Robert Burns and Slavery

By Gerard Carruthers

Scotland's national bard is often taken to be the forward-looking champion of human 'brotherhood'; and yet, also, Robert Burns let it be known that he had intended to sail to Jamaica to take up a position helping manage the slave economy. Apparently, he had proceeded so far with this affair as to timetable his voyage from Greenock on 10 August 1786 on board the Nancy, a brig that regularly traversed the Atlantic from the Clyde to the Caribbean and back with personnel and freight, including sugar, which was associated with the slave plantations. Scotland had no such notorious port as Liverpool or Bristol where African slaves, men, women and children were chained in the most appalling captivity before a crossing that took some weeks, with frequently 40 per cent plus of the slave 'cargo' dying en route, mostly from disease or sometimes from severe physical abuse (though either way as the result of determined mistreatment). The sailings from the Clyde associated with the slave trade were quicker and so more suitable for the carriage of more precious human lives: the whites who traded in their human traffic or sugar or tobacco, which in the latter half of the 18th-century represented a profitable interlocked economy from the United Kingdom to South Carolina to Antigua and Jamaica. Glasgow, or even Scotland's part in the slave economy is less nakedly apparent, but perhaps more insidious than was the case in the south. There are the very matter-of-fact, even pleasant, illustrated adverts for the sailings of the Nancy posted in the newspaper, the *Glasgow Advertiser* in the late 18th-century, which attest to the 'banality of evil'. Almost certainly, Burns saw these adverts in the *Advertiser* and this was what put the idea of a potential new life into his head. Why did he want to emigrate? On the face of it he had decided to run off with Mary (or, perhaps, on her birth documentation at least, Margaret) Campbell ('Highland Mary') after being rejected by Jean Armour who in obedience to her father's wishes had abruptly stopped all relations with the poet. This was in spite of the facts that Jean was in the early stages of pregnancy and that Robert and Jean had plighted their troth by signing their names together in a Bible, in token of an irregular but legally binding betrothal. In early 1786 Jean's father went to the extraordinary lengths of having a lawyer formally cut the names from the Bible and so dissolved the marriage contract. Burns, never one to be long without female solace, turned to the servant girl, Highland Mary, with whom he had probably been dallying while courting Jean in any case and, seemingly, he resolved to start a new life with her in Jamaica.

In May Mary was sent ahead to wait for Burns in Greenock; in July the poet signed the Burns family farm at Mossgiel entirely over to his brother, Gilbert; in July and August Burns and Jean were publicly rebuked in church on three consecutive Sundays for fornication; in September Jean gave birth to twins (during which month Burns yet again and repeatedly postponed his trip to Jamaica); in October Burns heard that Mary had died at Greenock. By this last month, Burns's book, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (which had been published in Kilmarnock at the end of July) was a huge literary hit in Ayrshire and beyond, and the great and the good in the west of Scotland had begun to notice the poet. In early

September 1786 Burns wrote to John Richmond, who was probably helping to open up the prospect of literary fame for Burns in Edinburgh. A legal clerk, typical of the aspiring bourgeois class with whom Burns hung out throughout his early manhood, Richmond had a residence in Edinburgh (as well as in Ayrshire) and it was at his house in the capital in which Burns stayed from November of 1786 as he began to plan his 'Edinburgh' edition of poems to appear in 1787, an enlarged version of his 'Kilmarnock' collection. Burns wrote to Richmond:

> I am still here in statu quo, tho I well expected to have been on my way over the Atlantic by this time. - The Nancy in which I was to have gone, did not give me warning enough. - Two days notice was too little for me to wind up my affairs and go for Greenock. I am now to be a passenger aboard the Bell, Captain Cathcart who sails the end of this month. - I am under little apprehension now about Armour - The warrant is still in existence, but some of the first Gentlemen in the country have offered to befriend me; and besides Jean will not take any step against me.

