James Orr, Poet and Irish Radical

Carol Baraniuk
JAMES ORR, POET AND IRISH RADICAL
Series Editors: Michael Brown
Katherine Campbell
John Kirk
Andrew Noble

Titles in this Series

1 United Islands? The Languages of Resistance
John Kirk, Andrew Noble and Michael Brown (eds)

2 Literacy and Orality in Eighteenth-Century Irish Song
Julie Henigan

3 Cultures of Radicalism in Britain and Ireland
John Kirk, Michael Brown and Andrew Noble (eds)

4 The Politics of Song in the Age of Revolution
Kate Horgan

Forthcoming Titles

Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations
Carol McGuirk
JAMES ORR, POET AND IRISH RADICAL

BY

Carol Baraniuk
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii
List of Figures xi

Introduction 1
1 Critical Reception and Canonicity 7
2 Raising a Radical: Orr, Ballycarry and ’98: James Orr (1770–98) 25
3 The Construction of the Bard of Ballycarry: James Orr (1798–1804) 43
4 Bard in Residence: James Orr (1804–16) 61
5 Rude Scotch Rhymer? Scottish Enlightenment Influences on James Orr 81
6 Men of Independent Mind: Ulster Scots Poets and the Scottish Tradition 101
7 The Rebel Experience 123
8 The Robert Burns of Ulster? 143
9 Enlightened Romantic 165
Conclusion 187

Notes 193
Works Cited 219
Index 229
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are offered to the editors of Poetry and Song in the Age of Revolution who accepted this work for publication in the series. I am grateful to Andrew Noble who read the original manuscript for his many helpful, thought-provoking suggestions. Special thanks go to John Kirk who proofread the completed manuscript and provided invaluable advice on copy-editing and other matters. I am indebted also to Mark Pollard of Pickering & Chatto who dealt with my many queries concerning presentation and about the submission process in general.

This study has its basis in my doctoral thesis and I wish to express the warmest possible appreciation of Gerard Carruthers, who while I was his student at the University of Glasgow, proved himself the kindest, most generous and inspiring of supervisors, and continues to be a wise friend and guide.

Sincere thanks also to Kirsteen McHue for much good advice, always offered with sensitivity and good humour, and to Rhona Brown for her wise counsel, fine example and, above all, for her friendship.

I wish to record my gratitude to my former colleagues at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, in particular Hilary Avery, whose support and backing were crucial as I embarked on academic research and who offered much excellent advice on early conference papers. Warm thanks also go to Linda Hagan, a great conference partner and a great friend.

John Erskine of the Ministerial Advisory Group – Ulster-Scots Academy and Frank Ferguson, co-director of the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Ulster, have generously and graciously assisted the development of this study over the years. I have time and again benefited from their guidance, enthusiasm and learning. I remain indebted to them for many stimulating and informative conversations, and I continue to be inspired by their example; as scholars and as friends they set the bar extremely high.

The greatest debts, of course, are personal. My husband Kris has offered constant, loving, practical encouragement and endless patience throughout the process which has brought this study to publication. The book is dedicated to him with my gratitude for all his selfless support. My children Christopher and Marianne grew to adulthood as I researched and then wrote the text that appears here; their love...
and understanding even when I was very busy contributed massively to enabling its completion. My mother Mirion Shields has been unfailing in her encouragement, providing a listening ear and an astute perspective on everything. Warmest thanks go to her, and to the memory of William Shields, my father, whose pride in anything I achieved motivates me still. It has been a great delight to be able to share my enthusiasm for research with my niece Jennifer Orr. I wish to thank her for her many insights and for discoveries generously communicated. My friend Sheelagh Sleath has for many years encouraged my writing in all aspects. My thanks go to her for her wisdom and calm, unstinting support.

I wish to thank the staffs of the many libraries and archives where I carried out research for this study. These include Glasgow University Library; the Mitchell Library, Glasgow; the Belfast Central Library Newspaper Archive; the Linen Hall Library, Belfast; the Special Collections Department of the McClay Library, Queen’s University Belfast; Stranmillis University College Library; the Centre for Irish Migration Studies, Omagh; the British Library Newspaper Collection; the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI); the Manuscript Room, Trinity College Dublin; the National Archives of Ireland, Dublin; the John Hewitt Collection, University of Ulster and the collection of the former Ulster-Scots Academy Implementation Group.

