

Letter from Scotland

Robert Burns would have seen a fair few storms in his time on the farm and on his 40 mile a day rural rides as an exciseman. Since then climate change has added to the drama, which this week brought us Storm Isha and Storm Jocelyn.

We've had winds of 70 or 80 mph (107mph on the Tay Bridge), bringing blizzards to the mountains, taking trees down and causing travel disruption on the railways and the ferries. At one point 62,000 homes were without electricity and 60 schools across the Highlands and Islands had to be closed. In my own sheltered street in Edinburgh, a ridge tile was blown off my house and a large tree along the road was brought crashing down across a garden path.



“The wind blew as t’wad blawn its last/ The rattling showers rose on the blast...” Waves at North Berwick.

ScotRail came in for some criticism for cancelling all train services on the days the storms were forecast. They explained that it gave the traveling public a useful, if disappointing, certainty. And it allowed their engineers to clear fallen trees and other debris (wayward garden furniture) from the line and check for flood damage. But it gave us all the feeling that our civilisation is collapsing around us and we can no longer withstand the power of nature.

It's a pity then that we cannot make more use of all this wild power. This week the first minister Humza Yousaf tried to make headlines at a renewable energy conference in Glasgow by announcing the latest stage in the bidding for a £500m programme to build better port facilities for off-shore wind farms. But the announcement got lost in the battle with the UK Government over oil and gas developments and nuclear power – both of which the Scottish Government is sceptical about.

The first minister also had more trivial issues to attend to this week. On Thursday he appeared before the UK Covid-19 Inquiry and apologised for The Scottish Government's handling of WhatsApp messages. They should have been kept, he said, and he has in fact submitted his own – unlike the main actors in the Covid crisis, Nicola Sturgeon, her chief of staff Liz Lloyd, John Swinney the deputy first minister and Jason Leitch the NHS clinical director who all made a habit of deleting their WhatsApp messages at the end of the day.

At this point I'd like to ask: what has become of "the right to privacy?" WhatsApp messages are clearly private – just like a confidential conversation. I don't think it makes for good decision-making if officials or ministers are not able to debate freely among themselves. We already accept that in the case of legal advice which is properly kept confidential.

It's all very exciting to unearth racy quotes from WhatsApp messages – like Nicola Sturgeon's exasperated remark that Boris Johnson is a "clown". But this is at best tittle-tattle

and at worst character assassination. Such revelations, more seriously, give unnecessary pain to the victims of Covid. Indeed the whole Covid-19 Inquiry prolongs and deepens their grief. We see that written all over their faces as they stand in vigil outside the Inquiry building. The Inquiry has become less about learning lessons and more about revenge. The righteousness of hindsight is not always a useful thing.

I wonder what Robert Burns would make of all this political bloodletting. Would he see it as the people versus the ruling elite ? Or would he see it all as the fate of man to have tragedy and hardship placed upon him like a pilgrim's burden.

At this season of the year, stories always emerge of new manuscripts of Burns' writing coming to light. The latest is an early draft of his song "Ye Jacobites by Name" which has been found among old papers at Barnbogle Castle overlooking the Firth of Forth. The Burns expert Professor Gerard Carruthers from Glasgow University says the draft reveals that Burns originally wrote the song in support of the revolutionaries of his own time. But he changed it into an anti-war song about the earlier Jacobites when he realised it might jeopardise his employment as a government tax collector.

If Burns had drafted the song on WhatsApp, would the authorities have the right to see it? Discuss.



The Robert Burns window in St Giles' Cathedral PHOTO ©2024 The Edinburgh Reporter