

ROBERT BURNS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY GUSTAVE CARUS

THE health of William Pitt had been proposed and drunk with a will when Robert Burns startled the company with the words: "A bumper to the health of a much greater man—General Washington."

The Treaty of Paris, formally ending the American Revolution, was hardly ten years old, and all loyal and proper British subjects still regarded the seceding colonists as rebels and traitors. Yet the poet, at a private dinner at which he was a guest, expressed thus his approval of one who had been only a short time before at war with the country.

It was a time of extreme reaction in Great Britain. The French Revolution just across the Channel frightened all people with conservative leanings; even those who normally had liberal tendencies went over to the conservative camp, understanding, as they did, nothing of the political or social meaning of the great events of the time and able only to see and fear the Reign of Terror. Any liberal move, even a mild one, even the words "freedom" and "liberty," were looked on as dangerous.

Robert Burns was a passionate lover of liberty, and in those days of reaction and repression made no secret of his sympathies, which he expressed in conversations, letters, and poems. His too freely expressed approval of the cause of the French Revolution seems to have been the cause of most of his troubles.

His biographers have given the impression that his unpopularity with the people of Dumfries, where he lived during the last four years of his life, was due to his intemperate habits and his association with low company. But we know that intemperance was so general, even among the gentry, that it could hardly have made him objectionable. By "low company" was meant, most likely, people, not with bad habits, but with *objectionable opinions*, people who were sympathetic with enemies, who were pro-French, pro-American and pro-revolutionary. Men like Maxwell and Syme, whose *opinions* today would be called radical, were his frequent companions, and out of the enthusiasm shared with these men he wrote the *Tree of Liberty*, a half humorous ballad of the French

Revolution. The good citizens of Dumfries were decidedly shocked by the conversation and opinions of this group.

The poet's poverty made him dependent on his position in the Excise Service. Faithful and zealous service was not enough; to make his position secure, it was necessary not to offend his superiors, including the party in power in Parliament, by political opinions or conduct. Burns' independent spirit made this difficult.

The following episode is typical of his troubles. A smuggling brig was seized in the Solway by the excisemen. Burns took part in this dramatic affair. Before making the attack while waiting for a re-enforcement of dragoons, it is told that the poet became impatient and composed *The Deil's awa wi' the Exciseman*. When re-enforcements arrived, he led the party and was the first to board the ship, distinguishing himself for his courage. He would have been promoted for his part in this seizure but for what followed.

The brig was condemned and sold at auction the next day, with all her stores and arms, among which were four carronades which the poet bought for three pounds. These small cannon he sent to the French Assembly with a letter expressing his sympathy, an unwise performance, since both the guns and the letter were intercepted at Dover. Diplomatic relations with the French Republic were strained; war actually came some time later. Either this event or his too freely and vigorously expressed opinions led to an official investigation of the poet-exciseman's political conduct and ruined his chances for promotion.

But other forces were pressing toward his undoing.

A group of super-patriots organized a society which they called the Loyal Native Club, "for preserving Peace, Liberty, and Property, and for supporting the Laws and Constitution of the Country." Commissary Goldie of Dumfries was president and Francis Sprott, the town clerk, was secretary. During the summer of 1793 this society paraded through the streets of the town with two effigies of Tom Paine which they burned while the crowd applauded. The ladies of the town prepared beautiful bandeaux of blue satin ribbon, embroidered with the words "God Save the King!" and distributed them to the Loyal Natives to wear on their hats for the parade, and across their breasts at the ball held that evening.

These patriots made Burns and his liberal friends the chief

object of their animosity. One member wrote these lines which someone handed to the poet over the table at a convivial meeting:

Ye sons of sedition, give ear to my song,
Let Syme, Burns and Maxwell pervade every throng,
With Cracken, the attorney, and Mundell, the quack,
Send Willy, the monger, to hell with a smack.

On seeing these words, Burns at once wrote this reply:

Ye true "Loyal Natives," attend to my song,
In uproar and riot rejoice the night long;
From Envy and Hatred your core is exempt,
But where is your shield from the darts of Contempt?

