

## Robert Burns and the First World War

David Goldie

The Great War of 1914-1918 was the United Kingdom's introduction to total war – the first international war to be contested by a whole, mobilised population rather than a representative army. It was also the first European war that the nation would fight with a universally-educated and literate population. The Education Acts of 1870 (in Scotland 1872) had ensured that every British person had undergone a compulsory primary education and might reasonably be expected to be able to read and write and be on nodding terms, at least, with the literary tradition and its canon of great writers.

The Great War also had the distinction of being the last major conflict before the era of mass radio and television broadcasting and the sound film. The cinema was in its infancy in 1914 and was still largely considered to be a novel medium of entertainment rather than one of art or information. Radio, similarly, was a technology in search of a wider popular purpose, which it would only discover with the establishment of the BBC in 1922. Broadcast television would, of course, arrive only later in the mid 1930s.

Given such circumstances, it is clear that the written word had a reach and a significance that it had never had before and that it would never have again. The printed word was the primary means for the transmission of information and ideas, whether that was through the mass circulation daily newspapers such as the British *Daily Mail* or Scottish *Daily Record and Mail*; weeklies like the *People's Journal*; or in the pages of books by popular authors such as Marie Corelli, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, or Annie S. Swan.<sup>[1]</sup> Writing mattered, and as commentators such as Paul Fussell, Peter Buitenhuis, Modris Ecksteins, and Samuel Hynes have shown, it offered forms and narratives through which the war's multiple confusions and absurdities might be understood and rendered comprehensible; a conceptual grid for the calibration of the mental and moral compass.<sup>[2]</sup>

Poetry had a particular place to play in this, especially in the early years of the war when there was a sustained effort to endow the conflict with an elevated sense of purpose and moral strenuousness. Poems such as Wordsworth's 'Happy Warrior' and Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade' were taken off the shelf and dusted down by anthologists and newspaper editors in order to show off the historically-superior qualities of British courage, while the poems of more recent writers – among them, Rudyard Kipling's 'Recessional', Henry Newbolt's 'Vitaï Lampada', and Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier' - were trailed through various media in the attempt to cement in the public mind the idea of a peaceable folk roused to righteous and glorious action in the defence of their time-honoured values and national sense of mission. This was not merely an establishment imposition, but seemed rather to be the manifestation of actual consensus. The war created not just an active readership for poetry, but also a burgeoning writership. Newspapers in Britain, as in continental Europe, were deluged in the early months of the war by enthusiastic amateurs prompted into verse by the recent events.<sup>[3]</sup> The *Daily Mail* estimated in 1915 that more poetry 'had found its way into print in the last eleven months than in the eleven preceding years', while newspapers as diverse as the *Westminster Gazette* and the trench paper the *Wipers Times* began actively to discourage what the latter described as the 'hurricane of poetry' that they found blowing their way.<sup>[4]</sup>

Scotland was no exception to this trend, with all newspapers, from the thundering establishment dailies like the *Scotsman* and *Glasgow Herald* to popular weeklies such as the *People's Friend* and *People's Journal* and local papers such as the *Paisley Daily Express* and *Kilmarnock Standard* publishing a markedly increased number of poems in response to the early-war crisis, and turning for reassurance to its traditional writers. In most practical terms this, of course, meant Robert Burns.

Burns had been the subject of various forms of national celebration since his death, from the monument-makings, statue-raising, and bust-unveilings of the Victorians, through the many national and international Burns Clubs that became the Burns Federation in 1885, to his continuous presence in a wide range of printed books and popular newspapers.<sup>[5]</sup> Burns's legacy was for all this time much contested, with diverse groups and individuals claiming the bard for their own particular brand of political, or social, or recreational opinions.<sup>[6]</sup> But for all this contestation, and perhaps because of it, Burns occupied a prominent and distinct place in Scottish culture, becoming in the nineteenth century what Alex Tyrrell has called a 'lieu de mémoire': an object of public memory widely understood to be, and consecrated as, 'the quintessence of a nation'.<sup>[7]</sup> Such an attitude can certainly be seen in the comments of the doyen of *Blackwood's*, 'Christopher North', who assured his readers in 1829 that to Burns 'the Genius of Scotland points in triumph as the glorious representative of her people'.<sup>[8]</sup> Principal Shairp likewise, though a little less elevated in his diction, said much the same thing when he asserted in

1879 that Burns had restored a sense of national pride to Scotland and that 'in looking up to him, the Scottish people have seen an impersonation of themselves on a large scale'.<sup>[9]</sup>

One of the consequences of being writ large in the culture in this way, was that Burns was a ubiquitous figure in both high and low culture. The Establishment continued to pay its respects publicly to the Burnsian memory in its biographies, editions, and monuments. One of the most solid pillars of its Liberal wing, the Earl of Rosebery, had, for example, among many other activities unveiled the statues of Burns at Dumfries in 1882, on the Thames Embankment in 1884, and in Paisley in 1896. He had unveiled the bust of the poet in Westminster Abbey in 1885 and led the Centenary celebrations at Dumfries in 1896. He was the patron of a Burns club founded in 1885 that had been named in his honour and continued to play an important part in the annual celebrations of Burns's birth.<sup>[10]</sup> This was most visible perhaps in Glasgow where he helped, along with other grandees such as the Earl of Aberdeen, to finance the elaborate annual garlanding and floral decoration of Burns's statue in George Square. Rosebery was an honorary president of the Burns Federation, whose active presidents included eminent public men such as the Burns scholar and editor of the *Glasgow Herald*, William Wallace, and the long-time editor of the *Burns Chronicle*, Duncan McNaught. Bodies such as the London Burns Club made sure that the Scottish bard's reputation was bruited forth in the British metropolis, while prominent expatriates, among them Andrew Carnegie, spread the Burnsian evangel further afield – in Carnegie's case by unveiling a bronze statue of Burns in Schenley Park, Pittsburgh in November 1914.<sup>[11]</sup> Scottish suffragettes granted Burns perhaps the ultimate accolade as a symbol of the masculine establishment by attempting, in one of their last violent interventions, to blow up the Burns Cottage in Alloway in July 1914<sup>[12]</sup>.