All of this is, I think, quite revealing. Burns had claimed previously and does so again in the passage just quoted that Jean's father has a warrant to throw him in gaol (though this may have been melodrama on Burns's part). It is far from clear how James Armour could have accomplished this, legally. (James Armour, incidentally, had supposedly fainted when he learned of Jean's pregnancy – not because of this fact alone, but because he had been told that Robert Burns was the father – to be honest not an unreasonable reaction from any loving father hearing that his daughter was involved with Poet Burns. Though I'm not sure this tale is to be believed either; it smells too much of Burns lore.) Burns could easily have reached Greenock, a distance of some 40 miles, in a day, and we know for fact he had already signed Mossgiel over to his brother. So he had nothing much in the way of affairs to 'wind up', as he puts it. I think Burns had taken cold feet about his proposed voyage well before he heard of Highland Mary's death (the reason often given by biographers for Burns finally aborting his Jamaican plan). Even if the notion of James Armour taking out a warrant for Burns's arrest is the poet being fanciful it is perhaps psychologically revealing. He felt persecuted, or at least disrespected: it is quite clear that Burns, a tenant farmer who was also a man of some clear accomplishment and learning expected to be seen as a catch by James Armour for his daughter. As so often was the case throughout his life, Burns had a very clear idea of where he was in the social pecking order, and thought himself to be the equal, at least, of the Master Mason, Armour (when he wanted to impress people later on, Burns claimed that his Father-in-Law was an architect). It was a severe shock for the exceptionally class-conscious Burns to be looked down upon by the Armours, and this, arguably, explains what I take to be a fantasy of Burns: that he might as well be regarded as a rootless, buccaneering kind of man – the kind who might well go off to make his fortune in Jamaica – at once confirming his dark reputation in James Armour's eyes, but also including the possibility, of returning, like so many others, with his dubiously acquired wealth to lord it over those who had previously snubbed him. I tend to side with those commentators who see Burns as never seriously intending to emigrate. But this is not to get Burns off the hook, to enable us to say, 'Oh, he never really wanted to be part of the disgusting West Indies economy.' On the contrary, in this episode of his life Burns, I would argue, is guilty of a failure of sympathy, a failure in imagination. And there is corroborating evidence for this view in his poetry. At some point during April and July 1786 Burns wrote 'On a Scotch Bard Gone to the West Indies' in which the poet projects himself being tearfully missed when he leaves Scotland and projecting a kind reception in the West Indies:

Jamaica bodies, use him weel,
An' hap him in a cozie biel:
Ye'll find him ay a dainty chiel,
   An' fou o' glee
He wad na wrang the vera Diel
   That's owre the sea.

'Jamaica bodies' are presumably the whites (who will treat him well) and provide for him a cosy shelter. Yes, it is a somewhat comical poem, but not an ironic one. Burns thinks of living 'cosily' amidst the slave economy? And this thought is appallingly compounded in the same stanza when Burns talks of himself being harmless, as someone who would not 'wrang the vera Devil' over the sea. The problem, precisely, is that the Devil most certainly was at work over the sea in the plantations in Jamaica.

Burns, actually, is remarkable in his work for how little attention he pays to the African slave and we can contrast him somewhat unfavourably with a number of contemporary Scottish writers in this regard. Robert Burns's rather

insipid 'The Slave's Lament' (1792) has provided an otherwise disappointed politically correct readership for the Scottish Bard with a slender thread with which to tie him to the Abolitionist cause. Burns's sympathy for the plight of the Senegalese captive in this song first published in James Johnstone's *Scots Musical Museum* was subsequently and gratuitously magnified with the claim that the tune chosen by Johnston (in collaboration with Burns) was 'an original African melody', but this is untrue. This claim was first made, unaccountably, by the song-historian Stenhouse in 1853 and continues to be parroted by some Burnsians. Actually, even the attribution of the words to Burns merits some re-examination. It is possible that Burns merely collected the song when scraping the barrel to send Johnston material; it is also possible that Johnston, aware of the poor quality of the piece, attempted to give it added whoompf by attributing it to Burns. It is fairly pallid stuff:

It was in sweet Senegal that my foes did me enthral,
For the lands of Virginia, ginia O;
Torn from the lovely shore, and must never see it more,
And alas! I am weary, weary, O!

