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Paul Bishop and Robert Burns

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ABSTRACT
Attention is drawn in this brief note to how Paul Bishop's interests as an earth scientist and physical geographer inspired the author in interpreting the poetry of Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns. James Hutton's geological theories regarding the age of the earth, the historical instability of the earth's surface and the erosive powers of the elements likely influenced Burns, suggesting new inflections to the interpretation of at least two of his well-known poems. Paul Bishop's assistance with respect to interpreting a Burns copyist's poem is also explained.

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My very short contribution here in memory of Professor Paul Bishop is necessarily a little anecdotal. Many such anecdotes, though, help accurately convey the effective scholarly modus operandi of Paul, that most human of geographers in his cross-border inter-disciplinarity. I first came to know him as a member of the University of Glasgow's Senate Discipline Panel, which he convened with great skill and endlessly patient sensitivity. Admiring of Paul, it did not immediately occur to me that we would ever have any sort of formal academic interaction.

In fact very quickly, he had co-opted me to do a reading for him in Medieval Scots on the process of weaving which was part of a talk he was giving to a local history society. Our paths crossed again in a similar context with meetings of the Friends of Thomas Muir organisation in East Dunbartonshire. Thomas Muir of Huntershill (1765–99), advocate of reformist, democratic ideals in the 1790s was transported to Botany Bay for fourteen years on trumped up charges of 'sedition', escaped and had a series of hair-raising adventures in North and South America and also in France (see Carruthers & Martin, 2016). Paul's own fascination with Muir was typically wide-ranging but concerned, naturally enough, the travels of the reformer. One idea he gave me as I work towards a new intellectual biography of Muir was properly to map Muir's extraordinary journeys, which he calculated amounted to something like 27,000 miles (unusual for anyone in the 1790s, with the possible exception of press-ganged mariners). I have begun a map of these journeys, with the ultimate aim that this should eventually become an online interactive version.

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As an eighteenth-century literary scholar I work on Scotland's national bard, Robert Burns (1759–96), and I am on the Board of Robert Burns Ellisland Trust overseeing the poet's home and farm (1788–91) as a cultural heritage site (https://www.ellislandfarm.co.uk/). Erosion of the bank of the River Nith which runs through Ellisland is an occasional problem, and who better to provide useful advice, which he did for the Trust, than Paul Bishop? Even before this, however, Paul one day in 2014 button-holed me on campus with the question, 'What do you know about Burns and James Hutton?' (Hutton, 1726–97, that geological pioneer of weather science). 'Nothing at all,' I replied. 'Well, what about "A Red Rose?",' Paul interrogated further. Very soon, and with a little further investigation, I was sure he was right, with the useful product of some additional new annotation for the Oxford University *Poetry of Robert Burns*, which I am currently editing.

At the home of philosopher Adam Ferguson in 1787, Burns met Hutton (McIntyre, 1997, p. 104). Both Burns and Hutton were farmers as well as intellectuals, and, although we do not have any precise record of conversations between the two men, it is improbable that they did not converse over what today we would call 'Earth Science' among other topics. Burns was very attuned to contemporary thinking of all kinds and would have been aware of Hutton's work. Hutton's ideas were widely reported in the periodical press in its theories of the historical instability of the earth's geology and the erosive energy of rain, on which the geologist published and lectured (especially to the Royal Society of Edinburgh, of which Paul himself was a distinguished latter-day member) during the later-1780s and early-1790s.

This material helps provide new context to one of Burns's greatest love songs, *A Red* Rose (1794), as well as subtext – specifically a more wry one than is traditionally read within it. The text (here from Kinsley, 1968, II, p.735) begins with the idea of cyclical seasonality as:

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June

And this idea of changing environment is maintained in the second and third stanzas:

And I will love thee still, my Dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun

Traditionally, critics have read *A Red Rose* as an extended conceit, fairly straightforward but powerful, of indefatigable love. However, once we grasp that Burns is aware of his Hutton, we might read, *contra* young love, its overblown naivety. This really ought not to be a surprise, given the opening signal of the text where the love is 'newly sprung' and presumably likely to change as the seasons do. Prompted by Paul, my editing of this text will for the first time in any Burns edition include annotation (yet to be precisely worked out) from Hutton's oeuvre. Hutton's pioneering of the idea of the radical impermanence of the Earth and Burns's undoubted exposure to it delivers a different song, no less tender but signalling greater human fragility.

