ROBERT BURNS AND THE POLITICS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION IN SCOTLAND

This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of one of the most significant and profound events of modern times — the French Revolution. When, in July of 1789, the Parisian mob stormed the Bastille, a train of events was initiated which ultimately was to reverberate throughout the whole of Europe. Although Scotland did not escape the impact of these momentous events, it is true to say that the reaction of both the people and the state authorities was conditioned by the very special circumstances which existed in the country at that time.

It is commonly supposed that the societies and movements which emerged in Scotland following the revolution constitute evidence of a widespread and enthusiastic acceptance of the political theory of Jacobinism. A closer examination of the situation reveals, however, that a genuine sympathy for the aims and methods that were employed by the French revolutionary movement was limited to a very few individuals. Rather, a picture emerges of a large number of Scots who, although ardent in their support for the introduction of ‘democratic principles’, never fundamentally wavered in their support for the British state.

In this regard the poems and letters of Robert Burns assume a great significance. As a typical member of the Scottish literati his work clearly illustrates the widely felt and deep-seated commitment to the idea of constitutional reform. More specifically, his work, which was composed in the months immediately following the outbreak of the revolution, permits us to trace how far the symbolism and rhetoric of the latter event had penetrated the consciousness of reform-minded Scots. Finally, Burns' poetry also allows us to examine the retreat that took place from this rhetoric following the series of repressive measures that were instituted by the British state against the perceived revolutionary threat.

Robert Burns is most deservedly renowned for the many intricate and beautiful poems which he constructed around the theme of love. It is the deep and powerful insight which he brings to his examination of this topic which most fully reveals perhaps the true dimensions of his genius as a poet. At the same time, however, it would be a serious mistake to assume that his poetic imagination was restricted solely to this topic. On the contrary,
some of his most popular and widely read poems are concerned with an investigation into the injustices and abuses which he perceived were being perpetrated on his fellow countrymen by those in positions of power and privilege. His wickedly humorous denunciations of the 'Auld Lichts' of the Kirk are particularly well known instances of this sort of poem.¹

Burns, however, also composed a number of poems which were overtly political in nature. The difficulty with analyzing these poems lies in the fact that on close examination they are found to contain a number of apparently contradictory points of view. As we shall shortly see, while these contradictions certainly exist, they may be understood in light of the political events which took place in Scotland between 1789 and Burns' death in 1796.

When Burns visited Edinburgh in 1786 there is little doubt that like most of the other literati of the Scottish Enlightenment he was a confirmed Tory. To assign such a party label to these men is not to claim, of course, that they could not at the same time occasionally display the most enthusiastic and patriotic Scottish sentiments. Such sentiments, however, only usually arose and were displayed when it was perceived (whether accurately or not) that some form of anti-Scottish prejudice was taking place on the part of the government or people in England. For example, the exclusion of Scotland from the Militia Act of 1757 and the anti-Scottish riots that were fanned by Wilke's 'North Briton' were only two of a number of incidents in which the literati were moved to protest against the 'injustices' perpetrated by England against its ostensibly 'equal' partner in union.² At such moments they espoused a pseudo-nationalism which more often than not took the form of an identification with the Stuart cause. There was no time, however, when any real question arose as to where their true loyalties lay. To a man their allegiance was directed to the continued prosperity and well-being of the British state.³

Burns was no exception to this rule. While in Edinburgh he bitterly criticized 'yon mixtie maxtie queer hotch potch, the Coalition'⁴ of the Whigs Charles James Fox and (the Scotsman) Lord North. At the same time he warmly applauded those policies of William Pitt the younger which were aimed at constructing a strong and powerful navy to defend British interests. In a poem entitled 'The Dream' (which was included in the Kilmarnock edition) he wrote,
I'm no mistrusting Willie Pitt,
    When taxes he enlarges,
(An Will's a true guid fallow's get,
    A name not envy spaigres),
That he intends to pay your debt,
    An' lesses a' your charges;
But, God sake, let nae saving fit
Abridge your bonie barges
    An' boats this day.\(^5\)

We must be careful to note that Burns' Tory attitudes and beliefs were subject to certain important alterations and modifications during his Edinburgh visit. The impetus for these changes arose, it appears, when Burns was introduced and was befriended by the circle which gathered around the great Whig politician Henry Erskine. The true nature and extent of their influence on Burns can never of course be ascertained precisely. What is clear, however, is that this influence was sufficient to lessen some of his earlier enmity to the Fox-North coalition. It appears that he seriously considered withdrawing from publication some of his earlier, more strident, anti-Whig poems.\(^6\)