All on that charming coast is no bitter snow or frost,
Like the lands of Virginia, ginia O;
There streams for ever flow, and there flowers for ever blow,
And alas! I am weary, weary, O!

The burden I must bear, while the cruel scourge I fear,
In the lands of Virginia, ginia O;
And I think on friends most dear, with the bitter, bitter tear,
And alas! I am weary, weary, O!

Surprisingly unnoticed is a much more interesting engagement by Burns (albeit in a sub-textual instance) with the 'African Question'. This occurs in his poem 'The Ordination', first drafted in 1786, but revised in late 1787, as it lampoons the 'Auld Lichts' or Calvinist evangelicals in their theological battles with the Moderate Presbyterians in Ayrshire. Burns allows the 'Auld Licht' voice expression of its favourite darker Biblical texts, including those that revel in murder and whoreing. He also has this voice appeal:

Come, let a proper text be read,
An touch it aff wi' vigour,
How graceless Ham leugh at his Dad,
Which made Canaan a niger

Here, we have the myth of monogenesis (that humanity began as one race and somehow later became racially distinctive), comprising part of the litany of 'Auld Licht' ignorance. Clearly, what Burns looks forward to in 'The Ordination' is the casting off of the Old Testament mentality in Presbyterian Ayrshire. And with typical psychological comedy, Burns has an Auld Licht lament, 'Nae mair by Babel's streams we'll weep,/To think upon our Zion.' In a long historical comfort-zone of being cast-out seemingly (though in fact theologically dominant in the Scottish kirk for most of the 18th-century), the Auld Licht mentality in its scriptural hubris is actually desensitised to real cultural displacement, be it that of the Israelite or the African slave, according to Burns. Satirically, heroic, feminine, true Calvinism is seen towards the end of the poem hitting back at the forces of Moderatism 'banishing' and 'cowing' these, where liberal use is made of the whip also:

See, see auld Orthodoxy's faes
She's swingeing thro the city!
Hark, how the nine-tail'd cat she plays!
I vow it's unco pretty,
There, Learning, with his Greekish face,
Grunts out some Latin ditty;
And Common Sense is gaun, she says,
To mak to Jamie Beattie
Her plaint this day.

As recent work by Iain Whyte has shown, the Scottish Presbyterian church in the second part of the 18th-century, whether Auld or New

Licht, was pretty strongly Abolitionist. Burns, then, is being somewhat partial in tarring the Auld Lichts with the imputation of a pro-Slavery mentality; for instance, one of the key Auld Lichts he lampoons specifically by name in another of his Calvinist satires, 'The Holy Tuilzie' is John Russell, who was to be party to a particularly impassioned Abolitionist petition from the Presbytery of Irvine in 1792 (not everyone lashed by Burns's pen necessarily deserved it, at least not all the time).

