



'My name is Death/But be na' fley'd.': Bishop Percy and the Ghosting of Robert Burns in Ireland.

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Recent decades have seen much scholarly exploration of Robert Burns's impact on Irish writers, particularly those connected with the province of Ulster.¹ Less explored is the antagonistic and opportunistic response to Burns in Ireland by a number of poets, editors and patrons. This essay will chart Thomas Percy, (1729-1811) and his literary circle's responses in the Dromore area of County Down, to Burns's roles as poet, song collector and literary celebrity. It will argue that Percy and his associates reacted to Burns's work and literary afterlife with a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, they sought to emulate Burns through publishing or providing financial assistance to a number of texts of poetry and song. Secondly, they sought to establish a network of patrons and authors who employed literature as means to portray a stable and loyal Ireland after the Union of 1800/1. As well as a heavily revised edition of Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1795) the group created platforms for a variety of poets including Thomas Stott, Hugh Porter and Patrick Brontë. This strategy sought to invoke Burns directly as an influence, but also to implicitly exclude his legacy from shaping the writing of the circle. The essay will suggest that this strategy was not fully successful. Despite the generally good reception of Percy's fourth edition of the *Reliques*, the other authors in the circle did not always receive praise for their work, and writers like Stott were criticised for their weak, sycophantic verse.² It will claim that for some

¹John Hewitt, *Rhyming Weavers, and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down*. Ireland: Blackstaff Press, 1974. McIlvanney, Liam. *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-century Scotland*. United Kingdom, Tuckwell, 2002. Holmes, Andrew R.. *Revising Robert Burns and Ulster: Literature, Religion and Politics, C.1770-1920*. Ireland: Four Courts Press Limited, 2009. Baraniuk, Carol. *James Orr, Poet and Irish Radical*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2015. Orr, Jennifer. *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

² For the impact of *The Reliques* upon Romantic readers see Bertram H. Davis, *Thomas Percy*, (Boston, Twayne, 1981, pp 125-140.

of this circle, such as Hugh Porter, Burns's influence played a major role in shaping the promotion of their writing careers. However, for many, there was an attempt to manage the trajectory of the writer's work and career that minimised the agency and reach of the author. Ultimately, notwithstanding the attempts to quell and minimise Robert Burns's impact in County Down, his inspiration remained powerful and difficult to contain.

Robert Burns had significant impact in the north of Ireland. His poetry appeared in Ireland quickly after it was published in Scotland. Burns's work appeared in Belfast newspapers in the autumn of 1786 and a pirate edition of his Edinburgh edition followed in September 1787.³ Burns's work proved extremely significant in the development of a range of Ulster-Scots writers who found connection with Burns linguistic and cultural registers. While there was awareness of the Lowland Scots tradition in the generations before him, Burns's arrival as a literary sensation coincided with a growing print trade in the north Ireland. There was a market for his poetry and song and for other, Irish-born aspirants who worked within this tradition to seek the attention of the public. Ulster writers alluded to Burns directly and indirectly in their writing and through the ways in which their paratextual and bibliographical construction of their work spoke back to Burns. Some collections echoed the name of his books, some had portraits like his, some held subscribers' lists and glossaries, many sought to replicate the pacing of text and white space, many included tunes that Burns would have used, and many wrote in the Scottish dialect. Buyers of these works could read the many covert and overt textual cues that suggested the books of the Ulster rhyming weaver were cultural cousins to the Ayrshire bard. His shapeshifting proved a perfect inspiration for his Irish audience as some invoked him and his writing in positive ways, and others criticised and upbraided him. For generations his Edinburgh edition and subsequent collections provided a

³ John Erskine, 'Scotia's Jewel: Robert Burns and Ulster, 1786-c.1830' in *Revising Robert Burns and Ulster* pp 15-36; 22.

