isle’ (l. 5); ‘kind *paternal place*’ (l. 9); whose ‘lowly glens’ (l. 6) have heard that the poet is being driven out by ‘oppression, with her cruel thong’ (l. 7). The poet naturally seeks the shores of ‘Columbia’ (l. 3), post-revolutionary America, the modern model society which takes on an almost promised-land status.

It is not surprising that America should form the image of the ideal civic society in Thomson’s poetry. As well as providing asylum for so many British and Irish exiles and emigrants during the 1790’s, the American Revolution itself was held by many as the event that sparked Ulster Presbyterian radicalism and, as James Hope argued, the sight of young Irish men forced by economic necessity to fight on the side of the British had encouraged many to take the side of the colonists.<sup>39</sup> The speaker of ‘The Bard’s Farewell!’ (1793) vows never to return to Ireland until her hills are ‘wreath’d in Shamrock’ (l. 53) and rural Industry is left ‘unmolested’ (l. 51). The poem refers to ‘a late bill brought into parliament, too well known to need any description here,’ referring to the crippling import taxes applied in England to Irish linen.<sup>40</sup> Such conditions would be felt most keenly by the rural hand-loom weavers and mercantile classes of Belfast, both groups accounting for a sizeable portion of Thomson’s subscribers. The catastrophic effect that this had on the local weavers of the Ulster Linen triangle affected the livelihoods of Thomson’s closest friends such as Luke Mullan and it is possible that this poem may have been composed with reference to Mullan’s threats of emigration. Mullan did eventually depart for Scotland in 1794 where he appears to have worked as a ploughman before finding himself in the British naval fleet at Spithead, apparently an example of the Irish weavers forced by economic necessity into the British Armed Forces by the crippling of the Linen trade.<sup>41</sup> In 1796 he wrote to Thomson in

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<sup>39</sup> Myrtle Hill, ‘Millennial Expectancy in Late 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Ulster’, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Irish trade in the eighteenth century can be viewed as the main branch of Irish foreign trade or as the most indispensable factor in the country’s economic development’, (L. M. Cullen, *Anglo-Irish Trade 1600-1800*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), p. 205.

<sup>41</sup> Hope argued that this was a deliberate government policy in order to recruit troops, (R. R. Madden, ‘Memoir of James Hope’, *The United Irishmen*, p. 228.) The topic also preoccupied

response to the latter's pleas for him to come home but vowed that he would 'never' return to Ireland 'to [his] former wretchedness' until he could live 'independent and genteel'.<sup>42</sup> It is in this poem that Thomson's rhetoric soars to unprecedented polemic as he castigates the 'noxious *gales* of despotism' that 'trample knowledge, and *insult* the *wise*!' (ll. 30, 32). As the most widely published poet in the *Northern Star*, Thomson appears to have felt responsible to transform his bardic voice to function as mouthpiece for his community of radical weavers.

Of further significance was that this personal insult to Irish industry came on the heels of William Pitt's Bill of May 1793 which severely limited criticism of government following the declaration of war with Revolutionary France. The statement 'your children *dare* not tell each other so' (l. 28) heralds the growing atmosphere of repression in British politics. In his newspaper publications, Thomson shared the pseudonym of 'Lowrie Nettle' with the Scottish weaver and radical poet Alexander Wilson who was also writing in the 1790s against the tyrants of industry who cheated the weavers of Renfrewshire.<sup>43</sup> Wilson was a dissenting poet of some note and, dissatisfied with the political and economic climate of Scotland, he emigrated to America in 1794 leaving behind him a number of 'nettling' poems such as 'The Shark' (1792), 'The Tears of Britain' (1793?) and 'Address to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr' (1794). At the time of writing 'The Bard's Farewell!' (1793) Thomson seemed to fulfil Wilson's role on the other side of the North Channel as radical spokesperson on political and religious affairs. Wilson is perhaps an example of what might have been had Thomson followed suit and followed through with his thoughts of emigrating across the Atlantic.

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Wordsworth in the background to 'The Ruined Cottage' wherein Margaret's husband enlists as a paid recruit and does not return, resulting in the deaths of his family which leaves their cottage an overgrown ruin.

<sup>42</sup> Mullan to Thomson, 4 February 1796, TCD MS 7257, fol. 6.

<sup>43</sup> John Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p. 330n.

It is notable that, in attacking the ruling classes, Thomson rarely absolves the labouring classes from responsibility for their own destiny. Those who do not answer the call to America's shores of '*peace and liberty*' (l. 38) are accused of remaining 'in voluntary fetters' (l. 40), at the mercy of '*these ravagers*' (l. 36). The elegy demonstrates that as early as 1793, Thomson utilized his public platform to urge exile as a dignified and non-violent means of remedying the oppression of Ireland:

Ye *freeborn souls*, who *feel* –and feel *aright*!  
Come, cross with me, the wide, Atlantic main,  
With Heaven's aid we'll to the land of light,  
And leave *these ravagers* th' unpeopl'd plain. (ll. 33-6)

The paratactic syntax of the repeated word 'and' recreates the fragmented, empty American plains with their potential for expansion. This image of the emptied landscape endures, clearly intended as a blatant threat to the government by calling for proactive emigration, a 'political statement that challenges and repudiates the authority of the state from which one voluntarily secedes.'<sup>44</sup>

The right of secession from the state was integral to Thomson's identity as a Presbyterian and betrays to some extent Thomson's attraction to the rhetoric of individual conscience and free will, such as the '*free-born souls*! Who feel, - and feel *aright*' (l. 33), which implies a God-given right to sensibility and personal judgement. Thomson's radical proposal of non-violent direct action in the liberation of Ireland would eventually be taken up by James Orr in his masterpiece poem, 'To the Potatoe' (1804) in the line 'Gif thou'd withdraw for ae camping'<sup>45</sup> which Carol Baraniuk has described as 'truly radical, even revolutionary here.'<sup>46</sup> If this is true of Orr, it follows that Samuel Thomson's 'The Bard's Farewell' was even further ahead of its time in terms of its radical manifesto, demonstrating that Thomson was not

<sup>44</sup> Druery, *Transatlantic Radicals*, p.134.

<sup>45</sup> James Orr, 'To the Potatoe', l.81, *Collected Works*, p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Carol Baraniuk, "as native in my thought", p. 206.

the conservative poet he has often been dismissed as. Instead, Thomson was possessed of a mature revolutionary sentiment that eschewed violent action, a view that Orr, the more glamorous revolutionary figure, may not have arrived at until ten years hence after taking part in a bloody rebellion and enduring self-imposed exile. Perhaps by the time of the publication of 'To the Potatoe' in 1804, Orr had significantly moderated his position, arriving at a view somewhat closer to that of Thomson's. As Baraniuk rightly points out, the suggestion of emigration ought not necessarily to be interpreted as conservative or defeatist, and 'The Bard's Farewell!' offers an insight to an alternative strand of British radicalism picked up by Thomson in 1793 and echoed many years later by others.

Just as Thomson has existed in the shadow of James Orr's glamorous radicalism, a more troubling aspect of previous criticism has been the relegation of Thomson to the role of the mere follower of more radical poets. John Gray deserves much credit for presenting evidence of a potentially political relationship between Samuel Thomson and Robert Burns, suggesting that Thomson's correspondence with Burns was not necessarily of a purely literary vein. That said, the task of challenging Professor Liam McIlvanney's claim that Thomson was a 'bardolator' of Burns—'the tutelary poet of radical Ulster'—has been a more arduous process.<sup>47</sup> The work of an eminent Scottish critic like Liam McIlvanney is of great importance to the criticism of Irish literature in that he bore witness to the extent of poetic output in Ulster, thereby checking the over-enthusiasm of some to automatically attribute radical poems in vernacular Scots to 'an immaculately radical Burns'.<sup>48</sup> Gray was responding to Liam McIlvanney's citation of a 'Song' directly parodying Burns's 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat' published in the *Northern Star* on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1795.<sup>49</sup> While McIlvanney tentatively ascribed the poem to

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<sup>47</sup> McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, p. 221.

<sup>48</sup> John Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', pp. 320-334.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Dumfries Volunteers' (1795) was originally published in the *Edinburgh Courant* on 4 May 1795 and subsequently in the *Dumfries Journal* and *Caledonian Mercury* within days. The *Belfast*

Samuel Thomson, pointing out that the pseudonym ‘Lowrie Nettle’ resembled that of the above-mentioned Alexander Wilson’s pseudonym ‘Laurie Nettle’, Gray confirmed that the ‘Lyle’s Hill’ address, which appeared frequently in the Belfast press, firmly identified the poet as Samuel Thomson.<sup>50</sup> Thomson’s increased tendency to contribute under pseudonyms may correlate to the rise of government repression of the press, but this also appears to be a calculated attempt to reflect his poetic style and content, thereby identifying him to a knowing readership.

In addition to the pastoral *Thomalin*, *Lyles Hill*; *Alexis*; and *Colinet*, spiky pseudonyms such as *Lowrie Nettle*, *Lyle’s Hill*; *Mathias Bramble*, *Lyle*; and *Harry Hawthorn* reflect the growing reputation of Thomson as a poet who so enjoyed satirising or applying a good ‘nettling’ to fellow writers, regardless of their celebrity. Each pseudonym was also designed to signpost Thomson’s literary reading; ‘Mathias Bramble’ referring to the hero of Tobias Smollett’s epistolary novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771) and ‘Thomalin’ referring to Spenser’s shepherd in *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579). Thomson’s tendency to provide a literary nettling to others may provide a clearer context in which to consider his relationship with Robert Burns. Both Liam McIlvanney and John Gray recognized the literary sophistication of the ‘O Scotia’s Bard, my Muse, alas!’ (1795) in which, they argued, Thomson made an ‘impressive riposte’ to what he perceived as Burns’s abandonment of radical principles and complicity with government,<sup>51</sup>

O Scotia’s Bard! My Muse alas!  
For you in private blusters!

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*News-Letter* did not carry the poem until 18 October 1795 but in just over a week Thomson had produced a parody for the *Northern Star* which was published alongside the original Burns song on 2 November 1795.

<sup>50</sup> In 1806, James Orr referred in a letter to Thomson’s habit of satiric ‘nettling’, demonstrating that the poet had acquired a reputation for such barbed, satiric writing in both the epistolary and poetic media. (Orr to Thomson, 2 March 1806, TCD MS 7257, fol. 60)

<sup>51</sup> Gray, ‘Burns and his Visitors from Ulster’, p. 331. Thomson’s work was first published in the *Northern Star* on 2-5 November, 1795 under the simple title ‘Song’.



You've dip't I' th' dish wi' slee D[unda]s  
 An' pric'd the loaves and Fishes! (ll. 1-4)

Thomson's employment of biblical imagery of 'loaves and Fishes' to criticize Burns's apparent capitalist motivation in voicing 'loyalist' sentiments, is typical of the Thomsonian style of 'nettling' that would later be applied in his religious satires and poetic attacks. His decision to parody Burns's poem is therefore all the more significant in the light of his supposed idolatry. Thomson knew Burns's work intimately, making several references to it in his own poetry, and detected a clear change of language and sentiment in 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat'. McIlvanney praises Thomson's exchange of the metrical 'man' end rhyme in favour of the 'mock-formal "sir"' and Thomson's adoption of Burns's 'rather vulnerable image of the constitution as a leaky kettle', drawn ultimately from the image of '*Clout the cauldron*' from the episcopal satire of William Meston's 'The Knight':<sup>52</sup>

The *kettle* o' the Kirk and State,  
 Perhaps a clout may fail in 't;  
 But deil a foreign tinkler-loun  
 Shall ever ca' a nail in it:  
 Our FATHERS' BLUDE the *kettle* bought,  
 And wha wad dare to spoil it,  
 By Heavens, the sacrilegious dog  
 Shall fuel be to boil it!<sup>53</sup>

(Burns, 'The Dumfries Volunteers', ll. 17-24)

The *kettle* o' your *kirk* and *state*  
 For which your dads contended,  
 Has been sae ding'd and spoil'd of late,  
 I fear it can't be mended!  
 And if a British Tinkler dare

<sup>52</sup> 'The Knight', line 125 in William Meston, *The Poetical Works of the Ingenious and Learned William Meston, A. M., Sometime Professor of Philosophy in the Marshall College of Aberdeen*, (Edinburgh: 1767), pp. 46-7.

<sup>53</sup> 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?' (1795), *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968; henceforward, *Poems and Songs*), II, p. 764-6.

But shaw his bag and nails, man;  
 O bid the meddling loun beware  
 O' shaving and South-Wales man.<sup>54</sup>

(Thomson, 'Song, for the *Northern Star*', ll. 9-16)

The context of Burns's poem was the threat of French invasion as he wrote it while a member of the local volunteer militia, raised in Dumfries in 1795,

Be BRITAIN still to BRITAIN true,  
 Amang oursels united;  
 For never but by British hands  
 Must British wrongs be righted.

('Dumfries Volunteers', ll. 13-16)

Liam McIlvanney defends Burns's radical politics, arguing persuasively that 'the prospect of being "liberated" by foreign arms is not one which anyone imbued with civic humanist principles could relish.'<sup>55</sup> Burns does appear to invoke Real Whig concerns against those who would 'set the *Mob* above the *Throne*,' a suggestion that, uncharacteristically, Thomson appears to have considered particularly offensive as he replies, 'For those you Burke-like call the mob, / The very PEOPLE are man.' Given his own distrust of the mob, the sentiments of the poem might be attributable to Thomson's addiction to 'one-upmanship' and his tendency to parody the work of established writers. Yet although his personal indignation may not have been genuine, his *Northern Star* poetry appears to reflect the desires of its readership, inviting the conclusion that, in 'O Scotia's Bard', Thomson spoken on behalf of the many Irish radicals who considered Whiggish views to be close to apostasy. Liam McIlvanney points out that, if the story is true of Burns's refusal to join with the words of the national anthem in a

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<sup>54</sup> This may be an oblique reference to the exile of Thomas Muir and four other Scots to Botany Bay, New South Wales in 1794?

<sup>55</sup> *Burns the Radical*, p. 236.

Dumfries theatre, the ‘coercive loyalism’ of the poem’s climax might indeed have seemed ‘hypocritical’ at best.<sup>56</sup>

Who will not sing God Save the King,  
Shall hang as high as the steeple,  
But while we sing God Save the king,  
We’ll ne’er forget THE PEOPLE!

Each stanza of Thomson’s ‘O Scotia’s Bard’ engages blow-by-blow with the content of Burns’s song, and the *Northern Star* editor’s ready insertion of the savage parody directly underneath Burns’ original attests to his confidence of the weight it would carry among the readership:

So now I sing God Save the King,  
And the Queen to keep him warm sir:  
But may he high as Haman hing,  
Who dares oppose REFORM Sir.

With his reference to ‘as high as Haman hing’d’, Thomson refers to a biblical source in the book of *Esther*, but he also invokes Scottish literary precedent and deploys it against Burns, deliberately referencing Allan Ramsay’s ‘A Tale of Three Bonnets’ (1722), ‘I’ll see you hang’d, and her the gather, / As high as *Haman* in a tether’.<sup>57</sup> While challenging Burns, Thomson reveals also the extent of his familiarity with the Scottish poet’s earlier work; the stanza alludes to Burns’s sexual deflation of the British monarchy in ‘A Dream’ (1786) where the poet refers to George III’s second son the Duke of York, who was a naval captain with a reputation for love affairs. Burns satirises the duke using many sexually-suggestive nautical images, describing how he has ‘lately come athwart her ...large upon her quarter’.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, Thomson satirises the King and Queen, pointing out

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Allan Ramsay, *A Tale of Three Bonnets*, ([S.l.], [1722?]), p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> ‘A Dream’ (1786), ll. 109-117, *Poems and Songs*, I, pp. 265-269, (p. 269).

their shared sexual characteristics with the common people, relegating the king to a shivering elderly man and the Queen as his hot water bottle.

Given Thomson's active interest in Volunteering, writing to Belfast in order to procure 'a new system of exercise' for the Volunteers,<sup>59</sup> it seems sensible to conclude that he could not have taken issue with Burns's decision to enlist in the militia as such, but rather adhered to the more radical, paramilitary function of the Irish volunteer movement in their agitation for government reform. The fact that he arranged for copies of the *Northern Star* to be sent to Burns,<sup>60</sup> and which contained 'The Ayrshire Rose' (1796) a poem which paid tribute to Burns as 'the *one* time Ayrshire poet and ploughman'<sup>61</sup> seems to demonstrate a process of detachment from Burns as his own poetry matured. This contrasts sharply with the blanket theory of disenchanted idolater as elucidated by McIlvanney and Gray. Perhaps Thomson, who lived in the heartland of United Irish politics with a French invasion of Ireland expected imminently, was keen to remind Burns that his position as a radical in Scotland was neither as cohesive nor potent.

Particularly where the product is poetically superior to that of Burns's original, it seems that 'O Scotia's Bard' is testimony to Thomson's growing confidence in sporting with the work of his literary inspirations, extending even to the man he is alleged to have imitated.<sup>62</sup> Even if the sentiments of 'O Scotia's Bard' amount to genuine disgust with Burns's song, as Gray and McIlvanney assert, this incident by no means discouraged Thomson from writing daring and sophisticated political verse after 1795, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters. Thomson's parody of 'The

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<sup>59</sup> 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p. 324.

<sup>60</sup> J. Rabb to Thomson, 14<sup>th</sup> March 1794, TCD MS 7257, fol. 175: 'I'll very gladly open a correspondence with Mr Burns – and send him the *Star*, which I have a prospect of getting forwarded by Lemon of Donaghadee.'

<sup>61</sup> *Northern Star*, May 25-28, 1795. John Gray describes the poem as 'a virtual obituary to the still living Burns', 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p.330.

<sup>62</sup> McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical*, praises the poem thus, 'With its metrical fluency, its polemical poise and its cutting modulation [...] this is a much more assured and competent piece of work than the Burns song to which it replies. [...] Clearly for this Ulster poet at least, bardolatry had its limits.' (p. 239).

Dumfries Volunteers' marks the fact that Samuel Thomson as a poet was resoundingly independent of the influence of 'Burns the radical'.

In spite of a commitment to reformist and meritocratic principles, it is fair to say that Thomson, ever pragmatic, capitalized to some extent on the trend for radical poetry. His aims, as conveyed in the content of his correspondence with other poets, were first and foremost to establish himself as a poet of literary skill, and one whose bardship was not to be limited to spokesperson for the United Irish Society. While enthusiastic for the participation of the lower classes in state affairs, it is extremely unlikely that his design was to incite the public to extreme republicanism; he in fact betrayed concern that the mobilization of the uneducated masses without substantial measures of education would be a recipe for disaster:

Poor hinds by poverty abus'd,  
To aught but daily toil unus'd, [...]

Hence all these feuds and hellish broils,  
These conflicts that afflict our isles;  
There are exceptions – what the matter,  
The cause is – *people know no better*.<sup>63</sup>

Based partly on his experience as a schoolmaster, Thomson shared the key radical aspiration that literacy and education of the masses would bring about moral reform and, in turn, social reform. Although the poem's speaker cynically levels aristocrat with poor man, suggesting that Irish education does few favours for either, the inescapable sentiment is that the turmoil that has affected Ireland is in some way down to the actions of the uneducated mob who have allowed themselves to become the front line soldiers for a middle class who will not in turn extend the concessions they have won from the aristocracy.

Yet if the reservations expressed above in 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin' (1799) reflected Thomson's private views, his public print

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<sup>63</sup> 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin, a Pastoral Inscribed to my Rhyme-Composing Brother Mr Alexander Kemp' (1799), ll. 519-532, *New Poems*, p. 52.

ventures at this time took a remarkably different stance, particularly 'Epigram to a Rank Aristocrat', printed in the *Northern Star* on May 15, 1797, which proved to be Thomson's rhetorical grand finale in the *Northern Star* before the newspaper press was ransacked. This vicious satire on a landed gentleman, describes him as 'pork' to be cooked 'hissing with eggs in a pan; / Eat up by some red hot Republican clown / And go to form parts of the MAN!' (ll. 10-12). The poet argues that such ingestion might 'from a haughty Aristocrat knave / Be made a good Citizen True!' (ll. 15-16) suggesting that the only way to make a deserving patriot of a landowner is for him to be eaten and ingested by a true citizen, a Republican. Here Enlightenment ideas of citizenship, as opposed to the medieval term 'knave' which conjures up images of feudalism, are juxtaposed to produce cannibalistic satire which is reminiscent of the poetry of Jonathan Swift. Imagery of animals, particularly porcine, was commonplace in the satire of the 1790's following Burke's famous description of the 'swinish multitude',<sup>64</sup> giving birth to anti-Burkean verse in the *Northern Star* such as Paddy Pindar's 'Ode to the Pig.'<sup>65</sup>

Whether or not Thomson intended his poetry to incite levelling, he was writing in an exceptionally seditious tradition and his use of the term 'Republican' might effectively label him a Jacobin. Yet the self-revelatory violence of the speaker's tone invites questioning of the poet's intention: was Thomson joining in with the Jacobin propaganda often found in the radical press, or was he, like Burns in 'Holy Willie's Prayer' (1785) allowing the Jacobin speaker to reveal the venom and violence inherent in political ideology that had its beginnings in liberty, equality and fraternity? Just as the Jacobin engages in an act of cannibalism, so he becomes guilty of the same offence as the Aristocrat who he has murdered, highlighting the absurdity of the argument that the savage act of cannibalism could ever produce a good citizen. The poet appears to have played a cunning double

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<sup>64</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth, 1968; henceforward *Reflections*), p. 173.

<sup>65</sup> *Northern Star*, 25-28 May, 1795.

role, maintaining ambiguity in order to placate his *Northern Star* readership, but exploiting the half-truth of Augustan satire to expose what he apparently viewed as the hypocrisy of Jacobin republicanism. Once again, Thomson's work encapsulates the nuanced shades of political radicalism, demonstrating uneasiness with the prospect of violent physical force. Through the use of poetic voice, he aims to distinguish between positive political activism and a mob mentality which signifies, he implies prophetically, an alternative form of tyranny waiting in the wings.

Immediately following 'Epigram to a Rank Aristocrat', 'To the Cuckoo' (1797) featured in its penultimate stanza the uncharacteristically brazen verse which sets out his idea of republicanism, that of equality and fraternity:

Sweet bird, exulting, sing aloud,  
Thru' every green wood, glade and glen,  
No more thou meet'st a quarrelling crowd  
But TRUE UNITED IRISHMEN!<sup>66</sup>

This same poem re-appears in his post-rebellion 1799 edition of poetry but here the verse in question is curiously absent. Even without the explicit stanza, the poet relies on the reader to recognize the cuckoo as an unmistakable symbol of 'moral force' in radical circles:

The "Northern Star" represented the moral force of Ulster [...] there is music in moral force, which will be heard like the song of the cuckoo. The bird lays its eggs, and leaves them for a time; but it will come again and hatch them in due course, and the song will return with the season.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, it is significant that Thomson chose to depart entirely from his subtle radical pastoral vein, typical of the majority of his *Northern Star* poetry, and launch into such an explicit and radical stanza which seems

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<sup>66</sup> *Northern Star*, May 15-19<sup>th</sup>, 1797.

<sup>67</sup> James Hope quoted in R.R Madden, *The United Irishmen*, p. 233.

quite out of keeping with the rest of the poem, in rhythm and subject matter. The final stanza which follows it returns to the more subtle pastoral of the rest of the poem leaving the penultimate verse exposed and inconsistent.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, it confirms that Thomson utilised his firsthand knowledge of nature to exploit the radical currency of the pastoral genre.

Of further significance to the argument that Thomson sought to distance himself from the United Irishman, are his editorial decisions taken when republishing these two poems in *New Poems* (1799), substituting some expressions in 'Epigram to a Rank Aristocrat' with more diplomatic vocabulary and removing altogether the verse mentioning 'TRUE UNITED IRISHMEN' from 'To the Cuckoo'.<sup>69</sup> That Thomson should attempt to cover his tracks in the turbulent aftermath of the 1798 Rebellion is unsurprising, but it is impossible to ignore the fact that he published the more radical version of 'To the Cuckoo' (1797) at the time when the United Irishmen's intentions had converged on an armed rebellion. In spite of private reservations against the escalation toward physical force, he still appears to have been willing to bolster the United Irish position from the pages of the *Northern Star*. It may be the case that Thomson was merely responding to the predilections of his *Northern Star* readership, since many of his subscribers were readers of the *Northern Star* and at least ten of his 1793 subscribers were United Irish leaders.<sup>70</sup> The *Northern Star* offered a platform for Thomson to express his divided loyalties.

However, the adjacent positioning of the poems in the *Northern Star* highlights two very different strands of radical rhetoric. When measured against the idealistic pastoral 'Painite summer' imagery of 'To the Cuckoo'

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<sup>68</sup> An examination of the manuscript submitted by Thomson to the *Northern Star* shows that the poem was presented to the printers in the exact order in which the newspaper printed it, with no evidence of editing or interpolation, so we must take this as evidence that a political theme was the poet's intention, (TCD MS 7527, fol.169).

<sup>69</sup> 'To the Cuckoo' and 'Epigram to a Proud Aristocrat' (1799), *New Poems*, pp. 157-8; 210. Thomson revisions to his 'Epigram' include a new title, 'Epigram to a Proud Aristocrat', and the revision of the last line from 'made a good Citizen true' to 'made a man, honest and true'.

<sup>70</sup> They included Henry Joy McCracken, John Hughes, Samuel Neilson, James Orr, John Rabb, William Simms, Thomas Storey, Bartholomew Teeling and William Tennent, (*Poems*, pp. 9-19).



(1797), the violent rhetoric of ‘Epigram to a Rank Aristocrat’ calls to mind how far the French Republic of 1797 had drifted from its original values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Ultimately the sentiments traced through these overtly radical poems are perhaps best interpreted as enthusiasm for the early stages of the French Revolution and its wider implications for Ireland, and a trend of cooling revolutionary fervour typical also of the first generation English Romantics. David Hempton and Myrtle Hill draw attention to the many strands of religious radicalism arising from Irish Presbyterians from the ‘antique republicanism’ of the Hutchesonian Commonwealth Enlightenment coterie to hostility toward war and blood sports. It was perhaps the third strand of radicalism, that arising from ‘the American and French Revolutions, Paine’s *Rights of Man*, and the democratic corresponding societies’ that attracted Thomson initially and eventually disillusioned him. As a member of Isaac Patton’s Seceding Presbyterian congregation, Thomson came from a fairly conservative theological background but, like his fellow congregation member James Hope, shared the widespread enthusiasm for the early French Revolution. This can perhaps be traced back to a millenarian desire for the fall of popery, a desire which was not necessarily anti-Catholic, but formed in resistance to the use of force and compulsion in religion. Ian McBride argues that this redefinition of popery in an abstract sense enabled many Presbyterians ‘to condemn the anti-Catholic legislation as an instrument of antichristian tyranny.’<sup>71</sup>

By the time the French Committee for Public Safety was carrying out the regime of ‘the Terror’, Irish radicals were forced to confront the choice of reformist and revolutionary tactics.<sup>72</sup> It may be said that Thomas Paine’s writings reflected this dual phase trend in that his *Rights of Man* Parts I and II (1791), were received by radicals almost with almost universal enthusiasm in contrast to his later work, the *Age of Reason* (1794). The

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<sup>71</sup> McBride, “When Ulster Joined Ireland”, p. 92.

<sup>72</sup> Hempton & Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 24-25.

works of Paine were promoted in the Belfast *Northern Star* newspaper and circulated widely among Presbyterians through reading societies.<sup>73</sup>

Thomson acquired Paine's works from the bookseller William Mitchell and was likely responsible for circulating it among the Four Towns Bookclub.<sup>74</sup>

In addition to this, extracts of Paine's work were available in *Walker's Hibernian Journal*, a Dublin journal to which Aeneas Lamont, and likely Luke Mullan and Samuel Thomson, contributed.<sup>75</sup> When critical of the excesses of revolutionary fervour, Thomson appears to have been provoked mainly by the perceived threat of religious intolerance that he and others identified in some works inspired by Enlightenment philosophy, specifically the *Age of Reason*. The radicalism of Paine's *Age of Reason* was subversive at a much profounder level than the United Irishmen's aim of legal relief and constitutional independence, and Thomson's adverse reaction to Paine's later work is stronger evidence yet that his radicalism lay much deeper in his dissenting Protestantism than in contact with later French Revolutionary thought.

Although, to a certain degree, Thomson's Seceding Presbyterian background set him apart from many of his New Light radical contemporaries in Ulster during the 1790's, his views appear to follow the trend borne out by recent studies in Presbyterian history which demonstrate that 'Old Light' religious dissent fired Seceder and Covenanter radicals to oppose what they deemed to be tyrannical government. This 'eclectic radical tradition' is defined by Ian McBride as having roots in 'conceptions of liberty constructed in the conflict between the various Presbyterian p[arties and the Anglican establishment.'<sup>76</sup> This same ideology, which more

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770-1840*, (Oxford, OUP, 2006; hereafter *Presbyterian Belief and Practice*), p. 279.

<sup>74</sup> William Mitchell to Samuel Thomson, 24<sup>th</sup> August, 1792, TCD MS 7257, f. 162.

<sup>75</sup> 'Rights of Man: being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution. By Thomas Paine', *Walker's Hibernian Magazine, or, Compendium of entertaining knowledge*, (1792:Jan.) p.34.

<sup>76</sup> McBride, "When Ulster joined Ireland", p. 91.

accurately represented lay opinion in the countryside, also divided the United Irish movement at certain key pivotal points.<sup>77</sup> Mary Ann McCracken gave an account of the divisive influence of Paine's *Age of Reason* at one rebel camp in Ulster which, upon being read, caused several Covenanters and Seceders to walk away.<sup>78</sup> Certainly in Thomson's 'Answer to Paine's *Age of Reason*' (1797),<sup>79</sup> his accusation that Paine's work 'has set morals at odds', causing men to Bawl out "Revolution, and down with the Gods!" (ll. 29-30) and 'exciting cross parties to blows' (ll. 36) strongly indicates that he regarded Paine's later work as ultimately divisive. Thomson's poem 'Answer to Paine's *Age of Reason*' has been described as one of his most vehement satires but also one of his most 'unrestrainedly conservative' poems:<sup>80</sup>

But what could provoke you to write such a babble,  
And print it, to poison the minds of the rabble? [...]  
Contemptible trifle – O had it in wind  
Pass'd from your republican *section* behind,  
Or e'en like a bull-frog kept croaking within,  
'Twou'd have sav'd your poor soul from a world of sin (ll. 7-16)

Thomson was doubtless influenced by what fellow Seceder and United Irish leader James Hope called 'the republican spirit, inherent in the principles of the Presbyterian community',<sup>81</sup> but like many of the United Irishmen, he was first and foremost a Calvinist Presbyterian and was affronted by what he interpreted as a dangerous drift toward Deism in Paine's latest work. It is

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<sup>77</sup> Crawford Gribben points out the nature of Covenanter theology to politics: 'Arbitrary power was the tyranny to which the Covenanters most clearly objected. But theirs was more than a merely political dissent. In Covenanter rhetoric – and supremely in Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex* (1644) – the possibility of tyrannical power united political and theological concerns.' ('James Hogg, Scottish Calvinism and Literary Theory', *Scottish Studies Review*, vol.5, no. 2, Autumn 2004, (Glasgow: Association of Scottish Literary Studies), pp 9-26, (p. 16).

<sup>78</sup> Nancy J. Curtin, *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Belfast and Dublin, 1791-1798*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998), 191.

<sup>79</sup> Thomson, *New Poems on a Variety of Different Subjects*, (Belfast: Doherty & Simms 1799), pp. 164-5.

<sup>80</sup> Robinson & Scott, 'Introduction', *Country Rhymes*, p. xii.

<sup>81</sup> Hope quoted in R.R Madden, *The United Irishmen*, p. 228.

clear from the daily newspapers that even those men of the most radical persuasion who welcomed Paine's 'Rights of Man' did not necessarily welcome its sequel, as is shown in the writings of the Scottish radical James Tytler who published pamphlets critiquing the *Age of Reason* while he was immersed in the radical politics of Belfast.<sup>82</sup> It is interesting that, having lost himself in abusive language in line 35, the speaker of the 'Address to Paine' loses his fervour and goes on to pity the exiled Paine:

Poor wasp of commotion, the football of fate,  
A fugitive driven from state unto state,  
Still panting to join the political fray,  
With horrible wars, guilt and gibbets to stay [...] (ll. 31-35).

This reference to war and execution demonstrates that by 1797 Thomson had grown disillusioned with the French Republic, particularly following the Terror years of 1794-1795 and vented his sorrow at Paine's desperation to lobby the French government. His overwhelming sense of sympathy for Paine as a fellow misled radical overshadows the poet's righteous anger, echoing the opinion of many who were revolutionary enthusiasts in 1792 that the Revolutionary settlement had not produced the achievements expected, and many feared the logical extension of French Revolutionary violence to Ireland.

In order to avoid stereotyping Thomson as a 'conservative', particularly in comparison with the glamorously radical depiction of fellow poet James Orr, it is important to place their work within the context of the different, often antagonistic, strands of radicalism running through the United Irish movement during the 1790s. Marianne Elliott's study of the movement differentiates between the growing discomfort of the Real Whig 'moderate' wing, such as that of William Drennan in relation to the increasing revolutionary tendencies, against Wolfe Tone's wholesale

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<sup>82</sup> James Fergusson, *Balloon Tytler* (London: Faber, 1972), pp. 134-35.

embrace of French revolutionary principals.<sup>83</sup> Without evidence of his taking up arms in 1798, Thomson appears to have preferred to advocate radical messages through persuasion in the cultural media, though this might render a straightforward reading of vicious, cannibalistic satire like 'Epigram to a Rank Aristocrat' (1797) an irresponsible act of incitement on Thomson's part. It is therefore imperative to perform a nuanced reading of United Irish influence on Thomson as a poet. There is evidence to suggest that he was deeply uncomfortable with a revolutionary option, and indeed seemed somewhat taken by surprise when bloodshed became a realistic danger. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess how far Thomson favoured Catholic Emancipation. It was perhaps easy for a young poet to openly support the United Irish cause in the early 1790s, during the era of optimism and excitement, and when close friends like Luke Mullan were painting slogans on the green flag of the Roughfort Volunteers and marching through Belfast to commemorate the fall of the Bastille.<sup>84</sup>

During the years of heightening tension between 1797 and 1798, Thomson maintained correspondence with a number of politically active people such as the Belfast citizen Aeneas Lamont who had spent time in Revolutionary America; radical Antrim weaver poets and United Irishmen such as Luke Mullan and James Orr. It is of interest that only two letters to Thomson exist from the period July 1798 to January 1802, during the aftermath of the Revolution, suggesting that a great deal of his correspondence had been destroyed.<sup>85</sup> Whether this was intentional or not, we are still left with a number of interesting references that shed some light upon the political situation. Although the majority of these letters are

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<sup>83</sup> Marianne Elliott, *Partners in revolution: the United Irishmen and France* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>84</sup> R. R. Madden, *Antrim and Down in '98: The Lives of Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope, William Putnam McCabe, Rev. James Porter, Henry Munro* (Cameron, Ferguson & Co.: 1860), p. 101.

<sup>85</sup> The letters concern only Thomson's attempts to publish a second volume, suggesting that his correspondence may have been cherry-picked for preservation by his close friend, John Williamson, into whose custody the letters fell after Thomson's death; or that Thomson himself had destroyed it.

concerned with literary subjects, the above discussion of radical pastoral shows that poetry was by no means an apolitical subject. The state of alert in Britain as a whole is unmistakable from Aeneas Lamont's constant updates to Thomson as to the possibility of French invasion as well as news of the arrest and trial of suspects in Belfast on the eve of the 1798 rebellion.<sup>86</sup> It is notable that this correspondence, the most explicitly political that Thomson received, was carried on in private while Thomson was rebuilding his poetic career in the pages of the moderate *Belfast News Letter*, following the destruction of the *Northern Star*.

In addition to his position as confidante to these men who were, at least, sympathetic to the United Irish cause, Thomson's own private thoughts on the coming possibility of armed struggle evince a genuine struggle of conscience. It has been asserted by Robinson and Scott that Thomson must have been aware that he was treading a thin line as, a year previously in a verse epistle published in the *Northern Star*, he urged his poetic correspondent, the Rev. James Glass, to 'quat politics and news / To other themes invoke your muse'.<sup>87</sup> However, upon closer reading, the poem exhibits anything but avoidance of politics, and the publicly printed verse epistle and the reply solicited from Glass is an excellent example of political pastoral in which the traditional prospect poem is subverted as the poets look down on aristocrats. Thomson's speaker and the poet are transported to an imaginary pastoral scene based on the radicalised Lyle Hill landscape where both poets sit 'in rural state, and smile on a' the *little great*' (15-16). This rhetoric is typical of Thomson's tendency to set himself above the owners of the landscape and, as late as 1806 while he was engaged in soliciting the patronage of Lord Templeton, Thomson dared to address 'the golden great on whirling wing' to tell them that 'we here look down on *you*': a stern challenge to those critics of Thomson who feared that he had

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<sup>86</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 9 May 1798 (f. 47); Aeneas Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 9 June, 1797 (f. 78); Lamont to Thomson, 9 Sep 1797, f. 80.

<sup>87</sup> 'Stanzas addressed to the Rev. James Glass, A.M', ll. 57-58, *Northern Star* 3-7 April, 1797.

been won over by the power of aristocratic patronage.<sup>88</sup> Certainly, Glass's 'Answer' (1797)<sup>89</sup> demonstrated that Thomson's superior knowledge of the landscape to that of the aristocrats who owned it was regarded by others as firing the patriot heart:

Thro' verdant bow'rs and blooming meads to stray [...]
   
And bid me sing of *Freedom's* glorious fire,
   
Which leads the *Patriot* to the hostile field,
   
To conquer or to die, but ne'er to yield! (ll. 29-36)

Glass was a considerable radical poet in his own right and in praising Thomson, he identified his work within a recognizable vein of radicalism that challenged the right of the aristocracy to land ownership in the face of a disenfranchised labouring class who worked the land and produced wealth for others. It seems clear that, given his own success in using pastoral as a cloaking device for radical themes, Thomson's message to Glass to 'quat politics' (l. 57) emphasized that the role of a poet was much greater than polemical influence over weaker minds, but he must also serve also the higher purposes of Art and education, and thus to raise the profile of Irish cultural life. Glass's high rhetorical flourish and admission that his friend 'speak[s] the real feelings of [his] heart' (l. 42) identified Thomson and Burns as kindred spirits in their sympathetic and patriotic engagement with nature through a combination of literary craftsmanship and labouring-class 'modesty', both poets as fulfilling the bardic function of inciting the patriot to arms.

With such rousing poems in his repertoire, it is little wonder that Thomson's decline into silence after 1798 should be such an intriguing question, and his letters from the mid-1790s betray a growing consciousness of the dangerous position in which a poet could find himself. Government increased its attempts to repress 'seditious' poetry and many of those less

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<sup>88</sup> 'The Gloaming, a Rhapsody' (1806), ll. 9, 12, *Simple Poems*, p. 52.

<sup>89</sup> 'Verses by the Rev. James Glass, A.M in answer to those addressed to him by Mr Samuel Thomson of Cargranny.' (1797), *Northern Star*, April 10-14, 1797.

careful in their subject matter found that enquiries into their affairs had been conducted. Thomson's 1798 correspondence with fellow Scottish poet Alexander Kemp reveals that Kemp had been investigated by the government on the basis of his poetic verse and warned Thomson to 'Shun politics [...] the *noli me tangere* of the present age'.<sup>90</sup> Kemp's cautioning arose from his receipt of Thomson's continuation of 'The Twa Dogs', an excerpt written in the style of Burns from Thomson's pastoral 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin' (1799) which, although he stated he was 'particularly pleased' with it, he warned that 'however obliquely discussed, or tenderly touched, [political verses] may be productive of serious consequences.'<sup>91</sup> Kemp's reaction to the manuscript demonstrates first that Thomson engaged with political poetry right up to the rebellion, and second that even a re-working of Burns' famous animal fable was not subtle enough to avoid detection.

Both Thomson and Kemp wrote on political subjects and published in the Belfast newspapers, resulting in a government investigation into Kemp's writing. It seems sensible to question whether a similar investigation was undertaken of Thomson's poetry, thus accounting for his poetic and epistolary silence during 1798-99? In fact, a hitherto unknown poem 'The Thoughtful Bard', dated 24 April 1792, is catalogued among the Rebellion Papers in Dublin, seized among documents from the *Northern Star* which also includes a sequel to 'The Linnet' by Luke Mullan.<sup>92</sup> The discovery of such a poem of radical content, even more daring in its anti-aristocratic sentiments than 'The Bard's Farewell!', is unsurprising, considering Thomson's great success in public print during his lifetime and suggests that his definition of 'bard' was strongly coloured by his political sympathies in the 1790s. Kemp and Thomson seem to have developed a method of writing to one another by inscribing short sentences which could

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<sup>90</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1798, TCD MS 7257, f. 47.

<sup>91</sup> Kemp to Thomson, *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> 'S. Thompson, Carngranney, author of "The Thoughtful Bard"', Rebellion Papers, 620/19/77.



only be decoded by the recipient if he read it backwards, suggesting that radical subjects were indeed discussed between them: 'I send you a most bitter philippic, two of our deceased *Eccentrics*, against our present *Lacihcranom ynitsed*<sup>93</sup> – I need scarcely tell you, suggest the expediency of keeping it *private*.'<sup>94</sup> The danger of publishing radical verse in the *Northern Star* seems to have been highlighted for Thomson by correspondence with the poet and Northern Star typesetter, Aeneas Lamont who informed him of the fate of several Northern Star proprietors and employees, disguised in a casual remark about a flageolet:

Tom kean<sup>95</sup> has one, I believe, but he is not at home – I thought you knew about him – he was out on a ride for the Star about 3 months ago, and was taken up at Newtownlimivaddy [Limavady] and sent to Derry Jail, when he was kept about 6 weeks, removed to Dublin by a habeus, about 3 weeks ago where he was discharged on bail by the Chief Justice. I have been in expectation of his arrival here every night since his liberation, and cannot for my life divine the cause of his delay – if he has a flagelet, you shall have it when he comes home.<sup>96</sup>

In order to be trusted with the business of the prisoners, Lamont was obviously involved to a great extent in United Irish circles. His reason for communicating this information is clarified by James Hope's account of his own charge of carrying messages to 'the Kilmainham prisoners [...] [including] five young men of Belfast' in 1796.'<sup>97</sup> This group was likely to have included Tom Kean, but it is perhaps because of Hope's errand that Thomson was informed by Lamont of the delay. Thomson's best friend

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<sup>93</sup> "Monarchical destiny"

<sup>94</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 17 Dec 1797, *ibid.*, f. 33.

<sup>95</sup> A.T.Q Stewart identified 'One William Kean, a clerk of the *Northern Star* in Belfast [who] was arrested along with Henry Munro but escaped', *Summer Soldiers: the 1798 Rebellion in Antrim and Down*, (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995), p.250; but Gillian O'Brien identifies him as 'Neilson's clerk, Thomas Kane' in 'Spirit, Impartiality and Independence: The *Northern Star*, 1792-7', p. 19.

<sup>96</sup> Aeneas Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 9<sup>th</sup> Sep. 1797, TCD MS 7257, f. 80.

<sup>97</sup> R.R Madden, *The United Irishmen*, p. 246.

Luke Mullan was Hope's brother-in-law, and Thomson appears to have been charged with carrying Mullan's news from the British Navy to his family in Ulster. It is therefore tempting to speculate that Thomson carried Mullan's news of a sensitive political nature to the United Irishmen of Belfast.

Certainly, even in spite of intensifying political repression, Thomson's desire for political news from Belfast only increased and he retained a privileged position as confidant of news from Belfast of United Irish activities. His constant Belfast correspondent, Aeneas Lamont, sent him frequent accounts of Britain's war with France, and very carefully expressed to Thomson details of how plans for rebellion were coming along in the face of the Belfast citizens' apparent powerlessness in the face of grievances inflicted by the loyalist troops, including the destruction of the *Northern Star* newspaper:

The French are threatening to punish perfidious England – *They will* put their threats in Execution [...] There are vast preparations going forward on all the French coasts – These can only be for England or Ireland [...] The Mutiny on the fleet still continues in all the ports [...] At home we have nothing but one frightful scene of unbridled brutality after another. There are about 20 houses ransacked here, some of them gutted and their furniture destroyed – all this is done in open day, without so much as a magistrate making his appearance, nor can anyone go to look for within law or justice. This is done by Orange Soldiers and Yeomen. [...] <sup>98</sup>

In his daring description of 'perfidious England', Lamont drew on the well-known Jacobite expression 'Pefidious Albion' used throughout history by England's Catholic neighbours, implying England's perpetual treachery.<sup>99</sup> Lamont also informed Thomson of the destruction of the *Northern Star*, 'You will get no more Stars or impartial news,' and with this, Lamont became Thomson's main source of international and political news.

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<sup>98</sup> Aeneas Lamont to Samuel Thomson, [9] June 1797, TCD MS 7527 f. 77.

<sup>99</sup> Schmidt, H.D. 'The Idea and Slogan of "Perfidious Albion"', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Oct., 1953), pp. 604–616.

Lamont's views are clear as he rounds off his lengthy letter by quoting lines from United Irish leader William Drennan's poem 'Erin to her own tune': 'Men of Erin arise and make haste to be blest, / Rise! - Arch of the accan and green of the West.' Lamont was by no means the first poet of Thomson's circle to entertain radical politics on the side. Thomson's most prolific correspondent, his neighbour Luke Mullan, on board the HMS Queen Charlotte from 1796, was involved in the Spithead mutiny of 1797 and wrote to Thomson in similar ambiguous language to tell him that it was settled.<sup>100</sup>

Although Thomson's correspondence mentions nothing of the rebellion, the lengthy silence of his pen and the gap in his correspondence is ominous. His shock discovery in 1804 that his friend Aeneas Lamont had been dead for over one year suggests that he may have allowed his correspondence with more radical friends in the city to slacken.<sup>101</sup> Historical records demonstrate the particularly devastating consequences of insurrection for Templepatrick and the harbouring of fugitives in the Lyle Hill area (situated strategically on the mountain backroad to Belfast), makes it almost impossible that Thomson escaped its effects. The only explicit poetic evidence of his reaction to the aftermath of the rebellion is a bitter piece of anti-Hogmanay, 'Reflections on the Last Night of the Year 1798' (1799) which appears to express sorrow and regret at the events of the past year. The poet invokes the image of the individual called to account for his misdeeds, particularly those that fall within the 'crimson journal of these isles', implying a bloody history which engulfs Ireland, Scotland and England and, though it does not explicitly blame the British authorities, the image of crimson blood flowing from the nation is not without its bardic undertones. The poem is written through the eyes of the piper Damon, who,

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<sup>100</sup> Mullan to Thomson, 15 May 1797, f. 10.

<sup>101</sup> Dorothea Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 23 Mar. 1804, TCD MS 7257, f. 81. Thomson appears to have discovered the news somehow, and wrote immediately to Mrs Lamont, who replied with the letter referenced here. Mrs Lamont's comments that no verses were published in memory of her husband, may demonstrate how reliant rural people, like Thomson, were upon the Belfast newspapers to carry such news.

in absenting himself from the new year festivities, beholds in his imagination an apocalyptic scene infused with Christian theology where ‘the burthen’d herald of a guilty world ... stand[s] indicted’ along with the rest of mankind: ‘we the insects of this fleeting day,’ a potential allusion to Burke’s ‘swinish multitude’ or, as Tim Burke argues, Edmund Burke’s reference to the multitude as noisy, disruptive grasshoppers.<sup>102</sup> Thomson’s association of mankind with insects adds to the image of the people envisioned by their rulers as nothing but a crushable swarm of the lowest life on earth. This is further borne out in the image of the ‘great King’ to whom the lay is addressed seems inspired by the Old Testament God of judgement from whom Damon seeks forgiveness.

