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Campbell, Thomas

(1777–1844)

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Thomas Campbell (1777–1844)

by Sir Thomas Lawrence, *c.* 1820

Campbell, Thomas (1777–1844), poet, was born in High Street, Glasgow, on 27 July 1777, the youngest child of Alexander Campbell (1710–1801) and Margaret, *née* Campbell (1736–1812).

Early life and education, 1777–1798

Thomas Campbell's father had built up a tobacco importing business which was disastrously affected by the American War of Independence, but the family did not forfeit its social standing, and Thomas himself was baptized by Thomas Reid, at that time professor of moral philosophy in Glasgow University. There was little money to spare, and much consequent pressure on the children to work hard and make their own way in the world. Four of Campbell's brothers spent part of their working lives in British Guiana, and a fifth had an unprosperous career in textiles in Germany and France. Two sisters became governesses, and a third worked in a boarding-school.

Campbell proved to be an exemplary pupil at Glasgow grammar school, and achieved even greater success at Glasgow University, which he entered in 1791 with a view to entering the ministry of the Church of Scotland. He showed unusual facility in writing verse, submitting essays in rhyme when prose was expected. One of these exercises, on the origin of evil, is a fair adaptation of the method of Pope's *Essay on Man*. He won prizes, and acquired a reputation as a debater and translator. In his fourth year at university his father's income was still further reduced by the loss of a chancery suit, and Thomas was obliged to spend the summer vacation working as a tutor in a family on the island of Mull. He returned to the university for one further session, and attended John Millar's lectures on Roman law. Thirty years later, when Campbell was promoting his plan for a university in London, he recalled Millar's 'electrifying' lectures with an enthusiasm which suggests a lifelong influence. They probably reinforced the radical convictions already generated by his indignation at the savage sentences passed for alleged sedition on those moderate reformers Thomas Muir and Joseph Gerrald; Campbell had attended their trial before the notorious Lord Braxfield in Edinburgh.

On leaving Glasgow University in 1795 Campbell again spent a summer as a tutor in the highlands, this time at Dounie, near Crinan, in Argyll. In the autumn he spent two months in Edinburgh in an attempt to take up law, but got no further than working as a copying clerk. He was introduced to Dr Robert Anderson, editor of the monumental *Complete Edition of the Poets of Great Britain*, and through him to the publisher Robert Mundell, for whom he is said to have prepared an abridgement of Bryan Edwards's *West Indies*.

Although Campbell returned to Glasgow, and had plans for a literary periodical there, he was unable to earn a sufficient income, and considered crossing the Atlantic to make for himself a career in trade, as his brothers had done. But poor health at this time discouraged him from emigrating, and in 1798 he settled in Edinburgh, working as a tutor and picking up such literary work as he could. In time he met many talented literary figures, notably Dugald Stewart, Archibald Alison (author of a celebrated essay on taste), and the young Francis Jeffrey.

The Pleasures of Hope (1799) and European travels, 1799–1802

On 27 April 1799 Mundell published Campbell's *The Pleasures of Hope*. It was an immediate success, and created eager expectations of future greatness. As the engineer Thomas Telford told Alison, Campbell would surpass 'your Pindars, your Drydens, and your Grays': he looked more like a Scottish Milton or Shakespeare, or even something better (Beattie, 1.395). The poem's popularity is an indication of the prevailing taste, still far more at ease with eighteenth-century didactic poetry than with the innovations of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*. But the poem was also fortunate in its timing. It was peculiarly welcome to those in sympathy with political reform who were at their most despondent over the bloodshed of the French Revolution. Campbell's poem found ways of asserting radical sentiments that avoided the deadly charge of association with ‘French principles’. He denounced the destroyers of Polish liberty, and breathed vengeance on the oppressors of India and supporters of the slave trade. A second part was equally welcome in its rejection of a scepticism that reduced humanity to a 'frail and feverish being of an hour' (*The Pleasures of Hope*, line 338). But Campbell never had confidence that he could sustain the reputation thus early established. He was unable to develop his next poetical project, a celebration of Edinburgh to be called 'The Queen of the North', beyond a few fragments.