The Scots poems discussed include glosses which are in many cases context-dependent. John Kirk’s expertise was invaluable in checking my glosses, as were the following resources:

Dictionary of the Scots Language (DSL) http://www.dsl.ac.uk/


Finally, James Orr’s two original volumes of poetry, now digitized, may be viewed on this University of Ulster website: http://www.arts.ulster.ac.uk/ulster-scotspoesy/.
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure I.1: James Orr’s monument, Templecorran Cemetery, Ballycarry 4
Figure 2.1: James Orr’s Ulster 28
Figure 2.2: James Orr’s cottage (privately owned) 29
For Kris
INTRODUCTION

James Orr (1770–1816), a native of the Presbyterian, Scots-speaking village of Ballycarry in east Antrim, was virtually forgotten by the public for most of the last century, but in his own lifetime and for a period afterwards he was admired and respected as a leading Irish writer, particularly within the province of Ulster. During the turbulent 1790s Orr, who was a weaver by trade, first achieved fame, or notoriety, as a contributor to the United Irishmen’s newspaper, the *Northern Star*, printed in Belfast. Politically radical, he was angry about the injustices he observed within Ireland, such as rural poverty, inequalities suffered by the Dissenting population among whom he had grown up, and humiliations endured by Catholics as a result of the Penal Laws. Committed to the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and democracy, he is known to have participated in the Rebellion of 1798 in the neighbourhood of Antrim as a supporter of Henry Joy McCracken.

After a period on the run in Ireland, for a time in the company of McCracken and James (Jemmy) Hope, Orr fled to America, probably to the neighbourhood of Philadelphia, for an interval of a few months. There a newspaper editor printed a sample of his verse, prefacing it with the first recorded, approving comment on his work: ‘We understand the present production is by James Orr, an humble weaver from the North of Ireland. We could wish that his writings were better known.’ That wish was fulfilled when Orr availed himself of an amnesty extended to rebels and returned home.

In 1804 Orr published a volume of verse, *Poems on Various Subjects,* and was a regular contributor to the poetry columns of Ulster newspapers and periodicals well into the 1800s. The courtesy title Bard of Ballycarry, by which he is still known, demonstrates the esteem for his talents that prevailed among his neighbours in the Broadisland district of east Antrim.

Following the poet’s death in 1816 Alexander (Sandy) McDowell, Orr’s friend and brother Freemason, gathered a selection of his poems for a posthumous publication which was issued in 1817. McDowell contributed both a verse elegy and a biographical sketch of James Orr to this second volume. He was circumspect and restrained in his praise, commending his friend’s works on the grounds that they would not impair the morals or offend delicacy. He seems
to have been attempting an honest evaluation of Orr’s powers, not wishing to
claim for him the genius of a Pope or a Milton, yet recognizing that at times his
poetry soared far above the merely commonplace:

there are passages in his works, which would not have disgraced almost any author to
have written. In the pictures which he draws of country manners in the lower ranks of
life, he is always accurate, and his descriptions are often not only just, but beautiful.6

McDowell’s hesitant commendation suggests he believed that Orr was at his best
when he kept to subjects that arose from his own station in life. He proved less
restrained, however, when liberated by the muse of poesy. In his ‘Elegiac Stanzas
on the Death of the Author’, Orr is permitted to cut a romantic figure, identified
with the linked tropes of Ireland and freedom:

While truth and right bless Erin’s plains,
Or freedom’s sons her standard rear,
Or while they spurn at slav’ry’s chains,
The name of ORR they shall revere.’ (ll. 21–4)

The selection of poetry which McDowell made for the 1817 volume, The Post-
humous Works of James Orr of Ballycarry, is now manifestly incomplete. His
purpose, at Orr’s request in 1816, was to gather the dying poet’s remaining works
and to sell the new volume for the benefit of the poor of the Broadisland district,
but he omitted no fewer than twenty-nine texts which were to lie undiscovered
in newspapers until the historians Donald Harman Akenson and William H.
Crawford located them for their study of 1977.8

