

3. Robert Tannahill: Scottish Poet After Burns

Gerard Carruthers

Another of Gordon's great interests was the songs and poems of 'Paisley Poet' Robert Tannahill. He published several papers on Tannahill, including in a typical merging of his interests, an attempt to link the poet to his landscape ¹. In September 2004 Gordon organised a conference in Paisley covering Tannahill's work and the historical background at the time. Gordon had already agreed to publish this article in the next Journal, which was contributed by Gerry, who spoke at the conference.

Robert Tannahill's place in the tradition of Scottish poetry is not entirely a happy one. If it is the case that early nineteenth century Scotland bungles its poetic inheritance, then Tannahill shows symptoms of this problem. Part of this mishandling, found in numerous poets from 1788 until the 1840s involves the transfixing influence of Burns where Burnsian phraseology is parroted as though representing sacred text and a grossly simplified Robert Burns of suffusing sentimental and rather nebulous feeling is venerated. Tannahill's series of three commemorative poems for Burns, written for the Paisley Burns Club represents an interesting test-case. The first of these 'Odes', from 1805, is drenched in the phraseology of Burns and genuflects particularly towards his 'The Vision' with the notion that the Gods had overseen Burns's poetic formation. Burns's promulgation of this idea in 'The Vision' had been replete with irony, self-mockery (and perhaps even anger), but Tannahill's 1805 ode, is an altogether po-faced confection inhabiting a clichéd, reactionary version of Scottish identity. In the poem, Scotland's 'guardian' spirit, Caledonia in bardic garb and with an Ossianic shield, appears at the court of Jove. Caledonia is there to plead for a poet for the Scots whom he describes as lacking in nothing else, since they are:

..... great in arts and arms,
And every worth that social fondness charms,
With every virtue that the heart approves,
Warm in their friendships, rapt'rous in their loves,
Profusely generous, obstinately just,
Inflexible as death their vows of trust;
For independence fires their noble minds,
Scorning deceit, as gods do scorn the fiends.²

So we have the martial myth of the 'fighting Jock' ('arms') and the practical Scot ('arts' here refers generally to mechanical, industrial and other forms of prosaic rather than 'artistic' ability). The Scots are the greatest, but they need someone to publicise this message; what is needed is a 'Patriot Bard to celebrate their worth'. Impressed by Caledonia's plea, Jove grants a kind of virgin birth, as Burns comes out of nowhere, that is to say Scotland has no poetic pedigree before him, even though it is the chosen race with William Wallace performing the Moses function:

'Twas in regard to Wallace and his worth,
Jove honour'd Coila with his birth;
 And on that morn,
 When Burns was born,
 Each muse with joy
 Did hail the boy

Here we have that phenomenon identified by Edwin Muir where Burns is an alternative messiah for Scotland, as the muses appear, magi-like to greet, and by implication bestow poetic gifts upon, the infant Burns.

In 1807, Tannahill was again involved in penning commemorative lines on the bard as part of a sequence comprising, two 'recitatives' and two songs. Lambasting 'haughty Gallia' at a time when the war between Britain and France has become heightened, Burns is now granted an ascension into heaven as eternally 'his star of renown through the gloom shall be seen.' Burns is a safeguard for the country's future: 'Bards, yet unborn, and patriots shall come,/And catch fresh ardour at thy hallow'd tomb!' Is the country Scotland, or Britain since Tannahill refers to 'the Bard who ennobles our isle'? In 'The Twa Dogs' Burns in keeping with the mock-ignorance of his poem's animal protagonists had referred to 'Scotland's isle' but this phrase represents for Tannahill a convenient license for eliding the difference between Great Britain and Scotland and setting up an unproblematic, Loyalist Britain. Likewise Burns had minted the phrase 'haughty Gaul', in his song, 'The Dumfries Volunteers' but with the essential rider to this identification that Britain did not need the French to sort out its undoubtedly flawed constitution, since it had its own 'people' to bring about internal reform (and in using the word 'people' Burns showed his democratic sympathies). With Tannahill what we have instead is merely jingoism, as the French are simply and solely to blame for the current war.

