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The Mouse's Saturday Night: A Background to One of Robert Burns' Best-known Poems

Robert Gibson

Introduction

In this short paper I discuss what is almost certainly the best-known poem¹) in the Burns' canon, '*To a Mouse*', and suggest that a richer understanding of the work may be gained by considering the wider social and economic context surrounding its composition, rather than – as has almost all commentary on the poem hitherto – focusing exclusively on the circumstances of Burns' (1759–1796) life and his intellectual milieu. As the tongue-in-cheek title suggests, I also look at a second poem, '*The Cotter's Saturday Night*'; my view is that these two works may be connected by more than simple authorship and date.

Burns as 'National Bard'

I will begin with a brief account of the author's place in the Scottish imagination. Burns' status as Scotland's national poet began to coalesce in the early decades of the 19th century – thanks in large part to the efforts of his many patrons and admirers, among them the young (later Sir) Walter Scott – and was by the 1850s quite secure²). This status persists today for

two main reasons. Firstly, with the arguable exception of Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978) no other poet has ever come close to usurping Burns’ role as national bard. Secondly, to the extent that the average Scot today can recite a poem, or even part of one, that poem will almost certainly be *‘To a Mouse’*.³⁾

The relatively few Burns poems and songs still widely known today – the ‘standards’ if you like – have been enjoyed for their lush sentimentality (*‘My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose’*; *‘Ae Fond Kiss’*), their rapturous praise of Scotland’s natural scenery (*‘My Heart’s in the Highlands’*) or their romanticized glosses on key events in Scottish history (The wars of independence against England in *‘Scots What Hae’*; the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 in *‘Charlie Is My Darlin’*). Burns has also been widely admired, and at times condemned, for his overtly democratic and egalitarian stance (*‘Is There For Honest Poverty (A Man’s a Man for A’ That)’*) and his sly mockery of inherited wealth and authority (*‘The Twa Dugs’*) and of religious hypocrisy (*‘Holy Willie’s Prayer’*).

‘To a Mouse’

But the Burns poem which is to this day the most widely known within Scotland is *‘To a Mouse’*. The poem owes this status to its brevity – only eight verses – and its theme of what unites and distinguishes the human and animal conditions. It is the only Burns’ poem – quite possibly the only poem – which almost every Scottish child has had to memorize early in life, and it is precisely this ‘learned in school’ aspect that is key to the poem’s continued popularity. It is short enough to reproduce here in full⁴⁾:

To A Mouse,

On Turning Her Up In Her Nest With The Plough, November 1785

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
O, what panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty, Wi' bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee, Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave 'S a sma' request:
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' wast,
An' weary Winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,

Thou thought to dwell,
 Till crash! the cruel coulter past
 Out thro' thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
 Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
 Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
 But house or hald.
 To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,
 An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,
 In proving foresight may be vain:
 The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
 Gang aft agley,
 An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
 For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
 The present only toucheth thee:
 But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
 On prospects drear!
 An' forward, tho' I canna see,
 I guess an' fear!

At least on the surface, '*To a Mouse*' neatly serves up only the most straightforward of 'messages', and one well suited to elementary education.⁵⁾ This message is, baldly stated, that we can and should empathize with our

fellow creatures, yet at the same time realize that human consciousness is intrinsically different from that of animals; while we can empathize with the mouse in her distress, we cannot *identify* with her.

We have an eyewitness account of the immediate context of the poem's composition, in the shape of a recollection in 1841⁶) by John Blane, who as a boy had been a hired labourer on Burns' family farm. Speaking of a day in November 1785, he recalled that Burns had reprimanded him for chasing and attempting to kill with a 'pattle' (a wooden implement used to clean soil from a plough-blade) a field-mouse he saw running in a field in which Burns was ploughing. Blane's account makes clear that the poem was stimulated by a real – if in that era quite banal – event. Blane reported that “for the rest of the day [Burns] was moody and thoughtful”, and that on coming very late to the bed the two shared Burns recited the poem to him in something very like its published form.⁷⁾

A Man of Feeling

'Sentiment' was the rage in the late 18th century, and at this stage in his life Burns was obsessed with the urge towards a suitably 'refined' sensibility to the point of carrying with him at all times a copy of “*The Man of Feeling*” by the Edinburgh writer, critic and editor Henry McKenzie. McGuiirk (1997:4-5) summarizes the 'man of feeling' in these terms:

“Men of the world follow a survival principle; men of feeling look after lost causes [and choose] abandoned or humiliated objects to chastise callous society”

This trait in Burns, or at least in his poetic persona, is readily apparent in his less well-known piece – one arguably much less 'successful' in literary

terms as well as in terms of its reception – ‘*To a Mountain Daisy*’, a poem addressed to a flower that the poet has inadvertently crushed underfoot. If a common wild flower can be the object of sentiment, how much more so a dislodged field-mouse.

