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Robert Burns and Twentieth-Century War

David Goldie

In the final year of the First World War, John Buchan told a London audience that ‘the time of war was a time to turn to poetry, for the poet wrote for the great moments of life’. Buchan’s assumption of poetry’s relevance to an understanding of the Great War would be borne out by the continuing influence of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and many others as the twentieth century unfolded. It seemed obvious to Buchan that at times of the greatest personal and social stress it is to poets and poetry we look for necessary sustenance and consolation.

What is perhaps surprising is that the audience Buchan was addressing was the London Burns Club, and that the poet he refers to - who ‘wrote for the great moments of life’ in wartime - was Robert Burns. In hailing Burns as the embodiment of the values for which the war was being fought, and as the exemplar of a form of writing uniquely capable of articulating these values, Buchan was not only flattering an audience of confirmed Burnsians but was also drawing on almost four years of war culture in which Burns had reinforced his role as Scotland’s national poet: the symbolic manifestation of its character and spokesman for its values of intelligent good-humour, fortitude and human solidarity.

This chapter will explore Burns’s place in that culture as well as in the rather different culture that followed it in the war of 1939-1945, a period spanning thirty years in which his reputation shifted, moving from somewhere near the centre of Scottish culture out towards its periphery.

Burns in the First World War

When war broke out at the beginning of August 1914 Burns’s status as Scotland’s national poet was apparent. He was – especially every January around the celebrations of his birthday – a highly-visible figure in the popular culture landscape. Even for those Scots who had only a slight acquaintance with his poetry, he was a kind of mythical figure embodying, as Principal Shairp had put it a few years earlier ‘an impersonation of themselves on a large scale’: an embodiment of the Scottish people ‘both in their virtues and in their vices’.¹

But while the primacy of his status was uncontested, the nature of his achievement and of his example was much less clear. For some, he offered a model of genial conformism - of the ability of an exceptional individual to speak for the sentiments of the group; for others he was the perennial outsider - the humane but hard-headed individualist, throwing shade on the softer vices, the comforting evasions and hypocrisies, of group think. This divided interpretation, of an assimilated versus a radical Burns, had a long history, stretching back to his own lifetime. But its contestation gained a new currency and a new urgency in war. For the assimilationists Burns was the exemplar of the values we were fighting to defend, for the radicals he was a disruptor, the premonitor of those more revolutionary ideals we should be fighting for. Both attitudes could, of course, co-exist in more subtle forms of criticism but in the polarising context of war, criticism and commentary tended to find itself sitting on one side of the fence or the other – seeing the bard as either fully attuned to the war effort or an ally of those critical of both the war itself and the motives of those who prosecuted it.

¹ Principal Shairp, *Robert Burns* (London: Macmillan, 1887), 196.

As might be expected in what many interpreted as a time of existential national crisis, it was the first of these views that held sway, with Burns being enlisted for the duration into the ranks of those who supported the war.

This was manifested in several ways in both the visual and printed culture of the war. Burns might, in the view of some critics, have been a rather ambivalent recruit to the Dumfries Volunteers in 1795, but the contemporary military establishment had few scruples in enlisting him wholeheartedly into service in the current crisis. This had begun even before the war, when Earl Roberts, the former Commander in Chief of the British Army, was attempting to drum up support for conscription through his National Service League. In a heavily-publicised series of speeches in Glasgow, delivered to 35,000 citizens in a variety of Glasgow locations in 1913, Roberts summoned up, as he put it, 'as a witness to my appeal your hero-poet, Robert Burns'. He quoted from *Scots Wha Hae*, 'Free-man stand, or Free man fa' / Let him on wi' me!' before boldly asserting to his Scottish listeners that 'I am confident that Burns would have been on my side'.² When war broke out, '*Scots Wha Hae*' proved a popular poem among recruiters. Almost every eligible man in the Glasgow Tramways department heeded Kitchener's call in 1914 and joined up, forming the 15th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry. At the public parade marking their departure for service, the convenor of the Tramways department encouraged the assembled enlistees to take their inspiration from Burns quoting his words of Bruce before Bannockburn.³ Edinburgh arranged things even more ostentatiously for a volunteering meeting at the Usher Hall to create what would become McCrae's Battalion, the 16th Royal Scots, with a pipe band playing '*Scots Wha Hae*', and the publication of a bespoke version of the poem in the Edinburgh *Evening Dispatch*:

Who would bear a sword unsheathed
While the guilty Kaiser breathed?
Rise wi' vengeance steeled and teethed,
Strike wi' George McCrae.⁴