template for poets. However, Burns was by no means the only writer gaining attention in Belfast. If we turn to the question of publication of Scots balladry in Belfast in the 1790s, it can be argued that one of the most significant texts to appear was Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1795. Indeed, examples of Percy's editing of Scottish ballads appeared in Belfast newspapers before Burns.⁴ His collection, *The Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, despite the title, contained a broad selection of Scots language songs. There does not appear to have been any direct correspondence between Percy and Burns. Burns, was said to hold Percy's ballad "O Nancy Wilt Thou Go With Me" in high esteem, even if he had difficulty in accepting a version that had been transposed into Scots. Percy, as an editor of antiquarian texts, tended to favour traditional and historic writing rather than contemporary authors—if Burns was a shapeshifting radical, Percy was a conservative traditionalist who sought to uphold and maintain the religious and political Establishment. Despite this, Percy continued to correspond with many involved within the writing and publishing industry, even though outwardly claiming that his position as a bishop meant that he was no longer keen to be engaged in worldly matters. Percy's direct response to Burns no longer remains extant. It is worth surmising that he would not have viewed Burns as of serious consideration in the early years of Burns's success, even when Burns was declaring himself as a "bard", a term which opposed Percy's favoured term 'minstrel'. To the contemporary reader these terms might read as interchangeable, but to the eighteenth and early nineteenth century audiences they were heavily freighted terms in the culture war of the British and Irish archipelago. To some, Burns's use of the term "Bard" echoed earlier Scottish attempts to assert cultural, moral and aesthetic dominance of British literature.⁵ In the preface to *The Reliques* Percy

⁴ *Belfast News-Letter* 11 November 1785.

⁵ Corey Andrews 'The Clubbable Bard: Sentimental Scottish Nationalism and Robert Burns' *Lumen* Volume 21, 2002, 105-130; 106. For further discussion on usage of the term see: Maureen N McLaine, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Katie Trumpener. *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2021. For Percy's influence in this area see: Kathryn, Sutherland. "The Native

affirms that that his favoured type of *relique* was the minstrel ballad. He provided an account of the type of poet who wrote these ballads. Percy's construction of the minstrel was inspired by the contemporary fascination with the idea of the poet as bard, but it was articulated in such a way to suggest that the primacy of this type of poet was held by the English minstrel tradition, not the ancient (and Celtic) bardic forbears. This was a reaction against the patriotic statements of the Celtic nations and sympathisers that had been made by James Macpherson in Scotland, and Thomas Gray and Evan Evans in Wales regarding the respective primitive poets of their nations. *The Reliques* sought to prove the existence of the ancient English minstrels not through mythical and poetic declamation as Percy's rivals had done, but by providing allegedly 'hard evidence' of them through foregrounding the use historical records and the remains of ancient ballad texts as opposed to materials gathered from the oral tradition. Burns move towards editor of national Scottish song did not exercise Percy too much either, though he did purchase Burns's works through intermediaries in Scotland, and by the time it would have done he was too frail to do anything about it.

Percy, while he maintained strong connections with publishing in Britain was also aware of the burgeoning print industry in Ireland. Belfast publishing in the 1790s and 1800s was eclectic: offering reprints of established writers, radical and popular ballad and poetry, regional epics and collections of poems on various subject, with occasional, often charitable enterprises of juvenile verse.⁶ Belfast in this period has been described a town of Enlightenment values and aspirations, as well as being town with a strong Ulster-Scottish character.⁷ It could also be termed, post 1800/1 as a place aware of its potential to benefit as a

Poet: The Influence of Percy's Minstrel from Beattie to Wordsworth." *Review of English Studies* xxxiii (1982): 414-433.

⁶ John, R., R., Adams *The Printed Word and the Common Man. Popular Culture in Ulster. 1700-1900*. Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Q.U.B, 1987.

⁷ Jennifer Orr, *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

city of the Union. It is in this cultural nexus where Republican Enlightenment and what might be termed Imperial Enlightenment values met and existed at times in social concord and at others in cultural or actual physical contestation.

As an upholder of the values of the Anglican Establishment in Ireland, Percy had a variety of more vexing cultural debates to deal with which were more pressing than Burns in the 1790s. The very methodology that had formed the editing of the *Reliques* was being questioned by the radical English ballad editor Joseph Ritson in his publication *Scottish Song*.⁸ In Belfast and its environs the United Irish movement was proliferating and using the ballads as a means to spread their message in the collection *Paddy's Resource*.⁹ These developments in the world of song also came at a time when he felt that his ecclesiastical position meant that he could not be seen to be engaging in such frivolous endeavours.¹⁰ For much of the 1790s Percy was more focused on diocesan matters or on personal or family business in England and did not focus on new developments in literature. That is not to say that Percy was oblivious to Burns. Initially, he may not have paid too much attention to him as his focus was on antiquarian balladry rather than contemporary writers. He had been alerted to him by Andrew Caldwell,

A rural poet, one Robert Burns, a ploughman in Ayrshire, hath published a volume of poems, which have been so well received that 3500 copies were sold in a few weeks. There are several other works upon the anvil in this writing town.¹¹

Caldwell later purchased Currie's edition of Burns on Percy's behalf:

I have lately read the works of Burns the Scotch poet: I must own his Doric muse gives me great pleasure; his letters often display a critical taste and such information as is surprising under so many disadvantages as he was subject to by birth and station. Dr. Currie, as editor, has done himself great credit ; I am particularly pleased with his

⁸ Joseph Ritson, *Scottish Song in Two Volumes* (London, J Johnston, 1794).