But if Burns is indeed critiquing a ‘callous society’ in ‘*To a Mouse*’, we may ask how that society manifests itself in the poem. We have of course the author’s declaration of regret that ‘*Man’s Dominion / has broken Nature’s social union*’ – although it might be argued that this is in part a slice of contemporary cant thrown in to satisfy the reader that the poet is no untutored rustic: he is versed in the universalist and benevolent ideas of the time, and he can rhyme as well in the acrolect as in dialect. At a more mundane ‘social’ level, while acknowledging the tension between the farmer scratching his living from the soil and the ‘thieving’ field-mouse that pillages, on however small a scale, his hard-won crop, Burns appears to be locating himself as a kind of ploughman-philosopher, at once a man of the world and a man of feeling. We can imagine the younger and less elevated John Blane’s surprise at being rebuked for trying to kill vermin in the normal way!

Burns’ travails

As I noted above, ‘*To a Mouse*’ is conventionally interpreted as reflecting Burns’ personal troubles, with the mouse’s misfortune as the stimulus that verse of the time was thought to require. The closing lines of the poem, with the semi-proverbial couplet

The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men,
Gang aft agley,

make explicit the poet's anxieties over his personal circumstances:

But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

In 1784 Burns' father had died, and the family had been forced to move to a new and apparently less productive farm, Mossgiel. Apart from the troubles attendant on his new role as head of the family, Burns had suffered the embarrassment of public rebuke in church for having fathered an illegitimate child ('Dear-bought Bess', born in May 1785) on Betty Paton, a family servant. (By September of that year Burns had transferred his affections to, and indeed formally promised to marry, Jean Armour, whose father refused to consider Burns as a future son-in-law and who would later take legal action over the child Jean inevitably bore.) In October, Burns' youngest brother John died at the age of sixteen, and if this were not enough Burns may also have come to doubt his wider appeal as a poet, and may already have begun to contemplate a move to the West Indies to take up a clerical post on – tragic irony! – a slave plantation. Taken together, the calamities of Burns' life certainly provide grounds for fear of the future, and his looking backward to 'prospects drear' may adequately be explained by bereavement and the relentless physical labour of farming, and of course his perceived lack of success as a poet.

Mice and Men

But at the time '*To a Mouse*' was written, field-mice were not the only of Burns' 'fellow mortals' whose homes were in danger, nor was the poet

himself alone in facing ‘prospects drear’. By 1785, rural Scotland had for some time been undergoing the most radical change in land tenure and husbandry in six hundred years, with a huge impact on large sections of the rural population⁸). Historically, agriculture in Scotland had largely revolved around the ‘toun ferm’ (‘town-farm’) which, as the name implies, was more like a hamlet or very small, dispersed village than a farm as we conceive it today⁹). The toun might have one inhabitant who held actual legal tenure of the land, while the other residents were either his sub-tenants or the (legally landless) ‘cotters’ who provided essential farm labour – as well as making the tools and implements that were needed – in exchange for the ‘right’ to grow their own food and perhaps graze a cow or two on part of the toun land, and to live there in a simple thatched ‘bigging’ of clay or stone. It was quite normal for these informal ‘cotters’ rights’ to be passed from one generation to the next, so that touns were often small but long-lasting communities, and their inhabitants linked by kinship and marriage as well as by economic ties.