In 1800, though, Campbell sought to qualify himself further as a man of letters by travelling to Germany, as Coleridge and Wordsworth had done, to learn the language and acquaint himself with a literature that had for some years been recognized as exceptionally vital and innovative. He went to Hamburg and stayed there for some weeks, meeting the aged poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and other established writers. Later in the summer he went to Regensburg in Bavaria. While he was there a French army attacked and took the city, and Campbell witnessed some of the fighting at close quarters. The occupation itself seems to have caused him little inconvenience, and he went on to Munich, where he was on good terms with French officers, and given protection to pass through the whole army of Moreau, the commanding general.

Campbell returned to Hamburg for the winter, and stayed in the neighbouring city of Altona, at that time under Danish rule, as was the entire north bank of the River Elbe. So when war threatened between Britain and Denmark in March 1801 he quickly extricated himself, travelling home in a ship that was harried by a Danish privateer. In Altona he was infected with a venereal disease, probably syphilis, which further impaired his never robust health. But his enforced leisure produced some of the short poems that considerably enhanced his popularity, notably 'The Exile of Erin', inspired by his friendship with Anthony MacCann, a survivor of the Irish rising of 1798 who was living in Hamburg.

This friendship, together with Campbell's association with French officers in Bavaria, prompted an inquiry into his loyalty by the sheriff of Edinburgh. But by now his reputation was established in influential circles around Lord Holland in London as well as among the literati of Edinburgh. He was further secured by the patronage of Gilbert Elliot, Lord Minto, who had recently returned from Vienna where he had been British envoy: he was anxious to learn about conditions in French-occupied Bavaria, and was impressed by this talented young observer. Minto had been a close associate of Edmund Burke, but tolerated Campbell's outspoken radicalism, perhaps thinking that he would grow out of it.

Marriage, and later works, 1802–1819

With the restoration of peace in 1802 Campbell considered returning to the continent to collect material for a travel narrative, possibly extending to Turkey and Persia. The publisher Archibald Constable supported the project, but the renewal of war in 1803 made it impracticable, and the success of a new edition of *The Pleasures of Hope*, which included such poems as 'Hohenlinden', convinced Campbell that he could live by his pen in London. He was, indeed, tempted by the possibility in 1804 of a professorial chair at the University of Vilna, then under Russian rule. But he prudently decided that his interest in the regeneration of Poland would make such a post unacceptably perilous. Besides, on 10 October 1803 he had married Matilda Sinclair (*c*.1780–1828), the daughter of a cousin of his mother's, and they soon had a family to consider. There were two sons, both named after friends: Thomas Telford, born in 1804, and Alison, born in 1805. Both were unfortunate, as Alison died of scarlet fever in 1810, and Thomas became incapacitated by some kind of mental illness in adolescence, from which he never recovered. The early years of the marriage were overshadowed by anxieties about Campbell's own health and his finances. He supported himself with hackwork such as *The Annals of Great Britain* (1807), although, as he complained to Walter Scott, the publishers knew of his dependence on them and took advantage of it. But in 1805, with the support of lords Minto and Holland, he was awarded a pension of £200 a year. His father had died in 1801, and he gave generous support to his widowed mother and his sisters, so that the pension did not do a great deal to ease his own situation. But it was something, and successive editions of his poems and the publication in 1809 of *Gertrude of Wyoming* supplemented a still rather modest income.