It is intriguing to speculate on the possible existence of an unofficial canon
of Orr’s works, a selection which McDowell may have deemed too indecent
for publication, particularly since Orr is known to have complained that his
audience was often a somewhat uncouth company whose preference was for rib-
aldry.9 If such a body of crowd-pleasing poems ever existed it appears to have
been most thoroughly suppressed and in all likelihood destroyed. McDowell’s
role in some respects may parallel that of Dr Currie’s with regard to the selection
and publication of the works of Burns, and at the time must have appeared both
decent and sensitive. He may even have been acting in accordance with Orr’s
own wishes. Currently, Orr’s extant vernacular texts comprise between twelve
and thirteen percent of his oeuvre as a whole.10

Ample evidence remains that Orr enjoyed the respect of other Ulster writers
from the labouring and middle classes during his life and following his death.
The County Antrim bards, John Dickey of Donegore and James Campbell, the
Bard of Ballynure, responded to Orr’s death with respectful elegies. Campbell’s
talent was for the composition of rollicking broadsides, but here we may observe
him making a valiant effort to produce a dignified and decorous tribute:
His soul possessed that quality,  
He loved the truth that made him free; (ll. 7–8)

...  
You on inspection this may find,  
He had a clear capacious mind;¹¹ (ll. 11–12)

It was the poet James Russell English, however, who more than a decade after Orr’s death called attention to the need for an appropriately imposing monument to mark Orr’s final resting place. In a note to his poem ‘The Late James Orr’, English deplored the fact that ‘So lightly has Irish genius been estimated, that James Orr, though styled by contemporary writers the “Burns of Ulster” has reposited in a nameless grave in the Churchyard of Templecorran, for fourteen years’. Both the poem and the note underlined Orr’s close identification with Ireland, showing his contemporaries considered him to be a national poet, or wished to promote him as such. Indeed, English expressed the expectation that ‘every genuine lover of their country’ would be supportive of the plan for a monument.¹² Figure I.1 shows the impressive memorial which was raised in Orr’s honour following English’s appeal. While English’s portrait appears romanticized, it is in perfect accord with the ideals which may be inferred from Orr’s œuvre and from the few details of his life that are known. It is in part the purpose of this study to demonstrate that throughout his life Orr remained true to the United Irish ideal of establishing a nation where the common name of Irishman would replace the terms that divided the population on the basis of creed, and where the social justice favoured by Henry Joy McCracken’s and Jemmy Hope’s wing of the movement might be achieved.

English identified Orr as a ‘man of independent mind’ but made the Burns reference still more explicit with his claim that Orr had been regarded as ‘the Burns of Ulster’ by contemporary poets.¹³ The reference to Burns was a potent one and should be read as a calculated stratagem; English was recognizing Orr’s exceptional talent and urging his claim to be honoured as a national bard. He may also have been implying particular appreciation of Orr’s vernacular works, but certainly not that Orr was no more than a gifted imitator of the Scots genius. A generation after Orr’s death, Robert Huddleston of County Down, himself a prolific vernacular poet, began to focus public attention specifically on Orr’s vernacular poems, asserting that these testified to his untapped potential. ‘Is there nothing that is worthy in Orr of Ballycarry?’, he demands, going on to insist that had Orr received the patronage that was offered to the Scots poets Hogg and MacNeill he might have achieved still more and been remembered for longer.¹⁴ This, of course, raises the question of why patronage was offered and to whom. MacNeill was a conservative figure, while Orr was an anti-establishment radical and in his youth an active United Irishman, therefore less likely to attract wealthy supporters. Orr certainly warned his former mentor Samuel Thomson against accepting the patronage of the rich, presumably because it might lead to the loss of his independent poetic voice.¹⁵
In the late twentieth century some of Orr’s best work was republished and he began to be openly recognized and promoted by scholars and enthusiasts as the greatest of the writers represented within an Ulster Scots poetic tradition. While the present study argues that Orr, a patriotic citizen of Ireland in an era long before partition was ever imagined, should be acknowledged as an Irish writer of exceptional talent, it also demonstrates that his Scots cultural heritage is securely nested within this identity. Thus his poetic output represents a northern tradition, or school, within the literature of Ireland but may also be read as Scots diasporic literature, which vigorously transforms and extends the range of the Scottish poetic tradition in an Irish setting.
For many students of Orr his life and character have proved as fascinating as his verse, particularly his experiences of rebellion and exile, and his autodidacticism. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while knowledge of the breadth of his poetic output declined, Orr’s memory was kept alive by local historians, men of letters and newspaper editors. Articles about Orr tended to focus on his United Irish involvement, his honest character, his concern for the poor, his personal attractiveness, and the regrettable descent into alcoholism which may have brought about his premature death. Often the same sketchy details, anecdotes and traditions were repeated, or embellished with no reference to sources.

