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Construction of Culture: Robert Burns' Contributions to Scottish  
National Identity

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## **Abstract**

In the popular imagination, Scottish culture is frequently reduced to haggis, kilts, and bagpipes, and Scotland itself is often mistakenly viewed politically as just an extension or territory of England. After spending three months in Edinburgh on a CU study abroad program, I left with a new appreciation for Scotland and its people. Though it is only a small nation, Scotland has a distinct culture that is at times misunderstood both within the United Kingdom and abroad. With this in mind, I decided to look more closely at Scottish identity and its formation over several centuries. Robert Burns is one of the best-known figures in Scottish history, so in this thesis I focus on his poetry and examine his contributions to Scottish culture in a sociohistorical context. With reference to theories of nationalism, cultural identity, and postcolonialism, I study the manner in which Burns uses his poetry to react against the Anglicization of Scotland that had occurred in the decades after the Union of 1707. He not only highlights the problems of the post-Union shift in culture, but also endeavors to disrupt England's ongoing influence on Scotland. Burns then further seeks to reconstruct a unique Scottish identity through his romantic poetry. Burns' influence has survived through generations and, as I will show, is reflected today in the current debate concerning Scottish independence from England. It is clear that Robert Burns' efforts to construct a unique Scottish culture have endured and will continue to be influential for Scotland as the independence movement comes to the political forefront.

*For Burns exalted our race: he hallowed Scotland and the Scottish tongue...The Scottish dialect as he put it, was in danger of perishing. Burns seemed at this juncture to start to his feet and reassert Scotland's claim to national existence; his Scottish notes range through the world, and he has thus preserved the Scottish language forever—for mankind will never allow to die that idiom in which his songs and poems are enshrined. (Devine 294)*

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## Introduction: Who Was Robert Burns?

In his speech to begin the celebration of Burns Night on January 25, 2012, Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond alludes to Robert Burns' poem "A Man's a Man For A' That" (1795) as he comments on the growing debate for Scottish independence. Referring to Lord Forsyth, the former Conservative Scots Secretary, Salmond said, "I'm told there are members of the Lords who believe it is in their province to set boundaries on what Scotland can and cannot do. Perhaps they should be reminded Burns's great hymn to equality has been heard in this Parliament before" (Gardham). That same day, David Cameron, the British prime minister, also called upon Burns' poetry. Drawing attention to Salmond's reluctance to set a date for his referendum on Scottish independence, Cameron compared Salmond to Burns' description of a "wee cowering timourous beastie" in his poem "To A Mouse" (1785) (David Cameron). Why is it that these two politicians, who represent opposing sides in the debate about Scottish independence, are each invoking the eighteenth century poet Robert Burns? What relevance does the poet's legacy have for discussions of Scotland's national identity and political future some two hundred years after his death? Who was Robert Burns and why is he still celebrated today?

Robert Burns was one of the most influential representatives of Scottish nationhood in the post-Union period. Recognizing the threat of English cultural and political hegemony over Scotland, Burns hoped to combat this hegemony through a reassertion of Scottish culture. In the face of increased Anglicization in Scotland following the Union of 1707, Robert Burns used his romantic poetry to construct an image of Scotland that would dismantle Anglicized depictions of 'primitive' Scotland. Through his poetry, he extolled a proud Scottish past, wrote about the characters and concerns of the Scottish people in his own time, and imagined a future free of

English dominance. In the context of theories of nationalism, cultural identity, and the postcolonial experience, in this thesis I will examine Burns' efforts to (re)construct a Scottish identity in the post-Union period.

Though he died nearly 216 years ago, the poetry and works of Burns are still recognized around the world. Burns' Night, held on the date of his birth (January 25), is an annual celebration of Scottish national heritage and the legacy of Robert Burns. Burns' Night is an evening filled with mirth and amity where friends and family gather together to eat the Scottish national dish, haggis, and recite the poems of 'Rabbie Burns.' Following the reading of Burns' poem "Address to a Haggis," the host of the supper slices into the haggis, then toasts to the meal with a glass of scotch, and passes the meat around the table. After this traditional meal, the party honors Burns with recitations of some of his best-loved poems. To supplement the readings, orations are given regarding the life, work, and nationalism of Robert Burns. After much celebration and merriment, the (slightly weaving) host thanks his guests and the whole party sings out the evening with Burns' "Auld Lang Syne" (O'Hagan 88). Year after year, people gather to partake in this tradition in celebration of a man who spoke for both the intellectuals and peasants of late eighteenth-century Scotland.

On January 25, 1759, William Burnes and his wife Agnes Broun welcomed their first child, Robert Burns into the world. He was born in their small cottage in Alloway, South Ayrshire (Bold 3). Burns was the first of seven children born to William and Agnes. William made a living as a tenant farmer, renting land from wealthy landowners and doing his best to make a profit farming the acreage. Unfortunately, William was unsuccessful in his endeavors and died in 1784, exhausted and bankrupt (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* viii).

William Burnes supported Robert's education and sent his son to study with ministers William McGill and William Dalrymple. Additionally, Burns attended school in Ayr for a short time before his father hired a tutor, John Murdoch. Burns learned a fair amount of French as well as a smattering of Latin. He later followed in the footsteps of his mentors McGill and Dalrymple, joining the Ayr Library Society. Through this membership, Burns had access to even more educational opportunities, studying the effusive works of eighteenth-century English writers from Shakespeare to Dryden (Leask, *Pastoral* 11). In 1780, Burns co-founded the Tarbolton Bachelors Club that included five other young peasant men, looking to debate serious intellectual and Enlightenment issues. On July 4, 1781, Burns was inaugurated as a Mason into the St. James Lodge in Ayrshire, later becoming the Deputy Master of the Lodge in 1784 (Leask, *Pastoral* 12).

Though these pursuits consumed much of his time, Burns needed another source of income. Taking up his father's trade after William's death in 1784, Burns became a tenant farmer, though he was unsuccessful in the vocation. Robert also had many opportunities to seek companionship. In 1785, a young servant girl from the farm gave birth to Burns' first illegitimate child. By 1786, Burns had fallen in love with Jean Armour who gave birth to Robert's twins in September of that year. Because her father did not approve, Jean refused to marry Robert. By this time, the farm was not prospering and Burns was forced to look elsewhere to earn a living (Bold 8).

With his relationship with Jean Armour seemingly at an end and his farming career in tatters, Burns looked to immigrate to Jamaica to find work. Before leaving, however, he took one last chance to publish the poems he had been writing as sort of a hobby over the years. This volume of poems is referred to as the *Kilmarnock Volume* or *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish*

*Dialect*. This volume was so well received that Burns was able to stay in Scotland and move to Edinburgh with Jean Armour, whom he had finally married, to write more poems and songs (Bold 8-9). Following the publication of the compilation, Henry Mackenzie famously described Burns as a ‘Heaven-taught ploughman’ in *The Lounger* in December of 1786 (Leask, *Pastoral* 3). While it is true that Burns was a ploughman and farmer by trade, he was not simply ‘Heaven-taught’ (Pittock, *Scottish and Irish* 147) as we know from his education in Ayrshire. However, Burns used the nickname to his advantage and became a hero to the peasantry and educated elite alike. In Edinburgh, Burns published the Edinburgh edition of his *Poems* with more pieces added, and this remained the most influential work he published (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* xi).

In Edinburgh, Burns was able to improve his social status by joining the more genteel social groups because of his skill as a poet. Unfortunately, the farm he rented that was left under his brother’s care was still not doing well and Burns was unable to make a sufficient income from his poems. Struggling both as a farmer and a poet, Burns sought a position with the excise service in 1789, and in 1791 he moved to Dumfries. As an exciseman, Burns continued to write poems and spent a great deal of time writing and compiling songs. Burns’ songs made up large proportions of James Johnson’s *The Scots Musical Museum* (1787-1803) and the first five volumes of George Thompson’s *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice* (1793-1818) (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* ix). These collections served to make Burns even more popular in Scotland and in the international arena. On July 21, 1796, Robert Burns died at the age of 37.

Though it has been over 200 years since his death, the works and character of Robert Burns live on. Across the world, his influence can be found, though often people do not



recognize it. Every year we sing “Auld Lang Syne” to say goodbye to the trials of times past and greet the days of the future. In January, people gather to celebrate Burns’ life and works at the Burns Supper. We can even attribute some of the most influential sayings of the more recent past to the poems of Robert Burns. For example, John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* can be linked to the Burns’ poem “To a Mouse” (“The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/Gang aft a-gley, [often go awry]”) (O’Hagan 180). Burns was a peasant farmer, a Mason, a poet, a songwriter, a politician, a father, a husband, and to some a hero.