'*Scots Wha Hae*' was frequently seen in the many anthologies of martial verse that sprung up with the war, among them Oxford University Press's *Poems of War and Battle* (1914). It was often sung along with the National Anthem at public events in Scotland. According to the *People's Journal*, it had 'become the battle-cry of the nation', being 'sounded throughout the country from Maidenkirk to John o' Groats'.⁵ The *Daily Record* described it in similar terms as 'at once the most warlike and the most patriotic national anthem ever composed'.⁶ And in the view of the *Falkirk Herald*, 'the power in the avalanche of its patriotic zeal is fitted to carry along with it the most irresolute slacker and to cause the sorriest coward to cast aside his craven soul'.⁷ Given this salience, it is unsurprising that the authorities used the song, and Burns's background as a volunteer, in advertising for the funds that would sustain the war

² "National Service," *The Times*, 7 May 1913, 6.

³ "Tramwaymen's Noble Response," *Glasgow Herald*, 8 September 1914, 7.

⁴ Jack Alexander, *McCrae's Battalion: The Story of the 16th Royal Scots* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2003), 80.

⁵ "Robert Burns as Recruiter: The Inspiration of His Songs," *People's Journal*, 23 January 1915, 7.

⁶ "Burns and the Sodger Laddie," *Daily Record and Mail*, 25 January 1915, 4.

⁷ H. Makinson, "Robert Burns and War," *Falkirk Herald*, 30 January 1915, 8.

effort, such as the Tank Bank drive and ‘War Weapons Week’ of 1918.⁸ Even the Church of Scotland got in on the act, with one divine describing ‘Scots Wha Hae’ as ‘the greatest War ode in the world’ and the ideal counter to a Germany driving Europe ‘back to Barbarous Ages’.⁹

The song’s omnipresence made it also ripe for imitation and pastiche. Scottish papers of all kinds published attempts by many a budding poet to harness the sentiments of Burns’s words to the particular circumstances of the war, often in quite inappropriate ways.¹⁰ One such was the a so-called ‘Shirker’s Version’, an apparent attempt to shame any Scots who might be hesitant about enlisting:

We’re Scots wha ne’er for Britain bled,
Scots wha’ m French has never led,
An’ care mair for oor cosy bed,
Than ony victory.¹¹

Popular newspapers like the *People’s Journal* ran features and historical accounts on Burns, reprinted poems of his relevant to the times, and made him a character in serial stories. They organised competitions, so called ‘Burnsettes’ based on identifying his works from picture clues, offering busts of the poet and Burns ashtrays as prizes, and encouraged amateur poets to emulate him through competitions such as a 1915 ‘Burn’s Telegrams to the Kaiser’ competition. Burns continued, too, to be present in performance, with recitations in theatres and cinemas, and even new plays like George Eyre Todd’s *The Angel of Robert Burns* (1917).¹² Burns was box-office in another sense too, with groups as diverse as Burns Clubs, football clubs, and even abstainers unions running concerts and events in his name that earned considerable sums for wartime medical and social charities.¹³ The YMCA organised Burns nights for soldiers on the front lines.¹⁴ British prisoners set up their own unofficial club in the internment camp at Ruhleben near Berlin and entertained themselves and the other inmates with Burns songs and events.¹⁵

⁸ See "Leith Tank Bank," *The Scotsman*, 26 January 1918, 6. "Scots Wha Hae," *The Times*, 8 April 1918, 13.

⁹ Donald Macmillan, *Burns and the War; His Message to the Nation: An Address Delivered before the Glasgow and District Burns Association, in St. George's Parish Church, on 28th January, 1917* (Glasgow Glasgow and District Burns Association, 1917), 3 & 8.

¹⁰ See, for example, "Sons of Britain: A Georgetown War Song, Tune 'Scots What Hae,'" *Georgetown Gazette*, October 1917, 30; and G. A. Bell, "Here and There," *Evening Times*, 8 September 1914, 2.

¹¹ Reprinted in Derek Young, *Forgotten Scottish Voices from the First World War* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), 16.

¹² See, for example, "'Burns' Picture Recital," *The Scotsman*, 16 January 1917, 7; George Eyre-Todd, *The Angel of Robert Burns: A Play in Four Scenes Showing the Poet as He Lived* (Glasgow: Scottish Country Life, 1916).

¹³ See "Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Burns Federation," *Burns Chronicle* 28 (1919): 141. Walter Terry, "The Year in Variety," in *The Era Annual 1918* (London: Era, 1918), 44.