⁹ *Paddy's resource : being a select collection of original and modern patriotic songs, toasts and sentiments, compiled for the use of the people of Ireland*. (Belfast, 1795).

¹⁰ Bertram Davis, Thomas Percy, A Scholar-Cleric in the Time of Johnson, (p270).

¹¹ Andrew Caldwell to Thomas Percy, 2 May 1787, *Nicholls Illustrations* vol viii, p 234.

observations on the good effects of a certain degree of education for the lower class of people. Many persons of good sense are against that altogether; I never could be convinced by them, and suspect the motives do no honour to their hearts.¹²

The first decade of the nineteenth century provided more opportunity for Percy to act as a patron to local writers. He spent more time in the diocese which enabled him to focus on those around him.

Percy's arrival as Bishop of Dromore in 1782 was an apotheosis of his *Reliques* project, and as such he began the process of putting the project to bed. The name Percy had served him well as the literary custodian of the House of Northumberland, whose patronage was instrumental in assuring his success in both literature and the clergy. Perhaps this is why in 1756 he began spelling his name as we know it now, not the 'Piercy' of his time at Christ Church or the 'Pearcy' of his father. Though the Northumberland Percys were no relation, his dedication to Elizabeth Seymour, Duchess of Northumberland in the 1765 first edition of the *Reliques* commenced a patron/artist relationship between the two, and Percy became not only the trusted editor of Northumbrian heritage but also the tutor to the young Algernon Percy, the future Earl of Beverley. He began work on a Percy family history in 1765; an unpublished 1776 version of this contends that his own great-great-grandfather, also called Thomas, was a relation of the Northumberland Percys.¹³ This period of self-styling cemented his literary and clerical reputation, however by the time of his arrival as Bishop of Dromore in 1782, he felt compelled to shift focus somewhat. His first sermon in that diocese reassured the clergy and parishioners that he stood before them not as an urbane society-man but as a servant of God:

Neither deep erudition, nor polite learning, nor elegant address, nor convivial Talents, nor a sociable turn, nor any other of the usual recommendations among men of the world can reconcile us to the character of an unfaithful Minister of Christ, to a false or deceitful or careless Steward in the Mysteries of God. And if ever Fidelity in the

¹² Caldwell to Percy, 16 December 1800, Nicholls, p 26.

¹³ Thomas Percy (?1776) *An Account of the Private Family of Percy, formerly of Worcester, afterwards of Bridgnorth, Shropshire*. British Library Add. MS 32326.

Christian Minister... were requisite, it is surely in a more especial manner at present, when the Christian religion is so often either obliquely or fundamentally attacked, and its mysteries ridiculed or explained away by the fashionable writers of the age.¹⁴

Now that his 'convivial Talents' had been filed away along with his 'fashionable writer' friends, he turned his attention fully to the pastoral. Though he had several unfinished literary projects, including the aforementioned history of the house of Percy, he scarcely picked up a pen after this. However, the notion of a fourth edition of the *Reliques* was in his mind as early as 1783, not as a project for himself but for his son Henry, "or, if he should decline it, for a very poetical nephew of mine."¹⁵ This would eventually come to pass in 1795, when the fourth edition of the *Reliques* would be published under the ostensible stewardship of his nephew - also named Thomas Percy.

But the 1795 edition was not the passion project that the first edition had been. Initially in this period dismissing his work as a collector of ballads as juvenile, Percy began to feel less indifferent towards the project advancing in 1787, when he began writing to his correspondents about remarks made by Joseph Ritson in his *Select Collection of English Songs*. Ritson, an atheist activist for vegetarianism with an avowed sympathy for the leaders of the French Revolution, was as antithetical to Percy in style and temperament as it was possible to be. Though both were antiquarians with a particular interest in ballads, Ritson railed against modern additions and emendations to ancient ballads and he excoriated Percy for doing so. In a 1784 letter (signed 'Anti-Scot') to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, he demonstrated that John Pinkerton's *Select Scottish Ballads* prominently featured forgeries, which Pinkerton was forced to concede. This was part of Ritson's umbridge with Percy, and the *Reliques*. Percy's mentor Shenstone had in 1760 cautioned him that edits should "have the

