

The Vernacular Enlightenment

By Ken Simpson

'Vernacular' and 'enlightenment': in the same breath? How could these possibly be linked?

The first step in an attempt at an answer involved a visit to the dictionary. 'To enlighten': 'to shed light on/give light to/impart knowledge of/to'.

Of what does Scottish vernacular poetry of the 18th-century give knowledge? – Scotland and Scottish culture. To whom? – Not just to their English partners in union, but also to the Scots themselves. 'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us/To see oursels as others see us' wrote Burns, evoking Adam Smith. But the crucial preliminary was that Scots see themselves. National self-identification in the early decades of the 18th-century was a necessary prelude to the Scottish philosophers' subsequent investigation of personal identity.

'Now there's ane end of ane old song': Lord Seafield's words as Chancellor when, according to Lockhart of Carnwath, he signed before the Scottish Parliament the exemplification of the Act of Union. But the song endured (albeit sometimes in a more polite version). Paradoxically, when Scots became Britons they became more aware of what it was to be a Scot. Political union presented a threat to cultural identity; hence the need to preserve or revitalize the modes, forms, and language of the native tradition. There followed three decades of collecting and innovating, practices continued later in the century by Burns, Scott, and Hogg.

In the vanguard was James Watson who, as the prospect of political union loomed, initiated the work of conservation with his *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems*, vol. I (1706) Watson shows a keen sense of the significance of the collection (both the activity and the outcome): he alludes to 'the frequency of Publishing Collections of Miscellaneous Poems in our Neighbouring Kingdoms and States' and notes that this is 'the first of its nature which has been published in our own Native Scots Dialect'. He is doing the nation a service, and he knows it.

Watson is determined to establish textual authority: 'as a Test of the Undertaker's Care to please his reader as much as he can, this first Essay is chiefly composed

of such Poems as have been formerly printed most Uncorrectly, in all respects, but are now copied from the most correct Manuscripts that could be procured of them'. This represents a key stage in the transition from oral to written culture: collecting and publishing establishes the definitive text, a process that would enrage traditionalists such as James Hogg's mother.

The range of Scottish voices is remarkable. Watson's achievement was to present the nation's literary culture in a way that was socially and linguistically inclusive. William Drummond is represented by both 'Polemo-Middinia' and 'Forth Feasting'; 'The Flying betwixt Polwart and Montgomery' and Hamilton of Gilbertfield's 'The Last Dying Words of Bonny Heck, A Famous Grey-Hound in the Shire of Fife' cohabit with 'The Discription of the Queens Majesties Maist Honorable Entry into the Toun of Edinburgh' by John Burel and 'Epithalamium Upon the Marriage of Mary Queen of Scots, to the Dauphin of France ... Done from the Latin of Buchanan'. Watson has identified, preserved, and showcased Scotland's finest in all its diversity.



With access to the 16th-century Bannatyne Manuscript, Allan Ramsay continued the process of conservation with *The Ever Green* (1724). But here, alongside stalwarts like 'Christ's Kirk on the Grene', 'The Thistle and the Rose', and 'Auld Kyndnes quite foryet', we find imitations of the work of the Makars by Ramsay (eg. 'The Vision')

and his contemporaries. In the same year Ramsay produced *The Tea-Table Miscellany* which ran through 14 editions. Again the range is remarkable in terms of both language and subject matter: contents include 'Come, Florinda, lovely charmer'; 'Gi'e me a lass with a lump of land'; 'How happy is the rural clown'; 'Jocky fou, Jenny fain'; 'Lassie, lend me your braw hemp heckle'. Ramsay's commentary is as much a medley as the contents. 'What further adds to the esteem we have for them, is their antiquity, and their being universally known', he asserts, then adds, 'my being well assured how acceptable new words to known tunes would prove, engaged me to the making verses for above sixty of them ... about thirty more were done by some ingenious young gentlemen, who were so well pleased with my undertakings that they generously lent me their assistance.' There is an ambivalence in Ramsay's attitude: he will innovate and sanction innovation, but at the same time, like