¹⁴ J.A.M., "A Nicht Wi' Burns at the Front: From a Church of Scotland Chaplain," *The Scotsman*, 11 February 1918, 6.

¹⁵ See "A Burns Club in Germany," *Scotsman*, 15 January 1915, 6. "A Burns Celebration in a German Prison," *Scotsman*, 12 May 1915, 14. Joseph Powell and Francis Gribble, *The History of Ruhleben: A Record of British Organisation in a Prison Camp in Germany* (London: Collins, 1919), 187.

Burns's value as a recruiting agent had been recognised by the British Parliamentary Recruiting Committee when, in 1915, they made him the only British poet to feature in their poster campaigns. Their Burns poster pictured the poet in cameo under the heading 'What Burns Said – 1782 Still Holds Good in 1915'. Alongside his likeness was printed the first stanza of 'I'll Go and Be a Sodger' and in large type the recommendation to 'Take His Tip'.¹⁶ And such value was recognised post-war too. According to Brigadier-General Sir Robert Cranston the disproportionately-high volunteering rate of Scots in the recent war was 'due to Robert Burns, who laid the foundation of the heroic spirit which was in the nation at the present day'.¹⁷ William Will, President of the London Burns Club, continued this theme in 1919, having examined the archives of the Dumfries Volunteers and finding that Burns had been – contrary to some opinions - an active and exemplary volunteer soldier.¹⁸ This prompted another wartime Leader, General Sir Ian Hamilton, to celebrate Burns's credentials as an inspirational soldier poet, and to laud him for his contribution to the recent war effort, suggesting that the great Scottish divisions which had distinguished themselves in the war owed 'some of their exceeding great valour, to "Scots wha hae"'.¹⁹ This argument was taken up again by James L. Hughes in 1922, in the somewhat anachronistic argument that Burns's service and his poem for the Dumfries Volunteers, 'Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat', 'did more to arouse the people of Scotland and England to put down the bolshevism of the time than any other loyal propaganda'.²⁰

There was, however, another current of thought in wartime – one perhaps more sympathetic to Bolshevism and certainly more sympathetic to socialism – to which Burns also appealed, and which similarly claimed him as an inspiration. This was found in the emerging labour movement, for which Burns was not simply an inspirational figure, but a foundational one – a man whose principles denied the kinds of easy co-option into the establishment assumed by those who supported the war. According to Ramsay MacDonald, the Scottish founder of the Labour party, Keir Hardie, 'had got more Socialism from Burns than from Marx', and there was a similarly strong Burnsian inflection to the politics of many of the labour leaders who rose to prominence in the war, among them Robert Smillie, Willie Gallacher, J. R. Campbell, Davie Kirkwood, Patrick Dollan, and John S Clarke.²¹ For these activists, Burns spoke not in the voice of authority but in the speech of the oppressed and the dispossessed – talking not for the regiment, but the awkward squad. They called down an alternative Burnsian tradition, going back long into the previous century in which Karl Marx had reportedly read and admired Burns and poems like 'Scots Wha Hae' had sustained assorted Chartists, social reformers, and Suffragettes.²² For leftist thinkers in wartime like Willie Stewart and David

¹⁶ See <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30198>.

¹⁷ "Edinburgh Border Counties Association," *The Scotsman*, 20 January 1919, 3.

¹⁸ William Will, *Robert Burns as a Volunteer: Some Fresh Facts which help to compound the Poet's Critics* (Glasgow: John Smith & Son, 1919)

¹⁹ "Burns as a Volunteer: Sir Ian Hamilton's Vindication," *The Scotsman*, 27 January 1919, 4.

²⁰ James L. Hughes, *The Real Robert Burns* (London: W. & R. Chambers, 1922), 13.

²¹ Ramsay MacDonald in William Stewart, *J. Keir Hardie: A Biography* (London: Cassell, 1921), xxiii..

²² Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 319. Christopher A. Whatley, "'It Is Said Burns Was a Radical': Contest, Concession, and the Political Legacy of Robert Burns, Ca. 1796-1859," *Journal of British Studies* 50, no. 3 (2011): 639-66. T. C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), 237. Leah Leneman, *A Guid Cause: The*

