Robert Burns: A Self-Portrait

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More than most authors we come to know Burns through the letters he wrote and received. True, there are some contemporary accounts of the poet, but these are mostly to be found piecemeal, scattered through the journals and reminiscences of those who had met him, usually during the two years from late 1786 until 1788 when he was a familiar sight on the streets of Edinburgh. The picture which we form of the poet through these glimpses of him is that of a man riding the crest of a wave of universal admiration; if he had faults these were either glossed over or excused as the quite forgivable eccentricities of genius. Unfortunately he had no Boswell; the accounts of him in Edinburgh are by different observers with quite other standards from those few who gave us details about him after he had left the capital.

Although he kept no systematic journal, he twice—on his Border tour and on a Highland tour—kept a sort of running diary for a short space of time. These diaries are so cryptic that, while they form a valuable record of the people he met and the places he visited, they do not afford a detailed view of the poet’s thinking or the process that would turn sense-impression into poetry. I deliberately wrote first of the people he met because one has the impression that for Burns the most important aspect of these journeys was the meeting of people; he was above all else a social being. He loved company—in part as an escape from the gnawing loneliness within but in part, too, because he could help people to rise above themselves, to share his vision of a better world.

Burns’s first Commonplace Book covers the period from April 1783 to October 1785. It thus contains almost the earliest surviving record in the poet’s hand (there are a few letters of earlier date) during a crucial two and a half years of his life, a time when he was ripening as a poet.
This is not to suggest that Burns began writing poetry only in 1783 when he commenced the Commonplace Book—the book itself tells us that “I never had the least thought or inclination of turning Poet till I got once heartily in Love, and then Rhyme & and [sic] Song were, in a manner, the spontaneous language of my heart.” In his autobiographical letter the poet tells us that this first venture into verse came in his “fifteenth autumn,” some ten years before the Commonplace Book was begun. But though he was known locally as a versifier, capable of turning a rhyme with mordant wit, he apparently addressed himself seriously to poetry at about the time that he began his entries in the Commonplace Book.

The opening paragraph of that work shows us a self-conscious novice admitting that he was “but little indebted to scholastic education,” who excused his “performances [which] must be strongly tintured with his unpolished, rustic way of life” (ICPB, 1783, p. 1). The paragraph is followed by two quotations from Shenstone, a writer for whom Burns had a very high regard, and whom he mentions frequently in the Commonplace Book. Though his intentions may have been good, Burns was probably still only incubating his poetic gift for the first year of the Commonplace Book—the first eleven months, to March 1784, occupy only five and a half pages, one of which is blank. Suddenly in March and April we have twelve pages of MS., and as suddenly we get a glimpse of the maturing of Burns’s genius. Citing Shenstone to the effect that “love-verses writ without any real passion are the most nauseous of all conceits,” Burns adds,

As I have been all along, a miserable dupe to Love ... I put the more confidence in my critical skill in distinguishing foppery & conceit, from real passion & nature.—Whether the following song will stand the test, I will not pretend to say, because it is MY OWN (ICPB, pp. 11-12).

Stand the test it most certainly did—the song was “My Nanie, O.”

In another entry made in April 1784 Burns devotes about a page and a half to the beginning of an essay which sought to divide young men into

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1 Robert Burns’s Commonplace Book, 1783-1785, ed. James Cameron Ewing and Davidson Cook (Glasgow: Gowans and Gray, 1938), p. 3 [hereafter referenced in the text as ICPB]. Of the several editions of the Common-place Book this is the only completely accurate one, consisting of a printed transcript of the MS. as well as a facsimile of the original. It was re-issued in 1965. [For this and following items, now see also Nigel Leask, ed., Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose [The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns, vol. I] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Eds.]
two classes: grave and merry. The next entry is dated August, and opens thus:

The foregoing was to have been an elaborate dissertation on the various species of men; but as I cannot please myself in the arrange-ment of my ideas, I must wait till farther experience & nicer observation throw more light on the subject.—In the mean time I shall set down the following fragment which, as it is the genuine language of my heart, will enable any body to determine which of the Classes I belong to— (ICPB, pp. 15-16).

Here follows “Green grow the Rashes—O.”

While there are unmistakable signs of the emergence of Burns’s genius as a song-writer—on the whole probably the greatest in the English-speaking world—there are some pedestrian performances too, witness:

O Thou, Unknown, Almighty Cause
Of all my hope & fear,
In whose dread presence ere an hour
Perhaps I must appear (ICPB, p.18).

And so on. The piece is prefaced: “A prayer, when fainting fits, & other alarming symptoms of a Pleurisy or some other dangerous disorder, which indeed still threaten me, first put Nature on the alarm.—.” While Henley and Henderson suggest December 1781 as the date of composition, the fact that Burns chose to include it in his Commonplace Book in 1784 points to a still-forming critical faculty in the poet.  

But on the whole the poems get better as we go along: in September we find “Tibbie I hae seen the day” (ICPB, p. 20) and the first proof we have of Burns’s writing of bawdry, “My girl she’s airy” (ICPB, p. 21).