¹⁴ Quoted in Davis p267

¹⁵ Also quoted in Davis 270, Jan 3 1783 letter to Pinkerton

appearance of a modern *Toe* or *Finger*, which is *allowably* added to the best old Statues,” a suggestion he did not take on board when ‘The Child of Elle’ was expanded from a 39-line fragment to an epic of around 200 lines. His own antiquarian philosophy tended towards trusting the editor to mediate the spirit of the work, rather than the reality of what was extant. Ritson held this in such sustained opposition that the best-known rendering of his likeness features him standing on a torn sheet titled ‘Dr Percy’s ancient ballads’ while writing his own tract accusing Percy of being a liar.¹⁶

Referring to Percy’s essay on the ancient English minstrels, Ritson wrote that he “question[ed] the propriety of his inferences, and, indeed, his general hypothesis” that the English minstrels represented a respectable section of society, and indeed suggesting that many of the ballads presented by Percy in the *Reliques* as English could not be ascribed to them. Here he indulged his Francophilia, suggesting instead that the French influence on these ballads was far more convincingly evidenced. That English minstrels were part of a noble literary tradition was not only a key textual factor in the *Reliques* but a concept that underpinned the ancient nation-text the *Reliques* both represented and preserved. The *Reliques* represented a British unity under a conservative set of conditions: culturally Anglican, textually literate, and deferential to existing cultural hierarchies. The role of the English minstrel in upholding these conditions was to establish an ancient provenance for the – relatively new – British nation-state from which the *Reliques* took its poetic identity.¹⁷

Percy’s minstrel had become a powerful cultural figure, recreated by James Beattie in his poem ‘The Minstrel’ and used to evidence the provenance of the nation’s ethnic literature.¹⁸

¹⁶ James Sayers (1803) *Joseph Ritson ('Impiger iracundus inexorabilis acer')*, etching and aquatint. National Portrait Gallery Reference Collection, NPG D48868

¹⁷ See Danni Glover (2017) *Thomas Percy: Literary Antiquarianism and National Invention* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Ulster University)

¹⁸ Margaret Forbes, *Beattie and His Friends* (Constable, 1904) p56

To have these mythic figures reduced to “rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars” was unconscionable. Percy was not the only editor attacked by Ritson, who also went after Samuel Johnson and George Steevens in print, but when he suggested in 1790 his doubts that Percy’s now mythic Folio Manuscript may not even exist, the gauntlet was thrown. “No other writer,” he slyly wrote, “has ever pretended to have seen [the Folio MS]... And it is remarkable, that scarcely any thing is published from it, not being to be found elsewhere, without our being told of the defects and mutilation of the MS.” Not content to attack Percy’s theories, this was an attack on his very scholarly process - and both were an attack on the project of cultural Anglicanism that Percy, in the present stage of his career, was more apt than ever to defend.

Percy became convinced that this attack in particular was a ruse to enable Ritson to access the Folio Manuscript for himself and though he had begun to show the document to select interested parties, he vowed that Ritson would never personally see it. Ritson was clearly beginning to sting Percy, who described him as the source of “wanton Outrage” and “unprovoked Insult”, and in 1792 he began to respond publicly through commencing work on the fourth edition. In August of 1792, the young Tom Percy began to contribute to his uncle’s project, though it is clear from Percy’s correspondence between 1792-5, much of which involved exchanging copies apparently on his nephew’s behalf, that Percy was not as hands-off with the work of the fourth edition as he would come to claim. This is also apparent in much of the text itself. The advertisement to the fourth edition dismisses the ballads as “the amusements of [Percy’s] youth,” an assertion surely too bold for his young nephew to make on his behalf but just bold enough for the older man to respectfully distance himself from the very project he assured his Dromore parishioners would not distract him from his ecclesiastical mission. The ballads themselves undergo significant revisions, additions, and

extrapolations from their source texts, even compared to earlier editions, which was characteristic of Percy's often heavy-handed editing. Percy's essay on minstrelsy, which had been the focus of Ritson's most sustained critiques on his work, approximately doubled in length and their already substantial explanatory notes expanded from 38 pages in the 1765 edition to 52 in 1795. In the fourth edition, the advertisement asked the reader to judge for themselves whether the "composer" of the *Reliques* - that is to say, Percy himself, had produced a work "with which the judicious Antiquary hath just reason to be satisfied, while refined entertainment hath been provided for every Reader of taste and genius." The implication was clear: a majority of readers - most of whom would have been aware, if not of the influence the *Reliques* had had on the literary landscape, certainly that they had since its publication been in a boom period of published balladic anthologies - would co-sign that his project was necessary, substantial, and entertaining. Ritson's taste and genius were in question, as was his political and textual radicalism, and the conservatism of the cultural Anglican ballad project would prevail.

