



Scots Language Centre

Crack About Politics



Document 7

On the Price of Meal
c.1800

Historical and Political Background

The article below 'On the Price of Meal', originally appeared in a journal from Paisley named *The Scotchman*, and dates to around the year 1800. The word meal usually meant oatmeal in Scotland, but could be applied to any grain or seeds that had been put through a process of grinding in order to produce fine granules. Corn is another word for the seed or grain (particularly wheat) before it has been processed by grinding or other means.

At first glance, a discussion about meal may not seem political, and, indeed, much of the discussion below deals with bread and butter issues, such as pricing and the drink industry. But these bread and butter issues fuelled political campaigns precisely because it meant the difference between eating and starving, so the subject was economically and socially political rather than narrowly party political. The London Parliament had been under pressure from the landowners' lobby in the 18th century to introduce legislation that would put high duties on imported corn and so protect the landowners' profits at home. The first of the so-called corn laws was introduced in 1804 which led to greater wheat production but the price of bread became very high. At the same time war with Napoleon Bonaparte led to a blockade and grain shortages. When war ended in 1814, cheaper imports of corn led to a lowering of prices again so the Tory government passed a new corn law in 1815 to place higher duties on foreign corn, keep bread prices high, and landowners in profit. But this hit the working people badly because their staple food was bread and now they were paying much of their wages just to eat. Both before and after 1815 there were meal mob riots in Scotland and elsewhere, either because of scarcity, or as a protest against prices. Manufacturers – who owned and ran the expanding industrial centres – also wished to see the price of grain kept low so workers could afford to feed their families. But low bread prices meant the manufacturers could pay lower wages and so they campaigned against the landowners. A long struggle ensued and the corn laws were not finally repealed until 1846.

The Scotchman Article

The author of the article is at pains to demonstrate the hypocrisy of those who complain (in paragraphs 1 and 2) about the scarcity of meal, blaming farmers for selling corn (grain) to brewers, and the high prices set by meal-mongers (sellers), while the complainers at the same time spend so much on drink. He points to scarcity resulting from other reasons. In particular, the author speaks in paragraph 3 about the hoards of drink sellers found in every nook and cranny, up every alley, in every town, who make far greater profits than any meal-monger ever did. Yet, he says, the complainers say nothing about them. In paragraph 5 he tells us that a person will drink more grain in whisky in a morning than in meal that would feed him for a week but will complain about the scarcity of meal, and comments "It's plain eneuch that gin we drink our corn we canna get it to eat." He argues (paragraphs 6-8) that the brewer cannot be blamed for getting more out of corn by making it into drink than a miller can from making it into meal, and should not try to forbid the brewer from buying up corn in scarce times, because this leaves then the farmer short of buyers. The author makes the wry comment that if there was no whisky the drinkers would just drink rum and instead fill the pockets of the sugar merchants (paragraph 9). He states that it is not his intent to side with the farmers – and wishes there was no rise in the price of meal – but if people spend more on drink they should not complain about lack of food. People will say, he continues (paragraph 11), that drink is much cheaper than food, but the government taxes make it artificially high, to which the author replies there is no law forcing people to drink. He finishes with the observation (paragraph 12) that we should not complain about the dearth of meal: "Ye maun haud your tongue about taxes till ance ye quat taxin' yoursel's wi' drinkin."

Language

The text is written in a style that was familiar to the 18th and 19th century reader, the spelling customs of Older Scots having been replaced by the conventions used in English, including the ‘apologetic apostrophe’ and also some instances of grammar. Some forms, such as *do* and *to*, which we would regard as English today, were still standard in Scots at the time our author was writing, but which were replaced by *dae* and *tae* in the 19th century. The text is certainly in Scots, but there are some inconsistencies (perhaps due to the printer) in form or spelling, such as *about/aboot* and *gieing/giein*. On the other hand, there are many instances of distinct Scots vocabulary, rich turns of phrase, and Scots idiom throughout. We should note the following:

ANGLICISMS

There are one or two forms and expressions that are typical of English rather than Scots. For example, the author consistently uses the forms *farmer*, *market* and *neighbours* rather than Scots *fermer*, *mercat* and *neebors* (or variants thereof). There are occasional points of grammar that appear more English, as in *wha hae baith* and *wha racket maist* (rather than *that haes baith* and *that racket maist*) but the author was not alone in this trend.