This often high-minded attention to the Burns legacy was augmented by a more vulgar fascination with the bard in Scottish popular culture. Nowhere was this better seen than in the *People's Journal*, a newspaper that had by 1914 long defaulted on its obligations as the 'ploughman's bible' of nineteenth century north-eastern Scotland to become a rather typical product of the new journalism, feeding stories of crime, sport, and human interest to its largely urban population across Scotland.<sup>[13]</sup> Like many other papers of the new journalism the *People's Journal* sought occasionally to interest its readers in high culture, but typically did so in a way that simplified and sentimentalised: from one point of view facilitating culture, from another simply rendering it facile.

This could be seen in its response to the annual Burns celebrations in January of 1914, the year war broke out. This was an era in which popular newspapers commonly gave out free gifts and supplements, so it is not surprising that the *People's Journal* for the last week of January appeared with a free gift book, *Scotland's Immortal Bard: Songs and Poems by Robert Burns*.

This offered a predictable selection of the more popular Burns poems, a Burnsian populism that was also reflected in what the paper referred to as its 'Burnsettes'. These were competitions within the paper that invited readers to make out the titles of well-known Burns poems from picture clues and which offered substantial cash prizes and '100 Beautiful Busts of Scotland's Immortal Bard (in Antimony) and 100 Burns Ash-trays as Consolation Gifts'. In the same month the paper began a serial story that purported to be a tale from Burns's life, but was in fact the pretext for a typically sensational piece of romantic fiction. The serial, 'The Star o' Robbie Burns: Or the Wooing of Bonnie Jean', featured Burns in a somewhat improbable plot involving false weddings, gypsy camps, kidnappings, smuggling, and the bringing to book of an aristocratic villain.<sup>[14]</sup> In addition to this, regional editions of the paper ran their own separate accounts of the ways in which Burns had impacted on the local historical legacy. On 17 January 1914, the Aberdeen edition of the paper ran a feature, 'Aberdeen in Burns' Day' which recounted what Burns had thought of the city on a visit there – a similar feature, on what Burns had made of Dundee, appeared in the Dundee edition of the paper on the same day.<sup>[15]</sup>

### **Burns in Wartime**

Whether Burns was seen from on high as a pliable quietist, the author of 'The Cottar's Saturday Night' who might reconcile the poor to their lowly estate, or from lower down the social scale as a kind of poetic Robin Hood, the author of 'A Man's a Man' set on redistributing the common wealth of esteem to all social classes, he was undoubtedly an attractive figure. He had been famously no lover of system, and was recognised as one of the great proponents of individual liberty (in both senses of that term), so when war came he fitted in well with a mood, actively promoted by the authorities, in which the British saw themselves as plucky everymen cheerfully facing with their volunteer army the inhuman efficiencies of Teutonic militarism. The continued celebration of Burns throughout the war, then, could be seen at its most basic as a way of keeping up morale and stressing continuities with the British and Scottish past. The garlanding of the George Square statue in Glasgow continued and remained, judging from the pictures in the press, an elaborate affair.<sup>[16]</sup> The civic ceremony of placing a floral tribute on the mausoleum at Dumfries likewise persisted, the *Scotsman* noting in 1915, in fact, a larger than usual attendance.<sup>[17]</sup>

Though the vigour of their activities was increasingly attenuated by a range of pressures, from the demands of war work that diluted the available male population right through to a reported shortage of haggis, there was still considerable activity throughout the war among Burns clubs and enthusiasts.<sup>[18]</sup> Although most Burns clubs suspended many of their activities during wartime, the number of clubs actually grew: the Burns Federation had numbered 227 affiliated clubs at the beginning of 1914, by the end of 1918 this had grown to 254. What activity there was in wartime included several significant events, among them the unveiling of the Stirling Burns

statue in September 1914, the completion in October 1915 of a seven-volume Braille edition of Burns's poems and the preparation of a Moon-type edition for blind readers (completed 1917), and in 1915 the inauguration of the refurbished Burns House at Mauchline by the Glasgow and District Association of Burns Clubs. Burns club concerts and celebrations continued, too, often in relation to troop entertainment and charitable fund raising, making considerable sums of money for medical charities.[\[19\]](#)

Apart from official Burns club events the poet also continued to be visible at a popular level. The *People's Journal* marked his birthday in January 1915 by running a 'Burns Telegrams to the Kaiser' competition in which readers were invited to compose a short message from the dead Bard to the German emperor. The Journal's sister paper the *People's Friend* had Burns offering useful support for those fighting the war in an article 'Burns the Patriot: Some Seasonable Sayings'.[\[20\]](#) Partick Thistle FC sponsored an annual 'Burns Nicht' at the Empress Music Hall in Glasgow throughout the war. More soberly, the Glasgow Abstainers Union continued its own annual Burns Concerts in the Glasgow City Halls. As with the Burns club events, these could raise substantial sums for war charities: a 'Rabbie Burns Matinee' at the Glasgow Pavilion in 1918, for example, was reported to have raised over £1,000 for the Princess Louise Limbless Sailors and Soldiers Hospital at Erskine.[\[21\]](#) There were Burns nights too in rather more unexpected places. British prisoners set up their own unofficial club in the internment camp at Ruhleben near Berlin and entertained themselves and the other inmates with Burns songs and events.[\[22\]](#) There were many Burns nights too at the front. A Church of Scotland chaplain recounted with considerable national pride such an evening in a YMCA hut in France in *The Scotsman* in 1918:

Of course there were many Englishmen there, and almost as eager listeners as the Scots. 'Everyone is interested in Burns,' said an English officer, and one recognises with pleasure that, perhaps, more than ever to-day is our national poet coming into his own.[\[23\]](#)