The political backdrop to the fourth edition also represented a shift in context. Though Dromore was a relatively quiet diocese, and though by the time of the fourth edition's publication the situation had not yet deteriorated to sustained violence, Percy could not fail to notice the rising demand for reform in Ireland that threatened the peaceful stability of the British nation-state invented by and preserved in the *Reliques*. By 1796, Percy funded a militia of local yeoman to defend the diocese should violence arrive at Dromore. He also installed his nephew and editor-mouthpiece Tom as rector of Magheralin - though he refused to defend him when he returned to England in defiance of the church's rule that clergy should reside within the area of their own appointment full-time, confiding in his wife Anne that he found the young man's "Tastes & Pursuits... so different from mine." This confidence

perhaps suggests yet more convincingly that the fourth edition was more of a continuance of Percy's own scholarship than he felt was proper to admit to. In this context the fourth edition becomes not just a revised text for a new phase in Percy's life, but a statement of the stability he was trying to cultivate for the conceptual and actual nation-state in which he worked. Not only was the *Reliques* commercially successful enough to run through four editions in Percy's lifetime, but it was also philosophically welcomed enough that each edition brought with it answers to the national question in the years in which they were published. The project existed to invent and protect a stable version of the nation; it could be updated any time a dissenter threatened to upend this stability.

1. The promotion of Thomas Romney Robinson's *Juvenile Poems*

Percy, perhaps unlike Burns in Ayrshire, provided patronage to a number of beneficiaries.¹⁹ In many ways Burns rise to fame, under the promotion of being a 'Heaven-taught plowman' provided an impetus to Percy to provide assistance to the "early genius" he came into contact with.²⁰ This charitable approach was based on a number of preoccupations. His motives could be said to be based upon a genuine altruistic, Christian motivation, and one reinforced by the premature death of his son and nephew. He had himself know the rewards that patronage could play and how in the early years of his career, his prospects as 'grocer's son' had been enhanced through his work as an editor and antiquarian. However, his choices for patronage also contain a desire to create a politically and cultural distinct coterie that differs from other writers and networks in the north of Ireland at the time. If Burns's had gained popularity as a heaven-taught ploughman, it was not in Percy's interest to advance the labouring class of his vicinity who had been involved in United Irish activity. The poets that

¹⁹ For a discussion of Burns often indifferent attitude to fellow labouring class writers in Ayrshire, see George S. Christian. *Beside the Bard: Scottish Lowland Poetry in the Age of Burns*. United States: Bucknell University Press, 2020, p 2.

²⁰ Preface to *The Poems of Thomas Romney Robinson* (180x), xxv

he favoured were either drawn from those who would have been too young to be supporters of the United Irishmen, or those engaged in church, education or business who were very much supporters of the Union.

The novelist and travel writer John Gamble noted:

His lordship was blind for several years before his death. Afflicting as this circumstance was to himself, it was a fortunate one for many young men whom he took into his house as reader, and afterwards brought forward in life.²¹

The reputation of the group has not fared well in literary history, with many subsequent generations of readers finding them derivative and unoriginal. It was a group that provided one of their first twentieth century chroniclers, John Hewitt, with some difficulties as he his survey of writers from the north of Ireland acknowledged Percy's group's significance but had difficulty with what he saw as the derivative nature of their work. Hewitt felt that Percy acted "as a brake on literary experiment".²² However, it could be argued that these writers were not necessarily being advanced on the grounds of originality, but on their depiction of a peaceful Ireland enjoying its status within the Union with Great Britain, and in this respect Percy's patronage becomes a continuation of the stability he sought to engender through subsequent editions of the *Reliques*. However, for all the attempts to excise Burns from the literary discussion, Percy was doomed to failure. For some, whose early work had appeared as potentially radical, gravitated towards Percy as a marker of their post Union loyal status. For example, William Hamilton Drummond, a Belfast school teacher who had dabbled in Jacobin-style epics in the mid-90s, later praised and propagandised Percy in his *The Giant's*

²¹ John Gamble, *A View of Society and Manners in the North of Ireland in the Summer and Autumn of 1812* (P 55-6)

²² John Hewitt, *Ancestral Voices* p68-9.