The question remains: who must be forgiven? Is he praying on behalf of himself; interceding for the rebels, or the rulers? The poem carefully masks any criticism of government by implying that the guilt is shared by all mankind. The reference to ‘acts of treason’ for which mankind stands ‘indicted’ is highly ambiguous given the historical context of 1798 when several of Thomson’s subscribers had been tried and some executed for treason, like United Irish leader Henry Joy McCracken, a subscriber to Thomson’s poems in 1793. The poet’s sorrow is clear and his speaker’s act of retreat may reflect the heavy punishment inflicted upon Templepatrick village for the involvement of many of its inhabitants in the 1798 Battle of Antrim, particularly the stockpiling of arms, hidden under the floorboards of the Templepatrick Presbyterian meeting house which were subsequently picked up by the rebels along the way to the battlefield of Donegore Hill.<sup>103</sup> The repercussions of the failed rebellion changed the political landscape of Templepatrick immensely as the Ordnance Survey Memoirs record that ‘in the rebellion [...] the inhabitants of this parish were engaged almost to a man, and on 7<sup>th</sup> June, they marched in a large body from Templepatrick to Donegore. They, however, received such a warning,

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<sup>102</sup> Tim Burke, ‘Poetry and Self-Fashioning in 1790’s Ulster’, p. 40

<sup>103</sup> *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland*, p. 109.

in the deaths of many of the inhabitants and in the burning of their village, that they have not since meddled in politics.’<sup>104</sup>

Thomson’s cottage was situated on the northern brow of Lyle’s Hill boasted a clear view of Donegore Hill and the question of where Thomson was on the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1798 remains. ‘Elegiac Verses on the Death of a Beloved Mother’ (1798)<sup>105</sup> pays a first person tribute to a parent ‘who died on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1798’, the very day of the Antrim rising. Thomson’s ‘turning out’ on the day of Antrim rebellion has never been established but from his private correspondence, he certainly expressed reservations about the benefit of an armed struggle. Given that in the poem, the death of the mother took place on the very day of the Battle of Antrim in which the Roughtfort corps served Henry Joy McCracken, it inevitably, though perhaps uncharitably, renders what appears to be an unfortunate family event slightly suspicious. If we accept that the mother in question was Mrs Thomson, two theories surrounding the poem are plausible: a) it was a genuine tragedy coincidentally occurring on the day of the Rising; or b) the tragedy was a convenient public print excuse for not turning out on the day. Neither explanation is particularly satisfactory given that there is no death notice in the Belfast newspapers nor does Thomson mention that his mother or father are living in poetry or letters. The curious dearth of Thomson’s correspondence from 1798-99 may offer an even more provocative reading in that the ‘beloved mother’ lamented may not symbolize any living woman at all; indeed, it is possible that ‘a Beloved Mother’ was a deliberate figurative rendering of Mother Liberty and the death of Irish independence in Mother Erin:

Long, with a patient and unruffled mind,  
Affliction’s anguish she un murmuring bore;  
At length her weary spirit she resign’d,  
And sweet affection warms my soul no more! (ll. 5-8)

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid*

<sup>105</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 178-9.

While the defeat of the Irish rebels at Antrim by no means quelled the movement altogether, moderates like Thomson, who were left behind to witness acts of retribution, may have resented the moral high ground of unrepentant radicals who went on the run. When the long anticipated French aid did not come, retreat into domestic quietism appears to have been a necessity for those left behind. Was it simply convenient and prudent to condemn radical excess altogether, having become utterly disillusioned with the tyrannical turn of events in France under the Terror and, subsequently, under Napoleon? In radical Ulster, disillusionment with the French Revolution seemed slower to trickle through, and hopes remained among the most radical that a French liberation of Britain might be expected in the winters of 1798 and 1799. But by 1799, many members of the moderate Belfast public were convinced that the French had done more to oppress individual liberty in the countries they invaded:

When the French Revolution commenced in 1789, there were a few honest men that did not wish it success [...] HOW HAVE OUR HOPES BEEN REALIZED? – RELIGION is laughed at, a strumpet representing the Goddess of Reason in one of their most solemn festivals [...] Has LIBERTY shared a better fate than RELIGION? No.— [...] Within the last two years see more printing presses put down in a week, than were silenced in England or Ireland for one hundred years. See the banishment of Directors, and Representatives returned by the people without a specific charge, a hearing, a trial, or a conviction. [...] Wherever they [the French] go you find them confounding the true principles of freedom with the false, exciting the poor against the rich, and ruining both poor and rich, by the never-failing consequences that fall to every country they enter [...]'<sup>106</sup>

The writer of this piece, 'A.B' of Lurgan also contributed a poem in which he described the French nation as 'homocidal *Gallia*' [sic], a far cry from the verses of endorsement that many contributed to the *Northern Star* only a few years previously.<sup>107</sup> The following week, 'Paloemon' of Antrim contributed 'An Acrostic' in honour of Lord Bridport, commander of the

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<sup>106</sup> Belfast News-Letter, 7 May 1799.

<sup>107</sup> BNL, 17 May 1799.

British fleet, referencing Burns's 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat', ending with the stirring line, 'Rejoice Britannia, if the fleets engage, / Then haughty Gaul will feel great Bridport's rage.'<sup>108</sup>

Even in the most resistant county of Ulster, the mood appeared now in favour of war for the defence of Britain against a common enemy. Linda Colley writes that 'Long before 1803, the French had ceased to be viewed, even by many radicals, as liberators and exemplars for the unreformed states of Europe,'<sup>109</sup> and there are hints in *New Poems* (1799) of a growing disgust with Napoleonic France, disguised in animal fable. Thomson seems to have taken this view from the late 1790s, penning 'Lilt to a Frog' (1799) which seems to make a deliberate reference to Napoleonic France:

ATTENTION, Monsieur Frog;  
There, on the dainty fog,  
Squat on thy burn so yellow,  
For two minutes sit thee still,  
But this is not thy will,  
For faith thou art a restless sort of fellow.<sup>110</sup>

The frog appellation had evidently come to represent the aggressive Frenchman in the British popular press as an anonymous contribution to the *Glasgow Courier* shows, 'Very well Mr Nick Frog, then come your ways over, / The nearest I think is from Calais to Dover, / We'll teach you fine things, 'mong others we trust, / The grand vulgarism of *biting the dust*.'<sup>111</sup> Although the poem appears to describe the history of the French and their monarch, the sentiments are clearly universally applicable to all monarchies,

Thy fathers, like the Jews,  
Poor ideots, did refuse  
Without a king to dwell

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<sup>108</sup> BNL, 21 May 1799.

<sup>109</sup> Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation: 1707-1837*, (New Haven [Conn.] ; London : Yale University Press, 2009), p. 318.

<sup>110</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 197.

<sup>111</sup> *Glasgow Courier*, 27 January 1798.

When Jupiter, they say,  
Sent one, which in a day  
Or less, they wish'd in hell!

The French were given a king who 'was wood' (mad) and have traded him in for 'Monsieur Stork', apparently playing on the description of Louis XVI as 'King Log' and Napoleon as 'King Stork', insinuating that they have traded one despot in for another. However, Thomson's use of the word 'wood', which is also the middle English word for 'insane', immediately conjures the image of George III who at this point was thought to be suffering from a form of insanity. 'Monsieur Stork' could therefore, in a British context, refer to William Pitt the younger, who was often depicted as scrawny and stork-like in political caricatures, and whose family crest contained an image of a stork. The interest in family crests and coats of arms would reflect the increasing interest in antiquarianism in Britain, and perhaps informed Thomson's political symbolism. The poem should thus be read as an intricately coded political mirror on the British Regency crisis where the implication is that the Prime Minister had assumed the royal prerogative through the insanity of the king. The poets counsel, 'Go to hell and seek redress, / Or live just as you are' implies that French republicans, who deposed one king only to gain an Emperor, have got exactly what they deserve. This highly intricate animal fable is further evidence that Thomson's political radicalism thus lies much deeper in his Dissenter politics than in his contact with French Enlightenment thought, but it demonstrates also that he retains a measure of ambivalence toward the British state. Condemnation of the constitutional arrangement of the French state has obvious implications for monarchical government in England, and barely revises the regicidal sentiments of 'The Hawk and the Weazel' (1796).

Thomson's later sorrow following the failure of the rebellion of 1798, finds itself couched in terms of bitterness:

Let fools political their heads perplex  
'bout that which ignorant, as I of Greek, indeed they are.



It makes me lunatic almost to hear,  
 Some clownish blockheads, Frenchified fools,  
 Lisp out, affected, their exotic terms  
 Of Citizen and Section, nonsense all.<sup>112</sup>

The excerpt above is taken from Thomson's calendar poem, 'The Year in 12 Fits – Inscribed to Damon' (1799) where the poet assumes an almost monastic position upon the brow of Lyle's Hill, looking down upon the cottages of his friends, offering constant prayers for their welfare. The title of the excerpt, 'June', combined with its reflective tone and political subject matter ensures that there can be no doubt that the verses refer to the events of the Battle of Antrim in the previous year.

Thomson's plea to 'Ye powers that order from confusion bring [...] protect my friends' seems to be a clear reference to friends like James Orr and James Hope, who were on the run following the failed rebellion of 1798. In his criticism of 'Frenchified fools' (l. 32), he is explicitly critical of those who continue to talk the revolutionary talk without the actions of the '*virtuous man*', thus differentiating between the virtuous intentions of comrades like Orr and those of ill-informed and bloodthirsty jacobins. The reference to 'Frenchified fools' betrays the fact that his condemnation is reserved mainly for the lack of French military support following the death of General Hoche and the nation's subsequent abandonment of plans to liberate Ireland. While it would be too far to suggest that Thomson was so much governed by a humanist sense of order that he eschewed rebellion, he became increasingly concerned with the role that the mercantile classes had played in bringing about the Irish Rebellion. As the following Chapter will demonstrate further, it seems undeniable that it was the poet's religious belief in virtuous individual action that informs his political poetry, encouraging him to satirise the behaviour of individuals who threaten this worldview. It does beg the question would Thomson have been less critical of these classes had the Irish Rebellion been a success?

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<sup>112</sup> 'June', ll. 29-34, from 'The Year in 12 Fits, Ascribed to Damon' (1799), *New Poems*, p. 221.

Regardless of private misgivings as the United Irishmen transitioned toward 'physical force', Thomson was not a conservative and never condemned the actions of the United Irishmen, a point which is further borne out in the following chapter which examines the period directly preceding the Act of Union. During the Union period, there was ample opportunity for a remonstrant radical poet to prove his loyalty to the crown by lending his voice to calls for parliamentary Union, but Thomson remained committed to publishing in an anti-Unionist journal which featured 'Protest Against an Union with Great Britain by William Drennan'.<sup>113</sup> Though he may have felt it unwise, Thomson was not unduly critical of those who pledged themselves to armed action, but, like James Orr in 'Donegore Hill' (1804), he appears disillusioned with the reality of the mass desertion that took place on 7 June 1798. Orr's narrator points to the oath sworn by the United Irishmen, that 'ilk loun will swear to, never swithrin',<sup>114</sup> but reflects that a man's honour, if hastily sworn, is tested and found wanting in the face of battle. Thomson's rational plea to 'individuals [to] REFORM THEMSELVES, / And represent them, each the *virtuous man*' insists upon the same asset that Orr's narrator identifies as lacking in his troops; that of sufficient self-knowledge.

Thomson's growing emphasis on individual responsibility marks the lingering influence of Enlightenment rationalism and even New Light theology on his political beliefs. However, as the following chapters will demonstrate, his belief in the improvement of man was moderated by a discovery similar to that of Wordsworth's disillusioned radical; that is, the recognition that much of human destiny relies on the actions of a single person, such as a Robespierre, who distorted liberty into terror; or Napoleon who transformed that terror into tyranny. This Romantic acceptance of the individual destiny would, in Thomson's case, be expressed in explicitly Christian terms, rather than the humanist, egoistic terms of Wordsworth.

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<sup>113</sup> *The Microscope and Minute Observer*, (March, 1800), 2 vols, (Belfast: Joseph Smyth, 1799-1800; hereafter *The Microscope*), II (1800), 3, pp. 131-5.

<sup>114</sup> Orr, 'Donegore Hill', ll. 95-96 (1804), *Collected Works*, pp. 33-37.

However, as the following chapters show, Thomson's radicalism became increasingly spiritual and evangelical, reflecting the radical republicanism of his Seceder heritage and the growing evangelicalism of the nineteenth-century Presbyterian churches.

## Chapter Four

### **‘Here no treason lurks’ – Bardic Self-Rehabilitation in the Wake of Union 1798-1801**

If the 1790s had been the age in which Thomson engaged with rebellion, the years up to the Anglo-Irish Act of Union (1801) might be described as a time in which he contemplated romantic ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’.<sup>1</sup> Whether by design or by necessity, Thomson attempted a subtle rehabilitation of his public image by cultivating a literary persona engaged with quietism and retreat into local community themes, including local linguistic utterance. This was necessary since Thomson’s poetic reputation had relied largely on frequent features in the *Northern Star* and had thus been identified with the rebel cause of the United Irishmen. Now that the *Northern Star*’s platform had been removed from him, it was necessary to reinvent his bardic persona so as to maintain legitimacy as an Irish poet in a world where his political affiliations had been castigated as treasonous. In response, Thomson appears at first to root himself in localised bardic context, but closer reading soon reveals that the poetry of the 1797-1800 period maintains a subtle dialogue with the political.

Having been initially energised and excited by the prospect of liberty embodied in the early years of the French Revolution, Thomson betrays deep anger with the despotic turn of Revolutionary France toward Terror and conquest.<sup>2</sup> These feelings were inflamed further by his own experience of the failure of the Irish Rebellion in 1798. Having previously expressed a passion for the Ossianic romantic narrative of Macpherson, Thomson gained firsthand experience of being ‘left behind’ in a post-war landscape, having

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to Lyrical Ballads’ (1800), *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; hereafter *Lyrical Ballads*), p. 239.

<sup>2</sup> Disaffection with the French is evident in Thomson’s poem ‘Lilt to a Frog’ (1799) in *New Poems*, p. 197 (discussed above) and is further evinced in ‘To a Spider’ (1799) discussed below.

witnessed the forced exile of his more senior United Irish friends James Orr and James Hope. Thomson found himself living on in a post-rebellion world, assailed by guilt and weakness, inevitably encouraging him to fashion himself as ‘the ghostly figure of disconnected artist’.<sup>3</sup> As a man of radical associations, if not personal involvement, it might have been tempting for Thomson to take refuge in conservative self-protection, but instead of joining the many voices calling for a parliamentary Union, he demonstrated a response which has more in common with the intellectual project of fellow disillusioned radicals, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the political turmoil of the Rebellion and Union debates, the vocabulary of union and fragmentation was widespread and even within the poetry of the locale Thomson betrays high emotion and political resistance. From the fireside of ‘Crambo Cave’ and from the slopes of Lyle Hill, he engaged with the painful memory of the 1798 Rebellion and prospect of the coming Union, through a series of covert mechanisms: from the use of Scots language and verse forms to disguise themes of political resistance, to the imaginative exploration of different types of ‘union’, including the sexual and the fraternal.

A remarkable gap in Thomson’s correspondence occurs during the political upheaval of the years 1798-1800, directly in the wake of the Irish Rebellion, when the British Government was preparing to attract ‘popular support’ for an Anglo-Irish parliamentary union, having divested the Irish Parliament at Dublin of its powers.<sup>4</sup> Even the radical area of Templepatrick had been brought under control by force of government arms, paralyzing the demoralized former rebels.<sup>5</sup> Those who had escaped the consequences of involvement in the rising continued to be objects of suspicion, particularly during the winters of 1798-99 when the government believed that, in

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<sup>3</sup> Fiona Stafford quoted in Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union: making connections in Scottish and American writing*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002; thereafter *Fragments of Union*), p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland, 1603-1923*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 275, 282-3.

<sup>5</sup> Thomson’s landlord, John Templetown of Castle-Upton, reportedly feeling betrayed by his tenants, was listed as a supporter of a Parliamentary Union. (*Belfast News-Letter*, 4 October 1799.)

addition to active cells of Jacobin conspirators through Britain, the French were preparing for another invasion of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> Retreat into the confidence of his choice circle of friends, in addition to reaction against community talk and censure, appears to propel Thomson in several poems on the subject of Calumny; but his post-1798 work also betrays his own confidence in a living and active local community which is, contrary to the picture of a community beaten into submission painted by the authors of the *Ordnance Survey Memoirs*, anything but humble, or simple.<sup>7</sup> While a prospective Act of Union was not discussed openly in Thomson's second volume, critics such as Tim Burke (2003) and, in particular, Frank Ferguson (2009), have drawn attention to a number of references to imaginative, philosophical, cultural, and religious 'unions' within Thomson's work that 'offer an insight into Presbyterian attitudes to union with and their sense of difference to Great Britain.'<sup>8</sup> These imaginative unions explore human relationships through friendships, from romances (with undertones of sexual union) to ecclesiastic union. The effect of Union with Britain on Thomson's identity as an Irishman was not to absorb him into an agenda of 'Britishness'; nor did it encourage him to write backward-looking elegies or bardic laments; rather, his poetry is firmly grounded in the present, thriving community of South Antrim, as he begins to experiment with wider poetic traditions in an attempt to preserve and celebrate it.

Although he was eagerly writing towards a second volume of verse, Thomson met with frequent discouragement from fellow poets and publishers alike. The *Northern Star* proprietor and Thomson's steadfast

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<sup>6</sup> Ian McBride, 'Ulster Presbyterians and the Act of Union', in Michael Brown, Patrick Geoghegan and, James Kelly (eds.) *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: Bicentennial Essays* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003; henceforward 'Ulster Presbyterians and the Act of Union'), pp. 68-83 (p. 78, 71).

<sup>7</sup> '[Templepatrick's] present inhabitants are of a much less enthusiastic spirit and content themselves with attending to their domestic affairs. [...] They are a quiet, industrious class, humble though comparatively independent in their circumstances' *OSM*, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Ferguson, "'The third character': the articulation of Scottish identities in two Irish writers' in *Ireland and Scotland in the Nineteenth Century*, (eds.) Frank Ferguson & James McConnel, (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), pp. 62-75, (p.62).

supplier of books Robert Callwell commented in 1797 that ‘Respecting your publishing another Volume of Poems, I think the times are against it – and in my opinion it would be a losing game, it will be much better to wait some time in hopes of Peace.’<sup>9</sup> Poetry and sedition were now closely aligned pursuits, and Thomson, whose early reputation had been so closely bound up with the radical poetry corner of the *Northern Star*, found that the circle that had been so encouraging to his work was largely defunct. Following the unprecedented epistolary activity of Thomson’s circle in the years 1796–1797, the exile of members of the fraternity, such as James Hope and James Orr, and the breaking of the *Northern Star* printing press, poets of pro-Union predilections were now filling the pages of the *Belfast News Letter* with verses. Thomas Stott, a prolific contributor to the *Belfast News Letter* and a member of Bishop Percy’s circle, quickly re-emerged to fill the gap in the public press left by the bards of the *Northern Star*, printing poem after poem on topical subjects and noteworthy events.<sup>10</sup> Almost instantly Thomson had been forced to reinvent himself for the more moderately left-of-centre *Belfast News-Letter*, enlisting the assistance of his fraternal circle, including Alexander Kemp in the pages of the *Belfast News-Letter* and, closer to home, his best friend John Williamson, who became the commonly-cited figure of ‘Damon’ in Thomson’s *New Poems* (1799), named after the classical epitome of self-sacrificing, congenial fraternity. Fellow poetic friends, particularly Damon, became mirrors for Thomson’s poetic self and internal poetic audiences through which he could establish his own persona among his readership.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Callwell to Samuel Thomson, 30 December 1797, Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, fol. 70.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Stott (1785–1829) was a linen bleacher from Dromore who was a member of the literary circle of Bishop Percy. He was originally a democrat but made the pragmatic choice of supporting the Anglo-Irish Union. Alongside Bishop Percy, Stott played a role in the recalibration of Irish Presbyterian culture, suggesting that Northern Presbyterians had been led astray temporarily in the Irish Rebellion. In contrast to the coded republican resistance of Thomson and Orr, Stott and Percy created a ‘literary and cultural Athens in a peaceful, Enlightened, honest culture of poetic simplicity,’ (Frank Ferguson, ‘English Bards and Scotch Reviewers: The Predicament of “Groveling Stott” and Ulster-English Poetics c.1795–1825’, 27 November 2009, CECS seminar series, Queen’s University, Belfast.)

While the pages of the *News-Letter* were filled with loyalist verses, Thomson chose *The Microscope; or Minute Observer* (1799-1800) as a means of regrouping with like-minded men. The short-lived but vibrant literary journal was a rallying point for Irish reformers like William Drennan, who been in support of reform, if not revolution, and involved in the early constitutional phase of the United Irishmen. From 1804 Drennan, a passionate opponent of the Act of Union, went on to co-edit the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* – the successor of the *Microscope* – to which James Orr contributed. Indeed, Thomson's connection with Drennan's circle, which began around the United Irish conception in 1791, continued through the *Microscope* and, through the relationship with his patron Samuel Thompson of Muckamore, connected him with the planning of the Belfast Academical Institution, with which Drennan was involved.<sup>11</sup>

Writing under his *News-Letter* pseudonym of 'Alexis', readers would know that Thomson had abandoned the increasingly conservative newspaper for a more refined, left-of-centre publication, dedicated to preserving in literature the minute details of Irish culture. The Virgillian pseudonym was appropriate to the pastoral subjects of the poems, published during this time. *The Microscope* carried seven poems by 'Alexis' and, at the end of each issue, dutifully informed its readers of when they could expect the next instalments of their favourite poets. The poems of 'Alexis' became a regular feature of the publication alongside the contributions of a Glasgow student known as 'Alonzo'; 'G, Lisburn'; and a few pieces by 'A Patriot', probably the Ballycarry poet, James Orr. Orr informed Thomson that he kept a close eye on his contributions to *The Microscope* and noted that some of the pieces re-appeared in a modified state in Thomson's third volume of poetry, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806).<sup>12</sup>

While the *Northern Star*, produced in Belfast, had been widely read throughout the countryside, *The Microscope* brought rural scenes to the eyes

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<sup>11</sup> David Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, p 199.

<sup>12</sup> James Orr to Samuel Thomson, 4 January 1806, PRONI T2702/1.



of urban readers. In contrast to the *Belfast News-Letter*'s fascination with established literati such as Walter Scott, contributors to *The Microscope* acquainted its readership with English Romantic and labouring-class poetry, such as Coleridge's 'Fears in Solitude', (immediately preceding Thomson's 'August'),<sup>13</sup> and Robert Bloomfield, author of *The Farmer's Boy*.<sup>14</sup> *The Microscope* was an excellent fit for Thomson's verse; in addition to his popularity as a nature poet in *The Northern Star*, he was well-positioned to corner the market for nature poetry in *The Microscope*, being praised both by his contemporaries (and subsequent literary critics) for a remarkable attention to descriptive detail.<sup>15</sup> It was also a broader literary metaphor for a good poet's ability to sharply amplify and elevate natural subjects in verse, in comparison to his antithesis embodied in Pope's *Art of Sinking* whose eyes 'should be like unto the wrong end of a perspective glass, by which all objects of nature are lessened.'<sup>16</sup> Attention to microscopic detail also implies the highlighting of cause and effect, which may reveal that objects and events are not necessarily as they seem when viewed under a sharper lens. The journal's subtitle of *Minute Observer* indicates that from the first issue, Thomson provided for the expectations of the readership, tailoring content and language to public demand.

If, as Jonathan Bate argues, 'Scientists made it their business to describe the intricate economy of nature; [and] Romantics made it theirs to teach human beings how to live as part of it', Thomson was entering into the discussion of living well in harmony with the environment.<sup>17</sup> 'Lyle's Hill, a Rhapsody' (1799) provides a minute description of the topographical view from Thomson's hill while the poet demonstrates his ecological awareness

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<sup>13</sup> *The Microscope*, I (1799), 4, 182-4.

<sup>14</sup> *The Microscope*, II (1800), 8, 353-7.

<sup>15</sup> John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Jack, *Augustan Satire: intention and idiom in English poetry, 1660 to 1750*, (London: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 40.

by throwing into stark comparison the ‘road to town’, crowded with ‘Village shopmen [...] intent on gain [...] Stupid as stones’ (ll. 87-90), with the ‘mosses, fens, and woodlands hoar / Down to *Neagh*’s Romantic shore’ (ll. 98-99). Thomson wrote several poems on the theme of man’s inhumanity to ‘nature’, particularly ‘On a Spider’ and ‘On Seeing a Fellow Kill a Linnet on the Nest’ (1799) the latter of which seems to be inspired by Burns’s ‘On Seeing a Wounded Hare Limp By Me, which a Fellow had just shot at’ (1789). In contrast to ‘On a Spider’ (1799)<sup>18</sup> which begins with the poet’s disgust at the ‘Despot-like’ spider ready to ensnare and toy with its prey, ‘On Seeing a Fellow’ has a wider application to human murderers with the poet expressing a wish to visit vengeance upon them.

‘Elegy on a Robin Red-Breast’, re-published in *New Poems* as ‘Poor Robin’s Elegy’ (1799)<sup>19</sup> is more sentimental in that the despot condemned here is a cat who, in killing a bird, merely follows natural instinct. The speaker displays ambivalence toward animal instinct, railing against the cat killing the bird while at the same time longing for the robin’s instinctive visits to the poet’s cottage to ‘claim the pittance of his daily food.’ (l. 24) The speaker complains that robin’s death has a personal effect on his artistic creativity, as he is deprived of the song of the bird. A darker Romantic sensibility emerges in the poet’s emotional reaction which seems to suggest that man is more like *Baudron* the cat who tears its victim ‘limb from limb’ (l. 11) in opposition to the Hutchesonian idea that man in a state of nature is naturally disposed to good. Once again, a moderating philosophic impulse and Hobbesian fear of anarchy creeps in to a poem which, at first appears to be a piece of straightforward sentiment. The ‘social union’ between man and animal, celebrated by the lonely figure of the poet, is broken by a tendency toward anarchy, common to both man and animal. But by finally invoking image of the ‘widow’d mate’ who comes to Crambo Cave to ‘wander, broken-hearted through the thorns’ (ll. 27-28) in the company of the poet, he demonstrates empathy with the widow, deliberately

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<sup>18</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 205-6.

<sup>19</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 30-31.

undercutting the overall distrust of natural instinct present in these poems. By his very expression of sympathy in this poem, the natural-taught poet admits inherently that man is capable of improvement.

A more human union is imagined in the rather imitative ‘Sonnet, the Cotter’s Bed’, published in the *Microscope* in July 1799, and reprinted in *New Poems* (1799), which imagines the sexual union between man and wife as consolation in the face of poverty as Sawney, the labourer, forgets his hard labour in the arms of his wife. The passionate and warm imagery of the octave gives way to a disappointingly conventional sestet which echoes the ‘useful toil’ of Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751). Sawney is no longer named, but is described as a ‘churl’ who ‘whistling chearful to his labor goes, / Unknown, unknowing, thus from year to year, / His useful life, in even tenour, flows.’ The reader may detect an underlying tone of sarcasm in the sestet, particularly when read in *New Poems* (1799) alongside the sarcasm of ‘The Roughfort Fair, a Rustic Parody of Gray’s *Elegy*’ (1799), suggesting that Thomson could not quite bring himself to emulate a poem of rustic virtue:

In vain for them the blazing hearth may burn;  
 Their wives in vain the supper may prepare;  
 In vain the children wish their sire’s return,  
 Expecting sweets and play-things from the fair.

Poor wives! How often are ye but deceiv’d  
 With husband’s promise when they go away... (ll. 21-26)

The *Microscope* poems of 1799 would be republished amid *New Poems*, an edition in which the theme of union was revisited in various forms, with the lingering subtext of the political never far away. The publication of *New Poems* proved no easy task when, in 1799, the North of Ireland was still experiencing reverberations from the Rebellion. In preparation, Thomson consulted the advice of the poet-scholar William Hamilton Drummond, who opined that a true poet should not allow himself to be absorbed by the

agenda of ‘faction’.<sup>20</sup> Drummond’s pessimism may have arisen from the stagnation of public support for the arts, but the evidence of poetic output from 1798 demonstrates that a poor political climate may have helped to stimulate poetic quality by driving poets toward the pleasures of imagination. As will be demonstrated below, Thomson not only encrypted his political meaning with language, but also turned to the epic, dream vision work of Spenser and other English writers for an imaginative exploration of identity.

The Bard of Carngranny was not prepared to surrender his claim on a mixed audience; he asserted his low origins and humble living situation, while at the same time capitalized on his learning and literary sophistication. Resignation, encountering death, inwardness, and rejecting the metropolis dominate Thomson’s second published collection, *New Poems on a Variety of Different Subjects* (1799). The poem ‘Ode to Poverty’ (1799)<sup>21</sup> alludes to his implicit acceptance that social inequalities will not be redressed and that he will continue as a poor schoolmaster-bard who must take comfort in a literary community beyond the grave:

Well, since thou hast possession took  
Of all I have, grant but *this nook*,  
                    To hold my books and bed;  
Therein, beneath thy ragged reign,  
Shut up from Folly’s airy train,  
                    To commune with the dead;  
With Shakespeare, Milton, Pope by turns;  
    Old Ossian, Spenser, Young;  
With Ramsay, Fergusson, and *Burns*,  
    As good as ever sung.                   (II. 29-39)

Thomson’s poems are littered with references to Shakespeare, a fact which contradicts John Hewitt’s assertion that ‘Shakespeare seems hardly to have

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<sup>20</sup> Drummond to Thomson, 29 Dec 1798, TCD MS 7257, f. 87.

<sup>21</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 160-163.

been read [...] I found no reference to any of the plays.’<sup>22</sup> Given the notoriety of their mutual Burnsian enthusiasm, it is notable that Luke Mullan frequently weaved Shakesperian quotations into his letters to Thomson, exalting Shakespeare as ‘our fav’rite’.<sup>23</sup> Although chiefly celebrated for his Scots verse, Thomson’s literary paper-trail ranges widely throughout English poetry, being arranged from Shakespeare to Pope, and includes Spenser, in addition to the pre-romantic poetry of Edward Young and Macpherson’s *Ossian*. Indeed, as Thomson’s use of the wider Scottish vernacular tradition emerges strongly from *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793), then the influence of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets like Shakespeare, Spenser, and Pope is still more evident in *New Poems* (1799). *New Poems* might be regarded as Thomson at his best; satirically biting at characters of both local and national significance, mediated through a confident register of Scots and English.

The organisation of the edition is highly fragmentary, containing almost 300 pages of varied subject matter, including confident experimentations with poetic voice and genre: from poems such as ‘Davie and Sawney: An Ale-house Eclogue’ (1799) and ‘Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin’ (1799); to styles such as religious black humour and savage parody; to a wide experimentation with poetic genre. Understandably, given Robert Burns’s death in 1796, the volume contains fewer references to Burns than the 1793 edition, but the idea that Burns’s death paralyzed Thomson’s poetry must be dispelled by a more thorough examination of *New Poems*. Upon the poet’s actual death, Thomson composed an ‘Elegy on Burns’ (1796), placed only pages apart from ‘The Ayrshire Rose’, suggesting that Thomson was not particularly rueful of his expression of

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<sup>22</sup> John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p. 47. From the outset, Thomson adopts several epigraphs from Shakespeare, including quotations from: *Henry VIII* in ‘Ode to the Fireside’ (1793); *Hamlet* in the introduction to *New Poems* (1799); and *Othello* in ‘Ode to Calumny’ (1799).

<sup>23</sup> Luke Mullan to Samuel Thomson, 29 September 1796, TCD MS 7257, f.4.

criticism, but more importantly, that the death of Burns stimulated, rather than stultified, his poetry.<sup>24</sup>

If, as will be demonstrated, the verse epistles of the *Poems* (1793) were often concerned with a fraternal insulation against the critical establishment, *New Poems* (1799) ends on a confident and defiant note against the criticism of other aspiring and established poets:

The little tasteless critic I despise;  
His praise or censure is alike to me,  
Whose prose and rhyme will dare to criticise,  
Tho' scarcely master of his A, B, C!<sup>25</sup>

Yet this defiance is based on experience of censure shared with established poets of the British tradition, who suffer 'such poor Macflecknos (sic)' that 'At *Burns* and *Milton* e'en take offence!' (ll. 29-30). He ends by adding his own moral precept:

Would only those presume to censure song,  
Who can themselves superior song compose,  
Wou'd all but such, I say, restrain the tongue,  
Bards would be rescued from a host of foes. (ll. 33-36)

This prickly growth in confidence against criticism and tendency to self-fashion as a peasant may well be attributable to Thomson's central position in a growing network of local poets, and the shift in focus to subjects in which he could command ultimate authority—such as the local community and nature—finds focus in the image of the poet's fire-side, a symbol of feigned poetic retreat, where the author claims to indulge in the society of dead authors through the pages of their works and entertains only select companions.

A defensive retreat into the safety of a literary community constructed only of trusted companions would be understandable, given the turmoil

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<sup>24</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 172.

<sup>25</sup> 'Ne Plus Ultra', ll.25-28, *New Poems*, p. 290

inflicted upon Templepatrick during and after the 1798 rebellion. Yet, as Frank Ferguson has argued, Thomson's preface to *New Poems* (1799) is a calculated act of prefatory deception, where the poet feigns a poetic retreat into the humble cottage. Playing on Christ's comparison of a camel passing through the eye of a needle to a rich man entering the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 24:19), the poet suggests that the narrow entrance admits only humble visitors:

Stoop, if you please, you are rather high, and my door is remarkable low, both strait and low, so that of the multitude, few are of a dimension suitable to enter with *convenience* [...] Now that thou art falsely moor'd within, look around and examine my furniture a little – examine all, for “here no treason lurks”. I plann'd and executed it myself. Some of the articles are a little coarse, but in general they answer to the END.<sup>26</sup>

The sinister use of the quotation, “here no treason lurks”, is an allusion to Shakespeare's tragedy, *Titus Andronicus* (c.1590)—a tale of rape, murder and revenge—and the same quotation was later used echoed in Pope's ‘This harmless Grove no lurking viper hides’ from *Summer, the Second Pastoral; or Alexis* (1709).<sup>27</sup> No less incidentally, *Alexis* was the new pseudonym chosen by Thomson, under which he placed his contributions to contributions to polite publications such as the *Belfast News-Letter* (1797-1800) and the *Microscope; or Minute Observer* (1799-1800), mentioned above. The poet dares the reader to examine his domestic situation and find any evidence of treason with, of course, the sinister allusion that it has been well-hidden. Published one year after the Irish Rebellion, the political allusion to Templepatrick's engagement in rebellious activity would not have been lost on the reader.

The preface drips with sarcasm, as he claims he can offer only scraps of scrounged food to the reader, a foretaste of the fruit-stealing subject of

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<sup>26</sup> Thomson, ‘Preface’, *New Poems*, p. v.

<sup>27</sup> Pope, ‘Summer. The Second Pastoral, or Alexis’ in *The Poems of Alexander Pope: a one-volume edition of the Twickenham text with selected annotations*, ed. John Butt, (London: Meuthuen & Co, 1963, repr. 1965), p. 129.

‘To a Hedge-hog’ that is to be found in on page 126 of the edition: ‘But as to a repast! Alas! All I can offer you is a cold one, composed of *wild berries* and *spring water*.’ It is also a forerunning idea that would inform his satiric epistle to Aeneas Lamont in which he claims that Lamont will not travel to see him for fear of catching fever by sleeping beneath rough blankets and eating rustic food like ‘buttermilk and slugs’.<sup>28</sup> Thomson is by unapologetic for invoking such Irish country cuisine; by contrast, like Robert Fergusson’s praise of stodgy Scottish food in ‘The Farmer’s Ingle’ (1771), Thomson sees potatoes, buttermilk, tree fruit and spring water as iconic staples of pure, rural Irishness in opposition to the cultural confusion of the urban bourgeois environment which, he implies in the Epistle, erodes one’s sense of identity. Frank Ferguson points out that Thomson’s cataloguing of inferiority (including such invocations of social isolation and coarse cuisine to be expected at Crambo Cave) ironically prefigures the ‘Miltonic quietism’ of County Antrim that the later Ordnance Survey memoirs of 1831 present to the reader.<sup>29</sup> This chapter’s closing discussion of ‘To a Hedge-hog’ (1799) will demonstrate that such poems therefore all the more sophisticated in their sleight of hand.

In addition to a more confident, even sarcastic preface to *New Poems*, there is a notable change in the mode of production. Thomson’s metropolitan, radical city readership had all but dispersed; some keeping a low profile, some exiled or in hiding, and some even executed, such as the United Irish leader Henry Joy McCracken. However, his decision to publish his *New Poems* with the Belfast printers and booksellers Doherty and Simms, who had purchased the remains of the *Northern Star* press after it had been ransacked by the Monaghan Militia, suggests that his readership may not have been altogether alien from that of the 1793 edition.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Epistle to Mr Aeneas Lamont, line 161, *Simple Poems*, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Ferguson, ‘The articulation of Scottish identities’, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> J.R.R Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man*, p. 25, 147. Simms later separated from Doherty and joined up with a Mr McIntyre to form the successful Belfast publishing enterprise, Simms & McIntyre which issued a lot of Irish interest publications e.g. *Two historical plays. The battle of Aughrim, Ireland preserved* and *Irish legendary tales and stories*.



subscriber list reads like a ‘who’s who’ of Templepatrick Parish residents, extending from areas within a one mile radius such as Carngranny, Roughfort and Templepatrick, and extending throughout the wider County Antrim townlands of Muckamore, Crumlin, Ballymartin, and Larne. It is likely that many local subscribers came from the Roughfort Book Club, established in 1796, of which Thomson and Luke Mullan were principal members, boasting the common experience of having met Robert Burns face-to-face.<sup>31</sup> Yet *New Poems* was by no means confined to County Antrim, attracting subscribers throughout the capital of Belfast and into County Down from Holywood in the north to Dromore in the south.<sup>32</sup>

Listed first and foremost in Thomson’s subscription list were his local friends John Williamson and Thomas Beattie,<sup>33</sup> indicative of the fact that the circulation of this volume was less metropolitan than that of the 1793 edition (fifteen copies of which had found their way as far as a bookseller in Boston, Massachusetts).<sup>34</sup> The prologue to *New Poems* includes a typical Thomsonian nettling for ‘some professed ... friends’ who ‘from a penury of liberality towards the engagement of the *domestic literary exertions of Ireland* [had] with a coldness, which adds little or nothing to their honor, refused their assistance to this publication,’ reflecting a cooling fervour among certain figures towards their own national literature and, it seems, particularly pertaining to verse which might have patriotic or radical associations.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas *Poems* (1793) was produced largely as a result of Masonic and political networks, often organized through key players in the Belfast press such as Aeneas Lamont, Thomson prided himself on securing both a

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<sup>31</sup> F.J. Biggar, ‘Thomas Beggs, an Antrim Poet: and the Four Towns Book Club’, in *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology* (second series), 8 (1902), pp. 119-27, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. vii-ix.

<sup>33</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. vii.

<sup>34</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. vii.

local readership and the support of men like Samuel Thompson of Muckamore, a Presbyterian landowner who had connections in London as well as a high standing among the Belfast literati. This Mr. Thompson appears to have gone on to be involved with the planning of the first Presbyterian college of further education, the Belfast Academical Institute, so he was evidently supportive of Thomson's efforts to elevate himself as a poet of rural, Presbyterian background.<sup>36</sup> Not only would the patronage of such a man encourage the widespread dissemination of Thomson's work in Ireland, it might also hopefully take his work beyond the island and, thus, help to establish him as an Irish literary export and a bard for the nation. A deep romantic impulse, exacerbated by the post-rebellion events invited a sour view of the urban metropolis and enabled the focus to move onto an imagined, wider, national space which was essentially non-urban.

One theme in *New Poems* that differs radically from Thomson's previous work is Thomson's exploration of rural marriage and sexual unions. Little is known of Thomson's personal life, except that he never married and, in marked contrast to other poets of his circle, particularly Aeneas Lamont and Alexander Kemp, Thomson wrote little sentimental love poetry, and the verses that he does write are often disillusioned and sometimes bitter. Between 1794 and 1799, Thomson penned a series of sonnets to pastoral figures of 'Delia', 'Sylvia', and 'Anna'. The sonnets to Delia, published in a sequence dedicated to the memory of his friend James McNeilly, express realistic anguish over unrequited love, tempting the conclusion that Thomson had experience of being rejected by a particular woman in his community.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the poet produces a fictional pastoral, 'Sylvander, an Eclogue' (1799) in which the shepherd hero vocalizes his despair when rejected by Sylvia.<sup>38</sup> Some of the most sexual poems are written about the figure of 'Anna', a favourite addressee of

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from Samuel Thompson, Muckamore, 27 April 1816, PRONI, SCH/524/7B/10/11.

<sup>37</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 182-187.

<sup>38</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 122-125.

Robert Burns in song, and betray evidence both of sympathy with Burns's poetic expression of sexual desire, and of personal heterosexual craving in the poet for an unnamed woman.<sup>39</sup> Sylvia, Anna, and Delia may be literary types, but Thomson's tendency to reference real people in his community by the use of pseudonyms allows for the possibility that these pastoral names may represent real women or one woman in particular.

Thomson introduced the figure of Delia at the very beginning of his first published edition in the poem 'Damon and Thyrsius' (1793),<sup>40</sup> in which the two shepherds extol the virtues of their ladies, Lavinia and Delia. Little more than a pastoral convention in 1793, Delia becomes a much more central character in *New Poems* (1799), featuring finally in the aforementioned sequence of sonnets. The sonnets chart an emotional process in the male speaker: of love, forced separation, betrayal, and the continuing pangs of unrequited love that no distance can quell. The octave of 'Sonnet V, Parting' (1799)<sup>41</sup> imagines Damon leaving on a journey across the sea, wondering if Delia will spare a thought for him, and the sestet imagines her inconstancy of heart:

There you may pause, and read my humble name,  
With yours engrav'd on every blooming tree, [...]  
Yes, you will think on me, and haply say,  
Thus Damon sung, but Damon went away. (ll. 9-14)

The finality of the last line creates a cold and pragmatic Delia, rather like Chaucer's Criseyde, who will doubtless soon move on to another lover; a fear which is borne out in the next sonnet, 'VI. Grief': 'On all around me, vulgar like, I'll throw / Since he deceiv'd me whom I thought had truth, / And she disdain'd me – now adieu to both.' (ll. 12-14). Yet 'Sonnet VII, The Disconsolate' demonstrates that Damon cannot enjoy Nature because of the 'Heart-rending thought! ... the cruel stings, / The poison'd darts of

<sup>39</sup> 'A Dream' (1799), *New Poems*, p. 212; 'To Anna' (1806), *Simple Poems*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>40</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 1-5.

<sup>41</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 183.

unsuccessful love!’ (ll. 3-4) – a piece of conventional Petrarchan imagery. In spite of the occasional conventional line, Thomson points up Damon’s psychological process as he is unable to keep his thoughts from dwelling on Delia’s imagined physical presence, which is captivating and ‘lovely’ (l. 9). At no point is Delia’s character explored in any detail, save for Damon’s impressions and visions of her; in his mind, they have become one and he is irrevocably changed into something other than his ‘same’ self:

I peradventure might myself resume,  
And be the same; but, ah! I cannot tell!  
‘Heartless I am,’ you say, and you say true;  
My heart, o falsest maid, remains with you!     (Sonnet VII, ll. 11-14)

Damon appears to convey Delia’s speech, but turns it against her in the final line, laying the blame for his bitterness at her feet. Turning once more to Nature as a mirror for emotion in ‘Sonnet IX, Hope and Fear’, Damon imagines that the moon’s waxing and waning reflects his hopes and fears that Delia will return to him:

See how between us and fair Phoebe’s face,  
The nightly vapours in confusion fly:  
Now lost in shade, and now her silent race  
She runs in splendour up the azure sky.  
‘Tis thus alternately that hopes and fears,  
In wild disorder, thro’ my bosom roll;  
Perhaps the prospect for a moment clears,  
Then double darkness, luring, blots the *whole*!     (ll. 1-8)

This oppositional tendency recurs through the romantic psychology of ‘Sonnet XII. Impatience’ as the speaker looks into a mirror and finds he beholds Delia’s face instead of his own. One of her eyes looks kindly on him, while the other is scornful, reflecting not only Damon’s fears of how Delia feels about him, but his own scorn towards himself for losing his identity in her. The keen sense of impatience that Damon feels is directed toward himself.

‘Sonnet X, To Delia from Scotland’ brings the figure of Damon closer again to Thomson’s own biography. Several of the *New Poems* (1799)

reflect on Thomson's time in Scotland in 1794 when he visited Robert Burns and, probably, Luke Mullan in Wigtownshire. It is, therefore, tempting to imagine that Thomson may have penned this sonnet while in Scotland and addressed it to a woman in Ireland. Damon comes to realise that the excitement of Scotland cannot dull his feelings. Thomson never allows himself to descend into Petrarchan cliché; there are the expected references to light and dark, heat and cold and weeping, but he follows this with his own original imagery such as in 'Sonnet XI. The Disconsolate' where Damon repairs 'To mouldy caves that bar the eye of day / Where hid in darkness, where no mortal hears, / I smother Echo with my sighs and tears.' (ll. 12-14). The poet's grief is so great that it chokes the classical figure of loneliness, turning every emotion in on itself. After much grief at Delia's refusal to love him, Damon reports in 'Sonnet XIII. To Delia' that she has apparently relented: 'Ah! Delia dear, these accents break my heart! / You say you love me! Ah! I know you love; / But Fate, my darling, says that *we must part!*' (ll. 1-3). Damon's declares that his descent into poverty means that he cannot make Delia his wife because he recognizes the reality of their future together: 'That beauteous form was never made to prove / The pains of poverty—misfortune's smart, / By which I am already helpless drove.' (ll. 4-6). Damon promises to always think on her 'lovely form' (l. 14), wherever he may be driven next. Thomson harnesses the tenets of Augustan sensibility, abruptly changing Delia's feelings just at the moment when Damon is forced to reject her. If the opportunity to marry had arisen, Thomson must have been aware that it would have been impossible to maintain his lifestyle as a man of letters with a wife and children in a small cottage, particularly because his income from the hedge school was so meagre.<sup>42</sup> Once again, the aspirations of the man of letters were frustrated by a rural occupation that barely elevated him above his labouring-class companions.

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<sup>42</sup> J.R.R Adams comments that 'Many if not most of the hedge schools were wretched enough affairs [...] The income of the hedge-schoolmaster was small. [...] In the parish of Dunaghy, County Antrim, the fees payable were 2s.6d to 3s4d. for reading, 4s. for writing and 5s. for arithmetic.' (*The Printed Word and the Common Man*, pp. 12-13).

