

BURNS, BANNOCKBURN AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EVANESCENT

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It is said that Robert Burns wrote ‘Scots wha hae . . .’ while staying in the Murray Arms, the very inn at Gatehouse-of-Fleet which was the base for the conference from which the present book arises. There are many who would favour that song as a national anthem for Scotland. Of its more obvious rivals, ‘Scotland the Brave’, though a fine brash march, lacks the ultimate panache of the Marseillaise and is all too easily reduced to a squeeze-box parody of itself. The droplets of saccharine in ‘Flower of Scotland’ can turn bitter on the tongue. Like many of the best of Scottish traditional tunes, the air Burns ensured would live into our century as ‘Scots wha hae . . .’ sounds well whether played fast or slow. Played contemplatively, it has the necessary gravitas to dignify solemn occasions; played briskly and with a Scots snap, it can have the spunk and swagger to celebrate victory at Cardiff Arms Park.

As the words make clear, Burns’ aim in writing the lyric was political. Though published under such titles as ‘Bruce’s address to his Army’ or ‘Bruce to his men at Bannockburn’ the motivation and style had as much to do with 1789 as 1314, that is, with the French Revolution as much as the Scottish War of Independence. When Burns moved to Dumfries in 1791 he made new friends who included a Dr William Maxwell. The doctor had been in France during the revolution and had come back full of enthusiasm for common folk asserting their independence. Burns joined him in this, like many another Scottish and English liberal at that time. What Burns wrote in ‘Bruce’s address’ was not so much a work in the Scottish folk tradition as a rhetorical poem of slogans and exhortations. It is typical of its period rather than its place. As David Daiches has pointed out,¹ ‘The Scots (language) in the poem is not integral . . . and by the last two stanzas it has been given up and the poem is revealed as an English sentimental poem on liberty in the eighteenth century sense’.

By oppression’s woes and pains!
By your sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
 But they shall be free!

Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrant fall in every foe;
Liberty’s in every blow!
 Let us do, or die!

Soon the guillotining of the French royals and then the outbreak of war between France and Britain in 1793 made such sentiments seem subversive rather than liberal. Burns had been outspoken, and had put more of what

he felt down on paper than a judicious civil servant should. He lost some of his more genteel friends, but contrived to keep his job when called to book by the Excise service.

To a cynical twentieth-century eye, these Anglified verses are pompous rather than persuasively incendiary. Though the preceding Scots-flavoured stanzas have more of a swing to them, they are hardly Rabbie at his best:

Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled,
Scots wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victory.

Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front of battle lour;
See approach proud Edward's pow'r
Chains and slavery.

Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave?
Let him turn and flee!

Wha for Scotland's king and law
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
Free-man stand, or free-man fa'
Let them follow me!

Even that so-familiar opening line is not immune to criticism. Sir James Murray has pointed out that if the aim was indeed to put the words into Bruce's mouth, the correct Middle Scots idiom would not be 'Scots wha hae . . .' but 'Scots that has wi' Wallace bled . . .'

The merit of the case for regarding this as a potential anthem for Scotland, therefore, rests with the tune rather than the words. And the case is given historical depth by the fact that this tune is not merely an eighteenth-century confection, but seemingly one of the older elements in Scotland's musical heritage. Robert Burns suspected that this was so, and though as Murray indicated, the poet was not our best guide through the thickets of early verbiage, we owe him more than is generally realised for his sustained activity in seeking out and preserving our folk music. It was not just his expertise in using old tunes as vehicles for his poetry. From 1787 until his death in 1796, he collaborated with James Johnson in producing the six-volume *Scots Musical Museum*. As Johnson proved increasingly dilatory (it took him over six years to produce the final volume after Burns died), the poet assumed ever increasing responsibility for keeping the project moving, both in the collection and in the editing of material.

Among the tunes which he encountered was one known as 'Hey, tuttie taitie . . .' (in some sources '. . . taittie'). Of this he wrote 'I have met the tradition universally over Scotland, and particularly about Stirling . . . that

this air was Robert the Bruce's March at the Battle of Bannockburn, which was fought in 1314'. He therefore adopted the tune, and wrote the 'Bruce's address' words to it. In practice, this association with Scotland's most popular poet has guaranteed the survival of this tune into our electronic age. It was, however, a near run thing. The high-handedness of publishers in printing his poems in conjunction with melodies of their own choice, and not those for which he actually conceived the verses, is notorious. In some cases, sound recordings of performances reconstructing the settings which he intended are only now becoming available. Sometimes the last lines of verses of this song were padded out:

- . . . Wha sae base as be a slave?
Traitor! Coward! turn and flee.
(instead of: Let him turn and flee!)
- . . . Free-man stand, or free-man fa'
Caledonian! on wi' me!
(Let him follow me!)
- . . . We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be — shall be free!
(But they shall be free!)
- . . . Liberty's in every blow!
Forward! Let us do, or die!
(Let us do or die!)

