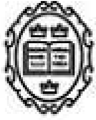

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Robert Burns and the Calvinist Radical Tradition
by Liam McIlvanney

It is one consequence of the endemic vagueness of historical periodisation, that historians are prone to place compensatory emphasis on points of radical discontinuity. An effective way of giving maximal definition and coherence to a chosen period of study, is to present it as the negation of the immediately preceding age. In the case of the Scottish century, this is a familiar scholarly tactic. Historiographically, the eighteenth century in Scotland has figured above all as the antithesis of the seventeenth: it is a century of civility coming after a century of near barbarism; a century of tolerance after a century of sectarian wrangling; a century of intellectual vitality after a century of intellectual stagnation; a century of expansive internationalism after a century of unhealthy introspection.

This emphasis on discontinuity has been particularly influential in studies of the cultural and intellectual milieux of eighteenth-century Scotland; in studies, that is, of the Scottish Enlightenment. According to the dominant historiographical account, the Scottish Enlightenment was rather a momentous unforeseen departure than the culmination of earlier trends and processes. It has been portrayed as a sudden efflorescence of rational enquiry in a land given over to barren scholastic fanaticism, explicable, if at all, as the result of civilizing contact with England, and owing nothing to the indigenous intellectual heritage. Its protagonists have been characterised as a dissident cadre of freethinkers, cut off not only from their country's inglorious past, but from the vast majority of their benighted countrymen. Propounded by Buckle and Lecky in the nineteenth-century, this view was influentially reiterated by Hugh Trevor-Roper in a seminal article of 1967, in which the Scottish Enlightenment is characterised as a 'sudden Scottish

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revival' of learning and culture, conducted by a handful of 'intellectual pioneers', following the 'dark age' of the seventeenth century.[1]

The notion that seventeenth-century Scotland was a savage, fanatical backwater depends – like much else in Scottish cultural analysis – on a pejorative assessment of Scottish Calvinism. For historians of the Buckle and Trevor-Roper school, Calvinism epitomises everything deplorable in pre-Union Scotland. 'One of the most detestable tyrannies ever seen on earth' was Buckle's description of the Scottish kirk. It was 'narrow nationalist Calvinism' and 'the stale waters of Calvinist bigotry' that, in Trevor-Roper's account, made seventeenth-century Scotland a dark age. In effect, all the binary oppositions which were held to divide the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Scotland were comprehended within one grand antithesis between a century which was definitively Calvinist – and *therefore* intolerant, backward, philistine and so forth – and a century which was dynamically rationalist and secular. The Scottish Enlightenment, for Trevor-Roper as for Buckle, is in the first instance a reaction against Calvinism.[2]

Until recently, this orthodox account of the Scottish Enlightenment held more or less undisputed sway. It had, in fact, been challenged almost at the outset, by the lonely figure of James Alfred Froude, who sought the source of Scotland's eighteenth-century successes in the country's earlier religious struggles against despotism. 'The Covenanters fought the fight and won the victory', wrote Froude,

> and then, and not till then, came the David Humes with their essays on miracles, and the Adam Smiths with their political economies, and steam-engines, and railroads, and philosophical institutions, and all the other blessed and unblessed fruits of liberty.[3]

But Froude won few adherents to this view. Indeed, his remarks drew only the most glibly condescending of rebuttals from Edwin Muir in his debunking biography of Knox.[4] Nevertheless, it is in the direction suggested by Froude that the most challenging recent work on the Scottish Enlightenment has proceeded. The orthodox account of Scottish intellectual history has come under increasing scholarly attack, as the role of Calvinism in the Scottish Enlightenment has been reassessed.

It has, of course, long been commonplace to acknowledge the *logistical* role played by the Kirk in preparing the Enlightenment, through its establishment of a system of near-universal education. Recently, however, more ambitious claims for Calvinism's intellectual role have been advanced. Rejecting the dominant view of the Enlightenment as an abrupt efflorescence, scholars such as Arthur Williamson and David Allan have identified a continuous tradition of Calvinist intellectualism connecting the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment to writers and scholars of the seventeenth century and earlier. In their analysis of the historical and controversial

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literature of early modern Scottish Presbyterianism, Williamson and Allan have encountered a vigorous and very widespread engagement with continental humanism which makes it very difficult to regard the literati of the eighteenth century as a completely new departure.[5] On the contrary, it has been convincingly demonstrated that the concerns and methods of the early modern Calvinist historians and thinkers – men like George Buchanan, Samuel Rutherford and Alexander Shields – provide the framework for the enquiries of the later Enlightenment writers. This is perfectly clear, for example, in the field of political theory: the participatory republican ethic of the Reformers and the Covenanters, with its conjoining of Calvinism and Florentine civic humanism, continues to inform the writings of Smith and Ferguson.[6] In addition to this overarching continuity of 'Calvinist humanist' discourse, certain other correspondences between the Enlightenment literati and their more conspicuously Calvinist precursors have been asserted. For example, the 'moderate scepticism' of the Enlightenment writers – their rejection of arguments based on custom and precedent in favour of systematic logic and speculation – has been attributed to the Calvinist heritage.[7] Similarly, the determinism inherent in the Enlightenment doctrine of 'unintended consequences' – the theory that great historical changes come about not through rational planning, but as the unforeseen outcome of various unrelated activities – has been linked to the influence of Calvinist providentialism.[8]