APOLOGETIC APOSTROPHE

This is the name given to the tradition which began in the 18th century of adding an apostrophe to the middle and ends of words where the writer imagined a letter was ‘missing’. This grew out of the confusion caused by the adoption of English conventions for writing. For example, in Older Scots we find the forms *gangand* (going) or *makand* (making) but because of English influence in always writing *-ing*, people now thought that the correct way to write these words was *gangin*’ and *makin*’ to show a sound was ‘missing’. That is why today we would still write *gangin* and *makkin*, though the ‘apologetic apostrophe’ is avoided by writers except where a word is abbreviated, such as *intil*’t (in til it) or *ye*’ll (for *ye will*) or to usefully show a difference in pronunciation, such as *dee*’d (the verb, died) rather than *deed* (the noun, act or document). In the meal text we find the forms *an*’ (unstressed and), *destroyin*’ (destroying), *e*’er (ever), *en*’ (end), *fin*’ (find), *grummelin*’ (grumbling), *i*’ (in), *ne*’er (never), *mak*’ (make), *managin*’ (managing), *onleukin*’ (observations), *pittin*’ (putting), *ser*’ (serve), *settin*’ (setting), *shamefu*’ (shameful), *spen*’ (spend), *staunin*’ (standing), *tak*’ (take), *thinkin*’ (thinking), *wi*’ (unstressed with), and *willin*’ (willing).

COGNATES

These are a class of words which are clearly related to equivalent words in closely related languages, having sprung from a common origin. So, for example, English *home* and *stone* and Scots *hame* and *stane* both originated from Anglo-Saxon *ham* and *stan*. In this text we find many standard Scots forms such as, *ahint* (behind), *ain* (own), *amaist* (almost), *ance* (once), *aneuch/eneuch* (enough), *auld* (old), *awthegither* (altogether), *ayont* (beyond), *baith* (both), *brocht* (brought), *claes* (clothes), *faut* (falt), *gie* (give), *gif/gin* (if), *hae* (have), *hale* (whole), *kent* (knew), *kintra* (country), *mair* (more), *maun* (must), *mony* (many), *nae* (no), *owr* (over), *parritch* (porridge), *skame* (scheme), *weel* (well), *wha* (who), *wrang* (wrong), and *waur* (worse).

NEGATIVE ENDINGS

The author uses fairly standard forms in Scots for representing ‘not’ and ‘did not’ at the ends of words. So we find *dinna* (don’t), *disna* (doesn’t), *canna* (can’t), *hadna* (hadn’t), *hasna* (hasn’t), *letna* (let not), *shouldna* (shouldn’t), *wadna* (wouldn’t), *wasna* (wasn’t), *werena* (weren’t), and *willna* (won’t).



OO/OU/OW

We have noted in earlier articles that the letters o/u/w could be interchanged in written Scots, but were generally pronounced as ‘oo’, as in *toun/town* or *cou/cov/cow*. By the 18th century Scots texts had begun to follow the custom (as our author does) of spelling words in common with English in the same way, as in *about*, *out* and *now*, though the vowel was pronounced ‘oo’ in Scots just as it is today. Our author does use *about*, *doot* and *noo* on a number of occasions, but also *houp*, *howe’er*, *oursel’s*, *power*, *snout* and *thousands*, probably pronounced as ‘how-p’, ‘hoo-ever’, ‘oorsels’, ‘poo-er’, ‘snoot’ and ‘thoosans’.

VOCABULARY

The text is rich in words which are either exclusive to Scots, or most closely associated with Scots. These include *aiblins* (possibly, perhaps), *ava* (at all), *breeks* (trousers), *byke* (nest), *aye* (always), *cannily* (carefully), *een* (eyes), *gait* (route, way or course), *gang* (go or walk), *gar* (cause, compel), *ilka* (every), *keytcht* (tossed aside), *kye* (cattle), *kyte* (belly), *lippen* (depend, trust), *muckle* (much), *owrance* (control), *paik* (punish), *siller* (money), *sough* (sigh, or opinion), *stechin’* (puffing), *sweert* (reluctant), *swither* (hesitate), *thae* (those), *thir* (these), *tint* (lost), *unco* (strange, unusual), *uphaud* (support), *undeemous* (extraordinary, or immense), *wame* (belly or womb), *war’d* (expended), *when* (few, a number), and *wyte* (blame). There are also some examples of *-it* endings typical of Scots, such as *allow’t* (allowed), *raist* (raised), *reckont* (reckoned) and *stupit* (stupid).