The ending of the Delia sequence may reflect Thomson's views on marriage, outlined in the poem 'Wedlock' (1799),<sup>43</sup> which compares marriage to a pair of sheers, a largely a hit-or-miss affair and best avoided if there is no guarantee of happiness:

When temper's alike to the *point*,  
And *keen*, they may lop away strife;  
But soon as they break at the *joint*,  
They are worse than a *one-bladed knife*. (ll. 5-8)

Thomson's own philosophy seems to be that it is better not to marry at all than risk an unhappy situation. The lack of choice in a marriage partner is satirised in 'Strephon's Case' (1799),<sup>44</sup> where the choice of 'old wrinkled Jean [...] that might be his mother's mother' (ll. 2-3) for her money, or 'buxom Bessy of fifteen' (l. 4), sends Strephon running to the arms of Lizzie who has 'nought ava to gie him' (l. 15). The poet draws upon 'a hackneyed expression of ... a superannuated clattering duena' to 'Marry for love and work for gear' (l. 21), leading the poet to conclude that 'Before I'd wed for gowd or gear, / I'd want a wife for a'thegither.' (ll. 23-4). A later poem, 'A Contrast. Phoebe and Rosie' (1806)<sup>45</sup> compares Rosie who is 'handsome but (oh Pity!) / she's stupid as a swine' (l. 10) with Phoebe who 'reads, thinks and speaks like a divine' (l. 12), but sadly Phoebe would be 'the first of lovely creatures' if she did not suffer the misfortune of being 'frightful'. This poem is a more savage examination of the subject of marriage and Thomson concludes cynically that 'ye bachelors that trip it snugly' will have no trouble making their decision:

Say which of these you'd wish to win?  
The one with outside dismal, ugly,  
Or t'other all deformed and thin.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 208.

<sup>44</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 137-8.

<sup>45</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects*, (Belfast: Smith & Lyons, 1806) p. 10.

The poem's misogynist speaker reveals the pragmatic 'weighing up' of options, pointing to a deeper social commentary on late eighteenth-century marriage, and conveying that the prospect of marital union for all three poetic subjects – the speaker, Phoebe, and Rosie – is little more than a gloomy compromise.

A more eroticized treatment of woman can be found in the figure of Anna. Whereas the idealized Delia is less convincing as a representation of a particular woman, Anna is not only described in more physical detail, but poems about her appear to have been circulated among Thomson's friends. The reader is led to wonder if Anna represented a woman in Thomson's personal life; a suggestion that, if true, may account for verses on her cruelty which were published in *The Microscope* poem 'August', but later omitted when the poem was re-published in *New Poems* (1799).<sup>47</sup> The latter pages of *New Poems* contain several poems not published in the newspapers which may have been enjoyed in the private domain by his male fraternity (including a potentially bawdy poem on the subject of Anna, 'A Dream'<sup>48</sup>), which were likely passed around in manuscript form. The published version differs from the manuscript by one word alone:

Methought I felt her beating breast!  
Methought her ruby lips I prest,  
Just as the cock did scream!  
Then all the fairy charm was broke!  
In strange disorder I awoke,  
And found it was a<sup>49</sup> dream!<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Compare *The Microscope* (August 1799) with *New Poems*, pp. 223f.

<sup>48</sup> Thomson's own hand, Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, f. 180.

<sup>49</sup> TCD MS 7527, f.180 – A hand similar to Thomson's, if not indeed his own, inserts the word 'wet' in pencil between 'a' and 'dream' in line 12. It is possible that this was a later interpolation as I have not yet found an occurrence of the expression 'wet dream' in eighteenth-century poetry.

<sup>50</sup> 'A Dream', lines 7-12, *New Poems*, p. 212.

The simple insertion of the word ‘wet’ before ‘dream’ in line 12 reveals the potential interpretation of the poem from a traditional lovelorn lay to Anna ‘in all her maiden charms’ (l.2) to a bawdy piece referring, not simply to the disturbance of an erotic dream, but to an incident of nocturnal emission. The ‘scream’ of the ‘cock’ that follows the poet pressing against Anna’s ‘ruby lips’ thus becomes a double entendre for the point of ejaculation following contact with the female genitalia. Even if the manuscript insertion in pencil is not Thomson’s, it remains likely that this poem was indeed passed in manuscript form to others, more than likely male, and was interpreted as a bawdy poem.

Set among a group of poems written to be read by those ‘in the know’, including one black-humoured ‘Epigram to Him who Will Understand It’ (1799),<sup>51</sup> which the manuscript tells us is a malicious reference to a local victim of the smallpox, it seems likely that many of Thomson’s poems were shared in private, and highlights the difference in style between those poems of civic and national theme published in the Belfast newspapers and those meant solely for the amusement of his poetic fraternal circle. This is substantiated by an underlying misogynistic motif designed to be interpreted by the single male reader—Luke Mullan, for example—who ‘laughed heartily at [Thomson’s] matrimonial spurs.’<sup>52</sup> Such an interpretation of *New Poems*, in particular, is heightened when viewed in comparison with the 1806 edition, *Simple Poems*, which is more religious in tone and which, interestingly, enjoyed a greater proportional female readership than either the *Poems on Various Subjects* or *New Poems*. Yet, ‘To Anna’ (1806),<sup>53</sup> probably addressed to the same woman who served as the erotic subject of his earlier ‘A Dream’ (1799), is a lament for fading beauty with age, steering Anna towards the solace of heavenly grace

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<sup>51</sup> TCD MS 7527 f.176v includes the following preamble: ‘Addressed to a young woman, who from a handsome child, tho’ of a malevolent disposition, was by small-pox transformed into (God forgive me) a frightful monster.’

<sup>52</sup> Mullan to Thomson, 15 May 1797, TCD MS 7527, f. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, pp. 43-44.



so that she will ‘never feel the wither’d face.’ The poem is affectionate but not without humorous undertones at Anna’s expense:

Not ev’n thy lips stern Time can spare,  
 Whence oft was snatch’d the balmy blessing!  
 But plants his hedge of whiskers there,  
 Which ruins all my Anna’s kissing! (ll. 13-16)

The speaker endures Anna’s ‘old dry arms around [his] ribs’, but conveniently ignores the male aging process. The serious theme of the poem, however, is to encourage a movement from physical and temporal concerns to that of the eternal; a far cry from the superficial humour of a poem like ‘Aversion’ (1799),<sup>54</sup> written, it seems, exclusively for male fraternal amusement:

On stormy day I hate to hear  
 The rain upon the windows rattle;  
 And equally it grates my ear,  
 To hear a senseless woman prattle.

John Hewitt’s assertion that bawdy poetry, such as that of Burns’s *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799), did not exist in Ulster must surely be revised in light of the poetic activity of Thomson’s circle. Frank Ferguson has drawn attention to Thomson’s Donegore friend, John Dickey, who employed carnivalesque bawdry in the context of Presbyterian psalm singing.<sup>55</sup> Ferguson points to the ‘Verbal and physical ejaculations, innuendo, and breathless rhythm conveyed through the stanza form’ in addition to the use of both Scots and English ‘in one form of coupling which leads to another.’<sup>56</sup> Burns’s own participation in Scottish bawdry of the late

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<sup>54</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 205.

<sup>55</sup> John Dickey, Rockfield, Donegore, *Poems on Various Subjects*, (Belfast: printed for the author, 1818).

<sup>56</sup> Frank Ferguson, ‘The Protean Burns: Conceptualisations of Burns in 19<sup>th</sup> C Belfast’, delivered at *Robert Burns and Ireland: New Readings on Old Relationships*, February 6-7 2009, University of Ulster Belfast Campus. I am grateful to Dr. Ferguson for permitting me to cite this paper.

eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries should perhaps discourage surprise that sexually comedic verse circulated among this group of young, Irish Presbyterian men and, although often classical in his expression, manuscript evidence proves that, in a culture that has often been read as uncritically puritanical, Thomson's circle was not insulated from the romantic cult of fraternal male bonding. Bawdry in Scottish and Ulster literature could accommodate a variety of creative passions: including fraternal camaraderie, social commentary and the sympathetic, or indeed unsympathetic, treatment of the female body.

In drawing attention to Robert Tracy's identification of an 'imperial romance' theme, Ina Ferris identified 'the complicated work of legitimation performed by the marriage trope in the national tale', suggesting that marriage in literature could be a highly political motif in the post-Union period.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps intriguing, then, to question whether or not Thomson creates an allegory for Ireland out of his own apparent rejection of traditional marriage in favour of fraternal ties? The reader of *New Poems* will be struck by the number of references to male friendships in a rural setting, particularly the character of 'Damon' which Thomson had employed since 1793. The 1799 edition of *New Poems* begins with a Spenserian dream vision 'Inscribed to my Dearest Friend, Damon'.<sup>58</sup> Three further poems addressing Damon are grouped together, forming the core of the 1799 volume: 'Lyle's Hill: A Rhapsody', 'The Fairy Knowe: or Damon's Birth-Place', 'Lines from Damon' and 'Crambo Cave, to Damon'.<sup>59</sup> Luke Mullan had been addressed as Corydon, and Thomson had himself taken on the guises of Colin, Alexis, and Thyrsius (sic) in his pastoral eclogues. Damon was a character used by Robert Fergusson, and Thomson subsequently chose the pseudonym to represent Fergusson in his four-way imitation of Scottish poets, 'Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin,

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<sup>57</sup> Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; hereafter *The Romantic National Tale*), p. 48.

<sup>58</sup> Thomson *New Poems*, p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 102-114.

a Pastoral Inscribed to my Rhyme-Composing brother, Alexander Kemp' (1799). Thomson's great enthusiasm for Fergusson's poetry was even picked up by Robert Burns who, in return for Dublin snuff, arranged on 31 March 1791 for Fergusson's complete poems to be delivered to Thomson via Thomas Sloan of Wanlockhead.<sup>60</sup> The pastoral pseudonym may not always have explicit political reference though, as it also enables the poet to take on another identity.

It is not often possible to distinguish clearly between Thomson's use of voice and his genuine display of emotion in his poetry, but in the Damon poems he envisions the passionate and emotional bond which enables him to create poetry with his friend as a congenial audience:

O SAM, thou learn'd me first to mark  
 The dancing glow o' Burns's fire;  
 And gied to me that dainty spark,  
     That mak's me ay his sangs admire.  
 Ere first my bosom to thy ain  
     Was kent, I pass'd a tasteless time:  
 Wi' care an' crouds I liv'd alane,  
     Nor thought of Burns, nor thee, nor rhyme,  
 But Friendship saw, an gat a string,  
     Ane tougher far than tug or tether,  
 Which Time can ne'er asunder wring,  
     And ty'd our honest hearts together.<sup>61</sup>

'Lines from Damon' (1799) takes the form of an apparently innocent speech, delivered to Thomson by the poet's apprentice on a walk into town, emphasizing that Damon represents the ideal male friendship, even refuge, in the face of the destruction of the United Irish utopian ideal of universal brotherhood. Frank Ferguson has identified a political, classical allusion in the use of the name:

The name is found in the legendary friendship of Damon and Pythias of Syracuse [...] and the name has become synonymous with strong

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Sloan to Samuel Thomson, 31 March 1791, TCD MS 7257, f. 72.

<sup>61</sup> 'Lines from Damon', ll. 1-12, *New Poems*, pp. 111-2.

male friendship and the perseverance of friendship under tyranny. Again this appears another oblique reference to the years after the United Irish Rebellion.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the significant symbolism inherent in the Damon pseudonym, Dr. Ferguson also points to the contemporary analogue of William Wordsworth who constructed his post-radical identity by employing the figures of Dorothy Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in order to envision himself as a poet.<sup>63</sup> Here we see Thomson making a similar transition from a lone voice that resounded in the *Northern Star* on both political pastoral and more explicitly radical subjects into the leading figure in a post-rebellion Romantic coterie that consisted of fellow Irish poets Aeneas Lamont, Alexander Kemp and Luke Mullan. John Williamson as ‘Damon’ is both ideal as a listener and as a protégé, reflecting Thomson’s position of poetic tutor that he was gradually assuming through his correspondence and meetings with other poets. Damon is ideal because he shares the poet’s vision of the world, his experience, his religious faith, his Ulster Scots tongue, and above all his literary passions:

Ye tauld me scraps o’ that sweet lay;  
And a’ its beauties to me shew’d;  
Ere since I’m wed to poesy; [...]

Aft wand’ring pensive o’er the hill,  
I feel the wild romantic glow;  
Drink Nature’s health at every rill  
And sowf a sang on every knowe. (ll. 23-32)

It is, therefore, no surprise that the subject of the pseudonym is a man whom Thomson knew for many years, and one who was a close neighbour in Carngranny. His identity is made known in a unique and unusual acrostic poem, ‘Acrostic to Damon’ (1799) which literally weaves together the names of Samuel Thomson and John Williamson, known as ‘Jack’.

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Ferguson (ed.), *Ulster Scots Writing: An Anthology*, p. 468n.

<sup>63</sup> Frank Ferguson, ‘The articulation of Scottish identities’, p. 69.

It was during this period of Thomson's life that Jack 'Damon' Williamson, who was mentioned in a coded reference alongside Luke Mullan in 'The Country Dance' (1793), took centre stage, having gradually supplanted the position held by Luke Mullan in the 1790s, whose whereabouts at this time are unknown. The last letter in the correspondence from Mullan was dated 23 March 1798, three months prior to the Battle of Antrim.<sup>64</sup> Williamson regarded Thomson as his poetic mentor, and attempted to court the muse himself, much to the surprise of Luke Mullan:

I am somewhat surprised that Jack is comenc'd poet [...] He will find it an arduous and profitless undertaking – But I suppose he knows the conditions before he begins (and if he shou'd be oblig'd to recede he must not complain).<sup>65</sup>

There is an undertone of jealousy in Mullan's words, as he became aware that Jack would fill the space that he vacated upon his departure from Scotland in 1794; yet Thomson and Williamson had no thoughts of a joint enterprise of poetry. Thomson maintained his position as mentor to Williamson and the latter appears to have become a mirror for the former's self-image.

'Lines from Damon' gives a sense of a master-student relationship as Damon attributes his notice of 'the spark o' Burns's fire', a reference instantly recognisable from Burns's 'Epistle to J. Lapraik (1785)'. This allusion to Burns is especially significant in its lack of political reference. When considered in conjunction with the Thomson correspondence, particularly with reference to Alexander Kemp and Luke Mullan, it seems that Burns's lingering influence on this circle of poets was of a predominantly literary rather than political nature. In addition, Thomson's description of Beattie as 'o' bards the best' (l.18) is striking, particularly as it has been underemphasized in previous criticism in comparison to the exploration of Thomson's relationship to Burns. In these lines, Damon

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<sup>64</sup> Mullan to Thomson, 23 March 1798, TCD MS 7257, f. 23.

<sup>65</sup> Mullan to Thomson, 27 Dec 1797, TCD MS 7257, fol. 19.

celebrates friendship above the ties of literary enthusiasm, and claims it has enabled him to appreciate the beauties of nature –Thomson’s subject area of forte. The surrounding view from Lyle Hill as far as Antrim to the West, and Donegore to the North, seems to have brought alive the Romantic sentiment in Beattie’s *The Minstrel* (1771) for Williamson, to the extent that he declares himself ‘wed to poesy’ (l. 25), and describes his inspiration as an emotion, ‘I *feel* the wild romantic glow’ (l. 30), creating an association of mood from the landscape on which he looks. Intellectual appreciation is not enough, but individual, emotional experience of the landscape is necessary to truly fire the Romantic poet. As Murray Pittock has argued, Beattie’s *The Minstrel* ‘was divorced from historical specificity in the interests of laying stress on the development of the imagination’, thus infused with Romanticism, stressing the importance of solitude and nature upon the soul.<sup>66</sup> Gerard Carruthers identifies how *The Minstrel* offered English Romantic poets Wordsworth and Byron, ‘important primitivism and antiquarian influences’,<sup>67</sup> highlighting these shared aspects in Thomson’s poetry in Ulster’s early Romantic period in which the natural resources and landscapes of Scotland could be used to explore what it means to ‘create’ a poet.

The poem ends with the dark image of innocent lambs about to be slaughtered by the circling carrion, denoted by the Scots name ‘corbies’ (l. 33). Damon identifies the poet and himself with the innocents, remarking that the ‘bloody shark’ (l. 37) of Cruelty is expected to descend upon them imminently: ‘Thy crimson course we’re sure to mark, / And hear the frightful croak o’ thee!’ (ll. 39-40). Damon echoes the sensibility against natural cruelty that Thomson’s expressed often in his nature poems, echoing the ambiguous political connotations of the tyranny that lie beneath

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<sup>66</sup> See Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.134 and Kenneth Simpson, *The Protean Scot: the crisis of Identity in eighteenth-century Scottish literature*, (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), p. 250.

<sup>67</sup> Gerard Carruthers, ‘Remaking Romantic Scotland: Lockhart’s Biographies of Burns and Scott’, in *Romantic Biography* ed. Arthur Bradley & Alan Rawes, (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 93-108, (p. 93).

Thomson's previous animal fable 'The Hawk and the Weazel, a Fable' (1796). It is difficult to decode the symbolism of the 'corbies', which may refer symbolically to the authorities who scoured the landscape in 1798-99 searching for the implicated United Irish banditti. Thomson would later develop these sensibilities beyond their natural context in 'To a Hedge-hog' (1799) in order to apply them to the political situation after the failure of the rebellion when the bird of prey came to symbolise a much more human threat.<sup>68</sup>

Thomson's concept of fraternal union is further borne out in an imaginative celebration of the birthplace, celebrating the qualities of comfort, homeliness, wonder, and beauty found in the Irish upbringing. 'The Fairy Knowe' (1797)<sup>69</sup> is an affectionate painting of what Thomson imagines Jack's early life was like: idealistic, affirming, and fairytale. The invocation of fairies is common in the *New Poems*, especially to invoke simplicity and secrecy, bringing a new focus in Thomson's poetry on the supernatural world of the imagination. Thomson takes Langhorne as his prefatory quotation: 'For love sincere, and friendship free, / Are children of Simplicity',<sup>70</sup> emphasising a friendship which is not based on wealth or fame, but on likeness of mind and companionship. As the poet envisions the Williamsons' Presbyterian family life as idyllic, there are echoes of the Presbyterian cotter figures of Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', and Burns's 'lisp'ing infant, prattling on his knee' is transformed in Thomson's vision: 'I see thee court thy father's smile, / Seated on his weary knee, / When return'd from twelve hours' toil, / To his cottage, rest and thee'.<sup>71</sup> It is

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<sup>68</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 126-8.

<sup>69</sup> Thomson *New Poems*, p. 108-110.

<sup>70</sup> Thomson *New Poems*, p. 108. The quotation is from John Langhorne's 'Miscellanies written in a cottage garden at a village in Lorrain occasioned by a tradition concerning a tree of rosemary,' *The Poetical Works of John Langhorne D.D.*, (London : printed for C. Cooke; and sold by all the booksellers in Great Britain and Ireland, 1798), p. 67. Thomson was drawing his quotations from a text fresh off the press.

<sup>71</sup> 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', l. 25, Robert Burns, *Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, Belfast: printed by J. Magee, 1787, p.128; Samuel Thomson, *New Poems* (1799), p. 109.

possible that Thomson recognised a cotter tradition in contemporary Scottish poetry as he invokes Fergusson's 'The Farmer's Ingle' (1773) as Williamson's mother, like Fergusson's *Gudame* telling her 'old warld tale [...] O *Warlocks* loupin' roun' the *Wirrikow*', tells him tales of the 'Wiricow / that nightly haunts the Fairy knowe.'<sup>72</sup> Both Fergusson and Burns's cotter poems impressed William Wordsworth in their depiction of the virtuous peasant lifestyle, but perhaps it was Burns's 'measure of rehabilitation for the Presbyterian Patriarch'<sup>73</sup> that appealed specifically to Thomson who depicts the Williamsons as a living example of a loving, Irish Presbyterian family.

'The Fairy Knowe' (1797) is not simply a sentimental imagining of his friend 'an infant, on the floor / snatching play things here and there' (ll. 29-30), but the commemoration of the ideal Presbyterian family upbringing: of hard work, tender parenting, and the oral tradition passed from parent to child. The poem is a declaration of the poet's role in the rediscovery of origins, the mapping of the past onto the landscape, and a joint act of 'Memory' that is performed by friends together:

Yes, upon the vernal brow  
 Of the humble fairy knowe,  
 We will sit and trace the spot  
 Where stood thy father's tufted cot.  
 The dwelling where thy infant sight  
 Open'd first on chearful day;  
 Now, by Time's assiduous flight,  
 All o'erthrown and brush'd away.  
 While Memory essays to draw  
 From Oblivion's wasting maw,  
 All the little list of things  
 Fluttering Fancy flaps her wings,  
 And to Imagination's view,  
 Builds the long lost bower anew. (ll. 13-26)

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Fergusson 'The Farmer's Ingle', stanza VII, *Poems on Various Subjects*, 2 vols. Perth: R. Morison, 1789, p. 57.

<sup>73</sup> Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p.33.



As with all idealised memories, we are to understand that such things have passed away and the two friends alone remain. The poem can be read as Thomson's elegy for a religious way of life that has been lost from nineteenth-century Ulster, but he chooses to explore it through a Romantic vision which imagines—and thus actively re-creates—the past of another, keeping his own experience at arm's length. The poem is more than a personal or fraternal elegy, however, it is a testament that where two or three are gathered in the company of the Muse, the past can be safeguarded and kept alive through poetic imagination:

Thus Ruin's bessom sweeps  
 The works of man away;  
 And hoar Oblivion after creeps,  
 And blots our mortal day:  
 The castle and the cottage are  
 Alike their crumbling prey. [...]  
 Long since thy honest heart and mine  
 Together fondly grew:  
 So Damon dear this verse is thine,  
 And thine its Author too. (ll. 47-59)

As the poet recognises that, regardless of the value that one places on one's home, all stalwarts and even birthplaces of druidic significance will pass away, and so he turns once more to the image of hearts entwined by poetry.

The image of the fraternal knot becomes most potent in a poem which broke all precedent in terms of form. In 'Acrostic to Damon' (1799),<sup>74</sup> Thomson manipulated the poetic form—a species of enigma poem—for the first and last time, to pay tribute to Williamson. Playing on a favourite pastoral image of shepherd companions, Thomson uses Biblical imagery to compare his relationship with Williamson to that of David and Jonathan, the son of David's enemy King Saul:

Just such a bond of union, as of old,

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<sup>74</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 204. Notably the poet privileges Williamson's name as the prompting initial of acrostic, with this uncharacteristic self-effacement suggestive of a deep and unselfish friendship.

Saul's son and David did together hold,  
 Our hearts hath bound in an eternal tie,  
 And which to loose, we time and man defy.  
 Heaven withholding wealth, to make amends,  
 More to endear our state, hath made us friends,  
 Never to separate, our names here stand,  
 United closely by the Muses's hand.  
 While blooms the hawthorn in the flow'ry vale,  
 Enriching sweetly every passing gale;  
 In meadows moist, while bending oziers sew  
 Love-breathing shepherds where to sight their woe;  
 Like as our souls in mutual friendship join'd,  
 The reader here our names enwarp'd will find.  
 Life's a short passage, down a doubtful steep,  
 Hence Death, black monster, with unpitying sweep,  
 In a few fleeting years, short months or days,  
 Our humble station from this scene will raise.  
 Ah, when the gloomy hours at last draws nigh,  
 Might we together up to Heaven fly,  
 Might we together but be call'd away,  
 Softly, to regions of eternal day;  
 Secure, we'd scorn the meagre traitor's dart,  
 Our only greatest fear, that we should part.  
 O, if my soul should first from earth get free,  
 Not even in heaven could it happy be,  
 Nor relish bliss till thou could'st share't with me.

Tim Burke describes this poem as 'an innovative contribution to the acrostic genre' which, he argues, was often a 'low and predominantly female pursuit' in the eighteenth century.<sup>75</sup> Thomson's use of the Acrostic both in its intricacy, secrecy and Biblical origins reflected a general interest in codes and secret conveyance of political message as can be seen in his correspondence with Alexander Kemp.<sup>76</sup> The Acrostic weaves Thomson and Williamson together by 'the muse's hand' in a poetic union, representing a spiritual union which continues after death and cannot be marred by the 'meagre traitor's dart' (l. 23): a clear refuge from political strife and, perhaps, questions against Thomson's loyalty. Burke points to the phrases,

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<sup>75</sup> Tim Burke, 'Poetry and Self-fashioning in 1790s Ulster', p.44.

<sup>76</sup> 'Lines, Written by somebody on the window of an Inn at Sterling, on seeing the Royal Palace in Ruins', Thomson's own hand, Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, f. 42.

‘meadows moist’ (l. 11) in which ‘love-breathing shepherds [...] sigh their woe’ (l. 12), which are conventional features of the pastoral, particularly when both shepherds are crossed in love by women,<sup>77</sup> suggesting that the union of friendship can effectively supplant the unsuccessful quest for heterosexual love. If the acrostic can be considered a traditionally ‘feminine’ genre, this poem effectively colonises it for a fraternal subject in which the brotherly poets escape the potential treachery of the world, especially set in the context of Thomson’s indulgence in coded expression as outlined above.

The ‘black’ning Despair’ of post-rebellion Ulster, and the redemptive quality of the loyal and perfect friend, is captured in a unique allegorical piece, ‘A Winter Night’s Dream, inscribed to my Best Friend Damon’ (1799),<sup>78</sup> written in the complex Spenserian stanza, and inspired by a fusion of classical epic and Chaucerian/Spenserian dream vision. The Augustan era saw an increase in political allegory from the Civil War period onwards and the result was high-genre satires like Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681). In Ulster there was also public taste for chivalric and non-chivalric romances from the medieval to Elizabethan periods.<sup>79</sup> Through his reading, Thomson was aware that allegory could be exploited for political currency and this poem is his first attempt at allegorical epic.

Thomson owned two volumes of Spenser’s works, having acquired them from the Belfast bookseller, William Mitchell, in March 1792, around the time he commenced his poetic career in the pages of the *Northern Star* newspaper.<sup>80</sup> His decision to preface his poem with a quotation, then attributed to Chaucer, rather than referring to classical sources, demonstrates a reluctance to follow foreign models. The Scottish novelist Tobias Smollet, whose novel *Humphry Clinker* Thomson had read, creates

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<sup>77</sup> Tim Burke, *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 15-23.

<sup>79</sup> J.R.R. Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man*, p. 43.

<sup>80</sup> William Mitchell to Samuel Thomson, 6 March 1792, Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, f. 164b.

Lismahago as a Scottish patriot who opines that Scots is the authentic ‘English’ language ‘in consequence of these innovations, the works of our best poets, such as Chaucer, Spenser, and even Shakespeare, were become [...] unintelligible to the nations of South-Britain [...]’<sup>81</sup> Thomson may have recognized that Chaucer’s English was closer to the Anglo-Saxon common origin of both modern English and Scots, being interested in the evolution of language and grammar.<sup>82</sup> The poetic visions of both Chaucer and Spenser were in keeping with a Romantic sensibility of reviving a great ‘British’ tradition of older modes and stanza forms. Spenser offered a model for common sense morality *par excellence* and ‘A Winter Night’s Dream’ demonstrates particularly Thomson’s budding interaction with the dawn of Romanticism, looking toward a spiritual resolution to the difficulties of identity and purpose, mediated through the sublime imagination.

Thomson adopts a stylized, middle English syntax to create an authentic metre, ‘Perchance me found out in my lowly place [...] But restless, moving Fancy still awake did keep’, (ll. 11, 36), in addition to archaic vocabulary and Chaucerian literary expression. The dream vision set-piece is contained within his reference to ‘Damon’, the poet’s one true friend:

“One such was I, till Friendship and the Muse,  
     Perchance me found out in my lowly place;  
*Nature*, the latter, ah! Did not refuse,  
     The former smil’d from *Damon*’s honest face. – (ll. 10-13)

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<sup>81</sup> Tobias Smollet, *The expedition of Humphry Clinker*, edited with an introduction and notes by Lewis M. Knapp; revised by Paul-Gabriel Boucé, (1771, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 199-200.

<sup>82</sup> At the turn of the Nineteenth Century, Thomson was becoming increasingly interested in English Grammar, and corresponded regularly with fellow Belfast schoolmaster and aspiring poet, David Boyd, on the subject, (Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, ff. 109-128.) He also returned ‘24 Vols of Bell’s’ to the bookseller Robert Callwell, (Callwell to Thomson, 17 July 1794, TCD MS 7257, f. 158). Callwell likely refers to Dr John Bell (1753-1832), the education specialist who pioneered the Madras System of Education (later introduced to Ireland by Maria Edgeworth and her father, Richard Lovell Edgeworth) which advocated Rousseau’s pragmatic educational theory of streaming and mentoring.

Whereas Thomson's earliest pastoral characters, Damon and Thyrsius, viewed the landscape and its 'romantic turn',<sup>83</sup> the speaker of 'A Winter Night's Dream' is guided through an imaginary pastoral landscape by Colin the Shepherd, named after the character that Spenser borrowed in turn from John Skelton for *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579), complete with *Piers Plowman* (c.1360-1386) undertones.<sup>84</sup> The dreamer claims that he is led into the visionary by reading over the pages of Spenser at his fireside, representing a safe and virtuous home environment from which he journeys inward. The fireside nook or Scots 'ingle-cheek' (l. 24) is a frequently recurring image in Thomson's poetry, such as in 'Ode, the Fireside' (1793), where the subject of the poem—the fireside of the low-born shepherd—attracts a coterie of likeminded people: 'And now and then, a mantling glass, / Which cheerfully I can divide / With rustic neighbour, lad and lass, / Around my humble Fire-side'.<sup>85</sup> This coterie, effaced with classical allusions in this poem, represented members of Thomson's circle of poets who met with him in his cottage. Thomson's post-Anglo Irish Union cottage fireside is an extension of the trope of 'hame content' that we find in the Tory Jacobite poetry of Robert Fergusson, in which the reader is warned not to be consumed by an increase in post-Union economic trade, but in Thomson's vision it also takes on a much more Romantic significance. The fireside is more than a point of resistance; it is the unifying point of creativity, providing warmth to the guests (notably both male and female) as they preserve the cultural life of Ireland by discussing and creating new literature.

The landscape of the vision, 'Morven's highlands' (l. 39), is a deliberate reference to Macpherson's *Ossian*, suggesting that a Romantic,

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<sup>83</sup> 'Damon and Thyrsis, a Pastoral' (1793) in Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 1-5.

<sup>84</sup> There is no written evidence that Thomson had read Langland, but variant texts of *Piers Plowman* were certainly in circulation during the eighteenth century and it is possible he may have read it. From the prefatory quotation to 'A Winter Night's Dream' (*New Poems*, p. 15), it is clear that he read excerpts—if not whole works—by Chaucer, whom he may have encountered through the Dedication of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calendar* (1579).

<sup>85</sup> 'Ode, to my Fireside' (1793), lines 21-24, *Poems*, p. 77.

subliminal, bardic, and national narrative runs beneath. The dreamer's guide is Colin the shepherd piper, a guise that Thomson himself often adopted, so it may be that Colin is a form of *doppelgänger*, another form of the poet's or dreamer's self, and that the poem is partly an exercise in self-discovery. The poet retires to the counter-revolutionary refuge of hearth and home, while the *doppelgänger* makes a dangerous journey into the underworld and back. There is a clear eschatological allegory running through the poem, as the dreamer is informed by Colin that "my friend, you have forwent your path," (l. 73) and refers to the 'danger of [his] state.' (l. 80) Having travelled through a familiar pastoral land of calm and serenity, Colin abandons the speaker at an unguarded gate, through which he passes into a form of underworld. There he beholds a congregation of various groups, centred on a goddess on a piebald chair, a figure inspired perhaps by the personified Dulness of Pope's *Dunciad* who presides calmly over a 'total cultural apocalypse'.<sup>86</sup> Likewise Thomson's Goddess presides over the total annihilation of a corrupt world of gluttony and betrayal. The bubbles she blows 'of mysterious kind' (l. 102) send the rabble into a fury to catch them:

'this capering, wild, unruly fry [...]  
Who, mad with tumult and outrageous joy,  
Promiscuous scrambled for them as they fell;  
All gap'd and gaz'd – alas, the reason why,  
They could not catch them...' (ll. 103-7)

The goddess is described as 'reclin'd' and yet, at the same time, 'frantic' upon catching the eye of the dreamer, which sets a chain of events in motion, much as the ejaculatory shout of Tam in Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter' (1790) unleashes the terror of Kirk Alloway. It is thus fitting that the poet should reference Tam's visual experience of the Devil's party, suggesting that the occult is at work in the vision:

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<sup>86</sup> Abigail Williams, 'Whig and Tory Poetics', *A Companion to eighteenth-century Poetry* ed. Christine Gerrard, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 444-457, (p. 456).

Here one delighted with a kitten toys;  
 Another pipes upon a pair of tongs;  
 A third one shows us how a hang'd man dies;  
 A fourth one murders time with wicked songs:  
 So fly the hours away with these distracted throngs. (ll. 95-99)

Thomson consciously references 'Tam o' Shanter' in several places, each time answering the Scottish poem with an Irish image: the second man plays the tongs, as Beelzebub 'skirl[s]' the bagpipes in Kirk Alloway; and his third man who demonstrates a hanging answers Burns's reference to the murder weapon of the Native Americans against the Scottish immigrants: 'Five tomahawks, wi' blude red-rusted'.<sup>87</sup> This horrific image is almost a psychological flashback to the execution of United Irish rebels, particularly the Antrim Commander-in-Chief, Henry Joy McCracken, who was hanged in Carrickfergus Jail on 6 July 1798. The reader is to understand that the 'murder[ing]' of time with (potentially seditious) song, next to the irreverent description of hanging, accounts for some of the sinful behaviour that the poet encounters, and which unleashes the coming judgement. Thus, Thomson marries references to Burns's most famous mock epic with the political undertones of the Spenserian dream vision to remind the reader, once again, of the traumatic events of 1798.

In anticipation of a new century in which the subject of Union with Britain was hotly debated, Thomson returns to the persistent Tory theme of *Luxury's* invasion of society as the dreamer hides himself in a nook, paralleling his earthly body asleep by the fireside, and beholds a dinner party which features a number of allegorical figures. Just as Ireland is threatened with absorption into a foreign country, the dreamer remains on the cusp of the scene, with the constant threat of being pulled into the action. The hosts are *Riot* and *Luxury*, described as a couple dressed in

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<sup>87</sup> 'A murderer's banes, in gibbet-airms; / Twa span-lang, wee, unchristened bairns; / A thief, new-cutted frae a rape, / Wi' his last gasp his gab did gape; Five tomahawks, wi' blude red-rusted: / Five scimitars, wi' murder crusted', ('Tam o' Shanter', ll. 131-6, *Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley, II, p. 561.)

black, who look on in amazement as a clergyman in liturgical dress surpasses their expectations of gluttony: ‘And still he cut and frown’d, / And gormandiz’d like any Russian bear.’ (ll. 147-8). The feast proceeds with vivid descriptions of gluttonous performances from the allegorical figures, while scenes of sexual immorality unfold with ‘*Fornication* lying on her back’ (l. 129) while the horrified poet watches on.

Thomson’s imaginative mastery of imagery is at its height in this poem, and its origins may lie in a source thus far unacknowledged in his poetry. Thomson conveys the true horror of hell, in the unnatural, foul figure of *Riot*, whose gender changes from male, as she commits vividly-described acts of cannibalism, back to female as she vomits up the entrails and remains of her fellow guests (ll. 172-180). The dreamer watches *Riot* eating the guests ‘stoop and roop’ (l. 166), an image and expression that is found in a well-known eighteenth-century Scots ballad, ‘Geordie Sits in Charlie’s Chair’, later compiled in Robert Malcolm’s *Jacobite Minstrelsy* (1829), in which the Duke of Cumberland arrives in hell:

They ate him up baith stoop and roop;  
Bonnie laddie, Highland laddie,  
And that’s the gate they served the Duke,  
My bonnie laddie, Highland laddie.<sup>88</sup>

Robert Malcolm notes that the ballad existed in several different forms, being eventually published in the *Scots Musical Museum*,<sup>89</sup> a publication to which Thomson was said to have contributed.<sup>90</sup>

*Riot* is to suffer the same fate as her victims, being thrown into hell by ‘black Destruction in a coat of mail [...] With moans redoubled, many an echo rais’d, / That far resounded o’er broad Stygian waves’ (ll. 172; 187-8), the same destination as that of the Duke of Cumberland in ‘Geordie Sits in

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Geordie Sits in Charlie’s Chair’, ll. 49-56, *Jacobite minstrelsy: with notes illustrative of the text and containing historical details in relation to the House of Stuart from 1640 to 1784*, [compiled by Robert Malcolm], (Glasgow: R. Griffin, 1829; hereafter *Jacobite Minstrelsy*), p. 286.

<sup>89</sup> *Jacobite Minstrelsy*, p. 284n.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas Sloan to Samuel Thomson, 31 March 1791, TCD MS 7257, f. 72.



Charlie's Chair'. It is more likely that Thomson knew of the ballad through oral transmission, and drew upon the balladeer's description of hell in the creation of *Riot*'s cannibalistic punishment of the dinner guests. The marriage of references: on the one hand, a familiar Jacobite ballad (with its emphasis on the illegitimacy of the Hanoverian succession), within a Spenserian style vision (with the allegorical reference of the *Faerie Queen* to Queen Elizabeth's reign), suggests further that 'A Winter Night's Dream' was written as a complex allegory of specific political dimensions, potentially undermining the legitimacy of George III, who presides over a contemporary cultural apocalypse of luxury and sin.

Whatever political subtexts exist within the poem, Thomson's ending purposely dwells on the personal effects of his imaginative journey. *Destruction* spares only the poet who takes flight from the place out into the dark plain until he reaches the safety of Colin's hill which is doubtless a representation of Lyle Hill. It is tempting to read this as an allegory of Thomson's escape from implication in the 1798 Rebellion which claimed the lives and reputations of several of his friends. Upon waking, the dreamer and the poet are now conflated as he comes to terms with the fact that he has been spared from the self-destructive society governed by Luxury and Riot. He senses that the threat has not passed and shares his thoughts with the reader, making no attempt to explain the allegory nor to pronounce any didactic moral. Offering up a prayer, 'Ye heavenly guardians of my native isle / Protect my brethren all from Folly's maze;' he prays for deliverance from the threat of *luxury* (the embourgeoisement associated with the wealthy classes) and from *Riot* (the human excesses of rebellion).

As before, Thomson condemns the sin and spares the sinner, staking his claim to an individual path of moderation and thus acknowledging the fault on all sides of the social divide in Ireland. Once again, the poet finds refuge in his fraternal union with Damon, as 'the *friendly pair*' hope to keep away from vice and folly, offering a final prayer. Through an imaginative encounter with eschatology, the poet concludes that it is the union of true friendship, 'Al sweet enjoyments bought withouten price' (l. 227),

epitomized by Damon, that will be redemptive. Indeed, just as the sins of this world are echoed in the dream vision, the liberty of friendship has a heavenly imprint, as ‘songs of bliss resound thro’ an eternal sphere’; Thomson argues that his friendship with John Williamson is somehow otherworldly, and has effects outside of time, in eternity.

Although *New Poems* represents a retreat from explicit political comment, the poetic quietism is a mere front. By treading a middle ground Thomson may have invoked the wrath of both the authorities and his more radical friends. In this light it is interesting that he composed a defiant tirade against calumny:

[...] to evade thy baleful eye,  
Misfortune’s thoughtless children fly,  
In pensive wise to weep. (ll. 28-30)

The image of ‘Misfortune’s thoughtless children’ (l. 29) is reminiscent of the fleeing rebels whose idealistic dreams had been quickly snuffed out, and although an amnesty had been offered to most of the surviving footmen, condemnation lingered for those who previously had involvement with political faction. Thomson’s defiant final stanza suggests that he empathizes with this persecuted group and utters a prophecy that calumny will turn upon itself, ‘Tho’ seeming for a while o’ercast, / Sweet Truth will triumph at the last (ll. 37-8).

The scars of rebellion are present throughout the edition and are marked in an interesting series of twenty-seven sonnets, dedicated to the memory of Thomson’s friend and neighbour James McNeilly, who died during the month following the Irish Rebellion.<sup>91</sup> The sixteenth sonnet—an address to the cuckoo—masks its reference to the scars of rebellion:<sup>92</sup>

[...] alas! Sweet minstrel, how chang’d are all  
The scenes of life, since last I heard thee here!

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<sup>91</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 181-195.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Sonnet to the Cuckoo’, ll. 3-8, *New Poems*, p.189.

Full many an ear now in the clay consumes,  
 That last year listen'd to thy delightful song:  
 Oblivion slowly draws her veil along,  
 And all the solitary scene beglooms!

In contrast to the bird of 'To the Cuckoo' (1797) that hails the arrival of 'TRUE UNITED IRISHMEN' in the glen, the poet reflects on the United Irishmen who marched 'last year' and now lie dead 'in the clay'. The cuckoo is now out of place in the landscape, with the implication that Paine's summer will never come again in Ireland.

The despondency revealed in this sonnet sequence gives way to rage in one of Thomson's most compact and microscopic-themed Scots poems, 'On a Spider' (1799),<sup>93</sup> which begins with the poet's disgust at the 'Despot-like' spider ready to ensnare and toy with its prey, 'the fellest far o' creepin' things' (ll. 1-2). The poem has a wider application to human murderers with the poet expressing a wish to visit vengeance upon them. 'On a Spider' is one of Thomson's many versatile odes which may be superficially reminiscent, in their language and titles, of Burns's 'To a Mouse', and though 'On a Spider' shares a common grounding in Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the emotion generated by the spider and flies appears to be condemnation rather than sympathy. Inspired by the scene of a spider about to devour flies caught in a web, the poem appears to be a straightforward reflection on nature, in which the poet recounts in detail the activity of a spider on the web. Thomson manipulates the rhyme scheme and skipping rhythm of Scottish Habbie Simpson stanza, capitalizing on the 'sting' in the tail of the final couplet, to lurch the reader from reflecting on the spider as an insect instinctively following nature, to beholding a tyrant. The poet appears to condemn the spider as a symbol of the 'gloomy, selfish, subtle mind / Wha nae content nor glee can find':

DESPOT-like, see where it hings,  
 The fellest far of creeping things:  
 How artfully the glewy strings

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<sup>93</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 205-6.

Enwarped are!  
To thoughtless insects feet and wings  
A fatal snare! (ll. 1-6)

The strong poetic voice that condemns the spider, echoes the cries of ‘despot’ that ran through the *Northern Star* during the 1790s, in resistance to monarchical tyranny.<sup>94</sup> The spider is described as a despot both for carrying out its natural instincts to kill flies who have danced too close to the web, and for toying with its prey. However, the poet extends his condemnation to the spider’s prey, the midges, who represent fools who ‘Now here, now there, at random reel / Thro’ thick and thin, / Till hard and fast his neck and heel / In Ruin’s gin’ (ll. 21-24), rendering the poem unstable as a straightforward piece of anti-establishment rhetoric. ‘Reel’ is Scots for acting in a disorderly and violent manner, possibly alluding to the uncoordinated rebel militias of the North who, in the absence of experienced leadership, were led into battle by the remaining young men who had not defected or run away.

In measuring his condemnation, Thomson stakes his claim on both sides of the argument, appearing to take a moderate and impartial position, but the use of the unequivocal statement ‘Ruin’s gin’ suggests otherwise. Perhaps, rather than being pragmatic, Thomson bought into the United Irish propaganda that the British government had deliberately attempted to provoke a crisis in Ireland, in order to create a political opportunity for Union.<sup>95</sup> If so, the weight of blame falls heavily upon the heads of the United Irish leadership who, with reference to the poem’s imagery, became caught in the spider’s web, thus enabling the Act of Union to be passed. Whatever blame may be due, the poet expresses his desire to crush the spider beneath a hammer, making clear that his loyalty remains with the rebels. The poem began in measured paces but accelerates towards the

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<sup>94</sup> For example, ‘Not till each frantic Despot’s ire / By its own efforts shall subside, / And in the shame of baffled pride, / The furies of his heart expire ...’ (‘Ode for the New Year 1795’, *Northern Star*, 23-26 March 1795.)

<sup>95</sup> Manuel Ceretta, “Like a Phoenix from its Ashes” United Irish Propaganda and the Act of Union, in Michael Brown, Patrick Geoghegan and, James Kelly (eds.) *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: Bicentennial Essays* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003; henceforward ‘United Irish Propaganda’), pp. 84-94 (p. 86).



poem, but this intricacy is the poem's great strength. The standard English poem, the 'Hedge-Hog and the Fox' (1793) opines that hedgehog is strong when he lies 'roll'd up in a ball' and the moral for Britain is that she opens herself up to defeat by displaying her arms:

Hence let Britannia warning take,  
And no Quixotic fallies make;  
But recollect, e're 'tis too late,  
The Hedge-hog's Folly, and his Fate.<sup>99</sup>

For the epigram of 'To a Hedge-hog', Thomson chooses a quotation from Broome's 'The Coquette', 'Unguarded beauty is disgrace', thus actively engaging with the same idea as 'The Hedge-hog and the Fox' of the need for self-protection.<sup>100</sup>

As Frank Ferguson has pointed out, the poem is a form of Horatian satire which may appear as a piece of country burlesque, but is considerably more sophisticated when employed with Thomson's considerable skill in the Scots language.<sup>101</sup> 'To a Hedge-hog' is no straightforward piece of sentimental Burns imitation. Thomson's choice of the ode for 'a rougher subject' was designed to reflect the inflection of the genre for national purposes that we find particularly in Ramsay's 'Elegy of Maggy Johnston' (1731) which, Murray Pittock argues, 'protect[s] and promote[s] a distinctive national voice by transforming English uses of literary kinds, not surrendering to them.'<sup>102</sup> In this way Thomson sought to reclaim the 'high' sentimental genre of the elegy for a lower, Irish political subject with a stylistic deployment of the Scots language to create self-conscious hybridity and hidden meanings which the local Scots-speakers would be expected to

<sup>99</sup> *Northern Star*, 14-17 August, 1793.

<sup>100</sup> William Broome, *Poems on Several Occasions*, (London: printed for Henry Lintot, 1739), p. 225.

<sup>101</sup> Ferguson, 'The articulation of Scottish identities', p. 67.

<sup>102</sup> Murray Pittock, 'Allan Ramsay and the Decolonisation of Genre', *The Review of English Studies* Advance Access published online on May 4 2007, <doi:10.1093/res/hgl138>, accessed 10 March 2008.

understand.<sup>103</sup> The ‘hurchin’ is the opposite of the traditional, beautiful subject of the elegy; it is prickly, offputting and ‘guarded’, being by its nature a subversive animal of resistance which is ironically at its strongest when rolled up in a posture of submission.

Thomson employs a self-consciously mixed register of English and Scots in the opening of the first stanza which observes the classical ‘youthful poets, thro’ the grove’ (l. 1), misleading the reader to expect scenes of courtly love as the poet attempts ‘to move / the darling object’ (ll. 2-3). He begins to resist neoclassicism by sprinkling the register with Scots; the poets ‘chaunt’ (l. 2), a reference to the sound of the bagpipe, and their classical exertions are brought down to earth in favour of ‘a rougher subject.’ (l. 6) This refers to the misleadingly-simple folk-style achieved by employing Ulster-Scots vocabulary, with its connotations of aphorism and homely philosophy, and it is a register which gradually becomes thicker as the subject of the poem becomes ‘rougher’, representing an unfamiliar ‘other’. The seemingly innocent, prickly creature is soon infused in the third stanza with radical undertones. The deliberate italicization in ‘Gudefaith *thou* disna want for *pikes*’ (l. 15) immediately conjures up images of the 1798 rebellion battles of Vinegar Hill and Antrim, the run up to which would later be described by James Orr in his poem ‘Donegore Hill’ (1804). During the Battle of Antrim, the rebels formed a gauntlet along the church wall with long pikes and killed many of the cavalry. Considering that battlefield pikes were often deployed in a pattern known as the ‘hedgehog formation’,<sup>104</sup> it is not difficult to see the deep political significance of the hedgehog which is described by its Scots name, ‘hurchin’ which can also mean ‘ragged urchin’. Frank Ferguson’s suggestion that the image of the figure ‘strib[bing]’ or milking the ‘outler

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<sup>103</sup> James Orr referred to the use of Scots language as an alternative and impenetrable tongue, ‘to quat braid Scotch [...] a task that foils their art’, (James Orr, ‘The Irish Cottier’s Death and Burial’, line 43, *Collected Works*, [Belfast: Mullan & Son, 1935; rpt. 1936], pp. 260-6.)