Watson, he wishes to authorise: 'The rest are such old verses as have been done time out of mind, and only wanted to be cleared from the dross of blundering transcribers and printers, such as "The gaberlunzie Man", "Muirland Willie" & c., that claim their place in our collection for their merry images of the low character.' Yet he also claims: 'I have kept out all smut and ribaldry, that the modest voice and ear of the fair singer might meet with no affront.' In *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* David Daiches emphasised the cultural dichotomy in 18th-century Scotland. A qualification was sounded by Thomas Crawford in *Society and the Lyric* with his suggestion that there was cultural interplay: the street/bothy song would find its way to the tea-table if it was any good. Yet there are here in Ramsay early indications of a civilising process that would lead to the situation later in the century where the custodians of naive art were 'people of taste'. By the time of Burns and George Thomson Scottish literary culture is hosting uneasy bedfellows: in particular, the zealous Scottish antiquarianism and the vanguard Scottish role in the vogue of primitivism do not always sit happily with the modernising and civilising impetus of Scottish Enlightenment thought.

In his Dedication to *The Tea-Table Miscellany* Ramsay exhorts 'British Lasses' to sing while the tea is brewing, then at the start of his Preface he says the songs are so infectious we're likely to dance to them. Ramsay upholds his right, as partner, to address a British audience, to contribute to the new British cultural identity. His Scottish contribution is distinctive. 'Elegy on Patie Birnie' ends:

Sae I've lamented Patie's end,
But least your Grief o'er far extend,
Come dight your Cheeks, ye'r Brows unbend,

And lift ye'r Head,
For to a' Britain be it kend

He is not deid.

For Ramsay, Scots have equal linguistic, as well as political, rights. In 'Richy and Sandy, A Pastoral on the Death of Joseph Addison', Sandy says of Addison: 'His Fame shall last; last shall his Sang of Weirs/ While British Bairns brag of their bauld Forbears.' For Ramsay, 'British bairns' is no oxymoron; he writes as a Scot, in Britain, to Britain. In the Preface to his *Poems* (1721) he refers to 'the Scots and English tongue' (singular) and to 'beautiful thoughts dress'd in British'; and he sees the linguistic range available to the Scot as a positive advantage:

of [English] ... we are
Masters, by being taught it
in our Schools, and daily
reading it; which being

added to all our own
native Words of eminent
Significancy, makes our
Tongue by far the completest.

Ramsay and his contemporaries established the momentum that would lead to Edinburgh's being acclaimed the Athens of the North by mid-century. Ramsay exudes sociability. Some of his activities were modelled on those of the English Augustans, with whom he corresponded: founding the Academy of St. Luke's; opening a theatre; helping to form the Easy Club (12 May 1712); and setting up a lending library in his shop in the Luckenbooths. The wig-maker who doubled as poet-librarian congratulates himself in 'An Epistle to James Arbuckle' (Jan. 1719): 'I theck [thatch] the out, and line the inside/Of mony a douce and witty pash [head]'.

Soon the Scottish stamp was put upon these cultural establishments. Within 18 months of its founding, the members of the Easy Club renounce their English pseudonyms and 'resolve to have Scots patrons'. No longer Isaac Bickerstaff, from Steele's *Tatler*, Ramsay becomes Gavin Douglas. This alias is significant. In identifying himself with the Bishop of Dunkeld who translated Virgil's *Aeneid* into Scots (1513) Ramsay is aligning himself with a master innovator; for Douglas had added prologues to each book of Virgil's epic. It is noteworthy that Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns (eg. in the epigraph to 'Tam o' Shanter') are intent on locating themselves within a Scottish tradition; in so doing they both celebrate their predecessors' achievements and legitimise their own.

Ramsay had little knowledge of Latin but, reliant on French cribs and familiar with English translations, he produced vernacular Scots versions of Horace's *Odes*. Ramsay's 'To the Phiz An Ode', inspired by Horace, *Odes* I, ix, contrasts favourably with English translations (eg. by Edward Sherburne (1651); John Dryden (1685)). Ramsay's version is characterised by specificity and an essential humanity. This is the real Edinburgh – for Soracte, substitute the Pentlands; it's midwinter, so golf-course and bowling green are deserted:

Driving their baws frae whins or tee,
There's no ae gowfer to be seen
Nor dousser folk wysing a jee
The byas bouls on Tamson's green.