The Scottish Enlightenment, then, is coming to seem less and less like Trevor-Roper's 'mysterious transformation',[9] and more like the development of an indigenous tradition of Calvinist intellectualism. The recent revisionist scholarship has re-established the continuity of Scottish intellectual history, and we are now in the position in which the writer of the most recent one-volume history of Scotland can boldly assert that 'the roots of the Enlightenment lay in the century of intellectual vigour which had preceded the Union of 1707'.[10]

If the notion of the Enlightenment as a break with the Scottish past has come under attack, so too has the related postulate of an elite cadre of enlightened intellectuals existing in splendid isolation from the majority of their contemporaries. The conventional depiction of the literati as an avant-garde has relied upon two rather questionable assumptions: firstly, that all the writers and intellectuals were 'Moderate' or latitudinarian in their Presbyterianism; and secondly, that the Moderates were diametrically opposed to the more numerous 'Evangelical' Presbyterians. As the recent revisionist scholarship has suggested, there were in fact areas of substantial congruence between the Moderates and their Evangelical contemporaries. Ned Landsman's account of an 'Evangelical Enlightenment', centred on Glasgow rather than Edinburgh, has helped to dispel the rather facile notion that Evangelicalism was antagonistic to secular learning.[11] Similarly, the broadening of the Scottish Enlightenment canon beyond a coterie of Edinburgh Moderates has allowed more attention to be focused on writers

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such as John Witherspoon, the Evangelical clergyman and scholar who went on to become president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton University).[12]

Calvinism, it must be remembered, was not the monopoly of any single party within the eighteenth-century Scottish kirk. The failure to appreciate this fact can be attributed to the narrow understanding of Calvinism current among modern cultural commentators. When taken to signify merely a morbid preoccupation with sinfulness and hell, Calvinism, where it existed at all, was indeed found predominantly among the Evangelicals or 'Old Lights'. However, when understood as a complex tradition of religious thought and practice, with its own modes of scholarship and currents of social and political philosophy, Calvinism will be seen to have impinged upon all parties within eighteenth-century Scottish Presbyterianism. The conventional, naively Whiggish account of a Scottish intellectual life in the eighteenth century, in which progressive, rational Moderates are pitted against fanatical Evangelical diehards, has been decisively revised. We can now appreciate the Calvinistic qualities of the Enlightened literati, and the 'Enlightened' qualities of the Calvinist Evangelicals.[13]

As a result of recent revisionist scholarship, then, the historians and philosophers of eighteenth-century Scotland have been reintegrated into the intellectual context of Scottish Calvinism. In the remainder of this article, I want to extend this process of reintegration into the sphere of literary culture, by exploring the role of Calvinism in the work of Robert Burns. Burns, I shall suggest, is another writer of the Enlightenment era in Scotland whose relationship to Calvinism requires to be reassessed. In particular, Burns's debt to the radical political heritage of Calvinism, to its traditions of popular libertarianism and resistance to tyrannical rule, is a feature of his work which has been consistently overlooked. Before going on to assess its impact on Burns's poems, I shall first give a brief outline of the Calvinist radical tradition.

* * *

The association of Calvinism with political radicalism reflects the pattern of development of the Calvinist Reformation. Whereas Lutheranism tended to develop through the sponsorship of princes, and so remained politically quiescent and deferential to the civil power, Calvinism developed in open conflict with hostile Catholic courts in Scotland as in France. Repudiating the right of the monarch to intervene in matters of spiritual moment, Calvinism stood for limited government in an age of monarchical absolutism. Moreover, Calvinism drew its support from social classes – the bourgeoisie, artisans, peasants – which were excluded from existing power structures. It gave these groups a share in ecclesiastical power by adopting a partially democratic system of government by church courts (Presbyterianism). And increasingly, given its hostile relationship with the crown,

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the kirk asserted the civil and political competence of the people, their right to resist bad government.