### **Burns the Volunteer**

There could be no denying Burns's popularity, then, but what he and his legacy actually meant to those who employed his name is more problematic. For anyone with a point to make about the war, the multi-faceted Burns seemed to have an opinion that offered them support. Before the war, the accounts of Burns's attitudes to war and aggression had often been fairly balanced. In a typical piece published in the *Burns Chronicle* in 1912, Andrew McCallum had recognised the poet's sometimes aggressive and militaristic impulses while noting his more sustained opposition to the wars of his time. McCallum's approach was sensitive to the poet's humane opposition to

warfare but was perhaps rather more typical of the contemporary Burns establishment when it came to Burns's politics. According to McCallum,

when we find him writing on peace and war we must not think of him only as the National Poet of Scotland, giving expression to national sentiments and aspirations, but as one of the great forces of the British empire, in shaping the destinies of which he felt that he must take some part.<sup>[24]</sup>

With the advent of war, much of this balance disappeared, although the emphasis on Burns's role as a moulder of national and imperial opinion remained. For the great majority who actively supported war, especially in its early stages, Burns offered a personal and literary example of the ways in which British liberty defends itself from foreign tyranny. The *Daily Record and Mail*, for example, was quick to emphasise the way Burns would have responded to the aggressive instincts of the Central Powers. Its correspondent mused, 'we can imagine what Burns would have said about German militarism and the crimes it has perpetrated, The Kaiser and the hordes of the disciples of "Kultur" would have been satirised in words as keen as a rapier.'<sup>[25]</sup> The British Parliamentary Recruiting Committee similarly recognised Burns's appeal by issuing in 1915 a poster that sought to use him as a recruiting officer. The poster featured a pictured cameo of Burns: its heading reading 'What Burns Said – 1782 Still Holds Good in 1915'. Beneath the poet's likeness was printed the first stanza of 'I'll Go and Be a Sodger' and in large type the admonition 'Take His Tip'.<sup>[26]</sup>

It was perhaps predictable in this context that one of Burns's more rousing martial poems 'Scots Wha Hae' would come to be employed as a call to war. Martial anthologies became very popular, especially in the first two years of the war before the debacle of the Battle of the Somme cooled many people's ardour, and 'Scots Wha Hae' quickly found itself included in the proliferation of anthologies of martial verse, among them Oxford University Press's *Poems of War and Battle* (1914).

When virtually the whole of Glasgow's Tramways department enlisted together to form the 15th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry in 1914 they were sent off to war with Burns's words ringing in their ears. In a speech reported in the *Glasgow Herald*, Bailie Kirkland, convener of the Glasgow Tramways Department, counselled the newly-enlisted soldiers to take their inspiration from Burns and quoted some familiar words:

“Lay the Proud usurpers low,  
Tyrants fall in every foe,  
Liberty’s in every blow,  
Let us do or die.”[\[27\]](#)

This was far from untypical, as can be seen in an article from the *People’s Journal* in early 1915 with the telling title, ‘Robert Burns as Recruiter: The Inspiration of His Songs’:

A verse from his famous war-song has become the battle-cry of the nation – it is blazoned on many of our public buildings, and has sounded throughout the country from Maidenkirck to John o’ Groats.

The *Daily Record* similarly hailed the song in 1915 as ‘at once the most warlike and the most patriotic national anthem ever composed’. It continued,

The patriotism which he instilled is having its glorious fruition. ‘Liberty’s in every blow,’ and, fighting for our national existence, we cannot but recall that fervent utterance of love of country and love of kind which makes Burns at once the greatest of all democrats and the greatest of all patriots who have sung. Our soldiers are falling, and their ‘latest draught o’ breathing’ is of the very spirit which animates Burns’s great hymns of war.[\[28\]](#)

Those who wanted their Burns to be an ardent militarist were also able to point to his membership of the Dumfries Volunteers. For many, among them Alexander Mutch, Burns was a shining example, not simply for writing about going to be a Sodger but for actually doing it – for having the gumption to take his own tip.

When Burns became a soldier, it was an hour in the history of his native land when no man who really loved peace could stand aside, and he showed he was willing to strike [ . . . ] Scotland is proud of her Patriotic Bard, and the British Army finds an abiding honour in once having had the name of Robert Burns on the roll of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers.[\[29\]](#)

This sentiment was sustained by the Volunteers themselves. At a smoking concert held in Burns’s honour at Elgin in 1915 a Colonel of Volunteers lauded the poet for his ‘manly invincible spirit’ and ‘love and pride of country’, and celebrated the fact that Burns had ‘immortalised the corps and helped the nation by his glorious song to the Volunteers, “Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?”’.[\[30\]](#)

The Burns that emerges here is the sentimentalised official Burns, the man who was to be lamented for the occasional lapse in his morals and for his occasional dalliances with radical ideas, but who, when push came to shove would always come through as solid respectable citizen defending the values of nation and empire – the drawing-room rather than the tap-room Burns, perhaps. From this point of view, Burns could be used to endorse virtually anything, including war finance. When the corporation of Leith was taking part in the selling of War Saving Certificates in the fevered Tank Bank drive of early 1918, Sir Richard Mackie invited a large audience gathered round the base of Queen Victoria’s statue to ‘buy one certificate for Rabbie and one for themselves’.<sup>[31]</sup> The irony that Burns had died in poverty, begging for loans of money seemed to have been rather lost in all this.

It was this misremembered, sentimental Burns that John Buchan invoked when he invited the wartime American Ambassador, Walter Page, to the 1918 London Burns Club dinner, suggesting to him how appropriate it was,

that the representatives of the Allies should be asked to assist in the celebration of the birthday of Robert Burns, for it was he who first in the history of the world gave lyrical expression to the desire for that universal brotherhood which the alliance of four-fifths of the world, against military oppression is helping us to consummate.

