Robert Burns - His Poetical Satire

Robert Burns was a person of temperament and passion. As commonalities of human nature, the same could be said of all but the most ascetic. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that the poet displayed these attributes more robustly than is altogether common. A poet without passion is an unlikely contradiction, and some degree of volatility of temperament often goes hand in hand. There is comparatively little of importance in the events of the poet's life and of his personal relationships that is not reasonably well known to us, thanks to the meticulous research of his many biographers and others, as well as through the great volume of Burns' own copious correspondence. Through that knowledge, it is possible to place much of his poetry in the context of actual life events, or at least to suggest plausible backdrop and motivation.

Throughout his works, Robert Burns displays a wide range of talents and interests beyond his obvious genius as a poet. He was a very knowledgeable naturist, an astute political observer, a social activist, a very accomplished writer of prose, a brilliant conversationalist, and possessed of a keen sense of irony and humour. He was also a man of the people who understood as few others did the fears and the day-to-day challenges that beset the common man. At a time not far removed from the disastrous 1745 uprising and its oppressive aftermath, Scotland was still under the thumb of its English overlord and its own home-grown grandees who were all-too-willing to act as enforcers for their southern masters, in many cases as a means of ingratiating themselves for wealth and honours. The common folk were treated as little more than fodder for greedy landowners and other members of the ruling class. This inevitably led to an impoverished majority, with few rights and liberties and little opportunity for upward mobility.

Robert Burns was keenly aware of the glaring disparities that divided the classes, and many of his poems and songs sought to shine a beacon on the resulting exploitation and injustices. He knew how to use humour and satire to confront these issues and humiliate or shame the abusers, but over time he became more and more aware of the limitations of free speech in eighteenth century Scotland, particularly in matters political or when appearing critical of the aristocracy, or even the native ruling establishment. This need for caution became all the more critical following his appointment as an excise officer, although even then he came very close to losing his living over a few indiscrete actions.

The power of satire became an essential weapon in achieving the poet's aspirations as a social activist; I say aspirations, but arrived at perhaps only reluctantly as a means of

shining a light on the wrongs that he grew more aware of through his youth and early adulthood. He knew that he had to be careful to avoid an appearance of open radicalism; hence, some of his most critical verses utilize thinly disguised polemics that fall just short of social or political impropriety, or even sedition, the latter offence having a very much lower bar than in later eras. However, some subjects were more open to direct criticism or satirical invective than others, and that is where we find the poet at his outrageous best. When he does take aim at the politicos or the general establishment, the casual modern reader may fail to appreciate the burr under the saddle, but Burns' contemporaries would have been more aware of current issues and events (and the important personages who were often in his crosshairs) and would have been attuned to some of the subtler inferences.

The targets that were particularly vulnerable to the bard's cutting satire (without fear of official sanction) included over-zealous religionists, hypocrites and annoying individuals who might have raised his hackles. In reading his works, the line between humour and intentional satire sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish. In the many epitaphs he composed, he occasionally appears to insult or ridicule people that we know were his friends, or others with whom he had no recorded enmity. This leads to a reasonable assumption that some of these were spoofs that he knew would be taken in good part. In other instances, he may have composed them as a matter of whimsy, perhaps following a particular event or a noteworthy personal characteristic, but without intending to make them public. An example of this latter genre might be his **Epitaph for William Nicol**:

Ye maggots, feast on Nicol's brain,
For few sic feasts you've gotten;
And fix your claws on Nicol's heart,
For deil a bit o't's rotten.

William Nicol was a master of classics at the High School in Edinburgh. He was an academic of some reputation and well respected by most of Edinburgh's elite. He was also a friend of Burns who accompanied him on his Highland Tour of 1787, and while Burns had good reason to be annoyed with him over at least one incident on that tour, they remained good friends throughout the poet's life, so much so that in 1791 he named one of his sons William Nicol Burns. So it does appear that these lines were never meant to offend. Still, one wonders at the initial reaction of the venerable Nicol upon reading them!

