

CLXXXIV.—TO MR. JOHN FRANCIS ERSKINE, OF MAR.

DUMFRIES, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1793.

SIR,—Degenerate as human nature is said to be—and in many instances worthless and unprincipled it is—still there are bright examples to the contrary: examples that, even in the eyes of superior beings, must shed a lustre on the name of Man.

Such an example have I now before me, when you, Sir, came forward to patronise and befriend a distant and obscure stranger, merely because poverty had made him helpless, and his British hardihood of mind had provoked the arbitrary of wantonness and power. My much esteemed friend, Mr. Riddel of Glenriddel, has just read me a paragraph of a letter he had from you. Accept, Sir, of the silent throb of gratitude, for words would but mock the emotions of my soul.

You have been misinformed as to my final dismissal from the Excise; I am still in the service. Indeed, but for the exertions of a gentleman who must be known to you, Mr. Graham of Fintry, a gentleman who has ever been my warm and generous friend, I had, without so much as a hearing, or the slightest previous intimation, been turned adrift, with my helpless family, to all the horrors of want. Had I had any other resource, probably I might have saved them the trouble of a dismissal; but the little money I gained by my publication is almost every guinea embarked to save from ruin an only brother, who, though one of the worthiest, is by no means one of the most fortunate of men.

In my defence to their accusations, I said, that whatever might be my sentiments of republics, ancient or modern, as to Britain, I abjured the idea: That a constitution, which, in its original principles, experience had proved to be every way fitted for our happiness in society, it would be insanity to sacrifice to an untried visionary theory: That, in consideration of my being situated in a department, however humble, immediately in the hands of people in power, I had

forborne taking any active part, either personally, or as an author, in the present business of Reform: but that, where I must declare my sentiments, I would say there existed a system of corruption between the executive power and the representative part of the legislature, which boded no good to our glorious constitution, and which every patriotic Briton must wish to see amended. Some such sentiments as these I stated in a letter to my generous patron, Mr. Graham, which he laid before the Board at large; where, it seems, my last remark gave great offence: and one of our supervisors-general, a Mr. Corbet, was instructed to inquire on the spot, and to document me—"that my business was to act, *not to think*; and that whatever might be men or measures, it was for me to be *silent and obedient*."

Mr. Corbet was likewise my steady friend; so between Mr. Graham and him I have been partly forgiven; only I understand that all hopes of my getting officially forward are blasted.

Now, Sir, to the business in which I would more immediately interest you. The partiality of my countrymen has brought me forward as a man of genius, and has given me a character to support. In the Poet I have avowed manly and independent sentiments, which I trust will be found in the man. Reasons of no less weight than the support of a wife and family, have pointed out as the eligible, and situated as I was, the only eligible line of life for me, my present occupation. Still my honest fame is my dearest concern; and a thousand times have I trembled at the idea of those *degrading* epithets that malice or misrepresentation may affix to my name. I have often, in blasting anticipation, listened to some future hackney scribbler, with the heavy malice of savage stupidity, exulting in his hireling paragraphs—"Burns, notwithstanding the *fanfaronade* of independence to be found in his works, and after having been held forth to public view and to public estimation as a man of some genius, yet, quite destitute of resources within himself to support his borrowed dignity, he dwindled into a paltry exciseman, and slunk out the rest

of his insignificant existence in the meanest of pursuits, and among the vilest of mankind."

In your illustrious hands, Sir, permit me to lodge my disavowal and defiance of these slanderous falsehoods. Burns was a poor man from birth, and an exciseman by necessity; but—I will say it! the sterling of his honest worth no poverty could debase, and his independent British mind, oppression might bend, but could not subdue. Have not I, to me a more precious stake in my country's welfare, than the richest dukedom in it?—I have a large family of children, and the prospect of more. I have three sons, who, I see already, have brought into the world souls ill qualified to inhabit the bodies of slaves.—Can I look tamely on, and see any machinations to wrest from them the birthright of my boys,—the little independent Britons, in whose veins runs my own blood?—No! I will not! should my heart's blood stream around my attempt to defend it!

Does any man tell me that my full efforts can be of no service; and that it does not belong to my humble station to meddle with the concerns of a nation?

I can tell him that it is on such individuals as I that a nation has to rest, both for the hand of support and the eye of intelligence. The uninformed mob may swell a nation's bulk; and the titled, tinsel, courtly throng may be its feathered ornament; but the number of those who are elevated enough in life to reason and to reflect, yet low enough to keep clear of the venal contagion of a court!—these are a nation's strength.

I know not how to apologise for the impertinent length of this epistle; but one small request I must ask of you farther—When you have honoured this letter with a perusal, please to commit it to the flames. Burns, in whose behalf you have so generously interested yourself, I have here, in his native colours, drawn as he is; but should any of the people in whose hands is the very bread he eats, get the least knowledge of the picture, it would ruin the poor bard for ever!

My poems having just come out in another edition, I beg leave to present you with a copy as a small mark of that high esteem and ardent gratitude with which I have the honour to be, Sir, your deeply indebted, and ever devoted, humble servant,

R. B.\*

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CLXXXV.—TO MISS M'MURDO, DRUMLANRIG.

DUMFRIES, /u/y 1793.

. . . Now let me add a few wishes which every man, who has himself the honour of being a father, must breathe when he sees female youth, beauty, and innocence about to enter into this chequered and very precarious world. May you, my young madam, escape that frivolity which threatens universally to pervade the minds and manners of fashionable life. The mob of fashionable female youth—what are they? Are they anything? They prattle, laugh, sing, dance, finger a lesson, or perhaps turn the pages of a fashionable novel; but are their minds stored with any information worthy of the noble powers of reason and judgment? and do their hearts glow with sentiment, ardent, generous, or humane? Were I to poetize on the subject I would call them the butterflies of the human kind, remarkable only for the idle variety of their ordinary glare, sillily straying from one blossoming weed to another, without a meaning or an aim, the idiot prey of every pirate of the skies who thinks them worth his while as he wings his way by them, and speedily by wintry time swept to that oblivion whence they might as well never have appeared. Amid this crowd of nothings may you be something, etc. R. B.

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\* This letter was penned in response to the sympathy which Mr. Erskine had expressed for Burns in a letter to Captain Riddell of Carse, when Burns was taken to task by the Board of Excise for his political opinions.