Tannahill's third ode for Burns, in 1810, is not unpleasant and like his second, is touching as it promulgates the idea that amidst the darkness of life, song and poetry might comprise good cheer. In the third ode, the comparison between the nativity and Burns is even nicely worked as he speaks of the winter season: 'Tho bleakest of the changeful year,/It blest us with a Burns,' before going on to list among other things a catalogue of gratuitous supernatural enjoyment - ghost stories and the like - that 'canty lads and lasses' share which represents a dumbing down of the Burnsian legacy of the supernatural in poems like 'Address to the Deil' and, most obviously, 'Tam o' Shanter' where Burns, for all that he entertains, is seriously interested in the psychology of the supernatural; for instance, both of the poems just mentioned imply that humans have more to fear from what is within them than from any ghost or witch or warlock. So, I'm suggesting that Tannahill is, indeed, one of those poets who drop the ball where understanding of the Burnsian legacy is concerned.

Tannahill not only exemplifies Scotland's amnesiac recollection of Burns, but of other writers also. This is true where Allan Ramsay is concerned. In a prologue that he wrote for a performance of Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd*, Tannahill draws general moral lesson about loyalty between landlord and tenants and the universal idea, the sub-Burnsian mantra, that the 'greatest treasures are the people's hearts'. Now Tannahill is not alone in espousing the virtues of Ramsay's rather hackneyed pastoral drama in the early nineteenth century. *The Gentle Shepherd* enjoys an enormous number of reprints and performances from the late eighteenth century and

well into the nineteenth. This wide popularity, however, is ironic when we consider the fact that Ramsay's play of the 1720s was a pro-Stuart work suggesting a brief golden age following the Restoration of 1660, and looking optimistically to a Jacobite return in the eighteenth century. For Tannahill like other Scots from a Presbyterian background, *The Gentle Shepherd* is transformed to become a politically denuded piece celebrating the simple joys of honest rural living (and, of course, this 'earthing' of Ramsay's play again is of a piece with the misreading of Burns, with so much of his reception taking him at his word as a bard celebrating the rustic lifestyle). It is somewhat ironic that a piece of Tory, Jacobite literature enjoining the highly hierarchical world vision of Stuart kingship should become part of the morally and culturally conservative culture of Scotland as this developed in the later eighteenth and into the nineteenth century after its defeats of 1746 had supposedly done away with any chance of Jacobitism having real influence in the nation again. Tannahill in his prologue is, yet again, seen as a promulgator of a culturally and morally compliant peasant and working class. Here, as elsewhere, in peddling such empty rusticity, Tannahill is one of many contemporary Scottish poets imaging a socially irresponsible, simplistically homogenised nation.

Let us consider two more examples of Tannahill's engagement with Scotland's literary tradition that do not augur well. 'The Haunted Wud' carrying the sub-title, 'in imitation of John Barbour'. This is a rather well written piece of Middle Scots imitation. It begins:

Quhy screim the crowis owr yonder wud,
 Witht loude and clamouryng dynne,
 Haf deifenyng the torrentis roare.
 Quhilk dashis owr yon linne?

Quhy straye the flokis far outowr,
 Alang the stanery lee,
 And wil nocht graze anear the wud
 Thof ryche the pasturis be?

John Barbour's epic *The Bruce* is, however, concerned with real-life political events and with national identity during the Wars of Independence. Tannahill, for all the skill he wields in 'The Haunted Wud' (technically one of the best things he ever wrote), merely uses his Barbour mode to produce something freakish where antiquated language is combined with overtones of the supernatural. Tannahill was all too prone to empty gothic melodrama of the type which was so fashionable in the early nineteenth century. We see one of the barren, gratuitous roads Tannahill was led down when we consider his poem, 'The Portrait of Guilt', a wholly clichéd performance featuring a man pursued by demons. The protagonist, a murderer, awakes to find he has been dreaming. The piece is described 'In Imitation of Lewis'. Matthew Gregory Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (1801) featured supernatural ballads of psychological depth contributed by Walter Scott among others; it is cringe worthy to read Tannahill's piece as it aspires to keep company with such pieces.