The inappropriateness of such enthusiastic bardolatry was implied in the Ambassador’s response: he replied coolly, and perhaps sensibly, that ‘it is not quite clear to my mind how a man can work in a speech about the Allies on a Robert Burns background’.<sup>[32]</sup> Buchan’s own Immortal Memory address to the Club on that occasion, however, showed little of this caution. For Buchan, Burns was the ‘poet of our common patriotism’ as well as author of ‘one or two of the classic war songs of the world’:

No man has ever preached more nobly the duty of the citizen, who, whatever his quarrels with his country, is bound to help to close up the ranks when his country is threatened. If you wish for a statement of the Allies’ War Aims you will find it through the poetry of Burns. Freedom, tolerance, sympathy in the State; devotion, courage, sacrifice in the citizen – it is all there.<sup>[33]</sup>

Such attempts to enlist Burns to the war party were opportunistic and stretched their readings of his works near to breaking point. There were occasionally others that appeared to go even further. One, instigated in a letter to the *Scotsman* by George Hope Tait of Galashiels, attempted to impute to Burns an active hostility towards the enemy by mistakenly interpreting a letter to Rev. Dr McGill of Ayr, in which Burns had invoked ‘a withering curse to blast the Germans of their



wicked machinations'.<sup>[34]</sup> A similarly bellicose interpretation of Burns came from the Reverend Donald Macmillan in an address 'Burns and the War: His Message to the Nation' given to the Glasgow and District Burns Association in 1917. Many British soldiers complained during the war of the bloodthirstiness of the clergy, and especially its more elderly members, who often seemed willing to sacrifice the young and set aside Christian principles in the support of the war, and Macmillan's is perhaps a classic example of this.<sup>[35]</sup> For Macmillan, 'Scots Wha Hae' 'is the greatest War ode in the world' and the ideal counter to a Germany driving Europe 'back to Barbarous Ages'.<sup>[36]</sup> Macmillan believed Burns to be 'one of the great triumvirate, of which Wallace and Knox are the other two', and it is perhaps Knox's sense of Justification rather than Burns's humanism he is really invoking when he sounds his own trumpet blast against the monstrous regiments of the German army:

It is because all those principles for which Burns contended and whose praises he sang, and which, we know, lie at the very foundation of human society, are being scouted and trampled under foot, that we, as a nation, have risen in our wrath, and are determined to sacrifice our very dearest and our best on their behalf. We seem to hear to-day the clarion notes of our great poet calling us to arms, and his message is to fight, to the last, in defence of what we, in our inmost souls, know to be more precious than life itself.<sup>[37]</sup>

One thing that might strike contemporary readers as rather strange in all this is the way Burns's Scottish patriotism had become identified, apparently unproblematically, with a rather jingoistic British nationalism – as if Burns had never said all those things about a parcel of rogues, or had never had qualms about the House of Hanover and the British state. It is, in fact, one of the paradoxes of the war that these kinds of assumptions were accepted almost universally. This was partly the legacy of a nineteenth-century Anglo-Scottish criticism that had tended to follow Carlyle in asserting Burns's status as a British, rather than merely a Scottish writer. In his oft-cited review of Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns* Carlyle had noted Burns's particular role in restoring national self-consciousness to Scottish culture but insisted on reading Burns as not only 'a true British poet, but as one of the most considerable British men of the eighteenth century'.<sup>[38]</sup> It was perhaps, too, a more sustained legacy of what has been called the Unionist Nationalism of Victorian Scotland, and an example of the complex intertwinings of nationalist and unionist ideologies that had, as Colin Kidd has convincingly argued, been fundamental to Scottish political thought for centuries.<sup>[39]</sup>

Such a complex intertwining could be seen in the ways that recruiters drew on examples of Scottish independence to support the British war effort. On the face of it, 1914 might have been a tricky time for those committed to the Union and its wars as it marked the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn – the high point of Scotland's independent resistance to

its southern neighbour. But the opposite was in fact the case. The economic successes of Unionist Scotland, bolstered by literary works such as John Davidson's *Bruce: A Chronicle Play* (1886), had fostered a widely-held view that the heroes of Scottish independence were not the enemies of the union but rather the builders of its strong foundations.<sup>[40]</sup> By safeguarding Scotland and maintaining it as a strong, free country, so this thinking went, they had, when the proper time for union arrived, ensured that the nation would enter that union as a proud equal partner and not a submissive junior member. As a consequence the Wars of Independence were not forgotten in 1914 but were in fact trumpeted forth. The *People's Journal* chose to emphasise its support for the recruiting effort in August 1914, for example, by publishing a cartoon that celebrated Bannockburn explicitly. The cartoon featured Robert the Bruce in the foreground, standing alongside a superimposed copy of Lord Kitchener's leaflet calling for his first hundred thousand volunteers. Behind the Bruce stands Britannia, with union flag, exhorting a crowd of willing volunteers; beneath her raised sword, the key dates '1314-1914'. Just in case the symbolism is lost on the *Journal's* readers, the caption at the bottom reads 'Shades of Bruce – The Same Spirit Still Lives'.<sup>[41]</sup> This spirit, which had once crushed an English army, appears now to be uncontentiously identical to the one that will see Scots fight side by side with the English against a common foreign enemy. This kind of conflation helps explain, perhaps, why the perceived nationalism of a writer like Burns posed no problems to unionists, and why recruiting rallies, such as the one convened by Lord Rosebery in Broxburn in September 1915, could close with rousing renditions of the apparently antithetical National Anthem and 'Scots Wha Hae'.<sup>[42]</sup>

### **Burns and the Radicals**

This was Burns the patriot. But what about Burns the radical? Much had been said of Burns's humanity, honesty, love of liberty etc. when he had applied them to a celebration of nation, but what about all the occasions when he used the same qualities to pillory the authorities in the name of the people – as he had done in the aftermath of the American and French Revolutions? Where was this bolder figure who was not afraid to speak truth to power?

