

1999

Alexander Geddes and the Burns "Lost Poems" Controversy

Gerard Carruthers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Carruthers, Gerard (1999) "Alexander Geddes and the Burns "Lost Poems" Controversy," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 31: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol31/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Gerard Carruthers

Alexander Geddes and the Burns “Lost Poems” Controversy

In an article engaging with the attribution of poems to Robert Burns by Patrick Scott Hogg in his book, *Robert Burns: The Lost Poems* (1997), I argue from stylistic and circumstantial evidence that Mr. Hogg is wrong to consider Burns as author in two instances.¹ The poems, it should be said, are from Hogg’s category B list (including ten poems), where he is less sure of Burns’s authorship than in the case of his category A list (fifteen poems), and are “Ode for the Birthday of C. J. Fox” and “To Lord Stanhope.” The first poem, I suggest in my article, is by Alexander Geddes (1737-1802) and the second by Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864). Since writing my piece, I have discovered positive proof in the form of a manuscript-copy that Geddes is indeed the author of the Fox poem and I have also made other findings relating to Geddes which have wider implications with regard to *The Lost Poems*. I now present proof of Geddes’ authorship in one other case and suggest that Geddes is probably the author of three more of Mr. Hogg’s category A poems and at least a further two pieces from his category B list.

From the A list is “Exhortatory Ode to the Prince of Wales on Entering his 34th Year.” Of this poem Hogg makes the claim, “it is effectively impossible that any other active poet could have written the ode other [*sic*] than Burns,” but this is demonstrably not the case since I have found the manuscript in Geddes’ hand in the same place where the manuscript for the Fox piece resides:

¹Gerard Carruthers, “A Note on Poems Newly Attributed to Burns” in the *Burns Chronicle* (December, 1998), pp. 26-8; Patrick Scott Hogg, *Robert Burns: The Lost Poems* (Glasgow, 1997). Henceforth Hogg.

the Petre family archive in Essex County Records Office, Chelmsford.² “Ode to the Prince of Wales” appears on 17 August, 1795, in the *Morning Chronicle*, a journal to which Geddes was one of the most frequent and radical poetic contributors during the 1790s. Given the wrong attribution by Patrick Scott Hogg we ought to be careful with the material which he has extracted from the *Chronicle* and the claims he makes for it. I believe that most of the material from this source featured in chapter seven of Hogg’s book, “The Ewe Bughts,” “Address to Justice,” and “The Cob Web—A Song,” as well as the piece on the Prince Regent, and two pieces featured in chapter nine of his book, “Ode Inscribed to Certain Jurymen,” and an epigram on Burke, along with the Fox piece, all again from the *Chronicle*, are by Geddes.

There would not be the space in even a hugely longer essay than this to furnish the full stylistic and circumstantial evidence which might support my own claims and so some brief indicators of why I believe Geddes to be the author of five of the Hogg pieces (besides the two which I have established definitely to be by Geddes) will have to do here. Also, since I am being necessarily combative, I ought first of all to pay tribute to Patrick Scott Hogg. All of us who work in the field of eighteenth-century Scottish literature owe him a debt for reinvigorating interest in the neglected area of poetry and the radical newspaper culture of the 1790s. It should also be added that mistaking Geddes for Burns in some instances is far from entirely blameworthy. After Burns, I would claim, Geddes is the second most significant Scottish poet of the 1790s. For various reasons, however, Geddes is a shadowy and unjustly little-known figure since he is important in Scottish, British and, indeed, European history and letters. A short sketch of his life and the recent powerful re-awakening of interest in Geddes gives a sense of the fact that, in spite of his subsequent relative anonymity, Geddes is one of the major intellects to emerge from eighteenth-century Scotland, and this, of course, is to place him among no small rank in the milieu of the Scottish Enlightenment.³

Alexander Geddes was a Roman Catholic priest from the North East of Scotland and the cousin of Bishop John Geddes whom Burns so admired. Educated at the Scots college in Paris, a very cosmopolitan center of eight-

²Hogg, p. 169; the precise reference to the portion of the Petre papers containing Geddes’ poetry is Acc. 2441 D/DP Z. 57. I am grateful for the expert assistance of the staff at the record office in aiding my research into this material.