The first chapter of this study reviews how Orr has fared in the estimation of scholars, critics and canon formers, both Irish and Scottish, from the nineteenth century until the present. It demonstrates how Orr’s vernacular compositions suffered a creeping exclusion from the canon of Irish literature and argues that an increasingly monist view of Irish identity, related to the forces of cultural and political nationalism, has ignored both the Lowland Scots heritage of parts of Ulster, and the northern school of Ulster Dissenter writers to which Orr belongs.

The increased interest in Ulster Scots poets, particularly Orr, recently expressed by some Scottish academics is considered and welcomed. It is evident, however, that while Orr’s considerable abilities as a poet are noted, he is too often evaluated in relation to Robert Burns. This study argues that Orr must not be interpreted as Burns-dependent, but should be understood and appreciated in his own right and within his own cultural context. The trend among academics from disciplines such as history or linguistics to mine Orr’s œuvre for data is also discussed, and it will be demonstrated that little true scholarly appreciation of the literary merit of his work has ever been attempted. In particular his standard English work has rarely been subjected to serious scrutiny. This has allowed many facile generalizations and prejudices concerning its alleged dullness or stiffness to remain unchallenged.

Three chapters of the present study are devoted to unravelling and reimagining more thoroughly than has been attempted in any previous enquiry the details and circumstances of Orr’s life, and to cross-referencing accounts gathered from local tradition with contextual information, archival material, uncollected works and what appear to be biographical details in the poems. The present writer contends that Orr was, almost certainly, closely linked with the northern United Irish leaders Hope and McCracken, and that he was the main United Irish contact in Ballycarry.

A further four chapters demonstrate Orr’s originality and independence as a poet through a detailed exploration of the relationship of his work to Scottish Enlightenment thought, and to the language and poetic genres of the Scottish tradition. Orr’s major vernacular works are evaluated and the extent to which the eighteenth-century Scots vernacular masters, particularly Burns, may have
intrigued, stimulated or provoked him is discussed. Orr’s effectiveness in transforming and developing key aspects of the Scottish poetic tradition in order to reflect his Irish cultural context is thereby established. This study argues additionally that Orr’s choice of the standard English register in which to compose most of his verse was quite deliberate, and was grounded in his desire to speak to the whole nation of Ireland in a bardic-prophetic persona.

Orr has conventionally been regarded as a post-Augustan writer. In the final chapter a range of his verse is subjected to critical close reading; this process elucidates his success as an innovator who engaged dynamically with Romantic nationalism and with Romanticism more generally as it developed in the wake of the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. Thus, this study reveals that Orr embraced innovation and engaged dynamically with contemporary trends. Its major purpose is to confirm the substantial nature of Orr’s achievement and to argue for the restoration of this neglected poet and patriot to his proper place within the literary canon of Ireland, the ‘lov’d lost country’ to which he dedicated his life.\(^{16}\)
1 CRITICAL RECEPTION AND CANONICITY

It was only with John Hewitt’s research into the rural bards of Ulster during the middle decades of the twentieth century that any serious retrospective assessment of James Orr’s poetry began to be undertaken. A few articles about him appeared in journals during the nineteenth century and allusions to his experiences were made in local histories; these will be considered in later chapters which reconstruct Orr’s life. While it is clear that Orr the poet was affectionately remembered, even venerated, for some time after his death, one must ask if there is any evidence that his reputation extended beyond Belfast and its heavily Scots-settled hinterland where he had acquired his audience. Apparently this was indeed the case. Research for the present study has uncovered an article that dates from 1829, two years before his monument was raised at Ballycarry. The *Irish Shield and Monthly Milesian*, an American journal aimed at Irish migrants and their descendants, presented to its readers an apocryphal account of his life along with a selection of his poetry.

