

## The Political Ideal of Robert Burns

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Then there are many things in Burns's poems and character that specially endear him to America. He was essentially a Republican—would have been at home in the western United States, and probably become eminent there. He was an average sample of the good-natured, warm-blooded, proud-spirited, amative, alimotive, convivial, young and early-middle-aged man of the decent-born middle classes everywhere and any how. Without the race of which he is a distinct specimen, (and perhaps his poems) America and her powerful Democracy could not exist to-day—could not project with unparallel'd historic sway into the future. (1)

So writes Walt Whitman in his *Robert Burns as Poet and Person*, recalling the great Scottish poet who had expounded his critical views on his contemporary society and politics almost one hundred years before. Both poets lived and died in a confused state of society and shared the experiences of the bitter life of poverty from their early years. Both poets with a burning ideal for freedom and liberty, implanted through their poetry and prose the seeds of Democracy which grew up in the two big countries on both sides of the Atlantic, namely in England and America. One lived in a turmoil age of growing America, generally called 'The Guilded-Age' the other, in a confused period of latter half of eighteenth-century Scotland.

The age of Burns, though a comparatively short period extending from 1759 to 1796, was indeed full of momentous incidents in the history of England. In his life time we saw the germination of the Industrial Revolution and the revisions of the parliamentary election system on British soil, and the French and American Revolutions abroad—all of which contributed to form the modern European societies.

Burns, though living in a rural district of Ayrshire, was sensitive of all these changes and hazarded his progressive opinion on his contemporary society as well as politics. He aroused the attention of politicians and of the countrymen to the rising power of modern democracy. In this sense he was by no means a mere rural poet who translated the old traditional songs and ballads of Scotland but he was a champion of new political and social ideal.

Born as the first son of seven children and brought up in stern poverty of unremitting labour, he became extremely sensitive to the idea of class distinction from his early years. This idea developed later into his hatred of wealth and power, a conviction which never left him throughout his thirty-seven years of life. In his letters and poems he frequently expressed this with vehement words of contempt for those who prided themselves because of their distinguished birth and wealth. In one of his letters, he writes :

What signify the silly, idle gewgaws of wealth, or the ideal trumpery of greatness! When fellow-partakers of the same nature fear the same God, have the same benevolence of heart, the same nobleness of soul, the same detestation at everything dishonest, and the same scorn at everything unworthy—if they are not in the dependance of absolute beggary, in the name of common sense, are they not Equal? And if the bias, the instinctive bias, of their soul ran the same way, why may they not be Friends? (2)

And again in 1789 when he returned from Edinburgh, he writes to Mrs. Dunlop quoting the words from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* :

Here am I, my honored Friend, returned safe from the Capital. To a man who has a Home, however humble or remote; if that Home is like mine, the scene of Domestic comfort; the bustle of Edinburgh will soon be a business sickening disgust.

“Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate you!”

When I must skulk into a corner, lest the rattling equipage of some gaping blockhead, contemptible puppy, or detestable

scoundrel should mangle me in the mire, I am tempted to exclaim—What merits these Wretches had, or what demerit have I had, in some state of pre-existence, that they are ushered into this scene of being with the sceptre of rule and the key of riches in their puny fists, and I am kicked into the world, the sport of their folly, or the victim of their pride? (3)

Also in the lines of his poems we can see such a vein of his feeling, notably in the poems like *Man was Made to Mourn* or his famous *The Twa Dogs*, in the latter of which he sings:

I've noticed on our Laird's court-day,  
An' mony a time my heart's been wae,  
Poor tenant bodies, scant o' cash,  
How they maun thole a factor's snash;  
He'll stamp an' threaten, curse an' swear,  
He'll apprehend them, poind their gear;  
While they maun stan', wi' aspect humble,  
An' hear it a', an' fear an' tremble!  
I see how folk live that ha'e riches;  
But surely poor folk maun be wretches?