Close-knit as it was, the toun-farm was a marvel of agricultural inefficiency, with its inhabitants engaged in what amounted to hardly more than subsistence farming, and lacking the resources and motivation to improve the unproductive land via drainage, new crops or new methods such as artificial fertilization. As the 18th century progressed, the urbanization of lowland Scotland developed rapidly, along with the rise of industry around Glasgow in the west, and the new coal-mines and ironworks of Bo’ness and Falkirk in the east and Wilsontown in Lanarkshire. There were many other new (albeit often small and sometimes short-lived) industrial centres, whose swelling populations had to be fed, and it became increasingly apparent that the traditional agricultural system could not come close to meeting this need. The cult of ‘improvement’, already well-established in England, spread

north of the border – although in Scotland these radical changes took effect over a much shorter time scale so that Devine (2011) sees them as authentically *revolutionary* there, rather than evolutionary as in the south.

In the interests of productivity, efficiency and of course greater income, the larger landowners in Scotland, i.e. the aristocracy and landed gentry, increased the pace of ‘improvement’ as the century progressed, clearing away the remaining town farms and their inhabitants and enclosing the land for lease as larger-scale, single-tenant ‘Mains’ farms more or less identical to those of today. As for the landless cotters, many left the countryside for work in the urban centres, while others took their chances in America or Canada. The remainder, as far as we can tell, moved to the small villages that some landowners created especially for the new rural proletariat whose labour was still essential in that pre-mechanical age.

This vast change in rural life was well under way by the time Burns composed ‘*To a Mouse*’, but it was by no means complete. Belonging as he did to the lower ranks of the tenant-farmer class – able only to afford the lease on poor or even marginal land – it is inconceivable that Burns was unaware of the plight of the remaining cotters in his area. (Indeed, his own family’s hold on their land was secure only in the short term, for many landowners had taken at this time to leasing their farms through auction, so that when one lease expired the price of renewing it might be prohibitive.)

A subtler message?

Could it be, then, that behind the sentiment and pastoral metaphor ‘*To a Mouse*’ is also a lament for a disappearing rural order, or even a coded critique of the iniquitous relations among men as well as between men and animals? The poem certainly contains tantalizing echoes of what was happening to the cotter population:

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
 It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
 An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
 O' foggage green!
 An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
 Baith snell an' keen!

When a toun farm and its humble dwellings were cleared, the walls of beaten clay-earth (pisé) would simply be smashed down and left to dissolve into the ground, while the turf or thatch of the roofs would be strewn to the wind. Any rough stone-work in the buildings would be taken for the construction of field-boundary dykes: nothing was left to the former inhabitants with which to build their homes anew – had they dared to try. As for mice, so for men. The fates of the cotter and the mouse are even linked by the image of destruction by the plough, for as soon as possible after the toun had been cleared its distinctive but inefficient ‘run-rigs’, the long narrow raised strips of land on which crops were grown, would be ploughed out of existence. Two maps of the estate of Longniddry, near Edinburgh, show clearly how radically the Scottish countryside was changing at this time, for the run-rigged ‘cot-lands’, the dwellings, the ‘infields’ and ‘outfields’ of 1778 have entirely vanished by 1792.¹⁰⁾

There are other hints that Burns may at least have had the cotters’ plight at the back of his mind when composing ‘*To a Mouse*’. Whatever his motive may have been for breaking with dialect and the ‘Standard Habbie’ rhyme-scheme in the second verse of the poem – and we know from Burns’ letters that in spite of the image he promoted of himself as an unlearned plough-boy of purely natural poetic gifts, he had no desire to be thought of as ‘merely’ a dialect poet – his choice of words is again intriguing. ‘Man’s

dominion' is clearly a reference to Genesis 1:26;28, with which Burns, as a product of the Scots Reformation, would have been entirely familiar and in which we learn that God gave man "*dominion over [...] every living thing that moveth upon the earth*". While there is no evidence in the poem that Burns is linking 'dominion' also to the power of one human class or group over another, his invocation of a prelapsarian 'social union' (from which Genesis explicitly rules out animals) might be read as subversive, echoing not only J.-J. Rousseau's contemporary and radical philosophy of man and nature, but perhaps even the much older catchphrase of the Peasant Revolt of 1381 and of later struggles against authority¹¹⁾:

*When Adam delved, and Eve span,
Who was then a gentleman?*

Whether or not Burns in fact intended in '*To a Mouse*' a critique of the changes in the rural order of the time, there is no reason to think him in any way hostile to radical political opinions. He did not hide his sympathy with the American Revolution, or later with that of France, and for a 'man of feeling' Burns was not squeamish about revolutionary violence – as we see from his letter of January 1795 to his friend Mrs. Dunlop, in which he bluntly asks of the executions of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette:

'What is there in the delivering over a perjured Blockhead and an unprincipled Prostitute to the hands of the hangman, that it should arrest for a moment, attention, in an eventful hour [...]?'