In Ireland, Orr was sufficiently well-regarded to merit a place in several important Irish anthologies, including *The Literary Remains of the United Irishmen* (1887), compiled by R. R. Madden (1798–1886) and *The Cabinet of Irish Literature* (1879–80), the great compendium edited by Charles Read (1841–78). Madden included Orr’s ‘Donegore Hill’ (1804), which offers a compelling account of the experience of the rebel army in the vicinity of Antrim on 7 June 1798. Significantly, this poem, which will be discussed in detail within the context of Orr’s engagement with the Scottish vernacular tradition, is expressed in dense Ulster Scots, which Madden accepts without any apparent need for explanation into an anthology designed to honour those who had committed themselves to liberty in Ireland.

Charles Read’s four volume anthology subtitled ‘Selections from the Works of the Chief Poets, Orators and Prose Writers of Ireland’, had the stated aims of producing a work ‘thoroughly National in character’ and of reclaiming writers assumed to belong to English literature who had actually been born on Irish soil. T. P. O’Connor (1848–1929), who contributed the Preface to the edition of 1884 and, following Read’s death in 1878 edited the fourth volume, recognized the anthology’s potential to buttress the Irish people’s confidence and sense of
nationhood. Its purpose was also to challenge the Anglo-centric attitudes of the
British literary establishment which privileged ‘London writers of comparatively small importance’ over ‘some Irish writers of genius’.3

Since the Cabinet project was evidently intended to establish an Irish literary
canon and to promote this in the United States through the American edition, it is
surely significant that the editors chose to include a small selection of Orr’s pieces.
The list of contents incorporates many very illustrious names: writers from a broad
range of confessional and political allegiances, including Sheridan, Tone, Grattan, Abernethy, Edgeworth, Moore and O’Connell. Of the Orr poems selected,
‘The Irishman’ (1805), ‘Song, Composed on the Banks of Newfoundland’ (1804)
and an extract from ‘Ode to Danger’ (1817) are in standard register, while ‘The
Irish Cottier’s Death and Burial’ (1817) is in the vernacular. Of these, ‘Song,
Composed on the Banks of Newfoundland’, which describes Orr’s traumatic voy-
age to America following the Rebellion, makes an important contribution to the
Irish emigrant literary tradition, while both ‘The Irishman’ and ‘The Irish Cot-
tier’s Death and Burial’ articulate Orr’s intense patriotism. The latter work, often
regarded as his finest, begins in English but modulates into fairly dense Ulster
Scots and, while expressing his deep commitment to the nation, also voices his
fears for the survival of his community in Ireland. The editor prefaces the poem
with a note that appears designed to be merely explanatory, but actually confirms
an othering within Ireland of the Scots-descended inhabitants of the north, based
on their accent, language and perceived racial differences: ‘They were . . . considered
by the native Irish of the other provinces an alien race’.4 There is a palpable contrast
here with Madden who seamlessly incorporates Scots vernacular poems into the
literary heritage left by the United Irishmen.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century apparently scholarly, but in reality
shallow, judgements dismissed Ulster vernacular verse as an interesting if some-
what derivative curiosity. D. J. O’Donoghue (1866–1917) provides an example
that reveals either his complete ignorance of a vernacular Scots tradition with
characteristic genres, or at least his failure to notice with what originality and
sophistication these forms had been employed by the best Ulster poets. In a
discussion of ‘the dialect poets’, including James Orr and Hugh Porter, he com-
mends but patronizes: ‘Some of these are excellent and simply because they are
so homely and natural’. Then comes the most damning generalization, all the
more reprehensible because it is indiscriminately applied: ‘It must be admitted,
though, that the dialect poets too often slavishly imitated Burns’.5

In the twentieth century a continuation of this regrettable process of ‘writing
out’ or discounting Scots vernacular poetry produced in Ulster continued, even
though Orr’s was of high quality, focused on the condition of Ireland, emanated
from the pen of a committed patriot, and endorsed the inclusive values espoused
by Wolfe Tone himself. Following partition, a major debate concerning the
perceived Irishness of Anglo-Irish literature developed, with Daniel Corkery (1878–1964) expounding an essentialist view of what Irish literature should comprise. For him there were ‘three great forces’ working in ‘the Irish national being’, which he believed Irish literature deserving of the name should reflect. These were: ‘1. The Religious Consciousness of the people; 2. Irish Nationalism; and 3. The Land’. Anglo-Irish literature, such as Edgeworth’s novels, he interpreted as Colonial, ‘all written for their motherland, England, by spiritual exiles’, while the contribution to cultural nationalism of those Ulster poets who wrote in Scots went unacknowledged.6

