

Second Epistle To J. Lapraik

While new-ca'd kye rowte at the stake
An' pownies reek in pleugh or braik,
This hour on e'enin's edge I take,
To own I'm debtor
To honest-hearted, auld Lapraik,
For his kind letter.

Forjesket sair, with weary legs,
Rattlin the corn out-owre the rigs,
Or dealing thro' amang the naigs
Their ten-hours' bite,
My awkart Muse sair pleads and begs
I would na write.

The tapetless, ramfeezl'd hizzie,
She's saft at best an' something lazy:
Quo' she, "Ye ken we've been sae busy
This month an' mair,
That trowth, my head is grown right dizzie,
An' something sair."

Her dowff excuses pat me mad;
"Conscience," says I, "ye thowless jade!
I'll write, an' that a hearty blaud,
This vera night;
So dinna ye affront your trade,
But rhyme it right.

"Shall bauld Lapraik, the king o' hearts,
Tho' mankind were a pack o' cartes,
Roose you sae weel for your deserts,
In terms sae friendly;
Yet ye'll neglect to shaw your parts
An' thank him kindly?"

Sae I gat paper in a blink,
An' down gaed stumple in the ink:
Quoth I, "Before I sleep a wink,
I vow I'll close it;
An' if ye winna mak it clink,
By Jove, I'll prose it!"

Sae I've begun to scrawl, but whether
In rhyme, or prose, or baith thegither;
Or some hotch-potch that's rightly neither,
Let time mak proof;
But I shall scribble down some blether
Just clean aff-loof.

My worthy friend, ne'er grudge an' carp,
Tho' fortune use you hard an' sharp;
Come, kittle up your moorland harp
Wi' gleesome touch!
Ne'er mind how Fortune waft and warp;
She's but a bitch.

She 's gien me mony a jirt an' fleg,
Sin' I could striddle owre a rig;
But, by the Lord, tho' I should beg
Wi' lyart pow,
I'll laugh an' sing, an' shake my leg,
As lang's I dow!

Now comes the sax-an'-twentieth simmer
I've seen the bud upon the timmer,

Still persecuted by the limmer
Frae year to year;
But yet, despite the kittle kimmer,
I, Rob, am here.

Do ye envy the city gent,
Behint a kist to lie an' sklent;
Or pursue-proud, big wi' cent. per cent.
An' muckle wame,
In some bit brugh to represent
A bailie's name?

Or is't the paughty, feudal thane,
Wi' ruffl'd sark an' glancing cane,
Wha thinks himsel nae sheep-shank bane,
But lordly stalks;
While caps and bonnets aff are taen,
As by he walks?

"O Thou wha gies us each guid gift!
Gie me o' wit an' sense a lift,
Then turn me, if thou please, adrift,
Thro' Scotland wide;
Wi' cits nor lairds I wadna shift,
In a' their pride!"

Were this the charter of our state,
"On pain o' hell be rich an' great,"
Damnation then would be our fate,
Beyond remead;
But, thanks to heaven, that's no the gate
We learn our creed.

For thus the royal mandate ran,
When first the human race began;
"The social, friendly, honest man,
Whate'er he be-
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan,
And none but he."

O mandate glorious and divine!
The ragged followers o' the Nine,
Poor, thoughtless devils! yet may shine
In glorious light,
While sordid sons o' Mammon's line
Are dark as night!

Tho' here they scrape, an' squeeze, an' growl,
Their worthless nievefu' of a soul
May in some future carcase howl,
The forest's fright;
Or in some day-detesting owl
May shun the light.

Then may Lapraik and Burns arise,
To reach their native, kindred skies,
And sing their pleasures, hopes an' joys,
In some mild sphere;
Still closer knit in friendship's ties,
Each passing year!

Epistle To William Simson

Schoolmaster, Ochiltree. - May, 1785

I gat your letter, winsome Willie;
Wi' gratefu' heart I thank you brawlie;
Tho' I maun say't, I wad be silly,

And unco vain,
Should I believe, my coaxin billie
Your flatterin strain.

But I'se believe ye kindly meant it:
I sud be laith to think ye hinted
Ironie satire, sidelins sklented
On my poor Musie;
Tho' in sic phraisin terms ye've penn'd it,
I scarce excuse ye.

My senses wad be in a creel,
Should I but dare a hope to speel
Wi' Allan, or wi' Gilbertfield,
The braes o' fame;
Or Fergusson, the writer-chiel,
A deathless name.

(O Fergusson! thy glorious parts
Ill suited law's dry, musty arts!
My curse upon your whunstone hearts,
Ye E'nbrugh gentry!
The tithe o' what ye waste at cartes
Wad stow'd his pantry!)

Yet when a tale comes i' my head,
Or lassies gie my heart a screed-
As whiles they're like to be my dead,
(O sad disease!)
I kittle up my rustic reed;
It gies me ease.

Auld Coila now may fidge fu' fain,
She's gotten poets o' her ain;
Chiels wha their chanter's winna hain,
But tune their lays,
Till echoes a' resound again
Her weel-sung praise.

Nae poet thought her worth his while,
To set her name in measur'd style;
She lay like some unkenn'd-of-isle
Beside New Holland,
Or whare wild-meeting oceans boil
Besouth Magellan.

