

7-1-1966

## Maga and the Ettrick Shepherd: Two unpublished letters of William Blackwood

Alan Lang Strout  
*Eastern Montana College*

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



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

---

### Recommended Citation

Strout, Alan Lang (2013) "Maga and the Ettrick Shepherd: Two unpublished letters of William Blackwood," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, 48–52.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol4/iss1/14>

This Notes/Documents 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](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

*dressed to the Mavis Well*), but also the original manuscript of *The Gentle Shepherd*.

This last is a folio manuscript of 105 pages, in its original green and gilt embossed covers. It has on the titlepage a note in Ramsay's hand: "This is the Originall Manuscript from which the Coppys were Printed; Presented to my Patroness March 2d 1737." According to a note on the inside of the front cover, written by Sir Alexander Boswell of Auchinleck in 1804, the Countess of Eglinton presented it to his father, James Boswell. Ramsay also comments on the various editions of Edinburgh, London, Dublin and Glasgow, expresses his hope that posterity will welcome the work, and notes that the additional songs (which do not appear in this manuscript) were added to the fourth edition in about 1732. Another note at the end of the manuscript reads "finish'd the 29th of Aprile 1725 just as eleven a'clock at night strikes."

The text shows a few variations from the first edition of 1725. There are a number of Ramsay's corrections and deletions, and also some of the drawings of heads and grotesque creatures, with which he often decorated his manuscripts. This copy of *The Gentle Shepherd* is of considerable interest, both in itself, and for its provenance, and is a valuable addition to the Ramsay items already in the National Library of Scotland.

ELSPETH YEO

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

**Maga and the Ettrick Shepherd**

*Two unpublished letters of William Blackwood*

The family of the late Robert Gilkison of Dunedin, New Zealand, have kindly sent me photostats of two letters of William Blackwood to the Ettrick Shepherd in 1821 and 1825. When Mr. Gilkison deposited most of his grandfather's literary remains in the National Library of Scotland in 1935, these letters (now given by the family to the National Library also) were left in New Zealand as of no importance. But the first communication partially modifies Mrs. Margaret Oliphant's picturesque presentation of Hogg in her *William Blackwood and His Sons* (Edinburgh, 1897, 2 vols.); and the second pleasantly illustrates

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

the relationship of publisher and poet in the days of the *Noctes Ambrosianae*.

Mrs. Oliphant (I, 242-3) includes a letter of Blackwood to Hogg, 15 May, 1821:

It is very odd, indeed, that Mr. Murray has paid no attention to your letters . . .

At the same time, you cannot say that Mr. Murray is due you more than the £ 50 on account of 'The Queen's Wake,' for it depends upon the copies sold of 'The Brownie [Of Bodsbeck: and other Tales, two volumes, William Blackwood and John Murray, 1818].'

I do not understand what you allude to when you say I let men of real genius slip through my fingers. I should be much obliged to you if you would tell me what you mean.

Again on June 6, 1821, the publisher writes: "As to interfering with Mr. Murray, I have told you all along it is a thing which I cannot do."

The hitherto unpublished letter was sent from Edinburgh on 12 June, 1821:

Dear Hogg

I am horridly vexed at this stupid blunder of my clerk's by which you have been put to so much trouble and inconvenience. I would rather have paid a good round sum than that this should have happened and more particularly with Mr. Murray. My clerk had only credited you with my own half of the price for the Queen's Wake, and when he settled Mr. Murray's acc<sup>t</sup> he neglected to give you credit for his half. I had quite forgot myself all about it, and I merely look'd into the Ledger where I saw Mr. M. charged with *half of paper & printing Queen's Wake*, but no mention of copy money. On turning up the particulars of the acc<sup>t</sup> just now I find to my great mortification that your money was included in the sum of £ 130- You may keep yourself however perfectly easy as I have written to the manager of the Leith Bank explaining the mistake, so that you will have neither trouble or blame, as I will retire the bill and pay any expenses.

I am Dear Hogg  
Yours very truly  
W. Blackwood.

Instead of clearing up matters, Blackwood's apologetic letter is merely an interlude to other importunate missives of the Shepherd until the publisher in despair pays a bill of £50 in dispute, in August, 1821. Mrs. Oliphant (I, 345) prints part of Blackwood's reply to Hogg's contrite note of August 28, 1821:

It is a great misfortune to you that you allow your imagination to run away with your memory, and then, after allowing your

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

mind to dwell on your own fancies, you positively assert them as truths. I am glad to have it in my power to put you right in a way you cannot dispute; but it is the first time I have been under the necessity of bringing forward a printer's account to substantiate any of my statements, either with authors or with any of my correspondents.

(May "Christopher North's" scurrilous attack on *The Mountain Bard* of August, 1821, legitimately have sprung from Blackwood's desire to get back something of the fifty pounds just ladled out to the poet?)

Whether Hogg's blunders in August might have been avoided if Blackwood had not blundered in June may be doubted. But at least the Shepherd was not always at fault in what Walter Scott calls his "cash troubles." The letter of June 12, 1821, shows William Blackwood to advantage (as was to be expected). I wish Mrs. Oliphant had printed it, but very possibly it was not in the Blackwood files.

