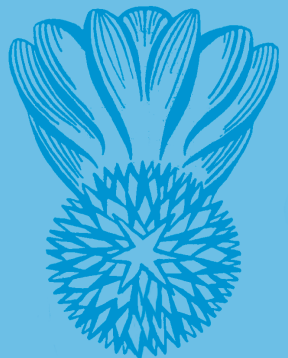


LITERATURE
AND POLITICS

A Parcel of Rogues

by **James Robertson**





Robert Burns (1759–96) famously denounced the Scots Parliamentarians who voted for the Treaty of Union with England in 1707, as a “parcel of rogues”. But politicians have been castigated and mocked by writers for centuries – in fact, you could say that such abuse comes with the job. The relationship between Scottish politics and literature has not always been easy, but it has positive as well as negative aspects.

“There’s ane end of ane auld sang,” the Chancellor, the Earl of Seafield, disparagingly said as he signed the Treaty. His anti-Union opponent, Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, had three years earlier written that “if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation” – an opinion now inscribed on the wall of the new Parliament. With Scotland lacking its own legislature, the nation’s ballad-makers, poets and, later, novelists did in a way come to be, along with the Kirk and the Law, a substitute political voice. Maybe this is one reason why we still attach such value to the words of Robert Burns, and why, in the 19th century in particular, the poems and novels of Sir Walter Scott became the window through which the outside world saw Scotland.

“We’re bought and sold for English gold”, was Burns’s bitter denunciation of the Union, and his song “A Parcel of Rogues in a Nation” deplores the idea of Scotland becoming a mere province of its southern neighbour. What really upset Burns was that Scotland’s hard fought for, centuries-old independence was signed away by a small group of men who were entrusted with determining national policy and laws but who seemed to put their own interests above those of the country:

What force or guile could not subdue
Thro’ many warlike ages
Is wrought now by a coward few
For hireling traitors’ wages.

Although this view – that bribes were the principal reason for Scots MPs agreeing to the Union – oversimplifies things, it was shared by the bulk of the population. No other single political moment in Scottish history has stirred such emotions among our poets and songwriters, both at the time and long after. Burns was writing eighty-five years after the event. In 1707 the Gaelic poet Iain Lom (John Macdonald, c.1620–c.1707) scathingly addressed Highland chiefs like Lord Duplin whose “heart wildly beat / when you heard gold was coming”:

shluig thu ’n aileag den gheanach,	you stifled greed’s breath
dh’at do sgamhan is bhòc e,	till your lungs swelled and hiccuped,
dh’fhosgail teannsgal do ghoile	till you could not contain it
’s lasaich greallag do thòna.	and set light to your arsehole.
“Oran an Aghaidh an Aonaidh”	“A Song Against the Union”



Meanwhile, an anonymous “Litanie Anent the Union” laid into almost every feature of Scottish affairs and government:

From heavie taxes laid on salt,
On blinkèd ale, on beer or malt, *[blinkèd: sour]*
And herrying us without a fault...

From trading with an emptie purse
And meriting the old wife’s curse,
And from all changes to the worse...

From bartering the ancient nation
For a new trade communication,
From English acts of navigation,
Deliver us, Lord.

Decades later, the Church of Scotland minister turned playwright John Home (1722–1808) suggested, tongue in cheek, a simpler reason for Scotland’s decline:

Firm and erect the Caledonian stood;
Old was his mutton, and his claret good.
“Let him drink port!” an English statesman cried;
He drank the poison, and his spirit died.

“Epigram on Enforcement of High Duty on French Wines”

Blaming the English for Scottish woes is a habit with a long pedigree, but there was another, at least as old, of criticising Scottish kings, courtiers and Parliamentarians for failing to perform their duties properly. In pre-Union Scotland the most famous example of a piece of literature confronting political mismanagement and corruption was the play *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, written by Sir David Lyndsay (c.1486–1555), himself a courtier during the reign of James V and the minority of Mary.

Lyndsay was building on the legacy of earlier great poets or makars, such as Robert Henryson (c.1420–c.1490), William Dunbar (c.1460–c.1520) and Gavin Douglas (c.1474–1522), who had variously used allegories, satires and poems of petition and of complaint, to make political points. “Gude rewle is banist ouer the Bordour” Dunbar had lamented in one of his poems, and Lyndsay’s play takes up the theme. It concerns King Humanitie, who is diverted from ruling his people well by such characters as Wantonness, Flatterie and Dame Sensualitie. Eventually Divyne Correctioun arrives to restore order and suggests the summoning of the three Estates of the realm – the clergy, nobility and burgesses – to a Parliament.



But the Parliament itself is corrupt and confused, the Estates entering the stage backwards to signify their poor condition. Meanwhile the ordinary people and the wellbeing of the whole country are represented by John the Common-weill. Through humour as well as moralising Lyndsay analyses the right balance of power necessary to maintain justice, liberty and prosperity in a country such as Scotland.

The ceremony and processions in Lyndsay's play had their basis in reality. The tradition of the Riding of the Parliament, revived in our own time, goes back many centuries. It was an opportunity for people to view their representatives on their way to make laws that would affect the whole nation, but the crowd was not always deferential. There was a sense, which has returned with the modern Parliament, that if the people and their representatives were within physical reach of each other, it both brought the idea of government closer to ordinary lives and concentrated the minds of the politicians. Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), in his novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, set in 1736, captures this idea through his character Mrs Howden, in words also now set in stone at Holyrood:

“I dinna ken muckle about the law,” answered Mrs Howden;
“but I ken, when we had a king, and a chancellor, and parliament-
men o’ our ain, we could aye peeble them wi’ stanes if they
werena gude bairns – But naeboddy’s nails can reach the length o’ Lunnon.”