<sup>104</sup> For discussion of how Swiss Pikemen were deployed in this way by Charles VIII, see Max Boot, *War Made New: technology, warfare, and the course of history, 1500 to today*, (New York: Gotham, 2006), pp. 2-4.

cow' (l. 39) may be 'an oblique reference to fugitive United Irishmen forced to survive in the country side in the post-rebellion period' is compelling given that several of Thomson's friends, if not Thomson himself, fought in this very battle.<sup>105</sup> The hedge-hog 'grubbin [its] food by thorny dykes' (l. 14), scrounging for food in rural areas, would support this reading as well as Thomson's poem 'The Gloaming' (1806) which was an earlier warning to the 'golden great' not to wander off the safe, 'broad highway',<sup>106</sup> suggesting that in such areas the cottager has subverted the hierarchy and knows the lay of the land better than the gentleman who owns it.

If the reader of 1806 had missed the radical subtext of 'To a Hedge-hog' (1799), they would perhaps be spurred to reconsider upon reading 'The Gloaming' (1806). The weight of argument for such a subtext in 'To a Hedge-hog' is only heightened by Thomson's reassertion of weaver imagery as the poet exclaims, 'Thou looks (L—d save's) array'd in spikes, / A creepin heckle!' (ll. 17-18) – 'heckle' being the Scots word for flax-comb. Again, Thomson exploits the potentiality for multiplicity of meaning in the Scots language. 'Heckle' has several other meanings; to 'sharply criticize or interrogate'; 'a long feather in a cockade'; 'a cough or cry, suggestive of an animal in distress; or a laugh. Thomson was a skilful and popular pastoral poet and, like Burns, demonstrates a keen familiarity with landscape and creatures alike; he knew that to see a hedgehog during the day was unusual and indicated that the animal was in distress. But the cockade image is the most explicit clue to the United Irish identity of the hurchin, referring to the green cockade worn by men in support of the Irish movement, as well as the obvious Jacobite connotations to the white cockade. This final image carried particular resonance in the late eighteenth-century mindset of British alarm, where Jacobite and Jacobin were often iterated together. The connotations of interrogation would also be particularly poignant following the arrest and trial of United Irish suspects. If we take an alternative meaning of the Scots

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<sup>105</sup> Frank Ferguson (ed.), *Ulster-Scots Writing*, p. 467.

<sup>106</sup> 'The Gloaming, a Rhapsody' (1806), lines 9, 45, *Simple Poems*, p. 52-56.





‘grim’ meaning ‘causing or suffering severe pain’ suggests that the hurchin is an ambiguous creature that may excite either the reader’s fear or sympathy, depending on their outlook.<sup>111</sup> The craftiness of the hedgehog is celebrated as it is likened to the devil, ‘Some say thou’rt sib kin to the sow, / But sibber to the deil, I trow’ (ll. 19-20) as the poet imagines that the creature was created as a joke of ‘*Belzie*, laughin, like to burst’ (l. 29). Frank Ferguson suggests that this is designed to refer to the ‘demonized United Irish cause’,<sup>112</sup> and Thomson notably ends the stanza with an assertion of the misunderstood creature’s divine purpose, ‘But naithing, as the learn’d allow, / Was made in vain’ (ll. 23-4).

Ina Ferris’s differentiation between Adam Smith’s model of sympathy (which effects a ready alignment of the affective and the rational) with David Hume’s model (which ‘disturbs the normal flow of one’s consciousness’)<sup>113</sup> can be seen when comparing animal poems such as ‘To a Hedge-hog’ with other poems such as ‘Poor Robin’s Elegy’ (1799). The robin is killed in the natural order of predator and prey; whereas the hedgehog behaves unnaturally so that it would certainly be noted by the foreign eye, perhaps the loyalist reader, whose political predilection should, the poet argues, be disturbed and displaced by confronting the United Irishman’s plight. The poem ends with the invocation of the mysterious figure of ‘Colley’ against whom the poet warns the hedgehog:

Now creep awa the way ye came,  
And tend your squeakin pups at hame.  
Gin Colley should o’erhear the same,  
          It might be fatal,  
For you, wi’ a the pikes ye claim,  
          Wi’ him to battle. (ll. 60-65)

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<sup>111</sup> Alternatively, Thomson may have intended this line as a jibe against Robert Burns’s employment of the term ‘snarlin’ tykes’ to describe the common people, (‘Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat’ [1795], line 9, *Poems and Songs*, II, p. 764-6). See discussion in Chapter Four.

<sup>112</sup> Ferguson, ‘The articulation of Scottish identities’, p. 68.

<sup>113</sup> Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale*, p. 13.

The reminder of ‘fatal’ pikes returns us to the politically-laden core of the poem, and serves a reminder of rebellion’s defeat. ‘Colley’, a Scots word for ‘common cur’ which took on the English meaning of thoroughbred sheepdog, is a more well-bred in contrast to the ill-bred United Irish ‘tyke’ and keen to impose order. To ‘colley’ a person in Scots means to ‘domineer over [...] to put to silence in an argument’, suggesting that the better bred Colley has defeated the ragged, labouring-class protagonist of the poem in spite of his army of pikes.<sup>114</sup>

Yet the enduring image of the defeated animal retreating away to ‘tend [its] squeakin’ pups at hame’, is perhaps designed to play upon Ascendancy fears of United Irish reprisal, or regeneration. If the hedgehog avoids the Colley and concentrates on fostering its young, a new generation may emerge with potential to reassert themselves. An alternative reading of Thomson’s ambiguous ending may draw on the sentiments of the anonymous poem, ‘The Hedgehog and the Fox’ (1796) and Thomson’s earlier ‘Hawk and the Weazel’ (1796), offering a subtle warning to a loyalist reader to likewise beware of the predator that will come after him—in this case—Napoleonic France. The continuing rise of Napoleon was a hot subject in the Belfast Press with the opportunistic Thomas Stott of Dromore, writing under ‘Hafiz’, publishing a Standard Habbie piece on the subject called ‘Address to Buonaparte’ (1800):

Now ca’ yourself what name ye please,  
*Consul—Dictator—or Praeses,*  
 Supported by the pious Sieyes  
     In council dark—  
 TYRANT, perhaps some folk will guess  
     Shou’d be *your mark*.<sup>115</sup>

Regardless, the climactic effect of ‘To a Hedge-Hog’ is to reclaim a classical genre for the context of the ‘other’, perhaps even an Irish context,

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<sup>114</sup> Dictionary of the Scots Language, [www.dsl.ac.uk](http://www.dsl.ac.uk), accessed 14 Feb 2008.

<sup>115</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 January 1800. There is a clear play on Burns’s ‘Address to the Deil’ here which demonstrates effectively Stott’s demonizing of Bonaparte as a figure of evil.

subtly weaving in recent political events which cannot be discussed openly. From this point onward, like the hedgehog ‘creep[ing] awa’, Thomson’s verse avoids direct political comment, *appearing* to shun politics as Alexander Kemp had recommended. ‘To a Hedge-hog’ serves as a covert memorial to the political scarring of Thomson’s native landscape, but also signals a poet’s determination to carry on with poetry beyond politics. That said, the poem is evidence that Thomson remained radical, to a point, into the Union period.

Far from a quietist retreat from the world, the ‘various subjects’ of *New Poems* make it socially, politically and poetically much more subtle than Thomson’s preface elucidates. *New Poems* demonstrates Thomson’s attempts to resolve his feelings of disappointment by exploring different types of union, both natural and social. Much of his former observation of community socialising, pastoral scenes gives way to a Romantic-visionary, imaginary Ireland, mediated through literary dream vision and fraternal *agape*, enabling him to re-imagine himself within other contexts, centred around the image of the cottage fireside. In *New Poems*, Thomson begins to move from explicit politics and human unions—both sexual and fraternal—toward a metaphysical union with God, and redirecting his energies toward religion and individual reform. It seems that, as Marilyn Butler argues of Wordsworth, the counter-revolutionary taste for ‘hearth and home’ fortified Thomson’s poetry, rather than undermining it.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830*, (Oxford: OUP, 1981), p. 66.

## Chapter 5

### ‘Lowrie Nettle’: Enlightenment Seceder and Satirist

But if you know yourself to be an ass,  
 A blockhead thick-skulled, narrow, selfish knave,  
 Quick on your plodding, grappling business pass,  
 Nor lose one moment here in *Crambo Cave*.<sup>1</sup>

While the image of the hedge-hog, discussed the previous chapter, was a metaphor for Thomson’s guise of a radical poet in retreat, it was also a double-edged Romantic strategy. The repentant radical Robert Southey described his own response to his life as an urban writer in a similar image of retreat ‘into my shell whenever I am approached, or [I] roll myself up like a hedgehog in my rough outside.’<sup>2</sup> Thomson’s propensity towards satire is acclaimed in James Orr’s correspondence with Thomson in which he refers to Thomson’s ‘nettling’ tendencies.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his *oeuvre* Thomson adopted a prickly exterior in his public writing, while maintaining an open and honest private correspondence with friends of congenial literary tastes and, often, political mindsets. The pricklier element of Thomson’s personality has been noted by critics of his poetry and his ability to disturb the emotions of his correspondents is borne out in several startled, even grovelling, responses. ‘Lowrie Nettle’ was a name familiar to readers of the *Northern Star* who read Thomson’s parody of Robert Burns’s ‘Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat’ (1795). Prickling friends in private correspondence was one thing, and mocking local community members in print was risky enough, but political lampooning in the post-Rebellion press was no longer an option. This chapter explores the extent to which Thomson’s most notorious character trait was deployed with skill not simply to attack his personal

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Crambo Cave: to Damon’ (1799), ll. 13-16, *New Poems*, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Southey, *The Life and Correspondence of Robert Southey* ed. Charles Cuthbert Southey, (Harper & Brothers, 1855), p. 93, *Google Books* [Original, Harvard University, Digitized 6 May 2008].

<sup>3</sup> James Orr to Samuel Thomson, 2 Mar. 1806, TCD MS 7257, f. 60.

enemies, but in an attempt to raise the standard of the arts in Ireland in line with eighteenth-century satirical models and contemporary Enlightenment discourses on improvement, education, self-reflection and the moral conscience.

Although the transitional period of the Anglo-Irish Union had limited political activity to some extent, it served to spur Thomson to more complex poetic creations, such as the complex coded vernacular subtext of odes like ‘To a Hedgehog’ (1799) and the imaginative envisioning of union imagery in romantic and fraternal poetry as detailed in the previous chapter. The emotional burden of transitional identity entailed by Union also encouraged him to experiment with content, combining his ability to revel in the Romantic conceits of loss and isolation, with a more dogmatic talent for Augustan satire. In the post-Rebellion and Union period of 1799-1801, having re-fashioned himself as the Bard-in-retreat, he concentrated ever more on his local community, particularly his religious activity as an Ulster Presbyterian, emphasizing improvement through the means of educational reform. Although his continuing interest in politics has been established in previous chapters, it is clear that he attempted to supplant his reputation as a radical poet with a growing interest in the spiritual life of the nation, providing him with a new focus and authority as a bard.

Thomson’s religious principles are not immediately apparent in his early editions, and are only expressed clearly in his final edition, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806). These poems as a group have received markedly less critical attention than Thomson’s previous works, suggesting that critics have been uncomfortable with a perceived shift from radical political content to religious principles. Recent work by historians such as Hempton and Hill (1992) and Ian McBride (1998) has helped to dispel this perception, pointing out that religious and millenarian discourse played a key role in encouraging Presbyterian radicalism; sermons based on biblical texts were circulated widely throughout Ulster during the eighteenth century,<sup>4</sup> and the *Northern Star* republished

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<sup>4</sup> J.R.R Adams cites an Appendix of Ulster Publications which is dominated by religious works and sermons, *Printed Word and the Common Man*, pp. 175-181.

millenarian excerpts of several older religious tracts in 1795.<sup>5</sup> Yet in spite of this, it appears that in the 1790s at least Samuel Thomson was primarily interested in literary works, rather than theological treatises and pamphlets. This suggests that Thomson's interest in millenarianism was more scant than many of his radical Presbyterian contemporaries. Indeed his transactions with the Belfast bookseller Robert Callwell (1793-1797) were mostly composed of poetic works, save 'Five vols of the the Bible'.<sup>6</sup>

*Poems on Different Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect* (1793) contains no explicit theological comment save, in the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan, a Brother Bard' (1791), the poet's imagined death wish that he might be laid under a mossy stone with his friend until 'judgement day'.<sup>7</sup> Such brief religious imagery is at times supported by a more Puritanical narrative of anti-luxury and a tone of moral indignation at an unequal and unmeritocratic society: an agenda that underpins all three of Thomson's published editions. The preoccupation with corruptive wealth and status can be seen in poems like 'Ode from Wealth' (1793)<sup>8</sup> in which wealth is 'a subtle passport to a guilty joy, / the foe of Virtue and the Devil's toy' (ll. 7-8), gilding the 'fopp'ries' and treading underfoot the 'ragged sons of worth' with whom he identifies.

The following chapters trace the growing influence of religion and religious romanticism on Thomson's poetry from an abundance of religious satire and shocking black humour in *New Poems* (1799) to a more Romantic vision of evangelical Christianity in *Simple Poems* (1806). Thomson's early poetry displays little anxiety when considering the deity, employing one reference to 'ye ruling pow'rs'—a vague reference to a deity more in the manner of Robert Burns's

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<sup>5</sup> Crawford Gribben, 'Antichrist in Ireland – protestant Millenialism and Irish Studies' in *Protestant millennialism*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Callwell to Samuel Thomson, 17 July 1794, Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, f. 158.

<sup>7</sup> 'Epistle to Luke Mullan, a Brother Bard', line 48, *Poems*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 109-110.

addresses to God—and several characteristically vicious closing epitaphs on local figures which set the tone for the marvellously satirical *New Poems on a Variety of Different Subjects* (1799):

HERE lies deserted by the soul,  
The clay contents of \_\_\_\_ the croul:  
He was, ----- but now he's dead as mutton,  
A M\_\_\_\_r, L\_\_\_\_r, and a Gl\_\_\_\_n.<sup>9</sup>

Thomson's shift towards a much more self-reflective exploration of his identity as an Irish Dissenting Christian had not yet taken place, and his satire bears the marks of a man coming to terms with the disruption that rebellion and political union had thrust upon his nation and group of friends. As will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, Thomson experienced a religious conversion of some kind in the early 1800s, which encouraged a more deeply reflective and personal religious practice which perhaps discouraged the open expression of political zeal.

From the outset of his career, Thomson's reading of Augustan satire was remarkably ecumenical. He was able to draw on a variety of Augustan satire that had been appropriated for different political, literary and personal agendas, from Dryden, Milton and Pope to Andrew Marvell.<sup>10</sup> From quotations embedded in his published volumes, it is evident that he was familiar with Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1680), *Macflecknoe* (1682), and the works of Alexander Pope. Each author employed a variety of mock-heroic satire, political allegory and, in the case of Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, humorous satire with a moralistic purpose: to resurrect friendship and expose the absurdity of family feuds. Satire could be practical, subversive, entertaining, moral and artistic. The 'Answer to Paine's Age of Reason' (1797) appears, in its epistolary form, to be a plea to reason, but the

<sup>9</sup> 'On a remarkable little, ILL-FAVOUR'D BODY' (1793), *Poems*, p. 125. The censorship of the final line, 'A Miser, Liar, and a Glutton', affords the poem more slanderous potential to shock.

<sup>10</sup> 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791), *Poems*, pp. 85-90. Thomson received a volume of Marvell's poems from the Belfast bookseller, Robert Callwell, who commented that 'his Genius is not equal to his Virtue', (Callwell to Thomson, 18 May 1793, TCD MS 7257, f. 152).



speaker's rising anger is betrayed by an increasingly elevated tone, coarse vocabulary and tight couplet rhyme scheme:<sup>11</sup>

DEAR TOM, I have read your production all over,  
 With the greatest attention, but cannot discover,  
 From the first to the last, of right reason a tittle,  
 Or argument either, the worth of a spittle.  
 For reason does all your assertions despise,  
 As foolish conjectures, blasphemy and lies. (ll. 1-6)

'Tis likely, perhaps, you esteem it a farce,  
 That there's any such thing as a hole in your a---  
 Because that, alas! You cou'd only be told it,  
 A palpable *hearsay*, you ne'er could behold it. (ll. 17-20)

While Joseph Addison expressed strong distaste for 'giving of secret stabs to a man's reputation,' he also equated satire with the associated pleasure of the imagination, a sentiment which is holy: 'greatness reminds us to admire God'; 'beauty stimulates delight in creation.'<sup>12</sup> In human cases where greatness and beauty break down, Thomson appears to justify making them the objects of his satire. Writing several protests against his own experience of calumny, Thomson seems to have seen potential victory against the malice of others through the deployment of the pen:

Tho' seeming for a while o'ercast,  
 Sweet Truth will triumph at the last,  
                   Despite of all thy art;  
 Methinks I see thee fairly foil'd,  
 And back upon thyself recoil'd,  
                   Knowing thy hateful heart.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 165.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Addison, 'The Danger of Satire', quoted in *The English Essayists: a Comprehensive Selection from the works of the great essayists from Lord Bacon to John Ruskin ... compiled by Robert Cochrane*, (London and Edinburgh: William P. Nimmo, 1879), pp. 114-116, (p. 114).

<sup>13</sup> 'Ode to Calumny' (1796), lines. 37-42, *New Poems*, p. 129.

As with his portrayal of his labouring-class community, he did not idealise local characters, but at times exercised a real sense of superiority over them.

Since its apex during the 1790s in populist publications like the *Northern Star*, labouring class poetry had waned in popularity and it is notable that by the early 1800s Thomson's contributions to the moderate *Belfast News-Letter* had lessened significantly in line with this trend. Instead the pages of the *News Letter* were filled with the verses of Thomas 'Hafiz' Stott, the protégé of Bishop Percy in Dromore. He has perhaps endured in infamy for numerous opportunistic anniversary odes, including one for the King's birthday, an ode for each month of the year on the subjects of the seasons, and an ode to the Anglo-Saxon champion of a unified English culture in King Alfred, clearly capitalizing on the recently enacted Union between Britain and Ireland.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Kohler writes that the 'birthday ode,' commissioned annually to honour the King, became an oft-cited marker of the panegyric ode's degeneration during the first half of the eighteenth century,<sup>15</sup> and it was not long before Stott engaged the attention of Thomson, who had, after all, contributed many carefully crafted odes on natural and political subjects to the Belfast newspapers from 1792 onwards.

Thomson's 'Epistle to Hafiz', was published in the *Belfast News Letter* in 1802,<sup>16</sup> and may have been a bona fide attempt on Thomson's part to network with a new rising star on the Irish scene, and to break into the burgeoning literary circle of Bishop Percy. Stott has often been maligned by critics as a dry and conservative flatterer, allegedly dismissed by Byron as 'grovelling Stott', but he was one of the best comic poets in Ulster at the time, and his career spans several

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<sup>14</sup> *Belfast News Letter*, 8 April 1800.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret M. Kohler, 'The Ode', *A Companion to eighteenth-century Poetry* ed. Christine Gerrard, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 386-402, (p. 388).

<sup>16</sup> *Belfast News Letter*, 30 Mar. 1802.

decades in public print.<sup>17</sup> Stott's poetic exertions and connections surely engaged Thomson's interest, but there are subtle undertones of nettling throughout the address to Stott, carefully balanced between polite compliments. Thomson opens the poem with an address to spring, adding that 'Ten thousand delights now the poet may find, / All new as he never had found them before.' (ll. 3-4). Although it may seem like a conventional opening, readers of the *Belfast News Letter* could not have failed to note Stott's annual poems on the return of spring and it is tempting to read a note of sarcasm in Thomson's verse, suggesting that these delights of spring are not quite as 'new' to the reader as they seem to 'Hafiz', Stott's poetic pseudonym. In addressing 'Hafiz', Thomson reflects on his own poverty, claiming to suffer for his art, 'For fate has decreed that the bard must be poor'. By contrast to the bard who desires only the honour of his country as recompense, Thomson then refers to Stott's comfortable position as protégé of a Bishop, and offers him some fraternal advice:

Philosophy says, and we know it is true,  
 That enjoyments are frequently found in the chase,  
 Enough then, to keep the bright object in view,  
 That on earth still eludes us, and shuns our embrace. (ll. 41-44)

Thomson goes overboard in asserting his desire for Stott's acquaintance, and his recurring compliments slipped in between barbs contribute to the overall tone of the poem, which is reminiscent of a subtle, Popean lampooning. The epigraph, taken from the Scottish poet Hector Macneill, adds to this potentially subversive reading since the lines come at the climax of MacNeill's poem which celebrates independence from wealthy persons: 'While Health, heavenly goddess, smiles / Buxom and gay, shall we murmur that / Wealth comes not nigh?'<sup>18</sup> Since

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<sup>17</sup> Frank Ferguson, 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> 'May-Day; or, the Discovery: a Pastoral in the Manner of Cunningham', lines 53-54, *The Poetical Works of Hector Macneill Esq.*, 2 vols, (Edinburgh: Printed by James Ballantyne & Co. For Mundell and Son [etc.], 1806), 1, p. 99.

Thomson evidently saw the benefits of linking himself with Presbyterian patrons like Samuel Thompson of Muckamore, he was certainly not anti-patronage altogether, but in his Epistle to Stott he certainly appears to make a jibe, albeit light-heartedly, at Stott's beneficiary position in relation to an Anglican Bishop, a principal figure of the Ascendency in Ireland. Perhaps Thomson was keen to remind Stott that as the prolific contributor to the *Northern Star*, Thomson was an old hand at the game of public poetry, or perhaps it was an attempt to clip the wings of a potential successor. It begs the question therefore, was satire ultimately a medium for those who felt they were losing a battle in the public or private sphere? Much has been written of the 'gloom of the Tory satirists'<sup>19</sup> in their battle with the Whig panegyrics of the eighteenth century, and it may be that here we have a mirrored pattern among the defeated United Irish generation at the point of Union, against unionist panegyric.

Although one might expect Thomson to wage war with brother poets in verse, Thomson most frequently deployed the genre in theological battles, adding weight to the theory that his radical politics were forged in his confessional identity. At the time of Thomson's writing, there were two Presbyterian congregations in Templepatrick, one led by the Reverend John Abernethy and one led by Isaac Patton, near Lyle Hill. Thomson belonged to Patton's Seceder congregation which in 1746 became the first Seceder congregation in Ireland and by 1792, Patton was one of only 46 ministers in the tradition. This distinctive dissenting Seceder sect was a further subsidiary within a powerful Presbyterian minority and perhaps explains, in part, Thomson's striking animosity towards Patton's rival, the Reverend John Abernethy. In spite of their similar public rejection of Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*,<sup>20</sup> Abernethy was evidently a

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<sup>19</sup> Abigail Williams, 'Whig and Tory Poetics', *A Companion to eighteenth-century Poetry* ed. Christine Gerrard, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006; hereafter 'Whig and Tory Poetics'), pp. 444-457, (p. 448).

<sup>20</sup> See John Abernethy, *Philalethes, or Revelation Consistent with Reason: An Attempt to Answer the Objections and Arguments against it in Mr Paine's Book, Entitled, Age of Reason*, (Belfast, 1795). The pamphlet war which followed was almost the eighteenth-century equivalent to that sparked by Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006).

favourite satirical subject for Thomson, forming the subject for three comic poems: 'Church Hill, an Elegy' (1796), 'The Bonnet, a Poem Addressed to a Reverend Miser' (1796) and 'The Flight of the Wig: an Old Catch Dressed Anew' (1799). The Victorian church historian Thomas Witherow draws attention to a poem, 'written by one Moat of Ballyclare, and published in 1820' in which 'the faults and eccentricities of Mr. Abernethy are not spared; he is described as fond of money, addicted to manual labour, able in argument, and acquainted with various branches of science.'<sup>21</sup>

The first mention of Abernethy in poetic print was from Thomson whose 'Church-Hill: An Elegy' (1796)<sup>22</sup> refers to him under his pseudonym, *Philalethes* and the poem is full of references to Abernethy's tight-fisted attitude, or what Witherow more charitably described as 'economy of habit.'<sup>23</sup> The prefatory quotation from Thomas Sackville, 'Musing on this worldly wealth, I thought, which comes and goes',<sup>24</sup> misleads the reader to expect a classical elegy for a dead friend, but Thomson's poem subverts this genre in favour of satiric mockery of Abernethy, who has not died but merely resigned his charge. In this respect, the poem resembles the same subversion of the classical elegy that Ramsay so often favoured, particularly in his 'Elegy on John Cowper, Kirk-Treasure's Man' (1721) which satirises the hypocrisy of one of the most powerful lay members of the Kirk. Abernethy is mocked particularly for his tendency to hoard wealth:

COME Muse, and view this venerable dome,  
 'Yclept Church-hill – 'twas Philalethes home,  
 Where anxious many a day the good man rul'd,

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Thomson wrote his aforementioned 'Address to Paine' c. 1797.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Witherow, *Historical and literary memorials of Presbyterianism in Ireland, 1623-(1800)*, 2 vols, (London: 1879,80; hereafter *Historical and literary memorials*), 2, p. 338.

<sup>22</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>23</sup> Witherow, *Historical and literary memorials*, 2, p. 338.

<sup>24</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 93. This quotation also signals that the poem should be read as a warning to its readers.

And swept together an immense of gold.  
 Come let us calmly each apartment trace,  
 Perhaps a fragment of his saving grace,  
 Among the rubbish in some nook, we'll find,  
 Not worth his bearing off, so left behind. (ll. 1-8)

The conventional, elegiac invocation of the muse is appropriately introduced in a dignified verse form and syntax, coupled with the use of the archaic English word 'yclept' (l. 2) thus heightening the expectation of a dignified tribute to Abernethy. Instead, the mock quality emerges as the speaker leads us on a privileged, covert tour through the 'venerable dome' of the church, professing that he hopes to be proved wrong in his poor opinion of Abernethy's avarice:

How vain the thought! Had it been worth a plum,  
 An old door handle, or a toothless comb,  
 An half-worn bessom, or a sickle heft, [broom  
 It was not possible it cou'd be left.  
 His *saving grace*! 'twas it like whirlwind,  
 Tore all away, and left a '*wreck behind*'. (ll.9-14)

Instead of the classical admonishment of the guarding nymphs, the speaker's chastisement falls upon the subject of the elegy in spite of his learning. The building, stripped of its possessions, comes to symbolise a wider spiritual impoverishment of the Lyle Hill church under the care of Abernethy:

Here he has studied too, but not to preach,  
 'Twas how to labour, jockey, and get rich.  
 Alas! How learning's sweets are thrown away! (ll.21-23)

Here Thomson embarks upon a more radical agenda. In making the case that educating the poor could both produce many stewards of the Lord's word, he subverts the aristocracy and church leadership to the lowest social positions. Abernethy's ineptness, according to Thomson, is indicative of a wider spiritual malaise affecting Irish society and also may function as an invective against the emphasis on rational learning within Abernethy's 'New Light' tradition, a trend

which often led to what Seceders tended to dismiss as rhetorically polished, legalistic sermons which had little application for the poor.<sup>25</sup>

The Seceding Synod had been active in preserving the vernacular Scots tongue spoken in County Antrim, issuing a statement which cautioned ‘against an affected pedantry of style and pronunciation and politeness of expression, in delivering the truths of the Gospel [...] to the corrupted taste of a carnal generation’, and Thomson’s ‘Epigram to a Reading Preacher’ (1799)<sup>26</sup> makes clear that a learned sermon of ‘pocket-bred, pitiful jargon’ is self-defeating if it is incomprehensible to the congregation:

With formal pomposity, how you can read,  
But meddlers scoffingly mock it,  
For sermons, they say, there’s no room in your head,  
So you can bear them about in your pocket. (ll. 1-4)

A similar sentiment, most likely applied to Abernethy, can be found in Thomson’s braid Scots poem ‘The Bonnet’ in which the speaker characteristically employs the vernacular for a particularly savage attack on Abernethy’s choice of headwear, which progresses to deeper criticism of his inability to convey a relevant message:

Perhaps ye think, an’ ye’re nae goose,  
*This* keeps your *Craneum* brave and loose;  
While that a hat confines the same,  
And ideas get owre het at hame [...]   
With energy of mind possest,  
When labouring out ye study best;  
An’ can soutrive in a dyke sheugh, [drainage trench]  
What may do poor fok weel enough.<sup>27</sup>

(‘The Bonnet, addressed to a Reverend Miser’, ll. 13-22)

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<sup>25</sup> Holmes, *Presbyterian Belief and Practice*, p. 132

<sup>26</sup> ‘Epigram to a Reading Preacher’ (1799), *New Poems*, p. 210.

<sup>27</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 84-92

Abernethy's preaching may reflect his learning through the communication of 'ideas' (l. 16), but the speaker uses homely wisdom and idiom such as 'ye're nae goose' (l. 13) and 'ideas get owre het at hame' (l. 16) to deflate Abernethy with a tone of mock sympathy that grows more savage as the poem progresses. 'Church Hill, an Elegy' performs a similar function but, by contrast, in Standard English, the moral centre of the poem conveyed by the following exclamation:

O, Philalethes! Shalt thou no more here  
 The rope of Avarice twine with sweating care!  
 No, no, alas! The fatal word is spoke!  
 You gave't a twist too much, and so it broke. (11. 29-32)

In classical elegy this exclamation is normally reserved by the speaker as a charge against the divine powers who have failed in their care of the departed body; whereas Thomson's speaker applies it to his subject who, notably, is not dead but has merely resigned his preaching charge.<sup>28</sup> Having set up the moral condemnation, Thomson promptly shifts the tone toward an escalating mock elegy, employing black humour as the speaker overhears the parish cat bewailing not the loss of her owner, but groaning through starvation:

What's this I hear! What means this bitter crying,  
 'Tis lonely baudrons in the garret dying:  
 After, incredible, a fortnight's fast,  
 She wriggling gives it up and squeaks her last.

Even the parish cat who has missed the opportunity of communing with the forces of evil on Hallowe'en attracts a greater degree of the poet's interest than the Reverend Abernethy. There is no elegiac company of mourners bewailing the departed minister but only the vermin living in the walls and 'poor dejected' insects inhabiting the wasteland that Abernethy has left behind him:

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<sup>28</sup> Witherow, *Historical and Literary Memorials*, vol. 2, p. 338; Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, pp. 412-3.)



Ye rats and mice that burrow round all wheres,  
 Us'd to the sound of formal evening prayers,  
 And psalms well chanted thro' tea-moisten'd throats,  
 How will you bear the woollen weaver's notes? (ll.45-48)

Abernethy's luxury and miserly behaviour have filtered down through the congregation, even to the very beasts that inhabit the building. Instead of making outright condemnation of Abernethy's luxury, Thomson anthropomorphises the vermin who are used to such luxury that the vulgar rural intruders will encourage them to take their leave of the building! That rats should be so choosy of their company in the local parishioners highlights the different company that Abernethy was used to keeping. Thomson's image of psalm-singing through 'tea-moisten'd throats' is a subtle reference to the fact that tea was still considered a luxurious commodity in the late eighteenth century, and as such, was a symbol of corruption.

The very title 'Church-Hill' is likely a deliberate pun on the poet and satirist, Charles Churchill whose work William Dowling reads as the 'redoubled rage that in the wake of the Augustan collapse there has arisen a false society whose crowning hypocrisy is that it cloaks its vulgarity and avarice in a morality it imagines to be Augustan.'<sup>29</sup> The classic elegy often contained a digression on the corruption of the times, implying that the subject suffered under them; here it is the subject of the elegy who is the cause or reflection of this corruption and it is left to the 'poor dejected spider' to weep for him. Thus the inherent humour and mock quality of the satire ensures that it never takes on an entirely bitter, Juvenalian character. Thomson ends the poem by restoring the classical genre by pronouncing the final elegiac *consolatio* which brings the subject to a fuller level of seriousness, and provides the potential for restoration:

Perhaps some other holy man of prayer,  
 Some trusty *watchman* from the Corps of Grace,  
 Will yet renew this venerable place:

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<sup>29</sup> William Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment: the poetics of the eighteenth-century verse epistle* (Princeton, N. J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, c. 1991; hereafter *The Epistolary Moment*), p. 115.

Some true descendant of the ancient *stock*,  
 May yet collect the unheeded, bleating flock,  
 That now divided, thro' the moors and bogs,  
 Neglected stray – the game of thieves and dogs. (ll.58-64)

Thomson employs recognizable Dissenting republican rhetoric, from the vocabulary of 'watchman' – a clear reference to Isaiah 62:5-6, where God commands the Israelites to be 'watchmen of Zion',<sup>30</sup> a chosen people—to Abernethy's 'bleating flock' who, like Milton's 'hungry Sheep' that 'are not fed, / but ... rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread',<sup>31</sup> are unfulfilled and thus prey to division and wandering off. Thomson appears to suggest that the New Light Presbyterians who followed Abernethy tended to mistake his learning for spiritual truth.

The poem appears to have been written in 1796, while the Reverend Robert Campbell was preparing to take over the charge of Templepatrick Presbyterian Church. It is likely that Thomson felt that Campbell might round up the wandering flock and encourage them to a more active type of Christianity that may have included subscription to the nonconformist tradition of contractarian politics.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, the final couplet is firmly apocalyptic, even revolutionary, in

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<sup>30</sup> The reference was cited by the Belfast Presbytery in their Representation to Parliament:

'When we do seriously consider the great, and many duties which we owe unto God ... we cannot but declare and manifest our utter dislike and detestation of ... practices, directly subverting our Covenant, Religion, Laws, and Liberties. And as Watchmen in *Sion* warn all the Lovers of truth, and well-affected to the Covenant, carefully to avoid ... horrid Insolencies, least partakers of their plagues',

(*A Necessary Representation* by the Belfast Presbytery in 1649, quoted in Marianne Elliot, *Watchmen in Sion: the Protestant Idea of Liberty*, [Belfast: Field Day Pamphlets, 1985], p. 5.)

<sup>31</sup> John Milton, 'Lycidas', ll. 125-7, *Milton: The Complete Shorter Poems* ed. John Carey, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., (1968, London: Pearson Education, 1997), pp. 237-256, (p. 252).

<sup>32</sup> 'The most important aspect of early Presbyterianism – the notion of a church as a covenant between God and man – was also reflected in the political sphere in the contractarian thinking [...] rooted in the republican thought of Milton, Harrington and Sidney, was to inspire the eighteenth-century reform campaign in Britain which attacked corruption, placement, excessive executive influence and unrepresentative government.', (Marianne Elliott, *Watchmen in Sion: the Protestant Idea of Liberty*, [Belfast: Field Day Pamphlets, 1985], p. 11).

tone, and suggests that Campbell's accession may herald a new stage in the development of the Presbytery of Templepatrick:

None knows on Saturday what is on Sunday  
To come to pass – "*Sic transit Gloria mundi.*"<sup>33</sup> (ll. 65-66)

Abernethy may have retired from his parish in 1796 but he continued afterward 'in spite of remonstrance, to celebrate marriages contrary to the rules of the Synod' and 'was deposed on the 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1802.'<sup>34</sup> It seems that so long as Abernethy continued to play a role in the local community, Thomson considered him fair game for satire. His poem, 'The Bonnet, a Poem Addressed to a Reverend Miser' (1799)<sup>35</sup> is quite a different style of satire from 'Church Hill, an Elegy' but addresses its subject does so to great effect in the mocking and reductive tones of braid Scots:

HA! ----- Whar got ye that?  
Whar hae ye flung th' ald wool hat?  
Hae ye hung't up, being auld and torn,  
To fright the rooks frae 'mang the corn,  
Or thrown't in spider neuk, to lig  
Alang wi' the' auld rejected wig?  
Tho' scoff'd and hol'd, depend upon it,  
Ye set it better than a bonnet. [suit (ll. 1-8)

Like Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, the spirited heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Samuel Thomson professed an inability to keep from laughing at the folly of those in his society and provides no exceptions for a former minister:

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<sup>33</sup> 'thus passes the glory of the world' - all things are transitory.

<sup>34</sup> Witherow, *Historical and Literary Memorials*, p. 338.

<sup>35</sup> 'The Bonnet, a Poem Addressed to a Reverend Miser' (1799), *New Poems*, pp. 84-92.

‘I know, as a worthy Author has said, “That Corbies and Clergy are a shot-right kittle;” but Nature, in her freaks, hath given me such a tickleness of intellect, that when I accidentally, or otherwise, meet with anything visible in itself even tho’ I should be guiltitined [*sic*] for it, ‘tis altogether out of my power to keep from laughing.’<sup>36</sup>

As with the quotation of ‘Corbies and Clergymen’ in the preface, Thomson’s illusions to Robert Burns’ Horatian mock addresses are plentiful and here we hear echoes of ‘Wad some pow’r the giftie gie us / To see ourselves as ithers see us’ from ‘To a Louse’ (1785):<sup>37</sup>

And gold was made – for what? To look at.  
While from your *rostrum* you deride,  
All ostentation, pomp and pride,  
Ah! On yourself cou’d you but look,  
And see as you see other fok’,  
Ye’d see your humped back support  
A turse of pride of other sort.  
For pride exists in monie a form;  
And surely there’s as little harm  
In that which trips in fashion nice,  
As that which creeps in rags and lice. (ll. 40-54)

Given Abernethy’s tendency to produce highly learned sermons, Thomson ironically turns Adam Smith’s Enlightenment psychology of self-awareness back on Abernethy, imploring him to reflect upon himself with equal rigour to that which he applies from the pulpit to his congregation. The application for the minister is not, however, to avoid using intellectual material but, simply, to practise what he preaches, serving therefore as a more polite rendering of his directive to Thomas Paine that he could only be told by another person that ‘there’s a hole in your arse’.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *New Poems*, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> ‘To a Louse’, line 44, *Poems and Songs*, I, p. 194.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Answer to Paine’s *Age of Reason*’ (1797), lines 27-30, *New Poems*, p. 164.

Thomson's favourite piece of Enlightenment philosophy (of self-reflection) is therefore deployed against Abernethy who, in his authorship of *Philalethes* (1795), set himself up as a would-be Enlightenment philosopher of reason. Adam Smith's theory of sympathy was perhaps additionally intended to reflect upon the schooling that the Glasgow-educated 'New Light' ministers brought with them to Ireland, particularly in the correction of their language. Susan Manning points out that 'Scotsmen compiled lists of ostracised "Scotticisms" and flocked to learn correct pronunciation from R.B Sheridan's Irish father',<sup>39</sup> and it was this programme of standardisation that was reflected in the polished prose of Abernethy's *Philalethes*. Of course, as 'Church-Hill, an Elegy' demonstrates, Thomson was an able poet in the English language, but he was perhaps keen to remind Abernethy of his responsibilities in addressing a vernacular-speaking audience, in the context of the sermon, perhaps the most crucial element of the Presbyterian church service.

There is inherent political significance in the fact that Thomson should employ Butler's satire *Hudibras* (which was aimed at the Dissenter mob) against a fellow Dissenter in the Reverend Abernethy. The caricature of Abernethy's bent figure 'resembling Hudibrases' (l. 59) is described with the full force of Scots language in its physicality and exactitude. Thomson recognised that the pulpit was a powerful instrument for the dissemination of ideas and that the sermon was deemed absolutely essential to spiritual growth and discipline, and expresses disgust at the spiritual degeneration of Abernethy's congregation: a 'graceless flock' that has 'grown sae lazy', and suggests that it is this 'lukewarm' bunch that 'hae put [Abernethy] crazy' (ll. 69-70). The metaphor of the sleeping flock fed into the energetic attack on spiritual complacency in Seceder and Covenanter circles, borne out of fears that 'the Scottish Universities would produce 'men ... whose legal sentiments were in direct antagonism to the Gospel and whose

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<sup>39</sup> Susan Manning, *The Puritan-Provincial Vision: Scottish and American Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 52.

“drowsy tinklings lulled the flock to sleep””.<sup>40</sup> Outward appearance thus demonstrates a lurking malaise affecting the wider Presbyterian community and one which is not beneath the notice of the shrewd and able social commentator, the bard.

On this note, Thomson expresses wonder that Abernethy knows no better than to expose himself to mockery by daring to pass the door of his cottage without expecting an upbraid in rhyme:

To pass the <i>cot</i> . (craving your pardon)	
Ye ken'd there wonn'd a bleth'rin bard in,	[lived;
Wha keeks, <i>incog</i> . at man an' woman,	[sneakily watches;
An' whan he meets wi' aught uncommon,	
In hamely aff-hand, rural rhymes,	
Sends all in print to future times	(ll.77-83)

The sociology of food creeps into the poet's key complaint that the Reverend is more keen to spend time with 'fok o' fashion' from whom he can get a good meal and '*draps o' tea*' (l. 163), highlighting once again what Thomson regards as an unhealthy attachment to luxury. Thomson sees the satire of such folly as integral to his role as bard, almost imbuing his verse with importance equal to Abernethy's prayers, as he commands Abernethy to 'keep that auld Bonnet frae my view, / And pray for me, I'll sing for you' (ll. 194-195). With a rhetorical ending verging on sacrilege, Thomson expresses satirical authority through poetry over members of his community and conveys a subtle warning that retribution is perhaps best served in rhyme.

Although Thomson appears to satirise superstition in his poetry, he simultaneously acts as a preserver of such culture in verse, as in 'To a Hedgehog' (1799), discussed at length in the previous chapter, in which the poet chooses to praise 'a rougher subject' (l. 6); that is the outwardly foul creature, and the product of the harpies. The creature, as work of the devil, is affectionately praised and, as

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<sup>40</sup> Andrew Thompson, *Historical Sketch of the origin of the Secession Church*, (Edinburgh: A Fullerton & co., 1848), p. 28.

has been argued above, it is used as a powerful political symbol for the reviled United Irish outlaw. The hedgehog is shrouded in superstition, particularly the belief that ‘To meet [the hedgehog] on our morning way, / Portends some dire misluck that day,’ (ll. 44-45); yet, while he pretends to satirize this folkloric belief, he is commemorating it in verse:

How lang will mortals nonsense blether,  
And sauls to superstition tether  
For witch-craft, omens altogether  
          Are damn’d hotch-potch mock,  
That now obtain sma credit ether  
          Frae us or Scotch fok.<sup>41</sup> (ll. 54-59)

The question is, who constitutes ‘us’, the group that is so deliberately differentiated from ‘Scotch fok’ (l. 59)? Thomson’s speaker takes on the voice of an orthodox Calvinist Seceder, expressing individual discernment, free from superstition and indulging in personal judgement even while the poet consciously immortalises such superstition in writing. The poet presents an enlightened, independent Irish people, refuting any suggestion that they are chained to superstition.

Thomson’s satire was not reserved simply for those he disagreed with; he was equally able to critique his own religious tradition. Although his ‘Address to Paine’ (1797) exhibits strong religious principles, Thomson had no intention of being labelled an apologist for the Seceder faction. Amid his most evangelical work in *Simple Poems* (1806), he retains the ability to see his religious faction as others see them, humorously imagining the bastion community of ‘auld Orthodoxy’ accusing him of idolatry for paying homage to the native boortree or elder that stands outside his door, ‘[Thou’lt] e’er ayont the parish be, / A thing to brag on, / ‘Tis better, for the auld folk, slee, / Might ca’ thee Dagon.’ (ll. 21-24).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 128.

<sup>42</sup> ‘To my Boortree’ (1806), *Simple Poems*, pp. 84-86.

The poet may appear to praise the tree as a symbol of ‘Auld Orthodoxy’, but an early reference to ‘Right monie a holy, well-meant prayer, / John Lowes’ grannum put up there’ alludes to notorious miscarriage of justice enacted by Puritan extremists against an Anglican vicar in Brandeston during the height of witchcraft trials in the seventeenth century. Thomson’s promise to protect the ‘boortree’ which the Seceders have labelled an idol parallels the actions that cost the Reverend John Lowes his life, namely defending several women in his parish wrongly accused of witchcraft.<sup>43</sup>

Thomson mocks the strict influence of the church on the older generation which, as James Leyburn points out, consisted of a number of strict rulings, including that ‘a person who complained of the behaviour of another must accompany his bill with a shilling, which would be forfeited “if he proves not his point”; [that] a beer-seller who let people get drunk would be censured; [that] parents who allowed their children to “Vague or play” on the Sabbath would themselves be held to have profaned the Sabbath’ and that ‘no child might be baptised until the good character of his parents was attested.’<sup>44</sup> The church’s influence manifested itself in every part of the Presbyterian’s life, particularly in the congregation of Patton. No man was to expect to escape God’s judgment, and Patton encouraged his congregation to see themselves as a people apart, waiting for the second coming of Jesus. There were several members of Patton’s congregation who were deeply uncomfortable with their minister’s anti-Episcopalianism, notably the United Irish leader James Hope.<sup>45</sup> Although often assumed to be religiously conservative, Thomson proved himself able to satirise his upbringing while, in the same poem, calling for Presbyterian unity under the shade of the boortree, which he intended to become a Virgillian symbol of his

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<sup>43</sup> Richard M. Golden, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: the Western Tradition*, 4 vols, Santa Barbara, CA.: ABC-CLIO, c2006), I, p. 675.

<sup>44</sup> James Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish: a Social History*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1967, p. 144-5.

<sup>45</sup> Madden, p. 226.



bardic responsibility to ensure that the cultural practice of his community was immortalised in verse.

Thomson, of all the Ulster poets, perhaps best displays a Burns-like talent for capturing voice, particularly in the satirical genre. Although Thomson did not approach Robert Burns's achievement in critiquing religious hypocrisy in poems such as 'Address to the Unco Guid', 'The Ordination (1786) and 'Holy Willie's Prayer' (1785), his ability to so skilfully parody Burns's 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat' in 'O Scotia's Bard' (1795) was largely due to his careful study of Burns's satire. Thomson's 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791) after all praised the Scottish poet's 'uncommon skill' and 'Horatian fire at command' (ll. 13-14) and, in spite of attending the kirk himself, he claimed to empathize with Burns, exclaiming, 'L—d man, I aften think on you! / When to the kirk our saints forgather!' describing them as 'a hypocritic senseless crew!' (ll. 19-21).<sup>46</sup> The correspondence between Thomson and Alexander Kemp, the Scottish-born Coleraine poet, betrays a quiet admiration of Burns's most irreverent work. Kemp, a fellow acquaintance of Burns, had met the poet during the 1780s and Burns had presented him with a copy of 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. Kemp jotted down a fragment of the poem from memory and sent it to Thomson, adding that the original had been 'dictated [...] one day during a social glass of Whisky Punch, after dining with [Burns] and his ~~bonnie~~ "darling Jean," at his own house' in Dumfries.<sup>47</sup> Kemp had lost the original 'perfect' copy and lamented that it had been refused by Mr Mackay, the editor of the Belfast News Letter, on the grounds that it was, regrettably, not fit for publication. Although the editor praised Burns's 'perfect master[y] of whatever subject' he wrote on, he also explicitly regretted the poet's tendency to 'sport so freely as he sometimes did with the sacred pages, or

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<sup>46</sup> 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791), *Poems*, pp. 85-88.

<sup>47</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 17<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1797, TCD MS 7257, ff. 33-38, (f. 35).

turn into ridicule what is *most holy*.’<sup>48</sup> Kemp’s ambivalent attitude toward the implications of the poem’s religious sentiments raises some questions: why did he send the poem to Mackay if he agreed that it was truly unfit for publication? Or was he convinced by the editor that he should protect Burns’s posthumous reputation, like so many of Burns’s subsequent editors and biographers? Kemp’s attempt to disseminate this poem to the newspapers, along with Thomson’s decision to keep the letter amid his most significant correspondence, suggests strongly that the recognition of Burns’s talent for satire was considered over and above its apparent offensiveness.