Causeway. In a Belfast that increasingly depicted itself as transforming into another northern Athens, Drummond praised the river Lagan:

Flow on fair stream- thy gathering waves expand,
And greet with joy the Athens of the land;
Through groves of masts thick crowding o'er thy tide,
A new Ilissus, roll in classic pride:
Thy Percy hail, with age and honour crowned,
Loved of the muse, and by the muse renowned.²³

Percy had connected with Drummond a few years previously, through his friendship with Dr

William Bruce, principal of the Belfast Academy:

Drummond was already well established among the leading Belfast intellectuals associated with the Belfast Literary Society. Though fearful of the revolutionary potential of the Dissenter community of Dromore, who outnumbered Anglicans by two to one, Percy still offered patronage to select figures, such as the renegade Presbyterian radical Drummond, arranging for him to receive a Doctorate of Divinity from Aberdeen University.²⁴

In addition to academic and ecclesiastical progression, Percy provided connections to publishers and the literary marketplace in England and Scotland and had previously promoted Drummond's epic loyalist poem *The Battle of Trafalgar* to the remnant of Johnson's club and to Robert Anderson in Edinburgh.²⁵

A review of the texts of the circle reveals that "English" neoclassical conventions were often employed with minimal attention to Lowland Scots or Celtic traditions, a curatorial philosophy that mirrors Percy's own in his curation of the *Reliques*, wherein ancient Scottish and Irish texts are represented as 'English' in their tradition as part of the cultural Anglican project. The intention was to generate readings that were idiomatically northern Irish in a post-Union landscape that was depicted as enjoying peace and prosperity. They offered a redefinition of the Dromore region after the Rebellion that seemed content within the new

²³ William Hamilton Drummond, *The Giant's Causeway*, (Belfast, 1811, p 31)

²⁴ Jennifer Orr, *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. p140.

²⁵ (Green 230; *Nichols Illustrations* VII:165).

political dispensations of Union and Empire. Furthermore, differing levels of assistance were proffered, depending on and linked to the beneficiary's social status. Percy did not want to become a second Henry Mackenzie and elevate heaven-taught ploughmen and weavers who may have been still in agreement with the aims of the United Irishmen, but to focus on young authors of the mostly middling sort who were either too young to have been involved in the Rebellion or needed to demonstrate their new allegiances. There may also be more personal reason for Percy's determination to assist young people. His only son, Henry, had died in April 1782, and this may have propelled him to seek out new surrogate children.²⁶ His nephew, also called Thomas Percy, appeared to have been earmarked as his literary successor, and given the official editorship of the 1795 fourth edition of *The Reliques*, but the relationship was by no means smooth, with Percy junior preferring life at Oxford rather than the living Percy senior had provided for him in County Down.²⁷

Secondly, the variety of voices within the circle reveals a much more expansive and extensive range of protégés than Hewitt would allow for. By extension, this variety questions recent discussion on the significance of Burnsian and Ulster-Scots traditions of writing in Belfast and the north-east of Ireland in the Romantic period. By exploring Percy's patronage system it is possible to see that while Burns's work did have a profound effect on newspaper verse and poetry produced in collections by individual poets, it was by no means the only mode that Ulster-Scots and other Ulster-based writers could express themselves in, and for some there was a determination to disguise, diminish or even excise any connection to Burns or Lowland Scottish traditions in their work.

The individuals whom Percy assisted reveals a far from homogenous group. The circle includes from clergy with academic interests, such as his nephew Thomas Percy, Hugh

²⁶ Davis, p 272.

²⁷ Davis p.310.

