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A Passion for Scholarship & Collecting: The G. Ross Roy Collection of Robert Burns & Scottish Literature

Thomas Keith

Stories of collectors' quests for books go back to ancient times, and many are recounted in Nicholas Basbanes' excellent 1995 book, *A Gentle Madness*,¹ but it was the Rev. Thomas Frognall Dibdin who first coined the term "bibliomania" in his 1809 book, *Bibliomania; or, Book-Madness; containing some account of the History, Symptoms, and Cure of This Fatal Disease*. Though Dibdin cited a "legitimate medical authority as a source for...the illness," he himself called his book a "bibliographical romance," so it is not off the mark to identify his comments as tongue-in-cheek:

[Bibliomania] has raged chiefly in palaces, castles, halls, and gay mansions, and those things which in general are supposed not to be inimical to health, such as cleanliness, spaciousness, and splendour, are only so many inducements toward the introduction and propagation of the BIBLIOMANIA! What renders it particularly formidable is that it rages in all seasons of the year, and at all periods of human existence.²

Apropos, there is a rare book in the Roy Collection written in 1811 by the Reverend William Peebles from Newton-upon-Ayr. Peebles had previously been the object of Burns's satire in both "The Holy Fair" and "The Kirk's Alarm." Peebles'

¹ Nicholas A. Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness* (Henry Holt & Company: New York, 1995).

² Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *Bibliomania or Book-Madness* (Chatto & Windus: Piccadilly, 1840), p. B.11.

book is a ranting polemic titled *Burnomania: The Celebrity of Robert Burns Considered in a Discourse Addressed to All Real Christians of Every Denomination*. Combined with bibliomania from time to time, “Burn[s]omania” is known to afflict some Burnsians.

Whether purchasing a book from a major auction house or from a parking-lot flea market, a collector can easily feel that he or she has stepped in at just the right moment and rescued that book for posterity—from a less discriminating collector, from an unscrupulous, high-priced, or slovenly bookseller, and always from the poor soul who might have cherished it just as much, had they only found it. Writing in 1862, John Hill Burton touched on this experience:

It is, as you will observe, the general ambition of [collectors] to find value where there seems to be none, and this develops a certain skill and subtlety, enabling the operator, in the midst of a heap of rubbish, to put his finger on those things which have in them the latent capacity to become valuable and curious...In such a manner is it that books are saved from annihilation, and that their preservers become the feeders of the great collections in which, after their value is established, they find refuge; and herein it is that the class to whom our attention is at present devoted perform an inestimable service to literature.³

There is perhaps only one thing a book collector enjoys as much as finding the books he or she is looking for, and that is walking away, after some expected haggling, with a great (i.e., inexpensive) price. Collecting goes back to ancient times, and there is an appropriate quotation on this subject in the Bible, much relished by Ross Roy:

It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer,
But when he has gone his way, then he boasteth.
(Proverbs XX, 14)

Trace elements of “bibliomania” can be found in the character of any serious collector. A colorful description of serious collectors was given in a speech to the Bibliographical Society of America in 1950 by Clifton Waller Barrett, whose extensive collection of American Literature is

³ John Hill Burton, *The Book-Hunter* (William Blackwoods: Edinburgh, 1863), pp. 221, 231.

now at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Barrett spoke about what he referred to as the “genus” Collector:

First of all he must be distinguished by his rapacity. If he does not covet and is not prepared to seize and fight for every binding, every issue and every state of every book that falls even remotely within the range of his particular bibliomania, treat him as the lawful fisherman treats a nine-inch bass; throw him back—he is only an insignificant and colorless offshoot of the true parent stock.⁴

Ross Roy is by any definition a serious collector. It has been Dr. Roy’s passion to gather a massive and comprehensive collection of material on Burns and Scottish literature that is now the largest such collection in North America, and is rivaled in size only by the Mitchell Library Collection in Glasgow.

Dr. Roy dates the beginning of the G. Ross Roy Collection of Scottish Literature to 1890 in Quebec when his grandmother, Charlotte Sprigings, inscribed an edition of Burns’s works to his grandfather: “W. Ormiston Roy / from his friend, / Charlotte A. Sprigings. / Xmas 1890.”⁵ By the time he died, in 1958, and left his collection to his grandson, W. Ormiston Roy had been collecting Burns and Burns-related books for at least sixty-six years. During the fifty years that have followed, Ross Roy has increased the size of that original collection at least ten-fold and, with deliberation and patience, he has added some of the rarest books known not only to collectors of Scottish literature, but to all book collectors. These include a copy of the Kilmarnock Edition (1786) and the only known complete copy of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799). A conservative calculation would make the Roy Collection one hundred and twenty years old.

A compelling influence on content of the Roy Collection is the literary background of the collection’s namesake and founder. Dr. Roy may not have known when he started out

⁴ Clifton Waller Barrett, “Some Bibliographical Adventures in America,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 1st quarter (1950).