³An excellent account of Geddes’ career as a biblical scholar is to be found in Reginald Fuller’s *Alexander Geddes: Pioneer of Biblical Criticism* (Almond Press: Sheffield, 1984). I am grateful to Dr. Fuller for his extensive correspondence and private conversations with me on Geddes and for his suggestions that the Petre papers would yield material on his poetic career. Further illumination of Geddes’ intellectual and cultural significance is provided in Bernard Aspinwall’s insightful, “The Last Laugh of a Humane Faith: Dr. Alexander Geddes 1737-1801 [sic]” in *New Blackfriars*, 58 (July 1977), 333-40.

eenth-century ideas in theology and politics, Geddes returned to his homeland after ordination to parish work in Auchinhalrig, turning down a position at the Sorbonne. In Scotland, due to his slightly flamboyant poetic career in the Latinist tradition (which succeeded in attracting the admiration of Samuel Johnson) and his interest in "higher" or literary criticism of the Bible, Geddes never enjoyed a very happy relationship with his ecclesiastic superiors (with the exception of his cousin who frequently tried to shield him from the displeasure of his brother-bishops). After his short-lived pastoral career, Geddes depended upon patronage received variously for the aristocratic Gordons in his native Aberdeenshire, the Earl of Traquair in Peebleshire and, finally, the Petres, the leading Catholic family in England. Geddes, ensconced in the South East of England from the 1780s, had his talents employed by Lord Petre in writing propaganda advocating Catholic emancipation. He was no man of narrow interest, however, and continued his work on scripture which, as Professor Jerome McGann has demonstrated, exercised a seminal influence on the thinking of William Blake, and was active in promulgating the ideas of Thomas Paine.⁴ Indeed, it is probable that Geddes had a hand in persuading his own publisher, Joseph Johnson, to print the first book of *The Rights of Man*. Geddes himself entered into broadcasting Painite and French Revolutionary ideals with numerous articles in the periodical press, the satirical, pro-abolitionist pamphlet, *An Apology for Slavery* (1792), and a copious amount of wickedly satirical political poetry commenting in bold detail on the constitution, institutions and day-to-day policies of the British state at home and abroad. One of the most remarkable episodes in Scottish literary history, though one that is very little known, is that his poem *Carmen Seculare* (1790) was read to the assembly of deputies in Paris at a time of particular nervousness among the revolutionaries so as to reassure its members that international intellectual support held firm. Since Dr. Reginald Fuller's groundbreaking work in the 1970s, Geddes' remarkable career has gradually begun to emerge from obscurity and, given the increasing interest in him by modern European biblical scholars, the work of McGann and others locating him as a pivotal thinker of the Romantic period and interest in his philological work on the Scots language by the likes of Professor Charles Jones, it is timely that a major conference is being planned by Professor William Johnstone at Aberdeen University for the bicentenary of Geddes' death.

Having sketched some of the general background to Geddes' career and stature (which should provide some pointers for those wishing to examine the poems highlighted by Hogg in relation to Geddes for themselves), I turn to the additional poems I am now suggesting look like the work of Geddes. Judging authorship from stylistic evidence alone and without the aid of manuscripts remains in a majority of cases notoriously difficult. There is a great deal of

⁴Jerome McGann, "The Idea of an Indeterminate Text: Blake's Bible of Hell and Dr. Alexander Geddes" in *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (Fall 1986), 303-24.

Geddes material still to be tracked down and a search of several places in England, Scotland, France and possible Spain and Germany is likely to yield more material. Prior to manuscript confirmation, my identification of the ode to Fox was arrived at by a very luckily distinctive pattern. Four factors suggested Geddes to me (apart from a general sensitivity honed through reading about one hundred poems by Geddes): the provenance of the *Morning Chronicle*, where I knew Geddes to be one of the staunchest allies of his fellow Aberdeenshire man, the editor, James Perry; the Scottish stanza form; the use of the notion of the Catholic theo-technicality, the “plenary indulgence”; and an anti-hierarchical sentiment including criticism of bishops and even the papacy. This was the bizarre matrix in which none but the eccentric career of Alexander Geddes could suggest itself. There is not the same happy confluence of factors in the other work I am now proposing to be by Geddes, but a little can be said, and, I feel, ought to be said.