Robert Burns has clearly contributed a great deal to the literary culture of Scotland since he first began to publish his poems. While his works are still read in his memory each year and for sheer entertainment, I argue in this thesis that the significance of these poems has less to do with their aesthetic value than with their role in constructing an identity for Scotland in the post-Union period. Following the union with England in 1707, Scotland joined England to become Britain. During the Enlightenment, the ideals of freedom, liberty, knowledge, and science were held in high esteem. Although the prominence of the Scottish Enlightenment gave Scotland intellectual prestige, Scottish culture was at the same time becoming more Anglicized. The long history of division between English and Scottish culture seemed to be fading, but this also led to a fading of Scotland’s cultural autonomy.

In light of this loss of cultural autonomy, poets such as Robert Burns and t Scott worked towards maintaining and even defining a Scottish national identity. Although influenced by many of the social ideals of the Enlightenment, Robert Burns’ poetry fits into the national Romantic movement that reacted against central Enlightenment tenets. Ultimately, Burns’ poems served to construct a distinctly Scottish identity in the face of rising Anglicization in the late eighteenth century.

## The Politics of Robert Burns and His Time

During the late eighteenth century, the political climate of Scotland and England was rather complex. While the Whig and Tory parties were the most popular in England, it was the Foxites and Pitties who had more following in Scotland. These parties were certainly not distinct, however. In fact, in the early 1790s, the Whig opposition consisted of “‘ultra-conservative Northites’ as well as liberal Foxites” (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 64). Throughout the period, these names came to mean different things, such that it is difficult to narrow down a defining political angle or viewpoint for each party. There were Fox-Northites, Portland Whigs, radicals, Jacobins, Jacobites, conservatives, loyalists, Covenanters, and nationalists (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 61-64). Though the party lines seem murky, the various political stances help to show that the time period in which Burns was actively writing was an “age of enlightenment and political latitude” (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 73) that allowed for people to have a certain amount of free speech and free thought.

Perhaps because of the variety of political opinions and parties at this time, it is difficult to say precisely which party Burns identified with. Since his death, scholars have attempted to categorize him in terms of political affiliation, but nothing has really been proven. As Colin Kidd states, there is “enough in Burns’s poetry and his letters to present him as, variously, a democrat, a republican, a revolutionary, a socialist *avant la lettre*, a fervent Scottish nationalist, a loyal...Briton and an internationalist champion of the brotherhood of man” (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 61). And since the parties and their political stances changed so frequently during the period, it is even harder to judge Burns’ affiliations.

What we do know about Burns is that he saw himself as a supporter of equality, liberty, and the people. During this lenient period of time for political thought and expression in

eighteenth-century Scotland, the Declaration of Independence was signed in America on July 4, 1776. Burns was seventeen at the time, and he became a great admirer of the ideas of liberty and freedom that emerged out of this rebellion. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was surely known to Burns and the theme of freedom that came out of the work was later used in Burns' poems (Bold 112).

In addition to the politics of the Enlightenment, the effects of the Union of 1707 between England and Scotland heavily influenced Burns. This pact between Scotland and England united the two nations into what we now know to be Great Britain. Up to that point, Scotland and England had been governed separately by their own parliaments. For England, the Union had many advantages. More people meant more taxes, which would help to pay down the large debt England had incurred during the Spanish Succession War (Devine 20). Additionally, the warring nature of many of the Scottish Highland clans would help to create a larger and more skilled fighting force for Great Britain, though this was not necessarily thought about at the time of the Union (Devine 626). Because Scotland had a strong trade base in the American colonies, especially with Virginia, England also hoped that the Union would increase transatlantic trade. One last advantage that can be mentioned is that through the Union, England would have greater power over a group of people known as the Jacobites who may have been a serious threat to them. In a time when Jacobitism (which largely focused on the restoration of the Stuarts to power) was deeply ingrained in the Scottish population, England was right to worry about rebellion against them in order to transfer power back to the old family (Devine 17).

While the Union appeared to be of great benefit to England, the Scottish population was deeply divided on the issue. For the elite classes of Scotland, especially those already participating in politics, the Union provided greater opportunities for socioeconomic influence

and prestige. For Scottish parliamentarians, “economic imperatives were the focus, as crop failures, famine and a disastrous colonial initiative (the Darien venture) left the country struggling in the 1690s” (Beland and Lecours 97). In addition, the British Empire represented a source of pride and political and economic opportunities for the politicians. Added prestige, new land, new markets, and further confrontation with France (the historical nemesis of Scotland) provided great incentive for the Scottish elite (Beland and Lecours 104).

For the masses, however, the Union meant paying higher taxes, still not having a chance to vote, fear for the loss of the Scottish Protestant tradition, and a loss of hope for supporters of the Jacobite cause. Overall, the Scots believed they would be marginalized and taken advantage of (Devine 8-20). Some say the Union was a ‘marriage of convenience,’ while others say it was an illegitimate decision, since it was not supported by the people, but made by only a small group of elites who may have benefited financially (Beland and Lecours 98). Despite the disapproval of the masses, however, the Union of 1707 was signed by the parliaments of England and Scotland, thereby abolishing the two separate parliaments and creating the British or Westminster Parliament, based in London. The political leaders of Scotland went to London, leaving the social aspects of Scotland to be run largely by the Church, or Kirk.

Nevertheless, by the 1720s the Scots were virtually governing themselves as a semi-independent nation. Under the Union, “component territories and populations are allowed to maintain their distinct laws, customs, and culture. The British state incorporated component units, over time and tolerated the notion that they could retain or develop, as well as express, nationhood” (Beland and Lecours 99). Even with parliamentary representation located in London, the representatives had worked to ensure that the legal and social institutions from the pre-1707 period remained intact. Post-Union autonomy rested on the Kirk, Scottish education

system, Scots law, and institutions/advisory boards (Beland and Lecours 100-101). While Edinburgh had lost its parliament, it had retained such institutions as the Board of Excise, the Scottish Courts of Justiciary, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and the Scottish Board of Burghs, among others (Devine 23-24). Because Scotland had been largely unregulated by England after the Union, it was possible for the two nations to live in conjunction with each other relatively peacefully. By the eighteenth century, some tensions remained, as a few Jacobites still harbored anger and resentment toward the Union and the monarch, but generally, the Scots had accepted the Union and the political parties were all Unionist (Beland and Lecours 104).

### **Burns on the Political and Social Implications of the Union**

The Union of 1707 was a topic on which Robert Burns wrote many poems. Because the Acts of Union had occurred several decades before Burns began writing his poems, some scholars argue that “Burns lived in an overwhelmingly unionist culture, in which Scottish nationalism was virtually a dead letter” (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 70). Although there were some frustrations with regard to how the Union had been passed, achieving Scottish independence was not a key focus at the time. Since the Scots had a great deal of both political and cultural autonomy under the Westminster Parliament, why, then, was Burns fighting so hard to establish and maintain a distinct Scottish identity? Through his poetry and other writings, Burns served as a catalyst for understanding the impact of the Union on the Scottish cultural identity.

In his assessment of the Union's impact, he was influenced by the events of the American Revolution. A child of the Enlightenment, Burns held the values of liberty and equality in high regard. In his "Ode for General Washington's Birthday" also known as "Libertie—A Vision," Burns writes:

'Tis liberty's bold note I swell;  
 Thy harp, Columbia, let me take!

See gathering thousands, while I sing;  
 A broken chain exulting bring,  
 And dash it in a tyrant's face!  
 And dare him to his very beard,  
 And tell him he no more is feared,  
 No more the despot of Columbia's race!  
 A tyrant's proudest insults braved,  
 They shout, a people freed; they hail an empire saved!

(Robertson 261)

America had broken free of the chains of English tyranny, a fact that Burns celebrated. For him, "The American slogan 'No Taxation without Representation' had relevance for the mother country, whose unrepresentative political systems was increasingly called into question" (Dawson 59). As previously mentioned, many Scottish citizens believed that the representatives supposedly serving their interests in Westminster were focused more on their own wealth and status than the good of Scotland's masses. Indeed, whereas before they had had their own parliament in Edinburgh, the Scots now made up only a small minority of representatives in London (Beland and Lecours 99). In view of both Scotland's lack of influence on the decisions of the empire and the British Parliament's focus on the elite rather than the provincial constituency, it is understandable that Burns would question the benefits of the Unionist

government. “Its defenders argued that the system did effectively represent the leading ‘interests’ of the nation, rather than individual voters of constituencies. But it was undeniable that it favored the aristocratic landed interest to the detriment of the rising commercial, financial and industrial interests.” (Dawson 59)

In addition to decrying the British government’s failure to respond to the needs of the Scottish peasantry, Burns was concerned about the sanctity of individual rights in Britain during the late eighteenth century. After losing America to the Revolutionaries, England knew the price of too much freedom. Moreover, the danger of outright rebellion was apparent to the government because the French Revolution was well underway on the continent. As a result of this fear, “The net of suspicion and paranoia enveloped even respectable opponents of the government, as some among the poets were to find. In 1792 Robert Burns’ gift of artillery to the French National Convention led to an investigation by his superiors in the Excise” (Dawson 61).