In the case of other epitaphs – which Burns did use as instruments of scorn – there is a known background that leaves us in little doubt about the hurtful intent, and we have many such examples. First, we have something entitled **The Toadeater**, in itself a considerable insult. This quatrain was directed at a young man of very modest means

who lucked into a considerable sum of money. Rather than enjoying his good fortune in a humble manner, he made a nuisance of himself by dropping the names of aristocratic individuals whom he was claiming as new friends:

Of Lords and acquaintance you boast,
And the Dukes that you dined with yestreen; *yesterday*
Yet an insect's an insect at most,
Tho it crawl on the curl of a Queen!

And there is the following double-barreled takedown of a poor hapless fellow and his domineering wife who lived in the poet's local town of Mauchline…from **Epitaph on a Henpecked Husband**:

As father Adam once was fool'd,
A case that's still too common,
Here lies a man a woman ruled –
The Devil ruled the woman.

In the **Epitaph to a Wag in Mauchline**, the target of comic reproach is an acquaintance and casual friend, John 'Clockie' Brown, a clockmaker. We never discover if he was amused or alarmed by this; a bit of both, probably, as in such a small community his reputation for cuckolding must surely have been known to at least a few.

Lament him, Mauchline husbands a',
He aften did assist ye;
For had ye staid hale weeks awa',
Your wives they n'er had missed ye!

Ye Mauchline bairns, as on ye pass
To school in bands thegether,
O, tread ye lightly on his grass –
Perhaps he was your father!

Anger or pique was sometimes the motivating dynamic that moved the poet to put poison pen to paper. He was capable of cruelty – fortunately exhibited only on a very few occasions – and had the power of redress of grievance at his fingertips. On one occasion while lodging at an Inn in the town of Sanquhar he was evicted from his room to accommodate a party attending the funeral of a wealthy widowed landowner who owned an estate in the area, although she chose to live most of her time in more fashionable London. Burns had to travel twelve miles on to New Cumnock through a nasty storm in January to the next Inn. He was so incensed at the resulting discomfort and inconvenience, and even more enraged by his knowledge that the deceased had been a self-indulgent and over-privileged exploiter of the poor, that he sat down almost

immediately and composed a stinging rebuke. In **Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs Oswald**, he begins by warning Satan of her arrival:

Dweller in yon dungeon dark,
Hangman of creation, mark!
Who in widow-weeds appears,
Laden with unhonoured years,
Noosing with care a bursting purse,
Baited with many a deadly curse.

View the wither'd beldam's face:
Can thy keen inspection trace
Aught of humanity's sweet, melting grace?
…and continues later with:
Lo, there she goes, unpitied and unblest,
She goes, but not to realms of everlasting rest!

Several more lines of insult and contempt followed…and these directed against someone he did not even know personally!

Burns displayed similar bile towards 'a vain coxcomb of an English commercial traveller' who acted condescendingly towards him while dining with friends in the King's Arms Hotel in Dumfries. His companions cajoled him into writing a few impromptu lines of rebuke, which, following his being apprised of the miscreant's personal details, he proceeded to so do under the title, **On Andrew Turner**:

In Se'enteen Hunder'n Forty-Nine,
The Diel gat stuff to make a swine, *Devil*
And coost it in a corner; *cast*
But wilily he chang'd his plan,
And shap'd it something like a man,
An' ca'd it Andrew Turner.

Hell knows no fury than a poet patronized!

Burns' most potent invective was often aimed at specific orthodox members of the clergy, or some of their more zealous acolytes from among the elders, or 'black gowns'. They tended to adhere to very rigid Calvinist dogma, reflected in their trademark fire-and-brimstone sermons and their harsh treatment – and often public shaming – of transgressors. They acquired the epithet of 'auld-lichts', and, although supported by conservative believers, they were often scorned and avoided by their more liberal brethren. The poet shared that distaste, but was kindly disposed to the more enlightened ministers who identified with the 'new-licht' movement. The latter was formally known as the "Moderate Party' and was gaining influence within the church ministry as well as among parishioners. Their sermonizing typically eschewed the

hellfire rhetoric for a more generous and forgiving ideology focused on personal salvation.