Ramsay an' famous Fergusson
Gied Forth an' Tay a lift aboon;
Yarrow an' Tweed, to monie a tune,
Owre Scotland rings;
While Irwin, Lugar, Ayr, an' Doon
Naebody sings.

Th' Illissus, Tiber, Thames, an' Seine,
Glide sweet in monie a tunefu' line:
But Willie, set your fit to mine,
An' cock your crest;
We'll gar our streams an' burnies shine
Up wi' the best!

We'll sing auld Coila's plains an' fells,
Her moors red-brown wi' heather bells,
Her banks an' braes, her dens and dells,
Whare glorious Wallace
Aft bure the gree, as story tells,
Frae Suthron billies.

At Wallace' name, what Scottish blood

But boils up in a spring-tide flood!
Oft have our fearless fathers strode
By Wallace' side,
Still pressing onward, red-wat-shod,
Or glorious died!

O, sweet are Coila's haughs an' woods,
When lintwhites chant amang the buds,
And jinkin hares, in amorous whids,
Their loves enjoy;
While thro' the braes the cushat croods
With wailfu' cry!

Ev'n winter bleak has charms to me,
When winds rave thro' the naked tree;
Or frosts on hills of Ochiltree
Are hoary gray;
Or blinding drifts wild-furious flee,
Dark'ning the day!

O Nature! a' thy shews an' forms
To feeling, pensive hearts hae charms!
Whether the summer kindly warms,
Wi' life an light;
Or winter howls, in gusty storms,
The lang, dark night!

The muse, nae poet ever fand her,
Till by himsel he learn'd to wander,
Adown some trottin burn's meander,
An' no think lang:
O sweet to stray, an' pensive ponder
A heart-felt sang!

The war'ly race may drudge an' drive,
Hog-shouther, jundie, stretch, an' strive;
Let me fair Nature's face describe,
And I, wi' pleasure,
Shall let the busy, grumbling hive
Bum owre their treasure.

Fareweel, "my rhyme-composing" brither!
We've been owre lang unkenn'd to ither:
Now let us lay our heads thegither,
In love fraternal:
May envy wallop in a tether,
Black fiend, infernal!

While Highlandmen hate tools an' taxes;
While moorlan's herds like guid, fat braxies;
While terra firma, on her axis,
Diurnal turns;
Count on a friend, in faith an' practice,
In Robert Burns.

Postcript

My memory's no worth a preen;
I had amaist forgotten clean,
Ye bade me write you what they mean
By this "new-light,"
'Bout which our herds sae aft hae been
Maist like to fight.

In days when mankind were but callans
At grammar, logic, an' sic talents,
They took nae pains their speech to balance,
Or rules to gie;

But spak their thoughts in plain, braid lallans,
Like you or me.

In thae auld times, they thought the moon,
Just like a sark, or pair o' shoon,
Wore by degrees, till her last roon
Gaed past their viewin;
An' shortly after she was done
They gat a new ane.

This passed for certain, undisputed;
It ne'er cam i' their heads to doubt it,
Till chiels gat up an' wad confute it,
An' ca'd it wrang;
An' muckle din there was about it,
Baith loud an' lang.

Some herds, weel learn'd upo' the beuk,
Wad threap auld folk the thing misteuk;
For 'twas the auld moon turn'd a neuk
An' out of' sight,
An' backlins-comin to the leuk
She grew mair bright.

This was deny'd, it was affirm'd;
The herds and hissels were alarm'd
The rev'rend gray-beards rav'd an' storm'd,
That beardless laddies
Should think they better wer inform'd,
Than their auld daddies.

Frae less to mair, it gaed to sticks;
Frae words an' aiths to clours an' nicks;
An monie a fallow gat his licks,
Wi' hearty crunt;
An' some, to learn them for their tricks,
Were hang'd an' brunt.

This game was play'd in mony lands,
An' auld-light caddies bure sic hands,
That faith, the youngsters took the sands
Wi' nimble shanks;
Till lairds forbad, by strict commands,
Sic bluidy pranks.

But new-light herds gat sic a cowe,
Folk thought them ruin'd stick-an-stowe;
Till now, amaist on ev'ry knowe
Ye'll find ane plac'd;
An' some their new-light fair avow,
Just quite barefac'd.

Nae doubt the auld-light flocks are bleatin;
Their zealous herds are vex'd an' sweatin;
Mysel', I've even seen them greetin
Wi' girnin spite,
To hear the moon sae sadly lied on
By word an' write.

But shortly they will cowe the louns!
Some auld-light herds in neebor touns
Are mind't, in things they ca' balloons,
To tak a flight;
An' stay ae month amang the moons
An' see them right.

Guid observation they will gie them;
An' when the auld moon's gaun to lea'e them,

The hindmaist shaird, they'll fetch it wi' them
Just i' their pouch;
An' when the new-light billies see them,
I think they'll crouch!

Sae, ye observe that a' this clatter
Is naething but a "moonshine matter";
But tho' dull prose-folk Latin splatter
In logic tulyie,
I hope we bardies ken some better
Than mind sic brulyie.