

Burns' reply to "The Star"

"A peasant boy"! A fechtin' word
Ye harl around. Are your e'en blurr'd?
The Teuchter clarsach, swept or no
Maks ne'er the sound that stirs me so,
But the Deil's ain fiddle wi' drum an' fife
Gars my pen flee as deer for life.

My classic lore, had I honed but dully,
Wad I liken Graham's laird tae Tully
Or spunkie Erskine's bold philippic
Tae Demosth'nes's tirade epic?
Nae serf am I, illiterate!
Wi' Glencairn's Earl I ha'e dined 'til sate.

Translation

(Burns takes exception to James Thomson's words in "The Star o' Robbie Burns")

"A peasant boy" Those are fighting words. You need your eyes tested, Jimmy. The highlander's Celtic harp or lyre, whether played glissando or otherwise, never produces the kind of music which awakens the poetic muse within me. It is the devil's own instrument, the fiddle, perhaps accompanied by fife and drum, which compels my pen to fly across the page, like a hunted deer running for its life.

If I had been a dilatory student of the classics, do you really think I'd have compared the debating prowess of two Scottish politicians to the mastery of two of the great dialecticians of ancient times – Tullius Cicero, the 1st Century BC Roman, and Demosthenes, the Greek orator who railed at the Athenians for not preparing to defend themselves against the impending onslaught by Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander, in the 4th century BC? I am not an illiterate serf. (or – I am not a serf you illiterate bum.) I have been accepted by the literati of Edinburgh and have enjoyed their hospitality and intellectual companionship until I felt I had had enough of it.

The reference to Demosthenes and Tully comes from an untitled poem written by Burns in support of the efforts of many Scots MPs of the time, among them the Laird of Graham (heir to the Duke of Montrose) and Thomas Erskine (heir to the Barony of Erskine) to put through Westminster an "Act anent the Scotch Distilleries", the outcome of which politicking was uncertain at the time of Burns' writing. The Act did in the event pass into law in 1786 in the manner for which Burns was hoping.

The notion of an "illiterate bard" does have a very long and creditable history from biblical times even until the present day (in Afghanistan and elsewhere). Burns was not one of them. Possibly the last of the great Scottish illiterates was Rob Donn MacAoidh whose Gaelic poetry survived for 40 years in the oral tradition from his death in 1778 until its first appearance on paper in 1829.

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