Lowe, Burns offered a different form of consolation, then, based more on his closeness to the concerns of the people than any sympathy he might share with the national mission - an incorruptible spirit immune to canting authority and populist coercion alike. For Lowe, Burns was fundamentally a pacifist, deprecating what he had described in a letter to Mrs Dunlop, as the 'destructive demon' of war that brings only 'misery and ruin to thousands.'²³ In Stewart's view, Burns had been misappropriated by the war's supporters, who would have served the nation better if 'they had ranted of Burns less and imbibed his spirit more'. Stewart lamented the fact that when a critical voice like that of Burns was needed, 'we have no modern poets who will even try to tell the truth about public affairs or about social conditions'.²⁴ This was the Burns who spoke directly to conscientious objectors like Bill Deans as he steeled himself through his incarceration in Wormwood Scrubs by reciting Burns's poems.²⁵ Burns's power as an anti-war poet was also noted by Thomas Johnston, wartime editor of the influential Independent Labour Party newspaper *Forward*. Johnston acted as a thorn in the government side in the First World War, but would serve with distinction as Secretary of State for Scotland in the Churchill government in the second. In 1916, he spoke for many on the left when he described 'Scots Wha Hae' as the 'national anthem' of the Scottish Socialist movement.²⁶

This perhaps illustrates well the paradox of Burns in the First World War. He had always been an ambivalent figure who could be taken to speak to both sides of almost any argument, but now even individual works such as 'Scots Wha Hae' were visibly open to conflicting interpretations. Roberts, the imperialist General calling for national conscription, and Johnston, the radical journalist demanding socialism and freedom of conscience, surely could not both be right in thinking the poem spoke directly to their causes. But both made the appeal, and both did so confident that Burns was on their side and that this was of crucial importance to their diverse audiences. Burns still mattered.

Burns in the Second World War

It might be said that Burns had had a good war in 1914-18, coming out of it with his reputation not only intact but enhanced. Although in poetical terms he was more a model for popular pastiche and parody than for the practice of serious contemporary poetry, he remained a pre-eminent symbol of national character – a figure to whom people continued to look for moral and human example. The authority he offered was not that associated with the setting of precedents and rules, or even models for living, but rather a kind of permissive cultural authority that understood and accepted the vagaries of human experience: the manifestation of a kind of folk wisdom to which Scots of all sorts could appeal and in which they would find their principles and prejudices reflected, their idiosyncrasies comprehended and condoned.

Women's Suffrage Movement in Scotland, Revised ed. (Edinburgh: Mercat, 1995), 117 & 204-6.

²³ David Lowe, *Burns: Poet of Peace and War* (Blebo Craigs, Fife: Craigwood House, 1915), 16 & 14.

²⁴ William Stewart, "Robert Burns on Current Politics," *Forward*, January 19 1918, 1.

²⁵ Ian MacDougall, *Voices from War and Some Labour Struggles: Personal Recollections of War in Our Century by Scottish Men and Women* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1995), 78-90.

²⁶ Graham Walker, *Thomas Johnston* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 37.

His role near centre-stage in the First World War was not reprised in the Second War, where he appeared to have more of a walk-on part every January and some small cameos in between. It is tempting to read this as a consequence of the spread of Modernism in the interwar years, and in particular of the development of the particular brand of revaluative modernism that became known as the Scottish Renaissance. The movement's leading figure, Hugh MacDiarmid, famously expressed a noisy disapproval of Burns and the Burns cult, seeking to shunt the Bard into a kind of branch line of a Scottish literary tradition whose mainline would now run directly from the Makars of the early Renaissance, Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas, to the present time and to the immodest MacDiarmid himself.²⁷ Examples of MacDiarmid's castigations of Burns were not hard to find in the years between the wars and after, from the poetic sideswipes of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) and the broadsides of 'Your Immortal Memory, Burns!' (1923) to the many essays over the years that attempted to put Burns and his supporters firmly in their place. In 'Your Immortal Memory, Burns!' MacDiarmid derided the Burns cult and its 'countless masses of befuddled men', who attend Burns suppers and worship him with their 'vivid clots / Of idiot thoughts'. In essays, he wrote that Burns's poetry was repetitious and little concerned with Scotland's scenery, history, and destiny, that it 'has dated very badly', and that in fact it marks 'the end of a phase - not a fresh start in Scots letters.'²⁸ Elsewhere, he described Burns's influence on Scottish poetry as 'wholly bad, producing little save puerile and platitudinous doggerel', and accused Burns himself of 'anti-intellectualism' and 'xenophobia' and for a betrayal of the Scottish tradition that has been 'largely responsible for landing the Scottish Muse in the horrible mess it has occupied since'.²⁹ It sometimes seemed, in other words, in the world according to MacDiarmid, that Burns had ruined Scottish poetry and had licenced a kind of maudlin simple-mindedness and complacent self-satisfaction in the great mass of enfeebled Scots, rendering them incapable of looking up and seeing the living genius walking among them.