Hutton's Burns might be read in another of the poet's greatest hits *Holy Willie's Prayer* (1785), that fierce, comical portrait of religious self-righteousness. Willie the canting, hypocritical Calvinist exalts that he is one of the Elect, predestined for salvation at the beginning of human time, 'Sax thousand years ere my creation' (Kinsley, 1968, I, p. 75). Here the knowing joke, shared with his Ayrshire Enlightenment cronies, is how ignorant, in fact, are the hard-line religious. They are unaware of Hutton's *Concerning the System of the Earth, its Duration, and Stability*, the ideas therein circulating only some months prior to Burns's penning of 'Holy Willie's Prayer'. There may be a further Huttonian riff as Willie boasts of his standing in the church, although actually vaunting subliminally his sexual prowess: 'I'm here, a pillar o' thy temple/Strong as a rock.' When we begin to read some of the new geology as ironic underfelt to *A Red Rose* and *Holy Willie's Prayer*, we also retrieve the Enlightenment Burns, a facet of the poet that (wrongly) still struggles for attention under his reception as a folk-writer.

In a slightly roundabout way too, the Burns connection pertained also when Paul suckered me into doing human geography, collaborating with a PhD student of his in employing poetry to write about historical deforestation. Very enjoyably, this turned into a small interdisciplinary publication where again my knowledge of the culture surrounding Scotland's national poet was enhanced (Muller & Carruthers, 2017). William Douglas, 4th Duke of Queensberry, was vilified by several writers, including some verses long thought to be authored by Burns, for cutting down woods along the banks of the River Nith in Dumfriesshire to furnish a dowry for his daughter, the Countess of Yarmouth. On a little investigation, however, this seems unlikely since the Countess was independently very wealthy. *Verses on the Destruction of Woods near Drumlanrig* sees the narrator wandering along the river one summer morning and becoming aware of bare ground where once there were trees. He is sure of the culprit (source?):

> The worm that gnaw'd my bonie trees,
> That reptile wears a ducal crown.

What we have here, in fact, is Burns impersonation by Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831). I knew this fact, as I had co-edited an online edition of the letters of James Currie (1756–1805), Burns's first editor and biographer, in which Mackenzie writes to Currie:

> I have just learn'd by accident, that you lately received from this Country a little Poem, said to be the production of poor Burns, (to whose Memory & Compositions, as well as to his family, you have done so much Service) & to have been found by me written on a window of a Country Inn in Dumfries-Shire. I think it but Justice to you as well as Burns, to tell you candidly how the fact stands. Having occasion last year to make a Journey thro' Nithsdale accompany'd by my eldest Daughter, We could not but feel the sharpest regret, & some little resentment, at the miserable Devastation which the Banks of that beautiful River had suffered from the cutting down of the Trees with which they had been cloth'd. My daughter observ'd to me that if Burns were alive, it would afford an excellent Subject for the Feeling & Indignation of his Muse to work upon. Catching the Hint, I wrote, almost impromptu, the little Poem in question, & read it next day at a Gentleman's House where we vizited, from the penciled Copy in my Note-Book, which I pretended to have taken from the Window-Shutter of a little Inn, whence I had actually copied some other Lines of Burns' in praise of a Young Lady, published by you in the Collection of his Works. (Carruthers & Simpson, 2011)

Here, then, the powerful anti-aristocratical vein in Burns is hijacked by Mackenzie due to his political enmity for Queensberry. Such exaggeration squared with mapping findings by Thomas Muller and Paul Bishop (in Muller & Carruthers, 2017) that the supposed extent of Queensberry's felling of trees was nothing like that which had passed into both folk and literary memory following Mackenzie's 'ventriloquising' of Scotland's national bard. Here, then, is another note for the 'Spurious and Previously Attributed Work' section to my edition of the poems of Burns. The Paul Bishop effect has been very good in the life of this literary scholar.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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