Though the publisher persuaded Burns to rewrite so that the lyric could be fitted to an alternative tune, happily for the survival of 'Hey, tuttie, taitie . . .' as part of our musical heritage, when the original pairing came to light, public opinion forced George Thomson to print it. Burns' intended version soon became sufficiently well-known outside the salons to be sung by Scots soldiers during the battle of Waterloo.²

It is one thing for the tune to have survived the two centuries which lie between Burns and ourselves, once it had got into print. But what of the prospects for the air actually having previously come down through a period twice that length, as Burns and many eighteenth-century Scots would have liked to have believed, that is, from Bannockburn until his lifetime? One twentieth-century reaction might perhaps be to utterly dismiss this, without serious consideration. We are dealing with a class of popular music which was literally unrecorded in those pre-electronic centuries. As a creation of the musically illiterate, it is true that it would not have had the chance of being circulated and carried between generations in manuscript staff notation or tablature, as first some religious, then latterly art music was. But such a blanket rejection of the feasibility of long-term oral/aural transmission of a folk-music theme would in fact be injudicious.

Occasionally, evidence crops up which gives us some indication of what is possible. For example, we should not disregard the unwritten survival

of Elizabethan ballads still being sung in twentieth-century Appalachian rural communities, in versions which show remarkable fidelity to the stylistic traits of four hundred years earlier. Sometimes, as there, words and music have transcended centuries as an integral whole. Often, however, the verbal content has lost its relevance or become unfashionable, and it is the tune which has persisted. Burns was by no means the only one to go in for re-cycling. Contemporary Orangemen who still raise the banner of 1690 and march off to 'Now we shall sing of Billy the King . . .' are perhaps unaware that during the lifetime of their hero their anthem had rather different words, which made it sufficiently popular to merit (or demerit?) a place in Thomas D'Urfey's 'Pills to Purge Melancholy'; try singing these stanzas to 'Lilliburllero':

I, a young maid, have been courted by many
 Of all sorts and trades, as ever was any.
 A spruce haberdasher first spoke me fair,
 But I would have nothing to do with small ware . . .
 My thing is my own, and I'll keep it so still,
 Yet other young lasses may do what they will.
 (Refrain twice)

A fine dapper tailor, with a yard in his hand,
 Did proffer his service to be at command.
 He talked of a slit I had above knee:
 But I'll have no tailors to stitch it for me . . .
 (Refrain twice)

One suspects that Rabbie, himself the author of such songs of transparent double-entendre as 'The Rantin' Dog the Daddie o't . . .', would have enjoyed this. As Daiches notes,³ 'Burns was a master of bawdry and produced for the private edification of his friends some of the finest examples of underground art ever to have reached the expert in what is politely classified as *curiosa*'.

Francis Collinson in his survey of *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*, gives attention to the deep roots of the many folk melodies which Burns borrowed, reinforcing the point that we do not have to go furth of Scotland for instances of good tunes being passed from generation to generation by ear. The sound archives of the School of Scottish Studies are indeed replete with examples, and those who explore the musical manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland or Edinburgh University Library can also make tuneful discoveries, as the writer has found on more than one occasion. For example, his grand-uncle knew an Edwardian music-hall song, 'Oh! Where's me fourpence, Charlie?'. This was clearly a parody of of an over-sentimental Jacobite song by William Glen (d.1824), which had the refrain, 'Oh! Wae's me for Prince Charlie . . .'. The tune was, however, not Glen's, but was known to Burns as that of the tale of Johnnie Faa, or the Gysie Laddie (after one who caused consternation in the

Cassillis family). This ballad figures in the Skene manuscript of about 1615-30 ('Lady Cassilles Lilt').

It is seldom clear how old such tunes may already have been by the time their music first happened to be jotted down in anthologies such as that of Skene, or of Sir William Mure of Rowallan (who filled his notebook with lute tablature sometime between 1612 and 1628). These were personal scores for people to play from, not academic works; tunes, as Sir William put it, 'for kissing, for clapping, for loving, for proving'. Such domestic compilers were not concerned to note the date and provenance of their favourite songs and airs for the convenience of posterity. Although some formally-composed Scottish music has come down to us in notation in earlier sources, the Rowallan lute book takes us towards the limits for written-down tunes of our traditional popular music.

