

The Suffragettes and Robert Burns

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MILITANTS AND BURNS'S COTTAGE.
TWO BOMBS IN POSITION.
ATTEMPT TO CAUSE DESTRUCTION.
PLAN FRUSTRATED BY NIGHT WATCHMAN.
TWO WOMEN CAPTURED, BUT ONE ESCAPES.
PRISONER ON HUNGER STRIKE.

This headline in the *Ayrshire Post* on 10 July 1914 refers to a striking event that had occurred in Alloway two days previously.¹ In the early hours of Wednesday 8 July, two suffragettes attempted to bomb Burns's Cottage, the site of Robert Burns's birthplace. One of these suffragettes was a militant New Zealand-born woman who went under the pseudonym of 'Janet Arthur' but whose real name was Frances Parker. Parker would later receive an OBE for her service in the Women's Army Auxillary Corps during the First World War. She was also the niece of Lord Kitchener, a British Army officer now best known for featuring on the iconic First World War poster, 'Your Country Needs You'. The other woman was a prominent suffragette and artist, Ethel Moorhead, of Irish descent, whose parents had settled in Dundee in 1900. Together, they travelled from Glasgow to Alloway in an attempt to bomb this Burns monument.

The attack was by no means unprecedented. Suffragette militant action was becoming increasingly common around this time, and Ayrshire was not immune to it. In March 1913, letterboxes in Ayr had been filled with acid to ruin the correspondence (a signature suffragette move),² and in April 1913 one of the stands at Ayr racecourse was destroyed by suffragettes, who left behind copies of leading suffragette magazines at the scene of the crime. The culprits of that arson attack escaped undetected. Wealthy individuals started to worry about the security of their properties and there was also a concern about the safety of key monuments, including Burns's Cottage. In 1913, the decision was taken by the Burns Monument Trustees to install a watchman to guard the site.³

¹ *Ayrshire Post*, 10 July 1914.

² *Ayrshire Post*, 7 March 1913.

³ *Ayrshire Post*, 10 July 1914.

At around 2am on 8 July 1914, the watchman, Robert Wylie of Russell Street, Ayr, noticed something odd. While positioned in the barn at Burns's Cottage, he spotted two figures (Parker and Moorhead) at the rear wall of the cottage, by the kitchen. He stepped out, and, upon noticing him, the two figures ran in the direction of Greenfield Avenue, to the back of the cottage. Wylie pursued them, and managed to catch both, but Moorhead escaped (apparently by bicycle). Neighbours heard Wylie's calls for help and came to his assistance. It became clear that this figure, wearing a cap and a pair of trousers, was a woman; Parker had also put stockings over her boots to soften their noise.⁴ A car then arrived to take her to the Ayrshire Constabulary on Charlotte Street, and a search began to find Moorhead, who was never arrested. Others went to inspect the property, where they found two bombs near the rear wall of the apartment; bombs that consisted of cylindrical biscuit tins, each filled with explosives.⁵

Parker was soon tried at the Sherriff Court in Ayr, and she started a hunger strike while in prison. This action led to her being transferred to Perth Prison, notorious for its brutal treatment of 'intractable' suffragettes, as the *Ayr Advertiser* noted. Indeed, in Perth Prison, Parker was forcibly fed.⁶ But while still in Ayr, crowds assembled to demonstrate against Parker's actions, with some reportedly stating: 'They should hang her' and 'She should be shot'.⁷ These people were not the only ones who were offended by her actions; Lord Kitchener is said to have been disgraced by his niece's actions.⁸

Part of the reason there was such dismay over this bombing attempt was that it was felt to be an attack on Burns himself, Scotland's national bard, and consequently also a strike at the nation as a whole. The *Glasgow Herald* described the bombing plot as a 'dastardly attempt' 'to destroy a shrine that Scotsmen in all parts of the world regard as sacred', while the *Ayrshire Post* characterized it as an attack on a 'national possession'.⁹ For the *Ayrshire Advertiser*, the bombing would have been a 'dire national catastrophe'.¹⁰

⁴ *Ibid.*; Dane Love, *Ayr Stories* (Ayr: Fort Publishing, 2003), pp. 115-117.

⁵ *Ayr Advertiser*, 16 July 1914.

⁶ In an article she wrote for *Votes for Women*, published on 7 August 1914, Parker claimed that she was forcibly fed by the rectum.

⁷ *Ayrshire Post*, 10 July 1914.

⁸ According to Perth's *The Courier and Advertiser*, Lord Kitchener was 'disgusted' by the bombing plot (4 February 2016).

⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 9 July 1914; *Ayrshire Post* 10 July 1914.