On another occasion he wrote the following:

ON COMMISSARY GOLDIE'S BRAINS

Lord, to account who dares thee call,
Or e're dispute thy pleasure?
Else why within so thick a wall,
Enclose so poor a treasure?

Lockhart relates an anecdote of this period, which Carlyle refers to as significant. He tells how David M'Culloch found Burns walking alone on the deserted side of the street, "while the opposite side was gay with successive groups of gentlemen and ladies, all drawn together for the festivities of the night, not one of whom appeared willing to recognize him. Mr. M'Culloch dismounted and joined Burns, who, on his proposing to him to cross the street, said 'Nay, nay my young friend, that's all over now.'"

That Burns tried hard to be more discreet, as was expected of a servant of the Government, although he was not fully successful, can be seen from his letter to Mrs. Dunlop of Dunlop, of January 2 and 5, 1793, in which he says:

.....I might indeed get a job of officiating, where a settled supervisor [of Excise] was ill, or aged; but this hauls me from my family, as I could not remove them on such an uncertainty. Besides, some envious, malicious, devil has raised a little demur on my political principles. . . . I have set, henceforth, a seal on my lips, as to these unlucky politics; but to you, I must breathe my sentiments. . . . The board had made me the subject of their animadversions; and now I have the pleasure of informing you, that all is set to rights in that quarter. Now as to these informers, may the devil be let loose to—but hold! . . . Alas! how little do the wantonly or idly officious think what mischief they do by their malicious insinuations, indirect impertinence, or thoughtless blabbings. What a difference. . . . the amiable circle I so lately mixed with at the hospitable hall of Dunlop, their generous hearts,—their uncontaminated, dignified minds—their informed and polished understand-

ings—what a contrast, when compared...with the soul of the miscreant who can deliberately plot the destruction of an honest man that never offended him, and with a grin of satisfaction see the unfortunate being, his faithful wife, and prattling innocents turned over to beggary and ruin!

But, that all was not set right can be seen from his letter to John Francis Erskine, Earl of Mar, (who, although he was a stranger to Burns, all unsolicited, offered his aid;) where we read:

You have been misinformed as to my final dismissal from the Excise; I am still in the service.—Indeed, but for the exertions of...Mr. Graham...I had without so much as a hearing, or the smallest previous intimation been turned adrift, with my helpless family, to all the horrors of want. Had I had any other recourse probably I might have saved them the trouble of a dismissal...one of our supervisors-general, a Mr. Corbett, was instructed to enquire on the spot, into my conduct, and to document me.—“that *my* business was to *act*, not to think; and that whatever might be men or measures, it was for me to be silent and obedient.”

Mr. Corbet was likewise my steady friend; so between Mr. Graham and him, I have been partly forgiven: only, I understand that all hopes of my getting officially forward are blasted.

Even his patriotism for Scotland was not entirely free from suspicion. His *Scots Wha Hae* would be irritating in some quarters, and the Jacobite cause, which inspired many of his best poems, among which are the *Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots; It was a' for our Rightful King; The Lovely Lass o' Inverness; Charlie, He's my Darling; Bannocks o' Bear Meal, and Oh I am come to the Low Country*, was in disfavor in official circles. The memory of the Jacobite uprising was still fresh enough to suggest disloyalty.

His loyalty, in his poems, to the house of Stuart is often criticized as inconsistent with his love of liberty. His position is explained in his letter of November 8, 1788, to the editor of the *Star*, a liberal London paper, in which he gives the reason for his lack of enthusiasm for the centennial celebration of the Glorious Revolution. He says:

The “Bloody and tyrannical House of Stuart,” may be said with propriety and justice, when compared with the present royal family, and the sentiments of our days; but is there no allowance to be made for the manners of the times? Were the royal contemporaries of the Stuarts more attentive to their subjects' rights? Might not the epithets of “bloody and tyrannical” be, with equal justice, applied to the House of Tudor, of York, or of any other of their predecessors?....

The Stuarts only contended for prerogatives which they knew their predecessors enjoyed, and which they saw their

contemporaries enjoying; but these prerogatives were inimical to the happiness of a nation and the rights.....