The atmosphere of suspicion soon infected the rights of individuals. In 1793-94, many reformers were tried in Scotland and given fourteen-year sentences and often, were transported to Botony Bay in Australia. These “events probably lie behind Burns’s anthem to ‘the cause of TRUTH and Liberty,’ ‘Scots wha hae wi’ Wallace bled’” (Burns, *Letters* II:235-6; Dawson 62). This culminated in the “suspension of *habeas corpus* between 1794 and 1801” and in 1817 and 1818 many suspected radicals were arrested (Dawson 62). Burns was frustrated with the strain on individual rights under the British Parliament. Having been influenced by revolutionary texts such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, it is no wonder that he questioned the power of the British government.

After nearly a century of life in the Union, Scotland had undergone a fair amount of Anglicization. As previously mentioned, the elites of Scotland had mostly moved to London

where there was easy access to new markets, land, and social circles as well as greater access to prestige (Beland and Lecours 104). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin explore England's influence on the cultures of the nations in its empire in the book *The Empire Writes Back*. Although Scotland was brought into the Empire through the Union rather than being conquered and colonized like India, for example, Scotland faced a similar loss of identity upon joining the Empire. Put succinctly, the growth of the English empire "leads to the naturalizing of constructed values (e.g. civilization, humanity, etc.) which, conversely, established 'savagery,' 'native,' 'primitive,' as their antithesis and as the object of a reforming zeal" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 3). Scotland and its people were seen as primitive and backwards compared to the more civilized populations of modern cities, such as London. A prime example of this characterization can be found in Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, where the word "oats" is defined as "A grain, which in England is generally given to horses; but in Scotland supports the people" (Johnson 498). The Scottish elites found more value in being part of English society, and so the traditional images of Scotland such as the tartan clad Highlander and the provincial cottars were associated with being primitive and outdated, rather than progressive and enlightened.

This shift is referred to as "*cultural denigration*, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 9). The concept of cultural denigration can be understood by considering that Scotland was generally thought of and referred to as "North England," a designation that Burns resented. As Bold writes, "Burns was a Scottish patriot who bitterly regretted the loss of Scottish independence that resulted from the parliamentary union of 1707... The notion of Scotland reduced to the regional status of North Britain disturbed him" (102).



Together with the lack of attention to the needs of the Scottish masses and the preference for the desires of the elite, the constriction of individual freedom under the Westminster Parliament frustrated Burns. Added to these political issues was the loss of culture in the face of Anglicization. With these concerns in mind, Burns set to work to recreate a unique Scottish identity through his poetry.

### **Construction of a National Identity**

Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* addresses the issue of constructing a national identity. First, Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). The nation or community is imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). This is the case in Scotland, where people take pride in the Scottish identity and heritage, yet obviously no one individual can know every other Scotsman. Through the imagined community, there is a conception of "comradeship" and "fraternity" that links these strangers.

When we turn to the later portion of Anderson's definition, however, we run into problems with regard to Scotland. An imagined community, Anderson explains, is "*limited* because even the largest of them...has finite, if elastic, boundaries" and is "*sovereign*" because the concept came to being during the period of Enlightenment and Revolution when "nations dream of being free" from the control of other nations (7). For Scotland, this concept of a nation beyond traditional geographic boundaries presents a problem. Clearly Scotland was (and is) not

completely sovereign from England, as the nations were united in 1707 and are controlled by the same parliament housed in London, though since 1998 Scotland has again had its own parliament, with limited powers, in Edinburgh—a development that will be examined in the conclusion to this thesis. While there is a geographic border between England and Scotland, this border grew increasingly porous during the late eighteenth century. “Scottish politicians came south to legislate, and Scottish businessmen had open access to London’s markets. In effect...*there were no barricades* on all these pilgrims’ paths towards the centre” (Anderson 90). Tom Nairn adds that a “massive intellectual migration” southwards from Scotland to London was taking place from the mid-eighteenth century on (123). Many of the most influential figures of Scottish politics and society were migrating towards the urban centers of England, taking with them a great deal of Scottish culture.

It is in reaction to this loss of Scottish identity that Burns begins to (re)construct the Scottish national character through his poems. By constructing a strong Scottish identity, Burns fights against what Anderson refers to as the “fatality” of a culture. Anderson points out that through the use of vernacular, a sort of “linguistic-nationalism” (42) is created. Also, “the cultural products of nationalism—poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts” (Anderson 141) and rhetoric are key components to the creation of unity in an imagined community.

Additionally, as Murray Pittock writes, Enlightenment values “stress the application of reason to knowledge (acknowledging the Humean arguments that cite the role of imagination and passion in knowledge), stadial development, technological progress, standardized language and shared British norms of civility” (*Edinburgh Companion* 7). Emerging from the Enlightenment is a desire by the Scottish elites for Scotland to leave its allegedly backwards and provincial past behind and shift towards a more civilized, English model of society.

This shift toward civility is seen in Scottish post-Union writing. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin explain, the experience of empire continues to “dominate culture production” in the post-colonial world “through the literary canon, the body of British texts which all too frequently still acts as a touchstone of taste and value, and through RS-English (Received Standard English), which asserts the English of south-east England as a universal norm” (6-7). Language “becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth,’ ‘order,’ and ‘reality’ become established” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 7).

While English is the national language of both Scotland and England, it is important to note there is a difference between the Scottish dialect and the dialect recognized as ‘correct’ in England, Received Standard English (RSE). In fact, the Scottish dialect should be recognized as an essential element of Scottish culture and heritage. Scots dialect was not only characteristic of rural farmers, but also of many of the greatest elites in the country (Devine 30). Ultimately, Scots is a dialect of English; however, the dialect is distinct enough from the mother tongue that it can be recognized as belonging specifically to Scotland and not any other region. While the Scots dialect is important to the history of the nation, with the growing Anglicization of the elites, RSE became the dominant form of English for the literati of the Empire. Put another way, “During the imperial period writing in the language of the imperial centre is inevitable, of course, produced by a literate elite whose primary identification is with the colonizing power...emphasizing the ‘home’ over the ‘native,’ the ‘metropolitan’ over the ‘provincial’ or ‘colonial’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 5).

The result of this shift to the modern, Anglicization of language, is what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to as “cultural hegemony”: “This cultural hegemony has been

maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes to post-colonial literatures which identify them as isolated national off-shoots of English literature, and which therefore relegate them to marginal and subordinate positions” (7). The literati of the British Empire are critical of provincial, seemingly uneducated vernaculars like Scots English and so this dialect is seen as inferior. In the end, the Scottish dialect is as marginalized as the Scottish nation that is relegated to the position of “North England.”

In light of these issues, it is no wonder that Burns feared the loss of a unique Scottish identity. His use of vernacular creates a sense of “linguistic-nationalism” in an attempt to fight the increased Anglicization of the literati of the British Empire. In doing so, he combines the concepts of mimicry and mockery to bring about an awareness of Anglicization. By calling forth the memory of Scotland’s past glory, Burns dismantles the Anglicized nature of eighteenth century Scottish culture and attempts to reconstruct the Scottish national character through his Romantic poetry.

### **Linguistic Nationalism and Mimicry**

One of the aspects of Burns’ work that was heavily criticized after his death by both English and Scottish literati was his use of the vernacular rather than RSE. As previously mentioned, in the British Empire, RSE represented power and prestige, especially for colonized nations under English rule. While Scotland was not technically a colony, we can see the same shift to RSE there that was seen in other nations. The Scottish elites conducting business in the markets or in parliament gradually shifted to a more Anglicized form of English, even when they still took pride in their Scots dialect overall (Devine 30).

Anderson comments on how it is possible to participate in “linguistic-nationalism” (42). This process relates to the ideas that languages are the property of specific groups of speakers and readers who imagine themselves as a community that is entitled to autonomy and equality (Anderson 84). Arguably, the Scottish dialect of English does belong to the Scottish people and it does create an imagined community that unites its speakers. In the face of Anglicization, it is true that Scots was falling victim to the change towards RSE.

As previously mentioned, the literati of the period often believed that the Scots dialect reflected a more ‘primitive’ and ‘native’ culture as compared to a higher form of English that was more ‘metropolitan’ and ‘modern’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 5). This tension between the two forms of English parallels the struggle between Scottish and English culture that Burns is dealing with. For him, Scotland is losing its identity to Anglicization, just as the Scottish dialect is being taken over by RSE. Anderson further develops this concept as follows:

While it is essential to keep in mind an idea of fatality, in the sense of a *general* condition of irremediable linguistic diversity, it would be a mistake to equate this fatality with that common element in nationalist ideologies which stresses the primordial fatality of *particular* languages and their association with *particular* territorial units. The essential thing is the *interplay* between fatality, technology, and capitalism. (43)

It is not enough to say that one language can cause the destruction of another. It is important to understand how environmental factors such as trade, technology, and migration contribute to this shift in language. In the case of Scotland, the period of Enlightenment certainly strives towards new technologies, migration of the elite to London, and more markets to trade in. As a result, the Scottish language is marginalized in favor of RSE.