It is disappointing to find this state of affairs perpetuated in The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing (1991–2002) which, despite its apparent breadth and inclusivity, finds space only for Orr’s ‘The Irishman’ and ‘Song, Composed on the Banks of Newfoundland’.7 While Orr has not been excluded from Field Day his vernacular works do not feature. If this is accidental, and not, as some have inferred, a late twentieth-century nationalist conspiracy, one can only say that the general editor Seamus Deane, a respected cultural analyst and a Derry man, really should have been better informed. The north-west of Ireland has been particularly affected by migrations from Scotland to Ulster (and vice versa), including and pre-dating those of the Plantations period. Indeed John MacCloskey, in his statistical reports on six parishes in the county of Londonderry in 1821, noted of local speech that ‘the dialect abounds in Scotticisms’.8 The Ulster Scots poets have been afforded space in some recent collections, though it is rare to find them appropriately or sensitively categorized. Andrew Carpenter, in Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland (1998), anthologizes several fairly dense Ulster Scots poems by Samuel Thomson and compares Thomson’s delight in language and the ‘sprightly force’ of his work to that of Burns.9 One has to ask if he would have considered placing Burns’s work in an anthology purporting to showcase ‘verse in English’. In his prefatory note to the selection from Thomson’s work, however, Carpenter does acknowledge that Thomson wrote in Ulster Scots.

It is encouraging to discover that the recent anthology Irish Literature 1750–1900 includes a fresh selection of Orr’s poems in both vernacular and standard registers.10 The pieces are prefaced with a brief commentary on Orr’s life and references to some of the influences on his work; the selection also incorporates a brief list of articles for further reading, including some recent essays. The influence of Burns on Orr is a little overstressed in the commentary and is related to his use of ‘the Scots dialect that Burns had so innovatively used himself’.11 This is despite the fact that the writer cites the works of critics and researchers who have emphasized that Scots was as indigenous to parts of Ulster as it was to Ayrshire in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, the selection effectively draws attention to vernacularity in Orr’s work and to the influence
of Presbyterianism on his thinking. Works selected include the vernacular ‘The Passengers’ and the ‘Elegy, on the Death of Mr Robert Burns, the Ayrshire Poet’.

The main body of Orr’s poems remained largely unavailable to the public until 1935 when a group of determined individuals from Ballycarry, many of them local historians and creative writers, achieved the republication of his two volumes of verse in a single edition. Their purpose was to stimulate local pride in Orr’s achievements by stressing he had acquired some status as a national poet having, as William Calwell makes clear in his foreword, ‘long been classed with the Irish immortals’. Presumably those nineteenth-century anthologies that included Orr’s work were in Calwell’s mind.

That the poetry of James Orr and his contemporaries began to excite serious interest among scholars and from the public is in large measure due to the efforts of the twentieth-century poet, critic and cultural commentator, John Hewitt (1907–87). In the 1940s, while researching his MA thesis, Ulster Poets 1800–70, Hewitt brought to light what he described as ‘a period of surprising poetic activity on many levels, including peasants and craftsmen’. He rediscovered early editions of poetry by James Orr of Ballycarry, Samuel Thomson of Carngranny, James Campbell of Ballynure and many more, mainly published through subscriptions gathered from their neighbours, and nearly all resident in the Scots-speaking heartlands within Antrim and Down. He was particularly delighted to discover poetry that recorded and dignified community life in the people’s own Braid Scotch.

Culturally committed to regionalism, it was clearly with a sense of mission that Hewitt set about publicizing these works of locally produced verse through radio talks, magazine articles and correspondence which communicated his excitement at his discoveries to academics and literary enthusiasts throughout Ireland and Scotland. Their responses reveal the extent of the work of rescue and recovery that he was undertaking. The historian J. C. Beckett wrote, ‘James Orr and David Herbison were familiar as names, but Herbison is the only one whose works I have ever gone through’. Another correspondent commended Hewitt but added a pertinent warning: ‘I’m greatly interested in these poets and I’ve often wished somebody would compile an anthology such as you mention, but unless it’s done within a few years, I’m afraid a glossary will be necessary for Ulster readers!’