Tannahill is intriguingly empty also when he turns to the Paisley literary scene. His 'Emigration of Alexander Wilson to America' laments the departure of the radical poet who had specific things to say about poor working conditions and abusive landlords. Wilson was a disciple of Thomas Paine who, like Paine found his way to Philadelphia (Wilson arriving there some years earlier in 1794), which was then an exciting centre

of liberal ideas. Wilson's poetry in counterpoint to that of Tannahill's take cognisance of the material industrial reality of Paisley in his time, as the opening stanzas of his 'Hollander or Lightweight' attacking a rapacious mill-owner show:

Attend a' ye, wha on the loom,
 Survey the shuttle jinking,
 Whase purse has aft been sucket toom
 While Willie's scales war clinkin'.
 A' ye that for some luckless hole
 Ha'e paid (though right unwillin')
 To satisfy his hungry soul,
 A saxpence or a shillin'
 For fine some day.

Shall black Injustice lift his head,
 An cheat us like the devil,
 Without a man to stop its speed,
 Or crush the growin' evil!
 No — Here am I, wi vengeance big,
 Resolv'd to calm his clashin;
 Nor shall his cheeps or powder'd wig,
 Protect him frae a lashin'
 Right keen this day.³

Part of the skill of these lines is that they mimic the efficient working of the shuttle, but in counterpoint to the smoothness of this operation they complain on behalf of the workforce. Here the 'Christ's Kirk' stanza form – throughout the eighteenth century in the poetry of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns a vehicle for lashing folly of one kind or another – is re-treaded to comment sardonically on the age of progress and to threaten violent chaos (as so often poems in the 'Christ's Kirk' stanza brought disorder down upon the head of stupidity and injustice). The threat of violent rebellion in the face of industrial conditions that marks a number of Wilson's works is a very potent type of Scots-language poetry in the 1790s. One would know nothing of this, however, from the lines written by Tannahill to lament Tannahill's flight to America. In a rare foray into the 'Habbie Simson' stanza, Tannahill says of Wilson:

He bravely strave gainst Fortune's stream,
 While Hope held forth ae distant gleam;
 Till dasht and dasht, time after time,
 On Life's rough sea,
 He weeped his thankless native clime,
 And sail'd away.

The patriot bauld, the social brither,
 In him war sweetly join'd thegither;
 He knaves reprov'd, without a swither,
 In keenest satire;
 And taught what mankind owe each ither,
 As sons of Nature.

Tannahill, clearly, is on the side of the reformist radical, but why does he swathe Wilson in such a vapid language, euphemistic in its sentimentally neutralised Burnsian construction of the 'patriot bauld' and the 'social brither'? And is the calling of 'knaves' really an appropriate contemporary term for unscrupulous capitalists in the Industrial Revolution? What was Wilson's story, we want to ask of Tannahill, but all we have are big gesturings, romantic terminology and no actual detail.

It is interesting that Tom Leonard in his anthology, *Radical Renfrew* (1989), selects twelve pieces by Tannahill and that only two of these have what we might call social specificity. 'W.————'s Recipe for Attaining a Character' and 'The Trifler's Sabbath Day' are departures from Tannahill's usually all too abstract approach to poetry. In the first of these pieces, the recommendation of how to observe religion in the Scottish fashion, 'with face as lang's a gothic window' and, in the second, the grotesque portrait of a man drowning a mouse in a tub for want of anything more entertaining to do on a Sunday offer a withering enough critique of Calvinism at its harshest, but Tannahill is remarkably loathe to criticise or even to comment on much else of a specific nature within his contemporary culture. Not without some strange irony is a piece included in Tom Leonard's anthology, 'The Moraliser' which has a man, John, berating his friend for shooting a blackbird in the wood, only to be undercut in his sentimental, abstract feeling by the intercession of John's wife into the pub where the conversation is taking place to point out that their children are hungry at home while he spends the family's money on alcohol. Be specifically rather than romantically feeling, we might also shout at Tannahill a great deal of the time.

