

Alexander (Sandy) Rodger 1784-1846

Alexander Rodger was born in 1784 in East Calder, Midlothian. By 1797 he had come to Glasgow as apprentice to a weaver and began composing verse around 1800. He married in 1806 and went to live in Bridgeton, then a suburb of Glasgow, and began publishing in *The Spirit of the Union* whose editor, Gilbert McLeod, was arrested and tried for sedition in 1819. Already in 1816 Rodger had composed a sarcastic piece which was critical of the city council whose members attempted to prevent a meeting of reformers in the city that year. In 1820 Rodger was also arrested and imprisoned because of his association with McLeod and his writings on political reform. While in prison, where he sang out his verses to annoy his jailers, Rodger composed *Written in a certain Bridewell*, which describes the family left at home to worry without means of support, and also the state of paranoia on the part of the authorities. Eventually released, Rodger later worked as a cloth inspector at Barrowfield and continued to write satirical poems on the reform movement in 1832 and afterwards. He died in 1846 and was buried in Glasgow.

The language of Alexander Rodger's poems ranges from English with Scots features through to consistently Scots. He often flitted between the two for effect and rhyming scheme. In 1820 Alexander Rodger was arrested in a raid and locked up a state prisoner, solely on the basis of his writings and associations, though he took no part in the uprising. In his unfinished piece on the rising called *Written in a certain Bridewell, by a state prisoner, in the month of April 1820*, Rodger described how his family felt and how he felt the heartless authorities had over reacted. The language is a mixture of English and Scots forms:

PENT up within this horrid cell,
How heaves my breast with anger's swell!
To think what I must suffer here,
Cut off from friends and freedom dear;
Reft from the truest joys of life,
The joys o' hame –my bairns, my wife;
Whilst they sit round a cheerless fire,
And wistfully at here enquire
What makes their father stay sae lang,
And if there's ony thing gane wrang?
And while they watch her looks, and see
The big tear gathering in her e'e,
The sad contagion spreads around,
Till not a cheerless tear is found –
Till not a breast but heaves and throbs,
Labouring with bitter sighs and sobs,
Such scenes, - and there are many such,
The hardest human heart would touch –
Would make the Cherokee draw back
His scalping knife and tomahawk,
Nor torture mair his vanquished foe,
But loose and let his prisoner go,
Armed with his hatchet, club and bow;
Would make the cannibal, that's bent,
On eating human flesh, relent,
And throw aside his bloody knife,

And spare his wretched victim's life.
But, ah! Such scenes can never thaw,
The icy hearts of men of law,
For their meek-eyed *humanity* is dead,
And fell *Hyena-ty* reigns in its stead.

But what's the reason I'm confined?
Nae reason, troth, can be assigned,
Unless it be, I chance to differ
Frae them wha will that I should suffer,
And that my views o' politics
Accord not wi' some statesmen's tricks;
Whilst they, good sauls, wha keep me here,
Are blest wi' een sae very clear,
That they can see that a' is right
That's done by them wha hae the might.

And so, they weel may see, in short,
For some o' them are weel paid for't;
Five hunder pounds or sax-a-year,
Should mak' a man see gay-an-clear;
And view things in anither light
Frae ony poor hard-working wight,
Wha doesna get a brown bawbee,
And therefore hasna een to see.

Ye though a poor man wants the sight,
To see things in their proper light,
Though wi' a squinting vision, he,
Must every thing obliquely see –
Must view oppression and taxation
As real evils to a nation –
Must think state paupers and their brats
A vermin o' destructive rats,
Devouring up the public good,
And robbing man o' half his food: -
Though thus, the poor man views the matter,
(What pity he can see nae better,)
Is that enough for those in power,
To gang at an untimely hour,
To bind and drag him aff to prison,
Under the horrid charge o' 'treason'?
As I was used – nor only I,
But scores o' mole-blind fools forby,
Wha couldna see, they were sae poor,
The beauties o' the scarlet w-----e;
Wha never bowed the knee in homage,
Unto the beast, nor yet his image,
Wha never did his mark receive,
Nor did his lying tales believe –

Wha never chimed in wi' the custom,
O' praising up a rotten system,
Wi' paper pictures a' patched round,
To hide its parts that are unsound –
Wha never could perceive the use,
O' starving men to feed a goose –
Wha never could admit the fack,
That black was white, or white was black,
But raised their voices loud and strang,
Against what they conceived was wrang.