There is an inevitable danger in assuming that Thomson’s poetic personae should reflect the author’s own opinions; whereas it is demonstrable that Thomson could be a master of voice, toying with different religious themes and ideas for the entertainment of his readership, whether they were an intimate, knowing circle or a wider audience. He drew on both difficult personal circumstances and vendettas against local figures, lampooning them with biblical, theological language and argument, and even casting some as reprobates. Thomson occasionally published in the Belfast newspapers under the pseudonym ‘Lowrie Nettle’, a name which was testimony in itself to his propensity for poetical satire. Thomson portrayed himself as the satiric observer of general social values, thus justifying his use of the pseudonym ‘Matthew Bramble’ in 1797, referring to Smollett’s satirical protagonist from *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771). An important contextual point is that many of the satirical religious poems are printed alongside satires of secular figures, including aristocrats, and extend to a manifesto against folly in society as a whole, rather than for exclusive religious purposes. His folk satire ‘Simkin: or a Bargain’s a Bargain’ (1799)<sup>49</sup> satirises both Simkin, a religious hypocrite, and an unnamed, ‘sleekit’ young man whom he swindles over the sale

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid.* As is detailed below, Mackay published several of Burns’s poems in the *Belfast News Letter* but in a notably sanitized form, explaining away the more radical sentiments and providing editorial explanations for Burns’s extra-marital addresses to Clarinda.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Simkin, or a Bargain’s a Bargain. A Tale’ (1799), *New Poems*, pp. 55-57.



He held it as a crying sin,  
 At hame, or onie place,  
 To tak a morsel, thick or thin,  
 Without a formal grace.

This favourite o' Heaven ae day,  
 To a neighbouring fair wad gang:-  
 Favourite of Heaven, did I say?  
 Gude faith I'm *aiblins* wrang. [possibly (ll. 9-16)

The irony becomes explicit as the narrator pauses to correct himself; but though he declares that his judgement is not always exact, he nevertheless proceeds with the tale, shifting abruptly into the present tense. Faced with an unreliable narrator, the reader must now question whether or not Sim can be trusted as he or she learns that he takes a sick horse to the fair. After selling to a 'jockey chiel' (l. 21), a young man who deals in horses, the two go to the pub for a drink, during which time Thomson provides a highly visual and entertaining account of Sim's great performance of praying:

Thrice he gov'd up niest the roof,  
 As aften shook his head,  
 Then clos'd his ein, an' rais'd his loof,  
 A holy man indeed! (ll. 33-36)

During this time 'to keep / Frae laughin' the purchaser, described as a 'tricky callan' (ll. 37-38), downs all the whiskey at once, adding the blasphemous counsel, 'To pray, quoth he, is not enough, / Hereafter watch and pray,' (ll. 43-4) an ironic usage of Christ's indictment to the disciples in Gethsemane to 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.' (Matt. 26:41) However, it is the young man who has been 'o'erseen' (l. 47)<sup>53</sup> and wakes up the next morning to discover that the horse has the 'glan'ers' (l. 49), a bacterial disease. Eventually seeking Simkin out, he rails against him, 'damnation!' (l. 56):

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<sup>53</sup> Scots idiom, meaning cheated as in 'done over'.

Ye old infernal hound of hell!  
 Ye hypocrite deceiver!  
 A gland'red horse to me to sell –  
 Swith the money up deliver. [Quickly  
 (ll. 60-63)

Simkin's sanctimonious reply highlights both his hypocrisy and the young man's foolishness:

'Hooly,' quo Simkin, unco slee,  
 'Gie o'er sic sinfu' jargon; [leave off  
 Nae money ye shall get frae me –  
 A bargain's ay a bargain.<sup>54</sup> [still  
 (ll. 61-64)

The poem uses several instances of Ulster-Scots diction such as 'gie o'er' (l. 62)<sup>55</sup> and the use of 'jockey' as a verb, 'to jockey horse' (l. 8), found only in Ulster-Scots. Thomson's masterful deployment of vernacular Scots brings both characters to life, creating a 'holy' character who apparently has more of the devil about him than of God, and a foolish young man who is himself taken advantage of while attempting to cheat the praying Sim out of his whiskey. Sim may have lost a gill of whiskey or two, but he has fulfilled his part of the bargain, a commentary upon adhering merely to the letter of religious law and ignoring the spirit. This sentiment would be particularly familiar to Thomson, whose Seceding Presbyterian tradition rejected the legalistic language of the Westminster Confession.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 55-7.

<sup>55</sup> 'Stop complaining'

<sup>56</sup> 'the Westminster Confession [...] reflects that legalistic dogmatism and that intertwining of politics and religion which are so much a part of the Presbyterian heritage. The result is a strict interpretation of the law and of the authority of the monarch as the source of that law', (Marianne Elliot, *Watchmen in Sion*, p. 9.)

From the beginning of his poetic career, Thomson intended to use satire as a means of accepting his misfortunes in life, as he assured his fellow bard, Luke Mullan:

Tho' tost aft, an' crost aft  
 By faithless, foolish fok',  
 I meet still, an' greet still,  
*Misfortune* with a joke.<sup>57</sup>

The post-Rebellion era, in which Thomson suffered a rupturing of his fraternal circle, seemed to offer little amelioration of Thomson's poverty, perhaps accounting for much of the dark humour present in *New Poems*. 'Rhyme Irregular. To a Rat' (1799) is exemplary of how Thomson used satire to confront his worsening state of poverty, drawing his epigraph, 'The rat by night such mischief did', from John Gay's *Fables*.<sup>58</sup> The rats become the symbols of tormenting poverty as he plots his revenge in verse: 'think not, hated rat, / She [the muse] sings to compliment thee, / No, rather to torment thee' (ll. 4-6). Thomson verges on the profane, transforming a tale of a rat infested cottage into a whimsical theological debate, musing on God's purpose in creating such creatures:

I've often wondered much,  
 If in Creation's motely throng,  
 Thy sire primeval had  
 A place to rest among,  
     That day when bird and beast,  
 A wond'rous numerous squad,  
 Before our Father came,  
     Instinctive to receive,  
     As he thought fit to give,  
 According to their nature, every one his name.      (ll. 8-17)

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<sup>57</sup> 'Epistle to Luke Mullan, a Brother Bard' (1791), lines 53-56, *Poems*, pp. 93-97, (p. 95).

<sup>58</sup> John Gay, Fable XXI, 'The Rat-catcher and the Cats', *Fables 1727 [and 1738]*, Vol. 1 (Menston: Scolar Press, 1969.)

So far, so orthodox, but the speaker quickly becomes carried away with his creative licence, as he constructs an alternative theory of creation in which the rat becomes a malevolent creation of 'Nature' (l. 22):

No: - rather I with those agree,  
 Who think thy race was uncreate,  
 Till after ours had robb'd the tree,  
 And tumbled from their first estate.  
 Thus Nature, in her idle mood,  
 When every useful thing was made,  
     Trying many an odd experiment,  
     And knowing of the coming flood,  
 In careless kind of merriment,  
     As any thing to drown was good  
                                     Enough – (ll. 18-28)

He thus envisions that the rat was a post-Eden creation, along with the 'thorns and thistles' which cover the earth, wrought by personified Nature who has fallen to the 'devil-making trade' (l. 28) as a response to man's sin. In an almost blasphemous aside, he imagines that the rat was able to slip unnoticed onto the ark and escape drowning because the Old Testament patriarch Noah was in a drunken stupor:

Perhaps the good man drunk,  
 (As well he lov'd his jug)  
 Within his hammock snug,  
 With resignation slept,  
 When of thy noxious race a pair,  
 Among the rest in crept,  
 And, unknown, quartered there. (ll. 54-60)

The apparently passing nature of the reference to Noah's drunken stupor refers to Genesis 9 where the patriarch accidentally exposed himself in front of his son Ham, who gossiped about his father's nakedness. When Noah discovered Ham's dishonourable behaviour he pronounced a curse on him, 'Cursed be Canaan; a servant shall he be unto his brethren' (Genesis 9:25), a passage that was often used

to justify race slavery.<sup>59</sup> Thomson appears to be flirting with the idea of Kamesian polygenesis that was ‘was still of profound concern to some leading Presbyterian intellectuals, such as the Reverend Henry Cooke of Belfast, as late as 1850.’<sup>60</sup> In 1808 Thomson was in friendly correspondence with the man who would become Cooke’s nemesis, Henry Montgomery, and it is tempting to suppose that he was deliberately provoking a reaction from his more intelligent readers.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the poet applies current Enlightenment debates surrounding slavery to his own creative, if unorthodox, theological explanation for all that torments man, denying God the responsibility of creating it and instead categorizing it as something which human sinfulness has enabled.

Often described as a conservative Seceder, it is interesting to note that Thomson here comes close to ‘sport[ing] ... freely ... with the sacred pages’, the accusation that the editor of the *Belfast News-Letter* had levelled at Burns.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, he addresses the problem of evil without a single reference to any Satanic activity; he merely uses the name of Beezlebub, a fellow fallen angel, in a list of textual references that enable him to swear an oath to annihilate the rats:

Tho’ thou wert many times as wise  
 As Father Prior’s mice,  
 Or Shenstone’s rat sagacious of antiquity,  
 I swear by Belzibub so black,  
 A potent dose, and soon, I will  
 Have made for thee, which in a crack,  
 Will lay thee silent, snug and still,  
 As a little recompence for thy iniquity. (ll.65-72)

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<sup>59</sup> Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; hereafter *Forging of Races*), p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Kidd, *Forging of Races*, p. 99.

<sup>61</sup> Montgomery to Thomson, 4 July 1808 quoted in Brian Walker, ‘Country Letters’, p. 130.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Kemp to Samuel Thomson, 17 Dec. 1797, TCD MS 7527, f. 35.



Even in composing the poem against the rats, the writer finds his efforts interrupted by the din in the rafters above.

Last night I sat, in order to compose  
 A soft love sonnet to my Delia fair,  
 I scarcely had the first line wrote,  
 When you gave such a squall, uncivil,  
 I drop'd my pen, indeed I thought  
 It was the very devil. (ll.63-78)

While the poet lies in bed, the subsequent 'hellish scream' of the rats interrupts a dream where he meets Delia 'down by a flowing stream', in a typical pastoral setting. The meeting of the lovers beside flowing water suggests that there may be a hidden sexual implication designed to be understood by the discerning reader, and when compared to 'A Dream' (1799) in which the dreamer's activities with Anna are interrupted 'just as the cock did scream' suggests that there may be an allusion to sexual dreaming.<sup>63</sup> This adds yet another comic element to the poem which began as a complaint against the rats, developed into a theological debate and is now ending as a pastoral dream with potentially bawdy elements. It is the interruption of this dream which finally rouses the poet to a passion as he goes, presumably, to procure rat poison, 'forgetting my prayers, swore a dozen of oaths; / By my Delia so charming, and by the sweet stream, / In eight days or less you'll spoil no body's dream! (ll. 94-96). The speaker's plethora of oaths is a humorous reference to an old Seceder debate about swearing an oath in the civil courts, a practice to which more 'sensitive' Seceders objected.<sup>64</sup>

Although the poem appears to explain away the problem of evil, its theological licence perhaps raises as many questions as it answers. The poem is a clever fusion of ideas, examining the theme of good and evil in creation, the romantic dream, and the comical satire of life's hardships. The irregular verse

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<sup>63</sup> 'A Dream' (1799), line 9, *New Poems*, p. 212.

<sup>64</sup> Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, p. 417.

form and rhythm of the poem reflects the marriage of many ideas and emotions; and the successful cocktail of biblical allusions, a pastoral romantic heroine, mock satire, and anthropomorphic drama, provides a commentary on the function of poetry as a literary weapon against the vicissitudes of poverty.

The few epigrams that satirise unnamed local figures and general types reveal a darker side to Thomson's satire. Like the Reverend Isaac Patton's glances from the pulpit, Thomson appears to make victims of community members who incurred his wrath. Although many of these poems have serious social application, others appear to serve personal vendettas, where the subject is satirised for their personal habits or illnesses and cast, in Calvinistic fashion, as reprobates. Many of these shorter epigrams exist in manuscript form and were, thus, likely circulated among his circle for entertainment purposes, suggested by titles such as 'Epigram to Him Who Will Understand It.'<sup>65</sup> It is possible that the poems were designed to mock the new ideas which came to Ulster from Glasgow and Edinburgh through the Synod of Ulster ministerial students but also, in the face of an emerging evangelical revival, such theological arguments would soon grow irrelevant in the quest to save souls – the trend of Romantic spiritual experience that seems to underpin *Simple Poems* (1806) most accurately. It is difficult to detect much of the same seriousness in poems such as 'Advertisement' (1799):<sup>66</sup>

P\_\_\_\_ S\_\_\_\_\_'s lost! Nick look below,  
I'm sure he went to h\_\_\_\_;  
If dark, the scoundrel stinketh so,  
You'll find him by the smell.

Andrew Holmes writes that 'Old Light and Seceder Presbyterians seem to have continued to believe in a literal hell, and with the dawning of the Romantic age and the influence of evangelicalism, hell once more assumed a central place in

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<sup>65</sup> 'Epigram to Him who Will Understand It' (1799), *New Poems*, p. 211

<sup>66</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 213.

religious discourse.’<sup>67</sup> The violence inherent in the orthodox imagery of hell with its darkness and fire is offset by the familiar Scots reference to the devil as ‘Nick’ (l. 6), not to mention the lack of reverence for the subject of eternal damnation (a confident assertion that is notably absent in Thomson’s later religious verse.) Thomson’s epigram only appears more savage and irreverent in comparison to Burns’s tribute to his travelling companion, William Nicol:

Ye maggots, feed on Nicol’s brain,  
For few sic feasts you’ve gotten;  
And fix yours claws in Nicol’s heart,  
For deil a bit o’t’s rotten.<sup>68</sup>

To the modern reader, some of the poems are little short of shocking in their venom and the ideas that the speaker appears to put forward. ‘Epigram to Him Who Will Understand It’ is a satire of Swiftian violence, directed against a woman whose appearance has been changed according to the malevolence of her personality:

WISE nature made thee handsome at the first,  
But when she saw thy wickedness – alarm’d,  
She all the fashion of thy face revers’d,  
And made the image, as the mind – deform’d.

Hereafter none with thee will be deceiv’d;  
Thy face is just an index to thy soul;  
Thy heart’s contents are on thy front engrav’d,  
Thy heart where furies, harpies, vipers roll!

The edition does not make it clear who is the person who ‘will understand it’, but in his manuscript, Thomson’s includes the background of the poem which only makes it more shocking, ‘Addressed to a young woman, who from a handsome

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<sup>67</sup> Holmes, *Presbyterian Belief and Practice*, p. 243.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Epitaph for William Nicol’, *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, I, p. 369. In accordance with Kinsley’s notes, the present writer has reproduced the version from Burns’s later printings.

child, tho' of a malevolent disposition, was by small-pox transformed into (God forgive me) a frightful monster.'<sup>69</sup> The description of a child as 'malevolent' betrays an attitude that was directly challenged by Enlightenment figures and throws light on the dark nature of Thomson's sense of humour. The poem went to press without the contextual footnote and the reader is left to guess the reasons for the speaker's revulsion with the subject. Thomson's decision to ascribe the poem to an unnamed friend and his interjection of 'God forgive me' indicates that he did not take such theological opinions seriously, and the fragmented, rabid diction of his speaker suggests that the epigram was another product of his unrestrained satirical voice. Indeed, like Burns's 'Holy Willie' and the *nouveau riche* speaker of Thomson's 'A Peripitae' (1806), the irate speaker reveals himself to be more malevolent than the silent object of his wrath. If the poem was intended to lampoon female vanity, Thomson demonstrated himself to be a less gentle satirist than Pope, whose satire, *The Rape of the Lock* (1712), does not approach Thomson's level of cruelty.

A poem of even more violent imagery is the apparently anti-Semitic 'Jacob's Beard' (1799)<sup>70</sup> which, having claimed 'PARDON me, Jacob, I covet thy beard, / To make not a wig for my christian skull' (ll. 1-2), proposes that the beheaded Jewish subject be used as a weathercock for the public good, '*Pro bono publico*, a top of the spire' (l. 8). Thomson subverts the genre of classical pastoral as the elements combine to make a mockery of the Jew's severed head:

In winter, the *trumpet* of Boreas thy nose;  
Thy right ear the *whistle* of Eurus in spring;  
In thy left shall the Zephyr of Summer repose,  
While the *Notus* of autumn behind thee shall sing.      (ll. 9-12)

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<sup>69</sup> TCD MS 7257, f. 176b.

<sup>70</sup> 'Jacob's Beard' (1799), *New Poems*, p. 207.

Given that 'Jacob's Beard' was originally entitled 'The Jew's Beard',<sup>71</sup> a piece of generalised anti-Semitic satire, this adds to the case that, in writing these epigrams, Thomson was picking off a number of 'types' and lifestyles. This is further borne out in a number of unsympathetic poems that appear to be based on locally-known figures. 'To an Old Churl, on his Expressing a Wish That He Had Died in His Last Illness' (1799)<sup>72</sup> seems to warn the old man not to wish his soul away too soon as, although it is 'fluttering in its cage of bones' and eager to fly away, (l. 3) he will find it 'batter'd base deform'd and foul, / With putrifying evil; / Go when it will, like wingless owl, / It hobbles to the devil.' (ll. 5-8) Thomson once again utilizes the Miltonic imagery of disease and contagion spreading in his flock.

Although comic savagery pervades the epigrams of *New Poems*, the layout of the edition suggests that this series of short poems may not be as frivolous as they might at first seem. 'To an Old Churl' follows immediately on from another poem of social seriousness, 'To an Ecclesiastical, Nonsensical, Wicked Magistrate'<sup>73</sup> which is directed towards those ministers who also held the post of magistrate, a community position responsible for dealing with minor criminal offences. Gerry Carruthers has drawn attention to the political criticism of the 'black banditti' city guard and Whig magistrates of Edinburgh in Robert Fergusson's 'The Daft Days' and 'Hallowe'en'.<sup>74</sup> The role of the magistrate was heavily politicized from 1700-1774 during which time a combination of high rents and economic hardship struck the linen industry. As Templepatrick was composed mainly of small tenant farmers and weavers, there was a high level of agrarian unrest and emigration which, according to the Church historian David Stewart,

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<sup>71</sup> TCD MS 7257, f. 170b.

<sup>72</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 201.

<sup>73</sup> *New Poems*, p. 208.

<sup>74</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'Poetry Beyond the English Borders' in C. Gerrard (ed.), *A Companion to eighteenth-century Poetry*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 581.

‘led to many of the young and strong fleeing from the country to escape the law.’<sup>75</sup> Stewart refers also to ‘A serious Address from the Presbytery of Strabane to the several congregations under their care’ which was publicly printed in the *Belfast News-Letter*, March 24, 1772 in which Presbyterians were warned sternly not to be ‘drawn into such unjustifiable (sic) conduct’, regardless of poverty or agrarian unrest around them, demonstrating that some Presbyteries were anxious to keep their members out of ‘evil’ sectarian activity.<sup>76</sup>

The role of religion in politics appears to have divided Reformed Presbyterians from Seceders during this period. The Reformed Presbyterian political canon was forged in a Calvinist theory of popular sovereignty that desired magistrates to uphold the Covenants.<sup>77</sup> Thomson’s poem demonstrates that he disagreed fundamentally with the mixing of these two roles, particularly as the role of the magistrate became increasingly politicized during the 1790s when radicals accused them of treating leniently, even acquitting, members of Agrarian sectarian organisations like the Break Of Day boys who persecuted Roman Catholics.<sup>78</sup> The role also had the potential to become religiously charged as demonstrated in 1793 when the Synod of Ulster hotly debated the power of the Magistrate in matters of religion.<sup>79</sup> In addition, during the 1798 Rebellion, the power of the magistrates is attested to by Henry Joy McCracken’s decision to march on Antrim during a meeting of magistrates in an attempt to paralyze the justice system, and following

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<sup>75</sup> David Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, p. 254.

<sup>76</sup> Stewart, p. 425.

<sup>77</sup> Ian McBride, “When Ulster Joined Ireland”, p. 81.

<sup>78</sup> In his account given to Richard Madden of his reasons for taking part in the 1798 Rebellion, James Hope described the ‘indulgences [...] for wrecking and beating the papists’ that were given to ‘the Break-of-Day robbers, the wreckers, and murderers who were supported by an indemnified magistracy’ (Madden, *United Irishmen*, p. 227, 228)

<sup>79</sup> Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, p. 382.

the failure of the Rebellion, the magistrates would have been called upon to prosecute many of Thomson's neighbours and friends who had been involved.<sup>80</sup>

The fragmented, short, adjectival bursts of the title 'To an Ecclesiastical, Nonsensical, Wicked Magistrate' betrays the poet's intention to make a serious denunciation of the poem's subject, gradually deflating him as he moves down the hierarchy of adjectives. Thomson not only objected to pluralism, but also to the fact that a clergyman should practise law which is graceless, corrupt and biased,

Two offices your Reverend doth  
Now occupy in place;  
Unfit for both, I take my oath;  
You want all sense and grace. (l. 1-4)

Justice is personified as an abused woman, no longer blind and impartial, 'You've torn the bandage off her eyes, / And kicked her out of doors' (ll. 11-12). In the spirit of contractarian Presbyterianism, Thomson emphasises that the magistrate's authority comes with the responsibility of defending liberty, not abusing it.

Thomson does not focus on the crimes of those convicted by the magistrates and there is no direct allusion to sectarian indulgences; instead, he makes his message universal by rounding the epigram off with a quotation from Homer's *Travestie*, 'The trade is learn'd in half an hour, / To spare the rich and flog the poor,' highlighting that the kernel of his objection is that law is applied unequally to the rich and poor.<sup>81</sup> This is an example of the radical poetry that Thomson continued to write after the 1798 rebellion, often missed by critics; but its application is not simply political. It is also indicative of the often difficult balance of artistic self-fashioning with genuine discussion of the function of poetry.

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<sup>80</sup> In addition, the descendants of Covenanters no doubt held in their memories the 'killing times' of the 1660s and 1670s, during which time the Covenanters of Scotland were persecuted by Charles II for refusing to submit to the authority of the [Episcopal] established church. Ian McBride points to the Solemn League and Covenant which limited the authority of magistrates 'to secular affairs.' (McBride, *Scripture Politics*, p. 69.)

<sup>81</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 209.

In seriousness and in jest, Thomson often reflects on the purposes of his art and the self-sacrifice inherent in writing poetry; but he also highlights its bardic purpose, particularly when it is used to cut down to size members of the community. Whereas his poems to local community members often have a comedic element, Thomson shifted toward Juvenalian Satire when attempting to expose social evil. It is clear from Thomson's manuscript that 'A Bard and a Bishop Contrasted' (1799)<sup>82</sup> was originally written with the poet's vocation in mind, since the opponent with whom he contrasts his vocation was originally to be a 'Lordship' which, second to the clergyman, was the class of person most commonly satirised by Thomson.<sup>83</sup> It also highlights the fact that Thomson maintained a sense of radical aversion to the misuse of power and the love of gain, given that the anti-bard, the Lordship/Priest/Bishop, was to be set against the 'simple, inoffensive lays' of the poet (l. 13). There is a degree of misleading simplicity employed here as Thomson must have been aware that, at the very least, his poetry would seem anything but inoffensive to the various subjects of his jibes. Having settled on a 'Priest' and then, scoring this out, on a 'Bishop' as his subject, Thomson sets up an opposition between the outwardly well-off and rotund bishop with 'head as solid as a stone / A wigful of oval bone' (ll. 4-5) and the 'outward ... marr'd' bard with 'unpowder'd head' (ll. 8, 10). The poem's negative description and continuous images of excess draw on the traditional characterization of the opponent in the Scots flyting tradition. The qualitative difference between the two is that the bard possesses a '*quantum sufficit* of brains, / Where Genius sits ...' (l. 11-12), whereas his counterpart is dismissed as 'yon torpid lump of dullness',<sup>84</sup> a blatant reference to Pope's *The Dunciad* (1728), perhaps the pinnacle of Augustan satire. Instead of protesting at the levelling down of literary standards, he attacks the absence of religious and political standards in Irish public life.

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<sup>82</sup> From 'Daisies, Violets, and Nettles, Inscribed to my best friend Damon', *New Poems*, pp. 196-7.

<sup>83</sup> TCD MS 7257, f. 161b.

<sup>84</sup> MS reads 'that' for 'yon'



Thomson's satires are therefore not necessarily expressions of personal vendetta or hatred, but artistic exercises that he passed around his circle of friends in order to draw attention to the potential for poetry to hold up a mirror to society, whether local or national. His skill in the religious satire goes some way to exonerating puritan culture from the culturally-vacant slurs of the Augustan era, while at the same time, recognising the elements of that culture which were outdated. Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) was inspiration for much Whig religious poetry, for example John Dennis's *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), and in the post-Union period Thomson began to experiment with religious poetry rather than satire. Poor health, depression and spiritual desire for transcendence may have moderated Thomson's *oeuvre* from poetry of resistance (Tory pessimism) to romantic resignation. Or perhaps he attempted to write what Abigail Williams describes as 'Modern religious verse' which 'was seen by some as an appropriate reflection on modern political liberty'?<sup>85</sup> The transferral of allegiance entirely to God's kingdom recognised a different kind of liberty which was not to be found in the alleviation of worldly suffering, but in God's promises for the kingdom come. The next chapter examines his final writings, where the growing spiritualism that is apparent in *Simple Poems* appears to quell his satiric fire. Could it be that the radical political challenges that fired his writing in the 1790s were reliant on his powerful Calvinist impulses? Certainly, Thomson's satirical bent is one of the aspects of his writing that sets him apart from other vernacular poets in Ulster, and marks him out as the best satirist among the 'Rhyming Weaver' tradition.

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<sup>85</sup> Abigail Williams, 'Whig and Tory Poetics', p. 453.

## Chapter 6

### Romanticism and Religion

TIME the old grey-bearded mower  
Sweeps along both night and day;--  
Mortal joy's a tender flower,  
Cut by him and thrown away.<sup>1</sup>

Following the biting satire and comedic assortment of *New Poems* (1799), 'Time' (1806) reflects both the eternal preoccupation and Romantic melancholy that pervades much of *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806), Thomson's final published edition. The volume marks a shift away from the Calvinist-fuelled satire of *New Poems* toward a more liberal concern with the individual spiritual experience. In his poetry of 1791-1800, Thomson rarely focused on the eternal, except through poems influenced by the Graveyard school, particularly Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742). From 1802, James Orr's letters to Thomson demonstrate that the two poets shared a genuine interest in religion, and even travelled to Carnmoney to worship together at the meeting house of Mr Paul.<sup>2</sup> Certainly Thomson's theological activities from 1806 until his death in 1816 appear to be in keeping with the theological liberalism of the Belfast Academical Institution and, in particular, the liberal Henry Montgomery who 'drew inspiration for his religious and political liberalism from the association of his "kith and kin" with the principles of the United Irishmen.'<sup>3</sup>

Thomson's final edition *Simple Poems* was published by Smyth & Lyons, a Belfast firm that specialised in religious publications, with a decidedly

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<sup>1</sup> 'Time', *The Microscope; or Minute Observer*, II, No. 1 (Jan. 1800), p. 37. Thomson published this poem under the pseudonym of 'Alexis'.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Walker, 'Country Letters', p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*, p. 71.

millenarian emphasis.<sup>4</sup> Smyth and Lyons also showed a committed interest in republishing Scottish and Irish works, such as Ramsay's poetry and the heroic celebration of a Scottish patriot, the *History of William Wallace*.<sup>5</sup> In line with Smyth & Lyons' portfolio, *Simple Poems* continued to explore religious identity and nationhood, while moving from the preoccupation of Enlightenment rationalism to the quest for the eternal sublime.

Thomson has often been pigeon-holed as the satiric, splenetic writer of comic Scots verses among the 'Rhyming Weavers' in comparison to more radical and romantic poetic contemporaries, which may account in part for the scant attention to and, at times total dismissal of, the more reflective and melancholic *Simple Poems* (1806). John Gray's attribution of Thomson's 'broken heart' to his alleged disillusion with Robert Burns's radicalism,<sup>6</sup> is better understood in the context of Thomson's adoption of a deliberately melancholy bardic persona, in line with early Romantic literary trends. Thomson's final volume of verse was published in 1806 and its contents written between 1800 and 1806, during which time Wordsworth and Coleridge first published *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; 1800). His poetry was published in the *Microscope, or Minute Observer* (1799-1800) adjacent to an extract from Coleridge's 'Fears in Solitude' (1798).<sup>7</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that Romanticism should pervade this work, as Thomson negotiated his identity as a poet in the nineteenth century. So often, Thomson has been viewed as an eighteenth century poet, with critics prepared to disregard his later work in favour of his pre-Union, comical, and community-centred poetry. In *Simple Poems*, familiar minute descriptions of nature, and implicitly political pastorals

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<sup>4</sup> J.R.R. Adams, *Printed Word and the Common Man*, p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Adams, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gray bases his conclusion on a single line from 'Sonnet to my Flute' (1800): 'The low-note murmuring of a broken heart' (l. 5), *Simple Poems*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *The Microscope*, II, No. 4 (August 1799), pp. 182-186.

were swapped for imaginative impressions of familiar scenes, even the rising and the setting of the sun, beginning and ending the edition on the deeply metaphysical notes of ‘Address to the Setting Sun’ and ‘Address to the Rising Sun’ (1806). Although much of the pre-Union poetry was carefully crafted for public consumption, particularly that which was printed in newspapers and journals; the more private, self-reflective poetry of *Simple Poems* (1806) displays deep emotion and poetic craftsmanship, as Thomson continued to grapple with his role as a writer, educator, and Christian disciple.

The title of his final edition, *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* (1806) places emphasis on simple truth and personal experience, which is free from artifice and emanates from a source of spontaneity. In his preface, Thomson opines that he has no pretensions to a learned audience, repeating the refrain, ‘I never intended it’, implying that what is presented to the reader is naturally-inspired, simple truth in simple language:

If the classical gentleman, accidentally honour me with a peep, and consequently be disgusted, all I have to say for myself is, ‘Sir, I sincerely ask your pardon; I did not intend it.’<sup>8</sup>

Although the poet claims to intend no offence to his gentleman readers, his decision to write simple, clear poetry for ‘rustic readers only’ taps into a levelling tradition in the same vein as Wordsworth’s aspiration to write in the ‘language really spoken by men’.<sup>9</sup> Yet although Thomson attempted to maintain this levelling tradition, the reality was that he had entered into a changed, post-Union world of social exchange with a left-of-centre metropolitan audience who required clarity, transparency, and a greater resource to the *lingua franca* of English. Of course, the audience of *Simple Poems* was no less engaged with literature than the Belfast radical intelligentsia

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<sup>8</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, v.

<sup>9</sup> *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 244.

that sponsored his original *Poems* (1793). In fact the wider scope of subscribers, some of whom were procured through Mr Thompson of Muckamore, contradicts the prefatory pose which promises ‘to give offence to no one, and to contribute to the innocent amusement of the cottage fire-side, in the hour of relaxation from toil.’<sup>10</sup>

The familiar romantic motifs of the ruin and the return to primitive self-sufficiency preoccupy the later poetry of Samuel Thomson as he was confronted by the reality of death and loneliness, but the division between literary self-fashioning and genuine depression is unclear. Thomson’s self-fashioned image of a recluse struggling between his obligation to society and his own interpersonal fulfilment sees him staying away from the Templepatrick fair:<sup>11</sup>

While half my neighbours now enjoy the fair,  
And give their vacant hours to social mirth,  
Here, left a prey to dark desponding care,  
At home I muse me o’er the lonely hearth. (ll. 1-4)

In choosing melancholy solitude, the poet-persona reacts directly against the jovial bystander-narrator of ‘The Simmer Fair’ (1792), imagining the local lads attributing his absence to a visit from ‘Lotharia [...] or ingenious Orr’ (l. 10), fellow poets. A literary meeting of higher minds keeps the bard at his fireside and away from the ‘random splore’ (l. 12). It is likely that Thomson did suffer from bouts of melancholy, but although he affects the position of bard in solitude, he remained concerned with the plight of his fellow men, and channels his desire for social reform, to be achieved through education, into an evangelical poetic testimony to a spiritual relationship and vision of God.

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<sup>10</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, v.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Sonnet, Written on Monday, July the first, old stile, 1802, being Templepatrick Fair-day that year’ (1802), *Simple Poems*, p. 47.

In addition, Thomson amassed almost 600 subscribers to *Simple Poems* (1806), more than the total number of subscribers to *Poems* (1793) and *New Poems* (1799) together, making *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* his most successful commercial venture. The notable shift away from satirical ‘nettling’ towards interpersonal spiritual fulfilment and marked individualism is conveyed mostly, though not entirely, in standard English. To the reader who seeks poems in Scots vernacular alone, these are sparser but the collection’s shock departure from the variety and spark found in the transitional *New Poems* (1799) has been exaggerated by previous editors. Both *Poems* (1793) and *New Poems* (1799) contain as their subtitle ‘Partly in the Scottish Dialect’ and were comprised selectively of Scots in a frame of standard English. *Simple Poems* (1806) appears to retain fewer Scots words and features none of the purposeful coded intricacy found in poems like ‘To a Hedge-hog’ (1799), perhaps demonstrative that Thomson attempted a semi-participation in post-Union, middle class print culture, indulging an interest in grammar and yet resisting enslavement to correctness. The short length of *Simple Poems* – consisting of just ninety-eight pages in comparison with the 290 pages of *New Poems* – tends to create an illusion of linguistic uniformity.

The poet had by no means abandoned the Scots tongue, but there appears a clearer differentiation in the use of Scots for comedy and English for feeling and seriousness. There are a number of comic efforts in the volume such as ‘John Cricket’,<sup>12</sup> a humorous tale of a quack fortune teller named ‘cricket’ who tells fortunes in exchange for food. A number of poems from the persona of Willy, including a ballad to the Scots tune of *Humors o’ glen*. Although written in the male subject’s Scots tongue, the poet appears to anglicize the verse which conveys the highest romantic emotion. The stanza in question contains one of the most potent images of Romantic spiritual transcendence, as Willy imagines his soul meeting with Grizzly’s on the slopes of Donegore Hill:

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<sup>12</sup> ‘John Cricket’, *Simple Poems*, pp. 49-50.

While I, fond Willy, stray thoughtful, recounting  
 The blessings that Hope from her habersack teems,  
 My wishes meet hers on the brow o' the mountain.  
 And laden with raptures, come back to my dreams.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, when compared to *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793) and *New Poems* (1799), the humorous and confident Scots verse epistles seem to have been exchanged for standard English elegies on the deaths of friends. Upon the deaths of Aeneas Lamont and John McNeilly, Thomson's primary correspondents during the period of composing the contents of the 1806 edition were Presbyterians who had studied at the University of Glasgow and men who were steeped in the 'Evangelical Awakening' which crusaded for moral and social reform in the nineteenth century. William Finlay of Carrickfergus (*matric.* 1804), a subscriber to Thomson's poetry, had offered to write a prologue to Thomson's new edition, playing on his mutual connection with the Ulster scholar William Hamilton Drummond (*matric.* 1794) who was teaching at Mountcollinger Academy. The second was Hutchinson McFadden (*matric.* 1796), an enthusiastic fan of Thomson's poetry who later gained the poet's spiritual confidence.<sup>14</sup> McFadden went from Kilraughts, County Antrim, to study at the University of Glasgow, matriculating in 1796 to study Logic under Professor George Jardine,<sup>15</sup> a man whom the twentieth-century critic David Craig accused of intentionally 'expunging sermons of vernacular linguistic elements.'<sup>16</sup> The influence of his Glasgow correspondents may have

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<sup>13</sup> 'Willy Sings Grizzly's Awa' (1804), lines 25-28, *Simple Poems*, p. 76.

<sup>14</sup> Drummond, McFadden, and Finlay's matriculation details can be found in the University of Glasgow Matriculation Records: *Records of the University of Glasgow, Scotland*, University of Glasgow Archives [accessed 6 March 2008].

<sup>15</sup> *Records of the University of Glasgow*, 5737/1796.

<sup>16</sup> Craig quoted by Allan H. MacLaine (ed.) *The Christis Kirk Tradition: Scots poems of folk festivity*, (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1996), p. 50.

encouraged Thomson to take onboard Drummond's assertion that 'the Scotch dialect is pleasing to few but Scotch readers'.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of percentages, *Poems on Different Subjects* was comprised of approximately 40% 'braid' Scots poems, in contrast to *New Poems* (1799) where vernacular poems comprised a mere 17% of the content. The figure for *Simple Poems*, being much shorter, weighs in at 15%, suggesting that Thomson's use of Scots declined most markedly between 1793 and 1799, before the composition of *Simple Poems*.<sup>18</sup> However, such a broad statistical percentage can be misleading as Thomson was much more likely to weave Scots and English together in *Simple Poems*, and subscription numbers from the volume suggest that this literary hybrid succeeded in reaching a much larger audience, perhaps partly due to the new linguistic accessibility of his poetry. It is of further note that even when writing in the Union period, Thomson's language reflects a fragmented rather than unified identity.

*Simple Poems* is also different in the Romantic and spiritual nature of the volume, reflecting a shift in Thomson's own religious circumstances. Surviving correspondence between Thomson and the Reverend Hutchinson McFadden, a minister of the Reformed Synod, appears to begin c.1807 during which time McFadden was minister of Newtownards Reformed Presbyterian Church where he had been ordained in 1805 following his education at Glasgow University.<sup>19</sup> As their intimacy grew, McFadden seems to have been one of the greatest encouragers of Thomson the religious poet, urging him to turning more sharply towards the eternal and to move away from his previous light-hearted attitude towards religious subjects:

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<sup>17</sup> William Hamilton Drummond to Samuel Thomson, 29 Dec. 1798, TCD MS 7257, f.87.

<sup>18</sup> These percentages take into account the total number of poems written in a sufficiently dense form of Scots, divided by the total number of poems in each edition, offering a clearer idea of Thomson's chronological use of Scots in his published work.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Loughridge (ed.), *Fasti of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland*, Part I, (Belfast & London, Presbyterian Historical Society, 1970), p.15.



Are you *occasionally employed* in keeping up a friendly correspondence with the *Muses*? If you have ability I think you ought – you will also allow me to say, that you should exercise your *Talents* in this way, specifically on religious subjects [...] You have *already* presented the world with some things of an amusing nature[...] <sup>20</sup>

Here McFadden opines that Thomson's poems were entertaining but not of sufficient seriousness to serve an evangelical purpose, demonstrating the solemn nature of Presbyterian evangelicalism in the early years of the nineteenth century. Thomson appears to have been reluctant in admitting to McFadden his connection to the Seceders, but McFadden reassured him:

Did you seriously fear that dryness between us was a consequence of telling me you belonged to the Secession! If so, your fear had no foundation [...] at the same time, when I examine your sensible letter I am persuaded that to be consistent with yourself you ought to be a Covenanter!<sup>21</sup>

In spite of historic disagreements between the two sects over religious interference in the law, McFadden and Thomson appear to have found common ground in their theology, the 'ardent' nature of which was common to Seceders and Covenanters alike,<sup>22</sup> and which enabled the disappointed radical to channel his energies toward improvement of the individual soul. Thomson's *New Poems* (1799) had previously satirised the various factions of Irish Presbyterians in 'The Roughfort Fair' (1799),<sup>23</sup> a poem which parodied Thomas Gray's 'mute inglorious Milton[s]', and suggested that a strong measure of alcohol might

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<sup>20</sup> Hutchinson McFadden to Samuel Thomson, 18 Jul. 1808, TCD MS 7257, f.184.

<sup>21</sup> McFadden to Thomson, 3 October 1807, TCD MS 7257, fol.133.

<sup>22</sup> Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 96-101.

unify them and finally bring all religious sects to the same level which, in this case, is the floor:

The stiff-necked formalist, with bigot breast,  
 That vain new-light men ever keen controuls (sic),  
 The subtle deist, held Religion's pest,  
 Here fall together, all as drunk as owls. (ll. 57-60)

The lighthearted attitude to religion in Thomson's poems of 1793-1800 gives way at times to the subject of hell which, in spite of being a literal belief in Seceder theology, he kept within the context of barbarous satire and humour. In 'To the Devil' (1799),<sup>24</sup> Thomson muses upon the nature of the devil and the various superstitions surrounding him, including shape-shifting. Although the bold and personal addressing of Satan and the reference to 'eldritch glen an' kirk' (l. 17) echoes both Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter' (1790) and the 'eldritch croon' (l. 30) of 'Address to the Deil' (1785), the poem lacks the confident, reductive voice that is found in Burns's poems. Thomson infuses his speaker's voice with more confusion than comedy, declining to utilize the comic properties of the Habbie Simson stanza. However he does employ a sense of scepticism, drawn from the declining belief in a literal devil among the rural classes, and refers to the folklore belief in the devil's ability to shape-shift, a belief also found in orthodox Christianity:<sup>25</sup>

WHETHER thou art or no,  
 I'm sure I cannot tell;  
 But foks will have it so,  
 And that thy home is hell.<sup>26</sup> (ll. 1-4)

<sup>24</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, pp. 199-200.

<sup>25</sup> Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, (Tavistock: Northcote, 2006), p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 199.

The opening stanza is reminiscent of Burns' 'A Prayer, Under the Pressure of violent Anguish' (1781),<sup>27</sup> somewhat ironically, given that Burns's poem is directed towards God:

O Thou Great Being! What Thou art,  
 Surpasses me to know;  
 Yet sure I am, that known to Thee  
 Are all Thy works below. (ll. 1-4)

Burns' rhetorical questioning of God's benevolent nature, 'Sure Thou, Almighty, canst not act / From cruelty or wrath!' (ll. 9-10) is echoed in Thomson's questioning of local folklore surrounding the devil, 'O. Nick, can this be true? / If so, 'tis somewhat odd!' (ll. 8-10). As the speaker of Thomson's poem muses further upon the nature of the devil, the poet allows his stanzas to grow in length as his thoughts begin to ramble, contemplating several representations of the devil in literature and in the popular consciousness:

Thou, Proteous-like, canst take  
 Thy trips in any form,  
 Sometimes a fiery snake,  
 Thou ridest upon the storm;  
 Sometimes a winged pig,  
 Thou ramblest thro' the mirk,  
 To dance thy mid-night jig  
 In eldritch glen and kirk. (ll. 10-17)

With echoes of Burns's 'Address to the Deil', Thomson traces his devil through literary history from the first reference to Proteus, the classical sea god whom Homer called 'the Old Man of the Sea'. This discussion of origins progresses to the Biblical image of the snake, the earthly form which the devil first took in Genesis 3:15, and, finally, the pig: a possible reference to Christ's driving the legion of demons into a herd of Gaderene swine in Mark 6:5 and Luke 8.26-39.

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<sup>27</sup> James Kinsley (ed.), *Poems and Songs*, I, p. 22.

The Prince of Evil is then reduced to a rambler who goes to join the dance in glen and kirk, an obvious reference to the cavorting of the Devil with the witches of Kirk Alloway in 'Tam o' Shanter'. Thomson's Romantic flirtation with the devil ends in the final quatrain as the speaker vows:

But what thy shape may be,  
Beast, reptile, fish or fowl,  
I covet not to see,  
Nor hear --- 'pon my soul.      (ll. 18-21)

The ending of the poem thus seems to betray a sense of honesty and fearful reverence for the concept of the devil that, mirrors Burns's admission that the fairy stories of his youth occasionally caused him a battle between irrational fear and reason. The influence of superstition and demonic folklore was attractive to the early Romantic poets and in Thomson's case mixed with Biblical teaching to form a specific discourse of the diabolic in Presbyterian communities. Thomson's tendency to play with this discourse gradually became tinged with seriousness after 1800 as his confidence in sporting with evil, even in a folklore context, seemed to erode away.

Between the years 1798 and 1806, Thomson's poetry reads almost as a catalogue of tributes to beloved people or objects, as if his quest was to immortalize elements of his own existence. The collection abounds with odes—some Horatian and others imaginative—and elegies on the deaths of close, male friends, apparently written in the spur of the moment. In the disorientation that bereavement brings, the combination of elegies and reflections on death form examinations of the poet's own fragmented self. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1798, within a month of the United Irishmen's defeat at the Battle of Antrim, came the death of Thomson's neighbour James McNeilly of Carngranny. 'On the Death of Mr. James McNeilly, of Carngranny, who died on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1798' (1798)<sup>28</sup> is a stately and dignified elegy, focusing less on the

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<sup>28</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 179-180.

poet's personal anguish and more closely on the dead man's achievements. Employing the *ubi sunt* convention, Thomson celebrates McNeilly first for his intelligence, 'Where now that virtuous and exulted mind?' (l. 6) and then for his philanthropic acts to the poor:

He did, virtuous man – he did it long,  
     Both cloth'd the naked and the hungry fed,  
 Whilst lessons rational flow'd from his tongue,  
     A meek improvement for both heart and head.      (ll. 13-16)

The fragmented questions and utterances—'He did, virtuous man – he did it long' (l. 13)—contrasts strongly with his glib, satirical contempt for the Reverend John Abernethy, whom he castigates for being exceptionally learned but miserly. He holds up McNeilly's knowledge as exemplary (since it is in combination with charity and generosity) and dedicates to McNeilly's memory a series of twenty-seven intricate sonnets on various topics, including some of his most intimate subjects. The series contains poems written to a woman, 'Delia', while the poet was in Scotland; poems of sensibility in a Burnsian style; and fraternal poems to Alexander Kemp that had been published in the *Belfast News Letter*, continuing the fraternal theme that is fitting to McNeilly's memory. These sonnets were anything but simple and won Thomson the particular admiration of both James Orr and John Dickey, both of whom were of a Romantic poetic vein.

It is notable that neither parents nor siblings are mentioned in the correspondence nor in any of Thomson's verse, save the hint in *New Poems* that Thomson may have lost his mother in 1798.<sup>29</sup> It is here that Thomson explicitly voices a Calvinist religious affinity, referring to a sense of salvation or 'election sure' (l. 16), trading in overt political aspirations for inward religious solace.

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<sup>29</sup> 'Elegiac Lines on the Death of a Beloved Mother, who died 7<sup>th</sup> June 1798' (1798), *New Poems*, pp. 178-179.

