

Burns and the borders of poetry in the letters of James Wodrow and Samuel Kenrick

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In June 1787, Rev. James Wodrow (1730–1810) of the parish of Stevenston, Ayrshire, wrote to his great friend and correspondent, Samuel Kenrick (1728–1811), a banker in Worcestershire. Wodrow was anxious about the biography he was writing of their Glasgow University professor, Principal William Leechman (1706–85), to be prefixed to the two-volume edition of Leechman’s sermons he was preparing for publication. One of his concerns regarded

the Scottisisms perhaps Vulgarisms in it which one unavoidably runs into, by aiming at an easy simple familiar stile which I have done— especially in the narative part & which is more natural to me and than any other[.]²

Kenrick responded in August:

Little do you think, that what you call scoticisms & vulgarisms, will perhaps soon be as admired for their naïvete & true old sterling English, as they are now studiously avoided by your late & present litterati.³

The rich and lengthy correspondence between James Wodrow and Samuel Kenrick contains four pairs of letters which discuss Robert Burns: a pair in 1787–88 responding to his poem, ‘Elegy on Sir James Hunter Blair’,⁴ a pair in 1789 considering ‘The Tattered Garland’ or ‘The Kirk’s Alarm’,⁵ a pair following the poet’s death in July 1796,⁶ and two letters by Kenrick in 1801–2 which mention James Currie’s ‘Life of Burns’ published in his *Works of Robert Burns* (1800).⁷ Their discussions of the two Burns poems in 1787–89 pick up the brief conversation they had had about Wodrow’s own use of his mother-tongue dialect, as they

¹ Forthcoming, *Burns Chronicle*, Sept. 2024.

² James Wodrow [JW] to Samuel Kenrick [SK], 22 June 1787, *The Wodrow-Kenrick Correspondence 1750–1810, Vol. 2: 1784–1790*, eds Martin Fitzpatrick, Emma Macleod and Anthony Page (OUP, forthcoming), Letter 130. See also note 7 below.

³ SK to JW, 23 Aug. 1787, Letter 131.

⁴ JW to SK, 13 Dec. 1787, Letter 134, and SK to JW, 13 Feb. 1788, Letter 135.

⁵ JW to SK, 9 Nov. 1789, Letter 151, and SK to JW, 16 Dec. 1789, Letter 152.

⁶ JW to SK, 20 Oct. 1796, Letter 210, and SK to JW, 23 Nov. 1796, Letter 211.

⁷ SK to JW, 28 Sept. 1801, Letter 230, and SK to JW, 6 Feb. 1802, Letter 231.

debated how much local knowledge was required to understand and appreciate Burns—both the language he used in any particular poem, and his allusions to individuals and local situations. Both of the poems Wodrow elected to send Kenrick were written in Scots, and both were circulated locally rather than published in Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scots Dialect*, published at Kilmarnock in 1786 and Edinburgh in 1787. While Wodrow, in common with many literary critics, feared that few English readers were in a position to grasp Burns's quality because they neither understood Scots language nor were they familiar with what he was describing, Kenrick was less worried about Burns's language and only noted that some of his poetry related to such local situations that its appeal must be limited. On the other hand, Wodrow, though a local parish minister, was rather less disturbed by Burns's ecclesiastical satire than, perhaps surprisingly, was Kenrick, a radical dissenter.

This bilateral correspondence comprises nearly three hundred extant letters written between 1750 and 1810, totalling nearly half a million words, pretty evenly distributed between both men. They had met as students at Glasgow University in the 1740s, and began writing letters to each other around 1748, which they continued until Wodrow's death in 1810.⁸ Wodrow, many of whose forebears and those of his wife were also ministers, was the parish minister of the small town of Stevenston, near Saltcoats (which formed part of his parish) in north Ayrshire from 1759–1810 after two years in the parish of Dunlop, following a four-year assistantship in Kilwinning. Kenrick, originally from Wrexham in Wales, was tutor to a family in Renfrewshire for the first fifteen years of the correspondence (1750–65), after which he moved to England, to the town of Bewdley in Worcestershire, near Birmingham, where he joined his brother Edward in a banking business, as well as local Unitarian circles.

