

Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation

Burns wrote the song in 1791, but did not initially want to take credit for its writing as at that time he was working as an excise man and as such, it would have been politically dangerous for him to profess anti-Scotland/England Union opinions, especially around the time of the French Revolution and when government informers were active. Burns supported the ideals of the Revolution and often at that time published in the radical press either anonymously or under a pseudonym. The song first appeared in print in Johnson's *Musical Museum* of 1792, but was not attributed to Burns. Interestingly, the phrase 'Such a parcel of rogues in a nation' is first found in James Hogg's *The Jacobite Relics of Scotland* in a poem called "The Awkward Squad", which attacked the "thirty-one rogues" - the Scottish commissioners, who were alleged to have sold the nation out in 1707 at the Union of the Crowns and who were well rewarded with land and money for their treachery

Most people would agree that it is an oversimplification to claim the Union of England and Scotland (and hence the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament) was brought about by the commissioners being 'bought and sold for English gold', that is being bribed. I think we need to go back to the failure of the Darien colonization project as one of the root causes for moving to the Union. The Darien Scheme, being an unsuccessful attempt by certain wealthy Scots' merchants to make Scotland a world trading nation by establishing a colony called "New Caledonia" on the Isthmus of Panama on the Gulf of Darién in the late 1690s

It was recognized that a large number of Scotland's nobles and upper classes were almost bankrupted by the Darien fiasco. With the failure of the Scheme, the Scottish establishment realised that it could never be a major power on its own and that if it wanted to share the benefits of England's international trade and the growth of the **English Empire**, then its future would have to lie in unity with England.

Burns wrote to Mrs. Dunlop (10th April 1790) "What are all the boasted advantages which my country reaps from a certain Union, that can counterbalance the annihilation of her independence and even her very name. (*At that time Scotland was known as North Britain.*) Nothing can reconcile me to the common terms. **English** Ambassador, **English** Court. I believe in my conscience such ideas as My Country, her independence, her honour."

As to the Union of Parliaments, there was no turning back, and there are other letters in which Burns states that the document concerning the British constitution contains glorious principles, but that he is alarmed at the corruption between the executive power and the House of Commons, which has caused a great deviation from these original principles. He was still, therefore, fighting for the best for Scotland under the union. This I believe is the true Burns. A man of honour who would not have sold Scotland for gold, who was prepared to accept the Union if the powers had stuck to the principles contained within, but who despised the corruption and the people who strayed from these principles of the constitution for their own benefits.

Could this be the reason why he produced the songs of Scotland for no monetary gain for himself? Many believe this was Burns' major patriotic task in life. He knew that a Nation without song had no soul, that a Nation without song would lose its identity and for that we should be thankful. Have you noticed that once the Scots started singing 'Flower of Scotland' at rugby and

soccer games, the English became much more patriotic with their singing of their national anthem or in the case of rugby, 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot'

What else I find interesting in the material that I've read, is a trend towards Burns' writing more radical poems and songs to support his true feelings and ideals about nationalism, the rights and brotherhood of man and independence e.g. his support for the French revolution and American Independence with poems such as 'The Rights of Woman in 1792; A Fragment (Ballad of American War) in 1784; 'Ode to General Washington's Birthday in 1794; A Man's a Man in 1795 and the Slave's Lament in 1792 and less of the works aimed at his local audience for their enjoyment and titivation. To me he has kept alive the idea that there is such a thing as a Scottish Nation by his references to these other themes.