The Stuarts have been condemned and laughed at for the folly and impracticability of their attempts in 1715 and 1745. That they failed, I bless god; but I cannot join in the ridicule against them.....

To conclude, Sir, let every man who has a tear for the many miseries incident to humanity, feel for a family, illustrious as any in Europe, and unfortunate beyond historic precedent; and let every Briton (and particularly every Scotsman), who ever looked with reverential pity on the dotage of a parent, cast a veil over the fatal mistakes of the kings of his forefathers.

This same Glorious Revolution, which gave the country the Bill of Rights, left in Scotland the painful memory of the massacre of Glencoe.

The religious controversy, which was then going on between the "Auld Lights" and the "New Lights", found Burns supporting the liberal party. He wrote a number of satires on the narrow Calvinism of his day, among the best known of which are *The Holy Fair*, *The Ordination*, *Holy Willie's Prayer*, *The Kirk of Scotland's Alarm*, and *To the Unco' Guide*, which latter has given a by-word to our everyday vocabulary.

His love for freedom was all-embracing and even included that of the outcast. He would have had the same contempt for the cringing beggar that he had for the titled sycophant, but he had a spontaneous fellow-feeling for the lusty vagrant, which he expressed in the final song of the *Jolly Beggars*:

A fig for those by law protected!
Liberty's a glorious feast!
Courts for cowards were erected,
Churches built to please the priest.

The story is told, that during the war between Great Britain and the French Republic, Burns was almost forced into a duel by an officer who took offence at the witty toast: "May our success in the present war be equal to the justice of our cause."

Burns was, however, a loyal British subject. Although he was ready to criticize the Government or the party in power, he had faith in the principles of the British Constitution. In a letter to John Erskine of Mar, he said:

In defence to their accusations, I said, that whatever might be my sentiments of republics, ancient or modern, as to Britain, I abjured the idea!—that a CONSTITUTION which, in its original principles, experience had proved to be every way fitted for our happiness in society, it would be insanity to sacrifice to an untried visionary theory.

But he did not blindly accept the British Constitution as perfect or final. When he presented to the Subscription Library in Dumfries, a number of books, including, a copy of *De Lolme on the British Constitution*, he wrote in it this inscription: "Mr. Burns presents this book to the library, and begs that they will take it as a creed of British Liberty—until they find a better.—*R. B.*" Fearing that this might give offence, he called next day and pasted the fly leaf against the back of the frontispiece, hiding his inscription. The volume can still be seen in the library and by holding the pages to the light, the inscription can be read.

While the French Republic was defending herself against aggression he applauded, but when she turned aggressor, he disapproved, as he wrote his friend, Robert Graham:

As to France, I was her enthusiastic votary in the beginning of the business. When she came to show her old avidity for conquest, in annexing Savoy, etc., to her dominions, and invading the rights of Holland, I altered my sentiments.

When during the war with France, an invasion threatened, he joined the corps of volunteers which was formed in Dumfries, and rehabilitated himself in the eyes of the townspeople to a great extent. For the occasion he wrote *Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat*, which became the song of the Dumfries Companies.

His patriotism never became chauvinistic. This poem is a rallying-cry for the defence of the native land and contains not one word encouraging or approving the invasion of a foreign, even an enemy country. Characteristic of it are the lines:

The kettle o' the kirk and state,
Perhaps a clout may fail in't,
But deil a foreign tinker loun
Shall never ca' a nail in't
Our fathers' blude the kettle bought,
And wha would dare to spoil it?
By Heav'n's! the sacrilegious dog
Shall fuel be to boil it!

It was quite natural that the American Revolution should appeal to Burns. He often expressed his disapproval of the British policy in the Colonies, his sympathies for the Americans and his admiration for George Washington. His *Ballad on the American War* is believed to have been written in 1784, but was not included in the Kilmarnock Edition of 1786 (the first edition) but was included in the Edinburgh Edition (1787). On seeing this ballad, smithy." The ballad forcefully gives the views of the liberals in

one reader, Dr. Blair, remarked "Burns' Politics smell of the Scotland on the war in the Colonies. It seems to have attracted little attention in America.