Finally, the author uses a number of expressions, such as ‘learn the cat to the kirn’, but one which will be immediately familiar (and modern sounding) is the simple ‘May be aye, may be no’ (nowadays ‘mibby ay, mibby naw’).

On the Price of Meal c.1800

The winter is now settin' in on us again, an' to my onleukin' its to be a gey tryan ane to mony a body amang us. I dinna mean to gie my reasons for this opinion the noo. They'll aiblins come as weel some time after this. It may ser' a better en' to gie my kintramen a watch word about their behaviour, an' set them on a skame that may be usefu' in helpin' them to owrput their hard times a wee' till we see what comes about.

We ne'er meet wi' ony mishap but we're amaist aye sure to lay the wyte o't on some body. We're unco sweert to fin' faut wi' oursel's. Ilka ane o' us, gif our ain word could be ta'en for it, wad hae been better aff gin sic a ane hadna dune sae an' sae, or gin things hadna happen to gang wrang wi' us. We're willin' aneuch to tak' the praise o' a' the gude that's in our lot to oursel's, but dreid sweert to tak' the blame o' the ills that befa' us. It's true eneuch that mony a ane suffers muckle hardship that's no brocht on by his ain haun: but its juist as true that mony a an'es wrangously blame't for things he was ne'er guilty o'. An' some get the wyte o' doin' things that's out o' the power o' man to prevent. The guilty too aften skulk ahint the ither folks' backs, wha hae baith to hide them an' bear the blame o' their misdoin's. Wrang notions about things gie rise mony a time to muckle stupit talk, an' mony a daft action. I see aye mair an' mair that there is nae houp o' wise conduct without richt thinkin'.

I took notice ance afore o' some shamefu' doin's that happen amang us, that I'm sure ye wad ne'er heard tell o', had it not been for folks want o' sense. Did ony body e'er hear tell o' a brute destroyin' the meat o't by way o' takin amen's o' its feeder for no gieing it eneuch? Horse an' kye hae muckle mair wit nor this comes to. Gin the meal happen to be dear this winter; or, what's juist the same thing, gin the money should be cheap, I hae nae doot but the auld sough'll be raist about the greed o' the farmers an' the meal-mongers. I hae my thochts that the dearth o' meal, an' may be some ither things juist as ill, maun be imputet to some ither cause, gin the saddle were laid on the richt horse back. But tho' we kent the cause o't ayont a doot, wad that richt the matter? May be aye, an' may be no. Howe'er this may be, I think I can see a way that the folk wha racket maist about dear meal, may baith help themselves in thir strait times, an' i' the lang-rin aiblins be a mean o' pittin' an en' to them. There's a set o' folk amang us, wham it costs sax times mair to maintain than a' the meal-mongers, an' shame haet they're gude for, the maist o' them: but meal-sellers we canna want. I mean the idle sloungers wha sell whisky an' ither sorts o' drink. Let ony body think on the swarms o' lazy slinks wha leive by this trade in every neuk o' the kintra, an' he'll easily see what an undeemous siller it costs to maintain them: for its no a wee thing that ser's them: they maun hae the best for baith back an' belly. Look juist at hame here, or gang in to Glasgo', or ony ither big toun, an' at every ither door, ye'll see ane o' them staunin' stechin' wi' his shouther at the door-cheek, settin' out his red snout an' muckle kyte. Forbye them that lye graenin' about the fires, and the nests o' them that lieve in throu' gangs an' bye lanes out o' sicht. Mony mae hae made up their packs, an' their wames baith, by sellin' rum an' whisky, than e'er did it by sellin' meal, an' yet there's ne'er a word about it. An' wha is't that does maist to uphaud thae drones i' the byke o' mankin? The verra folk that roar loudest about the dearth o' meal, an' the greed o' the meal mongers.