On the positive side, Tannahill can occasionally be good in his poetic abstraction. His best piece of melancholy reflection, presumably leapt upon by Tom Leonard for the Tannahill section of *Radical Renfrew* as he struggled, no doubt, through a number of entirely unworthy lachrymose pieces, is 'Ode to Jealousy'. Typically Tanahillian, jealousy is depicted as a 'demon' gnawing at the human body of the sufferer of jealousy, and the anti-social harm of self-obsession is sketched. For once, Tannahill's Burnsian phraseology in his final lines complements well his theme:

Let *man* be faithful to his brother *man*,
 Nor guileful, still revert kind heaven's plan,
 Then slavish fear, and mean distrust shall cease,
 And confidence, confirm a lasting mental peace.

Here the idea of 'mental peace' is nicely couched as the foundation of wider peace, and the positing of 'fear' as 'slavish' nicely connects personal to contemporary issues of wider human emancipation. This, however, is as about as politically explicit as Robert Tannahill ever becomes. If we compare his work to the slightly earlier Alexander Wilson, and the slightly later, John Mitchel (author of the magnificent 'A Braid Glow'r at the Clergy', written in the 'Christ's Kirk' stanza and showing that the Burnsian mode could still be wielded in the interests of wide and detailed cultural and political complaint) or William Finlayson, we see that among a line of Paisley and Renfrewshire poets, Tannahill is infuriatingly vague about his times. It would be good to know more Tannahill's activities in the Paisley Literary and Political Club that he

helped found in 1803. What exactly were his political views and were these given a full venting within the club? Whatever the facts here, his part in founding Paisley Burns Club in 1805 marks him out as among individuals who were seen as indulging a harmless pastime and as impeccably socially conservative (the British government through the 1790s and into the first decade of the nineteenth century is extremely sensitive about club and association gatherings but Burns was seen as a writer safe for clubs whose work was not likely to inspire anything too revolutionary in thought or behaviour – a phenomenon we see all too clearly in the case of Tannahill).

The fact is that Tannahill's best 'poetry' is apparent in his songs. This is the place where Tannahill can be seen as a pleasant minor writer of the Romantic age whose lyrical suffusion is marked by skilful landscape painting and, often within this, where love is an emotion poignantly described. The weight of numbers is impressive alone as Tannahill writes song after song with love at the centre of things. 'When John an' Me war' Married' written to the tune of 'Clean Pea Straw' shows Tannahill's panache in the Scots language so that one might wish he had indulged this more in his poetry also. What we have is a sense of the hardship of humble working life and a counterpointing of this with the cleanliness, one might almost say the luxury, of the simply happy marital bed:

When John an' me war' married,
 Our haudin' was but sma',
 For my Minnie, canker't carlin,
 Wou'd gie us nocht ava';
 I wair't my fee wi' canny care,
 As far as it wou'd gae,
 But, weel-I-wat, our bridal bed
 Was clean pea-strae.

Wi' wurkin' late an' early,
 We're come to what ye see,
 For fortune thrive aneath our han's,
 Sae eydent ay war we;
 The lowe o' luv made labour light,
 I'm sure ye'll find it sae,
 When kind ye cudle down at e'en,
 'Mang clean pea-strae

Here love is defiant - against lack of family support or even disapproval - and physically exuberant. A very nice touch is the way in which the hardship of the lover's manual labour is both signalled and denied by the lover-speaker (their work is made 'light' by their relationship at the centre of their life). It seems also that the female speaker is expressing herself some considerable time after her marriage. A healthy sex life, clearly, has endured. We aren't graphically given 'animal passion' among the 'clean pea strae', but it is obviously present as Tannahill here provides a variation on Burns's 'Jolly Beggars' mode, a regularly married couple (instead of irregularly conjoined vagrants as in Burns's cantata) have their close physical bond celebrated (in so far as Burns wrote of happily married sex, *he* tended to hide this away writing only about the marital bed, paradoxically, for his drinking cronies in the likes of *The*

Merry Muses rather than in any official publication).

Something I suspect that Tannahill himself didn't realise is that he did physical excitement much better than mental excitement. A song such as 'O Are Ye Sleepin, Maggie' is a much more convincing performance than his 'Ode to Jealousy' or 'The Portrait of Guilt'. The passion of the young man wooing Maggie is priapic as he arrives at Maggie's house demanding entrance because he is an element-defying, all-conquering hero:

Fearfu' soughs the boor-tree bank,
The rifted wood roars wild and dreary,
Loud the iron yate does clank,
An' cry o' howlets mak's me eerie.

