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"Burns' Radical Voice – Politics and Religion in the Age of Enlightenment"

I imagine what I have to say today as part of a continuing conversation that has been going on for some time and that I hope you will take up, if not already participating. It is about the Scottish Enlightenment and what it means then and now. But for the next forty minutes or so we are going to have the discussion with Robert Burns − or at least his poems.

Only a few weeks ago Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer and Nobel laureate, was here in the Scottish Parliament chamber talking to an illustrious international audience about the Enlightenment. For him it was all about reason, rational thought, and he was very doubtful of what he called “enthusiasms” − religion, ethnicity or nationalism, to name a few, were acceptable in very mild doses if at all. He did not consider art as a form of enthusiasm.

Yet this year’s Edinburgh International Festival is exploring the Enlightenment, which is one of the pillars or themes of the Year of Homecoming inspired by the 250th anniversary of Burns. For Jonathan Mills, the Festival Director, religion is part of the Enlightenment as is music and drama, but he has excluded Robert Burns, perhaps because he thinks he has little to add to the subject. Mills is also fairly disinterested in the political dimension, though the eighteenth century Enlightenment was an age of despotism and autocracy in Europe until the seismic shock of the

French Revolution. Politics do, however, slip in occasionally as when Mills comments that Handel's *Judas Maccabeus* was written in London shortly after the Battle of Culloden, and that 'See the Conquering Hero Comes' is a celebration of the victor who has long been labelled in the Highlands as "Butcher Cumberland".

The Herald newspaper has also been in on the Enlightenment act, asking readers to join in a dialogue and write some new philosophy, perhaps as a diversion from *het up* in Kirkintilloch or *dissenting* in Dunoon. For *the Herald* Burns is part of the Enlightenment and so are politics, but religion is questionable. "To a large extent" writes Harry Reid in *The Herald*, "the Scottish Enlightenment bypassed religion. It was essentially a secular movement." He then goes on, though, to describe how many of the key figures in the Scottish Enlightenment were ministers of religion without really explaining why. An apparent contradiction.

The danger, of course, with all these accounts is over-generalisation, abstraction. Everyone has their ideas about the ideas of the Enlightenment, but what about lived thought experienced in the social round, the reality of human flesh and spirit rather than the dry bones of verbal formulae. That surely is where we will find the mix, the connections and the contradictions that belong to any process of change and development in human culture. Which brings me neatly to our main interlocutor, our witness if you like, Robert Burns.

Now I am not going to cheat here, no sleight of hand or "rabbies" out of hats. I am not going to deploy recherché knowledge or some hitherto unascribed poem to demonstrate either my cleverness (were that possible) or a new theory about Burns. I am going to take four very familiar poems, all certainly amongst his best known if not the best known, and see what they can tell us, not just about Burns but about the Scottish Enlightenment through which he lived and its continuing significance.

Wee sleekit, cowrin, timorous beastie. I did warn you; it is a pity no-one warned this much abused, much addressed moose. But this is a case of familiarity breeds contempt.

Man meets mouse; ploughman turns up female mouse's nest with the coulter or ploughshare − something Burns knew plenty about since, as a young teenager, he had to do the work of a full-grown ploughman on the struggling family farm, which incidentally contributed to the poet's lifelong heart problems and his early death. However, this is not an animal fable in the style of Henryson − poems Burns knew well. Robert talks to the mouse but the mouse is speechless. What is sketched is a more subtle parallel between mouse and man. The oppressed mouse is like the wife of a small farmer turned out of her home, or nest, by the arbitrary power of a landowner. Robert himself recalled his whole family gathered round their parents weeping bitterly on receipt of a landlord's threatening letter − looming eviction and a dependent, or worse, homeless status for a vulnerable brood of brothers and sisters. The key here is sympathy, a bond of common feeling between mouse and man which shows up cruelty and injustice.

That wee bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turned out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald,
To thole the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

The implication is, of course, that such fellow feeling should exist between people as well as between humans and animals, but often it is lacking. Burns is not just being playful or entertaining here. He has in mind the philosophy of Adam Smith. Smith, a prime moral as well as economic thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment, argues that society cannot function without "moral sentiments", above all sympathy.