The kirk session exercised great sway over the lives of its congregants, and therefore criticising or ridiculing the clergy was risky. The most extreme sanction was excommunication, which would have meant being virtually ostracized from the community. Burns never seems to have seriously faced that prospect, but as a confessed fornicator he often had to tread lightly and had good reason to despise, and therefore disparage, the agents of his humiliation, especially as he himself had been subjected to public penitence on more than one occasion. Through his poetical assaults on the clergy, he did risk crossing the line on many occasions, but many of his more inflammatory pieces were not published until much later, and some not until after his death.

In his poem **The Twa Herds**, Burns roasts two auld-licht ministers – Alexander Moodie and John Russel – who, given their shared ideology, had been firm allies until they had a falling-out over a trifling personal matter; this was greatly inflamed by a dispute over the boundaries between their adjoining parishes in Kilmarnock. The unresolved squabble became the subject of their appearance before the Presbytery in Irvine during which they verbally abused one another with, according to one credible witness, 'a fiery virulence of personal invective such as has long been vanished from all popular assemblies…' which, as Burns suggested in the poem, would have been viewed with much glee by the more liberal ministers that were present to witness the unseemly exchanges:

Sic twa – O! do I live to see't? -	*such two*
Sic famous twa sud diagree't,	*should have disagreed*
An' names like villain, hypocrite,	
Ilk ither gi'en	*each other given*
While New-Light herds, wi' laughin' spite	*ministers*
Say neither's liein!	*lying*

The poem uses other imagery and language that, while very well understood at the time, would not be easily understood by modern readers if quoted here, but it mercilessly skewered both protagonists for their petty and unprofessional conduct, and would have been witheringly humiliating in its effect. We see further examples of Burns' contempt for these two individuals and selected other evangelical dogmatists in **The Holy Fair**, **The Kirk's Alarm** and other poems.

Even the wider population of parishioners who flaunted their rigid righteousness (despite often being found wanting in their own morals) do not escape the acerbic wit of the poet; they who *'…are thinkin' on their sins'* and who consider themselves

'…a chosen swatch,
Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces,' (how delightfully offensive!) and whom he further admonishes in **Address to the Unco Guid** (**…**the *Very Good*):
O ye, wha are sae guid yoursel', *who, good*
Sae pious and sae holy,
Ye've nought to do but mark and tell
Your neebours' fauts and folly! *faults*

But arguably top honours for the finest example of poetical satire in the entire treasury of English literature aught to be awarded to Robert Burns for his masterful *pièce de résistance*, **Holy Willie's Prayer**, which helped to expose the oppressive control of the religious establishment over the lives of the faithful and the sanctimonious hypocrisy practiced by some of its purported leading lights. I will treat of this in some detail as one of the best examples of the poet's keen perceptiveness in recognizing wrongs and injustices and his skill in exposing them, often by first treating us to the humorous or farcical antics of a subject's behaviour, followed by the bitingly satirical coup de grace of direct or implied condemnation. In this piece, he makes us both wince and smile at the absurdity of traditional Calvinist orthodoxy, and how better to expose such misguided dogma and its abuses than through the ridicule of laughter? But first a brief background.

Burns had been a member of the Mauchline parish kirk since the family's move to Lochlie farm in 1777, and remained so after they moved to Mossgiel farm in 1784. Mossgiel was rented from Gavin Hamilton, a gentrified Mauchline lawyer and landowner who was a good friend of young Robert even before he became the family's landlord. Burns and Hamilton both disliked the kirk's minister at Mauchline, Father William (Daddy) Auld, to the point of contempt. Auld was a strict Calvinist, but while a stickler in demanding conformity with established doctrine and behaviour, for the most part he appears to have been a fair enough man…except perhaps in his seemingly egregious dealings with Gavin Hamilton, who was regarded throughout most of the district as a man of integrity and a pillar of the community.

Hamilton came into conflict with Auld and the Mauchline Session over an issue concerning his proper handling, and implied fraudulent use, of parish funds, a dispute that dragged on for many years. Added to this very serious accusation were more trivial, and probably downright spitefully intended, charges of Sabbath-breaking. Hamilton was fiercely tenacious in his own defence, and the charges were abandoned in January 1785 following a ruling in Hamilton's favour by the Presbytery of Ayr acting as an ecclesiastical court of appeal. Mauchline Session had no option but to swallow its pride and accept this judgement.