But there are reasons to suggest that these vituperations were not as significant as they might appear. Firstly, for all MacDiarmid's polemical noise and the attention paid to it by later critics, he was and remained a marginal figure in the wider cultural environment of the interwar years - stronger in the role of gadfly and provocateur than literary statesman and canon-former. Secondly, there was a disingenuousness - and indeed a complexity - in MacDiarmid's agonistic relationship with Burns and the Burns clubs. MacDiarmid could, when not at his most intemperate, be quite careful in distinguishing between Burns and his cult, reserving much of his criticism for the unthinking, exclusive ways in which Burns was consumed. In this regard, his critique carried both force and good sense in pointing to the dangers of isolating and fetishizing a single figure as the representative of a national idea - a form of Bardolatry that excluded other voices and stifled innovation and development in poetry. There was, besides, another qualification to MacDiarmid's criticism of Burns: namely his continuing fascination for and obsession with his predecessor, and indeed his recognition

²⁷ See Robert Hay Carnie, "Hugh Macdiarmid, Robert Burns and the Burns Federation," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 30, no. 1 (1998): 261-76; Alan Riach, "Macdiarmid's Burns," in *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, ed. Robert Crawford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 198-215; Robert Crawford, "Macdiarmid, Burnsians, and Burns's Legacy," in *Burns and Other Poets*, ed. David Sergeant and Fiona Stafford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 182-94; Paul Magrati, "Macdiarmid's Burns: The Political Context, 1917-1928," *Scottish Literary Review* 11, no. 1 (2019): 47-66.

²⁸ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (Edinburgh: Castle Wynd, 1959), 23-5.

²⁹ *Albyn: Shorter Books and Monographs*, ed. Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 4. *At the Sign of the Thistle: A Collection of Essays* (London: Stanley Nott, 1934), 175.

of Burns's quality as a writer of a kind of poetry quite different to the one he practiced himself. MacDiarmid continued to speak at Burns suppers – in the 1959 essay *Burns Today and Tomorrow* he describes 'having proposed the chief toast at several Burns Suppers annually for the past thirty to forty years'.³⁰ It is true that these were sometimes not without their controversies – MacDiarmid's participation in a Burns supper in Bo'ness in 1960, for example, leading to the memorable newspaper headline, 'Scots Poet in Burns Club Scuffle' – but they testified to his continuing struggle with Burns and his memory.³¹ So while one part of him might rave in print about the malign influence of Burns and the Burns cult, he continued to wrestle with Burns as a progenitor and worthy antagonist, and to engage with, and profit from, the larger Burnsian cultural industry that he ostentatiously deprecated.

MacDiarmid's intemperate nature meant that his views on Burns, even when they might be worth listening to, went largely disregarded outside his narrow circle. But while he was powerless to influence the popular-cultural reception of Burns, he certainly seemed to have the attention of like-minded poets who were seeking new directions for Scottish poetry. A fellow-traveller, though one who didn't always see wholly eye-to-eye with MacDiarmid, was Edwin Muir. His description of Burns and Walter Scott as 'sham bards of a sham nation' in his poem 'Scotland 1941', was a token of the approach to Burns taken by the more seriously-minded contemporary Scottish poets of the war.³² These poets need not agree with the narrative concocted by MacDiarmid and Muir, predicated as it was on the notion of an idealized, undissociated pre-Reformation Scotland vitiated by a toxic combination of Presbyterianism, Unionism, and Capital, but they certainly shared in the practical attempts to create a modern poetry that conspicuously refused to resonate formally and tonally with Burns.

The Scottish poetry of the Second World War was markedly more powerful and ultimately more influential than the poetry of the First (in contrast to war poetry south of the border). The war's outstanding Scottish poems, among them George Campbell Hay's 'Bizerta' and 'Esta Selva Selvaggia' and Hamish Henderson's 'Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica', are formally much closer in form and language to Modernism than they are to the folk traditions of Burns.³³ The poets who emerged from the war, and who would dominate Scottish poetry for the rest of the century, Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig, Robert Garioch, Sydney Goodsir Smith, and Edwin Morgan, similarly appeared to have moved away from Burns towards other sources more suited to their modern concerns, among them Gaelic and wider European traditions, the New Apocalypse, or the Scottish Renaissance.³⁴

³⁰ *Burns Today and Tomorrow*, 1.

³¹ *New Selected Letters*, ed. Dorian Grieve, Owen Dudley Edwards, and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), 355.

