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The Bottle Imp

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Scots Word of the Season:
Mahoun

Mahoun *n.* a term used for the devil

Readers may recognise the term 'Mahoun' from the literary context in which it is perhaps best known, the poem 'The Deil's awa wi' th'Exciseman' (1792), by Robert Burns:

The Deil cam fiddlin thro' the town,
And danc'd awa wi' th'Exciseman,
And ilka wife cries:—'Auld Mahoun,
I wish you luck o' the prize, man!'

Here, 'Auld Mahoun' is used just like 'Old Nick' or countless other nicknames for Satan, the personification of evil. We may construe an autobiographical element to the poem, given that Burns himself worked in customs and excise for a time. But the name and character of Mahoun presents, in my view, some very troublesome difficulties. Some may feel that the term is completely unacceptable when they learn of its origins—it developed from a medieval form of the name for the prophet Muhammad. Robert Burns may not have been aware of this older meaning of the word, and it certainly seems very far removed from the spirit of 'A man's a man for a' that'. The medieval Mahoun appears in English and Scottish texts from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries representing a figure of fear, destruction and 'otherness' to be resisted or despised. The *Oxford English Dictionary* groups these negative uses of the term together under the definition: 'A god imagined in the Middle Ages to be worshipped by Muslims'. This ingeniously leaves the problematic 'imaginer' for the reader to construct.

Dictionary makers can naïvely tread strange paths in the pursuit of 'neutrality' or 'truth' but there are very few universals where politically sensitive words are concerned. Worryingly, seekers after absolute truths may turn to such

noble tomes as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, without considering the environment in which such works are produced. Concepts like *marriage*, for example, are usually defined in relation to the laws and 'norms' of the society at the time of publication. When defining religious terms, a capitalised 'Devil' might suggest a relationship of polar opposition between 'God' and 'the Devil'. Whose gods and devils are they? Such concepts have no universal meaning. Careful hedging terms like 'traditionally' and 'generally' are generously applied by the more politically conscious dictionary mills.

So what should be done with such a diabolical term as Mahoun? It could be buried with an apology for the medieval faux-pas and any offence caused. It could become an interesting curiosity of a former time, contextualising Burns' language within cultural history. Perhaps those who have learned it as a term for the devil should not be tarnished by its troublesome past, and should defend their right to use it. It may be futile to attempt to reconcile the political incorrectness of the word's history with the political innocence of children singing 'The Deil's awa wi' th'Exciseman' in a school competition in Ayrshire, the home of the Bard. But maybe I am missing the point of this miscreant term whose offensive origins 'meddle' with Burns' egalitarian legacy – and somewhere Old Nick is laughing up his sleeve.

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