Politicians in the 18th and early 19th centuries were used to getting pebbles and a good deal worse flung at them by the populace. In his novel *The Provost*, John Galt (1779–1839) has Mr Pawkie, provost of the burgh of Gudetown, describe what happens when he reads the Riot Act from a window to an angry crowd gathered below:

...they listened in silence. But this was a concerted stratagem;
for the moment that I had ended, a dead cat came whizzing
through the air like a comet, and gave me such a clash in the
face that I was knocked down to the floor, in the middle of the
very council-chamber.

More recently, Westminster politicians were often an easy target for our writers, especially if, like Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978), the writer was coming at them from both a nationalist and a communist standpoint. During the General Election of 1964, MacDiarmid stood as a Communist Party candidate in the Kinross and West Perthshire constituency of the Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home. He denounced Sir Alec as “a zombie, personifying the obsolescent traditions of an aristocratic and big landlord order, of which Thomas Carlyle said that no country had been oppressed by a worse gang of hyenas than Scotland.”



There was much more of this red-blooded invective, but in spite or because of his campaign tactics MacDiarmid came bottom of the poll with 127 votes. It is said that he asked for a recount, on the grounds that “it’s hard to believe there are 127 good socialists in Kinross and West Perthshire”!

Some Scottish writers, such as John Buchan (1875–1940) and Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham (1852–1936), did actually serve as MPs at Westminster. Although a Unionist, Buchan as early as 1932 showed himself to be open-minded about Home Rule. “If it could be proved that a separate Scottish Parliament were desirable,” he said, “Scotsmen should support it. I would go further. Even if it were not proved desirable, if it could be proved to be desired by any substantial majority of the Scottish people, then Scotland should be allowed to make the experiment.” In Buchan’s thrillers, as well as in his more profound historical novels, politics is seldom far away. “You think that a wall as solid as the earth separates civilisation from barbarism,” a character says in *The Power-House*. “I tell you the division is a thread, a sheet of glass.” Always aware of the importance of tradition as well as the fragility of progress, Buchan believed that “we can only pay our debt to the past by putting the future in debt to ourselves.”

George Bernard Shaw remarked that Cunninghame Graham led such an incredible life that he sometimes doubted if he was real. Born into an aristocratic Stirlingshire family, he was a lifelong adventurer, travelling in North Africa and cattle-ranching in South America, as well as writing short stories and non-fiction. At one time a Liberal MP, he was also a friend of Keir Hardie and became first president of the Scottish Labour Party on its formation; and, being a committed Home Ruler, years later he was a founder and first president of the Scottish National Party.

The real enemies of Scottish nationalism, he said, were not the English, “for they were ever a great and generous folk”, but those among us “born without imagination”. He also said, “The strife of parties means nothing but the rotation of rascals in office”, but he did believe in the power of politics to change things for the better.

So, too, did many Scottish writers in the period between the devolution referendum of 1979 and the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Those two decades saw the deaths of many of the great figures of 20th-century Scottish literature: MacDiarmid had died in 1978, and Norman MacCaig, Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith and Naomi Mitchison (“Nobody,” Mitchison said, “can be a power in their age unless they are part of its voice”), all of whom were in favour of a Scottish Parliament, passed on before it was achieved. But there was also a resurgence of interest in the Scottish literature of the past, a renewed commitment to writing in Gaelic and Scots, and a wave of new writers, most of whom wanted some change in Scotland’s political status.



Much of the cultural regeneration of Scotland that preceded the referendum vote of 1997 – which made it quite clear that, in John Buchan’s words, a substantial majority of the Scottish people desired their own Parliament – was instigated by writers. And there lies the positive side of the relationship between politics and literature. Writers will, with rare exceptions, never be politicians; but in their work they express political desires and dissatisfactions; they depict the real state of a country as well as imagining past and future states; they criticise and they applaud; they raise hopes and aspirations; and they are often called upon by the media to comment on some aspect or other of the nation’s life. In all these ways, they are as essential to the “common-weill” of Scotland as decent, industrious and visionary politicians.

None of this takes account of those Scottish writers whose works on economics, social policy and philosophy have had a direct and lasting effect on politicians throughout the world. These might include, for example, Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, David Hume (1711–76) and Patrick Geddes (1854–1932). But the last word here must go to Scotland’s Makar, Edwin Morgan (1920–), whose poem “Open the Doors!”, written to mark the opening of the new Parliament building, is a manifesto for writers, politicians and all Scotland’s citizens:

What do the people want of the place?

They want it to be filled with thinking people
as open and adventurous as its architecture.

A nest of fearties is what they do not want.

A symposium of procrastinators is what they do not want.

A phalanx of forelock-tuggers is what they do not want.

And perhaps above all the droopy mantra of “it wizny me”
is what they do not want.

Dear friends, dear lawgivers, dear parliamentarians,
you are picking up a thread of pride and self-esteem
that has been almost but not quite, oh no not quite,
not ever broken or forgotten...

We give you our consent to govern, don’t pocket it and ride away.

We give you our deepest dearest wish to govern well,
don’t say we have no mandate to be so bold.

We give you this great building,
don’t let your work and hope be other than great
when you enter and begin.

So now begin. Open the doors and begin.