When read beside some of the 1806 poems, ‘Elegiac Lines’ (1798) seems to express Thomson’s religious views more confidently, suggesting that turning to God played a key role in guaranteeing both his orthodoxy and allaying his spiritual anxieties about past conduct, perhaps specifically political. The reader is left to infer whether this guilt arises from armed action or, more likely, the incitement to arms that his poems encouraged. The poet is conscious of the ‘dark dreary vale / all black and dreadful [that ] glooms between us now!’ (ll. 21-22) as the dead figure finds a place in ‘the blissful regions of eternal day.’ (l. 4)

By 1810, the McFadden-Thomson correspondence shows little evidence of enduring poetic drive on Thomson’s part, confirming the suggestion most prevalent in John Dickey’s poetry that Thomson had sunk into deep depression during a languishing illness. By contrast, McFadden’s letters read like a passionate stream of consciousness, being heavy in exclamation and littered with biblical references, suggesting a highly motivated and excitable personality like that of his contemporary, the Reverend John Paul. His last letter to Thomson betrayed that he was suffering from a ‘tendency to inflammation in [the] breast’ which made him wary of open-air preaching, but added that ‘this of itself would have little influence on me.’<sup>30</sup> This condition ended his life prematurely on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1812 and his awareness of imminent death comes across in several letters devoted to discussing Thomson’s spiritual health, drawing attention to the fact that the poet’s physical health was very grave:

Your last letter grieved me – you have certainly been very ill. [...] *The Lord hath chastened you* (I trust you his Son by adoption and therefore I can use this term) [...] you have prayed for resignation to his [will] and you have earnestly decried that your affliction might “bring forth the peaceable fruits of Righteousness” ...<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> McFadden to Thomson, 1 Sep. 1810, TCD MS 7257, f. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

McFadden's counsel was orthodox, as Andrew Holmes points out, 'When exhorting the sick, the minister was to demonstrate that their illness came not by chance but by God's providence, "either for our correction and amendment, for the trial and exercise of our graces, or for other important ends", and that it would end well if "wise improvement" was made of it.'<sup>32</sup> McFadden's exhortation was a culmination of ideas that seem to have been building in the poet's mind and are evidenced in *Simple Poems* (1806) which more explicitly addresses spiritual subjects, particularly reflecting upon approaching death. The first record of Thomson's illness is in a letter from his patroness, Margaret Thompson of Greenmount, who sent him money for medicine.<sup>33</sup> This kindness must necessarily have rendered Mrs Thompson's own death particularly regretful to the poet who lamented his 'patroness ... dead and gone' (ll. 3-4) in 'Lines Composed on Passing Greenmount' (1806).<sup>34</sup>

Given these personal losses, Thomson appears to have been consumed by the realisation that death could approach unannounced. Where reflections on the eschatological condition of the human condition are relatively absent from *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793), published when Thomson was twenty-seven, they begin to creep into *New Poems* (1799). The poet states in 'A Birthday Thought' (1796) that 'my race is now half run, / God knows, it may be so, and more' (ll. 5-6) and the answer to his question, 'What have I done?' is the sinister reply, 'Much to lament and seek forgiveness for.'<sup>35</sup> The poet's subsequent reflections on the state of mankind are nowhere more pessimistically expressed than in his second poem entitled 'Another [Thought]'

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<sup>32</sup> Holmes, *Presbyterian Belief and Practice*, p. 241.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Thompson to Samuel Thomson, 15 Jan. 1802, TCD MS 7257, f. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, p. 51-52.

<sup>35</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 207.

(1799)<sup>36</sup> which—in posing the question ‘What’s man, this vacant, empty roarer?’ (l. 1)—is reminiscent of the following from Virgil’s *Aeneid* X:<sup>37</sup>

As wintry winds, contending in the sky,  
With equal force of lungs their titles try:  
They rage, they roar; the doubtful rack of heaven  
Stands without motion, and the tide undriven. (ll. 496-9)

*The Westminster Confession of Faith* defined the Fall of Man as ‘...original corruption whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good’,<sup>38</sup> and ‘Another’ (1799) appears to be drenched in this Calvinist doctrine of total depravity and attempts to cast some reflection on the horror of existence:

WHAT’s man – this vaunting empty roarer?  
In Natures womb, a little embryo,  
Begot by time, that hoary traveller,  
And never suffered to behold the light,  
Till Death, in pity to the mother’s throes,  
Allays her pains, and brings the babe to birth. (ll. 1-6)

The horrors of human existence, pertaining to those who are ‘prematurely born, / or die, according to the common phrase’ (ll. 17-18) are conveyed through graphic, maternal imagery in which giving birth, normally associated with life, is subverted in the context of a sinful world as a form of horror, death and miscarriage:

O Sin! Thou frightful busy monster,

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<sup>36</sup> *New Poems*, p. 203.

<sup>37</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid* ed. James Morwood & John Dryden, (Wordsworth, 1997), X, p. 299.

<sup>38</sup> *The Confession of Faith* [electronic resource]: *and the larger and shorter catechisms. First agreed upon by the Assembly of Divines at Westminster: and now appointed by the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland, ... Together with the directions of the General Assembly...* (Edinburgh: printed by T. Lumisden and J. Robertson, and sold at their printing-house, and by Mrs. Brown, 1744; henceforward *Westminster Confession*), p. 17. ECCO (Archive: University of Glasgow), [accessed 14 Aug 2009].



'tis thine to mix the Soul-destroying nostrum,  
 And eke to drop it in the cup of Nature,  
 Which, although melting in the mouth as honey,  
 No sooner swallow'd than it bitter grows  
 As gall or wormwood in the loathing belly;  
 Effecting agonies and dire abortion,  
 With all the horrors of untimely birth. (ll. 7-14)

The poem appears to reference Ecclesiastes 6:3 which states that 'If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.'<sup>39</sup> (KJV) Thomson seems to take a more pessimistic outlook; given that all are conceived as sinners, then it follows that all human life is by necessity a process of death, a form of abortion or miscarriage, with the result that 'countless thousands [...] Drop to eternity, defac'd and foul!' (l. 19) with the eternity in question being hell. It was not uncommon that the bleakness of Calvinist theology, specifically the emphasis on grace alone for salvation, should generate anxiety in the believer who could not avail himself of the reassurance of sacramental theology nor of religious rites. It is possible to detect some discomfort, even anguish when he considers the tenets of the Calvinist doctrine which stated that God predetermines the fate of each individual to either eternal life or damnation before they are born. The Thomson who wrote 'A Thought' (1806) seems more at ease with the idea of total depravity but, it must be said, does not elaborate as to whether or not he is implying that the human heart cannot be changed or, rather, simply making a case of individual humility:

WHOE'ER can sit him down and roose  
 His own dear heart, and call it good?  
 Believe me in a wise man's shoes

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<sup>39</sup> Biblegateway, <[www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes\\_6:3&version=9](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes_6:3&version=9)>, [accessed 15/03/2009].

Such crazy mortal never stood.<sup>40</sup>

In between such gloomy, reflective pieces, *Simple Poems* is comprised of a number of addresses, elegies, and odes in which there is a strong movement towards the discourse of the imagination. In his prefatory quotations to his odes Thomson repeatedly invokes Mark Akenside, Joseph Warton and William Collins, all three of whom between 1744 and 1746 published groundbreaking volumes of odes which changed the direction of the form from a satiric and lofty style to the more descriptive and imaginative. James Orr was very pleased with Thomson's 'Address to the Cuckoo' (1802),<sup>41</sup> a poem which demonstrates a development of Thomson's odes from conventional descriptive pastoral to imaginative allegory in a post-rebellion and post-union landscape. It also demonstrates the development of the cuckoo as a radical symbol from its earlier appearances in 'To the Cuckoo' (1797). By contrast, 'Address to the Cuckoo' is an anti-pastoral which, instead of welcoming spring, rebukes the birds for entering a Hibernia that has 'lost her May' (l. 16). In order to ensure that the conservative *Belfast News Letter* published the poem, Thomson had to mask its political content carefully, emphasising the necessity of silence and compliance with the season:

The tuneful Mavis now sits sadly mute;  
The frightened Larks are driven to and fro:  
Cold frost has silenc'd every warbler's flute,  
And musick dies beneath the falling snow! (ll. 17-20)

The poem was published in the newspaper with the subtitle, 'composed during a keen frost and driving snow, May 16, 1802', but the publication date of 4 June, a matter of days before the fourth anniversary of the Battle of Antrim,

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<sup>40</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> *Simple Poems*, pp. 38-40. The poem was first published in the *Belfast News Letter*, 4 June 1802.

raises suspicion that there is a deep radical subtext. The death of music is synonymous with the accusation that the rebellion period spelled the death of independent arts and culture, which according to William Hamilton Drummond, were tarred with inciting faction and sedition.<sup>42</sup> There is a hint in the final stanza that secret preparations are underfoot to restore Hibernia's summer season, perhaps a hint of the activity that would result in Robert Emmet's rebellion of 1803:

Yet, oh! A little while prolong thy stay,  
Behold the smiling loves, a flow'ry crown  
Prepare, in secret, for their blooming *May*,  
When she has cast away *December's* gown. (ll. 29-32)

Both 'To a Robin Red-Breast' (1799) and an earlier composition 'To the Cuckoo' (1797) are highly imaginative and enthusiastic: both ascribing the poetic inspiration of the muse to the song of the birds which, in the case of the latter poem, inspire the hearts of 'TRUE UNITED IRISHMEN'.<sup>43</sup> This blatant statement of radicalism, published in the *Northern Star* version of the poem of May 1797, was removed when the poem entered the post-rebellion edition of *New Poems* (1799). 'Address to the Cuckoo' (1802) demonstrates a more creative approach to radical themes, whereby they are masked in anti-pastoral where the seasons reflect the poet's emotions. The symbolic radical currency of the bird remains constant from the outset. Likewise 'Ode to the Lark' (1793),<sup>44</sup> tapped into the enthusiastic natural themes of ancient odes, where the nature-taught bard receives inspiration directly from nature as his reward. He 'Drinks sweet inspiration wild' until before his eyes 'Verse comes easy – thick and throng / The loose impatient ideas dance!' (ll.21-28). The poem exhibits the

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<sup>42</sup> Drummond to Thomson, 29 Dec. 1798, TCD MS 7257, f. 87.

<sup>43</sup> 'To the Cuckoo', *Northern Star*, 15-19 May 1797.

<sup>44</sup> 'Ode to the Lark', *Poems*, pp. 61-62.

Romantic tendency toward primitivism that would inspire Keats's 'Ode to the Nightingale' (1819).

A combination of rural pride and feigned primitivism culminates in 'The Gloaming, a Rhapsody' (1806),<sup>45</sup> the poem which perhaps conveys most obviously the sentiments of Burns' 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'. Thomson described the poem as Burns's best, 'Your *Cotter* fairly taks the shine',<sup>46</sup> and was likewise recorded as Burns self-confessed favourite, according to the *Belfast News-Letter*'s editor, Henry Joy, during his interview with the Ayrshire poet.<sup>47</sup> His reasons for admiring this poem were likely because of its broad appeal to Dissenters in enshrining their 'simple' cottage religion in culture, declaring that it is culturally resonant. Gerard Carruthers opines that the text's wide appeal to Dissenters during the Romantic period was because it 'appeared a propos the Romantic age's championing of peripheral culture, marginalised psychology, "the other"'.<sup>48</sup> 'The Gloaming' (1806), in spite of its title which implies that the subject is the waning of the day, masques a distinctly sinister undertone, informing the 'golden great, on whirling wing' (l. 9) that the cottagers 'here look down on you' (l.12):<sup>49</sup>

Far distant from the broad highway,  
And out of dissipation's view,  
'Tis here, ye glittering great and gay,  
The cottager looks down on you. (ll. 45-48)

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<sup>45</sup> 'The Gloaming, a Rhapsody' (1806), *Simple Poems*, pp. 52-56.

<sup>46</sup> 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791), line 36, *Poems*, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> John Erskine, 'Burns and Ulster: Readings and Meetings', a paper delivered at *Robert Burns and Ireland: New Readings on Old Relationships*, February 6-7 2009, University of Ulster. Erskine points out that, upon being asked what he considered his best poem, Burns might have tailored his answer to what he suspected would please Henry Joy.

<sup>48</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'The Ordination', a paper delivered at the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, 13 May 2009.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Gloaming, a Rhapsody' (1806), *Simple Poems*, p. 52-6.

The aristocrat is envisioned as a bird of prey on ‘whirling wing’ and there is a sinister warning to the ‘golden great’ (l. 9) not to wander off the safe, ‘broad highway’ (l. 45), suggesting that in such areas the cottager has subverted the hierarchy, and asserts his ownership of the land, based on the fact that he knows it more intimately than he who legally owns it. The landlord, often an absentee, may have held the legal right to land, but his knowledge of it was vastly inferior to that of his tenants, hence the poet’s implication that the landowner’s control over the landscape is negligible. The poem, published in 1806, would immediately remind the reader of the United Irish outlaws who had roamed the countryside in the years following the failed uprising of 1798,<sup>50</sup> in which areas like Templepatrick were said to have been ‘engaged almost to a man.’<sup>51</sup> As has been discussed above, the figuring of the aristocrat as an animal of prey is reminiscent of coded subtexts present in several other animal fable poems such as ‘The Hawk and the Weazel’ (1796) and ‘To a Hedge-hog’ (1799) that conveyed a suggested threat to the political elite.<sup>52</sup> In spite of these passionate verses in ‘The Gloaming’, the poem gradually gives way to a vastly different and despondent ending. The poet’s emotions are inseparably tied to his poetic landscape, as his final lines of ‘The Gloaming’ convey his own winding down of inspiration through the image of the exhausted gothic bat, and mirrored in a landscape that slips off to sleep:

Now night from Eastern mountains comes;  
Bright stars peep thro’ the azure sky;

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<sup>50</sup> Ian McBride points out that the British government had feared that the United Irish banditti would regroup in the likely event of another French invasion. (‘Ulster Presbyterians and the Act of Union’, in Michael Brown, Patrick Geoghegan and, James Kelly (eds.) *The Irish Act of Union, 1800: Bicentennial Essays* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003; henceforward ‘Ulster Presbyterians and the Act of Union’), pp. 68-83 (p. 78, 71).

<sup>51</sup> Angelique Day, Patrick McWilliams, Lisa English, (eds.), *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland, Vol. 35 – Parishes of County Antrim XIII (1833, 1835, 1838) – Templepatrick and District*, (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies in association with the Royal Irish Academy, 1996), p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> See Jennifer Orr, ‘1798, Before and Beyond’, pp. 122-125.

The drowsy beetle no more hums,  
The bat is tir'd, and so am I. (ll. 93-96)

The trope of the drowsy beetle dates back as far as Shakespeare, 'The shad-borne beetle with his drowsy hums / Hath rung night's yawning peal' (*Macbeth*, III.ii.42-3) and Thomson could trace it through a number of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets such as Dryden, Gray, Collins, Cooper, Warton, and finally Burns. Thomson subverts the trope for the melancholy purpose of conveying disappointed hopes, his emotions reflected in the creatures of the landscape with a stroke of sensibility equal in individuality to that of Burns's address to the field mouse. A real sense of despondency comes through at this point, that may owe as much to disappointed hopes in his landlord, Lord Templeton, as to Romantic melancholia. This pessimistic conclusion brings the reader a long way from the positive note of fraternal bliss that ends the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan' (1791). Thomson's 'Hope' (1806) describes Templeton's failure to provide the promised new cottage as 'a castle in the air', and was written around the same time as James Orr's 'To a Sparrow' (1804), which refers to human beings 'sufferin' sair / By biggin' castles in the air' (ll. 43-4). It is tempting to wonder if Thomson was sending a signal to Orr that he was indeed deceived in Templeton's goodwill towards him, and that he now resigned himself to Orr's intractable distrust of the aristocracy. It was perhaps this mixture of fraternal honesty, Romanticism, and radicalism in 'The Gloaming' that so engaged James Orr's delight and enthusiasm.<sup>53</sup>

'The Gloaming' endorses a simple, rural, Dissenting life as the poet portrays a precious and reverend silence falling in the countryside, where the only sound is 'the delight of praise and prayer' in contrast to the 'noise, confusion, plays and balls' (l. 27) of the city. Thomson turns his attention to the Dissenting nature of this religion, in opposition to the iconographic and ornate trappings of Catholicism in St Peter's and Episcopacy in St Paul's:

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<sup>53</sup> Orr to Thomson, 4 January 1806, in *Uncommon Bookman*, p. 129.

How soft, from yonder lowly bower,  
 The solemn-sounding evening psalm,  
 Where pious saints confess the power  
 Of Gillead's soul-restoring balm.<sup>54</sup> (ll. 29-32)

The image of 'Devotion's [...] sacred fires' illuminating 'our cots and smoaky cells' (l. 35) instantly calls to mind the Dissenting Presbyterian cotter of Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', which emerges yet again in Thomson's poetry, demonstrating that Burns's Presbyterian bardic pride—albeit with a critical eye—remained steadfast in his post-radical opus. In extolling the virtues of cottage religion in opposition to prelacy and episcopacy, Thomson echoes the characteristic Dissenting suspicion of excess authoritarianism in devotion. The poet consciously privileges natural theology over revealed religion, deliberately emphasized through the assonant parallelism of the city's 'plays and balls' (l. 27) and the grand churches' 'organs and bells' (l. 34). In praising rural religious practice over more ornate places of worship, Thomson was not necessarily pushing dogmatic Dissenting rhetoric; but in demonstrating the virtue of the 'cots and smoaky cells' (l. 36), he was reacting against the growing urbanization process brought about by the growth of industry throughout Britain, Europe and North America, and where evangelical Christianity was seen as a current through which these could be addressed.<sup>55</sup> 'The Gloaming' demonstrates further that, rather than losing his cutting edge, Thomson's experimentation with the symbolic, Presbyterian landscape of Ireland was re-employed as a Romantic attack against the Enlightenment preoccupation with the empirical world, creating an imaginative Eden in County Antrim with potentiality.

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<sup>54</sup> Referring to the balm or balsam carried from Gilead by merchants to whom Joseph was sold by his brothers (Genesis 37:25) but is also often read as a prefiguration of the living sacrifice of Jesus Christ to restore men's souls.

<sup>55</sup> Hempton and Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism*, p. 3.

The deceptively-provincial poem 'Lyle's Hill, a Rhapsody inscribed to Damon' (1799) demonstrates Thomson's engagement with the Augustan topographical genre, but Romantically envisioning the spirit of the Presbyterian people represented in the landscape.<sup>56</sup> He relocates the English topographical poem to Irish soil, beginning with the bard's wish that he could glorify his 'native isle' with 'Denham's classic skill or Dyer's soft, descriptive quill' (ll. 1-2). He appeals to the Georgic mode, but instead of offering agrarian produce, the landscape of County Antrim can boast spiritual nourishment in its export of Seceder Presbyterianism, as the bard recognises, in Calvinistic fashion, that God has 'decreed for humble me / Delightful Lyle to sing of thee.' (ll. 19-20). As he goes on to convey the potential idealism that could be produced from the scene, the bard claims an Irish identity, celebrating the site where he 'woo'd the muse' (l. 43) and received from her a 'shamrock wreath' (l. 44). The traditional concept of the prospect poem is subverted, as it is the humble rural bard rather than the landowner who looks down on the landscape below:

Hail happy place! Whose master kind,  
 Blest with a strong untainted mind;  
 Consistent, liberal, warm, humane,  
 Can look on sceptres with disdain,  
 And laugh at all the titled clan –  
 An independent, truly honest man.      (ll. 45-50)

Thomson appears to be referring to himself as the master of Carngranny, crowned with the Irish shamrock and looking down the slopes of Lyle's Hill toward Castle Upton, the residence of Lord Viscount Templetown who was the legal owner of the seat. It is thus not a Tory Humanist retreat into the country but Romanticized, Presbyterian imagery of his childhood that is presented as the ideal; the labouring swains are replaced by a vision of bygone times, rooted in the very beginnings of Seceding Presbyterianism in Ireland.

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<sup>56</sup> *New Poems*, pp. 102-107.



The poem is deeply personal, containing many John Clare-like exclamations of rapture drawn from the particular landscape features which enable him to mark the progress of the sun :<sup>57</sup> ‘O how I love to lie, sweet Lyle, / Upon thy grassy brow’ (ll. 71-722) as the sun ‘Ascend[s] up’ from behind Slieve True mountain, marked by its local vernacular name ‘Slavy-true’ and climbs to its midday position above ‘the *thorn*’, a specific tree outside his cottage (ll. 74-76) which becomes of greater significance in *Simple Poems* when it is cut down.<sup>58</sup> The poet does not wish to subdue the landscape by classifying features of the landscape but instead presents the poet’s moment-by-moment, subjective experience. He is inspired by scenes of hope in the young schoolboys enjoying the landscape, but he soon finds his view temporarily spoiled by the sight of ‘the road to town’ where ‘Village shopmen, toil along, / Intent on gain’ and wholly indifferent to nature’s beauty. Disillusioned with the scene, he moves to the Southern side of the hill overlooking the Sixmilewater Valley, and reflects upon ‘the hoary dome’ of Lylehill Seceder church where the landscape begins to reveal a religious character:

Hail, worthy man, who to the rock,  
Leadst thy little thirsty flock,  
And striking with the sacred rod,  
The flint-dividing wand of God.  
Obtains that *stream*, the sinner’s cure,  
Salvation’s nectar, sweet and pure. (ll. 110-115)

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<sup>57</sup> Compare, for example, with Clare’s ‘I love in summer to seek a seat / Wading the long grass were a path neer led’ (‘Summer Haunts’, ll. 1-2, *The Early Poems of John Clare: 1804-1822*, 2 vols, gen. ed, Eric Robinson ; ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell ; ass. ed, Margaret Grainger, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, c.1989; hereafter *Early Poems*), II, p. 576) and ‘I love to drop in summer on the grass / & with unwearied eye mark pleasing things’, (‘Sonnet’, ll. 1-2, *Early Poems*, II, p. 577). See Jennifer Orr, ‘No John Clare’: Minute Observations from the Ulster Cottage Door 1790-1800’, *John Clare Society Journal* 29 (2010), pp. 51-70.

<sup>58</sup> See ‘Verses on the assassination of a Favourite Thorn’, *Simple Poems*, pp. 93-94.

The Old Testament imagery of the wandering Israelites is connected with a tradition of water pastoralism that establishes the Lyle Hill landscape as fertile both in terms of nature and in pilgrim-like spiritual health. The original Presbyterians are compared to God's chosen people, the Israelites, wandering in exile through the desert, entirely dependent on God for nourishment and protection. The scene described is the Six Mile Water which ran through the valley at the foot of the hills, which was also the landscape in which Ireland's first recognised Seceder congregation was established in 1745, presided over by the late Reverend Isaac Patton (d. 1798):

O, the worthy * man revere	* The Rev. Mr Patton
Who, with holy watchful care	
For you pours his soul in ardent prayers.	
Unlike the formal, puff'd professor,	
And hypocrite, base transgressor,	
Who all the week to Mammon pray,	
Yet dare to preach on Sabbath day;	
Who learn'dly wander in the dark,	
Mastiffs dumb, that cannot bark.	(ll. 124-132)

Thomson's endorsement of Patton appears rooted in orthodox theology and radical Dissenting identity. Patton's arrival in Ireland set a precedent for an influx of Secession ministers from Scotland, giving the Six Mile Water valley a distinct dissenting culture that tended to reflect the trends of the Scottish church, including extensive open-air preaching.<sup>59</sup> The dense concentration of Scots Dissenters and their considerable power base in a small geographical area to the extent that 'the Presbyterian Church in Ireland was effectively a state within a state' caused the Episcopal party considerable alarm.<sup>60</sup> At this point, it appeared to the ruling classes that the growing power of the non-conformist

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<sup>59</sup> I. R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the late eighteenth century*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 73.

<sup>60</sup> David Hempton & Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society 1740-1890*, (London: Routledge, 1992; hereafter *Evangelical Protestantism*), p.16.

sect might overcome the ecclesiastical enactments designed to control it, and thus made the Dissenter threat to the Episcopacy as great, if not greater, to that of the larger Catholic populace. During the height of United Irish activity during the 1790s, this fear was magnified by the alliance between the Dissenting and Catholic masses. The Seceder reactionary doctrine was marked by a refusal to accept the *Regium Donum*, a return to true Covenanting theology whereby Christ alone was proclaimed absolute Head of the Church, as opposed to the monarch, and political activity commenced almost immediately.<sup>61</sup>

Thomson grew up as a member of Patton's congregation, whose style was described as 'ardent and excited – sometimes almost wild' tending to 'attack individuals, or even classes of individuals, who by any look or motion incurred his disapprobation.'<sup>62</sup> As a second-generation Seceding Presbyterian, Thomson was a product of a culture that had made a strong break with 'New Light' orthodoxy. In this sense, instead of looking backward to ancient history and ruins, the speaker of 'Lyle's Hill' attempts to capture the present scene as a place of spiritual purity and transcendence, reserving censure for those who pray to Mammon, the god of avarice, and treat the landscape as a means of capital. Upon seeing his young school pupils moving carelessly through the landscape, the scene fosters in the speaker a sense of intense patriotism which compels him to spur the youths on to glorify 'Erin, dear' (l. 70) through the pursuit of learning. Reflecting the centrality of individual education and literacy to Presbyterianism, there is an underlying desperation in 'Lyle's Hill' to encourage the younger generations to preserve the image of the Christian identity in the landscape, and a sense that the landscape itself will shortly be subject to change. The reference to pre-enclosure, 'wilds where flocks spontaneous roam' (l. 28), is conflated with reliance on God 'who vouchsafes to bless, / the inmates poor with Happiness' (ll. 31-32).

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<sup>61</sup> David Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, p. 82.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew R. Holmes, *Presbyterian Belief and Practice*, p. 132.

The emphasis on the poor's reliance on God is borne out more explicitly in *Simple Poems*, particularly in Thomson's symbolic poem, 'To My Boortree' (1806) which is even less favourable to the landowning classes in spite of being published in a collection of verse dedicated to Lord Templetown.<sup>63</sup> In spite of attending the meeting house of the Reverend John Paul, a man often described as one of the strongest critics of the New Lights, Thomson appears to have taken a more conciliatory approach to religion. 'To My Boortree' was 'written at the desire of the Reverend Mr [Robert] Campbell', who succeeded John Abernethy as successor to the New Light Presbytery of Templepatrick, and who later went on to become a Unitarian minister in 1830.<sup>64</sup> In addition to worshipping with Covenanters at Carnmoney, there is no reference in his verse or correspondence to Alexander Clarke, Isaac Patton's successor at the Lylehill Secession house, suggesting that Thomson had cut his ties with the Secession church. At this time the poet also enjoyed the close and intimate friendship of James Orr, who found the 'Calvinistic tincture' of poetry distasteful and whose on religious opinions have been described as 'New Light'.<sup>65</sup> The ecumenical address of the poem must therefore invite a careful judgement of its apparently orthodox rhetoric; the poem may appear to look back to 'happy days of yore', but it perhaps more of a call to unity among the divided Christians of Templepatrick, under the shade of the guardian tree.

Thomson begins by telling the reader that a beech tree once shaded 'auld Maro', better known as the poet Virgil, whose full name was Publius Vergilius Maro. The mention of Virgil sets a bardic tone for the poem and carries a subliminal political significance. William Dowling outlines that, while finding analogy between Augustan Britain and Virgil's representation of Rome, writers such as Dryden were affected by 'Virgil's own haunted memory,

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<sup>63</sup> 'To my Boortree, Written at the desire of the Rev. Mr. Campbell' (1806), pp. 84-86.

<sup>64</sup> *Simple Poems*, p. 84.

<sup>65</sup> Carol Baraniuk states that 'New Light Presbyterianism with its emphasis on the importance of the moral life was the mode of belief espoused by James Orr', "as native in my thought", p. 151.

present everywhere in his poetry, of the civil wars of Rome.’<sup>66</sup> Writing soon after the Irish Rebellion (1798) and the Anglo-Irish Act of Union (1801), Thomson claims the Boortree groves of Carngranny and Templepatrick for his bardic territory, fashioning himself an Ossian-like last of the race, uttering a mournful cry for a lost Ireland. In doing so, he demonstrates the fruits of Romantic quest for unity in a fragmented self, attempting to unite a divided and culturally fragmented people under his bardship. He affects modesty, claiming to make no pretensions to literary greatness, stating that his ‘boortree’ will ‘ne’er be sic a tree / As Billy Shakespeare’s mulberry’ (ll. 19-20), a reference to the tree outside Shakespeare’s home in Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>67</sup> From the beginning of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare and Spenser were lauded as poets who had elevated the British poetic tradition to the heights of Horace and the classical writers, recapturing a sense of the sublime. The poet’s choice of the Irish boortree over the more conventional British oak—itsself synonymous with Imperial naval victory—has the effect of crowning Thomson as a bard of the Irish nation, and, in answer to Shakespeare, he holds a stake in creating an Irish sublime. This reading becomes more convincing in the light of the writings of the Scottish radical James Thomson Callender, whose desire for a ‘wise, virtuous, *independent* government’ of Scotland would ensure that Scotland, Wales, and Ireland would no longer be like ‘three plants of inferior size, whose natural growth has been stunted by the vicinity of an oak.’<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Thomson appears to have played a type of flute, probably made from boortree twigs according to the ancient custom, endowing the tree with a

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<sup>66</sup> Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment*, p. 53.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Legend has it that when he bought New Place in Stratford-upon-Avon ... the Bard planted a mulberry tree in its Great Garden. By the eighteenth century, the great increase in his fame had caused seekers to pester the new owner, the Rev. Francis Gastrell, to such a degree that in 1758 he ordered the tree cut down’, (Terence Hawkes, *Meaning By Shakespeare*, [London: Routledge, 1992], p. 40.)

<sup>68</sup> Callender quoted in Michael Druery, *Transatlantic Radicals*, 1997, p.74.

deeper significant in his bardic identity.<sup>69</sup> As if in answer to James Orr's epistle, Thomson takes up the challenge to 'sing the burns, an' bow'rs, / O AIRLAN',<sup>70</sup> through the symbolism of the boortree.

The boortree is a symbol that triggers the poet's lament for the fragmented landscape on the one hand and, on the other, former fidelity to faith and traditions once integral to the culture of the people. This 'orthodoxy' is never claimed as explicitly Dissenting, and when read against his satirical references to Seceder fanaticism, discussed previously, and his allusion to extensive woodland coverage of the native Irish Elder, it suggests that the poet looks back even further into history, perhaps even to the Celtic past:

Lang syne, in happy days o' yore,  
Ere glaring guilt our system tore,  
Auld Orthodoxy blest our shore  
                    Wi' light and grace,  
And Boortrees every yard-dyke bore  
                    In every place.                      (ll. 31-6)

The stanza appears to take its shape from Fergusson's 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music' which opens 'On Scotia's plains in days of yore, / When lads an lasses *tartan* wore', lamenting the death of 'Saft Music'.<sup>71</sup> Thomson's subliminal referencing of Fergusson implies that the 'Auld Orthodoxy' symbolised by the boortree is as integral to Irish cultural life as traditional music is to Scottish culture. Since the ambiguous 'glaring guilt our system tore' (l. 32), possibly a reference to the political bloodshed of the preceding years in which the idealised partnership of Dissenters and Catholics had broken down,

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<sup>69</sup> See 'The Thumming Thumified Flute' (1806), *Simple Poems*, pp. 57-59. Brian McCandless refers to the 'long-standing, even ancient custom' of making flutes from elder wood, ('Historical Links among Pastoral, Union and Uilleann Bagpipes', <[http://www.bemccandless.net/pdfs/PastoralUnion\\_McCandless.pdf](http://www.bemccandless.net/pdfs/PastoralUnion_McCandless.pdf)>, [accessed 4 March 2010].

<sup>70</sup> James Orr, 'Epistle to S. Thomson' (1803), ll. 82-83, *Collected Works*, pp. 122-5.

<sup>71</sup> 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music', lines 1-3, in Fergusson, *Selected Poems*, p. 58.

the elder is no longer the home of sparrows and finches, but the home of gothic bats. The 'boortree, chaplain-like to all, [that] Stands just before my door'<sup>72</sup> is so potent a symbol that it encompasses the theological, political, and ecological changes within the landscape and serves as a visionary point of departure into an idealised and unified past. Having suffered tree loss in the past, the bard becomes determined that this particular tree, 'My Boortree', must be safeguarded both physically and creatively in rhyme, 'Until I die' (l. 60).<sup>73</sup> 'To my Boortree', one of Thomson's last poems before he retreats into poetic and social retirement, seems to represent a double agenda: as a Juvenalian act of defiance against the inevitable social landscape change he sees before him, modified by an appeal for religious unity within the strange new land of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland.

According to James Orr, the mysterious 'To My Boortree' had not 'met with public approbation', possibly because its meaning is so ambiguous and dependent upon religious sympathy. In *Simple Poems* Thomson continued to stretch the potential of the Scots language and, particularly, the Standard Habbie stanza, for social commentary, particularly his Wordsworthian spectacle poem 'The Beggar Wife' (1803). The common enemy of poverty began to draw the focus of religious sects in the nineteenth century. The thaw in relations between the Burghers and Anti-Burghers which resulted in the united Secession Synod of 1818 was noticeable from the close of the eighteenth century, and the overriding zeal for mission drew Dissenters of all sects closer together.<sup>74</sup> Thomson's growing interest in universal education appears to have played a role in moderating his theology. According to the orthodox church historian David Stewart, Isaac Patton was rather exceptional as a 'pioneer [...], as an

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<sup>72</sup> 'Verses on the assassination of a Favourite Thorn' (1806), ll. 43-44, *Simple Poems*, p. 94.

<sup>73</sup> See 'Verses on the assassination of a Favourite Thorn', *Simple Poems*, p. 93-94; and 'Pastoral Elegy to a Fav'rite Thorn on its being cut down' (1793), *Poems*, pp. 20-22.

<sup>74</sup> Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, pp. 204-5.

educationalist and a combative ecclesiastic', and claims that 'with the beginning of the nineteenth century, the old strait-laced ideas of the Anti-Burghers began to crumble'.<sup>75</sup> Thomson's connection with a number of educated men: from the Reverends John Paul, Hutchinson McFadden and William Finlay, all products of Glasgow academia, and David Boyd the schoolmaster at the Belfast Poor house, brought to his attention new methods of remedying poverty and ignorance.<sup>76</sup> Although his political radicalism had cooled, he was still deeply engaged with social questions, particularly as he began to experience poor health and bereavement. On a personal level, Thomson's attraction to religion was not only based in cultural identity but primarily in an attraction to Christian consolation, specifically the Gospel emphasis on behaviour that comforted the poor and oppressed. Ultimately it is upon this principle of sympathetic feeling for his fellow man that Thomson's radicalism hangs, but it is not always clearly identifiable in his early poetry.

Some of his experiments in morbidity and introspection, both of which had strong roots in the Romantic imagination of the 'Graveyard school', betray a sharp sense of social commentary mediated through sensibility. Thomson made several attempts to turn the genre to contemporary social themes that arose from Britain's wars, as in 'A Nocturnal' (1799) which attempts to create sympathy for Irish women abandoned by their lovers for the shores of America; most likely an allusion to the scores of Irish men who signed up to fight for Britain during the Revolutionary War. Likewise, a much later poem, 'The Beggar Wife' (1803) outlines society's failure to provide for women in old age, but in contrast, assesses a sentimental response as futile, and contemplates the possibility, or the impossibility, of heavenly consolation for the poet himself. In 'A Nocturnal' (1799) the speaker is on a midnight walk 'wrapped in pleasing melancholy' and makes no apology for focusing on 'that greatest of concerns,

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<sup>75</sup> Stewart, *The Seceders in Ireland*, p. 129.

<sup>76</sup> Thomson and Boyd's correspondence can be found in TCD MS 7257, ff. 107-128.



HIMSELF'. The speaker's self indulgent inwardness is momentarily disrupted when he overhears a woman lamenting that she has been abandoned by her lover who went to America. As he listens, the woman reveals that she concealed a pregnancy and gave birth in the open air, losing her baby to exposure. Before the speaker can intervene, she bids farewell and dives into the river, drowning herself before he can help her. On returning home to the safety of his cottage, the speaker is 'strangely agitated' and somehow changed by the experience, but the poet denies the somewhat voyeuristic male speaker any significant final comment, allowing the woman's words to resound in the mind of the reader. Thomson's ventriloquising of the female voice thus answers to a broader dialogue of romantic isolation-in-nature and self-reflection. The poem is immediately reminiscent of Wordsworth's powerful poem 'The Thorn' (1798) in which he attempted to draw attention to the plight of the impoverished woman when seduced.<sup>77</sup> This was, moreover, a situation that was mirrored in the contemporary war with Napoleonic France which coincided with the writing and publication of 'A Nocturnal' in 1799. 'A Nocturnal' is thus an example of a shift in Thomson's style from direct social commentary to individual plight and self-reflection.

By contrast, Thomson's poem 'The Beggar Wife' (1803)<sup>78</sup>—an emotional response to the figure of an elderly, decrepit begging woman—demonstrates a shift in the poet's treatment of female suffering as a social wrong, to a reflection of his own troubled relationship with the eternal. In conveying society's failing of the vagrant woman, Thomson offsets the poem's necessary affective sentimentality by using the concise structure and lilting rhythm of the Habbie Simson stanza:

SEE how yon weak, old woman drags  
Along the way, her weary legs,

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<sup>77</sup> Wordsworth & Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* ed. Celia de Piro, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 75-83.

<sup>78</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, pp. 66-68.

All bleeding, stung by cruel clegs:  
                     Old starving poor,  
 Man's help-meet, yes, Eve's daughter begs  
                     From door to door.                      (ll. 1-6)

Thomson is not content for his beggar woman to remain an isolated, literary type, and stresses the humanity of the figure, 'Eve's daughter' born to be both mate and helper to man. Like Wordsworth's Old Man Travelling who outlives his son, Thomson's beggar woman appears to have outlived her family. She is alone and deprived of what she was created to be. During the time when this poem was written, Thomson was beginning to take an interest in education as a means of social reform, and was well aware of the power that sensibility in poetry could exert on the moral judgement of the reader.

Although the poet's anger is directed toward the rich 'heart of brass' (l. 24) who can look at such a person without desiring to help her, his anger is at first moderated by a philosophy which, perhaps in wishful thinking, hopes that the beggar can indulge in divine comfort, 'Her soul, perhaps, on manna feeds

/ The still small voice May whisper peace —' (ll. 17-18). The poet seizes the momentary vision and the effect it produces in himself, as he considers the woman not just as an unfortunate figure but as a whole person, 'Poor outcast what about your name, / It matters not from whence you came.' (19-20).

Towards the end of the poem, the poet seems less and less convinced of the consolation he previously espoused in lines 13-18, turning to reflect upon the inevitability that he himself will be "Forgot and gone." (ll. 31-36). In 'The Beggar Wife', the poet fails to maintain his focus on the suffering of the poem's apparent subject, and opines, somewhat uncomfortably, that communion with nature ends in the grave, where the human being becomes one with the earth.

Unanswered questions and the horror of poverty were to be answered in the pages of St Ambrose, a saint and early church father renowned for his efforts on behalf of the poor. 'To Ambrose, in Heaven' (1806) offers a deeper insight into a more ecumenical Thomson who praises the 'soul-reforming page /

so pious warm, surpass'd by few' (ll. 2-3). Thomson's new approach is expressed in images of light and heat, betraying a new evangelical, perhaps almost charismatic, enthusiasm for revealed religion:

EMMAUNEL's ever blessed name  
Was on thy holy heart engraved;  
And though the world neglects thy fame,  
It echoes thro' the vales of Heaven. (ll. 5-8)

As the poet never married, Thomson's affinity with Ambrose may have some connection with Ambrose's preaching on the excellence of virginity,<sup>79</sup> and Thomson may have sought reassurance in such teachings, but this is merely speculative. Thomson's exaltation of the 'thrice happy Saint' (l. 9) reflects a fellow-feeling with St Ambrose who was not only learned but active on behalf of the poor, often admonishing public figures of the time in public worship, as Thomson did through satire. Looking forward to literary communion with such a saint in heaven plays into his view of fraternity as divine expression:

I've often thought, but the perhaps, 'twas wrong,  
That heaven's enjoyments were akin to this;  
That soul-exalting joys of sacred song,  
Were balmy entepasts of future bliss.<sup>80</sup>

In the 'Epistle to Aeneas Lamont' (1801), Thomson envisages a future for himself and Lamont in heaven among 'countless bards, of every age' (l. 51) gathered around King David, 'Still humming, and rhyming, / In unison together; / Inspir'd all – just fir'd all, / In presence of their Father.' (ll. 53-56). Thomson's belief that poetry is a divine pursuit with its ideal model in the Biblical David, is conveyed through the image of the communion of saints.

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<sup>79</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01383c.htm>, [accessed 19<sup>th</sup> March 2009].

<sup>80</sup> 'Ne Plus Ultra' (1799), ll. 17-20, *New Poems*, p. 289.

In comparison to *Poems* (1793) and *New Poems* (1799), Thomson's many voices and personae resolved into a single, individualistic voice in *Simple Poems* (1806). The edition contains much more personalized and inward-looking poems such as 'To His Guardian Angel' (1806) and 'Hope' (c. 1804) which are indicative of a poet attempting to release his grasp on the world and look towards eternity. Thomson was at times more comfortable distancing himself from his poetic persona by use of the third person pronoun as we see in 'To His Guardian Angel' (1806).<sup>81</sup> In addition to this uncharacteristic reverence of Saint Ambrose, Thomson also appeared to take comfort in the angelic, projecting onto his angel Biblical references to God's protection, such as 'Beneath the shadow of thy wings' (l. 7), based on Psalm 17:8; and he envisions his angel in an interceding role, crying 'a tear of pity ... and sigh'd to set him free' (ll. 19-20).

Evidently, the more austere doctrines of Calvinism were insufficient in themselves for Thomson in his twilight years, as he required the comfort of alternative beliefs based on individual conscience. Some of these beliefs might be equated with 'New Light' doctrine and some, such as veneration of the saints, arguably had more currency in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal faith traditions than in Presbyterianism. The reader also sees the poet granting a greater legitimacy to individual action as the angel is ultimately powerless to stop him from 'Falling a dupe to Belial's art, / In some deluding sty' (l. 23-4), and yet the angel is a comforter against the harshness of poverty and oppression:

Thro' adversity's cold gloom compell'd  
His dreary road to grope;  
Thy solace hath his murmurs quell'd,  
And renovated hope. (ll. 13-16)

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<sup>81</sup> *Simple Poems*, pp. 45-46.

The overwhelming desire to finally free the soul from body even pierces Thomson's nature poetry as he begins to see God reflected in all aspects of Creation, such as the Lark in flight which mirrors the spirits of the righteous to be close to God:

In this resembling well the Christian race,  
That from this briery wilderness up spring,  
And, joyful, pressing on from grace to grace,  
The good folk soar, and like thee soar and sing.<sup>82</sup> (ll. 9-12)

Enthralled in Epistemological sense, he cites the natural praise that beasts pay to the creator and argues that it is unnatural for human beings, set in a privileged position above animals, to deny such praise to God:

Endued with rational immortal view,  
The sole tax-gatherer of Nature's praise,  
Shall man, erect, high-priveleg'd refuse  
The commonest tribute creeping instinct pays!<sup>83</sup>

Thomson co-opts contemporary scientific field interest in the minutiae of the natural world into his theological argument. Though it is natural for human beings to desire to praise the Creator, he argues, there still remains the ability to withhold this praise. Thomson defines this gift of spiritual wisdom as 'rational', suggesting that denial of the Creator is not only foolish but contrary to reason, in opposition to the empirical demands of David Hume's philosophy. For Thomson belief develops from the principled doctrinal stance of his Seceder upbringing to the spiritual contemplation of the lilies of the field, like Wordsworth's Wanderer. Thomson's Presbyterianism seems to have developed from the Calvinist adherence to the letter of the law to a romantic Covenanting spirituality that translated the spirit of the law into a sublime exaltation of

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<sup>82</sup> 'Sonnet to the Lark' (1804), ll. 9-14, *Simple Poems*, p. 77.

<sup>83</sup> 'Sonnet to Spring' (1803), ll. 9-12, *Simple Poems*, p. 78.

feeling, which carries the soul forward towards the eternal, while the body remained on *terra firma*.

Although James Orr praised the aforementioned sonnets and recognised a clear Romantic impulse within them, it was Thomson's 'Address to the Rising Sun' (1806)<sup>84</sup> which, aside from a minor theological quibble, he described as 'the best in the miscellany'.<sup>85</sup> Through the mystical momentary experience of the rising and setting sun, the poet experiences a glimpse of eternity through the everyday, and the experience produces a very different kind of poetry from the empirical observation of nature found in *Poems* (1793). The sight of the sunrise presents the poet with a momentary grasp of spiritual possession, causing his mind to reflect upon his spiritual state. Suddenly, Thomson's sense of place transcends the national and the physical, as he becomes confident in his Divinely-ordained purpose. The cottage is unrecognizably transformed from a 'place of *dreams*' (l. 4) to a momentary site of revelation which strengthens him to continue into the new day:

ONCE more thou glorious king of rising day!  
 My gladden'd eyes behold thy golden beams  
 Laughing the raven gloom of night away,  
 And smiling, joyful, on my *place of dreams*. (ll. 1-4)

Before the poem can descend into allegory, playing on the obvious pun on 'sun', the speaker suddenly explodes into Romantic enthusiasm, enacting through his awe the apocalyptic return of Christ:

So may the sun of Righteousness arise,  
 With holy healing in his heavenly rays,  
 And shine on many a soul that abject lies  
 In this obscure, this tenebrific maze. (ll. 9-12)

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<sup>84</sup> *Simple Poems*, pp. 90-92.

<sup>85</sup> Orr to Samuel Thomson, 24 May 1807, transcribed by Brian M. Walker from the original (now lost). Transcript in the John Hewitt Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Ulster Library, hereafter cited within 'John Hewitt Collection'.

The simple progress of the sun across the earth is transformed in the speaker's vision into a God-like sun king smiling upon the nations and prefiguring the redemption of earth, a clear foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven:

Thy smile, bright monarch, makes the nations gay;  
 Thy blazing aspect, every way sublime,  
 Riding in triumph o'er the world away,  
 Marking the progress of revolving time. (ll. 13-16)

The Romantic and visionary image of 'the progress of revolving time' echoes Burns's phrase 'while circling Time moves round in an eternal sphere' from 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'.<sup>86</sup> Thomson captures the sublime representation of infinity in the sun's continuous rising and falling, prefiguring the liturgical descent into Hell and the rising of crucified Christ. Thomson describes the sun as 'Queen of Heaven' (l. 19), drawing on the traditional Roman Catholic attribution of this title to the Virgin Mary, and describes her in almost Petrarchan, erotic terms of 'crimson' heat which makes 'ten thousand watery eyes' of the flowers (l. 18):

Yes, from my pillow with delight I can  
 Read, in her face, the glory thou hast given;  
 As bright she rises o'er the works of man,  
 The lamp of wisdom in the way of Heaven. (ll. 21-24)

The poet then corrects himself, describing how, in an instant, she changes in his eyes to a 'dark watery body, in herself' merely reflecting the light of another, 'prolific warmth can only come from thee', (ll. 27-8). These constantly shifting impressions, wholly dependent upon the poet's subjective interpretation, lead the poet to reflect on man who is a mere reflection of God's light, 'Ye are the Light of the World' (Matt 5:14, KJV). As a Presbyterian, Thomson was evidently not immune to the power of the female religious icon which comes as

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<sup>86</sup> 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', l. 140, *Poems and Songs*, II, p. 150.

no surprise from the examples of his fraternal circle. Gerard Carruthers has argued that by speaking in the persona of Mary, Robert Burns's 'Lament for Mary Queen of Scots' is 'a strikingly ecumenical manoeuvre on the part of one from Burns's religious background.'<sup>87</sup> Carol Baraniuk has argued that James Orr challenges the Calvinist bigotry of his community with his imaginative 'The Vision- an Elegy'<sup>88</sup> in which he provides a sympathetic encounter with the ghost of Mary Queen of Scots, while Luke Mullan was absolutely transfixed by the portrait of the Catholic Queen during a visit to Holyrood in 1794 that he paid to see it twice.<sup>89</sup> All three poets came from the same conservative Presbyterian background and yet maintained reverent attitudes toward their Catholic icons. Mullan's almost spiritual transfixion with the image of Mary, arguably an almost Catholic expression of piety in itself, perhaps suggests that Burns's ambidexterity in religious appreciation was less exceptional among Presbyterians than previously supposed, and may draw on contemporary Marian fixation among Romantic radicals.

The Romantic vision ends with the speaker's emotional epiphany, as he confesses faith in God's providence and purpose:

Thou art *his* servant – and *he* plac'd thee there,  
 To bless this universe with life and light;  
 When *he* thinks fit, *he'll* pluck thee from thy sphere,  
 And all thy glory will extinguish quite. (ll. 33-36)

The climax of the poem enables the speaker to recollect his thoughts after his encounter with the 'shattering blast of the infinite', the sublime.<sup>90</sup> This Romantic burst of spiritual elation and ecstasy in parallel with the sun's red hot

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<sup>87</sup> Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 27.

<sup>88</sup> Orr, *Collected Works*, pp. 107-10.

<sup>89</sup> Mullan to Thomson, 20 May 1796, TCD MS 7257, f. 2.