In his letter to the editor of the *London Star*, Burns sets forth his opinions, saying:

...who would believe, Sir, that in this, our Augustin age of liberality and refinement, while we seem so justly sensible and jealous of our rights and liberties, and animated with such indignation against the very memory of those who would have subverted them—that a certain people under our national protection should complain, not against our monarch and a few favorite advisors, but against our WHOLE LEGISLATIVE BODY, for similar oppression, and almost in the very same terms, as our forefathers did of the House of Stuart! I will not and cannot enter into the merits of the cause; but I dare say the American Congress of 1776, will be allowed to have been as able and enlightened as the English Convention was in 1688; and that their posterity will celebrate the centenary of their deliverance from us, as duly and sincerely as we do ours from the oppressive measures of the wrong-headed House of Stuart.

To Mrs. Dunlop he wrote, much in the same vein, (November 13, 1788.):

Is it not remarkable, odiously remarkable, that tho' manners are more civilized, and the rights of mankind better understood, by an Augustin Century's improvement, yet in this very reign of heavenly Hanoverianism, and almost in this very year,* an empire beyond the Atlantic has had its REVOLUTION too, and for the very same maladministration and legislative misdemeanors in the illustrious and sapientipotent Family of H——as was complained of in the "tyrannical and bloody House of Stuart."

Burns' finest tribute to the American Revolution is his *Ode to Liberty*. The poem is in two parts, the first is called *The Vision* and the second is the Ode proper. A first version of the first part was published in Johnson's *Musical Museum*, in 1796, set to music, under the title *The Minstrel at Linlunden*, it included the following chorus:

A lassie all alone, was making her moan,
Lamenting our lads beyond the sea,
In the bluidy wars they fa', and our honor's gane an' a',
And broken-harted we maun dee.

and this stanza concluded the poem:

He sang wi' joy his former day,
He, weeping, wail'd his latter times;
But what he said—it was nae play,
I winna ventur't in my rhymes.

A second version of this part appeared in the edition of Burns' *1788, the centenary of the expulsion of the Stuarts

works edited by Dr. Currie (London, 1800) with the title *A Vision*. Here the chorus was omitted. It was believed by most editors and critics that Burns had written the song of the minstrel but had suppressed it and substituted the stanza given above. It seems that both parts of the poem were written about the same time, at the period of his life while he was suffering under the odium of his supposed lack of patriotism. During this time he spent many hours alone, at the Lincluden Ruins, a romantic and beautiful place, where the Clunden and the Nith join. Of the first part he made the two versions mentioned, one he sent to Johnson's Museum where it appeared during his life, the other was published by Dr. Currie after Burns' death.

The second part, *The Ode to Liberty*, the "Song the Minstrel Sang," he withheld from publication. He recited it to some of his friends and sent a copy to Mr. Perry of the London *Morning Chronicle*, with the suggestion that it might be published anonymously. This seems not to have been done. This manuscript was sold to Robert Clark in 1872 after Mr. Perry's death. At the sale it was described as "The original MS. of the Ode on the American War, in 62 lines, in three leaves written on one side only, in good condition, bound in red Morocco cover by Pratt, and lettered 'The American War' by Burns." A fragment of it, beginning "Thee Caledonia," he included in a letter to Mrs. Dunlop (June 25, 1794) where he says its subject is Liberty, and that he intends it as "an irregular ode to General Washington's birthday."

This second part, or the "Ode" proper, was first published in William S. Douglas' edition (Kilmarnock, 1876) but independent of the *Vision* which appeared separately in the same edition. In 1886 Mr. George Gebbie, in preparing his Complete Edition of Burns established that the *Ode* was the missing Song of the Lincluden Minstrel.

These poems seem not to be as well known in America as they deserve, and it is hoped that the future will grant them the recognition they merit.

We know Burns as the poet of labor and the plow, of love and sadness, we know him as the singer of conviviality, and as the Bard of Scotland. We should know him as the lover of liberty and freedom, the friend of the American Colonies, and the admirer of George Washington.