Gertrude of Wyoming was well received, although not as extravagantly as *The Pleasures of Hope*. Its vision of pastoral innocence evoked only to be destroyed by the savagery of war (embodied in this case by Mohawk allies of the British) was in tune with an increasing taste for pathos. Jeffrey, indeed, regretted the 'fastidious timidity' which led Campbell to refine away much of the original grandeur of his design (*Edinburgh Review*, 14, 1809, 19;

Beattie, 2.172). But the poem retained its popularity for many years, particularly in the United States. Still, like *The Pleasures of Hope*, it has proved less enduring than short and apparently unsophisticated poems such as 'Hohenlinden' and 'Lord Ullin's Daughter'.

In 1812 Campbell found a new source of income as a result of the expanding demand for public lectures, and gave a successful series at the Royal Institution on poetry. Later he was received enthusiastically in Liverpool and Birmingham, and Scott suggested he should allow himself to be offered a chair at Edinburgh University. This he declined, but his success as a lecturer contributed to the good reception of his *Specimens of the British Poets* (1819). The project had been in hand since 1805, originally as a collaboration with Walter Scott, but it was completed by Campbell at irregular intervals, the poet complaining that he had to wade through oceans of bad poetry 'where not a fish is to be caught' (Beattie, 2.47). The range and unfamiliarity of what was eventually chosen confirm the editor's diligence, but the book achieved its main notoriety because of a brief defence of Pope against what Campbell saw as a depreciation by his most recent editor, William Lisle Bowles. There followed a controversy on what Bowles called 'the invariable principles of poetry', in which Byron came to play the leading role.

Magazine editing, and involvement with London and Glasgow universities, 1820–1830

Campbell now entered on what was to prove the most successful venture of his life, the editing of the *New Monthly Magazine*. The periodical had been founded in 1814 in opposition to the radical *Monthly Magazine*, but had not prospered, and the publisher, Henry Colburn, sought to change its character by enlisting a distinguished editor. Although Campbell's background was reformist his friendships crossed party lines, and his cosmopolitan interests and sympathies made him an ideal choice. Immediately before taking up his editorial duties he travelled for half a year in Germany, looking for contributors, reporting back to Colburn on writers he had met, and promising not to involve him in unprofitable expense.

In the routine business of an editor Campbell was notoriously incompetent, unsystematic, and dilatory. He was fortunate in his assistant editor, Cyrus Redding, whose recollections of their partnership are an engaging mixture of affection and exasperation. Mrs Campbell herself was a great resource, supplying much of the order and system of which her husband was incapable, and her death on 9 May 1828 left him bereft in more ways than one. But Campbell's role was indispensable. It was he who insisted on high standards from his contributors, while exercising considerable tact in his rejections. He kept his rather unscrupulous publisher firmly in his place. Without Campbell, too, the magazine would have had a less cosmopolitan flavour.

It was while Campbell was editor of the *New Monthly* that he published his last substantial poem, *Theodric* (1824), but by common consent it was a failure. On the other hand, as a public man he had the distinction of successfully promoting the idea of establishing a university in London. He was discussing the project with Francis Place and others in 1824, and on 9 February 1825 published a formal proposal in *The Times*. It is evident that Campbell was inspired by memories of Glasgow and by what he had seen of German universities, insisting that much expense could be saved by students' living at home, thus enabling greater numbers to enter higher education. The scheme was strongly supported by radicals and utilitarian reformers, and aroused fierce hostility among conservatives, for whom the absence of religious education seemed even more sinister than giving the workers ideas above their station. Once the project was under way Campbell ceased to take much part in it, and Henry Brougham took the lead and rather more of the credit than Campbell felt was his due. But the very existence of the University College always gave him pleasure.

In 1826 Campbell was elected rector of Glasgow University, and took the duties of his office with unprecedented seriousness, examining the management of the university and protecting the interests of the students. Such was his popularity that he was re-elected for two further years, to the considerable annoyance of the authorities, who considered his third re-election to be illegal.