The theory of justified resistance was developed by Presbyterian thinkers in a series of polemical works, often written in times of armed rebellion: George Buchanan's *De Jure Regni Apud Scotos* (1579), written after the deposition of Mary; Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex: The Law and the Prince* (1644), written during the Presbyterian resistance to Charles I; and Alexander Shields's *A Hind Let Loose* (1687), written during the later Covenanting struggles. In these seminal works, the participatory and democratic values of Calvinism are mobilised to justify resistance to tyrannous government. The Calvinist understanding of ecclesiastical authority – whereby a fully competent lay community delegates a conditional authority to its ministers – is extended into the civil sphere. The resulting contractarian theory of government received its classic Scottish formulation in George Buchanan's *De Jure*, which argues that sovereignty is vested in the people, and that the people may legitimately cashier a tyrannous ruler.

In Buchanan's work, and in the work of later Presbyterian historians like Rutherford and Shields, the ideal of the active layman, interrogating the scriptures for himself and competent to share in the government of his church, translates into the ideal of the active citizen, determined to participate in his country's government, and willing to bear arms in defence of its liberties. The contractual ministry translates into the contractual magistracy, and government wields an authority which is not absolute, but conditional on its acting for the good of the public. Where government does not use its delegated authority for the good of all, the people are held to be justified in resuming direct control. Alexander Shields asserts the right of resistance in *A Hind Let Loose*:

> [I]n Conscience, we are no more free to Prostitute our Loyalty and Liberty absolutely, in ouning every Professor of the Magistracy; than we are free to Prostitute our Religion and faith implicitely, in ouning every Pretender to the Ministry.[14]

As David Allan has recently demonstrated, what we are dealing with in the work of Buchanan and the other Calvinist historians is a self-consciously republican discourse. Republican, in the sense that the true end of government is taken to be the good of the public – the 'common wealth' the 'res-publica' – and that the active citizenship of the people is deemed essential to that end. Public spirit becomes the key political virtue in Presbyterian political theory. *Salus populi, suprema lex* is considered the ground rule of government, and a concern for the public the only source of legitimate authority. This equation of virtue with public spirit destabilised traditional notions of social leadership: the truly great man is not the noble or the earl; it is the virtuous, public-spirited man, of whatever station, who alone is truly noble.[15]

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Now, from a political theorists's point of view, what is immediately striking about this Calvinist political discourse is its close resemblance to renaissance civic humanism. This was not lost on the Calvinists themselves, and from very early on we find the Reformed historians drawing explicitly on humanist values of civic patriotism and active citizenship, with citizenship closely identified with the right to bear arms. We find Robert Fleming drawing on Juvenalian notions of virtue as the only true nobility, Alexander Shields commending the civic virtue of the classical patriots, and the Covenanters being everywhere portrayed as civic humanist heroes, bands of citizen militia defending the nation's liberties against the mercenary troops of a tyrant.[16]

Of course, as Allan shows, there were obstacles to the successful integration of Calvinist and humanist discourses – for example, the treatment of free will and historical causality, where Calvinist determinism could conflict with the humanist model of an active *virtu* overcoming *Fortuna*. Nevertheless, there was sufficient common ground to create among early modern Scots Presbyterians an integrated political discourse which has been plausibly labelled 'Presbyterian humanism' or 'Calvinist humanism'.[17]

* * *

To what extent, and by what means, was Burns exposed to the political traditions of Scottish Calvinism? Growing up in the south-west, Burns was perhaps first brought into contact with Calvinism's political legacy on the level of legends and anecdotes of the Covenanters, the seventeenth-century Presbyterians who rebelled against what they saw as the civil and religious tyranny of successive Stuart monarchs. Burns's involvement in this type of popular Presbyterian culture has been described by William Donaldson:

> [Burns] was immersed in old-style Scots Whiggism from infancy. 'Burns Country' lies squarely within that tract of ground hallowed in Presbyterian memory by the sufferings of the persecuted remnant. Drumclog, Airds Moss, and Bothwell Brig all lie within a few miles of his native parish. Peden the prophet had been schoolmaster at Tarbolton. In the centre of Mauchline itself stood a tablet commemorating the execution of people taken in field-conventicles by Graham of Claverhouse and Grierson of Lag.
>
> His early childhood was dominated by his mother, Agnes Broun, a powerful and vivid personality from whom he would have absorbed much Covenanting lore. Her grandfather had been shot at Airds Moss. It was from his mother and the women about her that he was first exposed to folk-tradition and, one may guess, to an imperfectly literate and highly localised version of popular Presbyterian spirituality.[18]

As well as this exposure to legendary tradition, Burns was familiar with a large body of Presbyterian literature. Burns confesses to being 'deeply read'

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in popular eighteenth-century doctrinal works such as Thomas Boston's *Human Nature in its Fourfold State*, Walter Marshall's *On Sanctification*, and William Guthrie's *Trial of a Saving Interest*.[19] He was familiar also with Presbyterian literature of a more historical orientation: among the many 'religious pieces' which Burns ordered for the Monkland Friendly Society were Knox's *History of the Reformation*, and Howie's *Scots Worthies*, a hagiographical work on Protestant martyrs.[20] It seems reasonable to assume that Burns, as a voracious reader in south-west Scotland, came across other religious works which are not mentioned in the extant letters: Patrick Walker's popular Covenanting biographies, for instance, or the monumental *History of the Sufferings of the Church of Scotland* (1721–2) written by Robert Wodrow, the father of Burns's minister at Tarbolton. Whether Burns encountered the more explicitly political early modern Presbyterian authors – Buchanan, Rutherford, Shields – we can only speculate, although it is at least possible.