Like all the poems I am now questioning as the work of Burns, “The Ewe Bughts” was published in the *Morning Chronicle* (in 1794). It is an anti-war reworking of an old North-East song associated in earlier (though admittedly very different) versions, with the Gordons of Aberdeenshire to whom Geddes remained close for thirty years and whom he mentioned in about half a dozen poems. Also, Geddes’ criticism of William Pitt and British war policy is vociferous throughout the 1790s in about two dozen poems often published in the *Chronicle*. Adding to circumstantial evidence, Geddes wrote and reworked a number of songs in Scots including, most famously, “Lewie Gordon” which was passed to and used by Burns (the precise level of acquaintanceship between Burns and Alexander Geddes still remains to be unraveled). If I were to push my case, I might even point to the song’s lament for “Sandy,” the soldier abroad on duty in Flanders, and suggest a playful piece of self-reference. In the end, quite simply, it is at least as likely that Geddes wrote the song as Burns.

“The Cob Web—A Song” (1795) is written in a stanza-form of a kind Burns will sometimes use, but, as Patrick Scott Hogg observes, more usually involving Scots (Hogg, pp. 181-5). Who quite frequently employs English in this stanza which is familiar in a number of Scottish songs? Geddes. Let me put side by side one stanza from “The Cob Web” with a stanza from Geddes’ “Trial By Jury” (1795) to show, simply, a similar facility with the verse-form (a reading of the two poems in their entirety gives a strong sense that these are by the same person and I urge those interested to try this).

“The Cob Web”

The sweets of a blessing
 Are had by possessing
 Hail Britons ! the cause is your own
 You are wonderful great,
 You have princes and State,
 And the wisest and best on a Throne !

“Trial By Jury”

Let treacherous Spies,
 In a Patriot’s disguise
 For Britons most basely lay trains
 The mask is too thin
 To cover their sin
 And a trial by Jury remains

In support of his attribution of "The Cob Web" to Burns, Patrick Hogg notes the pseudonym "A Briton" attached to it, a name which Burns utilized in a letter of 1788. Apart from the fact that this pseudonym is not a hugely impressive pointer in itself, it more readily points to Geddes. Geddes used numerous pseudonyms in the press and in pamphlets including Polemophilus Brown, William Wilberforce, Dixi, and Philo-Pacis. If we examine his use of pseudonyms in the *Chronicle* approaching the publication of "The Cob Web," we find him using A Patriot in an open letter to William Pitt (July 2, 1795) and, most interestingly, A True Briton in an essay, "Scarcity of Corn" (July 25, 1795). Geddes' use of A True Briton occurs less than one month before "The Cob Web" by a Briton in the *Chronicle* (Aug. 21, 1795). Surely, from this pattern in the three pseudonyms we can suggest a variation on a theme?

The third of four of Hogg's A list which I believe to be by Geddes is "Address to Justice." Again, I can only offer some general comments at this stage. Geddes returns again and again to notions of justice both legal and in terms of the divine economy throughout his poetry. His work in this strain includes, as well as "Trial By Jury," "The Age of Wisdom and Virtue" and "Ode to the German Despots on Cutting Down the Tree of Liberty." Hogg's attribution to Burns on grounds of style is unconvincing, especially when the work is compared in diction and phraseology to the work of Geddes (again I invite those interested to look for themselves) (Hogg, pp. 170-78). "Address to Justice" also features a central preoccupation with, and an imprecation to, God which is very characteristic of Geddes' poetry but which is not evident in serious form in Burns after his rather morbidly religious period which had ended around 1784-5 at the latest.

Even more briefly, let us turn to Hogg's B list. "Ode Inscribed to Certain Jurymen" (1794) features a characteristic Geddes theme and a theocentric and benedictory structure which again look very like the work of Geddes. I have also found several satirical epigrams by Geddes on Edmund Burke, though not the one highlighted by Hogg (1796). Geddes has, at the very least, to be a strong contender for authorship of this piece.⁵

University of Strathclyde

⁵The contents of this article result from research on Geddes funded in part by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and the Centre for Scottish Cultural Studies, University of Strathclyde; I gratefully acknowledge the support of both.