The Sabbath-breaking charges alleged that Gavin Hamilton had instructed his servant to dig up some potatoes on a Sunday; also that he travelled on a Sunday, and finally that he failed to read his bible on Sunday. How anyone could have divined the latter transgression is a mystery, but all three charges were instigated by William Fisher, an elder of the Mauchline Session and one of Daddy Auld's foot soldiers in the corps of the righteous. Fisher himself was a relatively innocuous character who, though probably over-zealous in carrying out his duties, was no great villain. There are records of his being formally censured by the minister for drunkenness and fornication, so we know he was a hypocrite. He was even accused of theft of church funds, but apparently that was not proven. Notwithstanding, he was probably not much more badly behaved than many another in the corps of the 'unco guid'. But Robert needed a foil (or might we say a stooge?) for his inspired satirical masterpiece. As an object of ridicule to Burns and his friends as well as to others in the parish, Willie Fisher seemed a best fit for the role. And with no need for an audition!

Holy Willie's Prayer was composed almost immediately following Gavin Hamilton's vindication. The power of its satire lies not only in how effectively it exposes the doctrinal absurdity of orthodox Calvinism with, for many, the indefensible and unchristian premise of predestined salvation for the few (the **Elect**) and eternal damnation for the unlucky (and often virtuous) many; but also how such an elitist doctrine feeds a spirit of arrogant superiority in the often-flawed divinely chosen. What Burns was so keenly aware of was how the ministers, the elders and the inner circle of pious 'beagles' so ruthlessly commanded the lives of the humble congregants. And of course, the exercise of power by the kirk session and its loyal enforcers could so easily engender the kind of conceited hypocrisy that Holly Willie exemplifies in this denunciation.

Willie begins his prayer by acknowledging the Calvinist credo that God preordains the damnation of the many and the salvation of the few, but, he avers, it is…
A' for Thy glory,
And no for ony gude or ill
They've done afore Thee!

Willie concedes that, but for God's grace, he too could have been condemned to everlasting damnation just like the *'…thousands Thou hast left in night'*, for which he gives thanks while basking in a glow of self-righteousness:

That I am here before Thy sight,
For gifts and grace,
A burning and a shining light
To a' this place.

And as a member of the elect, he is guaranteed immunity from divine retribution for sins committed, no matter how grievous:

Yet I am here a chosen sample,
To show Thy grace is great and ample;
I'm here a pillar o' Thy temple,
Strong as a rock,
A guide, a buckler and example,
To all thy flock.

Here we are again treated to Willie's self-righteous bluster. Somehow even God's 'grace' is subordinated to Willie's own glory.

He then goes on for several verses admitting (in hilarious parody) to many acts of drunkenness and fornication. But how can he be held accountable for such imposed failings? For one thing, the drink made him do it. But in any case, the lustful temptations were sent to humble him, and as they are being imposed by the Almighty, what can he do but live with it?

Maybe Thou lets this fleshly thorn
Buffet Thy servant e'en and morn, *evening*
Lest he ower proud and high should turn,
That he's sae gifted: *so*
If sae, thy han' maun e'en be borne, *must even*
Until Thou lift it.

But there should be no such divine forgiveness for Gavin Hamilton's alleged misdeeds, nor for his ridicule of the clergy and the resulting disaffection of the parishioners:

Lord, mind Gau'n Hamilton's deserts:
He drinks, an' swears, an' plays at cartes, *cards*
Yet has sae monie takin' arts, *many*
Wi great an sma'.
Frae God's ain Priest the people's hearts
He steals awa.

Then there is that scoundrel, Robert Aiken, the local lawyer who acted for Hamilton against the Mauchline Session who, with his reputation for persuasive courtroom erudition, made a mockery of the case against his client, obviously to Willie's great mortification:

O Lord my God! that glib-tongu'd Aiken,
My vera heart and flesh are quakin',
To think how we stood sweatin, shakin',
An pish'd wi dread,

While he, wi' hingin lip, an snakin', *sneering*
Held up his head.