¹⁰ *Ayrshire Advertiser*, 16 July 1914.

Such public condemnation assumed (or at least implied) that the attack by the suffragettes was a direct attack on Burns himself. Was it? There is little evidence to suggest that this bombing plot was fuelled by hatred of Burns or his verse; if anything, this attack was a strange attempt to highlight the suffragettes' fondness for Burns's verse, especially those poems calling for liberty. Indeed, when we look beyond this attack, we find the suffragettes continually invoking Burns's verse in their own writings, including their poetry. Rather than assaulting the Scottish nation, we find the Scottish suffragette movement repeatedly flaunting its Scottishness, and drawing upon Scottish history to justify its practices. While the Burns bombing plot may have felt like an attack on Burns and Scotland, there was deep appreciation for the nation and its bard in the Scottish suffragette movement.

Appreciation of Burns was actually showcased by Parker herself. During her trial for attempting to burn, or blow up, Burns's Cottage, it is reported by the *Ayrshire Post* that she exclaimed: 'Liberty's in every blow, let us do or die' – a quotation from Burns's poem 'Scots Wha Hae'.¹¹ Parker took the opportunity to highlight that Burns was driven by a desire for liberty, which she believed should be honoured in the present day, in relation to female enfranchisement. What Parker pointed to was the hypocrisy of those who cherished Burns and his poems on liberty, but did not support extending the electoral franchise to women.

This desire to highlight the hypocrisy of the suffragettes' opponents was also showcased in another prominent suffragette attack in Scotland which created a national scandal. In 1912, Moorhead smashed the cabinet in which William Wallace's sword was held at the National Wallace Monument, and left the following card at the monument:

Your liberties were won by the sword.
Release the women who are fighting for their liberties.
Stop the forcible feeding.
A protest from Dublin.¹²

Here, Moorhead styles the suffragettes as allies of Wallace in their pursuit for liberty. Parker also made an allusion to the Wars of Independence during her trial in 1912, stating: 'You Scotsmen used to be proud of Bruce; now you are torturing women'.¹³ The sentiment that

¹¹ *Ayrshire Post*, 10 July 1914.

¹² *Stirling Observer*, 3 September 1912.

¹³ *Ayrshire Post*, 10 July 1914.

Moorhead and Parker were hoping to convey is that the suffragettes were the true followers of Bruce and Wallace, not their opponents.

When we consider the plot on Burns's Cottage, alongside the smashing of the Wallace sword cabinet, an alternative explanation for the bombing plot emerges. These attacks allowed the suffragettes to highlight that, while they might attack Burns's cottage and Wallace's sword, their opponents were attacking the spirit of Burns and Wallace in suppressing women's liberty. Through conducting these attacks, the suffragettes could portray their opponents as hypocrites and *themselves* as true patriots (albeit patriots who vandalised and attempted to destroy national monuments). We should not lose sight of the fact that the key motivation behind these attacks was to get publicity and headlines, but the suffragettes also considered carefully how they could justify these attacks in the name of patriotism and use them to expose the hypocrisy of their adversaries.

The wider suffragette movement in Scotland also reveals a broad appreciation for Burns and Scottish identity. This is especially apparent in Helen Crawford's writings and actions.¹⁴ Crawford was born in the Gorbals in 1877 and is perhaps best known now as a leading figure in the Communist Party of Great Britain, as well as for interviewing Lenin in Russia before returning to Scotland to become a town councillor in Dunoon. But, before her Communist days, she was, like Frances Parker and Ethel Moorhead, a decidedly militant suffragette who participated in various window smashing campaigns and went to prison several times, where she participated in hunger strikes.

In her autobiography, which remains unpublished in book form but has been digitized by the Marx Memorial Library, Crawford writes extensively about her suffragette days, and she specifically reflects on the attempt to bomb Burns's Cottage. She comments on a time when she was due to speak in Perth in 1914, on the conditions that suffragettes were experiencing in Perth Prison, and writes that the protesters lost momentum when people heard about the attempt to attack Burns's Cottage. Her writing reveals her outrage towards Parker's and Moorhead's attack, but she simultaneously expresses solidarity with them, even suggesting that Burns would not have been bitter about the attempt to burn his birthplace. She writes:

¹⁴ See Crawford [née Jack; other married name Anderson], Helen, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/40301>. [Accessed 11 February 2018.]

I was appalled to read in the evening paper that two women had attempted either to burn or blow up Burns' Cottage at Alloway. [...]