This was the Burns who had appealed so strongly to the socialist movement before and during the war, and who would continue to inspire them afterwards, the Burns to whom socialists such as Keir Hardie, Robert Smillie, Willie Gallacher, J. R. Campbell, and John S Clarke looked for literary expression of their political values.<sup>[43]</sup> When one of the war's leading socialists, Thomas Johnston, editor of *Forward* and future secretary of state for Scotland, declared in 1916 that 'Scots Wha Hae' was the 'national anthem' of the Scottish Socialist movement, he was not only trying to rescue Burns from the clutches of the war-mongers but was also attempting to reaffirm the song's place in the radical canon.<sup>[44]</sup> A century before, 'Scots Wha' Hae' had been such 'a rallying call for radicals' that Paisley magistrates considered making it an offence even to tap out

the tune on a drum.<sup>[45]</sup> More recently, it had been a favourite song of Scottish Suffragettes.<sup>[46]</sup> It was to these radical interpretations of the song, rather than to its assertions of patriotism, that Johnston and his ilk appealed.

To readers of this kind the proper emphasis lay less with 'Scots What Hae' or 'I'll go and be a Sodger' and more on songs that dwell on the separations and hardships caused by poverty or war, or in the documented accounts of Burns's antipathy to war. Both these were instanced by David Lowe in a pamphlet of 1915, 'Burns, Poet of Peace and War'. This rather idiosyncratic work seeks to ally Burns with Eastern mysticism ('The sages of Inde, guided by the lore of the Vedas, in their reverence for all forms of life, were equalled by the Scots peasant poet') and omits to mention his more aggressive and nationalistic qualities. Lowe chooses instead to focus on Burns's 'compassion' and his anti-war sentiments, quoting passages from 'Logan Braes' and from the letters, among them his deprecation of war in the letter to Mrs Dunlop of 2 January 1793: 'misery and ruin to thousands are in the blast that announces the destructive demon'.<sup>[47]</sup>

An article in *Forward* in 1918, offered a similar, if rather more conventionally political interpretation of Burns. This was by the Scottish organiser of the Independent Labour Party, and future biographer of Keir Hardie, Willie Stewart. It started with the sardonic observation that Burns was the poet of liberty, alcoholic conviviality, and freedom of speech – all things the government was currently clamping down on in the name of national security (*Forward* had itself been suppressed for a time at the end of 1915 and the beginning of 1916). Stewart, like Lowe, emphasised Burns's many anti-war pronouncements before noting piquantly that it was 'strange that these kinds of quotations are so unanimously overlooked by Burns orators and Burns dinners'. According to Stewart, a peaceful resolution to war is:

lang, lang in coming. And still, on Logan Braes, and on many thousand braes the wide world over, bereft and desolate women folk cry for their laddies that are 'ow'er the seas and far awa,' and helplessly adjure the unreachable rulers who have so ordered their destinies.

For Stewart this is the truth about the war, and the truth about Burns that establishment thinking has conveniently misrepresented or ignored: 'I cannot help but think if [statesmen] had ranted of Burns less and imbibed his spirit more, it had been better for us all to-day.'<sup>[48]</sup>

### **Burns and Contemporary Poetry**

Burns was of course not only a personal example but also a poetic one. A genuinely popular poetry such as Burns's naturally encourages emulation and pastiche at any time, so it not

surprising to discover that when war arrived writers in a wide range of publications found Burns's poetry to be a convenient reference point for their own thoughts.

Needless to say, 'Scots Wha Hae' was a poem that attracted many varieties of pastiche and adaptation. Some, like this by G. A. Bell of Bearsden and printed in Glasgow's *Evening Times*, blithely ironed out the poem's political and linguistic complexities and turned it into a celebration of the British state and monarchy tinged only with the politest hint of Scottish nationalism:

Scottish sons of gallant sires  
Britain's King your aid requires,  
To fight for all that love inspires,  
And for liberty.

Now's the time to prove that you,  
To your father's memories true  
Fight as only Scotsmen do —  
Fight for liberty.[\[49\]](#)

A similar form of polite co-option can be seen again in "'Sons of Britain": A Georgetown War Song. Tune, "Scots Wha Hae", published in the *Georgetown Gazette*, the factory newspaper of the vast Georgetown munitions complex in Renfrewshire in 1917:

Sons of Britain! far and near,  
Hark! the call of battle clear,  
Strike for home and altar dear,  
And for liberty.  
See the eagle's pinion's spread,  
Hear the Prussian's boastful tread,  
Rouse thee, Lion, from thy bed,  
Save posterity.[\[50\]](#)

Poems such as these are not only bad pastiches, putting Burns's forceful phrasing through the mincer of Edwardian verse rhetoric, they are also verbal equivalents of the *People's Journal* cartoons, serials, and competitions, playing fast and loose with Scottish history and reducing Burns's complexity of feeling and power of expression to a few formulaic and easily-recognisable gestures. The form of Burns's poetry may be emulated here but not its beating heart.

Other writers of verse attempted to rework Burnsian satire in the light of contemporary events. One such, an anonymous writer in the *People's Journal*, had the excellent idea of adopting the

monologue of 'Holy Willie's Prayer' for the German Kaiser, another Willie currently being held up for ridicule for his perceived hypocrisy:

Gott, Gott, dear Gott, attention please,  
Your bardner Vilhelm's here  
Und has vord or two to say  
Indo your brivate ear:  
So durn away all udders now  
Und listen vell to me,  
For vat I say concerns me much,  
Meinself und Shermany.