Hidden history

As far as this writer has been able to glean, with the sole exception of a rather vague suggestion in Ferguson 1964 that the poem cannot be properly understood without some consideration of its social background¹²⁾, no commentator has interpreted ‘*To a Mouse*’ as relating to anything outside of Burns’ personal life and (McGuirk *op.cit.*) the dictates of the ‘age of sentiment.’¹³⁾ This is far from surprising, for in marked contrast to the later ‘Highland Clearances’, the clearance of rural lowland Scotland was, in Devine’s (2011) phrase “silent”, impacting a “phantom people.” With one notorious exception, the dispersal of the lowland cotters and sub-tenants met with no violent resistance, and – to the modern eye – remarkably little protest from those affected or from the Church. All was orderly and seemingly inevitable, and in its own way quite rational: the expanding cities needed food that the old agricultural order could not provide; market forces dictated change, and landowners cheerfully complied. Moreover, despite the long history of many town-farms, their relationship to their landlords was essentially a legalistic one based on lease-hold, rather than – as in the Highlands – on real or imagined blood-ties between landowner and tenant. Lowland towns were evacuated when the lease on the land expired, or even before then if it became clear to the inhabitants that their landlord would not renew their tenure. As leases commonly expired a little after harvest-time, the people had to leave quickly in order to obtain new accommodation before winter set in.

‘To the Cotter’

My suggestion that Burns had more than a field-mouse in mind as the object of sentiment in ‘*To a Mouse*’ may gain support from his composition

in the same year of another poem included in his first published collection: “*Poems, Chiefly in the Scotch Dialect*” (1786). ‘*The Cotter’s Saturday Night*’ – once praised by Henry McKenzie as one of the finest of Burns’ works – is not well-regarded today. A much longer piece¹⁴⁾ and, as Daiches (1971:50) notes, rather cloying and maudlin to the modern ear, it presents a rosy yet by no means inaccurate picture of the life of a cotter family. It is clear from the poem’s descriptions of landscape and working practices that Burns was quite familiar with the cotter’s world and the customs and attitudes of its inhabitants. These he would recall from his earlier years, and was very probably still able to witness first-hand at the time of the poem’s composition.

‘*The Cotter’s Saturday Night*’ paints a picture of a poor but honest peasant family, virtuous and self-reliant, thrifty but generous, and above all obedient to human and divine authority. It is undoubtedly a heartfelt tribute to, and celebration of, the cotter class, but when we become aware of the backdrop to the poem it becomes very difficult *not* to interpret it also as something between a paean and a memorial to a vanishing way of life.¹⁵⁾

There are hints in the poem that changes in the traditional way of life are already in play. For one, there is no town but rather an isolated dwelling to return to at day’s end:

At length his lonely cot appears in view,
Beneath the shelter of an aged tree

Moreover, the cotter’s older children are

At service out, among the farmers roun’;
Some ca’ the pleugh, some herd, some tentie rin

A cannie errand to a neibor town

while the eldest daughter

deposit[s] her sair-won penny-fee,
To help her parents dear, if they in hardship be.

Although older children – if not needed in the work of the toun-farm – had been ‘fee’d out’ locally as labourers for generations, one forms the image here of a world in which waged labour is in the ascendant, with the cotter father of the poem perhaps the last un-waged worker kept on by the local landholder.

But if the above is true, what should we make of the lines:

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!

unless it is to see them as the expression of a forlorn, perhaps even naïve, hope that the clearance of the countryside will somehow cease? As Bentman (1987: 60–61) notes, ‘*The Cotter’s Saturday Night*’ is seen by many modern readers as not only overly-sentimental but also highly inauthentic or insincere as a poem. This, as the same author plausibly argues, is to miss the point of the piece: it should be taken less as an expression of Burns’ own perspective than as his attempt to ‘speak’ the life of the cotters as they themselves might do if they were able. For example, the cotter father’s admonition to his children:

Their master's and their mistress' command,
The younkers a' are warned to obey;
And mind their labours wi' an eydent hand,

And ne'er, tho' out o' sight, to jauk or play;

would indeed be as questionable – were it to be read as the poet's own voice – as would (Recall Burns' own premarital fornication!) the cotter mother's pleasure that her eldest daughter's suitor is “*nae wild, worthless rake.*”¹⁶) My reading of the poem, like Bentman's, is that it is an entirely genuine appreciation of a rural class that Burns grew up among, and with which he himself – despite his better-than-average education for a country lad, and his status as leaseholder of a farm – may have, to a degree, identified rather than merely empathized.