It is equally clear, however, that this influence never became so great that it caused Burns to wholeheartedly embrace the Whig cause. The confusion and uncertainty that were due to his political vacillation were now reflected in some of his poems. Burns' solution (and here he reminds us of the other members of the Scottish literati) was to retreat into a pawkish Jacobite sentimentality. His well known poem, 'O'er the Water to Charlie' is illustrative of his sentiments during this period,

I swear and vow by moon and stars,
    And sun that shines so early,
If I had twenty thousand lives,
    I'd die as aft for Charlie.\(^7\)

This tension between Toryism and Whiggism was not resolved until 1788. That year marked the one hundredth anniversay of the overthrow of the Stuart monarchy by the 'Glorious Revolution'. The anniversary was celebrated by an outpouring of Whig rhetoric that was distinguished only by the extent to which it managed to falsify and distort the true historical role which the Stuarts had played. It was in answer to the innuendo of the day that Burns
wrote,

We may rejoice sufficiently in our deliverance from past evils, without cruelly raking up the ashes of those whose misfortune it was, perhaps as much as their crime, to be the authors of those evils, and we may bless God for all his goodness to us as a nation, without at the same time cursing a few ruined, powerless exiles, who only harboured ideas, and made attempts, that most of us would have done, had we been in their situation.

The 'bloody and tyrannical House of Stuart' may be said with propriety and justice, when compared to the present royal family, and the sentiments of our days; but is there no allowance to be made for the manners of the times? Were the royal contemporaries of the Stuarts more attentive to their subject's rights? Might not the epithets of 'bloody and tyrannical' be, with at least equal justice, applied to the House of Tudor, of York, or any other of their predecessors?8

This letter is significant inasmuch as it helps reveal the nature of his political beliefs at this time. First, Burns demonstrates a genuine sympathy for the Stuart cause. Like all good Scottish Tories Burns could always find it in his heart to commiserate with the many trials and tribulations undergone by the Old Pretender's family. Secondly and more importantly, however, the letter also subtly suggests that while he as an individual was quite willing to give the state his allegiance, that allegiance would never be blind or unquestioning. Specifically, he wishes it to be understood that those politicians and men of power who presently condemn the Stuarts for their tyrannical and unjust practices, cannot expect to win the admiration and respect of the people as a whole if they employ similar tyrannical practices of their own. If the government wishes to maintain the loyalty of the population then they will be required to maintain certain standards of justice and equity in their conduct. It is precisely this latter theme, a humanistic commitment to the principles of social justice, which is the most striking feature of Burns' political outlook on the eve of the French revolution.

Let us now briefly turn to examine the political situation in Scotland at this time. Two major controversies exercised the imagination of the people, the first of which concerned the question of parliamentary and burgh reform. Although the county franchise which fixed the qualification of electors was considered too high

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(land had to be held to the value of 400 pounds Scots) the real abuse which was targeted by the reformers was the system which became popularly known as 'Nominal and Fictitious' votes. Simply put, large landowners would temporarily convey portions of their land to certain of their trusted supporters. The 'Parchment Barons', who were thereby enfranchised, would then vote in accordance with the desires of the particular landlord to ensure that his nominee was elected. When the election had been completed the portions of land would then revert to their original superior.

Such corrupt practices were found paralleled in the burghs. The great majority of council elections was based on a statute which dated from 1469. This statute permitted the out-going body of burgesses or councillors to nominate and in effect select who would serve as representatives for the burgh in the succeeding term. This venial practice of self-selection was aggravated in many cases by instances of the misapplication or misappropriation of town revenue by the burgesses, their illegal contraction of debt, their alienation of public property and similar offences.

It is true that attempts were certainly being made to reform some of the more obvious abuses to which this parliamentary and burgh system gave rise. However, William Pitt's overwhelming victory in the election of 1784 acted to dampen much of the impetus and zeal of the reformer's efforts. What legislation did manage to reach the floor of the House of Commons was half-heartedly at best and was quickly and quite easily defeated. Essentially, the movement for reform was fatally hampered by the limited extent of its popular appeal. That is to say, while the emerging middle class of manufacturers and entrepreneurs were in the main extremely enthusiastic supporters of the principles of reform, the larger mass of the population which belonged to the lower end of the social spectrum was unaffected by it. Not even the most zealous reformer was advocating the introduction of universal suffrage.