That man canna surely hae a very gude trade by the en' wha thrives i' the world by the ruin o' his customers. But gin folk be bent on their ain destruction, it wadna set them weel to fin' faut wi' ither's for takin advantage o' their madness. This may be ae reason that the drinkers an' the drink sellers gree sae weel. But i fin' nae faut wi' the drinkers for gieing the whisky sellers their price without grummelin': for my rule is, that the price o' a thing is juist what it'll gie. But let them pay peaceably for their meal too, an' mak nae din about it. An' gin they will uphaud whisky-sellers they maun e'en do't; but let us hear nae mae complaints against

meal mongers, I'm sure an' certain that the tane mak's the double o' the profit out o' the same siller that the tither does, an' there's naebody but they who can leive langer without meat or drink that'll swither whilk o' the twa sets o' folk is maist usefu'. But the uphaudin' o' the folk that sell drink is but ae piece o' the mischief.

Ane o' thae dry weasan't wichts'll ne'er staun to swallow as muckle corn in whisky on a morning, as wad hae ser't him for parritch a hale week, gin it had been grun' into meal. An' yet he'll yerr an' back about the dearth o' meal, an' misca' ither folk for mischief he's bringin' on himsel' an' his neighbours wi' the ain hauns o' him. It's plain eneuch that gin we drink our corn we canna get it to eat. It's juist as plain that gin we be willin' to pay far mair for't in whisky, nor in ony ither shape, that mair o't 'll be made use o' this gait nor ony ither. Wha disna ken that folk'll be best ser't wi' the thing they're willin' to pay best for? An' wha, that has ony sense ava, doots that this is not juist as it should be.

Gin the brewer can get mair out o' corn by makin' it into drink nor the miller can get by makin' it into meal, willna the brewer be able to gie maist for't? An' for that verray reason hasna he the best richt to get it? Wha's to hinner ony man frae laying out his siller i' the wey that he likes best, or thinks he's to mak' maist out o't? Gin it's to be reckont a crime to tak' the management o' a man's siller out his ain hauns, how comes't that we reckon we hae a richt to tak' the owrance o' ony ither things that belangs to him? – his corn, for instance, or his claes. But I'm far cheatet, gin we binna guilty o' baith thae crimes, whan we forbid the brewer to mak use o' grain in makin' drink. Hasna a man, tho' he should happen to be a brewer, the same richt to his siller that ither folk hae to theirs? an' shouldna he be allow't to tak' the same liberty wi' his ain that ither folk are allow't? An' will ony body tell me that a farmer hasna the same richt to his grain that he has to his kye; or that ony ither body has to aucht that belangs to them? There's naebody surely that wad venture to say he hasna. An' yet we tak' it on us to forbid the brewer to lay out his siller in buying grain: an' it's plain gin he dinna buy it, the farmer canna sell it to him. Sae it seems there's twa sets o' folk amang us that hae tint the richt o'managin' their ain affairs for nae reason that I can see, binna that we winna want yill an' whisky, an' canna want meal; twa wants that naebody, ane wad think, can wi' a gude face, wyte the present generation o' either brewers or farmers for inventin'.

First to Learn the Cat the road to the Kirn, an' then paik her for gangin', is surely wicked eneuch' but it's naething to the wickednes o' him who, forbye lettin' her see the road, hauds her tilt wi' the tae haun, an' thrashes her wi' the tither for being there. But what better are they wha temp the farmer wi' a muckle price for his grain afore it be grun', an' yet winna let him tak' it? An' e'en whan they hae oblig'd him to mak' it into meal afore he can get quat o't, think naething to stane him for seeking little mair nor he wad hae gotten afore after he has war'd a' his pains on't. Isna this what ilka ane wha drinks whisky an' fins faut wi' the farmers does? Drink nane o't an' I'll wad my life there'll be nae grain lost makin't. But gin folk be sae mad keen o'whisky as to gie ony price for't afore they want it, let them fin' nae faut wi' the farmers for sellin' the brewers their grain to mak' it o', an' takin' a gude price for what's left for meal. There wad aiblins be juist as little justice in makin' a law forbiddin' folk to drink whisky as in ane that forbad the makin' o't. But gin the makin' o't is to be reckon't a crime, what for shouldna the drinkin' o't be ane too. Solomon said gin there war nae tale teller, there wad be nae strife; an' I think I may say, without pretending to be wiser than ither folk, gin there were nae drinkers there wad be nae brewers. It's ill takin' the breeks aff a Hielandman, an' I believe it wad be kittle to tak' amen's o' the whisky-drinkers in sic a way as to recompense us for the mischief they do (for it's as plain as parritch to me, gin there be ill done it's them that are guilty o't); but I think, gin it war for nae ither reason but juist to open folk's een to their ain fauts a wee, it wad be richt, every time we said to the brewer he wasna to mak' use o' grain in makin' drink, to subject the drinkers o't to punishment too.