Lord, in Thy day of judgement try him!
Lord, visit them wha did employ him! *who*
And pass not in Thy mercy by them,
Nor hear their pray'r,
But for Thy people's sake destroy them,
An' dinna spare.

Willie ends his orisons by exhorting the Almighty to shower him with an abundance of grace and material goods, not for his personal benefit of course, but rather for God's own glorification:

But, Lord, remember me and mine,
Wi' mercies temporal and divine,
That I for grace and gear may shine, *goods*
Excell'd by nane, *none*
And a' the glory shall be Thine –
Amen, Amen!

Holy Willie's Prayer is so entertaining that we can miss some of the subtleties of form that contribute to the power of its message. The author's clever device of a prayer allows us to get inside the heart and soul of his subject in a way that a third party observer's rant would not. He begins his prayer with a perfectly pious and respectful incantation: 'Oh Thou, that in the Heavens doth dwell'; and in confessing to his all-knowing creator, his outlandish notions and his pathetic exhortations are more plausibly wearable by such an obvious hypocrite. The poet very skillfully builds up to the drama of Willie's true intension, which is not really to confess his sins so much as to bring down the wrath of God on his adversaries. In other words, Revenge!!

Burns may have felt that the kirk session would have taken serious action against him if he had admitted authorship of this most irreverent burlesque. It did not appear in either of his published volumes during his lifetime. No doubt he circulated it among his trusted cronies, and it did appear anonymously in a pamphlet circulated in 1789. Willie Fisher was to come to a sad end when, in 1809, he was found frozen to death in a roadside ditch after trying to walk home in a snow storm. It has been claimed that he was 'bitch-fou' at the time, but that was never convincingly proven.

Concerning the political issues addressed by Burns in his poetical works – directly or in more dissembling language – we might pose the question: How much active interest did Burns take in the politics of the day? The answer is, a great deal. But for what purpose?

In fact, it would seem that his principal interest in politics was tied to his advocacy for social reforms, particularly those that speak to liberty and equality, the latter dealing not only with equality before the law, but in the poor having the opportunity to enjoy a decent living in return for their unremitting toil. There are a surprising number of poetical pieces that come within this broad scope, indeed, too many to list or do justice to in this short discussion. But I will cite a few.

In his **Ballad of the American War**, written in about 1784, Burns takes his first brave leap into the dangerous waters of political commentary. He sensed that he was courting grave risk and decided not to include it in the Kilmarnock Edition of his poems, but did so in the First Edinburgh Edition of 1787 on the advice of two confidantes, one of whom was his benefactor, the Earl of Glencairn. As a republican, Burns was sympathetic to the 'patriots' of both the American war of independence and (in its early stages at least) the French Revolution. In this musical ballad he ridicules the bumbling efforts of the British politicians and the military commanders. There is little room for doubt in this satirical send-up which side Robert is on, and it is not that of the bumblers.

Ten years later his **Ode for General Washington's Birthday**, while ostensibly honouring this by-then world statesman, we might surmise that Burns was using it as a vehicle to champion – and in this case also celebrate – the cause of liberty.

But, come ye sons of Liberty,
Columbia's offspring, brave as free,
In danger's hour still flaming in the van,
Ye know, and dare maintain the Royalty of Man!

There is no satire in these lines. They are a clear statement of his love of liberty

References to liberty – sometimes personified by the poet when he capitalized the first letter – appear in nine of Burns' poems and songs. In almost all instances it is clearly associated with a political theme. **The Tree of Liberty** is a revolutionary song, almost certainly inspired by one carrying virtually of the same title, composed in 1775 by the political activist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine. It was one of Burns' most politically specific pieces whose allegorical approach serves as a thin disguise for his contempt of the French aristocracy, and his corresponding admiration for the revolutionaries who acted to rid France of their oppressors:

Heard ye o' the tree o' France,
  I whatna what 's the name o't; *don't know*
Around it a' the patriots dance,
  Weel Europe kens the fame o't.
It stands where ance the Bastile stood, *once*
  A prison built by kings, man,
When Superstition's hellish brood

Kept France in leading strings, man.