In 'The Ordination', Burns further sets up a false opposition (certainly so far as the slave question was concerned) as 'Common Sense' complains to James Beattie, the man in his own time perhaps even more so than Thomas Reid, associated with the philosophical school of that name. Beattie is the Scottish Enlightenment philosophe most enduringly abolitionist (and here, if previously he had been bettered in terms of pure epistemology by David Hume, he emerges in much better light than his old philosophic foe, some of whose comments on black people are simply indefensible and perhaps all the more so for a man of Hume's prodigious intellect). Around 1778, Beattie had written but not published his 'Discourse on Slavery with particular reference to the plight of the Negroes' and in a letter to his friend William Forbes 10 years later, in May 1788, Beattie rails against those who attempt to argue 'the licitness of the Slave-trade from the scriptures of the Old and New Testament.' One month later, he is, however, pessimistic about the traffic in slaves, fearing that 'it cannot be accomplished soon'. Much of the reason for Beattie's pessimism would seem to be the theological strength within the politically powerful Church of England in the 1780s in favour of Slavery, which was probably at least as potent at this time as the Abolitionist strain within the same communion. As Colin Kidd has recently shown also, Beattie in the polished published version of his *Elements of Moral Science* (1790) was, while whole-hearted and vocal in his anti-slavery stance, timid when it came to the business of detailed scriptural critique, believing without question that Adam had been white and that the black people had become so because of environmental conditions. Beattie 'argued' here too that 'the negro' in his indigenous context most certainly had a soul but had only 'a very imperfect idea of the supreme being'. 'Common Sense' clearly still had some way to go in practice to speak out univocally against slavery. In 'The Ordination' Burns is right to applaud implicitly Beattie's broad Abolitionist stance, but his seeming confidence that the forces of enlightenment and of reaction can clearly be delineated in matters of theology, culture and humanity, and especially with regard to the theory of monogenesis partakes somewhat of wishful and distorted thinking. Beattie was less than intellectually clear-sighted on the matter, then, however much his heart beat commendably in favour of Abolition. And it would be interesting to know the extent to which Burns's tantalising sub-textual material on the issue in 'The Ordination' shows, actually, conscious awareness of Beattie's problem on racial belief and an attempt at transference on to the hapless 'Auld Licht' fall-guy. We are into deep waters here, with soundings not previously registered in Burns criticism, which require further trawling.

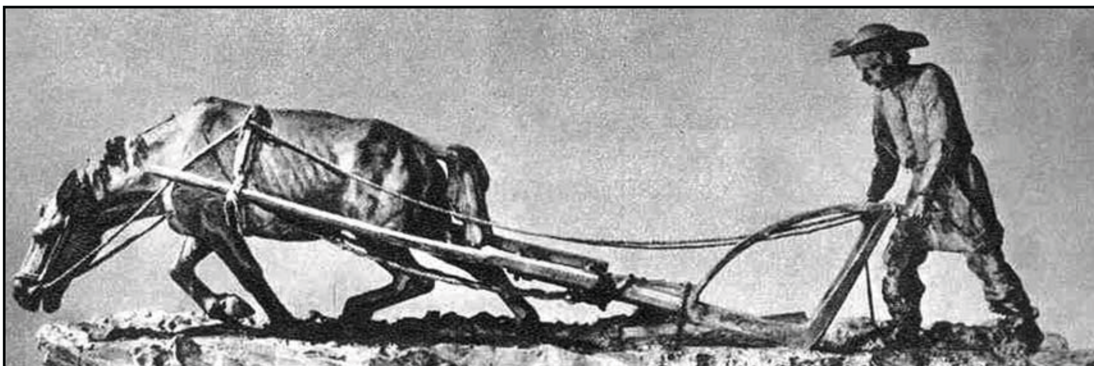
Let us take a final example of Burns's engagement with slavery, this time in 'Is there for honest poverty' (or 'A Man's a Man'). First of all I want to point to a strange historical 'accident' in this song first published in 1795. Burns has earned praise for penning a supposedly proto-Socialist anthem which ends with the lines:

That Man to Man the warld o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that.

Now the reason that Burns mentions the 'world' is because at this time when Britain is at war with France, had he said 'Europe' (which is really what he had in mind) he might well have been gaoled. The idea of a series of confederated or even united republics of Europe (and including the same within Britain for England, Ireland and Scotland – though not poor Wales) was what the French had in mind in the 1790s for their