Human conviviality offsets nature's chill,
and Ramsay conjures up a wonderful
metaphor for the effects of wine:

Good claret best keeps out the cauld
And drives away the winter soon,
It makes a man baith gash and bauld,
And heaves his saul beyond the moon.



Dryden's version of this pales into insignificance: 'Produce the Wine, that makes us bold,/And sprightly Wit and Love inspires.' With the very human particularity that vernacular Scots endows, Ramsay breathes new life into the representation of the rituals of courtship:

Watch the saft minutes of delyte,
When Jenny speaks beneath her breath,
And kisses, laying a' the wyte
On you if she kepp ony skaith.

Haith ye're ill bred, she'll smiling say,
Ye'll worry me ye greedy rook;
Syne frae your arms she'll rin away,
And hide her sell in some dark nook:

Her laugh will lead you to the place
Where lies the happiness ye want,
And plainly tells you to your face
Nineteen nay-says are haff a grant.

Scottish literature's fondness for the bizarre particular finds striking exemplification here: the suitor is advised to persevere; if he asks 38 times he'll ultimately have his way.

What particularly characterises the Scottish Enlightenment is the social and realistic basis of its activities across a broad range; the common factor is humanism. David Hume famously writes, 'Indulge your passion for science, says [Nature], but let your science be human, and such as may have a direct reference to action and society ... Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man' ('Of the Different Species of Philosophy', section I of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)). To secularise in this way, to place man at the centre of investigation of the human condition (rather than seeing him as an expression of God's will) was plainly to stir up a ferment in a country as theologically driven as Scotland. The vernacular poets are comparably radical: their challenge is to the authority of literary rules. Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns challenge the traditional correspondence between literary hierarchies and social hierarchies (that is, there is high art peopled by the eminent, and low art inhabited by the commoners). The Scottish vernacular poets subvert this convention, using the props of high art to render



the experiences of traditionally 'low' characters. They make a major contribution to the democratisation of literature but, unlike English poets who use mock-classical forms, such as Pope and Gray, they are not concerned merely to display their expertise in the mode: the distinctive dimension to the Scottish writing is the celebration of human experience. For Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns, the expressive needs of the poet dictate the choice of form, mode, and language; not vice versa. To paraphrase Hume: 'Be a poet; but amidst all your poetry, be still a man.'

'People poetry': this is, for Maurice Lindsay, 'the outstanding characteristic of Scottish poetry'. The work of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns bears witness. Theirs are particular people, particularly rendered. In 'Lucky Spence's Last Advice' the dying Edinburgh brothel-keeper offers practical advice to her lasses. It is more specific, and for that reason more useful, than the contents of any classical valediction, but the poem also enables Ramsay to highlight the double standards prevalent in polite society: the good citizens enjoy the services of the prostitutes but, to maintain the appearance of respectability, they ensure the girls are beaten monthly by the hangman to remind them of the vileness of their trade. In

'Elegy on Maggy Johnston' Ramsay's elegist is a customer of the deceased publican who laments her death not for her sake but for the fact that she takes with her to the grave the secret of her powerful brew. Ramsay puts his own signature on the conventions of classical elegy. Here is his take on the tradition whereby the elegist personalises universal grief by reference to his own experience:

Ae simmer night I was sae fou,
Amang the riggs I geed to spew;
Syne down on a green bawlk, I trow

I took a nap,
And soucht a' night balillilow

As sound's a tap.

And whan the dawn begoud to glow,
I hirsled up my dizzy pow,
Frae 'mang the corn like wirricow,

Wi' bains sae sair,
And ken' nae mair than if a ew

How I came there.



What is Maggie's legacy to Ramsay's speaker?
How is she immortalised? – Through the account
of the hangover to end all hangovers.