Hewitt’s research into the Ulster vernacular bards was eventually published with an anthology and accompanying glossary as Rhyming Weavers and Other Country Poets of Antrim and Down (1974). It remains a worthy introduction to the subject, but a thorough, detailed updating of its conclusions is long overdue. Although Hewitt’s study was genuinely groundbreaking, it betrayed particular blind spots from which appreciation of these writers is only beginning to emerge. He established and discussed several of the contexts from which the verse of his Ulster poets arose and which their poetry reflects. These include their linguistic
and literary kinship with the Scottish lowlands; local traditions and customs; rural life and the linen industry; Presbyterianism; radical politics; Freemasonry and self-education. He acknowledged the importance of the rural reading societies, to which many of the poets belonged, and he also recognized that these book clubs were suspected by the government of promoting radicalism and sedition, but he chose to present and commend the poets primarily as recorders of rural community life and customs, failing to ascribe sufficient weight to their national and supranational perspectives and to their intellectual breadth. This is most noticeably the case with his treatment of Orr, whom Hewitt in effect deradicalizes.

Though he cited some poems which seem based on Orr’s direct involvement with the events of 1798 he appears to have regarded these mainly as vivid evocations of Orr’s unhappy personal experience. Thus, although he commended the vernacular ‘Donegore Hill’, about the Battle of Antrim, and ‘The Passengers’, which deals with emigration, he regarded them as of ‘limited aim’ and anthologized neither.20 Today it would be legitimate to interpret these pieces as intense and vivid entries in a representative narrative of northern-based Irish radicalism. Furthermore, Hewitt included only severely truncated versions of ‘The Irish Cottier’s Death and Burial,’ ‘Song, Written in Winter’ (1804) and ‘To the Potato’ (1804).21 In the case of the latter he chose only the stanzas that sensuously recreate the wholesome potato-based dishes enjoyed by the peasant community. Incredibly, for a soi-disant man of the left, he chose to omit the more radical stanzas. Thus the reader is denied the daring power of Orr’s comparison of England to a bird of prey whose wings might easily be clipped if his compatriots resisted oppression by withdrawing their labour from the fields and from the armed forces. In explanation, Ivan Herbison argues that Hewitt’s presentation of the ‘rhyming weavers’, including Orr, was designed ‘to bolster his promotion of regionalism as a literary movement’. He shows that ‘While this approach literally grounds the poets in particular localities, it makes it more difficult to assess their work in the context of larger social, political and cultural concerns’.22

With regard to the Ulster poets’ relationship to Scotland’s vernacular tradition, Hewitt was determined to rebut the ‘Burns imitators’ charge, pointing out that the Ulster Scots poets, in their choices of language and verse forms, were no more imitators of Burns than Burns himself was of earlier Scottish masters. He acknowledged that the three great stanza forms, standard habbie, the Cherrie and the Slae stanza, and the Christis Kirk stanza appear repeatedly within the works of the Ulster bards but, crucially, he believed ‘it would be fair to suggest that the Ulster vernacular bards were in much the same relationship to Burns as he had been to his predecessors, and were working free-handedly within the same tradition’.23 As Andrew Noble has commented, ‘Creative influence, after all, is present in varying degrees in all poetry and is a primary force, unlike secondary imitation’.24
Hewitt rated Orr as a master craftsman in the utilization of Scots verse forms and in the composition of vernacular verse. However, Hewitt acknowledged that he had not made the selection for his anthology on ‘rigorous literary grounds’. The writers in general he characterized as ‘companionable men’ but ‘clumsy old poets’. Unfortunately, such language has contributed to their relegation to the status of interesting curiosities, fascinating for their revelation of folk life, its customs and its concerns, irredeemably average as writers. Such unfortunate generalizations undercut Hewitt’s genuine admiration of Orr and did a disservice to many other writers, notably Samuel Thomson of Carn Granny (1766–1816).