Here, we ought to consider the concept of mimicry in nation-building. The shift of language in Scotland is an example of “a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 4). Mimicry can be seen as embodying the new culture in order to gain the prestige that seems to go with being the dominant nation. While mimicry can thus be understood as an attempt to ‘improve,’ it can also be understood as an attempt to resist the loss of language by the subordinate nation. In a sense, mimicry can actually be a sort of mockery in that it also calls attention to the fact that this form of language or literature is not the native form (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 38). In essence, mimicry is both a way to regulate language as well as to mock the supposedly superior form.

Ultimately, mimicry represents the greater issue of authority between empires and their colonies. Homi Bhabha explains:

Mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire. It is the process of the fixation of the colonial as a form of cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge within an interdictory discourse, and therefore necessarily raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations, a question of authority that goes beyond the subject's lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an object of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation. (85-92)

In other words, mimicry is indicative of the struggle for acceptance and equality by the marginalized nation. It suggests and even enforces the idea that one language is better or more prestigious than another, thereby relegating the other language to being ‘primitive.’

The shift of language from traditional Scots dialect to Anglicized English in Scotland is therefore problematic for Burns, who fears for the destruction of the Scottish identity of which

the Scots dialect is a key aspect. To combat this issue, Burns writes many, if not most, of his poems in Scots, as has been illustrated in poems previously mentioned as well as those that follow. In doing so, Burns enacts “the abrogation or denial of the privilege of ‘English’” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 38) to reject power of metropolitan communities over language. To defy the supposed authority of RSE over the Scots dialect, Burns writes some poems entirely in Scots. In order to reach a larger audience, however, he also wrote many pieces with a hybridized version of RSE and Scots to allow for more readers to understand his poetry. This form of ‘code-switching’ reflects the “syncretic and hybridized nature of post-colonial experience [and] refutes the privileged position of a standard code in the language and any monocentric view of human experience” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 51). Clearly, by using Scots dialect in his pieces, Burns constructs a community and a national identity for Scotland that can be shared by his readers and countrymen.

### **Remembering the Past: A Deconstruction of Anglicized Scotland**

Scotland was in a period of political and social flux when Burns was writing his poetry. Although most Scots had generally accepted the Union, the Scottish past still exerted considerable influence on poets such as Burns. Following the failed Jacobite uprising of 1745, several laws were put in place to prevent such rebellious behavior from occurring in the future. For example, traditional Highland dress, signified by the tartan, was banned under the 1746 Dress Act. Additionally, the Disarming Act strengthened previous legislation against carrying weapons and the abolition of heritable jurisdictions and military land tenures served to curtail the power of clan chiefs (Devine 46).

In addition to these historical events that remained on the minds of some Scots, such as Burns, the Scottish also faced political problems. The Earl of Bute, Britain's first Scottish prime minister (1762-1763), was hated by many fellow (English) politicians and "was popularly believed to give clannish preferment to his own countrymen" in a time when "Scots were depicted by the English press as ravenous Highland beggars or as greedy careerists, flooding and devouring England" (Trumpener 76). Other well-known Scots, including David Hume and James Boswell, faced similar discrimination as a result of their Scottish heritage (Devine 27). As Katie Trumpener succinctly puts it, "If the immediate political consequences of conquest were a loss of sovereignty and a loss of national pride, the long-term cultural consequences were even more damaging: threats to the historical record and to the national sense of history, the determined undermining of cultural traditions, the erosion of language, and the gradual loss of national identity" (27).

Through his Romantic poetry featuring the Scots dialect, Burns criticizes the loss of Scottish culture and tears down the Anglicized nature of Scotland before constructing a new identity for the nation. In his poem "Scots Wha Hae" or "Robert Bruce's March on Bannockburn," Burns reminds his audience of the past glory of Scotland and demands that the essence of the Scots be fought for:

"Scots Wha Hae" or "Robert Bruce's March on Bannockburn"

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,  
 Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
 Welcome to your gory bed,  
 Or to victorie.



Now's the day, and now's the hour;  
 See the front o' battle lour;  
 See approach proud Edward's power,  
 Chains and Slaverie.

Wha will be a traitor-knave?  
 Wha can fill a coward's grave?  
 Wha sae base as be a Slave?  
 Let him turn and flie:

Wha for Scotland's king and law,  
 Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
 Free-man stand, or Free-man fa'  
 Let him follow me.

By Oppression's woes and pains!  
 By your Sons in servile chains!  
 We will drain our dearest veins,  
 But they shall be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!  
 Tyrants fall in every foe!  
 Liberty's in every blow!  
 Let us Do—or Die!!! (O'Hagan 187)

Written as if the speaker is going to battle with Bruce and Wallace in the 1300s, Burns' 1793 poem "Scots Wha Hae" comments on the condition of Scottish independence in Burns' time. By the late 1700s, the radical reactions of the French Revolution in addition to the American Declaration of Independence had made England wary of too much liberty and radical thought. Scottish radicals such as Thomas Muir and Thomas Palmer were being arrested and

exiled for writing and printing radical ideas, so writing about the Scottish fight for independence would very well have caused trouble for Burns (and he was indeed under investigation for being a radical in 1792 and 1793). Burns was forced to be more careful about his work. He wrote several pro-British poems to show his loyalty, though he still most likely continued his support of radical ideas and continued to write revolutionary poems anonymously and under pseudonyms (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 72).

It was very soon after the arrest of Muir that Burns first showed “Scots Wha Hae” to a friend. In the letter accompanying the poem Burns refers to “that glorious struggle for Freedom, associated with the glowing ideas of some other struggles of the same nature, not quite so ancient” (Bold 105). Clearly Burns felt that the struggle for an independent and unique Scottish identity was still an issue.

Looking at the poem, we can see that Burns views the loss of independence resulting from the Union of 1707 as a form of cultural and political enslavement. To begin, Burns invokes the heroes of the Scottish wars for independence to gain the sympathy of his readers and to remind them of the past strength of Scotland. The first stanza seems to be the beginning of a battle cry, used to kindle the fire of glory and honor in the hearts of the Scottish readers:

Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled,  
 Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
 Welcome to your gory bed,  
 Or to victorie.

Reading these lines historically, Burns is calling to the clansmen going into battle at Bannockburn, a battle fought near Stirling in 1314. This battle was one of the most important and decisive battles in the Scottish Wars for Independence, ending the First War for

Independence with a Scottish victory. With this great and glorious history behind the call, readers in Burns' time would surely have been excited by the proud *Scottish* moment in time. Just as this opening would have been used to rouse troops in the 1300s, Burns uses it to enliven his eighteenth-century audience.

Continuing his battle cry, Burns comments on what he sees as Scotland's slavery to England. When we consider the historical side of this next stanza, the reader can "See the front o' battle lour." It is not hard to imagine a crowd of kilted Scotsmen facing the approach of the English troops under "proud Edward's power." Scottish people reading this poem in the eighteenth century would recall the historical moment when Edward II and his troops came upon the southern road to Stirling only to find it blocked by King Robert the Bruce's troops. The clansmen were fighting not only a physical army that June, but also the "Chains and Slaverie" that would come with the failure to prevail over the English army. For Burns, Scotsmen watching as parliament signed the Union were in a sense reliving the battle fought in Stirling nearly 400 years earlier. And in his own time, Burns was watching the chains of Anglicization wrap around Scotland. The power of England, just like "proud Edward's power," meant "Chains and Slaverie" that would take away Scottish independence and identity. While the Scotsmen in 1314 were able to fight off the English, the "traitor-knave[s]" and "coward[s]" who signed the Union of 1707, in essence, caused Scotland to lose itself.

Clearly, ideas of liberty and freedom that were bubbling forth from the American and French revolutions were presenting a new battle. Intellectual freedom and liberty from despotism were in the balances and while other nations were taking the challenge head on, it seems that Burns was calling the Scottish public to arms as well. For him, a new war for independence, freedom, and identity was on the rise and the failure to win this battle would result

in continued fealty to English culture. Burns asks the reader, “What sae base as be a Slave?” In his eyes, being a slave to English culture and losing the Scottish identity that had once been so glorious was truly base, as opposed to the ‘primitive’ and ‘backwards’ stereotypes that were placed on Scotland.

