

Robert Burns and War

A few years ago, I presented a Remembrance Day discussion on Robert Burns' take on war. Upon reflection, that presentation was more about Burns' poetical reflections on how war affected the lives of people who were caught up in war time.

Such a poem was "The Sodger's Return". We are all familiar with the song of the same name. Burns' title for the song was "When wild war's deadly blast was blawn". In actual fact the poem does not deal with the impact of war on people's lives. (Slide 2)

Rather, it is written in the first person and tells a love story about a soldier returning home from a war and renewing his love affair with his sweetheart; his "Nancy". He walks down the path to Nancy's mother's cottage, still in uniform and carrying his knapsack that contained all his worldly possessions, and there he and Nancy fall into one another's arms. Nancy tells him that she has inherited her grandfather's wealth and together they live happily ever after.

Almost as a footnote to the song is the last verse:

"For gold the merchant ploughs the main,
The farmer ploughs the manner;
But *glory* is the sodger's prize,
The sodger's wealth is honor:
The brave poor sodger ne'er dispise,
Nor count him as a stranger;
Remember he's his country's stay,
In day and hour of danger."

If it weren't for that closing couplet, it would not be worth including it in this presentation.

Along those same lines, is another poem Burns penned in 1790, entitled "I'll mak you be fain to follow me". In this poem, the author overhears a young soldier attempting to woo a "bony young lass" by winning her over to the glory and glamour of life with a military man.

He promises her a part of his supper, a part of his bed, and packing along the King's high-gate with him.

Puts me in mind of the chorus of The Gallant Forty-Twa:

Romin' through the green fields on a summer's day,
Watching all the country lasses workin' at the hay.
They winked at me and laughed, I kened

I loved them ane and a', for I was wearin' the tartan o' the gallant Forty-Twa.
These poems and many more like them that would be classified as war poems dwell on the phenomenon of women being attracted to men in uniform. Why is that? I could only guess, but it is habit that persists to this day.

At the risk of going overboard on this tangent let me give you one more: This one is taken from *The Jolly Beggars: Sodger Laddie*, which Burns wrote in 1785. It is also known as "I once was a maid":

(See added page of I once was a maid) *Attached*

The story depicts a legitimate aspect of life in wartime: The camp followers whose lives took on that sort of immediacy.

And yet, in true Burns' fashion, we learn that despite misfortune, poverty and alienation from society, the floozy is still able to derive pleasure from her body: from alcohol, conviviality and love.

Whilst the foregoing shows some of the themes Burns explored and demonstrate Burns' powers of observation, they fall short of delving into his depth of feeling and the principles the man stood for and the strength of his convictions.

(Slide 3)

These words that appear on a recruitment poster under a cameo of the Bard and the caption:

"What Burns Said in 1782 Holds Good in 1915:

Oh why the deuce should I repine,
And be an ill foreboder?
I'm 23, and five feet nine,
I'll go and be a sodger.

TAKE HIS TIP"

'On the Seas and Far Away', written in 1794, provides a convenient segway from the emotional upheaval in people's love lives to the broader implications of war on societies: (Quote)

Peace, thy olive wand extend, And bid wild War his ravage end,

Man with brother Man to meet, And as a brother kindly greet: Then may Heaven with prosperous gales Fill my Sailor's welcome sails;

I once was a maid, tho' I cannot tell when, And still my delight is in proper
young men:

Some one of a troop of dragoons was my daddie, No wonder I'm fond of a
sodger laddie,

The first of my loves was a swaggering blade, To rattle the thundering drum
was his trade;

His leg was so tight, and his cheek was so ruddy, Transported I was with my
sodger laddie.

But the godly old chaplain left him in the lurch; The sword I forsook for the
sake of the church:

He ventur'd the soul, and I risked the body, 'Twas then I proved false to my
sodger laddie.

Full soon I grew sick of my sanctified sot, The regiment at large for a husband
I got;

From the gilded spontoon to the fife I was ready, I asked no more but a sodger
laddie.