James Wodrow's entire career as a parish minister was therefore spent in Burns's Ayrshire. He was acquainted with the county set as well as much involved with the poor in his own parish, and he was regularly involved in presbytery, synod and General Assembly business. He was a solidly Moderate churchman himself, a protégé of William Leechman, and on several occasions he was actively involved in defending friends against heresy charges brought by members of the Popular party in the deeply divided presbyteries of Irvine

⁸ The letters, around 85% of which are extant, are held by the Dr Williams's Library, London, at MSS 24:157. They were microfilmed in 1982, but remain relatively underused despite their breadth and depth of discussions of later eighteenth century intellectual, political and social life. They are now being edited for publication in four volumes, of which the first is available in print and via *Oxford Scholarship Online*. See *The Wodrow-Kenrick Correspondence, 1750–1810. Volume 1: 1750–1783* [*W-K*, vol. 1], eds Martin Fitzpatrick, Emma Macleod and Anthony Page (Oxford, 2020).

and Ayrshire and the synod of Glasgow and Ayr.⁹ Yet he was an eirenic man, with family roots in Covenanting and orthodox Calvinism, and he cherished genuine friendships with leading Popular party figures such as John Witherspoon and John Erskine and local orthodox Calvinists such as Robert Dow.¹⁰ Furthermore, the young Robert Burns lived in the parish of Tarbolton, from 1776 till 1781, where he founded the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club for debating. The minister of Tarbolton was Wodrow's brother, Rev. Patrick Wodrow (1713–93). Lesley Baillie (1768–1843) of Mayville House, Stevenston, approximately three hundred metres east of Wodrow's High Kirk, was the subject of Burns's 'Bonney Lesley' and 'Blythe hae I been on yon hill'. James Wodrow was a close friend of her father.¹¹ He must have read Burns's ecclesiastical and social satires with as much understanding as anyone.

Samuel Kenrick had lived in Scotland for twenty-five years. Moreover, his mother, Sarah Hamilton (1695–1775) was Scottish, the daughter of Rev. Archibald Hamilton (1658–1709) of Corstorphine, near Edinburgh.¹² Like Burns's mother, Agnes (1732–1820), *née* Brown, Kenrick's wife Elisabeth (c. 1726–1815), *née* Smith, was from Maybole, Ayrshire, and their daughter Mary (1754–1812) was born in Maybole and lived in Scotland for at least the first eleven years of her life. Mary visited the Wodrow family for an extended stay in summer 1784 (June till October), and took Helen ('Nell') Wodrow (c. 1763–95) back home with her to Bewdley for an even longer visit, till September 1785. This substantial experience of family and life in the south-west of Scotland is important context for Kenrick's discussions of Burns's poetry: he was not a disinterested reader nor unacquainted with Burns's *locus operandi*. In general, Kenrick had a more robust attitude towards English criticism of Scottish customs and people than did Wodrow. Discussing Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785), and admitting it to be 'entertaining' though 'a strange Hotch-potch', he was highly critical of Johnson's arrogance: 'I can hardly believe the

⁹ For his support of Alexander Fergusson of Kilwinning in 1769, see Letters 45–47, 49 in *W-K*, vol. 1; for his support of William M'Gill twenty years later, see Letters 146–154 in *ibid.*, vol. 2 (forthcoming). Colin Kidd, 'Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Scotland: an Ayrshire-Renfrewshire microclimate', in *The Enlightenment in Scotland: National and international perspectives*, eds Jean-François Dunyach and Ann Thomson (Oxford, 2015), pp. 59–84.

¹⁰ Rev. Robert Dow (1707–87), parish minister of Ardrossan in the presbytery of Irvine, whom Wodrow once defended when he was criticised for preaching in too orthodox a strain. JW to SK, 23 Nov. 1786, Letter 125.

¹¹ Burns called Lesley Baillie 'the most bewitching ... a woman exquisitely charming, without the least seeming consciousness of it'. Robert Burns to Lesley Baillie of Mayville, May 1793, in *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, 4 vols (1896), vol. 3, p. 428. There is a monument to her in Glencairn Street, Stevenston, with the text of Burns's poem inscribed on it. See also JW to SK, 16–21 June 1794, Letter 191, and JW to WK, 17/18 July 1794, Letter 193. I owe this information to Anthony Page.

¹² Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: The succession of ministers in th Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, 10 vols, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1920), vol. 1, p. 7.

tameness of your litterati before this surly giant.’¹³ In the same letter, discussing the linguistic scholar John Horne Tooke’s *Diversions of Purley* (1786),¹⁴ Kenrick both asserted that ‘my knowledge of the scots dialect enables to me to understand & relish much more than I should otherwise have done’ and noted an instance ‘wch. the author does not know is obvious to everyone in Scotland’, of one of Tooke’s major principles:

The words I mean are butt & benn– wch. you wd. call particles or adverbs or conjunctions. While in reality the[y] are verbs– viz bi–utan & bi–innen. To be out & to be in– in the imperative mood: wch. he shows to be the case wth. all prepositions & conjunctions.¹⁵