⁵ G. Ross Roy, introduction, p. xiv, in Elizabeth Sudduth, *The G. Ross Roy Collection of Robert Burns, An Illustrated Catalogue* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

how his passion for books and for Burns would lead him to become both a world-class collector and a world-class Burns scholar. By following those parallel interests Dr. Roy created three solid institutions for his fellow academics and his fellow collectors: the forty-four-year-old, distinguished scholarly journal, *Studies in Scottish Literature*; the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina's new Ernest F. Hollings Library; and the W. Ormiston Roy Memorial Fellowship which each year provides funds and housing for a scholar chosen from an application process, to conduct research in the Roy Collection for up to five weeks.

Conceived in 1963 when Dr. Roy was teaching at the University of Montreal and published later that year when he moved to Texas Tech University, *Studies in Scottish Literature* had an original editorial board comprising David Daiches, A.M. Kinghorn, Hugh MacDiarmid, A.L. Strout, and Dr. Kurt Wittig. Contributors have included some of the most important Scottish authors, poets, scholars, and critics of the last seventy years, including Alan Bold, George Bruce, Ian Campbell, Edward J. Cowan, Thomas Crawford, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Douglas Gifford, Duncan Glen, Alasdair Gray, Seamus Heaney, R.D.S. Jack, Tom Leonard, Maurice Lindsay, Norman MacCaig, Sorley Maclean, Margery Palmer McCulloch, William McIlvanney, Edwin Morgan, Edwin Muir, Trevor Royle, Tom Scott, Iain Crichton Smith, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Muriel Spark, Rodger L. Tarr, Robert Crawford, and Christopher Whyte, just to name a few.

Scholarship and collecting are two fields that have often remained separate, with the practitioners of each commonly avoiding the other's field, let alone excelling in it. However, Dr. Roy has managed to succeed at both and by doing so has in many respects helped bring the relationship between research and collecting much closer than it has ever been.

To help shed a little light on Dr. Roy's double achievement, here is a quote from Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach who was one of the most famous American booksellers of the twentieth century and who, along with Henry E. Huntington, J. Pierpont Morgan, and Harry Hunt Ransom, was one of the century's greatest book collectors as well. In 1927 Rosenbach wrote:

It is a wonderful and magnificent thing that the gathering of books in this country is in the hands of leaders of her industries, the so-called business kings, and not in the hands of college professors and great scholars... It is paradoxical, but true, that not a single great library in the world has been formed by a great scholar.⁶

Obviously Dr. Rosenbach did not imagine or predict the scope of Dr. Roy's vision. One could reasonably speculate, given stereotypes attached to scholars and academics, that it is primarily from the academic side that the wall between collecting and scholarship is maintained, but that is not necessarily true. When the major Philadelphian book collector Seymour Adelman was urged by his friends to publish a compilation of his various papers and speeches produced over a lifetime of experience collecting books, Adelman did so and wrote in his 1977 introduction:

My main anxiety is that I am now in danger of losing my franchise as a collector... I was put on this earth to collect books, not to write them. It has taken me fifty years to gather my collection, now forever happily in residence at Bryn Mawr College, and I would like to add to its shelves from time to time. Hence my concern. If, because of this book, my integrity as a collector is sullied by authorship, who knows what dire consequences will follow. Will any self-respecting rare-book dealer ever let me into his shop again? Will I be permitted to attend auction sales? Will I be expelled from the Philobiblon Club?⁷

Bear in mind that is only for being an "author" that Adelman is traumatized into fearing that he'll be thrown out of the collecting brotherhood, he doesn't even mention what would probably to him be the much more disturbing appellation of "scholar."

So there is a reason why the G. Ross Roy Collection in the University of South Carolina's new Special Collections library is a place where a massive and valuable collection of Scottish material will continue to grow and be preserved; where scholarly research can be conducted; and where the

⁶ A.S.W. Rosenbach, *Books and Bidders* (Little, Brown: Boston, 1927).

⁷ Seymour Adelman, *The Moving Pageant* (Lititz: Pennsylvania, 1977).

curious or needy who have exhausted their searches in the stacks can go to find what they're looking for. The reason is that Dr. Roy is both a collector and a scholar, and it is his resolve that this comprehensive collection should be accessible to researchers. Who is allowed to use this collection? Legal fine print aside, Patrick Scott, former Director of Special Collections, puts it most simply: "anyone with a pure heart, clean hands, and a photo ID."

