

SCOTS WHA HAE

This song was sent for publication by Burns in 1793 but he didn't want his name associated with it. Why? For one thing there was a febrile atmosphere in the country. The loss of America to Britain was still fresh in the memory while the 1789 French Revolution had sent shockwaves throughout Europe's establishment elites. They were fearful that the 'disease' of liberty, equality and fraternity would spread like wildfire. Much closer to home a young lawyer named Thomas Muir (who incidentally lived 3 miles from where I live) was on trial for sedition because of his links with French Radicals and the United Irishmen and more especially for his involvement in a U.K. wide society called The Friends of the People. Their crime was to agitate to extend the franchise from the tiny minority who were eligible to vote to include, for example, the new merchant classes emerging in the industrial revolution. Muir underwent a show trial and was sentenced to 12 years hard labour in Botany Bay (he incidentally managed to escape in Australia and was rescued by an American ship sent to pick him up on the orders of none other than George Washington).

More crucially for Robert Burns was his post as an exciseman, in other words he was a government employee. It was a job he could ill afford to lose. And so in this politically charged climate it was dangerous for him to espouse any radical views. That is the reason he framed this song of freedom in the past, during the 14th century wars of Scots independence.

We can see this song not just as a patriotic call to Scots but as an allegory for the freedom of any nation, and by extension for the citizen's right to freedom, which includes freedom of speech. Burns no doubt was referencing the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, the document which asserts the rights of the Scottish nation and which some claim to be a document that inspired the U.S. Declaration of Independence document. The great 20th century Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid once said that one had to be a nationalist before one could become an internationalist. And Burns was certainly an internationalist. Much of his poetry and song celebrates the brotherhood of peoples. So what we can take from Burns today is yes, we should be proud of who we are, yes we should be able to express our views freely and yes we should engage with each other as individuals and as nations. To do otherwise, to look inwards and spread division and intolerance, is to follow a dangerous path that can lead to conflict, just like the signs on the highway that say 'Wrong Way'.

--Alan Reid
January 2017