Wodrow’s and Kenrick’s discussions of Burns’s poetry and importance, though relatively brief, are therefore not simply the passing comments of friends tracking fashionable publications without much critical understanding. They are the responses of highly cultured readers, neither well known either in their own day nor thereafter, who did not write for publication, but who had received a fine education at the University of Glasgow, and who lived, read and wrote at a level which might be described as somewhere just beyond the circles of the Enlightenment literati who were and are household names. Wodrow knew many of the staff at Glasgow University, both by his geographical proximity and by his close relationship with Leechman till the Principal’s death in 1785. Between graduating and taking up his assistantship at the parish church of Kilwinning, Wodrow was librarian at the university¹⁶ just at the time when Adam Smith was beginning his teaching career, when both he and Smith were inexperienced enough for him to dismiss Smith’s ideas on teaching with the arrogant derision of youth.¹⁷ Later in life, he enjoyed dining and meeting *tête-à-tête* with major figures such as William Robertson and Hugh Blair when he was in Edinburgh for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.¹⁸ Living near Birmingham, Kenrick knew and admired Joseph Priestley.

¹³ SK to JW, 23 Aug. 1787, Letter 131.

¹⁴ John Horne Tooke, *Epea Pteroyta, or, The Diversions of Purley*, 2 vols (London, 1786).

¹⁵ SK to JW, 23 Aug. 1787, Letter 131.

¹⁶ From 1750–55. *The Matriculation Albums of the University of Glasgow from 1728 to 1858*, compiled by W. Innes Addison (Glasgow, 1913), p. 27.

¹⁷ ‘Smiths Reputation in his Rhetorical Lectures is sinking every day. As I am not a scholar of his I don’t pretend to assign the cause. ... I hear he has thrown out some contemptuos Expressions of Mr Hutchison. Let the young man take care to guard his Censures by the Lines Palisades & counterscarps of his science Retorick.’ Smith was seven years older than JW. JW to SK, 21 Jan. 1752, Letter 16.

¹⁸ E.g. JW to SK, 16 June 1785, Letter 96; JW to SK, 5 Aug. 1785, Letter 99.

They both read widely, despite frequent complaints that they had not enough time for it; and, while their letters deal with a wide range of subjects, from politics and religion, to family and friends, and health and emotions, it was rare for many letters to pass without a note or discussion of what they were reading, whether recent fiction, sixteenth-century or contemporary theology, or ancient literature. In one twelve-month period between spring 1784 and spring 1785, the publications they mentioned or discussed included the poetry and drama of William Mason and William Hayley,¹⁹ the theology and philosophy of Joseph Priestley,²⁰ Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783),²¹ the Scottish history of Hugo Arnot and Lord Hailes, and William Mitford's Greek history,²² the travel writing of William Coxe and Thomas Pennant,²³ as well as some unspecified novels.²⁴ 'I have not the time to read the sixth part of the books I have it in my power,' Wodrow lamented on 25 March 1785.²⁵

When, therefore, Burns's 'Elegy on Sir James Hunter Blair' was circulated locally in late 1787, Wodrow knew that it would interest Kenrick and his family, because it was the work of 'our Airshire poet',²⁶ although the content of the poem concentrates on themes of the premature death of a patriot and general dramatic scenes of wild Scottish nature rather than anything particular to the south-west. Like Burns, Sir James Hunter Blair had been a freemason, and he had welcomed the poet to Edinburgh. Wodrow thought Burns's elegy 'superiour to many of his printed [poems]'.²⁷ In his letter of 13 December that year, he mentioned that Nell and her sister Margaret ('Peggy') (1767–1845) had promised to copy and send the poem to Mary Kenrick. He expected Elisabeth Kenrick to be familiar with Blair's family, who lived in the district of Carrick in south Ayrshire, whose principal town is Maybole, where her family lived.²⁸

¹⁹ JW to SK, 15 April 1784, Letter 79; JW to SK, 22 Oct. 1784, Letter 84; SK to JW, 2–3 Dec. 1784, Letter 85.

²⁰ SK to JW, 2 June 1784, Letter 80; JW to SK, 22 Oct. 1784, Letter 84; JW to SK, 3 Jan. 1785, Letter 87.

²¹ SK to JW, 2–3 Dec. 1784, Letter 85.

²² JW to SK, 3 Jan. 1785, Letter 87; SK to JW, 27 April 1785, Letter 95.

²³ SK to JW, 21 March 1785, Letter 93.

²⁴ JW to SK, 3 Jan. 1785, Letter 87.

²⁵ JW to SK, 25 March 1785, Letter 94.

²⁶ JW to SK, 9 Nov. 1789, Letter 151.