From such an intense sentiment of his personal sufferings, Burns's idea grew up to his sharp critical views on the unfavourable treatment of English government. The Act of Union of 1707, by which Scotland was admitted into commercial relations with the colonies of England, started the country on the road to material prosperity. But the difficulty still lingered on the side of the English people in the form of ignorance and contempt. After the Union, Scotland sent a handful of representatives to Westminster, but with the succession to the throne by the House of Hanover, Scottish influence and power in the British government have greatly weakened. Ruled no longer by the Stuarts but by foreign kings, the social condition in Scotland became more critical year after year. Politically the position of Scotland became little more than a conquered province. Economically those who grasped a fabulous amount of money by smuggling with the West Indies overran the country and disturbed the price of land to such an extent that

no former landlord could compete with them. Most of these 'new rich' usually bought large acres of land for their retirement. Because of the influx of these people, the former landlords of Scotland had to leave their mansions and went to the cities, mostly to Edinburgh, after they sold their ancestral estate at a dirt-cheap price. But the poor peasants had no place to go. They had to work under the severe yoke of these retired smugglers. Burns was especially concerned about this fact. The new tyrannous class was unbearable for him, for his father had lost his fortune because of them. It was true, however, the new plan of agricultural improvement was under way, but its result did not ripen in the days of Burns. Political corruption and social and economic changes shrouded all Scotland in a gloomy and dismal cloud.

Into this pitiable social situation, the news of the American Revolution stirred the downcast minds of the Scottish people to aspire to the glory of freedom and liberty, then being achieved in the far-off place beyond the Atlantic. Burns was no exception. His adoration of individual liberty now began to grow to that of social and political liberty. The achievement of the American Revolution thus brought to the minds of the people a bright hope for spiritual renovation. But economically it brought at the same time the picture of sadness and hopelessness, for Scotland by the Revolution lost her market in the New World and furthermore she had to suffer the heavy taxation imposed by the English government. Concerning how much the Scottish farmer suffered from the effect, he writes in 1783:

—This country, till of late, was flourishing incredibly in the Manufactures of Silk, Lawn & Carpet Weaving, and we are still carrying on a good deal in that way but much reduced from what it was; we had also a fine trade in the Shoe way but now entirely ruined, & hundreds driven to a starving condition on account of it.—Farming is also at a very low ebb with us... In short, my d<sup>r</sup> Sir, since the unfortunate beginning of this American war, & its as unfortunate conclusion, this country has been, & still is decaying very fast.— (4)

The Revolution nevertheless must have offered him a considerable subject of his study. In 1786 he wrote a satirical poem called *The American War* in which he expressed not only his comprehensive views on military and political affairs but also his keen insight into the personal characteristics of soldiers and the statesmen who were concerned in the war. In the poem, he traced the trend of the events from the Boston Tea Party in 1773 to the victory of William Pitt in the election in 1783. Burns in this poem wielded his sharp satirical sword of his poetic genius, reviewing the follies of the prime ministers and the British generals in America without any reservation. The poem was originally published under the title *Fragment, When Guilford Good Our Pilot Stood*. The second Earl of Guilford was no other than Lord North on whose motion the cabinet decided to retain the duty on tea.

His indignation against the political body in England at that time is best seen in his letter addressed to the editor of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* in November, 1788:

Man, Mr. Printer, is a strange, weak, inconsistent being—Who would believe, Sir, that in this our Augustan 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, who would suppose that a certain people, under our national protection, should complain, not against a Monarch and a few favourite advisers, but against our whole legislative body, of the very same imposition and oppression, the Romish religion not excepted, and almost in the very terms as our forefathers did against the family of Stuart! I will not, I cannot, enter into the merits of the cause; but I dare say, the American Congress, in 1776, will be allowed to have been as able and enlightened, and, a whole empire will say, as honest, as the English Convention in 1688; and that the fourth of July will be as sacred to their posterity as the fifth of November is to us. (5)