He seems to cheer the fate of the hapless Louis XVI, who was held in contempt by most people in Britain at the time. He could therefore risk seeming dismissive of this particular monarch without raising the ire of the British royal house:

King Louis thought to cut it down,
When it was unco sma', man: *very small*
For this the watchman cracked his crown,
Cut aff his head and a', man.

Bringing the message closer to home;

We labour soon, we labour late,
To feed the titled knave, man:
And a' the comfort we're to get
Is that ayont the grave, man. *beyond*

He ends on a celebratory note, anticipating the happy coming of liberty to England (to include Scotland we trust?), but with the faintest of a hint of revolution as the alternative:

Syne let us pray, auld England may *then*
Sure plant this far-famed tree, man;
And blythe we'll sing, and hail the day
That gave us liberty, man.

The attribution of this song to Burns was questioned by early biographers, but more recent Burnsian scholars are near unanimous that it is indeed from his pen. If not Burns, they posit, then what other late 18th Century Scottish poet could have produced it? But given that it was composed at a time when the British government was particularly concerned about the emergence of revolutionary fervour at home and abroad, this song was not published until long after his death.

Another early work in which politically motivated satirical asides appear is **The Jolly Beggars**, probably from 1785. It is a lengthy 'cantata' composed mainly of songs to be performed by multiple parts, resembling something akin to a mini opera. As such, it is a unique project for Robert Burns. He later claimed to have forgotten he had written it, which seems less than credible, especially since it is considered to be one of his best works. It is mostly a celebratory revel by a group of vagabonds, with the emphasis on their joy of liberty. The first dig is directed at the then Tory prime minister, William Pitt the Younger:

Poor Andrew that tumbles for sport
Let naebody name wi' a jeer:
There's even, I'm tauld, i' the Court

A tumbler ca'd the Premier.
Observ'd ye yon reverend lad
Mak faces to tickle the mob?
He rails at our mountebank squad –
It's rivalship just I' the job!
And now my conclusion I'll tell,
For faith! I'm confoundedly dry:
The chiel that's a fool for himsel', fellow
Good Lord! He's far dafter than I.

The final song begins with a middle-finger to the ruling classes that would have had nothing but contempt for the ragged brigade of performers and their ilk:
A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest!

Now let us move on to another song with strong social and political inferences: **A Man's A Man For A' That**. This is a quite remarkable indictment of the British class system in Burns' time and the yawning deficit of wealth and of perceived worth and dignity between the common man and the gentry:
What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin' grey, an' a' that? *course woollen cloth*
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine –
A man's a man for a' that.
For a' that an' a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that,
The honest man, though e're sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.
And this rebuke for a pretentious, fool-of-a-lord:
Ye see yon birkie ca'd a 'lord,' *fellow*
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that?
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a cuif for a' that. *fool*
For a' that, an' a' that,
His ribband, star, an' a' that,
The man o' independent mind,
He looks an' laughs, an' a' that.

We can surely all agree that:
The pith o' sense an' pride o' worth,

Are higher rank than a' that.

The poet concludes with a heartfelt plea for equality and brotherhood between all men, prophesying that 'it's comin' yet for a' that':

Then let us pray that come it may
(As come it will, for a' that),
That Sense and Worth o'er a' the earth,
Shall bare the gree an' a' that. *be the goal*
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin' yet for a' that,
That man to man the world o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.

It is interesting to note that the final two lines of each of the five-octave stanzas is declaratory, serving for the most part as a pithy summation of the previous six lines. It is very effective in hammering home the message, often in a quotable dictum. We see this in the four examples given above. The first stanza (not quoted above) ends:

The rank is but the guinea's stamp, *superficial appearance*
The man's the gowd for a' that. *gold*

The song (which is recited almost as often as it is sung), while earnestly sincere in it's plea for social justice and equality and elegant in its ennoblement of the common man, nevertheless employs some language that is both cuttingly satirical and dismissively mocking of the gilded, and sometimes intellectually challenged, aristocracy. It is set to a lively, yet dignified reel that, along with its powerfully appealing sentiments, has helped to make it one of the world's most cherished revolutionary songs. One could argue that it is better suited to shining a light on the plight of the exploited masses than La Marseillaise, with the latter's emphasis on patriotic hyperbole and jingoistic calls-to-arms.