<sup>90</sup> Shaun Irlam, 'The Sublime' in *A Companion to eighteenth century Poetry* ed. Christine Gerrard, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 515-533, (p. 516).



demise beneath the horizon is the poet's own artistic expression of the Christian sublime.

*Simple Poems* closes on this upward trajectory with Thomson on the brink of a new identity as a liberal Christian, looking towards the eternal as a Romantic experience of the mind. It is here in this vision of religious awe and glory, experienced emotionally through the natural world, that Thomson reaches his final expression of Romanticism. Like Wordsworth, Thomson's poetic fidelity to nature continues to inspire him with joy and, in this case, reveals to him his purpose as a human being.<sup>91</sup> The spiritual theme of his work remains strong throughout the latter two editions but comes to dominate the 1806 edition and, in combination with serious illness, may be a means of explaining away Thomson's retreat into poetic silence after 1806. His political quietism in 1806 does appear to anticipate Seceder evangelicalism of the nineteenth century but the anti-aristocratic sentiments of 'The Gloaming' (1806) stand as a challenge to accusations of conservatism or defeatism. Thomson's radicalism remains strong in his resistance to mainstream episcopacy, luxury, the city and enlightenment empiricism. He combats these forces by conveying his preference for natural theology, Romantic retreat into the inward through nature, the dialogue of sympathy, and a strong attachment to a Dissenting and dissenting history. Thomson never wholeheartedly embraced Union with Britain but became increasingly conscious of the centrality of his Presbyterianism to his poetic identity; both as a means of identification with his native, Irish landscape, and also as a factor that entailed his feeling of displacement in a new United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Although in the context of Britain as a whole Presbyterianism was a minority religious tradition, Thomson stakes a claim for a strong cultural uniqueness which contributes to the Irish national identity.

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<sup>91</sup> 'And this prayer I make, / Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that lov'd her; 'tis her privilege, / Through all the years of this our life, to lead / From joy to joy', (Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey' (1798), ll. 122-126, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 121.

## Chapter 7

### **‘Glad hand in hand, we’ll hie us on, / An’ speel PARNASSUS HILL together’: The Fraternal Knot**

Samuel Thomson’s significance as an early Romantic poet lies not only in his own published poetry but also in his position as a poet who fostered protégés, and nurtured the love of literature in others. Although Thomson is credited with facilitating the poetic tradition that has come to be known as the ‘rhyming weavers’, it is hoped that this chapter’s examination of ‘Crambo Cave’ as an epicentre of transnational, Romantic and fraternal activity might render the rather misleading ‘rhyming weaver’ title redundant. After all, the circle counted among its number men of varied occupations: from the educated labouring-class poets James Orr, John Dickey, and Thomas Beggs, to the middle-class schoolteachers and tutors Alexander Kemp, and Dorothea Lamont. In most of these cases, Thomson sought out these acquaintances by initiating polite correspondence, most often in the verse epistle. The letters, which are fraught with high emotion, create a space for freely expressed sentiments including desire, enthusiasm and even anger, culminating in a deep and complex fraternal narrative that is played out in a turbulent political situation.

The correspondence of Thomson’s coterie is an important and fascinating resource for scholars wishing to study the Romantic period in Ireland. It not only provides the key to the poet’s desire to bring some order out of the fragmented experience of Irish rural life, particularly in the Union period, but, more importantly, his overall influence on the Ulster literary tradition. It is surprising that when F.J. Biggar’s 1902 article examined the Four Towns Bookclub in Craigarogan, there was little sense of Thomson’s personal importance excepting his connection with Burns. Biggar reported a sizable reading society of about forty members who regularly exchanged and discussed books were drawn from the four towns of ‘Molusk [Mallusk], Craigarogan,

Kilgreel, and Ballynabarnis[h], and were inhabited by a distinctive race, most related by affinity or intermarriage.’<sup>1</sup> Members included James Hope, his brother-in-law Luke Mullan, John Williamson, Samuel Thomson and James Orr who were bound by a combination of religious, familial and political connections. This fraternal book club contributed to debate in the Age of Enlightenment, promoting the ideas such of reason, inherent rights, individual judgment and government for the general good. Many of these men were members of Masonic brotherhoods, and there is the high probability that Thomson was also involved.

The creation of just government and the recognition of individual rights were central to several fraternal movements in 1790s Ireland, including the freemasons, the reading societies and the United Irishmen; and it was not uncommon for lodge meetings to form clandestine opportunities for United Irish activity.<sup>2</sup> Aside from several references to ‘fraternal’ among Thomson’s correspondents,<sup>3</sup> no direct evidence has come to light to prove that Samuel Thomson was a member of any masonic order and unlike fellow poet James Orr, he did not include Masonic songs in his published volumes. There is strong circumstantial evidence however to suggest that he had some connection within what Philip Robinson has called ‘hedge’ masonry,<sup>4</sup> in addition to hard evidence that Thomson was engaged with the Volunteers, a movement that developed alongside freemasonry, and counted among its members at least three of Thomson’s close friends. An undated letter proves that Thomson personally

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<sup>1</sup> F. J. Biggar, ‘Thomas Beggs, an Antrim Poet: and the Four Towns Bookclub’, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Robinson, ‘Hanging Ropes and Buried Secrets’, *Ulster Folklife* 32, ed. Alan Gailey, (Cultra, Northern Ireland: Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 1986; hereafter ‘Hanging Ropes and Buried Secrets’), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Both Luke Mullan and James Orr refer to ‘fraternity’ throughout their correspondence and Orr signed a letter of 1803 to Thomson, ‘yours fraternally’, (James Orr to Samuel Thomson, 24 May 1807, transcribed by Brian M. Walker from the original (now lost). Transcript in the John Hewitt Collection.)

<sup>4</sup> Philip Robinson, ‘Hanging Ropes and Buried Secrets’, p. 3.

solicited a ‘system of exercise’ presumably for local use in Roughfort.<sup>5</sup>

Thomson’s circle of correspondents included the aforementioned poet and tutor Alexander Kemp, with whom he shared coded, anti-monarchical messages, suggesting that radical subjects were indeed discussed between them:

I send you a most bitter philippic, two of our deceased *Eccentrics*, against our present *Lacihcranom ynited*—<sup>6</sup> I need scarcely tell you, suggest the expediency of keeping it *private*.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Thomson corresponded with the metropolitan figure Aeneas Lamont, the typesetter for the radical Northern Star newspaper and a Belfast Volunteer who had worked in the newspaper business in Revolutionary America. Notably while in America, Lamont corresponded with fellow masons of high rank such as Dr. Benjamin Franklin, who perhaps epitomises the political impact of freemasonry in Revolutionary America.<sup>8</sup> A further clue emerged following Lamont’s death in 1803, when Mrs Lamont wrote to Thomson, referring to a conversation she had with ‘your brother’ who confirmed that Thomson ‘[kept] a school’.<sup>9</sup> With no existing correspondence, nor any poetic or biographical evidence of a Thomson sibling, it might be surmised that Mrs Lamont referred to a masonic connection. These facts amount to the suggestion that Thomson was at the centre of a sophisticated community of masonic brothers throughout County Antrim and Belfast, which perhaps fostered his labouring-class fraternal identity.

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<sup>5</sup> David Clyde to Samuel Thomson, [undated], TCD MS 7257, f. 83.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Monarchical destiny’.

<sup>7</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 17 Dec 1797, *ibid*, f. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Gray, ‘Burns and his Visitors from Ulster’, p. 326. For reference to the letter see Dorothea Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 1 August 1804, TCD MS 7257, f. 85.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothea Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 1 August 1804, Trinity College Dublin MS 7257, f. 85.

Philip Robinson's extensive investigation of Irish fraternal societies alludes to a group practise at public gatherings, particularly among artisans at village fairs, where a 'quarrelling word' was used to justify singling out an individual for a beating.<sup>10</sup> One of Thomson's earliest poems, 'The Simmer Fair' (1792)<sup>11</sup> which is discussed in Chapter 2, is based on the medieval Scottish *Christis Kirk* tradition made popular by Allan Ramsay and celebrates a local fair and the debauched activities of the attendees. The poem includes two stanzas in which a cobbler comes to blows with a weaver, calling him 'creeshy bluttor'. It is possible that this was an example of a 'quarrelling word' and a sign to the other attendees to set upon the weaver in a scrum where 'monie a ane, for ither's cause, / gets bouk an banes weel paiked.'<sup>12</sup>

A more sinister implication is carried in Thomson's footnote to 'The Country Dance' (1793) which refers to the reception he apparently received from local weavers after they read his account of the Simmer Fair fight between the weaver and cobbler: 'But Simmer fairs an' wabster louns / Maun all be laid aside: Or basted ribs an' broken crowns / Will aiblins us betide' (10-13). This is not simply a comic reference, but an important fraternal tip of the hat, commonly employed by Thomson to figures of personal relevance, in this case to members of his fraternal circle who were weavers by trade. One such friend was Luke Mullan, mentioned by name along with another friend John 'Jack' Williamson who, along with Thomson himself, form a trio of wanton lads:

Come muse, we'll o'er to Habbie's hie.  
The e'ening's calm an' fair  
At hame what need we snoaring lie –  
An sican *pastime* there:  
We'll aiblins meet wi' L--- an' J---

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Robinson, 'Hanging Ropes and Buried Secrets', p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Simmer Fair' (1792), *Poems on Different Subjects, Partly in the Scottish Dialect*, (Belfast: printed for the author, 1792), pp. 26-31.

<sup>12</sup> 'And many a one for another's cause gets body and bones well thrashed.'

That dainty, *social pair*,  
 And get wi' them a dance an' crack,  
 Weel worth our gangin' there.  
 This bonie night. (ll.46-54)

From the rhyme scheme, Jack's name can be decoded against 'crack' (l. 52), but Luke Mullan, the other half of the '*social pair*' (l. 51), can only be decoded by a knowing reader who is familiar with Thomson's fraternal relations. Although the reference to the weavers is inherently comical, the bard indiscriminately highlights the currents of discontent within his rural community and the power of the factions to disrupt what is, essentially, a religious fair. In addition to internal poetic evidence of 'quarreling words', Thomson's published verse epistles demonstrate his desire to showcase the ability of labouring class men to form strong, intellectual and honest friendships that insulated them from the influence of more powerful men.

Secret brotherhoods also offered a measure of secrecy and a unified experience in a world fragmented by distance and political repression. The initial home-grown circle tutored by Thomson fostered this complex network of family and poetic associations, but internal poetic evidence and the pages of the Thomson correspondence demonstrate that this literary circle was wider still. During the 1790s the encouragement of Irish poets had been so bound up in United Irish radical circles with the *Northern Star* press, but Thomson's literary aim for his productions was wider: envisioning a literary revival rather than simply producing political polemic; seeking the poetic acquaintances of those men whom he considered 'convivial'. The patronage of fellow poets not only afforded legitimacy to the work of another, but they assisted actively in the dissemination of each other's work; subscribing to one another's volumes, procuring lists of subscribers, and even collecting payment as the Reverend Henry Montgomery attempted to do for Thomson's *Simple Poems* (1806). Several well-connected contacts could account for a large portion of the readership; although Burns had 612 advance subscriptions to the Kilmarnock

edition, Gerard Carruthers notes that these were ‘concentrated, principally, on fewer than a dozen individuals’, men of influence who disseminated Burns’s works, thereby creating a market.<sup>13</sup> Considering Thomson’s rural location, the sheer number of subscribers solicited for his works testifies to the importance of the complex web of well-connected networks.

At the centre of Thomson’s network was an inner circle of choice friends who were privy to the development of the circle, most notably Luke Mullan, life-long friend, neighbour, weaver, and the brother-in-law of the United Irish leader James ‘Jemmy’ Hope. Mullan’s correspondence with Thomson displays a discriminating eye for poetry and no reservations in terms of criticising the work of those who were hailed as local legends, but he is consistently reverent towards Thomson, seeking his tutelage at all times:

I am perfectly satisfied with Burns’s “Shakespearean sublime” now and wonder at my former stupidity –.<sup>14</sup>

Fraternity was a crucial part of the poets’ intellectual, conversational scene with their preference for intellectual retirement and the implicit criticism of corrupt society found in Scipio’s famous remark, ‘*Nunquam minus solus, quam cum solus*’, a phrase quoted by Thomson in ‘To the Cuckoo’ (1799). The radical poem’s subsequent reference to ‘TRUE UNITED IRISHMEN’ seems somewhat out of place after the author boasts of his experience of literary fraternity through reading, perhaps drawing an explicit contrast between the ‘quarrelling crowd’ that is ‘no more’ and men of true patriotic persuasion whose fraternity is based in natural sympathy and a literary mind. Literary fraternity was a concept that cut across geographical boundaries through letters and the pages of books, even spanning the great divide of life and death:

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<sup>13</sup> Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Luke Mullan to Samuel Thomson, 2 April 1797, TCD MS 7257, fol. 11.

I have, [...] my books and bed;  
 [...] To commune with the dead;  
 With Shakespeare, Milton, Pope by turns;  
 Old Ossian, Spenser, Young;  
 With Ramsay, Fergusson, and *Burns*,  
 As good as ever sung.<sup>15</sup>

Fashioning himself as a Romantic recluse, forsaking the ‘vulgar throng’ for the company of his local landscape of Lyle Hill,<sup>16</sup> the poet developed a unique relationship with the natural world around him, enjoying solitary rambles during the summer months. As the winter closed in, he gladly welcomed the company of select, intelligent friends by the fire-side, a constantly recurring poetic image in the work of Thomson and Orr who, in ‘Epistle to S. Thomson of Carngranny, a Brother Bard’ (1803) employs it as an image of safety after the perils of rebellion and exile.<sup>17</sup>

Although the circle was composed largely of labouring-class members, its members are elevated above the ‘hoarse goat-herd’s grating jargon rude’ by their literary taste.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to his solitary persona, the Thomson of the correspondence emerges enthusiastic, even desperate, for intelligent company and face-to-face friendship with a choice few. When a letter would go astray or the correspondent become tardy, the intense poet appears to have had no reservation in expressing his dissatisfaction, often producing a backtracking response from his apologetic correspondent, in the case of the Reverend Henry Montgomery, a reflective mini-sermon on wrongdoing:

I confess that I have acted wrong [...] in being so negligent of an act of friendship in which I voluntarily engaged. All this I grant. I trust that I

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Ode to Poverty’ (1799), lines 30-38, *New Poems*, p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Lyle’s Hill, a Rhapsody Inscribed to Damon’ (1799), line 149, *New Poems*, p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Epistle to S. Thomson of Carngranny, A Brother Poet’, in Orr, *Collected Works*, pp. 122-125.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Allan, Damon, Sylvander and Edwin, a Pastoral Inscribed to my Rhyme-Composing Brother, Mr Alexander Kemp’ (1799), line 16, *New Poems*, p. 33.



shall always feel ashamed of committing, but never of confessing an injury. Every man is liable to err, thro' the feelings and failings of humanity [...]<sup>19</sup>

Others, like Aeneas Lamont, returned fire with equal satirical power, but soon after warmed his letter with soothing congeniality, coaxing Thomson to sojourn with him in Belfast, 'Come away then, as soon as you like - you will find an old friend with his former face, and a new female one that will be glad to see you again'.<sup>20</sup> Lamont's candour was perhaps encouraged by the fact that he was one of the inner circle who knew Thomson face to face.

In creating a poetic fraternity, Thomson seems to have drawn on the epistles of Ramsay and Fergusson, as well as Robert Burns's adoption of vernacular Scots epistle to convey a literary manifesto, political opinions, and private feelings. The publication of Burns's work in Belfast in 1787 certainly appears to have inspired a new appetite for the vernacular Scots epistolary tradition in the radical Belfast press. In his 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns' (1791) Thomson responded to Burns' poetic manifesto in the 'Epistle to J. Lapraik' (1785) which championed bardic fraternity with origins in natural talent over and above classical learning.<sup>21</sup> Verse epistles to Burns published in the Belfast newspapers, of which Thomson's was one of the first, were guaranteed to solicit several responses from amateur poets. At this stage, Thomson, along with the Coleraine poet Alexander Kemp, exploited mutual acquaintances with Burns and set about promoting Burns's work in the local newspapers. Burns's reception in the Irish press was overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, positive and was assisted by radical correspondents like Thomson and Kemp introducing his work into columns such as the *Northern*

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Montgomery to Samuel Thomson, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1808, transcribed by Brian M. Walker from the original (now lost). Transcript in the John Hewitt Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Ulster Library.

<sup>20</sup> Aeneas Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 5 March 1797, TCD MS 7257, f. 76.

<sup>21</sup> 'Epistle to J. Lapraik, An Old Scotch Bard' (1785), *Poems and Songs*, I, pp. 85-89.

*Star*'s 'Muse's Corner'. These fraternal bards had won the acquaintance and esteem of a successful, labouring-class contemporary, and they recognised that in continuing to promote Burns's profile in Ireland, it might help to boost their own.

In addition to this, both Kemp and Thomson were intent on protecting Burns's reputation and establishing quality control in the pages of the newspapers. Kemp, writing under his pseudonym 'Albert of Coleraine', was one of several poets who ably cut down any perceived doggerel attempts to wage war with Burns in verse. On one occasion, the unfortunate contender Jamie Fleck penned an 'Epistle to Robert Burns' (1792)<sup>22</sup> that showed no want of wit, but he criticised Burns heavily for what he perceived to be disrespect toward the church:

A word I'll whisper in your ear,  
Upon the clergy ye're severe;  
Like naughty bairns, ye whip them fair  
    We taws and birch,  
Especial in your *Holy Fair*,  
    Ye shame the church. (ll. 37-42)

Fleck's chide followed directly on the heels of his accusation that Burns was in fact a college graduate who 'cou'd na just 'mang countra fools, [...] Get sic knowledge' (ll. 31-33), a statement that must have caused considerable offence among Thomson's largely self-educated rural readership. Luke Mullan responded in the *Northern Star* with a gentle rebuke in Standard Habbie, pointing out that Burns was an able satirist of hypocrisy, not an opponent of the church, and invoked the bonds of Irish fraternity in a polite attempt to win Fleck over :

Dear Jamie, I, your injur'd brither,

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<sup>22</sup> *Belfast News Letter*, 27-30 Mar, 1792

Wha claims auld Erin for my mither,  
 On Pegas' speed, comes drivin' hither,  
     A word to *counsel*—  
 But dinna ye mistak' it neithir,  
     'Tis freenship's ane sel!<sup>23</sup>

In stark contrast with Mullan's polite and able rejoinder, Fleck received an entirely undiplomatic dismissal from Alexander Kemp, who described his attempt as 'Thyrsius (sic) railing against Ajax – the impertinence of wantonness and imbecility!'<sup>24</sup> Thus the members of the Burnsian fraternal epistolary community employed the verse epistle to ensure self-selection of quality poetry, publicly and often savagely weeding out imitative doggerel by means of 'flyting'. In penning verse epistles that quickly shot down attempts at parodying Burns's work, Kemp, Mullan, and Thomson established themselves as the top poets of the Ulster public print hierarchy. By promoting Burns to the Belfast public, the newspaper had created a self-selecting readership and poetic base that defended the quality of the verse.

The Belfast newspapers not only published epistles to Robert Burns from Irish poets in the 1790s, and the efforts of Robert Anderson, the Cumberland bard, introduced him to Thomson's circle.<sup>25</sup> Fiona Stafford has drawn attention to Anderson's 'Epistle to Burns' (1796), written not long before Burns's death and, as in the case of Thomson, culminated in a visit to Dumfries but, in Anderson's case, it was a visit to Burns's tomb rather than as a result of an invitation.<sup>26</sup> James Currie's holograph MS published in the Burns

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<sup>23</sup> 'Epistle to Jamie Fleck, Occasioned by seeing his to ROBT. BURNS, in the Belfast News-Letter, of March 20<sup>th</sup>', lines 1-6, *Northern Star*, 4 Apr. 1792.

<sup>24</sup> *Belfast News Letter*, 15-18 May 1792

<sup>25</sup> A single letter from Robert Anderson to Thomson survives among the Trinity College correspondence, dated 22 Feb. 1812, (TCD MS 7253/8, f. 9).

<sup>26</sup> Fiona Stafford, 'Scottish poetry and regional literary expression' in Richetti (ed.) the *Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1660-1780*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; henceforward 'Scottish poetry'), p. 359.

Chronicle in 1933 points to subsequent verse epistles to Burns from Thomson's friend Luke Mullan in 1794,<sup>27</sup> and in the same year the Airdrie poet William Yates published his 'Epistle to Mr Robert Burns, The Ayrshire Poet' which, as Ian Reid has pointed out, also pits Burns against the canonical writers of the eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

Pope, Dryden, Thomson, Swift and Gray,  
 Steele, Addison, and mony mae  
 That now lie mould'ring in the clay,  
 Sang a weel-fard,  
 Yet ne'er cou'd better taste display  
 Than Colia's bard.<sup>29</sup>

Thomson, Yates and Anderson all adopt the traditional drinking pledge: Thomson hoped that 'in some thrang perchance I'll see you, / An haply treat ye to a glass, / An' likely grow familiar wi' ye'; Yates declares that 'I'd be fu' happy, / to drink wi' you a glass or twa / O' Mitchell's nappy'; while Anderson declares his intention to visit Dumfries when 'Aiblins some bonie afternoon / We twa may meet; / If sae, we'se spen' a white half-crown – / Wow, 'twill be sweet!'<sup>30</sup> The striking similarities of Yates's and Thomson's epistles, the former of which was published in 1793, a year after Thomson's, demonstrate that all three poets were following a recognised verse epistle convention; complimenting Burns by a favourable comparison to his eighteenth-century poetic contemporaries, while simultaneously highlighting their own knowledge of his contemporaries' work.

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<sup>27</sup> Burns Chronicle, 'Burns Literary Correspondents 1786-1796', *Burns Chronicle and Club Directory*, Second Series, Vol. VIII, (Kilmarnock, Scotland: Burns Federation, 1933), p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> Ian Reid, 'In Search of William Yates of Airdrie, Contemporary of Burns', *Scottish Studies Review* 9 (2009) no. 1, pp. 27-48.

<sup>29</sup> *Belfast News Letter* 5-8 Sep. 1794.

<sup>30</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, p. 87; *Belfast News Letter* 24 Sep. 1794; Stafford, 'Scottish poetry', p. 360.

However the Ulster poets were not always enthusiastic in their adoption of the drinking pledge: James Orr alluded ironically to the destructive effects of ‘Whiskey’s magic’ in ‘Address to Beer’ (1809), a poem which, in spite of its obvious originality and dialogue with a longer tradition of national food sociology, has often been used as evidence of the influence of Burns.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, though he celebrates the convivial qualities of snuff as his particular social drug, Thomson’s ‘Willy’s Farewell to Whiskey’ (1802) is written from the perspective of man who does not condemn drinking as his unforgiving, moralistic neighbours do, but simply points out in braid Scots that he chooses to relinquish alcohol for personal wellbeing since ‘drinking puts me ravin’ mad’ (l. 44). Having said this he is keen to assert, ‘Don’t let my old friends be thinking, / That I am without my joys’ (ll. 51-52). The poem is cleverly structured with a standard English opening and closing, designed to reflect the sober, rational side of Willy’s explanation, while the middle of the poem allows Willy to recollect psychologically on his love whisky and its effects on his ‘moon struck brain’ (l. 6). His affection for his drinking days is conveyed in Scots, but the core of the poem—the bitter reflection on the ‘Base, calumniating storks’ who condemn social men who drink together—is conveyed in clear, standard English that conveys a sense of seriousness to the reader:

Let Pharisees deride your reeling,  
 Poor, conceited, empty smush  
 Yours is every generous feeling,  
 Truth and every lib’ral wish. (ll. 37-40)

The implication that gatherings in taverns produces something more sinister than the ‘random splore and social noise’ that Willy celebrates, is perhaps a symptom of post-1798 Rebellion mistrust of tavern culture, as such gatherings

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Address to Beer’ (1809), line 12, printed in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* on 1 April 1809.

were key to the organization and operations of the United Irish movement. Fraternity in the nineteenth century remained suspect to many in the tight-knit community, indicative of Romantic rebellion and radical deviancy.

Likewise, another poem which demonstrates Thomson's brilliant mastery of voice, 'Listen Lizie, Liliting to Tobacco' (1799), adopts the persona of a weaver who claims to reject the Georgic verses of national 'fayre' for the luxury of '*potent weed*' Tobacco, and with it disclaims all attraction to riot and rebellion:

Let ither poets praise the Diel,  
Rant, rhyme, an' tippie till they reel,  
Or roose potatoes or ait-meal  
In sonnet slee;  
Here, hale an' hearty, at my wheel,  
I'll croon to thee. (ll. 7-12)

The effect of the drug is to promote peace among men of differing political opinions, having 'a wonderful effect / Upon the human intellect [to] mair than hafflins correct / Our strife and din' (ll. 42-45). As well as promoting conviviality, Snuff is also a test of male pride as the less-seasoned 'geeglin fool, newfangled drab' (l. 60) is prone to 'Puff out great mouthfu's – syne grown pale, / As onie hawkey; / Sweat, shake, an' bokin', lose his meal, / Then damn tobacco' (ll. 55-58). Those who persevere, it is implied, gain the respect of the fraternity and are able to sit 'Aroun' the ingle [...] an' joke' (l. 78), provided they keep off the subject of politics which fix 'the settling clouds o' anger [...] / on every brow' (ll. 85-86). The speaker appears resigned to the fact that the fraternity is powerless to change the state of the nation sighing, 'We curse the wars – wish broken necks, / What can we do?' (ll. 87-88). The speaker departs into a passionate tirade against an unnamed figure whose name is blanked out, the weaver then consoles himself that 'Rebellion's got a pretty thrashin - / Sedition's choakin' / When peace returns, we'll thrive in fashion / So let's be smoakin.' (ll. 91-94).

Having just commented on the expense incurred by his smoking habit, the reader is left with a sense of dissatisfaction with the speaker's complacency. The poem was written in 1798-99 when peace was merely an objective for the British Government, at the height of Napoleon's rise to power, and only a year after the turmoil of the 1798 rising when renewed fears of a French invasion were high.<sup>32</sup> The speaker's desperate attempt to convince himself that there is no need to fear further conflict—'But why this wicked fool digression! / Why put mysel in such a passion?'—perhaps causes the reader to question if snuff is merely an anaesthetic which dulls the senses so that the individual can retreat from the inevitable political conflicts that await the nation. Fraternity, therefore, could represent more than a hotbed of radical politics, and could also provide a refuge from the political.

The epistolary capacity to unify the fragmented social experience of rural eighteenth-century life is highlighted acutely in the Thomson correspondence, particularly where friends were kept apart by economic and political events. Thomson's correspondence with Luke Mullan during his self-exile from Ireland demonstrates Thomson's awareness of the epistolary form's unique ability not only to bridge the gap between persons, but to resurrect intimacy, even in a time of political unrest. Thomson and Mullan were aware that the deep secrets of the human heart were conveyable by letter and at great distance, as William Dowling explains:

The importance of the epistle in the eighteenth-century, however, has less to do with its mere ability to remedy the inconveniences of distance, as Steele puts it, than with its power as written discourse to resurrect an intimacy otherwise lost, to restore to momentary wholeness a world of sundered personal relations.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ian McBride, 'Ulster Presbyterians and the Act of Union', p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> Dowling, *Epistolary Moment*, p. 35.

A melancholic, idealistic young man, Mullan suffered many misfortunes in life including difficulty of employment, frustrated ambition and, Thomson suggests humorously, disappointed love.<sup>34</sup> Mullan enquired after Thomson's literary pursuits as well as keeping him abreast of literary gems, 'Tell me if you please the exact profit arising from your book – I have seen the nicest preface to a book entitled Ossian that ever I read – I will procure it if possible.'<sup>35</sup>

From the beginning of Thomson's literary career Mullan visited him often, as Thomson describes him travelling to Crambo Cave on horseback:

Come haste my brither! In a clap  
Unhouse your dapple-winged *crap*,  
An' mount wi' right good will:  
Withouten either whip or spur,  
He'll tak the road with airy birr  
An light on *Parnas' Hill*. ('Epistle to Luke Mullan, ll. 85-90)

Also written in the Cherrie and the Slae stanza, the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan' (1791)<sup>36</sup> is a poetic call to arms. This is a coded reference to the traditional Pegasus motif found in the verse epistle; Burns declared to Davie that his 'spaviet Pegasus will limp, / till ance he's fairly het'.<sup>37</sup> Thomson references Parnassus both in his epistle to Mr R— and to Luke Mullan, revealing his vision for his cottage 'Crambo Cave' as a personal Parnassus Hill onto which he extended invitations to other poets. The tone of the invitation to Mullan is excited and full of anticipation, conveying Thomson's sense of promise in his proposed poetic partnership. Mullan and Thomson advertised their proposed

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<sup>34</sup> 'Ah Myra! Full hard was thy heart, / Young Corydon's suit to deny, / And suffer him thus to depart, / Perhaps he may languish and die!', *Poems*, p.103.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Epistle to Luke Mullan, a Brother Bard' (1791), ll. 85-90, in Thomson, *Poems*, pp. 93-97.

<sup>37</sup> 'Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet', ll.147-8, *Poems and Songs*, I, pp. 65-69, (p. 69).



joint edition of poetry in the *Northern Star* in 1791.<sup>38</sup> This fraternal co-reliance is expressed simply and sincerely, but it has the power of setting a troubled mind at ease, and even insulating the bard from an uncertain future:

With L[uk]e whiles, a book whiles,  
To pass a happy *hour*;  
I'm careless an' fearless  
How faithless Fortune lour.<sup>39</sup> (ll. 67-70)

The sentiment expressed is one of fraternal solidarity which insulates the pair from the assaults of the wider world, even the evil tongues of men. This same sentiment is echoed in William Wordsworth's address to his 'dear, dear, sister' Dorothy in 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey',<sup>40</sup> where Nature can keep their minds on higher things. It may appear a simple sentiment, but the fact that Thomson chooses the sophisticated *Cherrie and the Slae* stanza of Alexander Montgomerie, often interpreted as an allegory of Montgomerie's personal struggle of religious conversion from Protestantism to Catholicism, suggests that Thomson is imparting in code something much more significant. J.R.R. Adams opined that Ulster Presbyterians must have debated the significance of the symbolic opposition of the sweet 'cherrie' and bitter 'slae', often interpreted as Catholicism and Protestantism, respectively.<sup>41</sup> In the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan' the 'slae' is represented by the poverty that results from the poet's vocation, while the 'cherry' represents the romantic consolation of natural feeling, drawn from an intimate knowledge, and true ownership, of the landscape.

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<sup>38</sup> *Northern Star* June 26-29, 1793.

<sup>39</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Wordsworth & Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* ed. Celia de Piro, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 121.

<sup>41</sup> Adams, *The Printed Word and the Common Man*, 72.

Thomson laments the fact that ‘*Boreas* before us / Is stripping all the trees’ (ll.13-4), but he assures Mullan that ‘in Burns’s way, I thus sooth up a roundelay, / My drooping spirits for to chear.’ (ll. 4-6). The invocation of Burns here is no throwaway reference; with his ‘Epistle to David Sillar, a Brother Poet’ (1785), Burns used the Cherrie and the Slae stanza to enter the contemporary debate surrounding the nature of friendship. Gilbert Burns suggested that his brother’s production of ‘The Epistle to Davie’ first gave Burns the idea of becoming an author,<sup>42</sup> and Thomson paints his relationship with Mullan in a similar fashion:

Come tune your pipe my L[uke], an’ gi’ us a spring,  
 For nane o’ a the herds like you can play;  
 Your flowing numbers meikle pleasure bring  
 An’ keep my cankering, careful thoughts at bay;  
 Let criticks censure, taunt an’ jeer away –

(‘To the Same’, ll. 73-77)

In an attempt to raise his spirits, Thomson refers to Burns’s poetry, just as Burns invoked Ramsay’s verse as a means of consolation, “Mair spier na, nor fear na.”<sup>43</sup> Both poets reflect on humanity’s sufferings with Burns dwelling on ‘How best o’ chieles are whiles in want.’ What makes the ‘best o’ chieles’ is not wealth or learning, but an independent mind. Likewise, Thomson and Mullan’s relationship epitomises the theme of virtuous friendship, a theme which appears accessible only to the subject of the epistle but, in fact, it is there for the contemporary reader to interpret also, reinforcing the idea of a wider reading community forged by a published epistle between two poets.

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<sup>42</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns, with an Appreciation by Lord Rosebury and a Glossary*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons), p.251.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Epistle to Davie, a Brother Poet’, line 25, *Poems and Songs*, p. 66. The original quotation comes from Ramsay’s ‘The Vision’.

He turns his mind to the transience of life: ‘When ‘tis the fate of all on earth, / When ‘tis for this we have our birth’ (ll. 18-9) as even the young and strong must face the grave and all learning is rendered ‘but a poor resource.’ Through rhetorical techniques such as *exclamatio* and potent imagery, the poet challenges both the recipient and, through the published epistle, the imagined community to name where he may find ‘ten social, honest men’. He conjures up the striking image of poverty riding on his back, building the galloping rhythm through alliteration—‘tho poorith on my riggin’ ride’—an image which gives way to an assonant scene of pastoral tranquillity, and Byronic free-flowing inspiration:

My life as like the chrystal rill,  
That wimpling flows [...]  
That careless frae its rocky source,  
Pursues its pebbly, winding course,  
Still murmuring to the sea. (ll. 57-62)

In humanist fashion, the bard struggles with himself, attempting to liberate his mind from the grasp of fortune and worldly struggle.

Thomson makes particularly skilful use of the Cherrie and Slae’s concluding halved line to envision Mullan and himself buried together after death:

Whilst you and I neglected sleep  
Aneath some mossy stone [...]  
Reposing, there dosing  
We’ll wear the years awa’  
Baith roun’ly an’ soun’ly,  
Until the Judgement Day’ (ll. 47-53)

Thomson suggests that his substitution of deep bardic fraternity with Mullan for sexual love is a stronger bond of the soul, transcending even death, and somehow more virtuous in being free from the complications of sexual love. It is a sentiment he echoes in ‘June’ (1799), when describing his friendship with

John Williamson, the recipient of the ‘Acrostic to Damon’, and both poems invoke the Biblical friendship of David and Jonathan, ‘the band mysterious, / Such as [...] / Held favour’d David and son of Saul, / In holy union bound our hearts in one.’<sup>44</sup> Both Thomson and Mullan attempted to resign themselves to the ‘*poortith* [of] the rustic bard’, consoling themselves in the words of Hugh Blair that ‘My mind to me’s a kingdom wide / Ne mair I wish or want.’ (ll. 45-46). Blair’s connection of rhetoric with fine feeling necessitated that ‘taste’ should be the inevitable product of a marriage between passionate natural impulse and the imaginative crafting of language. In their fraternal partnership, Thomson and Mullan sought to cultivate the combined inartificial effect of a feeling heart and reading mind:

Wi’ glowan heart I’m right content  
To see your name wi’ mine in *prent*,  
In humble *rural rhyme*:  
The swains unborn of other days,  
Will jocund chaunt our simple lays,  
Adown the vale o’ time: (ll. 41-46)

The partnership of Mullan and Thomson promised the meeting of Enlightenment and Romantic mindset, but sadly this potential forerunner of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) was not to be, since Mullan departed for Scotland in September 1793, putting an end to all hopes of a joint publication with Thomson. A sincere and earnest character, overshadowed in poetry by his friend Thomson and in military fame by his brother-in-law James Hope, Mullan sought his fame and fortune elsewhere.

Although the Thomson-Mullan correspondence contains fascinating political references, the main thrust of the narrative shows Thomson keeping Mullan abreast of literary developments in Ulster, particularly the circle of poets with whom he corresponded. 1797 was a year of copious poetic exchange

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<sup>44</sup> ‘June’ (1799), ll. 25-28, from ‘The Year in 12 Fits, Inscribed to Damon’ in Thomson, *New Poems*, p. 221.

for Thomson, who began trading verse and poetic biographies with the poets Alexander Kemp and James Glass, who paid tribute to Thomson in verse published in the Belfast newspapers. Two barely legible letters from the radical poet James Glass, written from Ballynahinch Spa, indicate that he suffered from a nervous illness that affected his handwriting. Glass had been a radical poet having published 'Libertas' (1789) on the occasion of the commemoration of the Siege of Derry,<sup>45</sup> and continued his bardic themes in the pages of the *Northern Star* with 'The Irish Bard' and 'Address to the River Leven'.<sup>46</sup> This pastoral element evidently pleased Thomson who published 'Stanzas addressed to the Rev. James Glass, A.M' (1797)<sup>47</sup> in the newspaper on 3-7 May 1797, describing his address as 'A simple lilt, no vera lang, / In artless, Scottish style' (ll. 2-3).

Although Thomson's epistle to Glass masquerades as a straightforward address to a brother poet, it plays with the reader's expectations, implicitly addressing the *Northern Star* readership who read over the shoulder of the internal recipient, Glass. The poet's counsel that Glass should 'quat politics an' news [and] to other themes invoke your muse' (ll. 57-58) appears also to shun the political predilections of the *Northern Star*'s radical readership. Yet the earlier lines of the poem are anything but conservative. Thomson exploits the 'Cherrie and the Slae' stanza to compare the life of the rural schoolmaster to that of the '*little great*' which refers either to the aristocracy itself or, alternatively, the bourgeoisie who have grown powerful through trade but lack the measure and experience of the aristocracy. The rural bard, ranked socially beneath both of these groups, sets himself at the top of the hill, looking down on them, and professing his own sense of moral superiority. The implication is that 'modest merit', perhaps implying urban meritocracy, has been of little

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<sup>45</sup> James Glass, *Libertas: a Poem*, (Belfast: J. and W. Magee, 1789).

<sup>46</sup> *Northern Star*, 16<sup>th</sup> May; 16-20 June, 1792.

<sup>47</sup> The poem is re-published as 'Epistle to the Rev. James Glass MA' (1797), *New Poems*, pp. 150-154.

benefit to the rural labouring-classes. Here Thomson expresses sense of pride on behalf of his community, akin to Burns's sympathetic utterance to Davie Sillar:

Think ye, that *sic* as you and I,  
Wha druge an' drive thro' wet and dry  
Wi' never ceasing toil;  
Think ye, are we less blest than they,  
Wha scarcely tend us in their way,  
As hardly worth their while?  
Alas! How aft in haughty mood,  
God's creatures they oppress!  
Or else, neglecting all that's guid,  
They Riot in excess!<sup>48</sup>

The *Cherrie and the Slae* stanza, with its inherent symbolic struggle, is a fitting choice for this dichotomy, here representing an Augustan opposition between luxury and simplicity. Like Burns's 'Epistle to Davie', Thomson's epistles to Mullan and Glass evince a sense of struggle between the bitterness of poverty and the sweetness of simple, rural life; or in Thomson's case the struggles between revolt versus contentment, and standard rule versus natural inspiration. The former is supported by Thomson's conscious self-referencing of his own radical productions: from the image of the mavis's song 'chanted frae a cage', reminding Glass of Thomson's 'The Goldfinch' (1793), the captive bird in 'a *bastille* of wire';<sup>49</sup> to the image of the poets singing 'Thro' woods now, whar buds now' which foreshadows the 'TRUE UNITED IRISHMEN' striding through the glen in 'To the Cuckoo' (1797).

Thomson's subtle use of the verse epistle for political content, demonstrates that his use of nature in is never purely aesthetic, but is symbolic of his radical philosophy and political consciousness. Likewise in Burnsian fashion he claims 'Nae rules I heed, I rhyme awa / tak' what the musie gies me'

<sup>48</sup> 'Epistle to Davie, A Brother Poet' (1785), lines 71- 80, *Poems and Songs*, I, pp. 65-69.

<sup>49</sup> 'The Goldfinch', *Poems*, pp. 38-40. See Jennifer Orr, '1798, Before and Beyond', p. 121.

(ll. 76-77), but crucially he demonstrates his own poetic vision independently of Burns, setting the poet apart as an ambassador of the romantic consciousness, sensing elements of nature that others cannot see:

Is there amang them a' can taste  
 Like us, the kindling dawn,  
 The raptures o' the breeze waste,  
 Or *daisy sheeted* lawn?  
 But wealth Sir, we've health Sir,  
 An' Nature's sweets are free;  
 To feel then, sae weel, then,  
 Is rowth to you an' me. (ll. 35-42)

Thus, when two congenial poets are gathered together, each is a witness to the visionary ability of the other. Crucially, Glass furnished his 'Answer' (1797) with a fraternal reference to Robert Burns, 'No wonder then that Burns your strains admir'd, / Since you, like him, by Nature was inspir'd.' (ll. 43-44).<sup>50</sup> Here, the literary appeal of Burns to Thomson is most succinctly expressed by another poet; rather than imitating Burns or looking to him as a radical tutor, Glass envisions Thomson as being divested of the same qualities in a poet that were found in Burns; a fellow man of feeling, schooled in nature above 'the gaudy colourings of art.' (l. 42). Burns's claims about his own natural talent in the verse epistle are thus borne out in Thomson's own self-fashioning and again in how others in his circle perceived him: as a spokesman for the rural intelligentsia.

But the democratic and inviting nature of 1790s print culture, in the radical press at least, was a zeitgeist fuelled by government attempts to repress it. The rebellion of 1798 and its wake did more than disrupt Thomson's print culture; it severed a number of his poetic friendships, some permanently. The poet who was determined to survive in the pages of the moderate post-rebellion press had to be adaptable, and it was the Coleraine poet Alexander Kemp to

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<sup>50</sup> 'Answer by the Reverend James Glass, M.A' (1797), *New Poems*, pp. 154-55.

whom Thomson turned in order to revive his broken fraternity. Although full of enthusiastic literary detail, Thomson's correspondence with Kemp was of a more measured and formal character by virtue of the fact that it originated through the pages of the *Belfast News-Letter* rather than face to face, and yet it still retains a surprising level of feeling and intimacy between two men from different classes who had never met one another. As a fellow correspondent of Burns, Kemp was responsible for the introduction of many Burns poems in the Belfast newspapers, and Thomson was impressed with Kemp's own work, published in the Belfast newspapers under the pseudonyms, 'Albert' and 'Humanitas'. Thomson opened private correspondence with Kemp in September 1797 and received the flattering information that Kemp had read *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793) and had 'long been desirous of [...] acquaintance.'<sup>51</sup> Their mutual reference point was initially Robert Burns, but the Ayrshire poet is referred to in connection with Kemp's own poetic efforts and the channelling of personal distress and sentiment into his poetry:

I write from the sorrowing feelings of my soul [...] You have dignified me with the appellation of "Poet – Mr Burns did me similar honour; [...] if my humble pen has the power of awakening a tender feeling, or of going to the mind of Sensibility the gratification of a free moment, 'tis all I aim at –<sup>52</sup>

The poets assisted one another in identifying the authors of other verses that they had admired in the Belfast newspapers, building a depository of local literary knowledge, including a nettling account of poetry by one Reverend Mr Learson, which caused Kemp to exclaim sarcastically, 'What do you think the *enlightened* people of Coleraine say? – "that Mr Learson's poetry is very *beautiful* and highly *entertaining*!!! [...] A tempore! [*sic*] O, mores!'<sup>53</sup> Once

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<sup>51</sup> Alexander Kemp to Samuel Thomson, 10 Sep 1797, TCD MS 7527, f. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 22 Jan. 1798, TCD MS 7257, f.45.



again, though Thomson has been classified as a poet of the labouring class, we see a clear appeal to 'taste' within the circle, particularly expressed through exasperation with popular doggerel.

Kemp published a series of poems during 1797 in the *Belfast News-letter*.<sup>54</sup> Under the pseudonym 'Alexis', Thomson responded to Kemp's crafted sonnets, by penning several sonnets of his own to 'Albert' in *New Poems* (1799). 'Albert' and 'Alexis' share a bond that is transcendent and spiritual, forged in a mutual love of tender sentiment:

Within thy bosom found the *friendly part*,  
And all thy soul, by secret instinct knew.  
How many, Albert, boast *the holy tie*  
Of *sacred Friendship*, and on form and face,  
Their whole affliction, superficial place,  
Yet greater strangers still than you and I!<sup>55</sup>

'Albert' recognised Thomson's overtures and replied in kind, citing the image of the poetic knot which Thomson had woven in his epistle: 'THOU, who, in secret, twin'd the laurel wreath, / For Albert's brow, thanks for thy meed of praise, / Unmeet, Alexis, for my humble lays'.<sup>56</sup> From March 1797 to April 1798, Kemp and Thomson maintained this brief republic of taste in the *Belfast News Letter* with sonnets, epistles and insertions of the work of Robert Burns. The flow of poetry was interrupted by the tense political atmosphere of Ulster in months leading up to the Rebellion, and was permanently stemmed by Kemp's relocation to London in 1799. Kemp's decision may have been as a

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<sup>54</sup> These include 'Sonnet, the Mariner' (20-24 Mar 1797); 'The Wounded Stag', 'Sonnet to Love' and 'Sonnet from Sterne, Maria' (3-7 Apr 1797); '...Written at Portpatrick While Waiting the Sailing of the Packet', '...To Evening' and '...Written at the Sea-Coast', dated *Coleraine May 5*. (May 12 1797).

<sup>55</sup> 'Second Sonnet to Albert', ll. 7-12, *New Poems*, p. 193. In the version published previously in the *Belfast News Letter*, Thomson describes the 'sacred tie' (l. 9) as 'sacred Union', conveying an even stronger bond between the two men.

<sup>56</sup> 'Albert's Answer', ll. 1-3, *New Poems*, p. 192.

result of the political repression he complained of, and the resulting stagnated arts culture of Ireland:

I have now relinquished the idea of printing them in this kingdom; [...] I thought that by continuing my insertions in the *Belfast News-Letter* for sometime, if the public supposed they professed any merit, subscriptions would come forward *unsolicited*; however, they seem to think otherways; - I may therefore most probably publish in London, where subscription will prove more liberal and voluntary.<sup>57</sup>

Kemp's frustration is evidence of a changing print culture in Ireland, particularly demonstrated by the prolific poet 'Hafiz', Thomas Stott of Dromore, who received the generous patronage of Bishop Percy, and who dominated the pages of the *Belfast News Letter* from 1799 onwards. In the radical 1790s Kemp and Thomson's fraternal project might have succeeded, but in the first decade of the nineteenth century, in the Belfast moderate press at least, the verse epistle format and publication-by-subscription appeared to be giving way to literary patronage and metropolitan academic projects. In fact, by the 1830s the poet Andrew McKenzie, forced to sell his cottage in the Ards and move to Belfast, opined that literary pursuits were entirely the prerogative of the middle classes:

Belfast is not the place where a man compelled to work for a living, will be admitted into the company of those who possess literary attainments. They generally move in a higher sphere of society and would think themselves disgraced by noticing a poor serf though gifted with genius. [...] When I think on some young men in your own neighbourhood – namely Williamson, Walker, Crowe and yourself, I cannot refrain drawing a comparison rather disgraceful to the Northern Athens.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Kemp to Thomson, 17 December 1797, TCD MS 7257, f. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Andrew McKenzie, Belfast, to J. R. Semple, Moilena Turnpike, near Antrim, 9 July 1832, John Hewitt MA Thesis, Boxes 16 and 17, University of Ulster, MS D 3838/3/18/Acc/7015, f. 19. The 'Williamson' referred to is most likely the son of Thomson's 'Damon', John Williamson, whose own correspondence is also held at Trinity College Dublin.