²⁷ JW to SK, 13 Dec. 1787, Letter 134. *Caledonian Mercury*, 1 Dec. 1781, carries a report of the St Andrews Day parade of the Edinburgh Grand Lodge, identifying Sir James Hunter Blair as the Grand Treasurer of Masons. I am grateful to Dr David Brown for this reference.

²⁸ Maybole was a significant concentration of Scottish freemasonry. Ronald Lyndsay Crawford, *Scotland and America in the Age of Paine* (Aberdeen, 2022), pp. 141–2. Stevenston acquired its own masonic lodge in 1787. John Strawhorn (ed.), *Ayrshire at the Time of Burns*, Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, vol. 5 (Kilmarnock, 1959), p. 268.

Previously in the correspondence, Wodrow had briefly mentioned Sir James Hunter Blair (1741–87), banker and lord provost of Edinburgh, responsible for securing the reconstruction of the South Bridge in the city, and he expected Kenrick, an avid reader of Scottish news and affairs, to be familiar with who he was:²⁹

He was married to the Heiress:³⁰ & you will know something of his char^r. even from the News Papers. He was at the head of the public spirited schemes for the Improvement of Ed^r. & was suddenly cut off in the midst of them about two or three months ago in his return from England.

Wodrow also assumed that Kenrick knew something of Burns—‘An Airshire farmer, a self taught Poet with no other education, but what he acquired from reading a little in the evening after he returned from the Plow’. Wodrow admired ‘the original painting of the scenes of nature and the scenes of low life in the first Edition of his Poems printed at Kilmarnock’ in 1786, and he had predicted that it would catch the attention of Edinburgh society, ‘where the enthusiasm is strong for every thing Scottish’. He had been surprised by the strength of its positive reception, there, however, and by the manner in which ‘the first people there’ had ‘caressed’ Burns.

Even more unexpected to Wodrow, however, was the ‘considerable run’ Burns’s poems had achieved in London. This he put down simply to fashion, because he ‘shoud imagine that few Englishmen coud understand the twentieth part of them & tho’ they did, coud relish the simple & beautiful pictures in them because they had never seen the original exhibited in real Life’. He cited the poet William Cowper, whose work was appreciated by both Wodrow and Kenrick, in favour of this view:

Cowper the English Poet admires Burns, regrets that he must lose much deserved praise because his Language is to many unintelligible, says ‘his candle is bright but shut up in a dark Lantern’.³¹

²⁹ JW to SK, 7 Dec. 1785, Letter 86; JW to SK, 31 Oct. 1785, Letter 104.

³⁰ He married Jane Blair of Dunskey House near Portpatrick, Wigtonshire in 1770. She inherited her father’s estate in 1777, when Hunter added Blair to his name.

³¹ JW to SK, 13 Dec. 1787, Letter 134. See Low, *Robert Burns: the critical heritage*, p. 91; J. Walter McGinty, *Robert Burns and Religion* (London, 2003), pp. 87–111, at p. 88. Wodrow is quoting a letter of 27 Aug. 1787 from Cowper to the lawyer Samuel Rose (1767–1804), the son of the famous schoolmaster and reviewer Dr William Rose (1719–86). Rose was a friend of Wodrow’s, but he was particularly close to Cowper.

‘It is said of Ignorance that it begets contempt’, Wodrow concluded, ‘but I have often thought also that it begets or heightens Admiration.’

Wodrow and Kenrick were both avid readers of the leading liberal periodical, the *Monthly Review*, and sometimes substituted its articles for reading books first-hand. Its critic, James Anderson, like the critics of the *Critical Review*, the *English Review*, the *General Magazine* and the *London Chronicle*, ‘much regret[ed] that these poems are written in some measure in an unknown tongue, which must deprive most of our Readers of the pleasure they would otherwise naturally create’.³² This critical response—often written by Scots in London such as Anderson—may have weighed with Wodrow in his doubts regarding the accessibility of Burns’s poetry in Scots, and he was in good company. Notoriously, the prominent Scottish critics Henry Mackenzie and Hugh Blair focused in print on the merits of Burns’s English poetry at the expense of his work in Scots, at the time of the publication of his first collection, for fear that emphasising the excellence of his vernacular poetry might diminish his readership.³³ It was not until 1809 that Francis Jeffrey defended Burns’s Scots poetry as ‘better than his English’ and asserted that ‘the Scotch is, in reality, a highly poetical language’ (not to be confused with ‘the barbarous dialects of Yorkshire or Devon’)—unlike Cowper in 1788, who had told Lady Hesketh that the Scots language used by Burns was ‘uncouth’, ‘barbarous’ and ‘disgusting’.³⁴ ‘Thomas Scotus’, writing in the *Morning Chronicle* in 1791, was an unusually early voice upbraiding Burns for writing in English at all.³⁵