What does 'music' mean to the ordinary citizen of
Edinburgh?, asks Ramsay in 'Elegy on Patie Birnie'. Is
it the classical myth of its invention by Apollo? No,
it is the ubiquitousness of the devious and highly
successful street busker, Patie, accompanied by the
midget dancer, Johnny Stocks. In 'To Robert Yarde
of Devonshire', Ramsay, mimicking the manner of
the Augustans, offers a long essay on the virtues of
moderation – 'Yet ae extreme should never make/A
man the gowden mean forsake' – and he applies it in
particular to love. But then he totally undermines his
thesis when it comes to specific advice to his friend:

Then wale a Virgin worthy you,
Worthy your love and nuptial Vow;
Syne frankly range o'er a' her Charms,
Drink deep of Joy within her Arms
Be still delighted with her Breast,
And on her Love with rapture feast.



Rules are
abstractions,
meaningless
generalities; real
human beings
are individuals,
a point further
underlined

by the poet's own practice within the poem:
feigning adherence to classical formula,
he then stamps his mark upon it.

Half a century on, Fergusson is equally inventive
in personalising the standard poetic baggage. His
poems, like Ramsay's, seem like a manifesto for
Scottish poetry, a manifesto on which they deliver
by example. In 'The Daft Days' the trappings of
classical pastoral are identified only to be rejected as
irrelevant to the reality of Edinburgh at New Year:

From naked groves nae birdie sings;
To shepherd's pipe nae hillock rings;
The breeze nae od'rous flavour brings

From Borean cave;
And dwyning Nature droops her wings,

Wi' visage grave.

The classical apostrophe to the presiding deity
is now given contemporary relevance; and
the reality is that if you have too good a time
you will fall foul of the officers of the law:

And thou, great god of Aqua Vitae!

Wha sways the empire of this city,
When fou we're sometimes capernoity,

Be thou prepar'd
To hedge us frae that black banditti,

The City-Guard.

If poetry has a place in the life of the ordinary citizen,
why should it not offer such practical advice?

In 'The King's Birthday in Edinburgh' Fergusson
deliberately chooses an occasion which had
been a common holiday throughout Britain
since the Union. Claiming, 'I'm fain to think the
joys the same/In London town as here at hame',
he then shows by increasingly bizarre detail
that they are most definitely not the same:

Now round and round the serpents whiz,
Wi' hissing wrath and angry phiz,
Sometimes they catch a gentle gizz,

Alake the day!
And singe, wi' hair-devouring bizz,

Its curls away.

Shou'd the owner patiently keek round,
To view the nature of his wound,
Dead pussie, dragled thro' the pond,

Takes him a lounder,
Which lays his honour on the ground

As flat's a flounder.

Equally he has shown that his is no standard, laureate-
produced, public poem: he has to take charge of the
Muse, as
incapable of
holding her
whisky as of
directing his
poem. The
point could
not be clearer:
classical
convention is
irrelevant for
the rendering
of the particularities of individual or nation.



The introduction of a second definition is long
overdue: 'to enlighten': 'to free from prejudice and
superstition'. This is precisely what Burns does in a
poem that is one of the great Scottish Enlightenment
texts, 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. Specific in origin, the
dismissal of William Fisher's charges against Gavin



Hamilton, it develops into arguably the most effective demonstration in world literature of the limitations and dangers of the closed mind. James Hogg would follow suit with *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*; likewise, though with much more benign irony, John Galt in *Annals of the Parish*.

Burns's Holy Willie is pathetic in his limitations: the 'pillar in thy temple' loses even physical self-control in the face of the liberal, enlightened challenge:

O Lord my God, that glib-tongu'd Aiken,
My very heart an' soul are quakin',
To think how we stood, sweatin', shakin',

An' pissed wi' dread,
While Auld wi' hingin lip gaed sneakin',

And hid his head.

But, devious in his logic (witness his willingness to endure 'houghmagandie' if that is God's will!), he is also awesome in the sheer force of his bigotry:

Lord in the day of vengeance try him,
Lord visit them wha did employ him,
And pass not in thy mercy by 'em,

Nor hear their prayer;
But for thy people's sake destroy 'em,

And dinna spare.