³² See Douglas Gifford, "Sham Bards of a Sham Nation?: Edwin Muir and the Failures of Scottish Literature," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 35, no. 1 (2007). Muir was noticeably more sympathetic in a post-war essay 'Burns and Popular Poetry', praising Burns's accessibility while lamenting the unhappy way Scottish culture had made him 'more a personage to us than a poet, more a figurehead than a personage, and more a myth than a figurehead'. Edwin Muir, *Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Hogarth Press, 1949), 57.

³³ See Roderick Watson, "'Death's Proletariat': Scottish Poets of the Second World War," in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 315-39; David Goldie and Roderick Watson, eds., *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914-1945* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2014).

³⁴ Though MacCaig and Morgan both paid tribute to Burns in poetry, MacCaig going on to edit *Honour'd Shade* (1959) an anthology of new Scottish poetry to mark Burns's

Interestingly, perhaps, one of the few poets to have tried to develop from Burns's poetry in the years leading up to the Second World War was the English poet W.H. Auden, who adopted and adapted Burns's Standard Habbie stanza in poems such as 'A Communist to Others' and 'The Witnesses'. And it is worth noting the way Henderson would move on from modernism and rediscover the folk tradition, grafting a Burnsian sensibility to Gramscian ideology to create a new hybrid of the Burns tradition that would inform both his collection of folk-songs and ballads and his authorship of works like 'The Freedom Come-All-Ye'.³⁵

If Burns was no longer considered a seminal poet for practitioners, he retained at least some of his popular appeal. He was called upon surprisingly little by Scots who fought in the Spanish Civil War, though there was at least one instance of a large-scale celebration when 1,000 republican troops held a Burns supper in the Jarama valley in 1937.³⁶ And the first substantial Spanish translation of his poems, which appeared in 1940 shortly after the end of that war, would go on to act as a covert challenge to Franco's centralizing state, offering 'an implicit demand for cultural and linguistic diversity in post-Civil War Spain'.³⁷ In the United Kingdom, however, the establishment continued to recognise Burns's appeal and attempted, as they had in the last war, to enlist him to its cause. In a speech in Glasgow in 1940, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, offered up Burns and the poem he called 'A man's a man for a' that' as the antithesis of the inhumanity of Goebbels and Himmler, arguing that the Nazis would find 'nothing but inexplicable, incomprehensible insularity and nonsense' in Burns's expressions of human warmth and solidarity.³⁸ This contrast was also played on in newspaper poetry, in which Burns was contrasted with Hitler and Lord Haw Haw (who had quoted Burns in his broadcasts in an attempt to sow seeds of discontent in Scotland), as well as in commentaries which saw Burns's life of struggle as a virtuous counter to the mendaciousness of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.³⁹ Burns's poems were given to Scottish soldiers on overseas service, and as a plangent reminder of their homeland to children being evacuated overseas.⁴⁰ His poems were read, and an on-air Burns supper, held as part of a 'Scottish Week' on the BBC Home Service, as well as on Children's Hour and the Forces Service.⁴¹ 'Scots Wha Hae' was proclaimed for holding a special place in the hearts of Czechs, and was offered as encouragement to other small allied nations such as Poland.⁴² It was even suggested that "'Scots Wha Hae", if Premier Stalin would allow',

bicentenary, and Goodsir Smith co-edited Burns's *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*. See Crawford, "Macdiarmid, Burnsians, and Burns's Legacy," 192.

³⁵ See Corey Gibson, *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Daniel Gray, *Homage to Caledonia: Scotland and the Spanish Civil War* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2008), 76.

³⁷ Sergi Mainer, "Translation and Censorship: Robert Burns in Post-Civil War Spain," *Translation Studies* 4 (2011): 81.

³⁸ "Teachings of Burns: Contrast with 'Mein Kampf'," *The Scotsman*, 16 September 1940, 3.

³⁹ P. MacFadyen, "In Memory of Robert Burns: Oors Is Nae Empty Boast," *Port-Glasgow Express*, 31 January 1940, 2; "Lockerbie Burns Night: The Poet of Freedom," *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser*, 31 January 1940, 8.

⁴⁰ "Scottish District News," *The Scotsman*, 9 April 1940, 5.

⁴¹ "Scottish Week Programmes: Anniversary of the Birth of Robert Burns," *Birmingham Daily Post*, 15 January 1940, 9; "The Immortal Memory," *Perthshire Advertiser*, 15 January 1944, 8; "Burns Anniversary: Poet of International Fellowship," *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser*, 28 January 1943, 5.