“Dante” Boyd, H. E. Boyd, Edward Berwick, all Anglicans in his diocese. Local aspiring businessmen like Thomas Stott also found their way into Percy’s company, as did the “wonderful boy” Thomas Romney Robinson, son of his friend, the artist Thomas Robinson who had painted the definitive Battle of Ballynahinch.²⁸

Percy’s support for publishing collections began with assisting William Cunningham “a poor weaver-boy”, and scholar at the Sunday School Percy had established in Dromore. He was given a teaching position in Belfast and helped to produce a book of poems.²⁹ Thomas Romney Robinson’s *Juvenile Poems* can be said to be the greatest achievement of Percy’s patronage in his Dromore years. The volume reveals Percy in the background, attempting to advance a new agenda for the poetry of Ireland in the aftermath of the Rebellion. The collection attempts to show the flowering of “English” inspired learning in Ulster. The hero of the collection is shown to be Percy, whose long poem *The Hermit of Warkworth*, was said to inspire Robinson from the age of two.³⁰ The preface attests heavily to Percy’s ‘benevolence and philanthropy’ and his ‘elegant criticism’ which was a ‘very powerful’ factor in shaping Robinson’s ‘service to the muses’.³¹

Percy played a large role in gathering names for the subscription list. Two thousand copies were printed for over fourteen hundred people, with Percy and his wife Anne purchasing 50 copies between them.³² Amongst this select gathering were the Lord Lieutenant; the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice, the Duke of Northumberland, many Anglican bishops and most of the nobility and intelligentsia of the North of Ireland. The mixing of former Presbyterian radicals such as William Drennan with key British Establishment figures, underlines the extent of rapprochement that had taken place in the North of Ireland. To

²⁸ Guy, Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance* p 553 (Robert Anderson to Percy, April 12, 1805 Nichols III. VII: 148-9). ‘Thomas Robinson’ <https://www.libraryireland.com/irishartists/thomas-robinson.php> accessed 06/06/23

²⁹ ‘Memoir of William Cunningham’ in *Gentleman’s Magazine* 1804 ii: p 1251.

³⁰ (Preface xxxvii).

³¹ (xliv).

³² (Davis, *Scholar Cleric* 324).

emphasize the neo-classical decorations of work, the titlepage has a print, of the young Robinson drawn by his father, Thomas Robinson, in a suitable pose of youthful wistfulness.

The book hints that reconciliation had taken place in the North between the factions as evidenced in the homage paid both to Belfast and to Percy's Dromore. These sites are shown to be a prime influence on the creation of the verse. Robinson's poems portray a peaceful Ulster, in which the landscape is a location for youthful outpourings of poetic sentiment, not a battleground for opposing ideologies. The only mention made of unrest is a tribute to Anne Percy's gifts to the local Yeomen, who are depicted as a sort of Home Guard. The real enemy is "Gaul" against whom the "united kingdom" is exhorted to stand resolute:

But fix'd, Old Anglia views their pride,
With Scotia's race renowned in song,
And Bold Ierne by their side,
Beas [sic] terror to the hostile throng. ("On the resolution of the Antrim Yeomanry 'To serve on any part of the Globe where it might please their majesty'"³³).

In many ways this statement echoes Burns 'To the Drumfries Volunteers':

Does haughty Gaul invasion threat,
Then let the loons beware, Sir,
There's wooden walls upon our seas,
And volunteers on shore, Sir.
The Nith shall run to Corsincon,
And Criffel sink in Solway,
Ere we permit a foreign foe
On British ground to rally!

Though in this instance the author doesn't have to engage with any anxiety about their conscience wrestling with their politics or radicalism as Burns may have done.³⁴ In a sense, the presentation of Robinson's childlike naivete provides a simpler way to make a patriotic statement about the yeomen (in Ireland) defending the local people against perceived external

³³ Thomas Romney Robinson, *Juvenile Poems*, p43.

³⁴ Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland*. Tuckwell Press: East Linton, 2002. P 237. Jennifer Orr, *Literary Networks* pp102-5

threat, when recent memory in County Down had witnessed them as providing the threat to UI households and individuals.

Percy also supported the publication of the work of the twelve-year old son of his chaplain Thomas Thirlwall. Connop Thirlwall's (1797–1875) *Primitiae or Essays and Poems on Various Subjects, Religious, Moral, and Entertaining* (1808) . Described in the preface as 'the encourager of early genius, and the common patron of literature in general' Percy was the main subscriber with forty copies from a total of five hundred and seven total.³⁵ Both Robinson and Thirlwall achieved renown in their adult careers as a scientist and church historian respectively and looked back on their early literary productions with embarrassment. Yet for all the management of prodigies such as these, Belfast kept producing poets in the image of Burns. In 1810 Andrew McKenzie published his *Poems and Songs on Different Subjects*, whose title and Burns-like portrait on the frontispiece carried strong echoes of Burns's earlier collection. The image of the labouring poet Bard (which carried strong resemblance to the United Irish croppy with his short cut hair) did not disappear. One of the most successful ventures in publishing weaver poetry in Ireland, it had over 2000 subscribers and made M'Kenzie £200. Percy had subscribed 3 copies.³⁶