Wodrow’s suspicion that even Burns’s portraits of the Ayrshire landscapes would have a less powerful effect on English readers than his local audience, also echoed a more dismissively expressed note by Anderson in the *Monthly Review*:

beside, they abound with allusions to the modes of life, opinions, and ideas, of the people in a remote corner of the country, which would render many passages obscure, and consequently uninteresting, to those who perceive not the forcible accuracy of the picture of the objects to which they allude. This work, therefore, can only be fully relished by the natives of that part of the country where it was produced; but by such

³² [James Anderson], *Monthly Review*, 85 (Dec. 1786), 439-48.

³³ Donald A. Low, *Robert Burns: the critical heritage* (London, 1974), p. 6. E.g. Christopher A. Whatley, *Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People* (Edinburgh, 2016), p. 16, on the nineteenth-century importance of Burns’s use of vernacular Scots for legitimising the language of ordinary Scots.

³⁴ Low, *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 5–6, 14, 16, 19–20, 24, 30, 72, 186. For Cowper to Lady Hesketh, see McGinty, *Robert Burns and Religion*, p. 89.

³⁵ Corey E. Andrews, *Inventing Scotland’s Bard: The British Reception of Robert Burns, 1786–1836* (Columbia, SC, 2022), p. 15; Whatley, *Immortal Memory*, p. 35.

of *them* as have a taste sufficiently refined to be able to relish the beauties of nature, it cannot fail to be highly prized.³⁶

Wodrow's concern, that even should London readers be able to understand Burns's Scots language, they would be less able to 'relish the simple & beautiful pictures in them because they had never seen the original exhibited in real Life', did not go so far as Anderson, who thought they could not be interested by remote landscapes.

Kenrick's reply³⁷ confirmed Wodrow's hope that he would be interested in the elegy, which he thought 'excellent', and which he compared to a similar tribute written by William Richardson, professor of humanities at Glasgow, to Dr William Irvine.³⁸ In Kenrick's view, the language used was secondary to the subject matter:

When sentiments of this sort come from the heart, as I presume they do in both these instances, they cannot fail of their effect in any language; how much more powerful and pleasing must they be when set off with the imagery & harmony of poetry! The single circumstance of prematurity, fills the soul wth. a painful regret, w^{ch}. disposes it to relish everything else that tends to heighten the loss.

Moreover, he was disposed to be more generous than Wodrow and Anderson to admirers of Burns who might be supposed not to understand his Scots language:

I should rather ascribe this excess of admiration to a more noble cause than ignorance. Every reader must understand something of him. What they do understand they admire, and *ex pede Herculem*,³⁹ conclude from thence that what they do not understand must be equally excellent.

Wodrow and Kenrick had discussed the use of Scots language earlier, not only in the context of Wodrow's 'Life of Principal Leechman' but also in the context of the publication

³⁶ [Anderson], *Monthly Review*, 85 (Dec. 1786), 439-48.

³⁷ SK to JW, 13 Feb. 1788, Letter 135.

³⁸ William Irvine, lecturer in materia medica and in chemistry at the University of Glasgow, who died in 1787. Robert Fox, 'William Irvine (1743-87)', *ODNB*. Richardson's 'Elegaic Verses Occasioned by the death of Dr Irvine' are reproduced in Andrew Kent (ed.), *An Eighteenth Century Lectureship in Chemistry* (Glasgow, 1950), pp. 149-50.

³⁹ Literally 'Hercules from his foot', inferring knowledge of the whole from one small part, from Plutarch's account of Pythagoras calculating Hercules's height from the size of his foot.

of Rev. William M'Gill's *Practical Essay on the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh, 1786). Wodrow had taken much trouble to ease M'Gill's book through to publication, regarding which he had sought advice from Kenrick and, through Kenrick, Joseph Priestley. Wodrow was keen that the book should be widely read in England as well as in Scotland, partly in order to raise a profit for the good of M'Gill's impoverished family, and he was anxious that M'Gill's language should not hinder that potential.⁴⁰ M'Gill had asked his opinion of the first edition. Wodrow told Kenrick:

I have marked a few inaccuracies in the Language chiefly Scotticisms you will be able to see many more which you would mark as well as give your sentiments of the whole & those of your friends. The former may be easily corrected in a second Edition if it is demanded but notwithstanding my repeated hints he has taken no measures to raise any attention to it in England and encourage an English sale without which the book will be in a manner lost notwithstanding his seven or 800 subscribers in this country. I wish you can give any hints on this point.⁴¹

It was not till September 1787 that Kenrick replied in regard to M'Gill's style, and then only briefly—but again, he was much less anxious than his friend about its likely effect on English readers. 'It is a good book. For it cannot be read, without our being made better thereby. We forget the author & style & think of nothing but the subject & our own feelings.'⁴²

Moreover, Wodrow and Kenrick had discussed the transferability of the Scots dialect in spoken English, when Wodrow had expressed concern regarding his daughter's visit to the Kenrick family in Worcestershire in 1784.