In regard to Burnsomania mentioned earlier, Dr. Roy has somehow managed to avoid the symptoms of it. Yet, being well rounded in all ventures, Dr. Roy does have in the collection a wooden bowl and spoon that are thought to have belonged to the poet. One story such objects tell is about the peculiar craze throughout most of the nineteenth century for personal relics of Burns. In fact, the obsession with all things Burnsian led to quite a few suspicious or wild claims. Following an exhibit for the centennial of the poet's death held by the Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts in 1896, the *Memorial Catalogue of the Burns Exhibition* was published by Wm. Hodge & Co. and T&R Annan & Sons in 1898. The editor of the catalogue, Wm. Young, R.S.A., went to great lengths to explain that of all the objects on exhibit, which included portraits, paintings based on the poet's works, manuscripts, holographs, books and relics, it was the relics which generated the greatest excitement among the attendees: "Hence it is everything connected, in the remotest degree, with his earthly pilgrimage [that] is guarded by all sorts and conditions of men with a solicitude that is apt to evoke a smile from those outwith the pale of the national feeling." The objects included every kind of furniture, kitchen implements, toiletries, scissors, knives, medals, swords, pistols, spectacles and snuffboxes, all having some relation to the poet and his contemporaries. Young also points out that the assumption that these items were what they were claimed to be was accepted by most of the public with "unquestioning faith," and he goes on to suppose that if the exhibit were to feature the very set of bagpipes the devil was playing in the poem "Tam o' Shanter" that it "might have been on view without exciting more than the mildest measure of surprise."

Dr. Roy once expressed his opinion on the subject of relic-mania and Burnsomania in relation to that always-elusive character Highland Mary, and I paraphrase:

For all the locks of hair identified as belonging to Highland Mary, one can only reasonably conclude that she was bald at the time of her death.

And yet, these artifacts, authentic or not, form part of what is the material research in addition to the books of this collection. Though there is currently a trend among university collections that is starting to incorporate items of research value other than books, from the beginning Dr. Roy has filled this collection with more than the traditional items found in traditional book collections.

The Roy Collection is, of course, well grounded in eighteenth-century Scottish poetry and song with essential as well as rare editions of Ramsay, Fergusson, Macpherson, the song collections by Oswald, Johnson and the rest, as well every major eighteenth and nineteenth-century edition of Burns, tracked in an annotated, interlinear edition of Egerer's Bibliography, rebound in four volumes. Every biography of Burns as well as the correspondence, major critical essays, bibliographies and illustrated folios, are to be found in the Roy Collection. In addition to books, standard formats include pamphlets, periodicals, magazines, newspapers, and broadsides.

The Roy Collection is strong in the areas of original manuscripts, letters, holograph proof copies, association copies and annotated editions of Burns, as well as housing the David Morrison *Scotia* and *Scotia Review* Collection, the Jonathan B. Pons Collection, the Robert Fitzhugh Research Collection, manuscripts and books of the poet Hamish Henderson and the scholar Robert Thornton, and original research notes, drafts, and recordings of Serge Hovey and related working papers for Hovey's *Robert Burns Song Book* donated by the late Esther Hovey and her son, Daniel. Some of the rare holograph materials in the Roy collection are original letters between Burns and "Clarinda," Agnes McLehose, Burns's letter to John McMurdo which includes the one and only mention by Burns of his *Merry Muses of Caledonia*, a Burns autograph manuscript of the song, "Ay Waukin', O," Robert Ainslie's copy of the 1787 Edinburgh

edition with Burns's handwritten notes indicating proper names throughout, James Hogg's annotated copy of Burns's poems, and Burns's own annotated copy of the first volume of John Moore's 1789 two-volume novel, *Zeluco*. Among very recent acquisitions has been a previously-unrecorded autograph manuscript of Burns's poem "A Poet's Welcome to his Bastart Wean."

The Roy Collection is also quite advanced when it comes to non-standard formats such as chapbooks; printed art, including posters and postcards; photographs, including *cartes de visite*, stereoviews, and various photographic prints; paintings and sculpture; audio-visual materials, including 35 mm films, videos, and DVDs; printed music, including songbooks, scores, and sheet music; sound recordings, including Edison Amberol records, 78s, 45s, reel-to-reel tapes, 8-track tapes, LPs, cassettes and compact disks; realia, or what is also called "material culture," including relics such as the porridge bowl, as well as statues, various souvenirs and Mauchline Ware; computer files; and anything that would be kept in a vertical file including clippings from newspapers and magazines, photocopies, brochures, Burns Supper programs, maps, trade cards, and academic papers.

It is Dr. Roy's dedication to gathering a broad scope of traditional and non-traditional formats, the depth of his commitment to detail and variants, and his vital contributions to scholarship that make the Roy Collection rank so high among book collections and which make it especially valuable to scholars. An important milestone was reached in April 2009 when *The G. Ross Roy Collection of Robert Burns, An Illustrated Catalogue* was published by The University of South Carolina Press. Comprising 476 pages and with 67 illustrations, this essential reference tool was compiled and edited by Elizabeth Sudduth, with the assistance of Clayton Tarr, and has an introduction and annotations by Ross Roy himself.

Dr. Roy's passion has been to create a legacy for Burns research and enjoyment of which Ross and his wife, Lucie Roy, can be proud, and for which the University of South Carolina, its library, and the rest of us are grateful.