And therefore were they seized by dizzens,
And dragged to Bridwells and to prisons,
And there shut up in cauld damp cells,
Where not a single comfort dwells,
But where the beds on which they lie,
Are scarcely fit for horse or kye,
Where creeping and where jumping cattle
Move thick as armies gaun to battle,
And where coarse meat in dirty cogs –
Meat fit for feeding ducks and hogs –
Is served up by some thief-like sinner,
Wi' hands' wad mak' the devil scunner,
And spew his fire and brimstone dinner.

But as for those wha sent us hither,
Here the poem ends unfinished.

Another example of Rodger's work, which continues the theme of political reform and class struggle, is his satirical poem entitled *The Waefu' Lamentation: of the Provost and Bailies of the Royal Burgh of Blythswood*, which describes the anger of the corrupt city councillors at the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill. The Bill sought to extend the vote and bring to an end the domination of councils by small self-interested groups and families. The poem, which is some 32 verses long, satirises the ruling families' loss of control over patronage, political appointment and wealth within the Scottish burghs:

Wow, Sirs! What's this come owre us a'?
Wae worth that vile Reforming Law,
That's torn the vested rights awa',
 Frae ilka borough,
An' left us Bailies nocht ava',
 But dool an' sorrow.

Alas! That I should live to see't.
The thocht o't 's like to gar me greet,
An' gnash my teeth, an' stamp my feet,
 Wi' grief an' anger,
To think how many pickings sweet,
 We'll pree nae langer.

Gane are our bits o' canny jobs,
By whilk we used to line our fobs,
And creesh our loofs, and gust our gobs,
 An' dink us braw;
The curst Reform! it comes an' robs,
 Us o' them a'!

Nae close electioneerings now –
Thae times are a' gane by, I trow,
When ye chose me, an' I chose you,
 An' here sit we,
As cowed as ony hummilt cow,
 That treads the lee.

Hech! but we've got a fearfu' fa',
We, wha were wont to gang sae braw,
Whase word or nod was ay a law,
 To a' about us;
The rabble now will owre us craw,
 An' rudely flout us.

Whare now are a' our gowden dreams?
Our hole-an'-corner plots an' schemes?–
Gane, like the sun's departed beams,
 Ayont the hill,
While ilka future prospect seems
 To lour wi' ill.

Nae mair we'll dine now wi' his Grace,
Nor to my Lord haud up our face,
To bargain for some snug bit place,
 For Jock the laddie;
Nor get our wife bedeckt wi' lace,
 An' silks fu' gaudy.

An' there's your auld bit house an' mine,
We thocht to get replaced short syne
Wi' ashlar wa's o' freestane fine,
 An' sclated riggins;
That's past – an' here we still maun pine,
 In auld thack biggins.

An' mair than that, I thocht to get,
A grand piano for our Kate,
Whare, leddy-like, she'd sit in state,
 An' thrum her tune; –
The pirn-wheel now maun be her fate
 To birr an' croon.

An' as for Jock wi' a' his lear,
He needna think on pu'pits mair,
For notwithstanding a' my care,
Expense an' pains,
I fear he jimply has a share
O' common brains.

But yet, for a' that, his bit lack
Wad ne'er hae been a great drawback
Unto his wearing o' the *black*,
Provided still
Things hadna a' been knocked to wrack
By this curst Bill.

For had we still possessed our vote,
We might hae made that muckle o't,
As, through some Patron, to hae got,
Our Jock a kirk: -
That's gane – now he maun cast his coat,
Poor chiel! an' work!