Sometimes, however, titles or fragments of lyrics are quoted in texts which are not themselves primarily musical. These allow us to trace material farther back, though not giving us the burden of the tune directly. It is remarkable where musical references do crop up: though those who believe that the Deil has a' the best tunes may not be surprised to find that the official report on the meeting of witches at North Berwick in 1591 cites the tunes 'Cummer goe ye on before' and 'The Silly Bit Chicken'. The writer of that glorious girth, the *Complaynt of Scotland*, enjoyed making lists, and he gives a useful indication of what songs and ballads were current in the 1540s. He merely names them, however, whereas George Bannatyne in his 1568 manuscript anthology of Scots poems gives us the complete words of songs, and in some cases (such as 'The wowing of Jock and Jenny') these can be matched to the traditionally associated tune, which is known from later sources.

Happily, a similar matching operation seems possible for the air to which Burns set 'Scots wha hae . . .'. Through the sixteenth-century court poet Alexander Montgomerie it appears possible to identify pre-Burns words previously set to 'Hey tuttie taitie'. These then give us a verbal hook with which to fish in literary sources for yet earlier mentions. Montgomerie was born around 1550, an impecunious cadet of Eglinton. He lived until c.1602, and was almost the last of the courtly poets to use Scots. He is best remembered for 'The Cherry and the Slae', but as Jack has pointed out,⁴ he also reworked the words of a folksong sung to our tune 'Hey tuttie taitie', and these have been preserved in the Drummond MS. His stanzas have been published in various versions; the aim here is not to provide a definitive edition, but rather to ease the way of the reader who may wish to try singing these rather attractive lyrics to our familiar melody. Thus, while a substantial amount of sixteenth-century spelling has been retained to give an impression of the texture of the original, modifications have been made to this and to punctuation. (Similar liberties have been taken with the other extracts, in the interests of clarity for the casual reader).

Hey, now the day dawis, The jolie Cok crawis, Now schroudis the schawis ⁵ Throu Nature anon. The thissell-cok ⁶ cryis On lovers wha lyis; Now skailis ⁷ the skyis, The nicht is neir gone.	5. (mist) shrouds the woods 6. thistle-cock = thrush 7. clears
The feilds owerflowis With gowans that growis Whair lilies lyk lowe ⁸ is Als red as the rone. ⁹ The turtill ¹⁰ that trew is With notes that renewis Hir pairtie ¹¹ persewis; The nicht is neir gone.	8. like flame 9. rowan 10. turtle-dove 11. mate
Now hartis with hindis Conforme to thair kyndis, Hie tursis their tyndis ¹² On grund whair they grone. Now hurcheonis with hairis ¹³ Aye passis in pairis, Whilk duly declairis The nicht is neir gone.	12. toss their antler tines 13. hedgehogs, hares
The sesoun excellis Thru sweetnes that smellis; Now Cupid compellis Our hairts each one On Venus wha waikis, To muse on our maikis ¹⁴ Syne sing for thair saikis, The nicht is neir gone.	14. mates
All courageous knichtis Aganis the day dichtis ¹⁵ The breist-plate that bright is To fecht with thair fone. The stonit steed ¹⁶ stampis Throu courage and crampis ¹⁷ Syne on the land lampis; ¹⁸ The nicht neir is gone.	15. rub-up 16. stallions 17. and curvettes 18. leaps
The freikis on feildis ¹⁹ That wicht wapins ²⁰ weildis, With schyning bright shieldis At Titan in trone, ²¹ Stiff speiris in restis ²² Ower coursaris crestis ²³ Are brok on thair brestis;	19. fighting-men 20. weapons 21. throne 22. in shield-notches 23. coursers = warhorses, plumes

The nicht neir is gone.

So hard ar their hittis,

Some swayis, some sittis,

And some perforce flittis²⁴

On grund whair they grone.

Syne groomis that gay²⁵ is

On blonkis that brayis²⁶

With swordis assayis:

The night neir is gone.

