

1820

SCOTTISH REBELLION

ESSAYS ON A NINETEENTH-CENTURY
INSURRECTION



Edited by

Gerard Carruthers, Kevin Thomas Gallagher,
Craig Lamont *and* George Smith

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ADDRESS

TO THE

Inhabitants of Great Britain & Ireland;

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN,

ROUSED from that torpid state in which We have been sunk for so many years, We are at length compelled, from the extremity of our sufferings, and the contempt heaped upon our Petitions for redress, to assert our RIGHTS, at the hazard of our lives; and proclaim to the world the real motives, which (if not misrepresented by designing men, would have United all ranks), have reduced us to take up ARMS for the redress of our *Common Grievances*.

The numerous Public Meetings held throughout the Country has demonstrated to you, that the interests of all Classes are the same. That the protection of the Life and Property of the *Rich Man*, is the interest of the *Poor Man*, and in return, it is the interest of the Rich, to protect the poor from the iron grasp of DESPOTISM; for, when its victims are exhausted in the lower circles, there is no assurance but that its ravages will be continued in the upper: For once set in motion, it will continue to move till a succession of Victims fall.

Our principles are few, and founded on the basis of our CONSTITUTION, which were purchased with the DEAREST BLOOD of our ANCESTORS, and which we swear to transmit to posterity unsullied, or PERISH in the Attempt.—Equality of Rights (not of Property,) is the object for which we contend; and which we consider as the only security for our LIBERTIES and LIVES.

Let us show to the world that We are not that Lawless, Sanguinary Rabble, which our Oppressors would persuade the higher circles we are—but a BRAVE and GENEROUS PEOPLE, determined to be FREE, LIBERTY or DEATH is our Motto, and We have sworn to return home in triumph—or return no more!

SOLDIERS,

Shall YOU, Countrymen, bound by the sacred obligation of an Oath, to defend your Country and your King from enemies, whether foreign or domestic, plunge your BAYONETS into the bosoms of Fathers and Brothers, and at once sacrifice at the Shrine of Military Despotism, to the unrelenting Orders of a Cruel Faction, those feelings which you hold in common with the rest of mankind? SOLDIERS, Turn your eyes toward SPAIN, and there behold the happy effects resulting from the UNION of Soldiers and Citizens. Look to that quarter, and there behold the yoke of hated Despotism, broke by the Unanimous wish of the People and the Soldiery, happily accomplished without bloodshed. And, shall You, who taught those Soldiers to fight the battles of LIBERTY, refuse to fight those of your own Country? Forbid it Heaven! Come, forward then at once, and Free your Country and your King, from the power of those that have held them too long in thralldom.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN, The eventful period has now arrived, where the Services of all will be required, for the forwarding of an object so universally wished, and so absolutely necessary. Come forward then, and assist those who have begun in the completion of so arduous a task, and support the laudable efforts, which we are about to make, to replace to BRITONS, those rights consecrated to them, by MAGNA CHARTA, and the BILL of RIGHTS, and Sweep from our Shores, that Corruption which has degraded us below the dignity of Man.

Owing to the misrepresentations which have gone abroad with regard to our intentions, we think it indispensably necessary to DECLARE inviolable, all Public and Private Property. And, We hereby call upon all JUSTICES of the PEACE, and all others to suppress PILLAGE and PLUNDER, of every description; and to endeavour to secure those Guilty of such offences, that they may receive that Punishment, which such violation of Justice demand.

In the present state of affairs, and during the continuation of so momentous a struggle, we earnestly request of all to desist from their Labour, from and after this day, the FIRST of APRIL; and attend wholly to the recovery of their Rights, and consider it as the duty of every man not to recommence until he is in possession of those Rights which distinguishes the FREEMAN from the SLAVE; viz: That of giving consent to the laws by which he is to be governed. We, therefore, recommend to the Proprietors of Public Works, and all others, to Stop the one, and Shut up the other, until order is restored, as we will be accountable for no damages which may be sustained; and which after this Public Intimation, they can have no claim to.

AND We hereby give notice to all those who shall be found carrying arms against those who intend to regenerate their Country, and restore its INHABITANTS to their NATIVE DIGNITY; We shall consider them as TRAITORS to their Country, and ENEMIES to their King, and treat them as such.

By order of the Committee of Organization,
for forming a PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT.

GLASGOW, 1st April, 1820.