Smith founded his idea of morality on the idea of 'an impartial spectator' who sees the situation in the round from the points of view of all the participants − in this case mouse and ploughman. Humanity is made to be social but, without such an internalised moral sense, society breaks down. Modern psychology repeatedly comes back to the loss of empathy, or the failure to create such bonding in early childhood, as the starting point of crime, anti-social behaviour and pathology. The great offence in 'To a Mouse' is destroying the very environment, the home, in which such bonds may be fostered. It is worth remembering that most of the extreme woes of William Burnes, Robert's father, arose from his determination to have his own independent farm household, so keeping his family together instead of sending them out from a young age as farm labourers or domestic servants, as was the custom in rural society. However, Burns' argument for sympathy goes beyond Adam Smith's moral philosophy as it also involves religion.

> *I'm truly sorry Man's dominion*
> *Has broken Nature's social union,*
> *An' justifies that ill opinion*
> *Which makes thee startle*
> *At me, thy poor earth-born companion*
> *An' fellow mortal.*

Sympathy between people, and between humanity and the natural world, is grounded in the creation of the world, men, animal and plant, by a benevolent deity, a loving God. Implicit in this divine creation is the desire for sympathy and harmony between all parts of creation – shalom. In this Burns is more radical than Smith and anticipates ecological thinking. This radicalism arises from his religious faith allied with poetic imagination.

There is also an issue here of harmony between different human capacities or senses – something which is central to the enquiries of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. For Burns the touchstones of right thinking are right feeling and creative imagining. The perspectives of impartial spectator should lead beyond impartiality to imaginative identification and compassion.

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen icker in a thrave
'S a sma' request
I'll get a blessin wi the lave
An never miss't!

Shared feeling animates the union of all life which should be acknowledged and expressed in our relationships and actions. Compassion is a distinctively human capacity and responsibility since it is humanity that can look backwards and forwards in hope and fear.

Still thou art blessed compared wi me;
The present only toucheth thee.
But Och! I backward cast my e'e
On prospect drear
An forward, tho I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

Catastrophe comes on the poor field mouse as a bolt from the blue but the special dignity and responsibility of human beings lies in memory, foresight and free will. The ability to love is a heavenly gift but also, for Burns, the driver, the motivating source of enlightenment. Of course on this occasion it is too late; the plough has already destroyed the nest.

'To a Mouse' is an early poem written in 1785 when Burns' rural experience was fresh and immediate. 'A Man's a Man for a' That' is a late poem written at a very low point for the poet, muzzled by his government employers in Dumfries, dogged by ill health and family worries. But the ground notes here also go back to Burns' first upbringing.

What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey, an a' that?
Gie fools their silks and knaves their wine –
A man's a man for a' that.

There is politics in here and philosophy and theology but also a continuing tribute to the remarkable William Burnes who practised the virtues of self-respect and brought up his children to be enquiring, critical and ready to live by principle. Here is Robert's tribute to his father written after his death in 1784 and now inscribed on the tombstone in Alloway kirkyard.

O ye whose cheek the tear of pity stains
Draw near with pious rev'rence, and attend!
Here lie the loving husband's dear remains,
The tender father, and the gen'rous friend.

The pitying heart that felt for human woe,
The dauntless heart that fear'd no human pride;
The friend of man, to vice alone a foe;
For ev'n his failings leaned to virtue's side.

Where did William get his independent yet critical self-worth, given his own minimal schooling? From a thirst for self-improvement driven by self-education and religious devotion together. Here is the stamp of eighteenth century Presbyterianism though, in William's case, an Enlightenment version based on the need for enquiry and dissent as well as reverence. This is the William Burnes who displaced the universally applied Shorter Catechism in his children's religious education with his own manual of religious belief. Unlike the impersonal, authoritarian, learned by rote character of the Catechism, William's manual is a dialogue between father and son based on a loving relationship and the shared desire to live a good and fulfilling life based on the New Testament Gospels. William Burnes has not had his due as an exceptional character in a remarkable instance of how Presbyterianism and the Scottish Enlightenment co-existed in the life of a tenant farmer. The reach of such ideas beyond learned elites is not a feature of the European Enlightenment as a whole. Back to 'A Man's A Man':

> *The rank is but the guinea's stamp*
> *The Man's the gowd* (gold) *for a' that.*

That comes directly from the radical teaching of Jesus in the Gospels and his scorn for the power or worth of money as a basis of value, social status or human behaviour. There is that same play with words and images, the same puncturing of short sighted pride and presumption. But there is also a strong combination here of the Creation theology of 'To a Mouse' and the Enlightenment thinkers, such as John Millar or Tom Paine, who followed through on the radical political implications of their philosophy. For Burns the panoply of worldly rank and show (so prevalent in the so-called Enlightenment) cannot overturn the innate dignity and equality of human beings which is expressed through intellectual sense and moral worth.