Without saying a word in his own voice, Burns demonstrates the need for enlightenment by allowing a mind immune to enlightenment to reveal itself.

Burns's poetry reflects the influence of key concepts in Scottish Enlightenment thought, such as Benevolence and Sympathy. Half a century before him, Francis Hutcheson, in 'Concerning Moral Good and Evil', had stressed the virtue of showing benevolence towards rational and moral beings 'in the most distant planets'. Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) popularised the notion that the capacity for feeling is an index to virtue and emphasised the important element of sympathy. Burns ranges widely in his exemplifications of sympathy. In 'Death and Dr. Hornbook' the sociable peasant-farmer lends a sympathetic ear to Death, reduced to a figure of ridicule by the local amateur pharmacist whose incompetence makes Death redundant. Here the convention of the bargain with Death is given an ironic twist: Death needs sympathy from the listener and the defeat of his human rival before he can regain his rightful place. Burns has humanised Death and magnified Hornbook, whose malpractice is so notorious that he can be relied on to achieve for them the evil ends of malcontents. Death is not

the enemy, Burns says, it is human corruption.

The process of demystification and familiarisation is taken further in 'Address to the Deil'. The ongoing need for this is evident from Walter Scott's concern as late as 1831 that George Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World* was still widely influential, especially in rural areas. Burns's Deil, familiarised within the community, is anything but the awesome figure of the Miltonic epigraph, 'O Prince, O chief of many throned powers,/That led th' embattel'd Seraphim to war'; rather, he is the local nuisance, familiarly addressed as 'Auld Hornie, Nick, Cloutie, Auld Hangie'. Demystified, the Devil is treated as a crony and warrants the speaker's sympathetic concern:

But fare-you-weel, auld Nickie-ben!
O wad ye tak a thought an' men'!
Ye aiblens might – I dinna ken –

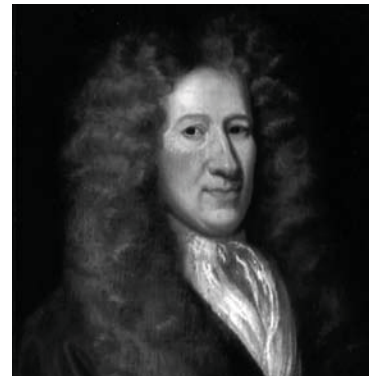
Still hae a stake –
I'm wae to think upo' yon den,

Ev'n for your sake!

Even the Devil does not deserve to be consigned to eternal torment, and if he would only reform it would benefit not just himself but all mankind. Here is a Christian egalitarianism of a remarkably liberal kind which confronts the certainties of orthodox Calvinism with the ultimate possibility.

One final definition: 'to enlighten': 'to elevate by knowledge'. Is this not precisely what Burns does in his finest achievement, 'Tam o' Shanter'? The demystification continues, with the devil and witches, like humans, feeling the need to party (and dance, and sweat), but here the focus of the familiarisation is Tam, 'heroic Tam' our representative. This poem is the zenith of Burns's universalising on the basis of the particular; it is local (think of how we are guided along Tam's route) and it is universal in respect of Tam's responses: the fascinated observer of Cutty Sark is safe until instinct triumphs over reason and in his sexual excitement he cries out, betraying his presence, and threatening his survival.

And how does Burns render the ordinary man's encounter with the supernatural? – Courtesy of the trappings of classical epic. Here the vernacular



poets' democratising of poetry reaches its culmination. With Tam as hero, the epic is democratised; and Tam is 'elevated' into a universal figure courtesy of Burns's knowledge of human nature.

Much is made of Burns's radical politics. I would contend that the subtlest, and arguably most effective, expression of Burns's radicalism is to be found in the radical use of poetic forms. In 'Tam o' Shanter' a process initiated by Ramsay, developed by Fergusson, reaches its culmination. High art-low art distinctions crumble before the expressive needs of the individual writer; and, paradoxically, out of the particularised rendering of experience there emerges universal truth.