⁴² James Hogg, "Diary of a Scot," *Daily Record*, 1 July 1942, 2; "Last Sunday's War-Time Meeting," *St Andrews Citizen*, 31 January 1942, 5.

‘should be adopted as the new Internationale’.⁴³ Burns’s volunteer service was brought up again, sometimes in humorous references to the Home Guard, and sometimes in more exhortatory fashion, as when the Rev. W. Phin Gillieson (in a manner reminiscent of the militant clergy of the first war) called plaintively to his audience: ‘Would he were living at this hour: Britain had need of him! We needed to-day a trumpet call like his to the Dumfries Volunteers’.⁴⁴ He featured too, as he had in the first war, both reverently and cheekily in wartime advertisements. The self-styled ‘Tobacconist to Rabbie Burns’, William Gordon Ltd, of High Street, Dumfries, claimed Burns’s blessing in its sale of duty-free tobacco cigarettes, heading its advert ‘The exciseman turns his back for the men who face the front’. Another suggested that ‘If Robert Burns were alive today...he would read, and probably write for, the DAILY HERALD...loyal exponent of the democratic principles and policies of the Great Poet, Humanitarian and Statesman’.⁴⁵ Burns continued to offer solace, too, as in the first war, to those whose consciences prohibited them from fighting their fellow men.⁴⁶

In many ways, then, Burns functioned in the second war much as he had in the first, as a vehicle for the many and varied opinions people chose to put in his mouth or impute to his memory. But that memory was more thinly stretched in the second war, and less deeply embedded in the texture of everyday life. This was – thanks to the cinema and radio – a culture less intimately wedded to the written word. There had been no outbreak of popular newspaper poetry in the second war as there had been in the first, and as a corollary there were many fewer parodies and pastiches of Burns’s poetry in the media. His work was rarely taught in schools.⁴⁷ And though he was still a figure in the cultural landscape, he was no longer the source for popular competitions or serialisations in papers like the *People’s Journal*. There were no posters, and there were many fewer charity fundraising events organized in celebration of him. Appeals might still be made like the following one from an article of 1943, ‘The War and the Burns Tradition’:

his work crystallises more of what ordinary men and women really care for than does almost any other secular written record. For that reason he needs our attention more than ever to-day. The things he wrote about are the things we fight for.⁴⁸

But such opinions tended to feature – like this one – in relatively small-circulation specialist publications such as the *Burns Chronicle*, or to be made in Immortal Memories and reported in newspapers when the Burns season came around every January.

It might be expected that this ‘People’s War’ would be well-suited to a People’s Poet like Burns, but the poet appeared strangely to have lost his immediacy and his radical edge. This perhaps had something to do with the stalwarts of the labour movement who had emerged in the first war and who had remained true to Burns and his message to the oppressed, but who had themselves moved closer to the establishment. Thomas Johnston was not the only one of these. Burns had been much on the lips of Labour Party parliamentarians in the years leading up to the second war such as Davie Kirkwood and the Reverend James

⁴³ "Burns Howff Club: Sir P. J. Dollan on Poet’s Ideals," *Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser*, 29 January 1944, 5.

⁴⁴ Harold Stewart, "Robert Burns in the Home Guard," *Daily Record*, 23 January 1943, 2; "Burns’s Message for to-Day," *Burns Chronicle* Second Series: 16 (1941): 10.

⁴⁵ "Advertising Matter," *Burns Chronicle* Second Series: 20 (1945): 19 & 6.

⁴⁶ "Objector Inspired by Robert Burns," *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 29 October 1940, 6.

⁴⁷ Patrick J. Dollan, "Robert Burns as a World Influence," *Burns Chronicle* Second Series: 19 (1944): 18.

⁴⁸ "The War and the Burns Tradition," *ibid.* Second Series: 18 (1943): 1.

Barr. Both were prodigious Burnsians. It was said that Barr had given 1200 addresses on Burns in the interwar years, and he was notorious for having spoken in a debate on the King's Speech in 1943 with quotes from Burns that filled a column of Hansard.⁴⁹ But Kirkwood's reverence for Burns was sometimes written off as a kind of affectation or sentimental shtick, and Barr seemed too ready to use Burns intemperately as an advocate for his own brand of militant Temperance. This was also true of probably the best-known Labour-party Burnsian during the war, Sir Patrick Dollan, who also appeared to bend Burns to a particular purpose – this time that of internationalism. Dollan had been imprisoned with hard labour during the First World War for his resistance to the government as a member of the Clyde Workers Committee, but had gone on to become Glasgow's first Catholic Lord Provost in 1938, being knighted in 1941 for organizing the city's response to the war. During the war he wrote and broadcast extensively, almost always on issues relating to the comity of nations, and often patterning his arguments around the figure of Burns.⁵⁰ In 1944 he put out a collection, *Songs of Liberty by Robert Burns*, which sold out its 6000 copies in a month, prompting Dollan to make a not entirely disinterested public appeal to ensure the widespread availability of Burns's poems to the fighting men.⁵¹ According to Dollan, it needed to be remembered that 'the ideals propounded by the leaders of the United Nations were, after all, those put forward by Burns', suggesting that