From his lofty position as a noble defender of the right to respect and equality for the common man as expressed in A Man's a Man, we cannot ignore the nadir of rancour that Burns was capable of descending to when made to feel wronged. Such was the case with a young female friend whom at one time he came almost to revere, only to experience a painful and humiliating rift in their relationship that caused him to display a most unfortunate spitefulness. The erstwhile friend was Maria Riddell.

Maria was the sister-in-law of a comparatively well-to-do member of the local gentry, Robert Riddell, whom Burns befriended not long after purchasing Ellisland Farm in 1788. Ellisland (six miles from Dumfries) was less than a mile from Riddell's home, Friar's Carse, where Burns became a frequent visitor. It appears that he and his

namesake were quite alike in personality, and shared many interests. Through his contact with the family, Burns became acquainted with the very attractive and much younger Maria, and they soon became good friends. Maria composed several poetical pieces that displayed remarkable talent, matched by her excellent ability in prose. In fact, the poet became something of a mentor to the young protégé. Unfortunately, in December 1793, Burns disgraced himself very badly in a serious drunken incident during a social gathering at Friar's Carse, and this caused a breach between him and the whole Riddell family. He made several attempts to apologize and 'make up', especially with Maria, but was met with a wall of silent rebuked. This infuriated him and, presumably in frustration, he stooped to the desperate tactic of penning at least three scurrilous poetical diatribes, one (an epitaph) directed at Maria's husband, and two at the young lady herself. One particularly odious barb was entitled, **Pinned to Mrs Walter Riddell's Carriage**:

If you rattle along like your mistress's tongue,
Your speed will out-rival the dart;
But, a fly for your load, you'll break down on the road,
If your stuff be as rotten's her heart.

It is doubtful that Maria ever became aware of these malicious projectiles, at least during Burns' lifetime, but the two did reconcile about two years later, just before he died, and she became a loyal and eloquent defender of his character when it was impugned by ill-informed commentators shortly following his death.

There are many other examples of Burns' use of satire, but I will conclude with a few lines that where etched into the glass of a window at a Stirling Inn using a diamond-tipped stylus the poet often carried with him, especially on his travels. While supping at the Inn with four companions, the party took in a view of the ruins of a former royal palace.

Here Stewarts once in triumph reign'd,
And laws for Scotland's weal ordain'd; *welfare*
But now unroof'd their palace stands,
Their sceptre fallen to other hands;
Fallen indeed, and to the earth,
Whence grovelling reptiles take their birth.
The injured Stewart line is gone,
A race outlandish fills its throne:
An idiot race, to honour lost – *idiot race: the Hanovarian royal line*
Who knows them best despise them most.

This was clearly an indication of the poet's now well-accepted sympathy for the Stewarts, and his corresponding antipathy for the House of Hanover. Burns would not

have admitted authorship of this seditious slander against the reigning monarchy. As merely an unsigned scratching on an Inn's window, he would have been relying on the anonymity of place and medium, and, less reliably, the discretion of his companions.

Had Robert Burns lived during or close to our time in a freely democratic Scotland, it is very likely that we would have been treated to many more irreverent and unrestrained commentaries, laced with rich and entertaining humour and satire. But his was a dangerous age for such libertarian luxuries, particularly in the field of politics or involving any challenge to the ruling hierarchies. His position as an excise officer and government employee called for even more caution, and, notwithstanding a small number of careless indiscretions that he managed to resolve through quick action and the helpful intervention of influential friends, he heeded that reality.

Some of what he decided he could not submit for publication in his editions was circulated among trusted friends and acquaintances in unattributed pamphlets and holograph copies. Even for many years following his early death, the censoring continued, many of his more questionable pieces not being published until the second half of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, we have access to most of them now, but in the process of concealment over so many years it seems inevitable that more than a few would have been destroyed by overzealous friends and family, or simply lost. Very occasionally a treasured manuscript is discovered in a dusty cellar or other unexpected location, but these are now a rarity.

October 10, 2016