But the peace it reduc'd me to beg in despair, Till I met ^{an} old boy in a
Cunningham fair,

His rags regimental, they flutter'd so gaudy, My heart it rejoic'd at a sodger
laddie.

And now I have liv'd - I know not how long, And still I can join in a cup and a
song;

But whilst with both hands I can hold the glass steady, Here's to thee, my
hero, my sodger laddie.

To my arms their charge convey, My dear lad that's far away. On the seas and far away,
On stormy seas and far away,

To my arms their charge convey, My dear lad that's far away.

The song describes a young woman's fear and longing for her lover who has sailed to war, but it contains a typically Burnsian appeal for peace, fraternity and equality: 'Man with brother Man to meet, And as a brother kindly greet'. That, of course, is what we are seeking from our Bard of wisdom.

Having given a nod to the world of romance and the lighter consequences of warfare, let me turn to Burns' strong feelings toward war's place in the righting of wrongs and the place of patriotism in a man's life.

(Slide 4)

Burns sent a copy of "Does haughty Gaul invasion threat?" to Mrs Dunlop in the autumn 1795. The poem was written while Burns was helping to organize the Dumfries companies of Volunteers against a proposed French invasion in the spring of that year. It was truly meant to serve as a rallying cry to all the British forces to repel the would-be invaders. I shall quote only the closing lines:

Then let the louns beware, Sir;

Be Britain still to Britain true, Amang ourselves united;

For never but by British hands Maun British wrangs be righted!

No! never but by British hands Shall British wrangs be righted! . . .

The wretch that would a tyrant own,

And the wretch, his true-born brother,

Who would set the Mob aboon the Throne,

May they be damn'd together!

Who will not sing "God save the King,"

Shall hang as high's the steeple;

But while we sing "God save the King,"

We'll ne'er forget The People!

But while we sing "God save the King," We'll ne'er forget The People!

Burns received some criticism for these concluding words, but for us they represent redemption. This line is the recurrent and constant principle that defines the true Robert Burns.

Those of you who have been fortunate enough to have visited the 2nd floor of the Globe Inn will have read this verse which Burns inscribed on a windowpane:

" I Murder Hate by field or flood,
Tho Glory's name may screen us;
In wars at hame I'll spend my blood-
Life-giving wars of Venus.
The deities that I adore
Are Social Peace and Plenty:
I'm better pleased to make one more,
Than be the death of twenty."

That first verse tells us much about Burns' views of life and the place of war in protecting his country and its people. (quote)

The second verse tells us much about the depth of knowledge and philosophy that this "ploughman" had acquired.

Incidentally, this poem is sung to the tune of Killiecrankie.

(read quote: p471 of MacKay and intro paragraph)

The name Zimri became a byword for a [traitor](#) who murdered his master. When [Jehu](#) led a bloody military revolt to seize the throne of Israel, killed both [Jehoram](#) king of Israel and [Ahaziah](#) king of Judah, and entered the citadel of [Jezreel](#) to execute Queen [Jezebel](#), she greeted him with the words: "Is it peace, Zimri, you murderer of your master?" ([2 Kings 9:31](#)). In [John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*](#), the character of Zimri stands for [the Duke of Buckingham](#).

Chapter 16 of [1 Kings](#) relates how Elah and all his family members were murdered by his [chariot commander Zimri](#), who became his successor.

Cozbi was the daughter of the [Midianite king Zur](#). This princess seduced Israelite men into sexual sin and [idolatry](#). Against the commands of [Moses](#), [Zimri](#) was seduced into having sexual relations with her, and she became his wife or [concubine](#). She and Zimri were killed with a [javelin](#) by [Phinehas](#), grandson of [Aaron](#) ([Numbers 25](#)).

Scots Wha Hae Quote and commentary. 500

(Last Slide)

A man's a man – read from the slide) 535