Britons.—God.—Justice.—The wishes of all good Men are with us.—Join together and make it one CAUSE, and the Nations of the EARTH shall hail the day, when the Standard of LIBERTY shall be raised on its Native Soil.

The 1820 Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain & Ireland.
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Notes on contributors

Alex Benchimol is Senior Lecturer in Scottish Romantic Print Culture at the School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow. Alex was a founding co-Convener of the Scottish Romanticism Research Group from 2010–2019. Alex has recently published articles and essays on the Scottish newspaper press in the eighteenth century, including on the *Glasgow Advertiser*, *Caledonian Mercury* and *Aberdeen Journal*. This research is part of a larger book project exploring Scottish periodical history and its relationship to new modes of material improvement and civic identity in Scotland since 1707.

Carol Baraniuk is a Research Associate in Robert Burns Studies at the University of Glasgow, working on the project 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century'. She has presented and published widely on Burns and his contemporaries in Ulster. Carol has a particular interest in how radical activity in Scotland and Ulster was reported in Belfast newspapers of the 1790s and the early nineteenth century. Her monograph *James Orr, Poet and Irish Radical* (Pickering and Chatto) appeared in 2014. Her essay 'Bringing it all back home: the fluctuating reputation of James Orr', in *Rethinking the Irish Diaspora* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), discusses the marginalisation of Ulster Presbyterian radical voices in Irish and British literary traditions.

Rhona Brown is Senior Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Literature and the Periodical Press at the University of Glasgow. She is author of *Robert Fergusson and the Scottish Periodical Press* (2012) and co-editor of *Before Blackwood's: Scottish Journalism in the Age of Enlightenment* (2015), and has published widely on Scots language poetry and the eighteenth-century Scottish press. She is Co-Investigator on two major AHRC-funded textual editing projects: 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century: Poems and Correspondence', where she is co-editor of Burns's Letters, and 'The Collected Works of Allan Ramsay', on which she is editor of Ramsay's Poems and Prose. Brown is also Co-Editor of the *Scottish Literary Review*.

Ian Campbell is Emeritus Professor of Scottish and Victorian Literature at the University of Edinburgh. Born in Switzerland and educated there and in Scotland, he studied at the Universities of Aberdeen and Edinburgh, and since 1967 has been on the staff of the Department of English Literature with visiting appointments including Japan, China, Canada and USA. The Duke-Edinburgh edition of the Carlyle Letters, of which he is one of the senior editors, is approaching completion (2022) with volume 50. He has for many years taught and researched Scottish literature, particularly of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Gerard Carruthers is Francis Hutcheson Professor of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is General Editor of the multi-volume Oxford University Press edition of the Collected Works of Robert Burns and is Co-Editor of the *Burns Chronicle*. Recent publications include

contributions to the collections, *Commemorating Peterloo: Violence, Resilience and Claim-Making During the Romantic Era* (2019) and *A History of British Working-Class Literature* (2017). With Don Martin, he is co-editor of *Thomas Muir of Huntershill: Essays for the Twenty-First Century* (2016).

Michael Demson is an associate professor at Sam Houston State University, where he teaches courses in Romanticism, World Literature, and Literary Theory. His recent publications include *Romantic Automata: Exhibitions, Figures, Organisms* (2020), co-edited with Christopher Clason, *Commemorating Peterloo: Violence, Resilience, and Claim-making in the Romantic Era* (2019), co-edited with Regina Hewitt, and an English translation *Me, Mikko, and Annikki* (2020), a Finnish graphic novel by Tiitu Takalo. He has published articles in various journals including *European Romantic Review*, *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Journal*, *Romanticism*, the *Keats-Shelley Journal* and *Romantic Circles*.

Kevin Thomas Gallagher won a College of Arts scholarship in 2017 to undertake doctoral research on his PhD thesis, 'Editing Robert Burns for the Nineteenth Century', which has recently been completed. Kevin was the Shaw Scholar in 2016-17, which allowed him to complete a Masters degree, wherein he explored the critical reception of Burns in the Scottish Modernist period. Kevin has worked closely with co-editor on this volume, Gerry Carruthers, as editorial assistant for the forthcoming *The Oxford Handbook of Robert Burns*, and has been on the editorial boards of *eSharp* and *The Kelvingrove Review*.