You know, dear Gott, I vas your friendt,  
Und from mein hour of birth  
I quietly let you rule de Heffen  
Vile I rules o'er de earth;  
Und ven I told mein soldiers  
Of bygone battle days,  
I gladly split de glory  
Und gave you half de praise.[\[51\]](#)

The Burnsian humour perhaps hits the mark here, although in the final analysis the conception is probably better than the delivery. A slightly cruder pastiche (although it was the winner of the *People's Journal* 'Burns Telegrams to the Kaiser Competition' in 1915) can be seen in Mrs D. Campbell of Melrose's adaptation of 'To a Haggis', written in a popular-cultural climate in which the Germans were almost always represented as a race of sausage-eating waiters:

Deil tak' yer ugly squirmin' face,  
Great savage o' the sausage race;  
Sune may yer carcase fin a place  
In some au'd midden.[\[52\]](#)

This is entertaining as pastiche and as light verse but like virtually all the Burns-inspired poetry of the war it plainly fails to take him seriously as a poetic model. Using Burns in this way confines him to a kind of venerable ludicrousness – a position in which he is valued only for his light mockery and not for his intelligence and his sometimes agonistic and heterodox instincts. This was the complex, radically oppositional figure who had, in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, influenced and inspired the many 'people's poets' of Scotland and Ulster

who took him as their model.<sup>[53]</sup> It was an influence that could be felt, too, in a poet such as James Young Geddes who, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, had shown how a Burnsian radicalism might be melded with a diversity of other influences, particularly that of Whitman, to create a Scottish poetry that developed the Burns tradition rather than simply mimicked it and emptied it of vitality.<sup>[54]</sup> But such attempts to develop a living tradition from the example of Burns were rare by the time of the war. The result, as it was expressed by William Stewart in the article in *Forward* quoted earlier, was that in wartime 'we have no modern poets who will even try to tell the truth about public affairs or about social conditions' – no poets able or willing to take on Burns's more quizzical and anti-authoritarian stance in their own voices. And there were even fewer like Burns, who did so in a distinctive Scottish voice.

There were notable attempts to keep alive, and indeed revive vernacular poetry during the war, the most visible being the Doric revival of North East Scotland which featured among others the work of Violet Jacob, Charles Murray, and J. B. Salmond.<sup>[55]</sup> John Buchan, too, wrote vernacular poetry of the war that owed much to Burns's example. This has been rightly praised, and Jacob, Murray, and Buchan wrote quite movingly of what Wilfred Owen would characterise as the 'pity of war' in poems such as Jacob's 'The Field by the Lirk o' the Hill', Murray's 'When will the War be by?', and Buchan's 'On Leave'. But while such poems capture the kinds of rural stoicism and simple piety sometimes found in Burns, they tend to lack that other radical, bawdy side of the bard. Most of all, and this is perhaps rather contentious, what they lack is the sense manifested in Burns's work of a poet writing about people very much like himself. Most of the poets of this revival were émigrés like Murray or, like Jacob and Buchan, members of the Anglo-Scottish elite – people who were less like Burns and rather more like the polite folks of Edinburgh who had welcomed, enjoyed, and condescended to him. While they embody an admirable commitment to local cultural traditions these poets are perhaps too self-conscious in their defence of a tradition from which they are in fact estranged, leading them into the ways of nostalgia and the idealisation of their subjects.

As it happened, however, very little of the poetry published anywhere in Scotland – in newspapers, pamphlets, or books – was written in the Scots language. The poetry of the folk, it appears, was no longer that rich Scots that Burns had done so much to promote in his own work and collect in the work of others. It was instead a fairly bland imperial Edwardian English. This is immediately obvious when one opens up the poetry pages of any wartime newspaper, even those previously committed to the vernacular like the *People's Journal*, and is reinforced if one looks through an anthology such as Hilda Spear and Bruce Pandrich's *Sword and Pen*. This selection of poems from Dundee newspapers in 1915 contains one hundred poems, of which only nine use dialect in any sustained way.<sup>[56]</sup>

One of the most disappointing examples of this, perhaps, concerns the ‘people’s poet’ of Dundee Joseph Lee. Lee was an editor on the *People’s Journal*, and a frequent and popular contributor to its poetry pages. He was a genuine and committed advocate of Burns, befriending Burns’s great-granddaughter Jean Armour Burns Brown, and contributing a number of Burns-inspired poems to the *People’s Journal* and the *Burns Chronicle*. One of the most celebrated being ‘The White-Washin’ o’ Robbie Burns’ – for which he also produced an illustration.<sup>[57]</sup> This poem lamented the indignities to which Burns had been put over the years by his so called celebrants and supporters – illustrated here by the metaphor of workmen crawling all over his statue in Dundee. But what is salutary about Lee’s career as a war poet, is the way he moved away from Burns as an exemplar during his war service. The two collections he published during the war, *Ballads of Battle* (1916) and *Work-A-Day Warriors* (1917) show him moving further and further away from a Burnsian vitality to a more terse poetry in standard English that showed the influence of popular imperial poets like Rudyard Kipling and Henry Newbolt. Indeed, in many he swaps his Scottish voice for the kind of cockney (or mockney) found in Kipling’s *Barack-Room Ballads* and in Kipling imitators like Robert Service and Patrick MacGill to the extent that there are more poems in cockney English than in Scots in *Work-A-Day Warriors*.<sup>[58]</sup>

### **Burns the Survivor**

Burns’s popular reputation survived the war and was, if anything, perhaps enhanced by it. But there was little sense that this was based on anything more particular, or more directly relevant, than the pull of his poetic persona. Byron was not the first, nor the last to comment on Burns’s variousness, when he talked of Burns’s ‘antithetical mind’, nor was Carlyle alone in lamenting ‘the want of unity in his purposes, of consistency in his aims’.<sup>[59]</sup> In wartime Burns appealed, as ever, to conservatives, liberals, and socialists; to Christians and atheists; to drinkers and abstainers; moralists and amoralists: militarists and anti-militarists. Perhaps this is to his credit. It is not the poet’s job to apply a consistent message, but rather to explore where words, feelings, and ideas might lead. W. B. Yeats had written in 1917 that ‘we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’.<sup>[60]</sup> In this sense Burns was almost always a poet before he was a rhetorician. This is perhaps why he seems to fit so awkwardly in the attempts of recent critics to pin him down to specific ideological positions. But it is maybe also why he offered little assistance to wartime writers in search of literary models: this was a moment at which, in the public sphere at least, there was a greater demand for literary rhetoric and displays of rectitude than for scepticism and the free play of poetic heterodoxy.