O are ye sleepin', Maggie,
O are ye sleepin', Maggie!
Let me in, for loud the linn
Is roarin' o'er the warlock craggie.

Here Tannahill's taste for the gothic is put to good humorous use, as the real primal force that is stirring is the bodily desire of Maggie's lover.

It is somewhat curious that Tannahill does not address slavery in his poetry but does so in one song, 'The Negro Girl' (curious also in that there is a pattern here with Burns who also only writes about slavery in a single song, 'The Slave's Lament'). Unlike in Burns's song, the black protagonists are given names: Fatima is torn apart from her lover, Zadi. Her misuse while being shipped is touched upon as at her, 'the rude seamen unfeelingly tore'. It is easy to forget how 'respectable' and in the majority were those who supported the institution of slavery (a repeated argument of the anti-abolitionists being that blacks enslaved became more civilised than they otherwise would have been). Tannahill takes this on by giving Fatima a mistress 'loving and kind' but saying that this is not enough. In orthodox Enlightenment fashion he argues that the basis of civilisation, of common humanity is the family unit out of which Fatima has been wrenched. We have in the song, then, a nice portrait of female despair in a specific context, again much more successful than some of Tannahill's more abstract, platitudinous poems of emotion.

Tannahill has an eye for experience from the female perspective that goes beyond simply the female persona in song. 'Kiss't Yestreen, Kiss't Yestreen' is comically exuberant, but also deliciously luxuriant as it enjoys the single incident of a kiss, though a kiss that contains an onslaught of bodily enjoyment:

The lasses a leuch, and the carlin flate,
But Maggie was sittin fu ourie and blate,
The auld silly gawkie, she couldna contain
How brawlie she was kiss't yestreen;
 Kiss't yestreen, kiss't yestreen;
How brawlie she was kiss't yestreen;
She blether'd it roun tae her fae and her frien,

How brawlie she was kiss't yestreen.

As with Tannahill's treatment of slaves and of women, sympathy, to some extent, is also helpfully extended in the figure of the highlander. 'Young Donald and his Lawlan Bride' is, to begin with, part of that movement that slowly and in only piecemeal fashion happens following the example of Macpherson's 'Ossian' of the 1760s where the highlander is no longer in lowland Scottish and British consciousness simply a bogey-man, or a half-human figure. What songs like Tannahill's are proposing, celebrating even at this time is a liaison that was still seen as shockingly inter-racial. Again there is the Tannahillian attention to physical love as Donald proposes to his lover 'to row thee in my Hielan plaid'. Romantically mysterious in one way, the ending of the song also engages with the fact that the lowlander simply cannot imagine what life is actually like in the Gaeldom, as ' 'Cross the Firth awa they glide,/Young Donald and his Lawlan' bride'. Arguably, however, if the previous savage stereotype of the highlander was harmful, the opposite reaction of the hero highlander (with the continuous implication between the two stereotypes of prodigious sexual energy) was not all that much better. With the exception of Burns in 'Address of Beelzebub', no lowland Scottish writer between 1745 and the 1860s does much to portray highlanders and their culture with any realism, and this at a time of phenomenal disruption in the Scottish highlands. Tannahill is certainly not blameless in the distortion of the highlands, as he enters as enthusiastically as any government propagandist into the portrayal of the valiant fighting clansmen protecting the green and pleasant land from the rapacious French.

The same paradox is apparent in Tannahill's engagement with Ireland in his songs, where an airbrushing out of the injustices actually operating in that country offsets initially sympathetic portrayal. We see this in 'Irish Teaching', where, quite grotesquely, Tannahill makes Eire a land of contented Britons:

Success to Ould Ireland for ever!
 'Tis just the dear land to my mind,
 Her lads are warm-hearted and clever,
 Her girls are all handsome and kind.
 And he that her name would bespatter,
 By wishing the French safely o'er,
 May the de'il blow him over the water,
 And make him cook frogs for the core.