Burns continues the call to arms, explicitly bringing in the idea of fighting for freedom. Historically, the speaker claims that “Freedom’s sword will strongly draw” to save “Scotland’s king and law,” presumably from domination by the English. But whether the “Free-man stand, or Free-man fa” the free man is extolled to follow the speaker. In the context of the battle and considering the title of the poem, it makes sense that Robert Bruce would be the speaker, calling his men to fight for the freedom of their nation. Turning to the application of this poem with regard to the Union of 1707, Burns is calling his fellow Scotsman to join with “Freedom’s sword” in claiming the liberty of “Scotland’s king and law,” rather than allowing the weak parliament members to give up the hard-fought freedom of Scotland. In Burns’ time, Scottish identity is falling to the forces of Anglicization and while he does not explicitly call for freedom from English rule, Burns certainly seeks to rekindle a uniquely Scottish identity. Burns uses his pen to fight for Scotland just as Bruce used his steel sword in the 1300s, whereas the politicians of the early 1700s failed to defend the nation.

As the poem continues, so does Burns’ yearning for freedom from English hegemony over Scotland:

By Oppression’s woes and pains!  
 By your Sons in servile chains!  
 We will drain our dearest veins,  
 But they *shall* be free!

Burns describes the “woes and pains” of “Oppression.” In the context of Bruce’s time, the clansmen fighting the English were fighting against the “servile chains” of England. In considering the future of their sons, the Scotsmen were fighting not only for their own freedom, but for the independence of their nation for generations to come. This speech demands that the fighters give their lives and “drain our dearest veins” for the sons of the nation to be free. Four hundred years later the Union of 1707 would be signed, taking away the independence of Scotland. Although overtly political, Burns’ message is also cultural: he in effect argues against the “woes and pains” of Anglicization, calling for the reestablishment of Scottish culture and exhorting his fellow Scots to “Lay the proud Usurpers low,” the usurpers of Scottish identity. In saying “Let us Do—or Die,” he argues that the Scots must retain their culture and defend themselves against Anglicization.

“Scots Wha Hae” is important to meeting Burns’ goal of reconstructing the Scottish identity. By reminding his fellow Scots of the history of glory and struggle, he fills the reader with pride for the Scottish nation and all it has fought for. Figures like Robert Bruce and William Wallace are seen as heroes in the memory of the nation. The memory of these figures ignites a passion within the Scottish reader that is unique to the character of Scotland. After thus grabbing the attention and heart of the reader, Burns then brings the audience through the history of struggle from the Wars of Independence to the loss of Scottish sovereignty in 1707 and finally to the struggle against English cultural and political hegemony in the eighteenth century. Burns’ romantic poetry serves in this way to rebuild a Scottish identity.

## Romanticism in Scotland

Two major movements existed at the time Burns was writing. The first of these was, of course, the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on scientific and social progress, and which in Scotland shares the same focus on freedom and equality that emerges in revolutionary America and France. Romanticism, in contrast, is more focused on the individual and on the preservation of a nation's cultural heritage. Pittock explains:

Romanticism can be seen as reinscribing the importance of the primitive and isolated person, the solitary figure of genius whose insights, acquired apart from the bustle of cities and commercial modernity placed him or her beyond the reach of sociability and civility, with their numerous, distracting and shallow associations or news, gossip and daily interchange. (*Edinburgh Companion* 7)

Whereas the Enlightenment is generally concerned with progress, Romantic poets tend to want to retain the traditional aspects of a culture.

Although it might seem as if the Enlightenment and Romanticism are in complete opposition, this is not the case. In fact, “the Enlightenment and Romanticism are... inextricably intertwined in Scottish Romanticism” (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 8). While the Enlightenment is certainly focused on progress and innovation, Romanticism can be seen as “collecting the members of the path of reason” with the goal of “knowing the light through knowing the dark and the present by means of the past” (Brown 51). Ultimately, both are “concerned with nation-building [and] national myth” (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 8).

Romanticism typically emphasizes the importance of the independent, “natural” man who remains outside of the metropolitan environment. While there are many different theories and criticisms of Romanticism (Hogle 1), there are a few aspects of the genre that scholars generally

agree on. In addition to being concerned with the isolated man, Romantic works are associated with nature and the imagination:

It has thus seemed proper to connect “Romantic” with William Wordsworth’s claim in a revision of his preface to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*—for many the collection that launched British Romanticism—that these poems... take “incidents and situations” based in “common life,” including a revived “nature,” and “throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things” are “presented to the mind in [such] an unusual aspect” that readers can now “trace” in them “the primary laws of our nature...the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.” (Hogle 1)

As T. M. Devine observes, the Romantics “caught an intellectual and spiritual mood at a time when massive economic, social and political change...saw ‘primitive’ societies possessing virtues that ‘modern’ societies had lost” (242).

In addition to these aspects of Romanticism, Murray Pittock adds five other characteristics that are indicative of the genre in Scotland. First, the presence and development of a separate public sphere in Scotland allowed Romanticism to progress, despite Scotland’s loss of sovereignty following the Union. Together with the agricultural and economic conditions of the nation, this led to more people moving from a career in farming to one in the professional sphere, and ultimately to an environment of strong political, philosophical, and scholarly growth (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 3).

The second aspect of Scottish culture defined by Pittock as contributory to the development of Romanticism is the use of genre to establish a distinctive identity, or selfhood (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 3). Various writers used influences from British, Latin, and other genres to create a distinctly Scottish form. Burns contributed to this creation by using different dialects of Scots to imbue his poems with various layers of meaning.

Closely related to the unique usage of genre, Pittock also points to the use of both Scottish and Anglicized vernacular to counter the trend of Enlightenment writing towards a more English rather than Scottish culture (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 4). This idea falls in line with those of linguistic nationalism and mimicry that were previously discussed.

The fight for a national identity is further evidenced by Pittock's fourth characteristic of Romanticism, the "taxonomy of glory" (*Edinburgh Companion* 5). The taxonomy of glory is defined as "the symbolic organization of images and tropes (e.g. those connected with bards and the bardic) into a reading of a glorious past" (Pittock, *Edinburgh Companion* 4). The references to Robert Bruce in the poem "Scots Wha Hae" are good examples of this. By linking his poetry to figures and events of the past, poets such as Burns are able to tap into and promote a feeling of national pride in the reader. He refers to the past in a way that reflects the struggles of the late eighteenth century, and thus makes a political and social claim about the present state of Scotland.

The final element that distinguishes Scottish Romanticism is the appearance of the Scottish self in an international forum. Pittock defines "the performance of the self in diaspora" as "the distinctive presence of national and associational Scottish culture internationally, and the continuation and development of the networks that sustain it" (*Edinburgh Companion* 5). For a comprehensive national identity to exist, Pittock argues, the identity must be recognized as unique on an international scale, not just within its own nation. In view of the prevalence of Burns' poetry in the global community, it is fair to say that the Scottish culture that Burns created through his poetry does indeed contribute to a greater Scottish national identity that is recognized outside of Scotland.



Before we analyze Burns' romanticism in greater detail, it is important to note that one of the most influential works of the Scottish Romantic Movement and on Burns as a poet (Stafford 37) was James Macpherson's *Ossian* (1760). The collection was supposedly made up of several fragments from ancient Celtic poetry that had been passed through the Gaelic and Scottish traditions through oral storytelling before being written down following the telling of the tales by a blind poet named Ossian (Trumpener 27). Macpherson uses Ossian and Ossian's culture to reflect the nature of Scottish culture in the mid-eighteenth century. There was some debate even early on as to whether the poems were indeed authentic or the creations of Macpherson himself. Following his death in 1796, the authenticity of the collection was researched and by 1805 a report was published confirming that the poems were faked, a fact that deeply harmed the reputation of the poet and the work he had done until the 1980s (Stafford 28-29).

While the poems were not recorded from a blind poet named Ossian who was the last of his people, they were still powerful works for both the poets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as for scholars today. At various times since the first publication of *Ossian* in 1760 and the publications that included the key pieces *Fingal* and *Temora*, the collection has been characterized as "a 'restoration' through which 'the antique spirit' could breathe 'enduring life,'" "a tribute to a devastated community," "the voice of an oppressed people," a call to "rescue the remains of Gaelic culture from the rapid erasure of the distinctive features of Highland life" and so on (Stafford 29-33). Overall, the work used imagery of the past to remind his audience of what they had lost in the face of progress.

It is clear that there are several connections between *Ossian* and Burns' goals and poetry. Like Macpherson, Burns strives to retain the Scottish culture that he feels is being lost to Anglicization. Just as "the desolation and hopelessness of his historic situation animate Ossian's

complaint and memories” (Trumpener 76), Burns, too, seeks to regain what has been lost. Ossian and Burns are both “Left in a present that is empty” and each “re-creates a mental landscape of memory and voice, a past composed of” works of poetry and song (Trumpener 76). Both Macpherson, through Ossian, and Burns clearly seek to remember the past glory of their cultures and they both use Romantic poetry to accomplish this goal. They use nature and history to recreate a national identity to combat the repression of Anglicization.