Support for Polish independence, and final years, 1830–1844

Campbell's most conspicuous intervention in public life, however, was his championship of the Polish people. As early as 1799 in *The Pleasures of Hope* his lament for Tadeusz Kosciuszko had associated him with that subjected nation's aspirations. When in 1830 the Poles were animated by the July revolution in France to establish their own independence, Campbell rejoiced. But in 1831 the Russians crushed the insurrection, driving thousands of Poles into exile. Campbell took the lead in mobilizing public opinion against the British government's indifference, and initiated an Association of the Friends of Poland to look after the welfare of the exiles. One friend spoke of Campbell's 'real heart-felt sorrow' for this beloved country: 'he identified all his feelings, nay his very being with it' (Beattie, 3.119). He had given up the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1830 and involved himself with another journal, *The Metropolitan*, but this did not prevent his assisting *Polonia*, a magazine aimed at maintaining interest in the Polish cause.

In his later years, in spite of persistent ill health, Campbell continued his career as an author, although with competence rather than distinction. His biography of Sarah Siddons (1834) is a pleasant portrait of the great actress, whom Campbell had known since his arrival in London thirty years earlier. His *Life of Petrarch* (1841), though not a scholarly work, is a reconsideration of the poet which is

unpretentious and perceptive. In another genre, *Letters from the South* (1837) records an adventurous visit to Algeria in 1834. He provides a judicious assessment of the virtues and shortcomings of the new French regime, but is also impressed by the eloquent lamentation of a 'native poet' on the fall of Algiers. These books kept his name before the public, as did many successive editions of his poetry, some of them handsomely illustrated by J. M. W. Turner. It was a particular pleasure to him that he was greatly admired in his native Scotland, where he was given the freedom of the city of Edinburgh, and Glasgow students established a Campbell Club in his honour.

In 1843, in search of a healthier climate, Campbell moved with his niece Mary from London to Boulogne, but the change did not help him, and a diseased liver led to his death there, at 5 rue St Jean, on 15 June 1844. He was buried in Westminster Abbey on 3 July with considerable pomp; and, if one observer can be believed, a clap of thunder, nicely timed, added a touch of sublimity to the ceremony (Hall, 358). A group of Polish exiles attended to express their gratitude to the poet who had served their unfortunate country so powerfully. A Colonel Szyrma scattered over the coffin a handful of earth from the grave of the man commemorated in *The Pleasures of Hope* as 'Warsaw's last champion', Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

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LUL, article, draft poem, and letters

Mitchell L., Glas., corresp. and literary MSS; letters and literary fragments

NL Scot., letters and papers; corresp.

NL Scot.

UCL, letters and poems

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V&A NAL, letters incl. to Colburn, publisher

BL, letters to Lady Holland, Add. MSS 51846–51849

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Derbys. RO, letters to F. C. Arkwright

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U. Leeds, Brotherton L., letters to John Richardson

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V&A, letters to Colburn

Yale U., Beinecke L., letters to Margaret Coates

Likenesses

T. Lawrence, chalk, pencil, and watercolour, 1808, Scot. NPG

J. Henning, pencil drawing, 1813, NPG

T. Lawrence, oils, 1820, NPG [see illus.]

S. W. Reynolds, mezzotint, pubd 1822 (after T. Phillips), NPG

E. H. Baily, marble bust, 1826, Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow

S. W. Reynolds, mezzotint, 1826 (after J. Lonsdale), BM, NPG

D. Maclise, watercolour drawing, 1830, V&A

Count D'Orsay, pencil and chalk drawing, 1832, NPG

D. Maclise, watercolour drawing, 1833, V&A

E. Finden, stipple, 1841 (after T. Phillips), BM

H. Room, oils, 1841, Scot. NPG

W. Brockedon, black and red chalk drawing, 1842, NPG

W. Brockedon, chalk drawing, 1847, NPG

W. C. Marshall, marble statue, exh. RA 1849, Westminster Abbey

A. Craig, oils, Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow

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Westminster Abbey, poets' corner *<http://westminster-abbey.org/our-history/people/thomas-campbell>*