There is one final point that ‘*To a Mouse*’ and ‘*The Cotter's Saturday Night*’ have in common: the reference to the month of November, in which the Scottish day ends in mid-afternoon and the cold of winter begins to bite. This feature of the poems may have the banal explanation that both were composed (as the former certainly was) or completed in that month, or the month may carry a symbolic meaning to do with the end of the yearly cycle of life and (much of) the labour of cultivation. It may even symbolize the end of an era, although whether this pertains to the demise of the cotter's way of life, or to Burns' own contemplated exile from his native land must remain moot.

In this paper I have suggested that ‘*The Cotter's Saturday Night*’ is as much a eulogy as a celebration of the cotters' way of life, and that Burns' sensitivity to their plight may – along with his genuine humanity, and the conventions of pastoral verse in that sentimental age – have been

instrumental in his seizing upon the distress of a lowly animal as a metaphor for human suffering in *'To a Mouse'*. The argument is a tenuous one, but if it is correct then two of the most superficially uncontroversial of Burns' poems may contain within their lines an intimation of the explicit social and political critique found in the Bard's later work.

Notes:

- 1) Other works by Burns are indeed more widely known (*'Auld Lang Syne'*; *'Is there for Honest Poverty'* (*'A Man's a Man for A' That'*)) but these were explicitly composed to be sung to music rather than read.
- 2) In this writer's view, the orgy of monument and statue erection to Burns of the 1870–1890s (both in Scotland itself and in the diaspora) was due less to a delayed appreciation of the poet's work than to the greater disposable wealth of the late 19th century.
- 3) Of one hundred Scottish adults whom I invited, more or less at random in 2008–9, to name a poem they knew, over eighty percent cited *'To a Mouse'*.
- 4) A standard-English gloss of the poem may be found at: <http://www.robertburns.org/works/75.shtml>.
- 5) The poem does this without the sexual innuendo and overt political questioning that has made the Scottish educational establishment wary of much of Burns' oeuvre.
- 6) Blane later became a long-distance coach driver, and appears to have made much of his earlier connection to the famous poet. If his accounts to various enquirers are to be believed, he witnessed the inspirations of several of Burns poems. Blane's presence at the scene of *'To a Mouse'* is, however, verified by the account of Burns' brother, Gilbert.
- 7) Doubt has been cast on the idea that Blane and the poet shared a bed, as Burns is believed to have shared a bedroom with his brother. This may undermine the claim that the poem was effectively conceived and completed in a single day.
- 8) The size of the landless peasant class in early 18th century Scotland is obscure, but Devine 2011 suggests that between one fifth and one third of the country's population of the time might be loosely categorized as *'cotters'*.

- 9) Although some 'planned villages' or industrial centres of the 18th century. were named after their sponsor with the suffix 'town' or 'ton' added (e.g the Wilson brothers new ironworking centre of Wilsontown) the great majority of Scottish place names ending in '-ton' reflect the origin of the settlement in a toun farm.
- 10) Reproduced in Daiches 1971:8–9.
- 11) see Cohn, N. 1970
- 12) While Ferguson is not discernibly marxist in his analysis, 'social' factors seem to have been more salient in the literary criticism of the 1930s. Ferguson does not develop his suggestion, however.
- 13) Daiches 1971:51 explicitly refers to the changes in land tenure and agriculture taking place during Burns' lifetime, but does not relate these to any specific works.
- 14) The full text of the poem, with glosses, can be found at: <http://www.robertburns.org/works/82.shtml>
- 15) In this writer's view, the orgy of monument and statue erection to Burns of the 1870s and 1880s (in Scotland itself and among the Scots diaspora) was due less to a delayed appreciation of the poet's work than to the greater disposable wealth of the later 19th century.
- 16) It is, admittedly, difficult not to imagine this as deliberate irony or jest.

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