It seems that Thomson was witnessing the decline of the labouring class, 'democratic' poetry that had once filled the pages of the *Northern Star*. His personal failure to engage Thomas Stott through his 'Epistle to Hafiz' (1802) suggests that Stott had no intention of being tainted by association with country poets of radical reputation, nor being drawn into public poetic flyting. Only five years later in 1807 Stott's profile in Belfast literary circles had clearly eclipsed Thomson's, since Stott was engaged in a correspondence with the editor of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle* Joseph Stevenson, keen to support the establishment of the Belfast Academical Institution. Stott personally pledged twenty guineas and seems to have encouraged the Bishop of Dromore to subscribe to the project.<sup>59</sup> As a neighbour and protégée of the Bishop, Stott was an important contact for the Belfast literary establishment and had been successful in securing steady patronage for his own productions. Although Thomson had been successful in attracting a measure of support from another of the Institution's key supporters, Samuel Thompson of Muckamore, he could not enjoy the same financial security that came from the constant patronage of a Bishop with literary priorities, as evinced in his nettling lines to Stott, 'To Hafiz, however, this will not apply, / For I'm told he has plenty to eat, drink and wear, / A competence, long may he live to enjoy'.<sup>60</sup> The dawning realisation that he was unable to compete on the Belfast literary scene without financial connections may have spurred him to attempt once more to engage Lord Templeton's attention. Certainly, Lord Templeton was an obvious choice given that he was identified by Samuel Thompson of Muckamore as a key prospective supporter of the Belfast Academical Institution, but it was a decision that resulted in Thomson's disappointment and a final disenchantment with literary patronage.

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas Stott to Joseph Stevenson Esq. Belfast, 9 Nov. 1807, PRONI SCH524/7B/1/12.

<sup>60</sup> 'Epistle to Hafiz, T. Stott, Esq., Dromore' (1802), lines 33-35, *Simple Poems*, p. 27.

Tim Burke's final assertion that 'poetic and erotic unions thus supplant the unstable and defeated political coalition of the (no longer) United Irishmen' is therefore a compelling reading.<sup>61</sup> Written long before the rebellion, the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan' (1793) could be considered even more erotic for its subterranean deathbed imagery demonstrating that the poetic fraternal union was a constant concept in Thomson's poetry, independent of political considerations. Thomson's bard may have been embroiled in political struggle, but his urge toward faction was always moderated by his superior drive of sympathy as a man of feeling which, he suggests, might have avoided the excesses of violence that culminated in 1798.

One correspondent who encompassed the meeting of sympathy with radicalism was the cosmopolitan poet and typesetter for the *Northern Star*, Aeneas Lamont, author of *Poems on Different Subjects* (1795). Lamont appears to have published an earlier volume in America during 1785 and dedicated the volume to Benjamin Franklin, engaging him in a correspondence.<sup>62</sup> Thus it could be argued with conviction that Thomson's solicitation of Burns, whether radical or not, found an earlier parallel in Lamont's correspondence with Dr Franklin. In procuring subscribers for Thomson's work in Belfast, Lamont put Thomson at the heart of the Belfast radical literati, the so-called 'Northern Athens' movement, which included a number of enthusiastic patriots like William Drennan who were also active in the Belfast Reading Society from 1788.<sup>63</sup> Certainly, Lamont appears to have been Thomson's closest friend in Belfast, teasing Thomson about his 'behaviour' during a visit to Belfast in 1795:

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<sup>61</sup> Burke, 'Poetry and Self-Fashioning in 1790s Ulster', p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> Gray, 'Burns and his Visitors from Ulster', p. 326. For reference to the letter see Dorothea Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 1 August 1804, TCD MS 7257, f. 85.

<sup>63</sup> W. A. Maguire, 'The Belfast Historic Society, 1811-1835' in *An Uncommon Bookman*, pp. 100-118, (p. 100).

I am not certain that I will ever pardon your behaviour the last time you were in town. You know I was writing a letter to my Mistress when you came in – you interrupted me – I fear I wrote nonsense, [...] However, if she should be displeased with my letter, I will tell her the truth, and make her write a lampoon on you for getting drunk, for you must know that she keeps company sometimes with the Girls of Parnassus – as a proof, you may see some of her verses in my book.<sup>64</sup>

As a correspondent, Lamont certainly made a witty match for Thomson's prickly temper, producing a humorous affidavit in 1795, testifying that 'the said myself is, at this said time of declaring, alive and well, now residing in Belfast aforesaid,' most likely in response to a characteristic Thomsonian nettling.<sup>65</sup> Like James Orr, Lamont was a cerebral correspondent who sufficiently challenged Thomson's wit, in contrast to the gentler Luke Mullan who, though earnest and spirited, was more ready to defer to Thomson's opinions.

Lamont's retort spawned one of Thomson's finest epistles in the challenging *Cherrie and the Slae* stanza, '...to Mr Aeneas Lamont' (1801).<sup>66</sup> which suggests pertly that Lamont cannot uphold his promise to visit Crambo Cave as he is much too urban to suffer rough blankets and country cuisine of milk and potatoes, 'buttermilk and slugs' (l. 161). The poem paints a picture of a single bard, 'a little drunk [...]' living simply with 'neither wife nor wean', and foregoing the pleasures of urban life for the creative, rural solitude:

I asked you once, but you forgot,  
 To come and see me at my cot,  
     That stands by pastoral Lyle;  
 You were to bring Tom Kean along;  
 Perhaps you thought, and not far wrong,  
     It was not worth your while;  
 To sup on buttermilk and slugs, \*  
     And lie on chaffy hammock,

\*A kind of Potatoe.

<sup>64</sup> Aeneas Lamont to Samuel Thomson, 3 Sep. 1795, TCD MS 7257, f. 74.

<sup>65</sup> Lamont to Thomson, 5 Mar. 1797, *ibid*, f. 76.

<sup>66</sup> 'Epistle to Mr Aeneas Lamont' (1801), in Thomson, *Simple Poems*, pp. 11-19.

Beneath our coarse-grain'd country rugs,  
 Would suit but ill your stomach.  
 In reek then, sic smeech then,  
 O sir, 'twad be your dead!  
 Believe me, 'twad grieve me,  
 To ken ye got the weed.<sup>67</sup>

Thomson's 'Cherrie and the Slae' stanza is steeped in his characteristic ironic tone as he teasingly suggests that his city friend is much too metropolitan to suffer a night in a rustic cottage, playing on the same mock-humility that he employed in his preface to *New Poems* where he apologises for his 'repast [...] of *wild berries* and *spring water*'.<sup>68</sup> Lamont is feminized as a hypochondriac with a delicate stomach who might catch 'the weed' – a Scots expression for the sudden puerperal fever which sometimes afflicted women in childbirth. Thomson thus exacted his revenge in rhyme, eliciting Lamont's remark that 'I don't know what the Divil you mean by stringing verses to me – but you may send me any thing you please.'<sup>69</sup>

When considering the correspondence between Thomson and the Lamonts in 1804, the affidavit of 1795 becomes painfully ironic. An unwitting Thomson wrote to Aeneas Lamont in 1804 after an uncharacteristic silence only to discover that his friend had died the year before. Lamont had planned to visit Carngraney with his wife Dorothea, but as she explained in 1804, 'the ill health of your friend prevented its taking place at the time, and death soon after fatally deprived him of that pleasure forever.'<sup>70</sup> This letter marks the beginning of a most interesting and intimate correspondence between Mrs Lamont and Thomson, with her request that the poet honour his friend's memory with a

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<sup>67</sup> 'Epistle to Mr Aeneas Lamont' (1801), lines 1-6; 155-68, *Simple Poems*, pp. 11-19.

<sup>68</sup> Thomson, *New Poems*, p. v.

<sup>69</sup> Lamont to Thomson, 5 Mar. 1797, TCD MS 7157, f. 76.

<sup>70</sup> Dorothea Lamont to Thomson, 23 March 1803, Thomson Papers, fol. 81.

verse epitaph which she greatly appreciated, but she judged ultimately that no poem could ever truly immortalize her husband.<sup>71</sup> She expressed her grief candidly to Thomson:

O my dear Mr Thomson! When I look back to the days I have passed with him, it seems like a golden dream, or an enchanted vision – but the charm was dreadfully dissolved and I was left in more wretchedness and misery, than I thought it was possible for me to bear and live [...] You see my dear Sir I am talking to you like an old friend tho' our acquaintance was but short but were you not the friend of my dearest friend? <sup>72</sup>

A poet who in 1818 published a volume of her own verse,<sup>73</sup> Dorothea Lamont was one of only a few prominent women in Thomson's *oeuvre*, and whose intelligence the poet seems to have been drawn to, referring to her as his 'Lavinia'.<sup>74</sup> In the absence of Aeneas Lamont, a friendship and literary exchange between the widow and the bard developed and a mutual frustration with their respective employment as schoolteachers.<sup>75</sup>

Lamont's literary confidence in writing to Thomson, an established poet, is typical of her work which was consistently published in the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* (1808-1814), under the pseudonym 'Delia' created for her by her husband.<sup>76</sup> Published in London, her volume of 1818 contains several

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 83.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 81.

<sup>73</sup> Mrs Aeneas Lamont, *Poems and Tales in Verse*, (London: Ogles, Duncan & Cochran, 1818).

<sup>74</sup> Lamont to Thomson, 5 March 1797, TCD MS 7257, f. 76. Other women include his patronesses, Margaret and Eliza Thompson; Mary, the wife of the Reverend Hutchinson McFadden; and his neighbour, the aspiring poet Margaret McNeilly.

<sup>75</sup> *Belfast News Letter*, 21 Nov. 1806 contains an advertisement notifying the public that 'Mrs Lamont begs leave to acquaint her Friends and the Public, that she intends continuing the School, as formerly[...].'

<sup>76</sup> *Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 6, No. 32 (March 1811), pp. 219-220 in which the entire 'Original Poetry' section of the Magazine was devoted to several of Lamont's 1818 poems: 'The Blush', 'To Eliza', 'The Boy and the Butterfly, translated from the French' and 'Melancholy Moments.'

moving poems, conventional sentimental pieces, translations from French, and songs and prose pieces such as ‘Dymphna: An Irish Legend’.<sup>77</sup> Given the extent of Aeneas Lamont’s radical connections in Revolutionary America and United Irish Belfast, it is unsurprising that his wife’s poetry should be infused with romantic nationalism, celebrating the revival of Irish music in ‘On the revival of the Irish Harp’ (1818) and the Irishman’s superiority of character in ‘Pat’s Salutation’ (1814)<sup>78</sup> in which she longs for ‘poor Paddy’s *rough shake of the hand*’ over the ‘complaisant whiles’ of the Frenchman and the ‘grave plodding face’ of John Bull. Like Thomson’s choice of ‘a rougher subject’ in ‘To a Hedge-hog’ (1799), Lamont appears to shun polite society, supplanting manners with honest, romantic sentiment and intimacy, a characteristic that she maintains is Ireland’s boast.

Though Dorothea Lamont and Samuel Thomson shared in both the poetic and teaching professions, they lived on either side of the sexual and urban/rural divides; and yet their friendship had its foundations in a mutual understanding of the frustrations of disappointed hopes, intelligence stifled by poverty and, most significantly, the loss of a dear and inspiring friend. As Mrs Aeneas Lamont, Dorothea not only carried on the Lamont name within the Belfast literary community, but she surpassed the reputation of her husband as a poet. It is her name, rather than her husband’s, that is cited in *Rhyming Weavers* (1794) by John Hewitt, albeit carelessly as a ‘colonial poet’.<sup>79</sup> Lamont thus earns a secure place in Thomson’s circle, first through her open and congenial correspondence with Thomson, and subsequently through her poetic exploration of personal loss and patriotism which held a firm place in the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* from 1811 to 1814.

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<sup>77</sup> Mrs Aeneas [Dorothea] Lamont, *Poems and Tales in Verse*, (London: Ogles, Duncan & Cochran, 1818; henceforward *Poems and Tales*).

<sup>78</sup> Lamont, pp. 69-70. The poem was first published in the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* 12, no. 66 (Jan 1814), p.37

<sup>79</sup> Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers*, p.46.



Following several shock bereavements, Thomson's physical and mental health were obviously in decline and his spiritual state ever at the forefront of his mind from 1806 onwards. The young Reverend William Finlay wrote to him in 1810, assuring him that 'I also my dear Thomson, am subject to bad health and dejected spirits [...] Since then we are both invalids, let us endeavour as much as possible to lighten each others load, by an unreserved and friendly correspondence. I am happy in knowing that you my dear Thomson in your affliction had recourse to the "fountains of living waters" – the only *true* source of comfort. A page of the Gospel affords more consolation in affliction than all the volumes of philosophy.'<sup>80</sup> Though he still maintained correspondence with poets in his circle including Robert Anderson, the author of *Cumberland Ballads*, it appears that the initiative was taken by others to strike up a correspondence.<sup>81</sup> The poet John Dickey addressed a verse epistle to Thomson in 1813 and, addressing 'Crambo Cave, where once the maids / of Helicon did hover' (ll. 13-14), implores him to rouse his muse:<sup>82</sup>

And are those rural strains forgot  
 That once were wont to quaver  
 And echo blithe through Crambo grot?  
 O! are they mute for ever?  
     Can it be so?  
     Ah! No, ah! No, --  
         Tune up your drowsy drone,  
     And make old LYLE  
     Ring yet awhile,  
         As formerly you've done.      (ll. 20-29)

Dickey employs a tongue-in-cheek description of himself as 'just a backward b'liever ... a lazy, greasy weaver' (ll. 61-3), a humorous and knowing echo of

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<sup>80</sup> William Finlay to Samuel Thomson, 14 June 1810, TCD MS 7257, f. 68.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Anderson to Samuel Thomson, 22 Feb. 1812, TCD MS 7253/8, f. 9.

<sup>82</sup> 'Epistle to S. Thomson of Crangranny, A Brother Poet' (1813) in John Dickey, *Rockfield Donegore, Poems on Various Subjects*, Belfast, 1818.

the ‘creeshy bluttor’ weaver of Thomson’s ‘The Simmer Fair’ (1792). It is apparent that Dickey is aware of Thomson’s theological leanings, commenting that ‘Tho’ I must own / To you unknown, / A sinner or a Saint, / Poor JACK may be, / Indeed for thee,’ (ll. 5-9), urging him to overlook this technicality with a simple line, ‘But let us come acquaint.’ (l. 10).

In spite of religious differences, obvious fraternal warmth developed between the two poets and Dickey devoted three epistles to Thomson and, upon hearing of Thomson’s death, a touching elegy. In Dickey’s ‘Second Epistle to Samuel Thomson’ (1814),<sup>83</sup> he sets out his own poetic agenda while casting himself as a wandering journeyman, compared to Thomson whose ‘bardship’s snug in Crambo-Cave’ (l. 50). He follows Burns’s ‘Epistle to Davie’ in lamenting the coldness of the season, but it is Lyle Hill that he claims stirs his soul to poetry:

Weel, fate and nature tak your swing:  
 Since bards were born like birds to sing,  
     Wi’ merry glee:  
 My very saul is on the wing  
     When LYLE I see. (ll. 20-24)

Through the epistle, the two poets are enabled to call out to one another across the valley between the hills of Donegore and Lyle. Dickey expresses a moment of Romantic sublime, as the view of Lyle and his brother bard sends his soul is soaring towards inspiration, and he expresses the wish that ‘Auld ERIN roun’ for many a mile / Would soon be ringing.’ (ll. 29-30). Lyle’s Hill is a recognisable symbol and trigger for patriotism, and one which inspires Dickey to sing of the same national scenes that are found in Thomson’s communal poetry, such as ‘The Simmer Fair’ (1791), ‘The Country Dance’ (1793) and ‘Lyle’s Hill, a Rhapsody’ (1799).

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<sup>83</sup> Dickey, *Poems on Various Subjects*, pp. 71-75.

Evidently 'Dear Sammy' continued to furnish his circle with literary works, as demonstrated in the tongue-in-cheek third Epistle to Thomson, 'On my Friend's causing a Brother to call for a Volume of his Poems which he had lent me' (1815).<sup>84</sup> The epistle is written, uniquely, in two parts – one in haste on Saturday night, and continued on Monday morning, allowing Dickey to keep the Sabbath in between. This deliberate demonstration of orthodoxy highlights the well-intentioned immediacy of answering his brother's request, while mischievously reminding Thomson that his Sabbatarian duties must necessarily prevail over the return of his volume: 'But here I must close, or infringe upon Sunday; / What remains of my story, you'll get on Monday.' (ll. 21-22). Though unrelenting in his Calvinism, opining that 'If nature is noble, when tried on a scale / That seldom or never is known to prevail' (ll. 47-48), Dickey places enormous faith in friendship which, when pure and unselfish, has the power to elevate the human heart:

If beings immortal should die like the brute,  
How vain must be all philosophic dispute  
About an hereafter and judgment to come?  
Of love and of friendship, I too might sing dumb.  
'Tis true, if we're wealthy, how wonderful plenty  
Our brotherly friends, but if poor, O how scanty.      (ll. 61-72)

The conclusion teases Thomson for his overzealous desire to obtain his property from Dickey, but any offence is mitigated by affection: 'So farewell my friend, at a crisis so tricky, / In true love and friendship, I'm yours, / JOHNNY DICKEY' (ll. 73-75). James Orr was certainly not alone in his ability to get the better of Thomson's prickly personality from time to time.

It is thus fitting that Dickey's 'Verses on hearing of the death of S. Thomson' (1816)<sup>85</sup> employed as its epitaph, 'Dear Thomson, favourite o' the

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<sup>84</sup> Dickey, *Poems on Various Subjects*, pp. 76-79.

<sup>85</sup> Dickey, *Poems on Various Subjects*, pp. 80-86.

Nine', a quotation from Orr's 'Epistle to Mr S. Thompson, Carngranny', (1803)<sup>86</sup> thus triangulating the fraternal bond between the men. As Thomson's health began to decline, he enjoyed an intense fraternal correspondence with Orr, which Carol Baraniuk has described as 'the most important creative relationship of [Orr's] life'. She argues that membership of Thomson's circle was vital in Orr's integration into society as a former rebel in 1799, and his sentiments are conveyed in the verse epistle:

[...] the epistle restores his relationship with the friend of his radical youth in the 1790s, but because, once published, it expresses that restoration publicly for the readership of both poets to observe. It also posits a basis on which all those radicals and United Irish sympathisers who are suffering fragmentation and alienation may remain true to their principles and to one another.<sup>87</sup>

In Ulster literary circles, it is generally accepted that Orr came to surpass his older friend in poetry, with Orr's first edition published two years before Thomson's final edition. Unsurprisingly, given their differing experiences, their *oeuvres* are dissimilar and are thereby deserving of equal attention, not least because of the importance of their friendship, conveyed by letters which feature a strong degree of affection continuing well into the nineteenth century. Baraniuk asserts unreservedly that although poets such as Thomson and Orr were rendered minor in comparison to the poetic achievement of Burns, both produced 'many individual works of true genius.'<sup>88</sup>

Thomson's frequent correspondence with Orr suggests that he was both impressed with Orr's debut publication, being 'with some of them [...] quite pleased, and with others of them the reverse', and eager for Orr's detailed and

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<sup>86</sup> Orr, 'Epistle to Mr S. Thompson, Carngranny' (1803), *Collected Works* pp. 122-5.

<sup>87</sup> Baraniuk, "as native in my thought", pp. 64; 309-10. As contemporaries, it is likely that Thomson may have introduced Orr to Hope.

<sup>88</sup> Baraniuk, "as native in my thought", p. 215.

frank opinion of his work.<sup>89</sup> Equalled only by Aeneas Lamont's witty affidavit, Orr ably moderated the more difficult side of Samuel Thomson, and his genuine concern for his friend's artistic success is evident in his praise for *Simple Poems*:

You want to know my opinion of your last publication and I shall readily give it. The epistle to Lamont, as published in *Microscope* was excellent; but you have added some stanzas which have somewhat impaired its beauty. Your 'Address to the Cuckoo' and 'grateful thanks' are very good indeed! In the address to 'his guardian angel', you at once breath the spirit of true repentance and of genuine poetry. Of the *Gloaming* you already know my opinion.<sup>90</sup>

Just as James Glass had paid tribute to Thomson's ability to convey 'the real feelings of [the] heart',<sup>91</sup> Orr's letter demonstrates exclusive preference for Thomson's more Romantic sentiments is clearly discernable from his partiality toward personal compositions that explore Thomson's personal relationships and religious experience. He draws special attention to Thomson's skill in the sonnet form, and reiterates his praise of Thomson's most Romantic poems, 'Address to the Rising Sun' and, in particular, 'The *Gloaming*' which 'I approved so much of [...] that I sent it to a friend in Belfast, that he might share in the pleasure it afforded me.'<sup>92</sup> Thomson's proposal that the poets exchange monthly letters demonstrates his appreciation of friendship with such a poetic equal, obtaining not only praise for his work but also an honest, and sensitive, appraisal of poems that were less successful:

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> James Orr, Ballycarry to Samuel Thompson, Crambo Cave, 24 May 1807, transcribed by Brian M. Walker from the original (now lost). Transcript in the John Hewitt Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Ulster Library.

<sup>91</sup> 'Answer from the Revd. James Glass, M.A' (1796), line 42, *New Poems*, p. 155.

<sup>92</sup> Orr to Thomson, 4 Jan. 1806, Hewitt Collection.

And now permit me to mention a few that I would rather you had suppressed 'the Contrast', 'to my Boortree' and the address to Capt. McDougall, have not, I believe, met with public approbation and in 'Willy Sings Grizzly's Awa' there are there are two or three lines which are no honour to the company among which they mix. You'll excuse the freedom of my cursory remarks and do me the justice to believe that where I have been incorrect the error did not originate in my heart.

Here Orr refers to 'The Contrast: Phoebe and Rosie' (1806), an unashamedly misogynistic poem on the subject of a man forced to choose between the lesser of two evils for a wife, and a few of the more bawdy lines of 'Willy Sings Grizzly's Awa',<sup>93</sup> indicating a particular distaste for low-minded discourse and fraternal bawdry, expressed elsewhere in his correspondence with Thomson:

If you are lonely I am equally so; honest fellows in abundance I can associate with; but such conversation! Their wit is ribaldry or scandal, their serious discourse is on the bloody gazettes of the day; their religion is damning [All men] and their song is Nancy Vernun – but I must change the subject, else you'd think me as splenetic as any of them.<sup>94</sup>

Thomson and, to a much greater extent, Orr were former radicals attempting to adjust to a post-revolutionary Ireland where politics were to be avoided. This perhaps partly explains the unpopularity of 'To My Boortree', possibly because of its cryptic theological (and inherently political) themes, but the most surprising revelation is the contemporary unpopularity of 'To Captain McDougall', Thomson's most memorized and quoted poem, where he claims to be 'IRISH all without. [...] Ev'ry item SCOTCH within.'<sup>95</sup> One can only speculate whether, for his contemporary readership, Thomson's hybrid Scots-

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<sup>93</sup> In an otherwise beautiful sentimental song of lost love, Thomson inserted the following lines, 'Ye left it wi' him who took care ay to breed it, / And guard it frae every thing wicked and vain, / Who gowf'd thy wee buttocks ay when they had need / Correcting thee kindly, as thou'd been his ain.' (ll. 9-12), *Simple Poems*, p. 77.

<sup>94</sup> Orr to Thomson, *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Thomson, *Simple Poems*, pp. 84-86.

Irishman was a distasteful compromise in an era where one was conditioned to consider oneself either Irish or British. Yet given that it is almost a mantra for the Ulster-Scots movement of the twenty-first century, it is perhaps further evidence of the prophetic quality of his poetry.<sup>96</sup>

Thomson's religious bent may have had some effect on Orr since they both travelled to Carnmoney to hear the Reverend John Paul preach, although Orr claims that 'to visit [Thomson] [...] was my chief design in attending the Ordination'.<sup>97</sup> Orr's addresses to Thomson both formally as 'fav'rite of the nine' and informally as 'Samie' equal Thomson's passionate descriptions of fraternity in his verse epistles, superseding even the 'Epistle to Luke Mullan' which envisions the poets at the beginning of their poetic enterprise. The 'Epistle to S. Thomson' envisions the bard returning home to 'my ain fire side' and re-establishing contact with an old friend after the turmoil of fugitive flight and the epic experience of exile. Orr's bard is a seasoned, experienced man seeking a return to the fraternity that Thomson was establishing in the 1790s, but aware that they now live in a changed world. In re-establishing the fraternity, Orr assures Thomson that they do not need to 'implore on supple knee, / the proud folks' patronage', likely a reference to Thomson's acquaintance with Lord Templeton, a relationship that excited Thomson with the promise of a new cottage, but a promise which was ultimately broken. Orr's following correspondence summarizes his tender longing to be near Thomson, and his private vision of their own exclusive poetic coterie:

I wish we liv'd near other – we would pass many an agreeable hour together, for I'm proud to think that there is a congeniality in our tastes and tempers – we wou'd read sometimes – we would rhyme sometimes – 'the joy of the [skill] should go round' and we would enjoy 'the feast of Reason and the flow of soul'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Billy Kay, 'The Scots Ower the Sheuch', p. 88.

<sup>97</sup> Orr to Thomson, 4 Jan. 1806, Hewitt Collection.

<sup>98</sup> Orr to Thomson, *ibid.*

Although Orr's criticism of Thomson's work been established, there has been comparatively little attention given to Thomson's poetic influence on Orr's work. This is partly due to the fact that there are no surviving letters from Thomson's hand, but it is interesting to speculate, particularly in Orr's early work. By the time Orr's first volume emerged in 1804, there were several echoes of Thomson's previously published work. Orr's epistle to a blind fiddler, 'Thaunie', which Baraniuk cites as an example of Orr's sense of his bardic role at the heart of village society where he honoured individual talents which were important to village life,<sup>99</sup> is reminiscent of Thomson's 'Elegy on R—I—' (1793) in which he honoured the later fiddler, Rab, for enabling the poor to enjoy themselves, discussed above in Chapter 2. Orr's 'To a Sparrow, on Seeing Some Boys Rob Her Nest' (1804), which echoes Burns's 'To a Mouse', is similar in content to two of Thomson's poems, 'On Seeing a Fellow Kill a Linnet on the Nest' (1799) and to a lesser extent, 'To a Magpie on seeing one rob a Blackbird's Nest' (1799), both of which play on reader familiarity with Burns's 'On Seeing a Wounded Hare'. Both Thomson and Orr reflect tenderly with compassion on the bereft creatures but it is Orr's reference to humans chasing materialistic ambitions and 'sufferin' sair / *By biggin' castles in the air*'<sup>100</sup> that takes the connection with Thomson beyond superficial similarity, playing on Thomson's poetic rebuke to his landlord in 'Hope' (1803),

The curious cave you drew for me,  
With such assiduous care,  
Was all a dream, I plainly see,  
A castle in the air.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> James Orr, 'Epistle to Mr N. P., Oldmill', *Collected Works*, pp. 78-81.

<sup>100</sup> 'To a Sparrow, on Seeing Some Boys Rob Her Nest', lines 43-44, *Collected Works*, p. 73.

<sup>101</sup> 'Hope', ll. 21-24, *Simple Poems*, p. 72. The poem of 1803 came out of Thomson's disappointed hopes in his landlord who had agreed to redesign his cottage, a plan which never materialized. Orr



Carol Baraniuk rightly argues that James Orr's 'To the Potatoe' (1804) is just such a poem with a radical subtext, daringly employing coded double-entendre to discuss the events of rebellion in 1798, and notes the same practice in Thomson's 'To a Hedge-hog' (1799).<sup>102</sup> Yet if, as Baraniuk argues, 'To the Potatoe' was composed 'in the wake of the 1801 Union', Orr must have been familiar with Thomson's 1799 poem 'To a Hedge-hog' making it likely that Orr's exploitation of 'the diversity of language [...] and a fine mesh of coded signals and *double entendres*' relating to the poor and the United Irishmen through the potato, might have been inspired by Thomson's symbolic hedgehog, the animal bearing United Irish pikes. Certainly, Orr's image of the foraging poor who 'boost to forage like the fox, / That nightly plun'ers' (ll. 27-28) is reminiscent of Thomson's hedgehog 'grubbin' [...] food by thorny dykes' (l. 14), carrying away enough fruit on its back to last it for two days (ll. 31-36), and stealing milk from cows (ll. 39-42), which was a known practice among United Irish outlaws when on the run in rural areas.<sup>103</sup> Likewise, Baraniuk discusses the play on the Scots word 'badger' which Orr writes is 'aft a lander / at day-light gaun' – badger here meaning a middleman, or one who tramps about the countryside with a heavy load. The disappearance of the badger echoes Thomson's hedgehog who, though according to superstition, is never seen in daylight, but the poet asserts that 'Right monie a hurchin I hae seen, / At early morn, and eke at e'en,' (ll. 48-9), suggesting that the United Irish outlaw is alive and well in the Lyle Hill neighbourhood, and perhaps is being assisted by the poet himself. Orr's comparison of England to a bird of prey whose wings might easily be clipped, and the speaker's call to the Irish to

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was critical of Thomson's faith in Templeton and it is likely that this mutual reference to 'castles in the air' reflects this discussion.

<sup>102</sup> Baraniuk, "as native in my thought", pp. 207-212.

<sup>103</sup> Frank Ferguson, *Ulster Scots Writing: an Anthology*, p. 468n.

withdraw their labour from the plain, echo two of Thomson's earlier published works, 'The Hawk and the Weazel, a Fable' (1796); and 'The Bard's Farewell' (1793). 'The Hawk and the Weazel'<sup>104</sup> is an animal fable poem in which the aggressive bird of prey is beheaded by a crafty weasel, whose habitat is the 'heath be-skirted green';<sup>105</sup> and it is possible that this allegory may have given rise to Orr's simile for England as a bird of prey. Likewise, Orr's speaker's suggestion to his compatriots, 'Gif thou'd withdraw for ae camping',<sup>106</sup> finds precedent in Thomson's 'Ye *freeborn souls*, who *feel* –and feel *alright!* / Come, cross with me, the wide, Atlantic main [...] and leave *these ravagers* th' unpeopl'd plain.'<sup>107</sup> Baraniuk concludes that in 'To the Potatoe' (1804), Orr's endorsement of non-violent direct action 'is truly radical'; but this is a judgment that must be predated and applied to Thomson, not least because it was he who articulated this view as early as 1793, when Orr was a loyal subscriber to Thomson's *Poems on Different Subjects* (1793).<sup>108</sup> Baraniuk's nuanced view of radicalism encompasses more than simply the use of physical force, and is thus a marked departure from previous treatments of Thomson which have tended to view his apparent reservations as conservatism.

Both Thomson and Orr retreat from direct action in the post-Union period but continue to elucidate radical philosophies through the fragmented Scots tongue which resists the standardising influence of Union. Like the hedgehog, Ireland will maintain her identity by nursing her distinct culture 'at hame'. The internal evidence of the poems indicates that there remains both the likelihood that Thomson continued to hold radical sympathies into the Union

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<sup>104</sup> Published in the *Northern Star*, 7-10 March 1796.

<sup>105</sup> 'Thomson, 'The Hawk and the Weazel, a Fable', l. 5, *New Poems*, p. 212.

<sup>106</sup> James Orr, 'To the Potatoe', l. 81, *Collected Works*, p. 59.

<sup>107</sup> Thomson, 'Elegy, The Bard's Farewell!' published in the wake of war with France in the *Northern Star*, 31 Jul – 3 Aug, 1793.

<sup>108</sup> Thomson, *Poems*, p. 16.

period, and an unacknowledged debt to Thomson, in James Orr's poetry. Thomson's desire to start a poetic fraternity demonstrates his awareness of Romantic potentiality, whereby the convivial, social, act of reaching out across geographical and social divides through the dominant form of the verse epistle recognised both the epistolary recipient and the 'internal [reading] audience'.<sup>109</sup> It was also a political act of setting himself up as the speaker for his community, boasting of his informal education and rural inspiration, and appearing to avoiding the 'proper' channels of communication. This rural bard established communication with sympathetic brother bards on his own terms, 'the situation of the poet, associated since Homer and Virgil with the voice of the community as a whole, the tale of the tribe listening to its own story'.<sup>110</sup> Where the community succeeded, brother bards did not rely on patrons or the literary establishment but, under the pretence of communicating privately to praise each other, referenced one another's work and applied the seal of approval. Their mutual affection, described often as 'congenial' at times supersedes the bonds of family and even, in the case of Mullan and Thomson, of marriage. Although its popularity waned considerably, the epistolary community of Thomson survived the changing print culture of the nineteenth century, and Thomson's bolstering efforts established a recognisable trend of verse epistle that continued well into the nineteenth century, as evinced by the poet Robert Huddleston's references to Thomson's epistles in 1844. With Huddleston's accolade of Thomson as 'the star of Erin set',<sup>111</sup> Thomson could thereby be described as the father of a distinctive Northern school of Irish poetry.

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<sup>109</sup> William Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment*, p. 3.

<sup>110</sup> Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment*, p. 11.

<sup>111</sup> Huddleston, *A Collection of Poems and Songs*, p. 107.

## Conclusion

Following an absence of contributions to the Belfast newspapers and journals and an increasingly sparse personal correspondence between 1810 and his death in 1816, it appears that Samuel Thomson's public print career ended after the publication of *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects* in 1806. The few letters that remain testify that he maintained his poetic fraternity by corresponding with the next generation of poets, including fellow *Microscope* contributor John Getty of Ballymena, the 'Cumberland Bard' Robert Anderson who was now resident in Ireland, and Andrew McKenzie of Dunover known as 'Gaelus'.<sup>1</sup> At his death, the epistle from John Dickey tells us that Dickey and Orr remained some of Thomson's most intimate friends and that his poetry continued to live in the minds of his contemporaries.

The circumstances of Thomson's decline from fame convey a tragic languishing illness which eventually paralysed his handwriting.<sup>2</sup> Thomson's cause of death is unknown, but a farewell letter from the Cullybackey poet John Getty indicates that Thomson knew that he was dying in 1815:

I am truly and heartily sorry to hear [...] that you are so low, I trust, however may still remain a little longer with us, but if it be otherwise determined God grant [...] that you and I may meet in happier and better world, where, to use the expression of Burns, worth of the heart is alone distinction of the man –<sup>3</sup>

Getty's fraternal reference to Robert Burns only heightens the *pathos* of his fraternal farewell, particularly as he quotes Burns's own epitaph for fellow poet Robert Fergusson. Getty thus implies that Thomson's poetic talents, like Fergusson's, had been underestimated by the *literati* in spite of his natural worth and purity of heart. Getty's employment of this reference was an apt and prophetic foreshadowing of the critical neglect that Thomson was to suffer, in

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Anderson to Samuel Thomson, 22 February 1812, TCD MS 7253/8, f. 9.

<sup>2</sup> A manuscript note referring to '1<sup>st</sup> June 4 O Clock, 1815' in Thomson's own hand is barely legible and betrays his difficulty in writing even the shortest of notes, (TCD MS 7257, f. 101).

<sup>3</sup>J. Getty to ST, Cullybackey, 27 May 1815, TCD MS 7257, f. 100.

spite of Robert Huddleston's attempts to immortalise him as 'the star of Erin set' in *A Collection of Poems and Songs, On rural Subjects* (1844).<sup>4</sup>

This thesis seeks to highlight the variety of style evident in Thomson's work, in conjunction with his dynamic ability to reinvent himself and turn his hand to a variety of genres including Augustan neoclassical pastoral, sensibility, Scottish vernacular poetry, satire, the romantic Ode, the renaissance dream vision, and Nineteenth-century evangelical spiritualism. The core chapters of this thesis attempt, by extensive close reading, to modify this further still by demonstrating how Thomson turned these conventions and genres to his own situation and emerged from behind his poetic voices and personae to produce distinctly personal and emotional Romantic verse in *Simple Poems* (1806).

This study emphasises Thomson's contribution to Irish culture as a skilful writer in both Scots and English as he ably demonstrates a canny awareness of changing audience and a desire to make his verses accessible on a national level. Thomson's skill in the vernacular tradition has been well documented in Philip Robinson's anthology of Thomson's work but without an accompanying glossary or study of his deployment of vernacular Scots, it has perhaps added weight to the accusation of bardolatry. Thomson's capitalisation on the popularity of Burns has been explored here and it is clear that his reliance on Burns, which decreased throughout his career, began with a clear agenda to elevate his vernacular language and culture, and to demonstrate his own skill in a recognisable tradition of Scots vernacular poetry. This study does not intend to overstate Samuel Thomson's independence of the Scottish vernacular tradition, but it does seek to foreground the importance of the English verse in Thomson's poetic development; and finally in *Simple Poems* (1806), the influence of what Wordsworth termed the 'real language of men'.

Although his Scots poems met with initial approbation, Thomson's increasing shift towards the English language demonstrates a desire to widen his appeal, reserving Scots for covert political writing, local satire, and free sentiment. In establishing several registers, Thomson attempted to engage the

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<sup>4</sup> Huddleston, 'Elegy to the Memory of the Amiable and Departed Thompson, Rural Bard, Carngranny' (1844), line 13, *Poems and Songs*, p. 107.

various strands of his readership by promoting his own native language and culture, on the one hand, and showcasing his taste and literary sources on the other, including the ease with which he handles complex forms such as the sonnet and the Spenserian stanza, and genres like the dream vision in ‘A Winter Night’s Dream’ (1799). He was an extremely versatile poet who almost certainly provided an example to spur on poets like James Orr.

The use of Scots was neither a simple reflection of Ulster folk life, nor was it simply Burns imitation. ‘To a Hedge-hog’ (1799) demonstrates the use of Scots vernacular for Irish political themes and covert rebel discussion. The present author also asserts that Thomson moderated, even revised, Burns’s religious agenda, answering back on behalf of the Auld Lights in a manner that would culminate in his masterful challenge to Burns’s ‘Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat’ (1795) in the Belfast press. This study has sought to establish that even the ‘Epistle to Mr Robert Burns’ (1791), often dismissed as a sycophantic piece, helped establish Thomson in the minds of Belfast readers and, equally, foregrounded his own learning; in comparing Burns to a long list of poets from Homer to Thomas Gray, Thomson demonstrates that his own reading is wide enough to identify Burns within a canonical tradition of poetry, where Burns as the pinnacle of that tradition wrote much of his verse in Scots. If Thomson can be called a ‘Rhyming weaver’, it in the sense that he takes the diverse threads of the literary past and weaves them together with his own unique vision, to create his own composite fabric of national literature.

This study provides close analysis of Thomson’s public print *oeuvre* as a whole, cross-referencing with letters and edited versions. As well as taking in Thomson’s private sphere, this study widens the definition of radical poetry to include published editions, coded registers, and labouring class pastoral that goes beyond 1798. The present author also challenges the description of Thomson as ‘unrestrainedly conservative’ by providing a more nuanced examination of radical Presbyterianism, drawing on the revisionist historicism of I.R. McBride, David Hempton, Myrtle Hill, Nancy Curtin and Marianne Elliot, which teases out the varied strands of Presbyterian radicalism in the United Irish movement. This study seeks to establish that, although Thomson’s early pastoral persona may have its

source in his rural upbringing, it was an image raised through the intellectual milieu of the *Northern Star* in 1790s Belfast. From the outset, Thomson was determined to fashion himself as a poet of the labouring-class, prefacing his debut edition of poetry, *Poems on Different Subjects* with a recognizable labouring-class trope, taking his persona of ‘a shepherd lad—he seek’s no better name’ from Spenser. Furthermore, it is inherently political in its picture of a perfect agricultural republic, in which fraternal honesty flourishes. The examination of verse epistles from fellow radicals, such as James Glass, proves that Thomson’s pastoral work was recognised by his contemporaries as a strain of radicalism that challenges the aristocratic right to land ownership and democratically asserts popular ownership of the landscape.

Although Thomson may not have been explicitly politically radical throughout his career, his sense of justice and desire for mankind’s betterment is present throughout, whether expressed in anti-aristocratic radical verses like ‘Epigram to a Proud Aristocrat’ (1797); radical pastoral like ‘The Gloaming’ (1806); or animal fabliaux such as the masterpiece ‘To a Hedge-hog’ (1799). Where Thomson has been anthologised, it is the latter poem that makes a constant appearance, demonstrating that although its coded intricacy has never been fully explored until now, the poem made a significant impact on its audience. This study’s realignment of Thomson’s career along historical lines finds that the Union of 1801, rather than the Irish Rebellion of 1798, proved a more significant historical turning point in Thomson’s life and work, necessitating a reinvention of his persona to adopt a Romantic, solitary quietism. *New Poems* (1799) is a successful and eclectic reinvention of Thomson for a left-of-centre, intellectual, and metropolitan audience. The edition’s fragmentary nature is a result of the poet’s attempt to resolve feelings of despondency and anger in the wake of a new ‘British’ identity. Like the first generation Romantics, he was able to fortify his poetry by retreating into ‘hearth and home’ and reinventing his persona. The skilful code and imagery of *New Poems*, exhibiting Jacobite undertones in ‘A Winter Night’s Dream’ and ‘To a Hedgehog’ (1799), avoids direct political discussion and evinces a poet who was dynamic and able to adapt. Significantly, poems such as ‘To a Hedge-hog’ and ‘On a Spider’ (1799) demonstrate that his

radicalism cooled much more slowly than has been allowed and, rather than fading into conservatism, it is reincarnated through the genre of Augustan satire before being resurrected as dissenting, evangelical radicalism by a personal spiritual experience.

His skilful and aggressive satire shows Thomson fighting a cultural war on a different front and attempting to resolve his fragmented identity. While he did not appear to offer physical assistance to armed struggle, he committed his principles to verse, particularly on the subject of religion. Chapter 4 makes the case that Thomson consolidated his position as Bard of Carngranny by asserting his interest in the spiritual health of his community, particularly the threats of luxury and avarice upon Irish culture. Just so, Chapter 5 establishes that his satirical ability and adoption of voice serves as a challenge to the stereotype of the cultureless, conservative Irish Presbyterian, presenting Irish satire as a form of imaginative retribution as well as self-criticism. This directly reflects the Enlightenment idea of seeing oneself objectively, as expressed by Burns in 'To a Louse', 'to see oursels as ithers see us.'

From this spirited high point of biting satire, it is perhaps inevitable that *Simple Poems* presents the reader with a surprising mellowing of style; but, rather than representing a poet who loses the cutting edge, it is clear from the above examination of the volume that Thomson begins to experiment with emerging literary Romanticism. Chapter 6 establishes that the contemporary success of *Simple Poems* has been obscured by critical failure to detect a Romantic potential in the Northern school of Irish poetry. This chapter argues that Thomson's growing interest in superstition, fairy, and demonic folklore is shown in poems such as 'To the Devil' and 'To a Hedge-hog', and these are less formulaic than setpieces such as 'The Simmer Fair' (1792). Thomson immortalises his individual relationships, conveyed in 'Epistle to Aeneas Lamont' (1801) and even disputes in 'A Spark of Peace to Eugenius' (1803), based on his neighbour John McNeilly. Relationships and real experience became central to Thomson's *Simple Poems* which sought ultimately to connect the mind and heart, perhaps encapsulating the meeting of Enlightenment and Romantic movement.



In some ways, *Simple Poems* (1806) is the most important edition for the critic in that it shows Thomson's progression or regression into a Miltonic, religious state and writing for a more varied audience. The poetry of 1800-1806 in its apparent simplicity of language was possibly intended to appeal just as much to the common people, being composed in the increasingly generally accessible English language, and the hints of romanticism and consistency of Thomson's values of social justice which appealed to his core readership, are still prevalent. It is surely time that we re-evaluate the characteristics expected from 'labouring-class poets', such as independence from patronage and political radicalism, and look again at literature which has traditionally been marginalized along the lines of the national paradigm. For every poet that fits such static categorizations and criteria, there is a poet who will resist it. The present study argues that Samuel Thomson attempted to transcend the bounds of national literature to form a transnational discourse but was highly reliant on a loyal, local readership who could interpret the coded subtexts that were necessary to discuss themes of national identity during one of Ireland's most unstable political periods.

The resounding words from Thomson's final published edition offer a sense of his vocation as a transnational cultural product. The much-quoted fifth stanza of 'To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton, with a copy of the author's poems' (1806)<sup>5</sup> sums up Thomson's sense of ancestry in Scotland as well as his firmly Irish roots:

I love my native land, no doubt,  
                   Attach'd to her thro' thick and thin;  
 Yet tho' I'm Irish all without,  
                   I'm every item Scotch within.                   (ll. 17-20)

The beginnings of the poem emphasise first that Thomson's Irishness is physically manifest, 'all without' and, as such, his national belonging in his birthplace, Ireland, is unequivocal. Yet it also betrays, deliberately, the extent to

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Thomson, 'To Captain McDougall, Castle Upton: with a Copy of the Author's Poems' (1806), *Simple Poems on a Few Subjects*, (Belfast: Smith & Lyons, 1806) p.87-8. It is worthwhile emphasising that Thomson wrote this poem for a Scottish patron, Captain McDougall, which may have prejudiced his choice of Scottish inspiration.

which he feels that his imagination has become displaced and relocated in the Scottish landscape of his ancestors:

And still when inspiration comes  
           To my night thoughts, and mid day dreams,  
 'Tis from her breezy, willowy holms,  
           Romantic groves and winding streams.

Indeed Fate seems to have mistook  
           The spot at first design'd for me;  
 Which should have been some flowr'y nook  
           In Ayr, or on the banks of Dee. (ll. 9-16)

The Scotland imagined here is entirely apolitical, almost like a promised-land. His expression of his own hybridity, forged in a combination of powerful nostalgia and native birth, is an acceptance of his fragmented identity. Like the exile motif present in 'The Bard's Farewell' (1793) which imagines mass emigration from Ireland's fields to the unseen American plain, Thomson reaches a spiritual, Romantic connection with Scotland which symbolizes a personal space beyond human struggle and politics, even beyond history itself; a place that lives in the imagination or the mind's eye. Thomson celebrates the hybridity of the Ulster Scot's culture and, in this poem, chooses to negotiate his identity as a spiritual exile from the land of his ancestral birth, a perfect combination of hardy, Irish blood and physicality, on one hand, and on the other, a mind informed by Scottish literary, philosophical (both Enlightenment and romantic influence) and theological currents.

Finally, Thomson's position in Irish literature is surely secured in his initiation of correspondence with such a broad cross section of fellow bards in the North of Ireland. The skill and ease with which he handles the verse epistle and sonnet forms for his agendas, whether they are political or personal, demonstrates an enthusiastic and confident personality, determined to maintain an eclectic, though select, group of compatriots. Although the present study has been challenged by the absence of letters in Thomson's own hand, one can infer from his correspondents his keen eye for nature, sparkling—if at times prickly—wit, and his earnest and demanding standards for friendship. There emerges a gentler

side to the poet from the honest and emotional letters from Orr and Mullan, in particular; and a clear enthusiasm and religious sincerity from his correspondence with William Finlay and Hutchinson McFadden.

Philip Robinson's recent anthology of Thomson's selected poems represents a landmark revival of interest in Thomson but, in its selective nature, it does not represent the full scope of Thomson's achievements and is particularly neglectful of his later work. Neither does it offer assistance with the interpretation of his vernacular poetry. The evidence of the present study surely suggests that it is time for the publication of a full, edition of Thomson's complete works, accompanied by a glossary and textual notes. A companion to such an edition would be a monograph incorporating the findings of the present study. Currently, a complete edition of Thomson's correspondence is being compiled by me with a view to contributing an important resource in Irish Romantic studies as well as putting an original, annotated, historical correspondence into the hands of academics and readers.<sup>6</sup> This series of publications would help facilitate the better appreciation of the rich and varied strands of Thomson's work to be comprehended and the quality of his writing to be fully appreciated. It is hoped that this will enable scholars to discuss the enduring significance of Samuel Thomson's life and work within the literature of these isles, and perhaps even further beyond.

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<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Orr (ed.), *An Ulster Writers' Circle: The Collected Correspondence of Samuel Thomson (1766-1816)*, introduced by Gerard Carruthers, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011). The edition will be part of the Four Courts Scotland and Ulster series, complementing work in the field by fellows of the Institutes of Ulster Scots and Irish Studies at the University of Ulster.

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