### **Burns’ Romanticism**

Burns’ poem “The Jolly Beggars,” written in 1785, illustrates the imagination and reflection on the common man that characterize Romanticism in Scotland. This cantata written in the Scots dialect features the stories of life and loss of several individuals gathered in a pub:

Ae night at e’en a merry core  
 O’randie gangrel bodies  
 In Poosie Nansie’s held the splore,  
 To drink their orra duddies.  
 Wi’ quaffing and laughing,  
 They ranted and they sang;  
 Wi’ jumping and thumping the very girdle rang. (Robertson 7)

This pub is depicted as the center of gathering and storytelling, a place where people can drink, dance, sing, and commiserate, thereby maintaining and spreading culture and tradition. Gathered in the place are several ‘beggars,’ each with his or her story to tell about their lives. First, there is the crippled old man, who tells of his life as an apprentice who then went to war for “my country.” There he lost his two limbs, fighting for his nation.

And now tho’ I must beg, with a wooded arm and leg,

And many a tattere'd rag hanging over my bum,  
 I'm as happy with my wallet, my bottle, and my callet,  
 As when I used in scarlet to follow the drum. (Robertson 8)

Even without his limbs, the old cripple takes pride in the nation he once fought for and is happy in the life he leads, even as a poor beggar.

Similarly, the woman who gave up her “sodger laddie” (Robertson 8) claims:

And now I have liv'd—I know not how long,  
 And still I can join in a cup or a song;  
 But whilst with both hands I can hold the glass steady,  
 Here's to thee my hero, my sodger laddie! (Robertson 9)

Here we see the beginning of the stories of memories and lost love. After reminiscing about her soldier love, she raises her glass to the brave man she lost. Though the woman has reached a point of experience and understanding of the choices she made and their consequences, she still remembers the past and how she came to hold the knowledge of the present. The fool, the fiddler, the soldier and the bard share similar stories of the love they have lost and the lessons they have learned (Robertson 10-18).

The story of the widow who lost her “Highland laddie” shows several characteristics of Romanticism and national identity:

Wi' sighs and sobs, she thus began  
 To wail her braw John Highlandman:—

A Highland lad my love was born,  
 The Lawlan' laws he held in scorn;  
 But he still was faithfu' to his clan,  
 My gallant braw John Highlandman.

## CHORUS

Sing hey, my braw John Highlandman!  
Sing ho, my braw John Highlandman!  
There's no a lad in a' the lan'  
Was match for my John Highlandman.

With his philibag an' tartan plaid,  
And gude claymore down by his side,  
The ladies; hearts he did trepan,  
My gallant braw John Highlandman.

We ranged a' from Tweed to Spey,  
And lived like lords and ladies gay;  
For a Lawlan' face he feared nane,  
My Gallant braw John Highlandman.

They banish'd him beyond the sea;  
But ere the bud was on the tree,  
Adown my cheeks the pearls ran,  
Embracing my John Highlandman.

But oh! They catch'd him at the last,  
And bound him in the dungeon fast;  
My curse upon them every one!  
They've hang'd my braw John Highlandman.

And now a widow I must mourn  
The pleasures that will ne'er return;  
No comfort but a hearty can,  
When I think on John Highlandman. (Robertson 10-11)

In this excerpt, Burns uses several images to invoke the memory of the glory of Scotland for his reader. A prime example is the reference to the Highlandman “With his philibag an’ tartan plaid,/And gude claymore down by his side.” After the banning of the tartan in the 1740s, the pattern was seen as a sign of rebellion and primitive society (Devine 46). For Burns however, the tartan is a key piece of the Scottish identity. He incorporates the imagery along with the “gallant Highlandman” who fears no one to shift the connotation of tartan from one of rebellion to one of pride and history for the Scots. Here is another example of Pittock’s ‘taxonomy of glory’—as in “Scots Wha Hae,” Burns connects his Scottish readers to their past and rekindles the pride in their nation that is being lost to Anglicization.

The depiction of the “gallant Highlandman” making his way across Scotland “from Tweed to Spey” is indicative of Romanticism. The excerpt highlights the life of the rugged individual and recalls the image of the glorious, independent Scotsman, fighting against oppression. Burns thus brings the reader back to the past and paints the scene of the Romantic Highlander trying to lead a simple life despite the reigns of the Lowland laws.

The story of the resilient Highlander, fighting against the “Lawlan’ laws,” serves multiple purposes for Burns. First, it brings to mind the history of Jacobitism and the will of the Highlander to resist the Union of 1707, even forty years after its signing. Additionally, if we look literally and geographically at the description of the “Lawlan” being the enemy of this man, we think of the location of England in relation to Scotland. By considering that England is the ‘lowland’ to Scotland (again, recalling that Scotland is referred to at this time as “North England”), it seems that Burns is calling to mind more than just Jacobitism. He is not only calling attention to the long history of struggle between England and Scotland, including the

battles for independence fought by Bruce and Wallace, but likely also criticizing English cultural dominance of Scotland in the late eighteenth century.

Indeed, Burns seems to issue a warning when the widow comments:

And now a widow I must mourn  
The pleasures that will ne'er return;  
No comfort but a hearty can,  
When I think on John Highlandman. (Robertson 11)

In the face of Anglicization, the Scots may become the “widow,” mourning the loss of the Scottish identity that may never return. Ultimately, it is clear that Burns is attempting to reconstruct the Scottish identity and create what Anderson refers to as an ‘imagined community’ of people sharing the same culture and history through both imagined scenes and the Scots dialect.

In “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” Burns constructs an image of the ‘primitive’ Scottish identity. The poem describes a part of the life of the Scottish cotter. Cotters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were usually Lowland agricultural laborers (often families) who ‘rented’ land from tenants of large estates and worked the property, sometimes paying a small rental amount to the tenant, but generally working the land for their keep. This workforce made up a majority of the population in most rural regions (Devine 130). During this time, landowners focused on the development of more efficient ways of agricultural production and often the use of technology, consistent with the ideals of progress and science in the Enlightenment (Devine 131). Unfortunately for the cotters, the methods of production they used were most often the traditional forms of labor that had been part of Scottish culture for generations. Tenants and landowners viewed the practices of cotters as “inefficient, wasteful of land, and incapable of reform” and possibly unable to meet the demand of the growing urban and industrialized

populations in the cities without the use of new technologies that the cotters could not afford (Devine 132). As a result, the cotters were systematically pushed out of their homes in the 1790s, putting an end to a uniquely Scottish way of life, just as the Highland Clearances had done not fifty years before (Devine 133).

It is in this context that we can understand Burns' poem "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Here Burns reminds his audience of the simple and honest past within the Scottish tradition, again using the Scots dialect to help form a linguistic identity. The poem's speaker begins by addressing the audience, saying that he is a simple bard singing "in simple Scottish lays" about the "lowly train in life's sequester's scene;/the native feelings strong, the guileless ways." These lines set the scene of a modest, 'primitive' Scotland where life is simple and honest, as is consistent with the Romantic style:

My lov'd, my honour'd, much respected friend!  
 No mercenary bard his homage pays;  
 With honest pride, I scorn each selfish end,  
 My dearest meed, a friend's esteem and praise:  
 To you I sing, in simple Scottish lays,  
 The lowly train in life's sequester'd scene,  
 The native feelings strong, the guileless ways,  
 What Aiken in a cottage would have been;  
 Ah! tho' his worth unknown, far happier there I ween!  
 ...  
 November chill blows loud wi' angry sugh;  
 The short'ning winter-day is near a close;  
 The miry beasts retreating frae the pleugh;  
 The black'ning trains o' craws to their repose:  
 The toil-worn Cotter frae his labour goes, -  
 This night his weekly moil is at an end,

Collects his spades, his mattocks, and his hoes,  
 Hoping the morn in ease and rest to spend,  
 And weary, o'er the moor, his course does hameward bend.

...

Burns thus describes the “November chill,” through which the “toil-worn Cotter” makes his way home, carrying his “spades, his mattocks and his hoes” with him “o’er the moor.” The chilly wind of November bringing about the harsh winter would be familiar to the Scottish audience. By describing the tired cotter, Burns ignites the audience’s imagination to “take ‘incidents and situations’ based in ‘common life,’ including a revived ‘nature,’ and ‘throw over them a certain colouring of imagination” (Hogle 1). Though the fields are cold and lonely, Burns brings the cotter and the reader into the small family cottage where the cotter

His clean hearth-stane, his thrifty wifie's smile,  
 The lispin infant, prattling on his knee,  
 Does a' his weary kiaugh and care beguile,  
 And makes him quite forget his labour and his toil

This description creates a picturesque scene of the virtues of the traditional cotter family. As the story goes on, the warmth and happiness fill the cottage as others arrive—“With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet,/And each for other's weelfare kindly speirs:/The social hours, swift-wing'd, unnotic'd fleet.” It is easy to imagine a bright, warm room full of chattering relatives, sharing stories and reflecting on their lives. This happy place would no doubt have brought memories to the readers of their own family gatherings where food and drink were shared and stories were told. In this way, Burns is reminding his audience of the joy and happiness of a simple life.