John Gardner is Professor of English Literature at Anglia Ruskin University; he is currently also Leverhulme Trust Research Fellow on the project 'Engineering notes on contributors xi Romanticism'. John has published widely on eighteenth to twentieth century literature and his monograph *Poetry and Popular Protest* (2011, 2018 pbk.) was shortlisted for the European Society for the Study of English prize. Current work includes an edition of Pierce Egan's *Life in London* for Oxford University Press and a collection of essays, *The 1830s*, for Cambridge University Press.

Moira Hansen is a postdoctoral researcher and tutor in Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, and an Associate Lecturer with the Open University. Her research interests lie in the eighteenth-century intersections between literary culture and medical practices, and in the life and works of Robert Burns as shaped by his physical and mental health. She is also currently reviews editor for the *Burns Chronicle*, published by Edinburgh University Press.

Archie Henderson, MA Ancient Studies, PgCert Genealogical Palaeographic and Heraldic Studies, is a Social History Researcher at Paisley Museum. His museum and heritage sector career has reflected his passions for cultural heritage, genealogy and social history. Research interests include Scottish Literature, Jacobite Studies, Early Medieval Scotland, Celtic Civilisation, Classical Civilisation, and Christian Theology.

Shaun Kavanagh is a former PhD student at University of Glasgow where his thesis focused on the experiences of Irish and Highland migrants in nineteenth-century Greenock. His publications include an article in the edited volume *Scotland and the Easter Rising, 1916*, by Luath Press, and on employment networks between Ireland and Greenock in the *Journal of Scottish and Irish Studies*. He is currently a secondary school teacher in Modern Studies and Politics in Inverclyde.

Craig Lamont is Research Associate in the Centre for Robert Burns Studies, University of Glasgow, working on two AHRC-funded projects: 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century' (PI: Gerard Carruthers) and 'The Collected Works of Allan Ramsay' (PI: Murray Pittock). His PhD won the Ross Roy Medal in 2016. His essays have appeared in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, *Scottish Literary Review*, *Book Collector*, *Burns Chronicle* and other journals, and his monograph, *The Cultural Memory of Georgian Glasgow*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in January 2021.

Anthony Lewis is the curator for Scottish History for Glasgow Life Museums. Within his remit are collections concerning Scottish government, politics, and literature. These include collections on Scottish radical politics.

Catriona M.M. Macdonald is Reader in Late Modern Scottish History at the University of Glasgow, a former editor of the *Scottish Historical Review*, current president of the Scottish History Society, and director of the Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies at the University of Glasgow.

Author of the *Radical Thread* (2001), and *Whaur Extremes Meet* (2009), editor of *Unionist Scotland* (1998) and co-editor of *Scotland and the Great War* (1999), and author of many other essays and articles on Scottish politics and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she is currently working on a monograph exploring Scottish historiography since 1832.

Emma Macleod was educated at the University of Edinburgh, and is a senior lecturer in history at the University of Stirling. She is the author of *A War of Ideas: British Attitudes to the Wars Against Revolutionary France* (1998) and *British Visions of America, 1775–1820: Republican Realities* (2013), and the coeditor of *Political Trials in an Age of Revolutions: Britain and the North Atlantic, 1793–1848* (2019), eds Davis, Macleod and Pentland, and *The Wodrow-Kenrick Correspondence, 1750–1810, Volume 1: 1750–1780* (2020), eds Fitzpatrick, Macleod and Page. She is the co-editor of the *Scottish Historical Review*.

Maria Marchidanu is a Scottish Literature PhD candidate. Her research focuses on a comparative study of female identity from Enlightenment philosophy to early nineteenth-century women's writing. In 2018, Maria was the project coordinator and editor of the literary anthology *You Don't Look British* (Lumphanan Press) exploring identity and diversity in Scotland. In 2019–2020, Maria was Lead Editor of the *eSharp* academic journal and in 2021 her research was presented during the 'Adventurous Wives' Chawton House conference.

George Smith is employed in the field of Community Education. He is a published author and play-wright. Publications include, with Gerard Carruthers, 'Scottish Rebellion 1820' in *Open House* (2020), 'Alexander Wilson's manuscript notebook: A Scottish poet in America, 1801-1803' in *Scottish Literary Review* (2017) and 'Daylight Rabbery: The Story of Antique Smith Robert Burns's Forgeries' in *The Drouth* (2013).