The *Noctes Ambrosianae*, so great was their appeal, enabled a real hotel keeper Ambrose to move from Gabriel's Road to Picardy Place in Edinburgh in 1826, and caused *Blackwood's Magazine*, even when the Whigs came into power, to flourish like the green bay tree.

Dickens's *Bleak House* presents vivid depictions of Leigh Hunt and Walter Savage Landor; Disraeli's novels contain thinly disguised portraits of his contemporaries; Peacock's works have as one of their charms the presentation of Shelley, Coleridge, Byron, and others; but John Wilson's characterization in the *Noctes* of James Hogg, an imaginative recreation of an actual living person, extending over more than a dozen years, is, as far as I know, unique in English literature.

A writer of fiction has the task of making his characters seem human; Wilson had the task, on the contrary, of making a human being seem fictitious. If this characterization lacks subtlety, it has vigour and gusto to atone. Hogg and the shower-bath, Hogg's suffering from the "janndice" (I was feared to wash my face, lest the water grow ochre), Hogg's cure for rheumatism, Hogg at the theatre in London, Hogg's blowing soap-bubbles at the age of eight — such passages prove (on however low a level) the dictum of De la Croix that "Art is exaggeration in the right place." Consider the Shepherd's inherent honesty, apropos of mock-turtle soup:

I hate a' things mock-soops, pearls, fawse tails, both bustles  
and queues, wigs, cawves, religion, freenship, love, glass-een, rouge  
on the face o' a woman, no exceppin' even cork legs, for timmer  
anes are far better, there bein' nae attempt at deception . . .

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Naturally any letters concerning Hogg's appearance in the *Noctes* have particular interest. Mrs. Oliphant (I, 353) includes as her last excerpt in his correspondence with Blackwood a grumbling communication of March 28, 1828, wherein he says he is "exceedingly disgusted with the last beastly 'Noctes' . . ." I wish she might have closed with, or at least included, this hitherto unpublished letter of his publisher:

Edin 27 Sept' 1828

My dear Sir

You did not come to town on Wednesday but I hope you will without fail on Wednesday night. It will be a sad disappointment to me if you are not here to sup with us at Ambrose's after my Index Sale.

Your Brownie I like still better since it was in types, though it is a strange wild savage affair. The Stuarts of Appin will be a great favourite. You will be not a little astonished at the *Noctes* particularly at your duello with Ambrose.

I am my dear Sir

Yours very truly

W. Blackwood.

"The Stuarts of Appin" appears in the second *Noctes* of October, 1828, No. XXXVIII, and "The Brownie of the Black Hags. By the Ettrick Shepherd" in October also (*Blackwood's Magazine*, XXIV, 489-496). In this *Noctes* Christopher North lies sleeping in the Snugery when Ambrose and the Ettrick Shepherd enter.

Shepherd. Gie me that cork aff yon table- I'll burnt it on the fire, and then blacken his face wi' coom.

Ambrose. (*Placing himself in an imposing attitude between North and the Shepherd.*) Then it must be through my body, Sir. Mr. Hogg, I am always proud and happy to see you in my house; but the mere idea of such an outrage- such sacrilege- horrifies me; the roof would fall down- the whole land-

Shepherd. Tuts, man, I'm only jokin' . . .

Then the Shepherd, remembering "Kubla Khan" and Coleridge, puts a horrid dream in North's sleeping brain to the effect that he is being guillotined until Ambrose tries to awaken the groaning and gesticulating victim, saying he will confess all.

Shepherd. What, you'll peach, will you? In that case, it is just as well to proceed to the last extremity. Rax me ower the carvin' knife, and I'll guillotine him-

Ambrose. Shocking, shocking, Mr. Hogg!

(*The Shepherd and Ambrose struggle violently for the possession of the carving knife- amid cries from the latter of 'Thieves-*

## STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

*Robbers- Fire- Murder!'- and in the struggle they fall against the chimney-piece, to the clash of shovel, poker and tongs. Bronte, who has been sleeping under North's chair, bursts out with a bull-bellow, a tiger-growl, and a lion-roar- and North awakes, collaring the Shepherd.)*

Bronte. Bow-wow-wow-wow-wow-

Shepherd. Ca' aff your doug, Mr. North,- ca' aff your doug!  
He's devourin' me-

North. Gentlemen, what is the meaning of this- you seem discomposed? James! Engaged in the duello with Mr. Ambrose? Mr. Ambrose!

*(Exit Mr. Ambrose, retrogrediens, much confused.)*

Shepherd. I'll ca' him out- I'll ca' him out wi' pistols. He was the first aggressor . . .

No wonder the *Noctes Ambrosianae* were the most popular of serial publications before *Pickwick Papers*. No doubt most respectable married people with umbrellas in academic life should prefer the Roman candle wit of Congreve, or Sheridan, or Oscar Wilde: — the remark by Elizabeth Bennet (not yet Darcy): "Lady Catherine has been of infinite use, which ought to make her happy for she loves to be of use."

But Mark Twain and Artemus Ward and Sam Weller and Christopher North bring England and the United States closer together with their ripsnorting down-to-earthiness; and, incidentally, with their low-brow use of dialect; and their freedom from sex, an extraordinary boon today.

ALAN LANG STROUT

EASTERN MONTANA COLLEGE