They were arrested and the newspapers were pouring forth vitriolic abuse upon the whole Suffrage Movement. I must confess that I did not know how I was to address the crowd that night. I saw myself being torn limb from limb, but it had to be done. I felt I had better deal with this Burns Cottage outrage first. I told the audience how the report had filled me with horror and fear, and that Burns's own words in "Scots-wha-hae" had spurred me to face the crowd:

Wha' wid be a traitor knave,
Wha wid fill a coward's grave,
Wha' sae base as be a slave,
Let him turn and flee.¹⁵

Crawfurd appears to have been particularly fond of 'Scots Wha Hae'; it is one of the songs she had encouraged suffragettes to sing in previous protests outside Perth Prison. She continues:

I expressed my Scottish sentiment in being glad the destruction hadn't been accomplished, and stated that the two women who had attempted it were not aware of the reverence that Scottish people had for Burns. At the same time I said, I felt that had Burns felt that the burning of his birthplace would give political freedom to the women of his country, he would have gladly sacrificed it: that even had it been burned to ashes, Burns would live in the heart of the Scottish people for ever. I ended with a quotation from the poem which he composed for a famous actress of the day:

While Europe's eye is fixed on mighty things
The fate of Empires and the fall of Kings,
While Quacks of every kind produce their plans
And even children lisp the rights of Man –
Amid this mighty fuss – just let me mention
The rights of women merit some attention.¹⁶

The poem referenced here is 'The Rights of Woman', composed by Burns for the actress Louisa Fontenelle. By quoting these lines, Crawfurd not only hopes to cast Burns as a fellow freedom fighter, but, more specifically, as a supporter of women's freedom – a proto-suffragette.

¹⁵ Marx Memorial Library, 'The Autobiography of Helen Crawfurd', <https://www.marx-memorial-library.org/socialist-opposition-to-ww1/movement-response/item/418-the-autobiography-of-helen-crawfurd>, [Accessed 11 February 2018.]

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Many suffragettes shared the ‘Scottish sentiment’ that Crawford espouses in her autobiography. One historical photograph reflects this point especially well: it features one of the most prominent suffragettes in the United Kingdom, Flora Drummond (known amongst suffragettes as ‘The General’), and a group of women celebrating the release of Mary Philips, a Scot, from Holloway Prison in 1908. The group of suffragettes bear a banner in the photograph, ‘Ye Mauna Tramp on the Scotch Thistle, Laddie’. Like Parker and Moorhead, these suffragettes style themselves as the true defenders of Scotland, who are being oppressed by those opposed to ‘votes for women’. When Philips was released, this group chanted ‘Scots Wha Hae’, a key anthem for the Scottish suffragettes.¹⁷ Indeed, we find lines from ‘Scots Wha Hae’ emblazoned on banners produced by pro-suffrage campaigns: the Northern Men’s Federation for Women’s Suffrage, for instance, included the lines, ‘Now’s the day and now’s the hour’ on their banner, housed in the People’s Palace, Glasgow. The People’s Palace collection, which largely comprises items donated by Crawford’s friend and fellow suffragette Janet Barrowman, also features a suffragette tea set, which sold at St Andrews Halls in Glasgow in 1910, that features Scotland’s national flower – the thistle. The colours of the thistle on this tea set happily complement the colours of the Women’s Social and Political Union – green, white and purple. The Scottish suffragettes clearly valued their national identity, and harnessed emblems associated with it in their agitation.

This appreciation for Burns and Scotland, which we find widely in the Scottish suffragette campaign, is clearly reflected in the poetry of the suffragettes. In fact, both the suffragette and anti-suffragette campaigns of the early twentieth century modelled their poetry on Burns’s verse, in exactly the same way as Burns was used by reformers and anti-reformers in the nineteenth century. While the Burns’s Cottage bombing plot might, at first glance, suggest the suffragettes were breaking with that reformist appreciation for Burns, what we find in the poetry of the suffragette campaigns is far more continuity than any decided shift between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

An example of a pro-suffragette poem appears in *Forward*, the Glasgow-based socialist newspaper, which was one of the few pro-suffragette titles in Scotland. The paper featured regular columns by Sylvia Pankhurst and a prominent Glaswegian suffragette, Janie

¹⁷ *Votes for Women*, 17 September 1908.

Allan. Tom Johnston, the editor of *Forward*, even printed *The Suffragette* – the UK’s main herald of the movement, along with *Votes for Women* – using his *Forward* press in Glasgow when it was suppressed elsewhere in the UK. One humorous poem in *Forward*, which had originally appeared in *Votes for Women*, is modelled on *Green Grow the Rashes O* and states that women should be given the vote, in order to end their window-smashing campaigns:

Green grow the rashes O,
Bang go the glasses O,
We have no pane, dear Mother now,
Within our window sashes O.