Hewitt’s concept of regionalism was too limited to incorporate what is now understood as hybridity. As a man and a poet Orr’s concerns were of necessity local, but also national and global. In choosing sides in the Rebellion, in coming to terms with its failure and with the Act of Union, he embraced and grappled with the question of his cultural and national identity. While he chose to describe himself as an Irishman, linguistically he had the options of Ulster Scots or standard English in which to express himself. These choices and conflicts contributed an important dynamic element to Orr’s poetic persona, as did his lifelong commitment to the social radicalism that had motivated many of the United Irishmen. In an earlier work Hewitt dismissed the decade of the 1790s thus: ‘Late in the eighteenth century ... the educated northerners were wasting their intellectual substance in theological disputation and abortive political gestures.’ More surprising still, the cataclysmic effects of the Rebellion and its aftermath Hewitt passed over in a mere subordinate clause: ‘When 1798 saw the sun set on the republican dream [my italics] the educated Ulsterman found himself caught up in the rapid progress of the new machine age.’

Hewitt’s favouring of regionality predisposed him to privilege vernacular verse and he recognized Orr’s expertise as a vernacular writer, but while he emphasized that Orr was working within the Scottish poetic tradition, he attempted no assessment of the importance of Orr’s contribution to that tradition. Furthermore, with regard to the greater part of Orr’s oeuvre, that which is expressed in standard English, for many years Hewitt’s opinion that Orr’s English verses were ‘competent, but seldom more than that’ has been the received estimate. At the very least this ignores some innovative and sophisticated pieces in the standard register, including soliloquy-style monologues and ‘The Assizes’ (1817), a long, thought-provoking and exceptionally well-crafted meditation on the contemporary system of justice.

By its very nature Rhyming Weavers, which was designed to give an overview of the works of a wide range of poets, may now be viewed as limited both by its breadth and its brevity. The author discussed several generations of vernacular poets. He explored only their collections of poetry, little books published mainly by subscription, but did not research newspaper publications. Nor had
he space to subject any of the included poems to the close readings which many
deserve. After the publication of *Rhyming Weavers* the relevance to Irish and to
Scottish studies of the Ulster bards, and particularly the significance of James
Orr, still remained to be thoroughly evaluated, though several details in Hewitt’s
commentary were to provide crucial leads for a later generation of researchers.
These included his observation of the ‘clustering’ of the Antrim bards,30 which
now may be more clearly understood as a writers’ network, and his recognition
of the essentially original, rather than imitative, spirit of Ulster vernacular verse.

Hewitt’s regionalism was perpetuated, not countered, when the historians
Donald Harman Akenson and William H. Crawford mined Orr’s *oeuvre*
for social history in their study of 1977, *Local Poets and Social History: James
Orr, Bard of Ballycarry.*31 Akenson and Crawford provided some invaluable and
thorough research, for example they located twenty-nine of Orr’s unpublished
pieces by exploring contemporary newspapers and journals.32 In addition, they
established the publication dates of many of the texts in Orr’s posthumous vol-
ume. Unfortunately, and to the detriment of their work, the dismissive tone they
adopted when offering evaluative comments frequently strikes a jarring note.
Repeatedly in their discussion we find Orr designated ‘local’ and ‘minor’, in
effect labelled and patronized. Their stated purpose was threefold:

> to illustrate how the work of a minor poet can be used as data for the social histo-
rian … Second [we wish] to indicate that literary data of the sort provided by Orr’s
poems are best treated by relating them to contemporary documents of the sort avail-
able in public archives … Our third intention is to suggest that scholars seeking to
understand any Irish literary figure of significance should look to archives and con-
temporary documentation as well as first editions and letters.33

There is much in the above with which any contemporary historicist critic is
likely to concur. However, the first and second points make clear the authors’
intention to employ literature as the servant of history: to provide ‘data’. Their
approach was, in effect, history-centric.

In addition, the authors seem to have been heavily influenced by Leavisite
notions of canonicity. They asserted that Orr was ‘scarcely the calibre of poet who
would merit scholarly study solely on the basis of his literary achievements’.34 As a
whole, their work is characterized by a failure to interrogate such initial assumptions.

While Hewitt had referred to Ulster’s ‘rural bards’, only occasionally employ-
ing the term ‘folk poet’, the latter was the term Akenson and Crawford preferred,
but such a designation does not do justice to the sophistication of Orr’s work. They
shared Hewitt’s prejudice against his English poems, which they regarded as ‘deriva-
tive’ and as ‘awkward imitations’, while the vernacular tradition was ‘indigenous’.35
English poetic genres, however, and the works of writers such as Thomas Gray, the
Anglo-Scot James Thomson and the Irish poet and playwright Oliver Goldsmith