In any case, Burns was familiar with the works of the Enlightenment literati – of Adam Smith, Thomas Reid, and, almost certainly, Adam Ferguson – in which the Buchananite civic tradition continues to figure prominently.[21] That the end of government was the good of the public; that the people had the right to resist tyranny; that popular participation in defence and government was vital to a nation's strength; that public spirit and not hereditary rank was the qualification for citizenship: all these principles of Calvinist humanism are as characteristic of the Moderate as of the Evangelical tradition, of Adam Ferguson as of Archibald Bruce. It would therefore be erroneous to take Burns's commitment to Moderatism as involving a root-and-branch rejection of Calvinism. Burns's commitment to the Moderate cause has in any case often been overstated. But even if Burns had been, in Witherspoon's sardonic phrase, 'fierce for moderation', he would not thereby have cut himself off from the political discourse of Calvinist humanism.[22]

* * *

The Calvinist roots of Burns's political radicalism are perhaps most evident in his assaults on upper-class corruption. From the early satires to the late revolutionary songs, Burns's political verse levels a scrutinous gaze at the moral walk of his society's governors. Burns dramatises the folly of a system which restricts civic participation to persons of rank and wealth in his portraits of upper-class depravity, such as the dissipated M.P. described in 'The Twa Dogs'.[23]

Haith lad, ye little ken about it;
For Britain's guid! guid faith! I doubt it.
Say rather, gaun as PREMIERS lead him,

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An' saying *aye* or *no* 's they bid him:
At Operas an' Plays parading,
Mortgaging, gambling, masquerading:
Or maybe, in a frolic daft,
To HAGUE or CALAIS takes a waft,
To make a *tour* an' take a whirl,
To learn *bon ton* an' see the worl'.

There, at VIENNA or VERSAILLES,
He rives his father's auld entails;
Or by MADRID he takes the rout,
To thrum *guittarres* an fecht wi' *nowt*;
Or down *Italian Vista* startles,
Wh-re -hunting amang groves o' myrtles:
Then bowses drumlie *German-water*,
To make himsel look fair an' fatter,
An' clear the consequential sorrows,
Love-gifts of Carnival Signioras.
For Britain's guid! for her destruction!
Wi' dissipation, feud an' faction!

Here, the civic humanist distaste at 'luxury' combines with a Calvinist animus against excessive sensual indulgence to produce a blistering indictment of upper-class corruption. The picture of a prodigal, hedonistic Member of Parliament is only one of Burns's many Calvinist salvoes against upper-class dissipation, against those who 'riot in excess' ('Epistle to Davie'). The dangerous social consequences which accompanied man's failure to discipline his appetites and passions was a constant preoccupation of the Scottish Calvinist mind. It was also one with which Burns was early familiar; the religious *Manual* which his father composed for Burns's instruction warns the reader to cultivate 'a mind regular and having the animal part under subjection to the rational'.[24]

In 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer, to the Right Honorable and Honorable, the Scotch Representatives in the House of Commons',[25] Burns continues his disparaging scrutiny of his social leaders. Adopting the persona of a 'simple Bardie', Burns implores Scotland's M.P.s to work for the repeal of the Wash Act of 1784, which had placed severe excise duties on Scotch whisky, and which was popularly regarded as an anti-Scottish measure. The tone of the poem is mainly jocular, but that does not diminish the stinging rebuke implicit in the circumstance of a 'simple Bardie' having to exhort his upper-class representatives to perform their public duty and fight Scotland's corner in the British parliament. That the Scottish members have so far proved reluctant to trouble the House with Scotland's grievances is put down to their involvement with the system of parliamentary patronage:

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Does ony *great man* glunch an' gloom?
Speak out an' never fash your thumb!
Let *posts* an' *pensions* sink or swoom
Wi' them wha grant them:
If honestly they canna come,
Far better want them.

In gath'rin votes ye were na slack,
Now stand as tightly by your tack:
Ne'er claw your lug, an' fidge your back,
An' hum an' haw,
But raise your arm, an' tell your crack
Before them a'.

Sensing that the appeal to public duty will not be sufficient to move Scotland's representatives to action, Burns then plays on their fear, threatening an eruption of popular violence if the M.P.s fail to secure redress for Scotland:

Arouse my boys! exert your mettle,
To get auld Scotland back her *kettle*!
Or faith! I'll wad my new pleugh-pettle,
Ye'll see 't or lang,
She'll teach you, wi' a reekan whittle,
Anither sang.