For guid’s sake gi’e the lasses Votes
Or onything they fancy O,
Or they will soon be at our throats
They’re getting’ maist unchancy O.

Green grow the rashes O,
Another window crashes O,
'Twere better far to gi’e them votes
Than those sic awfu’ bashes O.¹⁸

It is not clear who the author of this poem is – only their initials are provided, T. E. J. – but the speaker of the poem appears to be a man, who stresses that those opposed to women’s enfranchisement should supplicate in the name of peace. The speaker highlights that the suffragettes are not simply smashing windows but are also getting ‘maist unchancy O’, which is very likely a reference to their escalating, increasingly destructive, attacks. The poem is hardly a ringing endorsement of the suffragette cause, but it is nevertheless a humorous attempt to defuse resistance to the suffragettes.

Another playful appropriation of Burns appears in *Jus Suffragii Alumnae* from 1909, the magazine of the Queen Margaret Suffrage Society, Glasgow. Dr Marion Gilchrist, the first female graduate of the University of Glasgow, was the Honorary President of the society at this point. This poem presents the first two stanzas of Robert Burns’s ‘To a Mouse’ unaltered, except for italicising one word. The title of the poem is ‘Suffragette to Mr Asquith on his Back-Door Exit’, and it presents Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister at the time, who was broadly opposed to ‘votes for women’, as the ‘wee sleekit, cowrin’ tim’rous beastie’, who is confronted, not by a ploughman but by a suffragette:

¹⁸ *Forward*, 1 March 1913.

Wee, sleekit, cowrin' tim'rous beastie,
Oh, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou needna start awa' sae hasty
 Wi' bick'ring brattle!
I wad be laith to rin and chase thee
 Wi' murderin' pattle.

I'm truly sorry *man's* dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
And justifies that ill opinion,
 Which maks thee startle,
At me, thy poor earth-born companion
 And fellow mortal.¹⁹

The poem here portrays Asquith as a coward, afraid of the force and perhaps violence of the suffragettes. Aspects of Burns's poem take on new resonances when placed in the suffragette context: in 'To a Mouse', the ploughman destroys the mouse's home, and the suffragettes were known to set light to and (as we have seen) bomb houses. There is perhaps a subtle threat issued to Asquith here. And while the ploughman mourns the lack of equality between man and nature, the suffragette speaker in this poem mourns the lack of equality between men and women; the speaker stresses that it is '*man's* dominion' that is responsible for their lack of equality. Simply by changing the title of 'To a Mouse' and italicising one word of it, a very different, pro-suffragette, poem emerges.

But it was not just the pro-suffragette campaigners who modeled their verse on Burns; his verse was equally adopted by the anti-suffragette campaigns. In Aberdeen in 1908, a magazine, titled *The Premier*, was founded to campaign to install the Prime Minister, Henry Herbert Asquith, as the Rector of Aberdeen University (a campaign which was ultimately successful). The suffragettes backed his opponent, who also happened to be his parliamentary nemesis, the Unionist Edward Carson, *despite* the fact that Carson was also opposed to women's suffrage. This poem from *The Premier* is based on 'Ae Fond Kiss' and it playfully imagines Carson losing the rectorial election and having a melodramatic parting with his campaign team:

Unionists, we now must sever!
Suffragettes, farewell for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung dears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sigh and groans I'll wage thee.²⁰

¹⁹ *Jus Suffragii Alumnae*, January 1909.

The poem delights in anticipating the Carson campaign's loss and departure, while also portraying Carson as overly affected and disingenuous. Like the suffragettes, the anti-suffragette Liberal campaign was using and appropriating Burns's verse to meet their own ends.

What we see across these poems, and the wider responses to Burns by suffragettes, is that Burns's verse and his ideas inspired the Scottish suffragette campaign. Even the bombing plot, which many in 1914 understood as disrespectful towards Burns, appears to have been partly motivated by an appreciation for him: the plot allowed suffragettes to highlight that their opponents were the true enemies of Burns and his calls for liberty. But, equally, it is important to note that Burns was (and still is) embraced by a wide range of political campaigns, and his verse also inspired anti-suffragette poetry. In the Reform verse of the early twentieth century, like the political poetry of the nineteenth century, Burns was co-opted by opposing sides, each trying to style themselves as the true patriots of Scotland.²¹

²⁰ *The Premier*, 30 June 1908.

²¹ For more on how diverging campaigns in the nineteenth century tried to align their campaign to Burns, see Christopher Whatley, *Immortal Memory* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016).