24. departs

25. cheery

26. white steeds that

neigh

Helena Mennie Shire²⁷ has discussed the nature of the occasions for which such court poets produced different categories of material. She cites evidence assembled by Stevens²⁸ that it was sixteenth-century practice to mark the dawning of a day of tournament with a song of joyous entry, summoning the protagonists to the play of arms and the running at the ring. She classified this as just such a martial aubade, and it would clearly have been very appropriate for Montgomerie to have adopted a traditional song beginning 'Hey, now the day daws . . .' for his courtly reworking as the dawn introit commissioned from him.

She concludes²⁹ that 'probably the tune was a popular tune with this opening line known as far back as *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*'. As its title page puts it, this was 'ane compendius buik of godly and spiritual sangis, collectit out of sundrye partes of the Scripture, with sundrye uther Ballatis changeit out of prophaine sangis in(to) godly sangis, for auoyding of sin and harlatry . . .'. Emerging from the fervour for Reformation in the 1560s, it ran through various editions. Although only words and not musical notation are given, many folk songs and love songs may be identified among the 'changeit' songs, despite the way these secular works have been bowdlerised and parodied in the interests of religious propaganda.³⁰ 'Hay now the day dallis' is indeed there with its refrain of 'The nicht is neir gone'. Most of the stanzas are clearly the creation of those concerned with ending what they conceived of as the night of popery: 'Wo be to yow, Paip and Cardinall . . .'. The first verse, however, has the same content as Montgomerie's, and Helena Shire suggests that the *Gude and Godlie* compilers had adopted 'a spring aubade that was probably an old song'.³¹ She points out that while the later propaganda verses do not match well, the initial stanza does match Montgomerie in metre and would indeed sing to the same music as his piece. The suggestion is that both versions had as their common starting point a song that was already established by the 1560s.

We can indeed trace it back further than that. Gavin Douglas died in 1522, around thirty years before Montgomerie was conceived, and he himself had been born in the fifteenth century, in 1474. Yet we find that he not only knew 'The Day Daws', but expected his readers to be so familiar with it that he could allude to the song without explanation. He did so

in the course of his *Eneados*, which he eventually completed in 1513. This massive work was his Scots version of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and it is still considered to be one of the greatest Renaissance works of translation of a Latin classic into any vernacular. He added his own vivid prologues, and the part of The Prolog of the Threttene Buke which mentions the song runs thus:³²

Soon over the feildis schynys the lycht cleir,
 Welcum to pilgrim baith, and laborer;
 Tyte on hys hyndys gaif the greive a cry,
 'Awaik, on foot, go till our husbandry';
 And the hyrd callis furth apon hys page,
 'Do drive the cattal to thair pasturage'.
 The hynd's wife clepes up Katheryn and Gill,
 'Yea, dame', said thai, 'God wot, with a gude will'.
 The dewy grain, powderit with daiseys gay,
 Schew on the sward a colour dapill gray;
 The mysty vaporis spryngand up full sweet,
 Maist confortabil to glad all man's spreit,
 Tharto, thir byrdis syngys in the schawys,
 As menstralis playng The Joly Day Now Dawys.

William Dunbar also uses the song title, and in a way which offers an even clearer indication of the extent to which we must regard this as a very well known air indeed, more than three-and-a-half centuries before Robert Burns. Dunbar, like Douglas, was involved with the court life of James VI. Some of his works were celebrations, such as 'The Thrissil and the Rose' marking his sovereign's wedding. But some of his most memorable songs are his flytings: essays in that particularly Scottish art form, vituperation. Here are just three from the many verses with which he sings the lugs o' the Merchants of Edinburgh:

Quhy will ye, merchantis of renoun,
 Lat Edinburgh, your nobill toun,
 For lak of reformatioun
 The commene proffeitt tyne³³ and
 fame? 33. tyne = lose
 Think ye not schame,
 That onie uther regioun
 Sall with dishonour hurt your
 name!

May nane pass throw your
 principall gaitis³⁴ 34. gaitis = ways
 For stink of haddockis and of
 skaittis,
 For cryis of carlingis and debaittis,
 For fensum³⁵ flyttingis of defame: 35. fensum = offensive
 Think ye not schame,

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Notes

1. Daiches, *Robert Burns*, 30.
2. Winstock, *Songs and Marches*.
3. Daiches, *Robert Burns*, 274.
4. Jack, *Scottish Verse*.
- 5-26. See above.
27. Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry*.
28. Stevens, *Music and Poetry*.
29. Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry*, 149.
30. Ibid.; and Elliott and Rimmer, *Scottish Music*.
31. Shire, *Song, Dance and Poetry*, 19.
32. 13th Book, Bannatyne Club edition, 1xiv, pt.ii, 851.