* * *

An' L--d! if ance they pit her till 't,
Her tartan petticoat she'll kilt
An' durk an' pistol at her belt,
She'll tak the streets,
An' rin her whittle to the hilt,
I' th' first she meets!

Again, though the imagery has a comic exuberance, the threat to which it refers was real enough.

As an indictment of the Scottish aristocracy, 'The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer' is significant as much in its style as its substance. Burns's familiar, colloquial mode of address ('Arouse, my boys!', 'For God-sake, Sirs!') obliterates the epic distance which supposedly separates the M.P.s from the lower-class speaker. This familiar tone, together with some savage mock-humility ('Alas! I'm but a nameless wight,/Trode i' the mire out o' sight!) dramatises Burns's contempt for his supposed superiors, who have fallen so far short of what David Allan calls 'the Calvinist and humanist ideal of the active and virtuous social leader'.[26]

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In these early political satires, the prevailing authorial attitude of contemptuous detachment is the result of Burns's profound alienation from a government perceived as corrupt, distant, and impersonal – a government in which decisions are taken by 'folk in LUN'ON' at whom the Scots can only 'ferlie' (wonder) indignantly ('The Twa Dogs'). In his alienation from the British political system, Burns reflects a growing Scottish anxiety at the restricted scope for civic participation in the new British state. This anxiety was evident, for example, in the (unsuccessful) campaign for a Scots militia which many of the literati undertook in the 1760s.[27] It was evident, too, in the works of the later Enlightenment, such as Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), a work which is haunted by the decline of public spirit in modern centralised states:

> If national institutions, calculated for the preservation of liberty, instead of calling upon the citizen to act for himself, and to maintain his rights, should give a security, requiring, on his part, no personal attention or effort; this seeming perfection of government might weaken the bands of society.[28]

Many eighteenth-century Presbyterians, nurtured in a tradition of active armed resistance to Stuart tyranny and to Stuart-inspired rebellions, found it difficult to remain content with a government which asked nothing more of its citizens than docile obedience. Alarm at the decline of public spirit was only heightened by the burgeoning radius of British imperial dominion. As Linda Colley argues, an increased fear of corruption, and of contamination by 'Asiatic luxury', accompanied the sudden massive expansion of Britain's Empire following the Seven Years War.[29] Again, this anxiety is apparent in the works of the later Scottish Enlightenment. In Ferguson's *History of Civil Society*, the mood of confidence in the harmonious progress of commerce and virtue, the mood one associates with Hume, has given way to a much more pessimistic vision of commercialism's social consequences. In what amounts to an exercise in conjectural history as jeremiad, Ferguson laments the fragmentation of public spirit in modern commercial societies, the 'Corruption incident to Polished Nations'.[30] It is this type of anxiety which explains the tendency of the literati to eulogise the vigorous civic patriotism of more primitive societies – whether the ancient Sparta beloved of Ferguson, or the highland society of James Macpherson's Ossian poems.[31]

The belief in the superior civic virtue of small, independent polities exercised a similar influence on Robert Burns. In an anti-unionist song from 1792, 'Such a parcel of rogues in a nation',[32] Burns looks back to a glorious martial past, upholding Scotland's claim to have been a small, virtuous state maintaining its independence through force of arms:

> What force or guile could not subdue,
>   Thro' many warlike ages,
> Is wrought now by a coward few,

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For hireling traitors' wages.
The English steel we could disdain,
Secure in valour's station;
But English gold has been our bane,
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!

What we are offered here, in the lament of the aged patriot who speaks the song, is a civic humanist interpretation of the parliamentary Union: the sturdy civic patriotism of the common people has been betrayed by sensual, corrupt leaders (the 'parcel of rogues' are the thirty-one Scottish Commissioners), prepared to sell their country's liberty for private gain.

Central to 'Such a parcel of rogues' is the humanist notion that national liberty depends more on the martial exertions of the populace than on the provisions of government. It is this same ideal of the active, arms-bearing citizen that informs Burns's great war-song, 'Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn',[33] also known as 'Scots Wha Hae', in which the Bruce addresses his troops before battle:

SCOTS, wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victorie.

Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour;
See approach proud EDWARD's power,
Chains and Slaverie.

When Bruce seeks to rouse the spirit of his troops, he suggests the justice of their cause by emphasising the voluntary nature of their service:

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

Wha for SCOTLAND's king and law,
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
FREE-MAN stand, or FREE-MAN fa',
Let him follow me.

This emphasis on voluntary service derives from the humanist belief in the superior virtue of a citizen militia over a paid, standing army. In true humanist style, Burns presents the Bruce's soldiers as a virtuous volunteer militia, defending the nation's liberty against the forces of tyranny.