remapping of the continent. There is an implicit antimonarchist stance in the song. 'The honest man IS KING o men' says Burns in his text, and as a number of critics have noted Burns also cleverly embeds something of the phraseology of Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* in his poem. Both of these things might well be spotted, but a defence lawyer could quite easily argue that there is nothing explicitly seditious in these devices. On the other hand the explicit French egalitarian idea, 'It's comin yet for a' that/ That Man to Man Europe o'er,/Shall brothers be for a that' would have counted as out and out sedition so far as the British authorities were concerned, and it is most likely that any contemporary court of law at this time would have concurred. It is a nice irony that the changing of the text to 'world' has led to the inflated idea of Burns's democratic sensibility, when in fact he was attempting, understandably, to disguise this. Another textual fold, all too little noticed, is the line in the opening stanza of the song, 'The coward-slave, we pass him by,/we dare be poor for a' that'. Now I am not suggesting that Burns is referring to African slaves explicitly, or perhaps one should say realistically here, but he is certainly using the idea of African slavery as a metaphor. People are enslaved and enfeebled with their desire for power and rank, and, as Burns says, 'The rank is but the guinea's stamp/The man's the gowd for a' that' which carries, arguably and as Nigel Leask has suggested, the connotation of the stamp burned by iron into the slave's skin. Burns's logic is that another type of debased human condition is to be found at the top of the human social hierarchy just as much as at the bottom. This is quite nicely done. But, I would argue, it shows again, even as it is poetically imaginative, a somewhat limited, Eurocentric position on Burns's part. People can indeed be slaves to the wrong thing, but to use this metaphor at a time of real, appalling, miserable actual slavery is rather insensitive. It is even possible to suggest that Burns's 'coward-slave' touches on a contemporary idea that slaves become increasingly debased morally (so far, so logical, we might say) but that this is demonstrated also in a cowed or cowardly attitude where they do nothing to help themselves. (This rhetoric of increasing and irredeemable torpor of humanity is quite prominent in 18th-century moral discourse surrounding slavery.) One might justifiably say, of course, that this perspective is to make hugely arrogant assumptions about the choices available to most slaves. With or without this connotation, we find in 'Is there for honest poverty' (as with 'The Ordination') a disturbingly sub-textual (and so relegated) engagement with the slavery issue so that if we're looking to fill out Burns's politically radical or progressive CV then this is one area with which we really cannot do too much.

What has been said above will perhaps be seen as a little negative by some people, those, particularly, who dislike any kind of considered criticism of Burns. And there are many: such as the man who telephoned me two months ago and introduced himself by shouting down the line, 'Ye're nae freend o' mine'. When I asked



why, he replied that I was 'questioning Burns'. I replied that this is what I, as a professional academic, am paid to do, which, of course, cut no ice. Let me attempt, then, to plead for Burns something I equally often do alongside the questioning. We might simply suggest that Burns had little interest in the slave issue and it is up to the individual, writer or otherwise, to what extent he or she wants to be politically active or expressive. Burns's straying into the territory of slavery in his work is piecemeal and far from entirely happy, but, equally, it may be that Burns would liked to have said more but felt constrained since from the late 1780s he is a government employee (more vocal Abolitionist Scottish writers such as Alexander Geddes, William Campbell or William Yates were not so encumbered), and it is quite noticeable how as we enter the 1790s many Abolitionist writers are silenced (the aforementioned Campbell perhaps among them) because of the scare-mongering yoking of a cause that until then was finding very wide support across the spectrum of political and religious opinion in Britain, with the democratic sensibility of the early French Revolution, a despicable manoeuvre of the reactionary right at this time. That Burns, a man of undoubtedly genuine humanitarian spirit, is largely silent or maybe even confused on the Abolitionist issue should be a sober lesson to us all in how, for various potential reasons, we can lose sight of the big socio-moral questions that face us. We should not be complacent. We live in a world where United Nations figures show us that slavery of one kind or another (and perhaps of even greater variety of strain than in the 18th-century) is at least as endemic and virulent as in the time of Robert Burns. If Burns, arguably, did not do enough, too few of us who have come after him in history, clearly, have done anything effective either.

Note: The thinking in this essay has been hugely helped and informed by two recent publications: Colin Kidd, *The Forging of the Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), for which I am especially indebted in the material above on Beattie; and Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Gerard Carruthers, *Robert Burns* (Northcote Publishing, 2006) quickly sold out its first printing and has now been reprinted.