But drinkers'll tell us, tho' they wad rather hae whisky, they're willin' to tak rum, an' it needs nae grain to mak it. An' what's this but sayin', they're willin' to save the brewer frae skaith, an' fill the pouches o' the sugar merchants, an' let the farmer shift for himsel? An' no e'en that, for after they hae keytcht him out o' ae market, an' forc't him to tak' the only ane that's left, they'll no suffer him to mak' the best o't. They wad drive him into a hole, an' then gar him pay them to keep him in't.

Letna it be thocht I wad side wi' the farmers against ony ither body. Gin I had my wull there wad be nae rise on the meal, or ony ither thing for the sake o' gettin' drink made o't. What I wad be at is, that nae man should be forced to do ony thing wi' his ain but what he likes himsel; an' that ilka ane should fin' the effecks o' his ain folly; an' that naebody should be punish'd for ither folk's fauts. Gin the folk i' this kintra can afford to spen' three times mair siller in drink nor what wad haud them in meat (an' I'm sure this is done) whare in a' the world hae they ony richt to compleen for the dearth o' meat?

There's nae possibility amaist o' garin' folk that like drink see things as they should do. Tell them that their meat costs them little compar'd wi' their drink, they'll stop your mouth, as they think, by tellin' you that the drink costs little an' it werena the taxes o' the Government. But didst mak' ony odds to them wha gets the siller gin they be oblid'd to gie't out o' their pouch afore they lay their lips on the caup? Naebody needs attempt to say that the Government hasna laid heavy taxes on our drink; but it's juist as true that it has made nae law yet obleegin' us to swallow drink an' then pay for't: there's ae thing should ay be keepit in min' o', that the maist o' the drink that the Government taxes does us mair ill nor gude; an' gin it hadna been severely tax'd I hae nae doubt but thousands o' us wad hae destroyed oursel's wi even-doun drinkin', an' our Government disna demean itsel' to let folk kill themsel's this gait. Gin ony king were wantin to get quat o' a wheen o' his folk, an' fan himsel' at a loss to get a quarrel picket wi' ony o' his neighbours, sae that he couldna conveniently get them shot, I ken nae way that he could come to his purpose sae cannily as by giein' them plenty o' rum an' whisky to drink at a cheap rate. They wad soon do his business for him themsel's an be blithe to get leave. Mankin' hae a different notion o' thae sorts o' drink awthegither frae the brutes, for the mair a man taks o' them the keener he grows o' them. But I hae been tauld that a sow that has been the waur o' drink ance 'ill tak' a gude tent no to fill the sell o't fu' a second time.

Now, my kintramen, the sum o' the hale matter is this, - either ye maun drink nae whisky or ye maun fin' nae faut wi' the farmer for sellin' his grain to mak' it o'. An' ye maun say naething about the dearth o' meal as lang as sae muckle siller is spent buyin' drink. Ye maun haud your tongue about taxes till ance ye quat taxin' yoursel's wi' drinkin'. Nae Government can do richt unless the folk let it' an' I'll defy ony Government to gang far wrang gin the folk do richt. Keep aye min' ye hae the hank i' your ain haun. Gin ye brew weel ye'll drink the better. Lippen to naebody to keep you richt; an' keep aye min' that it's your ain faut gin ye suffer ony body to put you wrang.

Source: This article was originally published in *The Scotchman* in Paisley about the year 1800 and republished in the *John o Groat Journal*, Friday 7 October 1842.