

Address Of Beelzebub

Introduction

This poem, written in 1786, was provoked by the controversy over whether Highlanders should be encouraged to remain at home or emigrate. It is often described as a brilliant piece of invective against the abuse of power, and Burns uses heavy irony to make his point. Although written in 1786, perhaps because it was too risky to criticize a powerful man like the Earl of Breadalbane in print – it was not actually published till 1818, long after Burns's death.

Background

The Highland society in London 'learned from the Earl of Breadalbane (Broadalbane) that five hundred Highlanders had subscribed money to emigrate from the estates of Macdonald of Glengary to Canada'. The noblemen and gentlemen of the Highland Society decided such a loss of British subjects would lead to a threat to British security and an economic loss to the landlords. Therefore, in June 1803 parliament passed the Passenger Vessels Act, which raised the cost of a passage across the Atlantic to Canada and America under the guise of improving conditions relating to hygiene, food and comfort for passengers.

The truth of the Bill, drawn up by Scotland's lord advocate, Charles Hope, was revealed in a letter he wrote in 1804 in which he admits they were looking to prevent 'the effects of that pernicious spirit of discontent against their own country, and the rage for emigrating to America.' The Bill obviously worked for the Passenger Vessels Act led to further overcrowding and miserable living conditions of the Highlands. It is truly ironic that the very "gentlemen" then trying to prevent emigration, should a few years later, take up the cause with vengeance and perpetrate the forced exodus, known as the Highland Clearances, when the population no longer served as an economic commodity.

The Highland Clearances are still a very emotive subject to many people, in many parts of the world, today. They consistently provoke people to take sides and have led to deep, and sometimes acrimonious academic debate. Was this indeed the first example of 'ethnic cleansing'? The first clearances occurred as early as the 1770s, and people were still being evicted in the 1870s. Eventually, even the sheep, which replaced the people, were to a large extent gone. The great sheep farms were designed to provide landowners with an economic miracle, providing meat for the great burgeoning cities of the south and wool to the factories, but they became unsustainable by the last quarter of the 19th century, undercut by cheaper and often better quality products from Australia and New Zealand. Is it not ironic that these lands were so heavily settled by the very people cleared from the Highland glens?

The Clearances have been seen as an act of greed and betrayal on the part of the ruling class in the Highlands: and as an attempt to hold on to their land and preserve their wealth and status by sacrificing their people to a four legged animal called, a sheep.

May set their highlan bluid a ranklin;
Some Washington again may head them,
Or some Montgomery, fearless, lead them;
Till, God knows what may be effected,
When by such heads an' hearts directed:

But Burns, in addition to praising the Earl for keeping the 'Highland boors' under subjection, exhorts him to be even harsher on them and break their spirits,

But hear, my lord! Glengarry, hear!

Your hand's owre light on them, I fear;

Your factors, grieves, trustees, and bailies,

I canna say but they do gaylies;

I can't say but they do well enough

They lay aside a' tender mercies,

An' tirl the hallions to the birses;

strip the idlers to the skin

But the earl has to be careful as Burns can be seen to highlight the attitude towards the Highlanders in lines 37/38

Yet while they're only poind't and herriet,
robbed

Yet while they are only plundered and

They'll keep their stubborn Highland spirit:
spirit.

They will keep their stubborn Highland

So he suggests you really need to make sure they're punished by sending the men to jail for their debts and the young women to Drury Lane in London, where they can learn to make a living from prostitution.

But smash them! crash them a' to spails,

pieces

An' rot the dyvors i' the jails!

debtors

The young dogs, swinge them to the labour;

whip

Let wark an' hunger mak them sober!

work

The hizzies, if they're aughtlins fawsont, girls; in any way good looking

Let them in Drury-lane be lesson'd!

Burns/Beelzebub writes to congratulate the lords responsible for their actions against the audacity of the 'rebel generation'.

To cove the rebel generation,

An' save the honour o' the nation?

They, an' be damn'd! what right hae they

To meat, or sleep, or light o' day?

Far less - to riches, pow'r, or freedom,

But what your lordship likes to gie them?

and the social injustice of the piece is encapsulated in lines 51/52 '

An' gar the tatter'd gipseys pack And make the tattered gypsies leave

Wi' a' their bastarts on their back! With all their bastards on their back!

In the end, Beelzebub wants to meet the Earl in the devil's house. He'll keep a seat in Hell for him next to some of the worst villains of ancient times for example Herod, Polycrate, a 6th century Greek tyrant who killed both of his brothers to gain control of their kingdom and Almagro and Pizarro, two Spanish invaders responsible for slaughtering thousands of Inca in Peru.

Go on, my Lord! I lang to meet you,

An' in my house at hame to greet you;

Wi' common lords ye shanna mingle,

The benmost neuk beside the ingle, innermost corner beside the fire

At my right han' assigned your seat,

'Tween Herod's hip an' Polycrate:

Or if you on your station tarrow, doubt, hesitate

Between Almagro and Pizarro,

A seat, I'm sure ye're well deservin't;

An' till ye come - your humble servant,

Written by: Beelzebub in Hell, on 1st June, Anno Mundi 5790.

So what are we to make of the poem? I think a key message is that Burns assigns the sovereign right of man to him alone to be the one to choose his habitation and destiny.

I was also intrigued by the date Burns assigned to the poem. According to the Burns Encyclopaedia it conforms to the calculation of Archbishop Ussher of Armagh, who on the basis of the description of how earth was founded in Genesis 5 -25, had calculated the earth's creation by the Almighty as 4004 BC. AM or Anno Mundi (year of the earth), when added to 4004 BC gives the correct date of composition as 1786.

Further words on the Highland Society:

The Society was founded in 1778 by Highland gentlemen resident in [London](#) with

- "the view of establishing and supporting schools in the [Highlands](#) and in the Northern parts of Great Britain,
- for relieving distressed Highlanders at a distance from their native homes,
- for preserving the antiquities and rescuing from oblivion the valuable remains of [Celtic](#) literature,
- and for promoting the improvement and general welfare of the Northern parts of [Great Britain](#)".

Interestingly, in 1782, the Society was instrumental in securing the repeal of the statutory proscription of [tartans](#) introduced after the [Jacobite rising of 1745](#). In its early days it was active in the investigations into the authenticity of the poems supposedly written by [Ossian](#), which it had also helped to publish.