John Buchan had suggested to the loud applause of the London Burns Club in 1918 that ‘we can ask no better gift from the gods than that some second Burns should arise to embody in immortal verse the spirit of the British soldier to-day as a legacy to the unborn generation’.<sup>[61]</sup> But in the

Scottish context at least, the gods didn't seem to be listening and no such figure was forthcoming. What was coming was a Renaissance, embodied in the very different figure of Hugh MacDiarmid, which would have, especially in its initial stages, very little time for Burns and his legacy. MacDiarmid's castigations of the Burns cult are well known and are amply demonstrated in his poem 'Your Immortal Memory, Burns!' in *Penny Wheep* (1926).<sup>[62]</sup> His desire to cut Burns out of the Scottish tradition and return instead to Henryson and Dunbar reflects a general disillusionment about the vulgar misappropriation to which Burns had been subject throughout the nineteenth century, but is also perhaps driven by a particular sense that his legacy had been tried and found wanting in the war. Buchan had been quoted as saying 'that the time of war was a time to turn to poetry, for the poet wrote for the great moments of life'.<sup>[63]</sup> By this standard, Burns and his followers had failed.

What was perhaps particularly disappointing is that so few poets found Burns's intelligent scepticism or his defiant stylistic panache applicable to the war's particular circumstances. Those who professed themselves influenced by Burns rarely got beyond pastiche or, like Joseph Lee, found themselves moving away from his influence and modelling their work on exemplars more fitted for the times. The martial influence of Bruce and 'Scots Wha Hae' perhaps lived on, but the questioning, probing, antithetical spirit of Burns had been effectively suspended for the duration. The Whitewashin' o' Robbie Burns had continued, and had done Burns little service.

## NOTES

[1] The *Daily Mail* had achieved daily sales of over one million within four years of its inception in 1896, while at the turn of the century the *People's Journal* was claiming a readership of a million based on weekly sales of a quarter of a million. See *How a Newspaper Is Printed: Being a Complete Description of the Offices and Equipments of the Dundee Advertiser, People's Journal, Evening Telegraph, and People's Friend* (Dundee: John Leng & Co, n.d. [1898]), 18-19. For an authoritative account of the extent of popular book publishing, see Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[2] See, Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975). Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda 1914-18 and After* (London: Batsford, 1989). Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London: Bantam, 1989). Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990).

[3] For the international perspective, see 'They All Write Poetry', in Elizabeth A. Marsland, *The*



*Nation's Cause: French, English and German Poetry of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 1991), 1-32.

[4] Twells Brex, 'A Serious Outbreak of Poets', *Daily Mail* (23 June 1915), p. 11; 'Notice', *The Wipers Times or Salient News 2/4* (20 March 1916), unpaginated. Both quoted in George Walter, ed. *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2006), ix-x.

[5] See Edward Goodwillie, *The World's Memorials of Robert Burns* (Detroit: Waverley Publishing, 1911). Johnny Rodger, 'The Burnsian Constructs', in Johnny Rodger and Gerard Carruthers, eds., *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21st Century* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2009), 50-79.

[6] See R. J. Finlay, "The Burns Cult and Scottish Identity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Love and Liberty, Robert Burns: A Bicentenary Celebration*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997). I'm grateful to Professor Christopher A. Whatley for supplying me with a pre-publication version of his forthcoming essay "It is said that Burns was a Radical": contest, concession and the political legacy of Robert Burns, c. 1796-1859' from which I have also drawn here.

[7] Alex Tyrrell, "Paternalism, Public Memory and National Identity in Early Victorian Scotland: The Robert Burns Festival at Ayr in 1844," *History* 90. 297 (2005): 43. Tyrrell draws here on Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire* (1984).

[8] [Professor John Wilson], *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, May 1829, reprinted in John D. Ross, ed. *Early Critical Reviews on Robert Burns* (Glasgow and Edinburgh: William Hodge, 1900), 212-55 (p. 14).

[9] Though Shairp was careful to add that what Burns offered Scots was an impersonation of 'themselves, both in their virtues and in their vices'. Principal Shairp, *Robert Burns* (London: Macmillan, 1887), 196.

[10] See James Angus, *The Rosebery Burns Club Glasgow: A Short Sketch of Its Origin and Growth* (Glasgow: W. & R. Holmes, 1906).

[11] Carnegie had unveiled the Burns statue in Montrose in 1912. See "Mr Andrew Carnegie on Burns," *Burns Chronicle* 22 (1913): 69-82. Perhaps more significantly, he also arranged that every Carnegie Library in the United States had a bust of Burns.

[12] See Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause: The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland*, Revised ed. (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1995), 204-6.

[13] See William Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland: Language, Fiction and the Press* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), 145-50. David Goldie, "The British Invention of Scottish Culture: World War One and Before," *Review of Scottish Culture* 18 (2006): 139-45.

[14] See *People's Journal*, 17 January 1914, p. 2. The *Journal* followed this with another travestied version of Scottish history in the serial 'Scots Wha Hae: A Romance of Bruce and Bannockburn' that began on 11 April 1914.