A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an' a' that!
But an honest man's aboon his might
Guid faith he mauna fa' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their dignities, an' a' that

The pith o' sense and pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that.

You could, I think, in Burns terms add imagination − the ability to see things from a new perspective − to sense and worth in this trinity of innate God-given capacities.

O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us.

There is though an optimism at work here too, a belief in the possibility of progress and enlightenment. Burns rejects the Fall of Man, as the complete degradation of humanity preached by the Calvinist Puritans. Wrongdoing for him is not an inevitable result of our 'corrupt' natures but a folly or un-wisdom that we can forgive and learn to avoid. That does beg several questions about the human capacity for evil and injustice and potentially destructive desires. Agnes McLehose, or Clarinda, a moderate Calvinist, was constantly reminding Robert about sin in their slightly fevered correspondence, to what effect remains unclear. But Burns holds fast to hope, forgiveness and love including the love of a Heavenly Father as the basis of his faith in humanity.

Then gently scan your brother man,
Still gentler sister woman;
Tho' they may gang a kenning wrang,
To step aside is human

One point must still be greatly dark,
The moving why they do it;
And just as lamely can ye mark,
How far perhaps they rue it.

There is then a strong note of optimistic defiance as well as lifelong religious conviction in *A Man's A Man*'s ringing last stanza, written at a time when Burns' hopes were in reality being sorely tested all round him, politically and personally.

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 bear the gree an' a' that.

For a' that, an' a' that,
It's comin yet for a' that,
That man to man the warld o'er
Shall brithers be for a' that.

We can see clearly that for Burns it is poetry, sometimes expressed as song, that combines ideas, feelings, experiences and beliefs in a way that embodies and communicates a sense of life as gift, as passion, to be lived out in wisdom and love, and humour. But Burns's art also practices what he preaches by being so accessible and democratic, using the common languages including Scots, limpid classical English and music. He is master of what is often thought or felt, but rarely if ever so well expressed, and that is a vital part of any Scottish Enlightenment process then or now – art and philosophy feeding into a shared social and cultural space in which everyone can participate. A common culture underpinned by education, and not lowest common denominators.

Sometimes though, dazzled by the poet's genius for communication, we miss out on his sophistication and subtlety with our cult of Burns the common man, the roving ploughboy, etc. And a clear example of that is our third poem 'Scots Wha Hae'. This rousing sung poem has often been claimed as a nationalist anthem, but is it? The circumstances of composition are important.

In 1793 Burns was travelling in Kirkcudbrightshire and Dumfriesshire with his friend and fellow radical, John Sime. By chance at Annan they saw Thomas Muir being taken north under armed guard to stand trial for sedition. Muir, a lawyer and democrat, was the leading figure in the 'Friends of the People', the Scottish branch of the international radical movement. Muir was convicted of treason for membership of a 'banned association' and for distributing Paine's outlawed "Rights of Man". Ironically, in sentencing Muir to fourteen years' transportation to Australia, the Judge, Lord Braxfield, cited the perfection of the British Constitution which he asserted was incapable of improvement. The harshness of the sentences meted out to Thomas Muir and his earnest associates provoked widespread shock.

After the chance encounter with Muir or, in another version, after hearing the sentence meted out to Muir, Robert went out for a walk, with the tune 'Hey Tutti Tatti' which the Scottish troops were reputed to have sung on the march to Bannockburn, revolving in his mind. The result was 'Scots Wha Hae', a defiant anthem to liberty which links the historical and the contemporary struggle for freedom.

> *Lay the proud usurpers low*
> *Tyrants fall in every foe*
> *Liberty's in every blow*
> *Let us do or die.*
>
> *By oppression's woes and pains*
> *By yours sons in servile chains*
> *We will drain our dearest veins*

But they shall be free

In 'Scots Wha Hae', poet and songmaker, radical and nationalist, democrat and patriot fuse in a way that continues to resonate in Scottish society.