The second great controversy of this period, the question of religious reform, did not suffer from the same limited appeal. This issue rose to prominence with the introduction of the 'Roman Catholic Relief Bill' of 1778 and the widespread anti-popish riots which quickly followed revealed the full depth of popular feeling on this issue. For a number of reasons, however, a substantial portion of the established clergy supported the call for an alleviation
of the oppressive restrictions which Catholics suffered from. The result of this was a growing split between many congregations and their ministers. This in turn was responsible for the reemergence of an issue that had troubled many Scots ever since the time of the Reformation, that is, the problem of patronage in the church.

The right to appoint ministers to their parish had been restored to the landed aristocracy by an Act of 1712. This Act, which was bitterly disputed at that time, had led to secessions from the Kirk in 1740 and 1761 and had resurfaced once more in 1781. That year witnessed the emergence of the so-called ‘Popular Party’ in the General Assembly who had sought to uphold the right of congregations to a voice in the appointment of their minister.

This debate soon assumed national proportions with the creation of a substantial number of societies and committees which were dedicated to the cause of church reform. The general tenor of the plethora of pamphlets and resolutions which then came into circulation was to condemn patronage on the grounds that it constituted an unwarranted and unjustifiable delegation of powers to the landowning faction. Significantly for the first time, many of the arguments against privilege were now linked to demands for a more widespread and fundamental reform of the entire political system. For example, in 1783 the Glasgow Society for the Abolition of Patronage produced a pamphlet entitled, An Inquiry into the Principles of Ecclesiastical Patronage and Presentation. Therein it was argued that

More than once we have had occasion to observe and lament that, by the form of the constitution of the country, the great body of people are, in relation to civil affairs, excluded from the exercise and enjoyment of the rights of freedom. The consequence is what was naturally to have been expected — a total indifference approaching to insensibility in relation to the value and advantage of political liberty ... It is obvious to all the world that, excepting a mere security for life and a capacity of holding property, they are reduced to the exercise only of the common functions of all animals, the gratification of hunger and thirst and other similar enjoyments.

Although the struggle for a reform of the patronage system failed at this time the importance of the movement must not be under-
estimated. What this struggle did manage to achieve was a limited but nonetheless significant awakening of political consciousness in the mass of the Scottish people. It was this awakening which was to have such important consequences when the revolution broke out in France shortly afterwards.

The initial reaction in Scotland to the fall of the Bastille and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was muted. This was due to the fact that at first the full significance of these events was not readily apparent. This situation significantly altered with the publication of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke’s vehement attack on what he perceived as the emergence of French despotism provided the catalyst for a lively and spirited debate. In particular, it called forth a vast number of books, pamphlets and newspaper articles agreeing, or more usually disagreeing, with his analysis of the aims of the revolution. Generally speaking, those individuals and groups who had agitated most vigorously against parliamentary, burgh or ecclesiastical reform enthusiastically welcomed Burke’s assessment of the inherent dangers of French ‘democratic principles’. On the other hand, the majority of the population (that is, those at the lower end of the social spectrum as well as the manufacturing middle class) whose consciousness had been raised by the earlier struggles, eagerly welcomed the rhetoric of ‘democracy’ and ‘equality’ that was now emanating from France.

This large but initially inchoate movement eventually solidified with the publication of Tom Paine’s *Rights of Man*. In this work, which enjoyed widespread success particularly in Scotland, Paine attempted to suggest that in comparison to the new French constitution, the principles which informed the British constitution left a great deal to be desired. In particular, he sought to highlight not only the corrupt electoral laws but also the oppressive and unfair taxation system and how this was bound up in the whole system of power and privilege which was so successfully exercised by the nobility and large landowners.

It is likely that serious trouble might still have been averted if the state authorities had agreed to some of the more moderate demands of the reformers. Their actions amply demonstrated, however, how impervious they were to such a course. All attempts, for example, that were made to re-open the debate on burgh reform were strenuously and firmly opposed. To counter the flood of
articles calling for ‘democratic reform’ a proclamation was made banning every publication that was perceived to be ‘seditious’. Finally, legislation was introduced (the ‘Corn Law’) which provided monetary bounties in order to encourage the export of corn from the country while at the same time imposing heavy duties to discourage its import. While such a move was made ostensibly to counter a threat to food supplies due to the war in France, in effect it was an action that resulted in large financial gains for the large landowners. For the manufacturing middle classes, however, it meant an increase in the price of the basic staple bread which had to be paid for by raising the wages of the workforce. For the members of the lower orders who had no regular employment it raised the ominous spectre of starvation.18

As a result, by the middle of 1791, widespread and serious civil disorders had broken out throughout Scotland.19 There is no doubt that the principle motive behind these riots lay in the genuine fear of high prices and food shortages. The better educated and more politically aware leaders of the mob, however, often attempted to follow the lead provided by some members of the intelligentsia and expressed their material demands through a political symbolism imported from France. The most widely adopted and famous of these symbols was the ‘Tree of Liberty’ that was erected in towns and villages throughout the land. Robert Burns, in one of his most famous poems of this time, also adopted this symbolism.