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Some critics have regarded the reference to 'king and law' as somehow implausible coming from such a prophet of unruliness as Burns; Christina Keith even proposes that Burns introduces 'law' solely to make up the rhyme.[34] In fact, 'law' operates as a crucial clarifying counterweight to the preceding 'king'; it indicates that Bruce is a king hedged in by law, a constitutional monarch and not an absolute sovereign. This one word curtails the potentially royalist connotations of the song, and keeps it within the boundaries of civic humanist discourse.

Burns's treatment of the Wars of Independence, of course, was intended to possess a contemporary political resonance. As he wrote to George Thomson, the song was prompted by the recollection of Bannockburn and of 'some other struggles of the same nature, *not quite so ancient*'.[35] 'Scots Wha Hae' was written at the height of the sedition trials of 1793, when Scottish reformism was being forced underground and had begun to move from a constitutionalist to a revolutionary strategy.[36] At a time when armed insurrection was being mooted, 'Scots Wha Hae' looks back to a prior instance of violent resistance, in which an army of the people vindicated the nation's liberties.

In a short poem written three years later, Burns once again celebrates a historical instance of popular resistance to tyranny; the struggles of the seventeenth-century Covenanters. An appreciation of the Covenanters' political significance was something which Burns evinced early in his career. An entry in the first Commonplace Book, dated August 1785, shows Burns responding to the Covenanting traditions of his native Ayrshire; he expresses his pride at coming from 'a country where civil, and particularly religious Liberty have ever found their first support, and their last asylum'.[37] A decade later, Burns composes the following poetic tribute to the Covenanters:

THE Solemn League and Covenant
Now brings a smile, now brings a tear.
But sacred Freedom, too, was theirs;
If thou 'rt a slave, indulge thy sneer.

As in the case of 'Scots Wha Hae', this short poem has a contemporary political resonance. Like all lowland radicals since the late seventeenth century, the Scottish reformers of the 1790s drew on the legacy of the Covenanters[38]. The geography of radical reformism in the 1790s matched the geography of religious militancy in the previous century; it was in the Covenanting heartlands of the Southwest and Fife that Trees of Liberty were erected in the 1790s. In the mid-1790s, as Scottish radicalism was forced underground by government repression and abandoned the constitutionalist approach, the appeal of the Covenanters became strongly current once again. In 1794, for example, a group of Lanarkshire weavers who were plotting rebellion, distributed handbills and circular letters which, as John

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Brims says, directly recalled the Covenanters' Sanquhar Declaration of 1680.[39] It is significant that, in the increasingly fraught political atmosphere of the 1790s, Burns, too, looks back to the libertarian example of the Covenanters.

If Burns's theory of liberty owes something to the Covenanters, his understanding of equality and fraternity are also shaped by the Protestant past. Burns's much-discussed egalitarianism is, at bottom, the Calvinist belief in the equal validity of all forms of social occupation. In the defiant opening verse of 'A Man's a Man',[40] Burns rejects the pressure to regard manual labour as a demeaning activity, as the index of social or spiritual inferiority:

> Is there, for honest Poverty
> That hings his head, and a' that;
> The coward-slave, we pass him by,
> We dare be poor for a' that!
> For a' that, and a' that,
> Our toils obscure, and a' that,
> The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
> The Man's the gowd for a' that.

This is an impressive statement of the dignity of labour, of the Calvinist belief in the legitimacy and respectability of all callings.[41] The practice of one's vocation, however menial in itself, is pleasing in the eyes of God; 'toils obscure', performed honestly, are more pleasing to God than eminent idleness.[42]

The philosophy of 'A Man's a Man', one might argue, derives less from Tom Paine than from Calvin and Old Light Presbyterianism. Here is Ebenezer Erskine, leader of the Secession Church, protesting against an act of the General Assembly increasing the ecclesiastical power of the landowners:

> What difference does a piece of land make between man and man in the affairs of Christ's kingdom, which is not of this world . . . [W]hereas by this act we show respect to the man with the gold ring and the gay clothing, beyond the man with the vile raiment and the poor attire.[43]

This is precisely the sentiment, almost the very idiom, of Burns's revolutionary song:

> What though on hamely fare we dine,
> Wear hoddin grey, and a' that.
> Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine,
> A Man 's a Man for a' that.
> For a' that, and a' that,

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Their tinsel show, and a' that;
The honest man, though e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.

Burns's egalitarianism, like that of Erskine, betrays the unmistakable influence of Calvinism, founded as it is on the repudiation of outward splendour ('tinsel show'), the distrust of sensual indulgence ('silks' and 'wine'), and the sense of a god-given gradation of worth behind the man-made distinctions of rank and fortune. In this, his last great political song, Burns's 'secular Calvinist' critique of social inequality reaches its triumphant culmination.