An' wae's me! since he wants the brains
To handle chisels, files, an' planes,
There's naething for him now remains,
In this world wide,
That I can see, but knapping stanes
By some dyke side.

Nae mair will Blythswood meet us here,
An' dine wi' us four times a year;
We'll be for nae mair use, I fear,
To him, och hon!
An' therefore he will never speer
The road we're on.

Nor yet will Finlay Kirkland ca',
An' treat us in our ain Town ha',
Nor kiss our wives an' dochters a',
An' slip fu' sleek
A bonnie yellow George or twa,
Into their cheek.

O' had we but tae'n care langsyne,
An' made hay will the sun did shine!
But na – we boost to dash sae fine
Aboon our level:
An' wi' our dinners an' our wine,
Feast, rant an' revel.

Short-sighted mortals! ne'er to ween
But things wad be as they had been:
We little dreamt a blast sae keen
 For us was brewin',
Whase breath wad bring our branches green
 To wrack and ruin.

Aye, aye! – the crowd may bawl “Reform!” –
What wondrous gude it will perform!
To use it proves a ruthless storm –
 A devastation –
A plague - a pest – a canker worm –
 Annihilation!

May muckle trouble, dool, an' wae,
Alight on Russell, Brou'am, and Grey,
They've ta'en frae us our prop, our stay,
 Our chief support;
But bide a wee, - they yet will hae,
 To answer for't.

Aye, that they will, an' wi' a vengeance! –
For soon as comes a happy change ance,
We'll mak' them chaunt, in Royal dungeons,
 “Sweet Libertie!”
Or try if *Robespierrean* engines
 Can set them free.

An' a' the rest wha wi' them fought,
An' their unhallowed labours wrought,
We'll hae them served, too, as they ought,
 Vile, graceless fallows!
To justice they shall a' be brought –
 An' that's the gallows.

May ruin seize the wicked Press –
The movin' cause o' our distress –
It has exposed ilk wee finesse,
 An' loopy job,
An' shown us, in our nakedness,
 To a' the mob.

An' O!, confound the Unions a'! –
Sae bauld an' crouselly now they crawl,
They'd rule the King – they'd rule the law, -
 Ilk thing they'd rule:
I fear they'll try to chase awa
 Our King, ere Yule.

But Gude preserve him, honest man!
Frae that infernal, graceless clan;
I hope he'll yet do what he can,
 In our behalf
An' try to mend, by ilka plan,
 Our broken staff.

An' Heaven shield our spotless Queen
Frae ilka scoundrel Jacobin –
For she has kept her garments clean,
 'Mid a' this stour
Nor filed her fingers wi' it, I ween,
 Up to this hour.

May ilka blessin' light upon
The glorious Duke o' Wellin'ton,
An' may he do as he has done:
 Gude bless his Grace!
He was our leading-star – our sun,
 When he kept place.

May Heaven uphold Sir Robert Peel,
An' Weatherall, that witty chiel –
An' Croaker, too, wha fought sae weel,
 In our ain cause,
An' a' the rest wha, true as steel,
 Maintained our laws.

Gude save auld Airland's weeping Church,
Now hurklin' low without the porch;
They've torn her mantle, an' her curch
 They've set on lowe,
While wicked corbies crouselly perch
 On her bare pow.

An' gin they're no scaured aff, I doubt,
They'll pick her bare, clout after clout,
Nor leave her ought to wrap about,
 Her naked skin;
Na – waur, - they threaten to pick out,
 Her vera een.

An' her gude bishops still preserve,
Wha daily in the temples serve, -
Though want o' tithes may they ne'er starve,
 But aye hae plenty, -
For muckle, muckle they deserve,
 They are sae tenty.

They never stain their snaw-white bands
By breaking ane o' the Commands,
Nor e'er defile their haly hands
 Wi' dirt o Mammon;
Then! O! may those wha'd seized their lands
 Be strung like Haman!

An' may red wrath an' indignation
Be poured out on this graceless nation!
May ruin an' black desolation
 Sweep owre the land!
While, safe entrenched in domination
 We snugly stand!