Heard ye o’ the tree o’ France,
I watna what’s the name o’t;
Around it a’ the patriots dance,
Weel Europe kens the fame o’t.
It stands where once the Bastille stood,
A prison built by kings, man,
When superstition’s hellish brood,
Kept France in leading strings, man.20

It would not be inaccurate to state that Burns’ sympathy at this time lay with the most advanced and articulate fraction of the reform movement. In Dumfries he associated with a small group of like-minded individuals who met periodically to discuss ‘advanced’ views on constitutional reform. This group was probably modelled on the national society which had been launched in Edinburgh in July of 1792. This society, called the ‘Scottish Society of the Friends of the People’, counted amongst its founders such leading
Whig statesmen as the Earl of Lauderdale and the former Lord Advocate Thomas Erskine. In a poem entitled, ‘Here’s a Health to Them That’s Awa’, Burns celebrates these figures and the cause that they are supporting,

May Liberty meet wi success,
May Prudence protect her frae evil,
May tyrants and Tyranny time i’ the mist,
And wander their way to the Devil.

Not long after this Burns wrote to his friend John Erskine of Mar that,

The uniformed mob may swell a nation’s bulk; and the titled, tinsel Courtly throng may be its feathered ornament, but the number of those who are elevated enough in life, to reason and reflect; and yet low enough to keep clear of the real contagion of a Court; these are a Nation’s strength.

This letter is revealing of the true nature of the political sympathies of Burns and the reform societies. The ‘Scottish Society of the Friends of the People’ and its smaller, local satellite organizations agitated for certain specific reform measures within the framework of the already existing state structure. Indeed, in many instances, membership of these societies was conditional on the swearing of an oath to uphold the British constitution and a promise to eschew all those who participated in acts of civil disobedience. From the beginning, the avowed aim of these societies was to counteract the tendencies of those who might wish to advocate the radical, revolutionary overthrow of the British constitution and the establishment in its place of a constitution constructed on republican lines.

The efforts of these ‘Friends of the People’ to achieve any major reforms ultimately failed for the simple reason that no matter how hard they tried, they could never successfully articulate the difference between their reformist demands and the revolutionary connotations of the rhetoric and symbolism which they had so enthusiastically imported from France. At the same time, of course, it was in the interests of the authorities not to allow such a differentiation to take place. In particular, it was that faction of landowners and aristocrats who had so bitterly opposed any measure of political and ecclesiastical reform in the years preceding the revolution, who now attempted to suggest that any sympathy with the
'democratic principles' espoused by the 'Friends of the People' was tantamount to a call for bloody revolution. By successfully insinuating a connection between the call for reform and the doctrine of Jacobinism they effectively eliminated any possibility that the former could be achieved.

In fact they almost succeeded too well. When details of the 'September massacres' in Paris began to become known in Britain, the authorities managed to whip themselves up into such a state of hysteria that they began to believe their own stories about widespread plots to overthrow the government. From this time onwards almost every leading figure of authority began to take it for granted that reform was synonymous with revolution. Even the normally sober-minded and level-headed Lord Advocate, Dundas, had rendered himself into such a state of self-delusion that he commented that the principles of one reform association were,

... not a reform but a subversion of Parliament, not a redress or cure of grievances, imaginary or real, in a legal, peaceable, and constitutional way, but a determined and systematic plan and resolution to subvert the limited monarchy and free constitution of Britain, and substitute in its place, by intimidation, force, and violence, a republic or democracy.\(^{25}\)

In reality, of course, there were very few individuals indeed who espoused Jacobin views and they had no influence at all on the reform movement.\(^{26}\)

What did result, however, was a crackdown by the state authorities. By late 1792 they had organized a highly efficient network of spies who were relied on to inform on all those suspected of holding even the mildest of reform opinions. Early the following year they instituted a series of state trials which, under the enthusiastic direction of Lord Braxfield, condemned several of the leading reformers to long terms of transportation.\(^{27}\) When even these measures proved to be insufficient they did not hesitate to resort to armed force. The single minded application of these measures had the desired effect for by 1794 virtually every vestige of the reform movement had been stamped out.