Introduction

'The ebbing of the old shallow tide'

The civil context of the Radical War (1820)

Catriona M.M. Macdonald

According to Peter MacKenzie's *Reminiscences*, the location of the famous Reform meeting in Thrushgrove in October 1816 was only settled upon following a series of thwarted attempts to meet elsewhere.¹ In this, the organisers of the conference in which these essays originate have much in common with their predecessors: both tried to find a home in the Trades Hall in Glassford Street, Glasgow, and both had to think again. While in the nineteenth century the obstacle proved to be local magistrates who denied the reformers use of the Hall in favour of 'some mountebank . . . with his live Salamander', in 2020 the organisers faced the challenge of the Covid pandemic, booking and re-booking the famous Trades Hall in the hope of claiming a space Glasgow's radicals were denied, before ultimately settling on a virtual gathering - covering an expanse far larger than the Thrushgrove fields of tobacconist, James Turner - a year beyond the two hundredth anniversary.²

I. CONTEXT

The essays in this collection (belatedly) join many other anniversary publications in asserting the importance of the events in the west of Scotland in April 2020.³ In contrast to other recent works, which typically seek to narrativise the events in the wider context of Scottish radicalism, this volume adopts a different approach, acknowledging the paucity of evidence we have for what ‘actually’ happened; highlighting the contrasting and conflicting perspectives of groups and individuals who sought to understand and ascribe meaning to the events; and offering different frames within which the radical rising has been appreciated across the generations. Rhona Brown’s chapter is telling in this regard: the Scottish press has been mined for the insights it offers on the events of 1820, but what faith can we have in its accounts? There is no attempt in this volume to capture the essence of 1820, assert a definitive account, or claim it for any cause. This collection deliberately points in many directions in an attempt to reset the historiography of 1820 and suggest new research possibilities: among them, the insights offered by material culture, as evidenced here in the work of Archie Henderson and Anthony Lewis. It moves beyond claim and counter-claim from contemporary radical and loyalist interests and seeks distance from self-appointed ‘legatees’ of and aspirants to the ideals that are said to inhere in the events of Easter week, 1820 (not that there is any consensus on what these were). This is seen most obviously in Craig Lamont’s chapter which skilfully addresses how 1820 has etched its influence on the Scottish landscape, and how the drama of that year inspired Scottish writers. The meaning of ‘1820’ has always been found in how and when it has been remembered, mis-remembered and forgotten. That was the case in the court rooms for John Baird, Andrew

Hardie, James Wilson and others. It is the case now. The meaning of 1820 is not found solely in the motives of the few participants we can name, and those honoured as martyrs in the cause of democracy: here, Gerard Carruthers and John Gardner offer a fascinating insight into the work of Alexander Rodger, and Michael Demson identifies satire as a powerful political weapon. History is often the study of opaque utterances, stubborn silences and unintended consequences.

The context within which the events of 1820 took place is critically important in this regard – it dictated the bounds of the possible (and the probable), and should be appreciated both in the long- and short-term. Posterity is usually a less reliable guide than circumstance.

II. LONG-TERM

James Carlyle, father of philosopher Thomas Carlyle, died in 1832, the year that the franchise grew to accommodate those who posed the biggest threat to established interests – the middle class. Born a decade after a civil war had offered Scotland little but two versions of monarchy (Stuart and Hanoverian) and the killing field of Culloden, he had seen the loss of the American colonies, the French Revolution and decades of warfare on a global scale. And yet, as Ian Campbell emphasises in his chapter, it was in his final years, lamenting the worsening conditions of the ‘poor man’, that he predicted that ‘the world could not and would not last as it was.’⁴

The changing nature of poverty and working-class life in Scotland in the early nineteenth century in part explains ‘1820’. The process of urbanisation in Scotland was rapid and came later than in England and Wales: in 1750 just