Tannahill's intentions are good (sort of): 'don't see the Irish as ignorant savages'. However, what is given with one hand is then taken away with the other. Since the 1790s until the defeat of Napoleon, Britain feared an invasion through 'the backdoor' with the French arriving in Ireland, as they had tried at the instigation of Wolf Tone and the United Irishmen in 1798, an event whose success was wished for by Tom Paine. The Irish peasantry, Protestant as well as Catholic, had a great deal to complain about with regard to British rule from the 1790s well into the nineteenth century, and Tannahill's piece is mere wishful thinking. Once again, then, 'thinking' is not Tannahill's strong suit. One has the feeling from Tannahill's work that he is traumatised by the French, and to be fair there are very few people who can confidently welcome the prospect of their country being invaded. But, in his songs as

well as his poems, Tannahill overplays native British virtue and overdoes the supposed barbarism of the French. We are left with a confusing portrait of a man who admires Alexander Wilson (Wilson being a man of fully worked out Painite political philosophy) and who is against slavery and prejudice, but who is also somewhat reactionary, evading concrete matters of politics, including political and cultural injustice, in the British Isles. We come to realise, perhaps, that Tannahill was a sincere idealist. He believed in taking refuge in nature; he was true to one side of the Romantic age in desiring to find humanity and the world in harmonious relationship, to find the simple setting as the appropriate context for an essentially noble humanity. His personal over-sensitivity, however, meant that he had no stomach for the detailed problems of the world. He savours the colours, the sounds and smells of nature, but he has little time for the day-to-day particulars of society. Notoriously, of course, he was crushed by the poor reception of his work by publishers. I think that he reacted this way not because he was rampantly egotistical, but because something deeper was at stake. To Tannahill, his sincere engagement with a world of nature and of the emotions spoke of a reality that others should recognise and share; when they did not, this world of Tannahill's collapsed. If, as I have suggested already, Tannahill can be seen as complicit in the mishandling and the oversimplification of Burns, this was because, like so many, he believed in the ideals that Burns (not without slyness and some self-interested insincerity) promulgated. Tannahill was, in a sense, natural and unworldly, but without the intellectual slants and skills of social observation possessed by Burns. Tannahill is one of the many confused progeny of Burns who never really knew his father. At times though, he does sing sincerely from within. 'Langsyne Beside the Woodlan Burn' sees Tannahill at his very best in song-lyric, as well as providing an emblem, it might be suggested, of his own situation. A wider chaotic world is confusing to the female protagonist, as she seeks some surety, some connection in nature that fails but fails poignantly; at her core is hugely disappointed, hugely defeated passion, but passion nonetheless:

Langsyne, beside the woodlan burn,
 Among the brume sae yellow,
 I leant me neath the milk-white thorn,
 On Nature's mossy pillow;
 A roun my seat the flowers were strew'd,
 That frae the wild wood I had pu'd,
 To weave mysel' a simmer snood,
 Tae pleasure my dear fellow.

I twin'd the woodbine roun the rose,
 Its richer hues tae mellow,
 Green sprigs of fragrant birk I chose,
 To busk the segg' sae yellow.
 The crawflow'r blue, an meadow-pink,
 I wove in primrose braided link;
 But little, little did I think
 I should hae wove the willow.

My bonnie lad was forc'd afar,
 Tost on the raging billow;
 Perhaps he's faun in bludie war,
 Or wreck't on rocky shallow:

Yet, ay I hope for his return,
As roun our wonted haunts I mourn,
And aften by the woodlan burn
I pu' the weepin willow.

The connection here between nature and human love is unfulfilled. The world of humans is a cruel, nature-defying place and provides a clue, perhaps, to the fact that Tannahill so often shied clear of it in his work. He was a fragile creature, a nature-loving, humanly disappointed writer and in the end nothing at all like Robert Burns.

¹ Tannahill's Landscapes, *Renfrewshire Studies 2*, University of Paisley (1998).

² Quotation of Tannahill's work follows *The Poems and Songs of Robert Tannahill* edited by David Semple (Paisley, 1900) and from Tom Leonard (ed.), *Radical Renfrew* (Edinburgh, 1990).

³ See *Radical Renfrew*, p.13.