Belyve, the elder bairns come drapping in,  
 At service out, amang the farmers roun';  
 Some ca' the pleugh, some herd, some tentie rin  
 A cannie errand to a neibor town:  
 Their eldest hope, their Jenny, woman-grown,  
 In youthfu' bloom-love sparkling in her e'e-  
 Comes hame, perhaps to shew a brow new gown,  
 Or deposite her sair-won penny-fee,  
 To help her parents dear, if they in hardship be.

With joy unfeign'd, brothers and sisters meet,  
 And each for other's weelfare kindly speirs:  
 The social hours, swift-wing'd, unnotic'd fleet:  
 Each tells the uncoss that he sees or hears.  
 The parents, partial, eye their hopeful years;  
 Anticipation forward points the view;  
 The mother, wi' her needle and her shears,  
 Gars auld claes look amaist as weel's the new;  
 The father mixes a' wi' admonition due.

...

Adding to the scene are several images of love and relationships. The mother and father look to each other with pride for the family they have with them. As the young lovers enter the scene, Burns comments on "happy love! Where love like this is found;/O heart-felt raptures! Bliss beyond compare!" For him, a place so filled with love and light is where life is richest:

But hark! a rap comes gently to the door;  
 Jenny, wha kens the meaning o' the same,  
 Tells how a neibor lad came o'er the moor,  
 To do some errands, and convoy her hame.  
 The wily mother sees the conscious flame

Sparkle in Jenny's e'e, and flush her cheek;  
 With heart-struck anxious care, enquires his name,  
 While Jenny hafflins is afraid to speak;  
 Weel-pleas'd the mother hears, it's nae wild, worthless rake.

Wi' kindly welcome, Jenny brings him ben;  
 A strappin youth, he takes the mother's eye;  
 Blythe Jenny sees the visit's no ill ta'en;  
 The father cracks of horses, pleughs, and kye.  
 The youngster's artless heart o'erflows wi' joy,  
 But blate an' laithfu', scarce can weel behave;  
 The mother, wi' a woman's wiles, can spy  
 What makes the youth sae bashfu' and sae grave,  
 Weel-pleas'd to think her bairn's respected like the lave.

O happy love! where love like this is found:  
 O heart-felt raptures! bliss beyond compare!  
 I've paced much this weary, mortal round,  
 And sage experience bids me this declare, -  
 "If Heaven a draught of heavenly pleasure spare-  
 One cordial in this melancholy vale,  
 'Tis when a youthful, loving, modest pair  
 In other's arms, breathe out the tender tale,  
 Beneath the milk-white thorn that scents the evening gale."

...

Clearly, an atmosphere of love and affection is important to the Scottish identity in Burns' mind. The relationships of this family represent the same kind of community (as defined by Anderson) that Burns is attempting to construct for the Scottish nation.

The next section of the poem describes the typical Saturday evening in the cotter's home, with food and prayer bringing everyone together. Burns shows how the cotters live a simple and virtuous life. In the Romantic sense, he is creating a positive image of the 'primitive' life in contrast to the 'modern,' Anglicized culture that is developing in Scotland.

But now the supper crowns their simple board,  
 The halesome parritch, chief of Scotia's food;  
 The sowp their only hawkie does afford,  
 ...  
 The cheerfu' supper done, wi' serious face,  
 They, round the ingle, form a circle wide;  
 The sire turns o'er, with patriarchal grace,  
 The big ha'bible, ance his father's pride:  
 His bonnet rev'rently is laid aside,  
 His lyart haffets wearing thin and bare;  
 Those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide,  
 He wales a portion with judicious care;  
 And "Let us worship God!" he says with solemn air.

They chant their artless notes in simple guise,  
 They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim;  
 Perhaps Dundee's wild-warbling measures rise;  
 Or plaintive Martyrs, worthy of the name;  
 Or noble Elgin beets the heaven-ward flame;  
 The sweetest far of Scotia's holy lays:  
 Compar'd with these, Italian trills are tame;  
 The tickl'd ears no heart-felt raptures raise;  
 Nae unison hae they with our Creator's praise.

...  
 Then, kneeling down to Heaven's Eternal King,  
 The saint, the father, and the husband prays:

Hope "springs exulting on triumphant wing,"  
 That thus they all shall meet in future days,  
 There, ever bask in uncreated rays,  
 No more to sigh, or shed the bitter tear,  
 Together hymning their Creator's praise,  
 In such society, yet still more dear;  
 While circling Time moves round in an eternal sphere  
 ...  
 Then homeward all take off their sev'ral way;  
 The youngling cottagers retire to rest:  
 The parent-pair their secret homage pay,  
 And proffer up to Heaven the warm request,  
 That he who stills the raven's clam'rous nest,  
 And decks the lily fair in flow'ry pride,  
 Would, in the way His wisdom sees the best,  
 For them and for their little ones provide;  
 But chiefly, in their hearts with grace divine preside.

The virtues of the cotter family are shown in Burns' description of a typical Saturday night. In losing this way of life to progress and Anglicization, Burns sees the loss of community and harmony.

Finally, Burns clearly expresses the importance of the cotter tradition in the face of the modern way of life, and specifically, the life that is had by those in the urbanized world. Simple though it seems, it is in this kindly cottage that some of the best aspects of humanity can be found:

From scenes like these, old Scotia's grandeur springs,  
 That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad:

Princes and lords are but the breath of kings,  
 "An honest man's the noblest work of God;"  
 And certes, in fair virtue's heavenly road,  
 The cottage leaves the palace far behind;  
 What is a lordling's pomp? a cumbrous load,  
 Disguising oft the wretch of human kind,  
 Studied in arts of hell, in wickedness refin'd!

O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!  
 For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent,  
 Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil  
 Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet content!  
 And O! may Heaven their simple lives prevent  
 From luxury's contagion, weak and vile!  
 Then howe'er crowns and coronets be rent,  
 A virtuous populace may rise the while,  
 And stand a wall of fire around their much-lov'd isle.

O Thou! who pour'd the patriotic tide,  
 That stream'd thro' Wallace's undaunted heart,  
 Who dar'd to nobly stem tyrannic pride,  
 Or nobly die, the second glorious part:  
 (The patriot's God peculiarly thou art,  
 His friend, inspirer, guardian, and reward!)  
 O never, never Scotia's realm desert;  
 But still the patriot, and the patriot-bard  
 In bright succession raise, her ornament and guard! (Robertson 26-31)

Burns clearly believes that the provincial cotter represents the virtuous life of the Scots, or from where “old Scotia’s grandeur springs.” For him, this simple life is what makes a man love his

Scottish nation and it is this life that other nations look upon with envy. Though many people thought of the Scots as 'backwards' and provincial,' the Scots are depicted by Burns as strong, rugged, and independent as opposed to pampered city dwellers.

In comparison, the circles of pomp and luxury are depicted as "the wretch of human kind,/Studied in arts of hell, in wickedness refin'd!" Burns prays that his noble "Scotia! My dear, my native soil" be protected from "luxury's contagion, weak and vile." He desires the "simple lives" of provincial cotters to be protected in their virtue. Burns even uses the taxonomy of glory in recalling the memory of "Wallace's undaunted heart" to remind the audience of the pride of Scotland. It is clear that in his eyes, modernity and Anglicization are dangers to the Scottish identity represented by the typical, rural cotter. As a "patriot," and the "patriot-bard," Burns is speaking out against the loss of Scottish selfhood. "The Cotter's Saturday Night" is a strong example of how Burns uses Romantic poetry and the Scots dialect to reconstruct the scene of traditional Scotland in order to unite his fellow Scottish readers into a community that can resist the influence of the English and maintain a unique identity.

### **Conclusion: What Would Burns Say Now?**

It is clear that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Scotland was tottering between its own past traditions and the future of the nation as a part of the British Empire. For Burns at least, Scotland was leaning more and more towards Anglicization, losing its unique identity to the stronger power. But how has Scottish culture fared since the Enlightenment? Where is Scotland today, politically and culturally? And what has changed

since the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1998? What role does Robert Burns play in current affairs?

The pursuit of home rule in Scotland was brought about in the 1890s, following the home rule movement of the Irish in the 1880s. Because Scotland was largely Unionist at that time, however, the movement was unable to develop in any significant fashion. By 1928, support for home rule had increased enough that the left-leaning National Party of Scotland (NPS) was formed. In 1932, the right-wing Scottish Party came into being with similar goals for independence. The two parties merged to become the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 1934. Because the only ideology that all the members of the party could agree on was independence, the SNP was incapable of playing a significant role in the British Parliament (Pittock, *Road to Independence* 55).