Burns had been an early victim of the repression. In 1792 some unknown person denounced him to the authorities as one likely to
hold 'extreme views'. Burns, whose livelihood as a government excise man was put in jeopardy by these charges, wrote to his superior, Graham of Fintry, in the following terms,

I say, that the allegation ... is a Lie. To the British Constitution ... next after my God, I am most devoutly attached.

When that failed to clear his name he followed it up in January 1793 with another letter,

I never uttered any invectives against the king - His private worth, it is altogether impossible that such a man as I, can appreciate; and in his Public capacity, I always revered, and ever will, with the soundest loyalty, revere, the monarch of Great Britain as, to speak in Masonic, the sacred KEYSTONE OF OUR ROYAL ARCH CONSTITUTION. AS TO REFORM PRINCIPLES, I look upon the British Constitution, as settled at the Revolution to be the most glorious constitution on earth ...

We should not forget when we read these words that Burns was motivated in part by a fear of what such an accusation might mean for the future of his family and himself. As a man with a keen interest in the political situation he was well aware by this time of what steps the authorities were willing to take in order to suppress the opposition. He must also, however, have been angry and frustrated at being accused of adhering to principles that he had never subscribed to. Burns well knew the fundamental difference between the principles of constitutional reform and a support for Jacobinism. Yet in order to exonerate himself from the taint of the latter charge he was required to refrain from his passionate advocacy of those humanistic beliefs and values which were so dear to him.

It became increasingly clear in the last few years of Burns' life that Edmund Burke's analysis of the future progress of the revolution in France had been disturbingly accurate. Few now doubted that the French state had become as tyrannical and authoritarian as its absolutist predecessor. When, in 1795, it became known that the Directory was laying active plans for the invasion and conquest of Britain, the decision was made to raise a number of local self-defence units. Burns played an active role in the formation of one
such unit in Dumfries. Later that same year he wrote a poem which warned of the dangers of invasion and urged that,

O, let us not, like snarling tykes,
In wrangling be divided,
Till, slap, come in an unco loon,
And wi' a rung decide it.
Be BRITAIN still to BRITAIN true,
Amang oursels united;
For never but by British hands,
Must British wrongs be righted.

Such sentiments are not, of course, at odds with his earlier support for the reform movement. The situation has evolved, however, and Burns feels that he has to make plain his loyalty to the British constitution. It is interesting that even in this most patriotic of poems Burns cannot resist a final humanistic appeal.

The wretch that would a Tyrant own,
And the wretch, his true-sworn brother,
Who'd set the Mob above the Throne
May they be damn'd together.
Who will not sing, GOD SAVE THE KING,
Shall hand as high's the steeples;
But while we sing, GOD SAVE THE KING
We'll ne'er forget THE PEOPLE. 29

In this paper we have outlined the origin and development of the political response in Scotland to the outbreak of the French revolution. We have suggested that it is erroneous to view the popular movements of this time as some sort of 'off-shoot' of the Jacobin party. On the contrary, the Scottish people were concerned with attempting to find solutions to some very real social problems and were not particularly concerned with formulating abstract 'democratic principles'.

It is in this light that we should attempt to understand Robert Burns' attitude to the French revolution. As an articulate member of the literati he shared a passionate and genuine concern for a reformation of the corrupt practices perpetrated by the landed aristocracy on the mass of the population. He always believed, however, that such a reformation could only take place within the frame of reference provided by the British constitution. While his
advocacy of this cause would sometimes lead him to rely on the rhetoric and symbolism of the continental revolutionaires, it is a misconception to imagine that he ever supported the idea of the revolutionary transformation of the British state in the manner proposed by the Jacobins.

Robert Burns' life-long concern for the well-being of his fellow human beings and his desire for social justice is evident throughout his work. But we must lay to rest the myth of his Jacobin 'sympathies'. Like other thinking men and women of the day he advocated social and political reform, not social and political revolution.

University of Guelph

David G. Baxter

NOTES


7. 'O'er the Water to Charlie', in The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns, vol. 1, p. 400.


11. See Meikle, p. 33.

12. See Ferguson, p. 111.

13. See Meikle, p. 35.

14. Quoted in Meikle, pp. 36-37.

15. See Smout, p. 223.


17. See Ferguson, p. 250 and Meikle, p. 60.

18. See Meikle, p. 73.


22. 'Here's a Health to Them That's Awa', in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, vol. 2, p. 663.


24. See Ferguson, p. 252.

25. Quoted in Meikle, pp. 142-143.

26. See Lenman, p. 102.

27. The best account of these trials is contained in H. Cockburn, *Examination of the Trials for Sedition which have Hitherto occurred in Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1888).
28. Quoted in Lindsay, pp. 236-237.