Scots were allowing political personalities like Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, to be regarded as the great preachers and saviours for mankind, whereas Robert Burns, in a few poems and songs, outlined the principles and policy for social security, peace, and progress more eloquently than statesmen had done in a century of speeches.⁵²

While this kind of argument might be welcome to those heavily invested in Burns, it was perhaps attitudes like these that encouraged even the *Burns Chronicle* to draw back and insist that Burns be brought down, if not quite to earth, at least into a lower, more manageable orbit. In an editorial tellingly titled 'Robert Burns *Poet*: First Things First', the *Chronicle* cited recent claims for Burns to be regarded as 'the forerunner of Lenin and Stalin' or 'the apostle of freedom and democracy' or 'the greatest champion of freedom who ever lived'. It was the *Chronicle*'s view that,

Every type of propagandist has found in Burns's writings messages for Scotland and the world, in favour of every policy from Imperialism to Communism; and in the past few years more and more has been made of what this school of oratory would have us believe is a kind of poetical *Mein Kampf*.⁵³

Even if Hitler's struggle had made him a monster, this suggests, it might be best to avoid reading Burns's as making him a saint. Such an approach was perhaps welcome after three decades of hyperbole and contestation – a return to the relative sanity of peace after years of war and civil strife.

⁴⁹ "Testimonial to Rev. James Barr," *Motherwell Times*, 23 February 1946, 10; "Burns in Spate," *Daily Record*, 26 November 1943, 2.

⁵⁰ See, for example, "Fortress of Freedom: The Spirit of Clydeside. Sir P. Dollan's Broadcast," *The Scotsman*, 24 March 1941, 6.

⁵¹ "Forces' Interest in the Poems of Burns," *The Scotsman*, 5 February 1944, 3.

⁵² "M.O.I. Lecture," *Devon Valley Tribune*, 2 February 1943, 3; "Burns - and the Big Three," *Sunday Post*, 21 January 1945, 3.

⁵³ "Robert Burns *Poet*: First Things First," *Burns Chronicle* Second Series: 19 (1944): 1.

One of the more surprising books to come out of the war was J. R. Campbell's 40-page *Burns the Democrat* (1945). Campbell had, with Willie Gallacher, been a founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. He had been editor of the *Worker's Weekly* newspaper, and in that role had inadvertently helped bring down Ramsay MacDonald's first Labour government in 1924, and he would become the editor of the CPGB's *Daily Worker* throughout the 1950s. Campbell's account of Burns's life and work was not so surprising for its account of the relationship between Burns and Thomas Muir (something Dollan had dwelt on too), or its observations on the implicit references in 'Scots Wha Hae' to the oath of the convention of the Friends of the People, or even its assessment of Burns as foremost 'in the procession of Great Scottish Rebels' whose 'record of struggle against hypocrisy and privilege will inspire his fellow-countrymen to continue the fight until the system that gives rise to them is superseded by a new and better social order'.⁵⁴ What made it surprising was its characterisation of Burns, not so much as a heaven-taught ploughman as a hard-headed member of 'the class of emerging tenant farmers' dedicated to agricultural improvement and to sustaining 'the gradual economic progress of the tenant farmers, small manufacturers and the middle class in general to create the elements of a better order, with, of course, the more intelligent members of the working class admitted to their ranks.'⁵⁵

This balanced and mature assessment, from the pen of a man considered by some a dangerous revolutionary, offered a welcome break from the wartime polemic that had removed dimensionality from Burns by caricaturing him as establishment apparatchik on the one hand and saviour of the people on the other. Almost half a century of military and political conflict had flattened out the figure of Burns. Perhaps peace might bring an opportunity for a less populist, more rounded, more complex, and ultimately more worthwhile understanding of the poet and his legacy.

⁵⁴ J. R. Campbell, *Burns the Democrat* (Glasgow: Caledonian Books, 1945), 31 & 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2 & 9.