It was natural that Burns combined the idea of American Revolution with the idea of liberty. In 1794 he wrote a poem

under the title of *Liberty: A Fragment*, now generally called *Ode For General Washington's Birthday*, in which he sings thus,

No Spartan tube, no Attic shell,  
No lyre Aeolian I awake ;  
'Tis Liberty's bold note I swell,  
Thy harp, Columbia, let me take—  
See gathering thousands while I sing,  
A broken chain exulting bring,

And dash it in a tyrant's face,  
And dare him to his very beard,  
And tell him he no more is feared—  
No more the despot of Columbia's race!  
A tyrant's proudest insults braved,  
They shout, a people freed! they hail an Empire saved!

He continues,

But come, ye sons of Liberty,  
Columbia's offspring, brave as free,  
In danger's hour still flaming in the van,  
Ye know, and dare maintain, the Royalty of Man!

Lockhart in his *Life of Robert Burns* relates an interesting story which represents the feeling of Burns at that period. "According to the tradition of the neighbourhood," he tells us, Burns

gave great offence by demurring in a large mixed company to proposed toast, "the health of William Pitt;" and left the room in indignation, because the society rejected what he wished to substitute, namely "the health of a greater and a better man, George Washington." (6)

Though Lockhart informs this story as a mere episode, it is interesting for us to note this in connection with Burns's expressed political conviction.

His fervour for liberty embodied in the American Revolution reached before long to his enthusiasm toward the succeeding great event of eighteenth-century Europe, the French Revolution.

Like Coleridge and Wordsworth, his sympathy for the Revolution

was spontaneous, and yet voluntary. He had his faith in immense promise of time; he watched with keen interest the daring deeds of Girondists and Dantonists. In fact, he sent four carronades with a letter to the French Convention in 1792 and congratulated them on having repulsed conservative Europe. (7)

But soon after he heard the news that the new French Republic transgressed the rights of the neighbouring countries and made a great massacre in the same way as the old Louis regeme had done, Burns, like the rest of the English Romatics, withdrew his enthusiasm and sympathy from the revolutionists in France. Another reason which made him flinch from the Revolution was, I think, due to his personal circumstances. Burns by this time had been hired by the government as an exciseman. In addition to this position in the government, the increasing responsibility to take care of his growing family naturally checked his reckless activity in the politics. He was, so to speak, in the midst 'between two worlds', the world of his republicanism on one hand and the world of a faithful civil servant on the other. Expressing his genuine sentiment of those days he writes to Mrs. Dunlop at the close of the year, 1792;

We in this country, here have many alarms of Reform, or rather the Republican, spirit of your part of the Kingdom—Indeed, we are a good deal in commotion ourselves & in our theatre here 'God save the King' has met with some groans & hisses, which *Ça ira* has been repeatedly called for.—For me, I am a Placeman, you know, a very humble one indeed, Heaven knows, but still so much as to gag me from joining in the cry—What my private sentiments are, you will find without an Interpreter. (8)

As to his disappointment in the New French government, he says :

As to France, I was her enthusiastic votary in the beginning of the business.—When she came to shew her old avidity for conquest, in annexing Savoy, &c. to her dominions, & invading the rights of Holland, I altered my sentiments. (9)

From this time on his political fervour and his radical opinion gradually ebbed. But instead, his fervour for drinking increased. For four years from this time to his death, he suffered a great deal. For instance, he lost his only daughter towards the end of 1795 and he began to suffer from the constant attacks of rheumatism. Many a day he had to be in bed, for he could not get up except to crawl in the room. He probably knew himself that his life would not last long. On July 7<sup>th</sup> 1796, just three weeks before he died, he wrote a letter to Alexander Cunningham, lamenting his inability to compose poems and the miseries from which he was suffering.