Change began to occur after Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister of Britain in 1979. Thatcherism generally promoted the reduction of social welfare and related benefits programs. Many Scots were against such reductions, because Scotland had higher average per capita social expenditures than England (Beland and Lecours 94). One of the most controversial reforms for the Scots was the Poll Tax. This tax replaced the formerly progressive rating system, in which taxes for domestic services were levied on the basis of rental value. The Poll Tax made tax rates equal for all people, on the rationale that all people use the services equally (such as the National Health Service). Many Scots were angered when this reform was enacted in Scotland first (in 1989), before being instituted in England and Wales in 1990. To them, the reform served to replace the territorial and social unity of Great Britain with the ideal of economic individualism. Ultimately this goal fell into the realms of both neo-liberalism and conservatism, neither of which was generally supported by the Scottish. The Poll Tax was

heavily protested, and it led in part to Thatcher's departure from Downing Street in 1990, though she remained a Member of Parliament until 1992. The tax was finally repealed in 1992 (Beland and Lecours 112-7).

Disapproval of the Poll Tax had served to ignite a movement towards Scottish independence and home rule that was becoming attractive to the masses. The Labor party and Scottish Liberal Democrats published a document called "Scotland's Parliament, Scotland's Right" which promoted the creation of a Scottish Parliament. This new parliament would allow for a focus on Scotland's needs rather than on Britain as a whole; Scottish representatives would be able to better represent the Scottish people instead of acting as a small minority in the British Parliament; and the Scottish parliament would set the stage for independence (Beland and Lecours 119-20). After the difficulties of the Thatcher years, it was clear that the goals for Scottish and English social and fiscal policies were very different. So, in 1998, the referendum for the creation of a Scottish Parliament passed with 74 percent of the votes.

This agreement did not mean sovereignty for Scotland, however. The 1998 Scotland Act created a Scottish Parliament and Scottish Executive, but sovereignty remained with Westminster (Beland and Lecours 122). So-called 'reserved matters' also remained with Westminster, and these included matters of defense, foreign affairs, immigration, national security, economic competition, broadcasting, pensions and unemployment benefits, and most taxation policies. 'Devolved matters' were those that moved under the control of the Scottish Parliament. These included a limited power to increase taxes, and anything not explicitly reserved by the Westminster Parliament, such as matters of agriculture, forestry, education, Gaelic, health, housing, law and home affairs, local government, heritage, planning, police and



fire, social work, sports and arts, public records and stats, tourism and economic development (Beland and Lecours 122).

The struggle for Scottish independence is, as we have seen in this thesis, not a recent phenomenon, but dates back to the Wars for Independence that extended from 1296 to 1357. Though Scotland was able to fend off the English in the fourteenth century, by the eighteenth century the independence of Scotland was again in the balance. Though spurred by modern events such as the Poll Tax, the recent Scottish independence movement is in many ways the culmination of two centuries of reactions against English dominance in the aftermath of the Union of 1707.

There is no doubt that Scottish culture is still strongly present both within and outside of Scotland today. Symbols of the nation such as the tartan pattern, the kilt and clansman uniform have spread from the small region around the world and are recognized as distinctly Scottish. Even the glorious and bloody history of the nation has gone abroad, most notably through the award-winning film *Braveheart* (1995). Writers such as James Kelman, Iain Banks, Irvine Welsh and others have been enormously successful on an international scale with the publication of works focusing on Scottish urban life. Paintings by Scottish artists, including Steven Campbell, Peter Howson, and the 'New Glasgow Boys,' can be found around the world. And the gifted Scottish composer James MacMillan established an international reputation early in his life. Even Scottish television is branching off in its own way to be distinctly Scottish (Devine 608). Obviously, many Scots have taken up where Burns left off to ensure that Scotland is recognized as a unique and influential nation.

Today, however, the issue of Scottish identity has shifted from a cultural concern to a political one. Now it is not the loss of Scots dialect or Scottish traditions that is being focused

on; instead, devolutionists are primarily concerned about the fiscal and political future of the nation. Since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament of 1998, Scotland has prospered from the devolved powers given to the parliament in Edinburgh (United Kingdom 4). But while Scotland has considerable autonomy as a result of the Scotland Act of 1998, the Scottish National Party (SNP), which currently controls the Scottish Parliament, is arguing for (nearly) complete devolution and separation from England.

As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond, a member of the SNP, is the leading force behind this new movement for Scottish independence. Though he ultimately wants total independence from England, Salmond has proposed a referendum for the devolution of most, but not all, powers from Westminster to Edinburgh. He hopes that this proposed referendum, sometimes referred to as ‘devolution max’ or ‘devo max,’ will be voted on in 2014. It is interesting to note that 2014 will mark 700 years since the battle at Bannockburn—the battle that Burns describes in “Scots Wha Hae” (Carrell). Clearly, Salmond is drawing not only from the history of the Scottish Wars for Independence, but also calling to mind the poem Burns wrote for the purpose of reconstructing the Scottish identity.

Though the issue of ‘devo max’ is a complex one, Salmond explains, “the common understood definition of devolution max is that it is full devolution of all powers with the exception of defence and foreign affairs” (Buchanan). The goal is thus to obtain more of the ‘reserved powers’—powers over which Westminster has continued to exercise control since 1998—into ‘devolved powers,’ or powers controlled by the Scottish Parliament. A key argument in the debate is that Scotland should have the ability to raise its own funds to cover its own spending. The ‘devo max’ referendum would mean that Scotland would remain a member

of the UK, “with a single currency and defense force, but [would] have control over domestic policy and the economy” (Jowit).

By contrast, Prime Minister David Cameron is a leading opponent of the Scottish Independence movement. He has argued that full independence would leave Scotland in a tough position. He has made a “series of veiled threats about the problems raised by Scotland leaving the United Kingdom, including the potential loss of a seat on the UN security council, UK armed forces, and the pound...the loss of UK security services and difficulty combating terrorism alone” (Jowit). Cameron has claimed that a similar solution to ‘devo max’ could be found that is not as drastic; however, he has not specifically addressed which powers might be devolved from Westminster (Jowit). Today, the debate has been a matter of interest not only for the UK, but also for Spain and Madrid, and the issue has been discussed in the EU (“Scottish Independence”).

The struggle for independence in Scotland at present is more complex than has been described here, but it is clear that the issue of Scottish sovereignty from England is still being debated today. While Burns was concerned for the vitality of Scottish culture and identity, the focus is now more political and economically based. That is not to say that Burns is no longer an influential figure in the independence debate. As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, Burns continues to be invoked by political leaders on both sides of the argument. Moreover, he is also occasionally referred to in the press’s analysis of the debate, as the following political

cartoon (Adams) indicates:



In this cartoon, we see Alex Salmond cutting into a haggis that is shaped to look like Great Britain. Salmond is wearing tartan, and presumably a kilt to go with it. This clearly references Scottish culture and identity, just as Burns did through his descriptions of the cotters, for example.

Not only are the two nations, England and Scotland, clearly represented here, but Burns himself is also invoked in this cartoon. Because the cartoon was published on January 25, 2012, the haggis is obviously supposed to be a Burns Night haggis. To make this even more evident, a passage from Burns' poem "To a Haggis" is written on the bottom right. This poem is generally recited during the ceremony of the opening of the haggis before it is served.

What we see here is Robert Burns being invoked almost as he himself had invoked the legends of William Wallace and Robert Bruce. The cartoon thus suggests that Salmond is, or

sees himself as, a new Burns who will rally others to support Scottish independence. Though Burns was thinking most explicitly about cultural identity, Salmond has taken Burns' ideal one step further by openly arguing for Scottish political and economic independence. In the cartoon, Salmond is figuratively cutting Scotland away from England. The inclusion of a passage from Burns' poem seems to suggest that Burns would support Salmond's actions; however, when applied to the issue of Scottish independence, Burns' description of cutting the haggis might convey the opponents' view that independence could be a messy affair of "gushing entrails" as the two nations are severed politically. The cartoon nevertheless suggests that independence, in Salmond's view, will be a "glorious sight/ warm-reekin', rich."

So, what would Burns have to say about the current struggle for independence? While it is obviously impossible to know for sure, it seems reasonable to suspect that Burns would approve of the movement, at least on a cultural level. This movement is mostly focused on politics and economics, but if independence were to become a reality, it would certainly help to ensure that the unique national identity of Scotland remains intact. Whatever Burns would think today, it is clear that he has been an influential figure in the constructing of Scottish identity. Not only did his poems serve to wipe away the metropolitan, Anglicized view of 'primitive,' 'backward' Scotland, he also reminded his fellow Scots of their national heritage and identity. Through this process, Burns himself became part of that heritage and identity. Today he is recognized around the world for his accomplished poems and every year his contributions are celebrated. Devine is correct that "the next few years in the political history of Scotland should be interesting but entirely unpredictable" (663). It is clear, however, that regardless of whether Scotland gains independence in the next few years, Robert Burns is an important contributor to the construction and continued recognition of the Scottish identity.

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