I dare say Nell will feel herself for a great while in an uneasy & awkward situation from the want of the English Language I am much affraid that like your friend Brisbane she will not easily acquire a propriety in her manner of speaking whatever may be her ambition to do it yet there is no judging till She be tried.⁴³

⁴⁰ JW to SK, 22 Oct. 1784, Letter 84.

⁴¹ JW to SK, 23 Nov. 1786, Letter 125.

⁴² SK to JW, 28 Sept. 1787, Letter 133.

⁴³ JW to SK, 22 Oct. 1784, Letter 84.

Kenrick replied that, unlike his young friend Robert Brisbane, ‘who was what you call in Scotland a spilt bairn’, Nell Wodrow was unlikely to suffer long. ‘As to the English dialect it is soon acquired especially by the docile, gentle female sex, who are so chatty together.’⁴⁴ He pointed out that there were many dialects and accents within England, and that, below the upper classes, everyone was marked by these.

Thus Dr. Priestley notwithstanding the variety of different & best company he has been long accustomed to, wch. generally polishes & wears off these rough corners, still retains marks of the Yorkshire pronunciation both in familiar discourse & in the pulpit– & his lady a much stronger degree of the Westmoreland dialect, wch. borders on the scotch.⁴⁵

It is telling that the better travelled and more confident Kenrick never expressed anxiety about his daughter Mary’s ability to communicate in Scotland.

The opinions of Wodrow and Kenrick were reversed to some extent when it came to the content rather than the language of Burns’s ecclesiastical satire, ‘The Tattered Garland’ (1789),⁴⁶ in which individual Ayrshire parish ministers were singled out for biting mockery. Wodrow expressed no particular resentment of the content, and passed the poem on to Kenrick specifically for his amusement and that of Elisabeth and Mary Kenrick. Indeed, Wodrow sympathised with the satire, which was Burns’s comment on the trial for heresy of their mutual friend Rev. William M’Gill.⁴⁷ Wodrow was well aware of the ‘Killing Times’ of the previous century, from his family history, and he detested ecclesiastical persecution.⁴⁸ He

⁴⁴ SK to JW, 2–3 Dec. 1784, Letter 85.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Also known as ‘The Ayrshire Garland’ or, in a different form published in 1790, as ‘The Kirk’s Alarm’. ‘Garland’: ‘A collection of short literary pieces, usually poems and ballads; an anthology, a miscellany’. *OED*, 4.

⁴⁷ McGinty, *Robert Burns and Religion*, pp. 143–78. The M’Gill case in 1789–90 involved the presbytery of Ayr, the synod of Glasgow and Ayr, and the General Assembly. See also Wodrow’s support for the Rev. Alexander Fergusson of Kilwinning (1689–1770), mentor to both SK and him, when he embroiled himself in 1768 in a dispute in print with the orthodox minister of West Kilbride, Rev. John Adam, and found himself accused of heresy in his eightieth year, also for opposing compulsory subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1649) for Church of Scotland ministers. *W-K*, vol. 1, pp. 159–62; Colin Kidd, ‘The Fergusson Affair: Calvinism and dissimulation in the Scottish Enlightenment’, *Intellectual History Review*, 26 (2016), 339–54.

⁴⁸ Wodrow’s paternal grandfather, James Wodrow (1637–1707), his maternal great-grandfather, William Guthrie (1620–65), and his maternal grandfather, Patrick Warner of Ardeer (c.1640–1724) were only the three most prominent of his Covenanting forebears, emphasised by his father Robert Wodrow as examples for his children, in his biography of his own father (*The Life of James Wodrow, A.M., Professor of Divinity in the University of Glasgow* [Edinburgh, 1828], p. 196). They also included his maternal grandmother’s first husband, Ebenezer Veitch (1676–1706) and his great-uncle on his father’s side, Thomas Warner (d. 1716). See

had spent much of this letter detailing his own efforts to rally friends and allies in support of M’Gill against a heresy charge brought against him by Popular party ministers in the presbytery of Ayr, and then in the synod of Glasgow and Ayr, in response to the publication of his *Practical Essay* and, more immediately, his published centenary sermon on the Revolution of 1688.⁴⁹ Now, he wrote:

Whatever may be the success in our Ch. Courts, these fools & bigots will be sufficiently lashed at the bar of the public. A specimen which I send you of a Song printed at Glasgow. It bears marks of the hand of Burns our Airshire Poet whom you may have heard of.⁵⁰

Kenrick, perhaps surprisingly for a convinced Unitarian, was in fact more doubtful about Burns’s ridicule of clergymen, even if he allowed that Burns’s targets had themselves to blame. ‘Many thanks for Burns—he has again made us laugh heartily—tho’ I am no violent admirer of ridicule. Hypocrisy & grimace is certainly its fair game.’⁵¹

What Wodrow and Kenrick agreed on, however, was the intense localism of the content of the poem. ‘Such as it is,’ wrote Wodrow, ‘it will amuse M^{rs}. & Miss Kenrick but will be scarcely intelligible without notes which I shall subjoin upon the Cover pointing out the names & Allusions to facts sufficiently known on the spot.’ His notes for the Kenricks identified nine ministers referred to in the satire, added some comments, and translated a few Scots words for them. For instance:

Christopher A. Whatley, ‘Reformed Religion, Regime Change, Scottish Whigs and the Struggle for the “Soul” of Scotland, c. 1688–c. 1788’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 92 (2013), 66–99, esp. 71, 78.

⁴⁹ William M’Gill, *The Benefits of the Revolution, a Sermon* (Kilmarnock, 1789). Colin Kidd, ‘Scotland’s invisible Enlightenment: subscription and heterodoxy in the eighteenth-century Kirk’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, 30 (2000), 35, 45–7; Luke Brekke, ‘Heretics in the Pulpit, Inquisitors in the Pews: The Long Reformation and the Scottish Enlightenment’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 44 (2010), 79–98; Ronald Lyndsay Crawford, *The Chair of Verity: political preaching and pulpit censure in eighteenth-century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2017).

⁵⁰ JW to SK, 9 Nov. 1789, Letter 151.

⁵¹ SK to JW, 16 Dec. 1789, Letter 152.

7 The Rev^d. M^r. Alex^r. Moodie.⁵² Sing't singed but the Scotch more
contemptuous of this Gentleman⁵³ my friend D^r. Dow⁵⁴ upon hearing him harrangue
at Synod at Irvine said 'Poor thing! poor thing! The Head of him is as toom as a
baubee-whistle.'

Wodrow inserted 'halfpenny' above 'baubee', but did not feel the need to translate 'toom' or many other of Burns's words in the poem: it was the content rather than the language that he sought to elucidate for the Kenricks. Kenrick responded, similarly commenting on the topicality rather than the vocabulary: 'But the satire is too local and personal to last long. Without your notes we sh^d. have been quite in the dark.'

Burns died in July 1796, leaving his wife and family with no financial security. When Wodrow wrote to Kenrick in October, he noted briefly that a new edition of his poetry was in preparation, and correctly implied that this was partly for the benefit of his widow and children: 'A prodigious separate subscription is going on at the same time for a fund towards the maintenance of his family.' Peggy Wodrow had pre-ordered three copies of the book, edited by James Currie and including his biographical sketch of the poet.⁵⁵ Kenrick's reply carried a brief paragraph in response to Wodrow's comments on the poet's death, sympathising with Burns and his family, and foreseeing a lasting legacy: 'Tho' his career was short, it was brilliant, & his fame will be lasting.'⁵⁶

Finally, when Currie's four-volume *Works of Robert Burns*, including his biography of the poet, was eventually published in 1800, two letters from Kenrick commented on the publication. He had read it alongside Malcolm Laing's history of the 1603 Union of the Crowns and Robert Henry's *History of Britain*,⁵⁷ and had drawn from Laing and Henry

⁵² Rev. Alexander Moodie (1728–99), minister of Riccarton, near Kilmarnock (1762–99). He was an 'Auld Licht' preacher mocked previously by Burns in 'The Holy Tulzie' and 'The Holy Fair'. McGinty, *Robert Burns and Religion*, pp. 170–1.

⁵³ Stanza 8: 'Singet Sawnie! singet Sawnie, are ye huirdin the penny, / Unconscious what evils await? / With a jump, yell, and howl, alarm ev'ry soul, / For the foul thief is just at your gate. / Singet Sawnie! For the foul thief is just at your gate.' 'Singit', 'singed' but by extension, 'stunted, shrivelled, puny'. *Concise Scots Dictionary*, ed. Mairi Robison (Aberdeen, 1985).

⁵⁴ See note 9.