* * *

While the suggestion that a particular school of historians and philosophers has been influenced by Calvinism does not necessarily invite scepticism, the concept of a Calvinist poet will tend to be regarded as a contradiction in terms. Not only is there a general critical prejudice regarding Protestantism's supposed hostility to art; there is also, in the case of Scotland, a strong tradition of criticism which blames Calvinism for having broken the organic wholeness and continuity of Scottish culture. Given eloquent and authoritative statement by Edwin Muir in the 1930s and 40s, this indictment of Calvinism has proved lastingly influential.[44] Scottish criticism, as a consequence, remains hampered by the naively Whiggish assumption that all writers are, by the very fact of being writers, 'opponents of Calvinism, or . . . men out of sympathy with it'.[45]

Muir's interpretation of Scottish cultural history as a binary opposition between progressive liberals and reactionary Calvinists has had no difficulty in assimilating Robert Burns to its restrictive schema. After all, Burns was apparently so far out of sympathy with Calvinism as to compose a series of biting satires on the Old Light Presbyterians. Certainly, Burns had little sympathy for the Ayrshire Old Lights (though the dominant principle of his ecclesiastical satire is anticlericalism rather than anti-Calvinism). It nevertheless remains unfortunate that a critical preoccupation with the kirk satires has obscured the broader intellectual influence of Calvinism on Burns's work. That Burns deplored certain aspects of Calvinism – its seemingly harsh soteriology, its emphasis on faith over works – should not blind us to his sincere identification with the Calvinist political inheritance. Even Hume responded to the political heritage of Scottish Calvinism, acknowledging that religious 'enthusiasm', as in the case of the Covenanters, acted as a safeguard to civil liberty.[46] Burns's political vision, founded on the ideal of civic participation, on a critique of socially irresponsible leadership, and on a preference for small, republican polities, derives directly from his religious background. His political idiom is that 'Calvinist humanism' which shaped the work of Presbyterian political thinkers from George Buchanan to Adam Ferguson.

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That the religious dimension to Burns's political radicalism is so consistently overlooked, however, perhaps indicates something more than the inherent anti-Calvinism of the Scottish critical tradition. As the editors of a recent book on Protestant popular culture in Scotland acknowledge, there is an understandable reluctance in contemporary Scotland – particularly given the proximity of Ulster – to approach cultural issues from a religious or sectarian perspective. Of course, an exploration of Protestantism's cultural influence need not involve the historian or the literary critic in sectarian side-takings; as Walker and Gallagher indicate, it is 'possible to deplore anti-Catholic bigotry while appreciating the powerful energising and motivating role of Scotland's Protestant tradition in the lives of outstanding men and women'.[47] In this essay, I hope to have demonstrated to some degree the 'energising and motivating' influence of Calvinism in the poetry of Robert Burns.

NOTES

1 Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Scottish Enlightenment', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 58 (1967), 1635–1658 (pp. 1635, 1639).

2 Henry Buckle, *On Scotland and the Scotch Intellect*, ed. by H. J. Hanham (Chicago, 1970), p. 234. Trevor-Roper, pp. 1643, 1646.

3 J. A. Froude, 'The Influence of the Reformation on the Scottish Character', in his *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, 2 vols (London, 1867), I, 171.

4 Edwin Muir, *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (London, 1929), pp. 304–5.

5 Arthur H. Williamson, *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI: The Apocalypse, the Union, and the Shaping of Scotland's Public Culture* (Edinburgh, 1979); David Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment: Ideas of Scholarship in Early Modern History* (Edinburgh, 1993).

6 Christopher Harvie argues that recent scholarly analyses of 'Calvinist humanism' allow us to perceive 'a continuum between the Scots Reformation and the political theory of the Scottish Enlightenment, carrying forward to Andrew Fletcher and Adam Ferguson'; Harvie, 'The Covenanting tradition', in *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, ed. by Graham Walker and Tom Gallagher (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 8–23 (p. 12).

7 Stewart R. Sutherland, 'The Presbyterian Inheritance of Hume and Reid', in *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. by R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 131–149 (pp. 136, 141).

8 Allan, pp. 211–217.

9 Trevor-Roper, p. 1636.

10 Michael Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London, 1991), p. 351.

11 Ned C. Landsman, 'Presbyterians and Provincial Society: The Evangelical Enlightenment in the West of Scotland, 1740–1775', in *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, ed. by John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 194–209.

12 On Witherspoon, see David Daiches, 'John Witherspoon, James Wilson and the Influence of Scottish Rhetoric on America', in *Sociability and Society*, pp. 163–180; Ned C. Landsman, 'Witherspoon and the Problem of Provincial Identity in Scottish Evangelical Culture', in *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*, ed. by Robert B. Sher and J. R. Smitten (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 29–45.