I received yours here this moment and am indeed highly flattered with the approbation of the literary circle you mention; a literary circle inferiour to none in the two kingdoms.—Alas! my friend, I fear the voice of the Bard will soon be heard among you no more! For these eight or ten months I have been ailing, sometimes bedfast & sometimes not; but these last three months I have been tortured with an excruciating rheumatism, which has reduced me to nearly the last stage.—You actually would not know me if you saw me.—Pale, emaciated, & so feeble as occasionally to need help from my chair—my spirits fled! fled!—but I can no more on the subject—only the Medical folks tell me that my last & only chance is bathing & country quarters & riding (10)

In the last letter to his brother, Gilbert, dated on July 10<sup>th</sup>, he says:

It will be no very pleasing news to you to be told that I am dangerously ill, & not likely to get better.—An inveterate rheumatism has reduced me to such a state of debility, & my appetite is totally gone, so that I can scarcely stand on my legs.—I have been a week at sea-bathing, & I will continue there or in a friend's house in the country all the summer.—God help my wife & children, if I am taken from their head!—They will be poor indeed.—I have contracted one or two serious debts, partly from my illness these many months & partly from too much thoughtlessness as to expense when I came to town that will cut in too much on the little I leave them in your hands.—Remember me to my Mother.—(11)



He was thirty-seven years old when he died, believing that his friends, though small in number, would not forget him and would stand by his poor widow and helpless children in their need. It is said up until his last breath that he muttered something about the threatening letters of debt under which he had been tortured. Burns passed away leaving thirty pounds of debt. But he also left to us an inestimable treasure of songs and poetry. And on top of that he bequeathed to us his political fervour for democracy to which the author of the *Leaves of Grass* tendered his sincere homage. It is true that he was not favoured with a chance to speak his political passion aloud in his later years but it is also true that he must have carried it to his death-bed, wishing,

May Liberty meet wi' success!  
 May prudence protect her frae evil!  
 May tyrants and tyranny tine in the mist,  
 And wander their way to the devil! (12)

Or,

And future years shall prove the truth  
 That Man is good by nature.  
 Then let us toast, with three times three,  
 The reign of Peace and Libertie! (13)

Liberty and freedom are no doubt the key ideas of his life and their spirit was permeated in many lines of his poems and his letters. When he was ploughing out in the field or when he was confined in the musty room of the exciseman, his mind was always aspiring to realize in his society the idea of liberty, equality and fraternity—namely, his political ideal.

Notes :

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|----|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 1. | Walt Whitman    | <i>Complete Prose</i>         | p. 39       |
| 2. | Robert Burns,   | <i>Letters</i> , 272, vol. I. | pp. 257-258 |
| 3. | Robert Burns,   | <i>Letters</i> , 319, vol. I. | p. 311      |
| 4. | Robert Burns,   | <i>Letters</i> , 14, vol. I.  | pp. 15-16   |
| 5. | Robert Burns,   | <i>Letters</i> , 283, vol. I. | p. 271      |
| 6. | J. G. Lockhart, | <i>Life of Robert Burns</i> , | p. 160      |

7. J. G. Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns*, p. 164
8. Robert Burns, *Letters*, 524, vol. II. p. 137
9. Robert Burns, *Letters*, 530, vol. II. p. 144
10. Robert Burns, *Letters*, 700, vol. II. p. 325
11. Robert Burns, *Letters*, 703, vol. II. pp. 326-327
12. "Here's a Health to Them that's awa'," *The Poetical works of Robert Burns*, ed. Charles Kent, p. 330.
13. "A Revolutionary Lyric," *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Charles Kent, p. 224.

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2. Ferguson, Delancy, ed. *The Letters of Robert Burns*. Oxford: University Press, 1931. 2 vols.
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4. Lockhart, J. G. *Life of Robert Burns*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1933. (Everyman's Library)
5. Neilson, W. A. *Robert Burns*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1917.
6. Robertson, J. L., ed. *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*. London: Henry Frowde, 1904.
7. Whitman, Walt. *Complete Prose Works*. New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914.