⁵⁵ Clark McGinn, 'Burns and the bank manager: Robert Burns in the shadow of the debtors' prison', *Scottish Historical Review*, 94 (2015), pp. 140–63; Clark McGinn, "'The Improvidence of Men of Genius is Proverbial": Sympathy, Charity, and Patronage for the Burns Family Following the Poet's Early Death', *Scottish Historical Review*, 101 (2022), pp. 46–85.

⁵⁶ SK to JW, 23 Nov. 1796, Letter 211.

⁵⁷ Malcolm Laing, *The History of Scotland, from the union of the crowns on the accession of King James VI to the throne of England, to the union of the kingdoms in the reign of Queen Anne* (1800); Robert Henry, *The History of Great Britain, from the first invasion of it by the Romans under Julius Caesar*, 6 vols (1771–93).

a dismal picture of the violent party spirit, your regular government & barbarous manners—w^{ch}. are still marked in stronger colours by the ingenious & elegant Dr. Currie in his life of Burns!⁵⁸

In the second letter, he added that he had learned from Currie

w^{ch}. I had read wth. much satisfaction— of the state and improvement of knowledge and manners in Scotland— so much more important and useful than the crafty intrigues, and the devastation and bloodshed of tyrants and their servile satellites, w^{ch}. are the favourite and never failing subjects of both ancient & modern history.⁵⁹

In other words,

What a happy change did the revolution [of 1688] bring about in that devoted country— w^{ch}. was greatly improved by the union of the two Kingdoms!— altho' both those fortunate events, were most obstinately opposed & even execrated by the generality of the Scots nation. While poor honest John Bull never troubled his head about it, pro or con.⁶⁰

Burns himself told John Moore in 1787 that he had written for a local audience—‘my Compeers, the rustic Inmates of the Hamlet’—and he also expressed scepticism of his appeal beyond Ayrshire. Perhaps, at least in the early months after publication of his *Poems* in Kilmarnock (1786), Edinburgh (1787) and London (1787), he might have been sympathetic to Wodrow’s reading of his work.⁶¹ It is notable that, of Wodrow and Kenrick, it was the reader at a distance who defended Burns’s poetry in Scots. It is true that Kenrick had a substantial background in Scots, and he was certainly more sympathetic to Burns’s vernacular poetry than Cowper, who otherwise recognised and applauded Burns’s genius. On the other hand, Kenrick was free of any ‘Scots cringe’ from which London Scots such as James Anderson and other reviewers may have suffered; and he was corresponding privately rather than publishing his criticism, although little about his private correspondence suggests

⁵⁸ SK to JW, 28 Sept. 1801, Letter 230.

⁵⁹ SK to JW, 6 Feb. 1802, Letter 231.

⁶⁰ SK to JW, 28 Sept. 1801, Letter 230.

⁶¹ Low, *Robert Burns: the critical heritage*, pp. 8–11. See, e.g., Whatley, *Immortal Memory*, p. 9 for the rapidity of the growth of Burns’s celebrity from 1787.

that he would have been fearful of expressing his literary opinions in a public setting. Moreover, for all Wodrow's doubts about the broader appeal of Burns's writing in Scots, it is telling that the two poems he chose to send Kenrick were both written in that language.

Wodrow's and Kenrick's brief discussions of the life and work of Burns thus present a nuanced example of informal but informed literary criticism in the Enlightenment, beyond the circles of the celebrated literati or published reviewers. Their opinions were written for their own private edification and enjoyment, but they reflected the broader debates on the value of Scots vernacular, and the balance of preserving the old and pursuing the new in the Scottish Enlightenment.⁶² Their commentary on Burns's poetry was embedded in their own ongoing conversation about the transferability of language beyond borders. This conversation, carried on over several years in the 1780s, also took in their discussions of Wodrow's own writing and that of William M'Gill, as well as of Nell Wodrow's ability to communicate in speech in Bewdley. Given that poetry is to be spoken even more than to be read, perhaps Kenrick's comment on vernacular speech is a fitting conclusion:

In short there is vulgar pronunciation as well as a vulgar language, peculiar to every district in England (except Oxford) wch. marks more or less the language of every individual who does not take great pains to guard against it. And perhaps it is most attended to & guarded against by people of the most superficial minds.⁶³

⁶² Whatley, *Immortal Memory*, p. 16; Gerard Carruthers, 'Postscript: Varieties of Cultural Improvement in the Long Eighteenth Century', in *Cultures of Improvement in Scottish Romanticism, 1707–1840*, eds Alex Benchimol and Gerard Lee McKeever (London, 2018), pp. 233–7.

⁶³ SK to JW, 2–3 Dec. 1784, Letter 85.