For the poet Thomas Stott, his friendship with his Patron endured after Percy's death and he commemorated Percy with the erection of a small monument in Dromore.³⁷ He later wrote of this in his only collection of poems *The Songs of Deardra Translated from the Irish with other Poems* (London, 1825):

Several years ago, the Author had in contemplation to publish a volume of his Poems; and it was his intention, at that time, to dedicate it to his excellent and learned Friend, the late Dr. PERCY, Lord Bishop of Dromore. The lamented death of this

³⁵ Davis, *Scholar-Cleric*, p 325.

³⁶ Andrew McKenzie *Poems and Songs on Different Subjects*, Belfast 1810, p 16.

³⁷ Linde Lunney, 'Thomas Stott' *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <https://www.dib.ie/biography/stott-thomas-a8348> accessed 15/04/23

venerable Prelate prevented the execution of that design. But being still anxious to pay a tribute of respect to the memory of one for whom he entertained so high a regard, the Author has lately erected a little monument...in a park belonging to himself, containing the following Inscription on a tablet placed in the south side of basement:

S.M.
R. Rd. T. Percy, D.D.
Episcopi Amicus
Musarum Amicus,
Virtutibus, Ingenio, Literis
Cultus atque praeclarus
Ob. 1811.³⁸

Like Burns, death did not signal the immediate demise of Percy's stature as patron or literary figure within circles in County Down. His spirit lived on in a number of ways. Firstly, one of his diocesan clergy, Thomas Tighe, was in charge of editing and gaining subscriptions for the farmer/weaver Hugh Porter and his *Poetical Attempts* (1811) in a manner reminiscent of Percy's collecting the names of dignitaries for his projects. Tighe had also been instrumental in assisting Patrick Bronte gain a place in Cambridge. The opening flourish of the preface recalls Percy's ability to parade potentially unattractive verse, 'the humblest attempt of the weakest muse', as worthy of serious investigation (i). Dedicating the collecting to the powerful Earl of Moira, Tighe flatters his ideal reader with the following:

...a weak and tender plant of the County Down could not thrive in any situation so well as under the fostering shelter of the prime growth of its soil:- the lowly and creeping ivy raises its head and even flourishes when supported by the strength of the majestic oak (i).

In Percy's absence, Tighe was keen to promote the Moiras as benefactors to the 'weak and tender' growths of Ulster literature. As well, Percy is praised for refusing 'to exclude none from participation in his favours' (vi). His sojourn in Dromore is seen as a noble act, sacrificing his talents in order to protect 'the least spark of genius or moral goodness' in the

³⁸ Thomas Stott, *The Songs of Deardra* (London, 1825 v-vi).

province (vi). His philanthropy is shown to extend even to the “innocent sallies of his [Porter’s] rustic muse” (ix).

Percy is also acclaimed in the body of the collection. A poem is inscribed to his memory from Porter that affixes his lowly station and affirms the hierarchy of talent:

Attend ye worthies- do, ah! do
Produce the funeral song;
I’ll chant my little requiem too-
But behind the throng:

Yes, far-alas! far, far behind
The wailing crowd I’ll crawl,
And bid ambitious worldlings mind,
That great men weep, when good men fall!³⁹

However, Porter was by no means the obsequious mourner the lines imply and much of the verse gathered in his book harangues his patron for lack of attention and support. Porter’s usage of Lowland Scots literary tradition flays like a bardie revenant returning to flyte with the society that Percy had expended so much energy to construct. As much as he praises Tighe for his support, he has a poem in which he attacks him for ignoring him. His command of language displays someone well-kenned in the verse epistle of Burns and other Scots and the satirical birch that Standard Habbie could provide. Percy had sought to provide alternative modes, voices and genres to articulate the success of the Union and dispel the radical aspirations of the 1790s, that to many in Ulster saw Burns as a brother and figurehead of. However, the work of Porter, and other weaver poets who continued to publish in the 1800s, their commemoration of, assimilation of and dogged dialogue with Burns and the guid Scotch tongue acted as a means to question the success of Percy’s literary mission and patronage circles.

³⁹ ‘To the Memory of the Late Right Reverend Thomas, Lord Bishop of Dromore’ *Poetical Attempts* pp 108-109.