

ROBERT DAVIDSON – A SHORT APPRECIATION OF THE POETRY

In the arts today we look for social relevance, psychological insights, controversy, and – most of all – originality. It is often difficult, therefore, for the modern reader to engage with the literature – especially the poetry – of the past. This is particularly true of the poetry of the 18th and 19th centuries. Few today read Thomson's *The Seasons*, or Macpherson's *Ossian Poems* or Scott's *Marmion*, and yet in their time these poems by Scottish writers were the sensations of Europe. It is only fair, then, to look at Davidson's poetry in the light of the literary context in which he wrote – that is, by the criteria of the poetic aesthetic of his time: that of Pope, Cowper, Sherston, Gray, Scott and Burns (of whom, more later).

Their disciplines were technical:

- a) mastery of rhythm and rhyme, particularly in challenging verse forms;
- b) facility with sound – alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia;
- c) pictorial skill – simile, metaphor, adjectival aptness;
- d) appropriate use of rhetorical devices – apostrophe, repetition, hyperbole etc;
- e) allusion – to the Classics, to History and to other poets;
- f) wit – irony, use of old phrases in new ways, pithiness, double-meaning, etc;
- g) structural awareness – clarity of thought or narrative line, , effective conclusions.

And the poetry of Robert Davidson, a man from the humblest of backgrounds, almost completely self-educated, tied for life to his tiny corner of rural Scotland, stands up pretty well on these criteria – criteria developed by an educated, upper-class, well-travelled elite. And his poetry does this while remaining true to its roots in his Scottish, Calvinist, peasant social milieu.

His themes are:

- Hardship
- Cheerfulness, joy and resilience in the face of hardship
- Independence/Liberty – of mind, of religion, of country
- Loyalty
- Loss
- Grandeur – of nature and of his Scottish historical legacy

His verse forms – he uses at least 15 different verse forms:

- Standard Habbie verse (famously used by Burns in *Holy Willie's Prayer*, and first recorded in the 17th century *Elegy on the Death of the Piper Habbie Simson*)

- Christis Kirk verse (8 lines plus a tag line, used in the 16th century *Christis Kirk on the Greene*)
- Iambic tetrameter couplets
- Iambic pentameter couplets
- Iambic pentameter nonets (ABABDCDD)
- Quatrains ABAB in tetrameter, pentameter and trimeter (151)
- Quatrains AABB in tetrameter
- Sestet: 2(2 x tetrameter + trimeter) (eg Ordination)
- Tetrameter triplets + tag
- Hexameters + tetrameter refrain
- 3 different song forms (168, 174, 181)

It is worthwhile dwelling for a moment on one of these – the Standard Habbie. Called this from the 17th century poem, *Elegy on the Death of the Piper Habbie Simpson*, by Sempill of Beltrees in Renfrewshire, it was one of Burns’s favourite forms (the form of *To a Mouse* and *Holy Willie’s Prayer*, among others). And it is fiendishly difficult. It consists of 3 lines of 4 stresses, each line rhyming on the same sound, then a 2-stress line ending on a different sound, followed by a 4-stress line rhyming with the first 3 lines, and completed by a 2-stress line rhyming with the previous 2-stress line. Which means that in every verse you have to find 4 words rhyming with each other that keep to your point and make grammatical and semantic sense. There are 10 examples of the Habbie form in Walter Elliot’s collation, **The New Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border**, including Davidson’s *The Shepherd’s Address to His Auld Dog* - and Davidson’s quality stands out.

In all the forms he uses, his mastery of rhythm and rhyme is evident. He writes equally fluently in Scots and literary English (for England, too had its dialects as far removed from literary English as Scots) – and some of the few imperfect (to modern ears) rhymes he uses may indicate the way English was pronounced in the Merse of his day.

As a reciter - and I’m sure that other reciters will agree – I found it easy to pick up his flow, find his emphases, keep the sense of his line of thought. There was no feeling of unsteadiness, or tentativeness, or of rhymes being forced or taking precedence over sense. This is a man confident in his poetic skill and revelling in it.

He is particularly adept at using onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance for specific effects. He is sparing in his use of rhetorical flourishes, but when he uses them, they are appropriate and effective.

Originality was not a prime requirement in the art of his day – indeed, it was treated with suspicion. Alexander Pope defined poetry as “what oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed”. And Davidson makes no secret of his influences – anxiety of influence, which blocks so many modern artists, was not a 18th or early 19th century concern. *Churchyard Musings* is written in the same metre as Gray’s *Elegy Written In a Country Churchyard*, and

by doing so, Davidson is openly inviting comparison with the Gray poem. And to my mind he doesn't come off badly at all.

By writing in the Christis Kirk and Standard Habbie forms, Davidson invites comparison with Burns. Specifically, in *The Shepherd's Address to his Auld Dog*, written in the Standard Habbie form of *To a Mouse* and *Address to the Haggis*, he even quotes Burns: "Weel are ye worthy o' a ditty, The best I hae."

The best of Burns – *Tam O'Shanter*, *Holy Willie's Prayer*, *Death and Doctor Hornbook*, *For A' That and A' That*, and the wonderful love songs - is some of the most powerful poetry ever written, not just in Scotland. He was Wordsworth's poetic god. These great poems – unlike the vast mass of 18th and early 19th century poetry - are still vibrant today. They exhibit strengths we do not find in Davidson's work:

- Economy of language
- Tight structure and shaping
- Caustic wit
- Irony

However, that Burns is still accessible today is mostly due to the tireless efforts of Burns Clubs. Although his education was, by our standards, partial, he had, for nearly two years, the personalised input of a fine tutor. His status as a tenant farmer – though by no means an easy life – gave him access to a camaraderie of educated, artistic-minded people, among whom irony would have been appreciated and understood for what it was – and it is worthwhile remembering that *Holy Willie's Prayer*, that sublime piece of irony, was not published under Burns's name until after Burns's death..

None of this is to undermine Burns's poetry: the work is what it is – one of the towering achievements of western literature. But, it does put Davidson's work into perspective. His poetry stands comparison with that of other writer's of his time, and even with run-of-the-mill Burns. How it fares in that comparison is the prerogative of you – the reader.

If you wish to sample Davidson at his best, read some of the following:

A Mother's Lament – the first section is an exceptionally touching piece of writing.

The Ordination – Nub's speech is real rabble-rousing stuff.

The Witch's Cairn – the speeches of Bauldy, Sandy, Watty and the Friar are excellent examples of black humour.

The Song of the Patriotic Elector – again some fine wit and irony – not his usual mode.

The Term Day – insight into working folk who normally must live at the whim of their masters.

To a Water-fowl, To a Redbreast, The Shepherd's Address to His Auld Dog: fine lyric pieces grounded in reality.

Robert Davidson is one of the earliest Scottish peasant poets – the others being Burns, John Leyden and James Hogg. Despite his purely elementary education and life-long straitened circumstances and harsh working conditions, he produced poetry that can confidently hold its own with the work of his peers.

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