9.2% of the Scottish population lived in towns with over 10,000 inhabitants (16.7% in England and Wales); by 1850, 32% of Scots were town dwellers (40.8% in England and Wales).⁵ Such demographic change was bound to have consequences, particularly as a major driver for urban development in Scotland was manufacture – with very few exceptions, the Scottish town was a workers’ town. Thus, when local authorities failed to keep pace with the challenges wrought by population growth, few of their new citizens had the private resources to call on to survive the problems of modern urban life: housing shortages, overcrowding, cyclical unemployment, an overstretched poor relief system devised in an arguably simpler age, and low standards of public health. Established urban communities were destabilised as daily they were forced to accommodate migrants with little familiarity with the chains of obligation that to date had ensured urban stability. In 1820 it would not take much to strain these chains to breaking point. Seen in this light, it is perhaps not surprising that while the manufacturing towns of the west of Scotland generally recorded significant support for the strike action called on 1 April, many of the sites where radicals actually took up arms were outwith the big cities, in smaller conurbations like Duntocher and Strathaven which, as Kevin Gallagher and George Smith demonstrate in Chapter 6, were still small enough to ensure the intimate relations between neighbours that would make them more likely to trust one another.⁶ Similarly, in the poet Janet Hamilton’s Langloan locale, as Gerry Carruthers and Maria Marchidanu reveal, while neighbours both sympathetic and opposed to reform were aware of local radical activity, generally a conspiracy of silence held. It is also telling, as Shaun Kavanagh explains, that in many instances

‘outsiders’ were blamed for disturbances: in Greenock, where strike action did not take place and the local elite were proud of the town’s ‘loyal’ reputation, the disruptive elements in 1820 were identified as being from elsewhere.

When the rising was called in 1820, Scotland had been at war for thirteen of the previous eighteen years, and the period of peace heralded by victory at Waterloo in 1815 had not ended the militarisation of Scottish society – something only too evident in the authorities’ response to the rising when professional and ‘citizen’ soldiers were deployed.⁷ Peace also made a casualty of the war-time economy: by 1820 some sectors that had been protected from foreign competition due to war-time blockades were struggling, and inflated demand for war-time essentials came to an abrupt end, reducing demand for other associated products and services. Scottish weavers were hit hard, but so too were many other occupations: in the Highlands, the decline of the kelp industry produced a wave of migrants, seeking opportunity in Lowland towns that were already struggling. Thousands of demobilised soldiers discovered that the Scotland to which they returned had not been worth the sacrifice, and found a hollow echo of the loyalty they had shown King and country in the sentiments of an elite that aped military mores while displaying the very oligarchical, corrupt and un-Christian values they had been told they defeated in the war with France.⁸

The principles of political economy, now more diffused throughout the fabric of Scottish society than had been the case in the eighteenth century, were compromising the traditional bonds of social cohesion that had served to protect workers from the most intense pressures of the marketplace. Magistrates could no longer set wages in local communities, and paternalism within the workplace

was in jeopardy as workers were laid off, wage rates declined and craft status was imperilled by new practices and modes of manufacture. The Corn Laws from 1815 demonstrated that it was only the landed elite that could expect protection from market forces – protection that came at a huge cost to industrial workers, who found the price of bread rise at the very same time as wages fell. Is it any wonder that workers came to appreciate that only by gaining the power to change laws might the law defend them? The years leading up to 1820 saw workers across the British Isles seek redress through the courts, as their power to combine in defence of pay and conditions was curtailed. This was particularly the case in Scotland following 1813, and Carol Baraniuk explains in her chapter how this was manifest in Belfast too in 1816.⁹

III. SHORT-TERM

It is clear that by 1820 discontent with the power of the Scottish elite was long-standing in many areas of industrial Scotland. It is one thing, however, to nurse grievances, and quite another to act on them. The short-term context is well known: the Peterloo ‘Massacre’ of 1819, the Cato Street conspiracy of February 1820, and – often forgotten – the general election (6 March to 13 April 1820). The Lanark Burghs election was held on 31 March, the day before the rising, when the popular candidate, the mill owner Robert Owen, was overruled by the burgh councillors who settled on Henry Monteith, Lord Provost of Glasgow, as their MP. In later life Robert Owen reflected:

. . . four of the Old Lanark voters upon whom I had every reason to depend, had, by being feasted, kept intoxicated, and by other means known at this time to



14. *Left.* The Wilson Monument, Strathaven.
(Image courtesy of the author)



15. *Below.* The 1820 Martyrs' Monument, Sighthill Cemetery, Glasgow.
(Photo © Lairich Rig (cc-by-sa/2.0))



16. The 1820 Martyrs' Monument, Woodside Cemetery, Paisley.
(Photo © Lairich Rig (cc-by-sa/2.0))



17. Battle of Bonnymuir Memorial.
(Photo © Lairich Rig (cc-by-sa/2.0))