Enthusiasms and principles are not so easily unpicked as Wole Soyinka implies, especially when people have their backs to the wall and oppression staring them in the face, as he himself experienced when unjustly imprisoned. Nonetheless the basis of the poem is a principled defence of liberty, founded on centuries of Scottish political thought. First comes the sixteenth century Reformation in which the Scottish reformers John Knox and George Buchanan vigorously articulated the right of resistance, armed if necessary, to an unjust authority even when it was backed by the law : obedience to the law of God outweighed human structures or systems. This was an explosive doctrine in a period obsessed with social order and hierarchy, yet one that plays a huge part in world affairs today. These principles were continued by Milton and the Puritan radicals, and underpinned the Covenanting movement of the seventeenth century in Scotland. They then feed into the radical political thinkers of the Enlightenment period particularly in America where the War of Independence and the new Federal constitution drew consciously on this mix of religious belief in the innate dignity and worth of each individual, and a philosophical belief in the innate right of each human being to exercise self-determination within just and equal. socio-political structures.

It is important to note that Burns had imbibed these radical traditions long before the French Revolution- at home, at Church, from his reading, and at the meetings of the Freemasons. Freemasonry, which originated in post-Reformation Scotland, was at this time a seedbed of radical political thinking. Masonic fellowship cut across the normal social boundaries, if not the gender boundaries, that still dominated eighteenth century Scottish life. The radical promise of the Reformation fathers was still to be won in politics, church affairs, and the quest for universal education and social care. Burns poetry boosts all of these causes making him a vital link between Reformation radicalism and the Scottish Enlightenment on the one hand, and the making of modern Scotland on the other. The poet articulates the ideals but also popularises them since, for every single reader of Adam Smith or John Millar, Burns was to have at least a thousand. His is the defining radical voice.

One last poem. In the remaining few years of his fore-shortened life, the passing of time and the prospect of death preoccupy Burns's poetry, outwith the songs of political protest. Yet the mood is never bitter or resentful. The fragility of life calls forth sympathy and sensitivity rather than anger or defiance. Many of these poems have a spontaneous quality − the feel of immediate response to personal circumstances − and together they constitute an artistic achievement unequalled in Burns's oeuvre. Still only in his late thirties, Robert was producing new work of outstanding freshness, combining technical virtuosity with assured simplicity. The leitmotiv is compassionate wisdom as, for Burns, any sense of immortality is rooted in the values of this mortal existence, raised to a higher purer pitch of perception. This late flowering includes poems such as 'O Poortith Cauld and Restless Love', 'O Were My Love Yon Lilack Fair' and 'O Wert Thou in the Cauld Blast' − unequalled lyrics.

The finest blend of poetic creation and traditional song which Burns achieved in this late phase is surely written with Jean Armour in mind. ‘Auld Lang Syne’ is a hymn to memory and to young love, yet paradoxically it is also an act of anticipation, forecasting a time or condition of contented age which Burns and his faithful loving wife were not destined to reach. We are reminded of the unique hima capacity to look forwards and back. Nonetheless, the companionship evoked here is a realised, rather than an anticipated, emotion.

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot,
And auld lang syne!

And surely ye’ll be your pint stowp,
And surely I’ll be mine,
And we’ll tak a cup o’ kindness yet,
For auld lang syne!

We twa hae run about the braes,
And pou’d the gowans fine;
But we’ve wandered mony a weary fit,
Sin auld lang syne.

We two hae paidl’d in the burn,
Frae morning sun till dine,
But seas between us braid hae roar’d
Sin auld lang syne.

Note the echo there of ‘Till all the seas gang dry, my love’.

Yet, characteristically for Burns, friendship and love are celebrated as social bonds which extend to a universal human fellowship sealed in a loving cup.

And here’s a hand, my trusty fiere,
And gie’s a hand o’ thine,
And we’ll taka right gude-willie waught,
For auld lang syne!

The continued popularity of the song is the finest tribute Robert could have desired as man and poet, but it is also a profound expression of the Scottish Enlightenment as lived experience, a communion of all that is best in our imagining, thinking, feeling and aspiring, past, present and future.

I was thinking about how to finish this talk when Scotland's Justice Secretary Kenny McAskill announced the release on compassionate grounds of Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed al Megrahi. In freeing the Libyan convicted of the Lockerbie atrocity McAskill appealed to core "Scottish values": justice and compassion, freedom and humanity, all set within a context that was greater than the individual human life.

If these are core Scottish values then Burns defines and articulates them in the poems we have discussed today. So perhaps there is a continuing Enlightenment and continuing reasons for Scotland being Scotland in the wider world.