13 In reviewing the Evangelicals' enlightened credentials, we should observe not only the contribution made by Evangelicals to secular learning, but also their commitment to 'progressive' humanitarian causes. For example, it was the Reformed Presbyterian Church – that fiercely Calvinist denomination taken to Ireland and the American colonies by emigrant Scots – which was the first church in America to exclude slave-owners from membership; see A. L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688–1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh, 1973), p. 26.

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14 Alexander Shields, *A Hind Let Loose* (n. p., 1687), p. 269.
15 Allan, pp. 34–5, 88–9.
16 Allan, pp. 80–98.
17 Williamson, p. 87; Allan, p. 109.
18 William Donaldson, *The Jacobite Song: Political Myth and National Identity* (Aberdeen, 1988), p. 73.
19 *Letters*, II, 16.
20 *Letters*, I, 392.
21 Burns refers to the work of Smith and Reid in his 'Letter to James Tennant, Glenconner', *Poems and Songs*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1969), p. 180. That he read Ferguson seems probable; certainly he visited Ferguson in 1787 in Edinburgh; see James Mackay, *Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 266–7.
22 John Witherspoon, 'Ecclesiastical Characteristics', in *The Works of John Witherspoon*, 9 vols (Edinburgh, 1805), VI, 139–222 (p. 147).
23 *Poems and Songs*, p. 110.
24 William Burnes, *A Manual of Religious Belief in a Dialogue Between Father and Son* (Kilmarnock, 1875), p. xlix.
25 *Poems and Songs*, p. 149.
26 Allan, p. 194.
27 For an account of this important issue, see John Robertson, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Militia Issue* (Edinburgh, 1985).
28 Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 191.
29 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (London, 1994, first published 1992), pp. 101–5. John Dwyer argues that 'Many of the writings of the Scottish Enlightenment, especially those of Ferguson, can be read as attempts to counter the ethical contamination emanating from the seat of an increasingly extended and decadent empire', 'Introduction – A "Peculiar Blessing": Social Converse in Scotland from Hutcheson to Burns', in *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland*, ed. by John Dwyer and Richard B. Sher (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 1–21 (p. 6).
30 Ferguson, *History of Civil Society*, p. 248.
31 Ferguson praises the participatory polities of ancient Greece, where 'the people were generally admitted to a share in the government; and . . . were obliged . . . to bear a part in the defence of their country'; *History of Civil Society*, p. 229.
32 *Poems and Songs*, p. 511.
33 *Poems and Songs*, p. 561.
34 Christina Keith, *The Russet Coat: A Critical Study of Burns' Poetry and of its Background* (London, 1956), p. 164.
35 *Letters*, II, 235.
36 John D. Brims, 'The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 464, 550.
37 Quoted in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford, 1968), III, 1070.
38 C. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730* (London, 1987), p. 24.
39 John D. Brims, 'The Covenanting Tradition and Scottish Radicalism in the 1790s', in *Covenant, Charter, and Party: Traditions of Revolt and Protest in Modern Scottish History*, ed. by Terry Brotherstone (Aberdeen, 1989), pp. 50–62 (p. 59).
40 *Poems and Songs*, 1969 edition, p. 602.
41 '[N]o task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight'; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols (Philadelphia, 1990), I, 725.
42 Compare the lines from the second 'Epistle to J. Lapraik': 'The social, friendly, honest man,/Whate'er he be,/'Tis *he* fulfils *great Nature's plan*,/And none but *he*', *Poems and Songs*, p. 71.
43 From a speech to the General Assembly, May 16, 1732, reproduced in Donald Fraser, *The Life and Diary of the Reverend Ebenezer Erskine* (Edinburgh, 1831), p. 359.
44 In *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (Edinburgh, 1982, first published 1936), Muir charges Calvinism with effecting a profound dissociation of sensibility in Scottish culture: 'The Scotland of James IV shows us a coherent civilization, and in the individual writer thought and feeling harmoniously working together. Calvinism drove a wedge between these two things' (p. 144). Earlier in the same book, Muir refers to 'the strict Calvinism

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of the Scots, which was adverse both to the production of poetry, and to poetry itself' (p. 10). Edna Longley demonstrates the continuing currency of Muir's critique when she describes 'the Calvinist spirit . . . in Scotland' as being 'hostile to artistic expression'; see *Styles of Belonging: The Cultural Identities of Ulster*, ed. by J. Lundy and A. Mac Poilin (Belfast, 1992), p. 15.

45 Edwin Muir, *John Knox: Portrait of a Calvinist* (London, 1929), p. 307.

46 David Hume, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', in *Hume on Religion*, ed. by Richard Wollheim (London, 1963), pp. 246–251 (p. 250).

47 *Sermons and Battle Hymns: Protestant Popular Culture in Modern Scotland*, ed. by Graham Walker and Tom Gallagher (Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 1–2.

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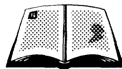

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