- [15] These editioned copies of the *People's Journal* are available at Dundee Central Library.
- [16] See, for example, *Daily Record and Mail*, 25 January 1916, 8.
- [17] "The Mausoleum at Dumfries," *The Scotsman*, 26 January 1915, 6.
- [18] See "No Haggis: War Time Dinner of London Burns Club," *The Times*, 26 January 1918, 3.
- [19] See "Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Burns Federation," *Burns Chronicle* 28 (1919): 141.
- [20] Ian Farquhar, "Burns, the Patriot: Some Seasonable Sayings," *People's Friend*, 25 January 1915, 78.
- [21] Walter Terry, "The Year in Variety," in *The Era Annual 1918* (London: Era, 1918), 44.
- [22] See "A Burns Club in Germany," *Scotsman*, 15 January 1915, 6. "A Burns Celebration in a German Prison," *Scotsman*, 12 May 1915, 14. Joseph Powell and Francis Gribble, *The History of Ruhleben: A Record of British Organisation in a Prison Camp in Germany* (London: Collins, 1919), 187.
- [23] J.A.M., "A Nicht Wi' Burns at the Front: From a Church of Scotland Chaplain," *The Scotsman*, 11 February 1918, 6.
- [24] Andrew McCallum, "Burns on Peace and War," *Burns Chronicle* 21 (1912): 34.
- [25] "If Burns Were Alive," *Daily Record*, 25 January 1918, 2.
- [26] See <http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/large.php?uid=29282&sos=1>.
- [27] "Tramwaymen's Noble Response," *Glasgow Herald*, 8 September 1914, 7.
- [28] "Burns and the Sodger Laddie," *Daily Record and Mail*, 25 January 1915, 4.
- [29] Alexander Mutch, *Robert Burns from a Soldier's Standpoint* (Aberdeen: Rosemount Press, 1915), 22.
- [30] "Private Robert Burns," *The Scotsman*, 26 January 1915, 6.
- [31] "Leith Tank Bank," *The Scotsman*, 26 January 1918, 6. Burns's memory would be again prevailed upon later in the year, when Scots were invited to contribute funds to 'War Weapons Week'. See "Scots Wha Hae," *The Times*, 8 April 1918, 13.
- [32] This correspondence is quoted in Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan: A Biography* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965), 210-1.
- [33] ""The Immortal Memory": An Extract from the Proceedings of the Annual Birthday Celebration of the London Burns Club (Now the Burns Club of London) on 25 January 1918," *John Buchan Journal* 30 (2004): 6.
- [34] G.H.T., "Robert Burns on the Germans," *The Scotsman*, 28 October 1914, 8.
- [35] See, for example, Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: SMC Press, 1996), 109-19.
- [36] Donald Macmillan, *Burns and the War; His Message to the Nation: An Address Delivered before the Glasgow and District Burns Association, in St. George's Parish Church, on 28th January, 1917* (Glasgow Glasgow and District Burns Association, 1917), 3, 8.

- [37] Ibid., 3, 7.
- [38] Thomas Carlyle, *Burns* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1854), 43-8, 7.
- [39] Graeme Morton, *Unionist-Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830-1860* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999). Colin Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- [40] Davidson makes this very clear by portraying a Wallace whose actions are explicitly a strategy to ensure that 'we, free Scots, / May one day be free Britons'. John Davidson, *Plays* (London: Elkin Matthews & John Lane, 1894), 168.
- [41] *People's Journal*, 15 August 1914, 4. See Goldie, "The British Invention of Scottish Culture," 137.
- [42] See "War of the Nations: Lord Rosebery on the Crisis of Our Fate," *The Times*, 7 September 1914, 2. David Goldie, "Scotland for Ever? British Literature, Scotland, and the First World War," in *Ireland (Ulster) Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons*, ed. Edna Longley, Eamonn Hughes, and Des O'Rawe (Belfast: Queen's University Belfast/Ció Ollscoil na Banríona, 2003), 113-20.
- [43] See T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London: Fontana, 1987), 256. Ramsay McDonald had famously written of Keir Hardie that he 'had got more Socialism from Burns than from Marx'. 'Introduction' to William Stewart, *J. Keir Hardie: A Biography* (London: Cassell, 1921), xxiii. John S Clarke, a leading light in the Socialist Labour Party and joint editor of the paper *The Socialist*, would become Labour MP for Maryhill and, from 1943-6, President of the Burns Federation.
- [44] Graham Walker, *Thomas Johnston* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 37.
- [45] Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950*, 237.
- [46] Notwithstanding their attempts to blow up his childhood home, of course. See Leneman, *A Guid Cause: The Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland*, 117, 204-6.
- [47] David Lowe, *Burns: Poet of Peace and War* (Blebo Craigs, Fife: Craigwood House, 1915), 16 & 14.
- [48] William Stewart, "Robert Burns on Current Politics," *Forward*, January 19 1918, 1.
- [49] G. A. Bell, "Here and There," *Evening Times*, 8 September 1914, 2.
- [50] "Sons of Britain: A Georgetown War Song, Tune "Scots What Hae"," *Georgetown Gazette*, October 1917, 30.
- [51] "The Kaiser's Prayer," *People's Journal*, 26 December 1914, 3.
- [52] Mrs D. Campbell, "What Burns Would Have Said to the Kaiser," *People's Journal*, 23 January 1915, 5.
- [53] See Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2002).
- [54] Valentina Bold, "James Young Geddes (1850-1913): A Re-Evaluation," *SLJ* 19.1 (1992): 18-

27.

[55] Colin Milton, "A Sough O' War: The Great War in the Poetry of North-East Scotland," in *Northern Visions: Essays on the Literary Identity of Northern Scotland in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Hewitt (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1995), 1-38.

[56] Hilda D. Spear and Bruce Pandrich, eds., *Sword and Pen: Poems of 1915 from Dundee and Tayside* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989).

[57] Poem and illustration had also appeared in the *Burns Chronicle* (January 1913), 66-8. See, in addition, his 'Robert Burns to Robert Bridges', *Burns Chronicle* (January 1915), 80-81.

[58] Fuller accounts of Lee's wartime poetry can be found in Bob Burrows, *Fighter Writer: The Eventful Life of Sergeant Joe Lee, Scotland's Forgotten War Poet* (Derby: Breedon Books, 2004), 63-127. See also David Goldie, "Was There a Scottish War Literature? Scotland, Poetry, and the First World War," in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 161-5.

[59] Leslie A. Marchand, ed. *Alas! The Love of Women*, vol. 3: 1813-1814, Byron's Letters and Journals (London: John Murray, 1974), 239. Carlyle, *Burns*, 78. For an excellent recent discussion of this variousness and the troubled question 'What was Robert Burns?' see Murray Pittock, 'Nibbling at Adam Smith', in Rodger and Carruthers, eds., *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21st Century*, 118-31.

[60] W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 331.

[61] ""The Immortal Memory"," 6.

[62] See Alan Riach, "MacDiarmid's Burns," in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 198-215.

[63] "No Haggis: War Time Dinner of London Burns Club," 3.