Exactly half the entries were made between June 1785 and October of that year, when he abandoned the Commonplace Book. On these pages we find an artist who is confident of his work. Here are “The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie,” the two “Epistles” to Lapraik with their deft handling of Standard Habbie, as well as others. Here too under the date of August we have a first glimpse of Burns calling for a more truly national poetry:

We have never had one Scotch Poet of any eminence, to make the fertile banks of Irvine, the romantic woodlands & sequestered scenes on Aire and the heathy, mountainous source, & winding sweep of Doon emulate Tay, Forth, Ettrick, Tweed, &c. this is a

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complaint I would gladly remedy, but Alas! I am far unequal to
the task, both in native genius & education (ICPB, p. 36).

On this modest estimate he was gloriously wrong.

Burns kept a second Commonplace Book between 9 April 1787 and at
least the spring of 1789, perhaps later. Although editors from Currie
onwards have used the manuscript, and although all the contents have
been published, the work has never been published in its entirety at one
time. Most of the manuscript is filled with transcripts of poems. Burns
declares that “I will sketch every character that anyway strikes me, to the
best of my observation, with unshrinking justice” (2CPB, p. 2).

In the early pages we do find comments on some of the people Burns
had met. These entries are intensely human: we have Burns complaining
of a person of rank being showered with attention “that is forgot to the
Son of Genius and Poverty” (2CPB, p. 4); we have Burns writing that the
“noble G— [Glencairn] has wounded me to the soul” because he
favoured a “blockhead” rather than the poet in dinner conversation
(2CPB, p. 5); and on the same page, while displaying his liking for Hugh
Blair, Burns is severe in his judgment of the doctor’s abilities—he says,
in fact, that he is “meerly [sic] an astonishing proof of what industry and
application can do.” Of Dugald Stuart the poet wrote that he was “the
most perfect character I ever saw” (2CPB, p. 6) and he gives us also a
fine short sketch of his publisher William Creech (2CPB, pp. 7-8).
Although he suggests Creech’s tight-fistedness, he does not openly
mention it. Burns was to know a good deal more of his publisher’s
fondness for money before he finally got a settlement with him!

Unfortunately Burns did not keep to his stated intent to sketch those
people he met during his protracted Edinburgh stay—and what a pity that
is. For Burns was not taken in by those he met, as we see from the
trenchant remarks he made in some of his letters.

When Burns had a little money from the unexpected success of his
Edinburgh volume of poems (he eventually cleared about £450, a tidy

\footnote{William Jack published the prose sections of this Commonplace Book in \textit{Macmillan’s Magazine}, March-July, 1879 (vols. 39-40) [hereafter referenced in the text as 2CPB]; annotations are from this source, but the page numbers will be those of the MS. [Since this essay was originally published, there have been two full editions of the Second Commonplace Book: by Leask, as in n. 1 above, and by Bill Dawson, in \textit{Burns Chronicle 2014} (November, 2013), 23-54. Eds.]}

sum in those days), he treated himself to what was probably the first real holiday of his life. Leaving Edinburgh on 5 May 1787, Burns went on an extended tour of the Borders which lasted until 1 June. The journal which the poet kept while on this trip is the longer of two he is known to have kept. The tour came when Burns’s fame was at its zenith, and we can sense the poet’s enjoyment of the flattery he received. Thus on 7 May: “My reception from Mr. & Mrs. Brydon extremely flattering.” On 9 May: “Dine with Captn. Rutherford. The Captn ... showed a particular respect to My Bardship—.” On 11 May: “Was waited on by the Magistrates and presented with the freedom of the burgh” (Jedburgh).

At the same time Burns was enjoying the pretty, and not-so-pretty, women (of sisters he wrote [8 May] that they had “too much of the Mother’s half-ell mouth & hog-like features”). The next day he was “within a point and a half of being damnably in love.” And Burns the practical farmer is impressed with the land, or comments on the price of a fox-hunter (11 May), or attends the sale of an unfortunate farmer’s stock (25 May) and calls on “rigid Economy & decent Industry” to preserve him from such a fate. Although this last entry is cryptic we feel the shudder of recollection of his own experience at Lochlea.

Towards the end of June Burns made a second tour; this time he visited the West Highlands as far as Inverary for a week. He kept no journal that is known, although we have a fragment of a letter to Robert Ainslie from Arrochar and a long letter to James Smith of Linlithgow upon the completion of the trip on 30 June.

Later that summer Burns and his friend William Nicol, classics master at the High School of Edinburgh, toured the Highlands from 25 August until 16 September. Burns started well, but the journal soon becomes little more than a catalogue of places visited and people seen; almost one-third of the journal is devoted to the first two days of the trip. When he

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4 See Burns’s letter to Mrs Dunlop of 25 March 1789 (Letters, I: 388). [For consistency through this volume, quotations from the letters originally cited in this essay from Ferguson have been standardized to Roy page numbering. Eds.]

5 “The Journal of the Border Tour,” ed. J. De Lancey Ferguson, in Robert Burns His Associates and Contemporaries, ed. Robert T. Fitzhugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943), pp. 108-22. This is the only reliable edition of the journal. Subsequent references will be to date of entry only. [Now see also Leask, as in n. 1 above. Eds.]

6 Journal of a Tour in the Highlands made in the Year 1787, ed. J. C. Ewing (London & Glasgow: Gowans & Gray, 1927). This edition combines a printed
visited Linlithgow on the first day he was moved by the sight of the room where Mary Queen of Scots was born. He liked the Gothic church, too, with its “infamous stool of repentance standing, in the old Romish way, on a lofty situation. What a poor, pimping business is a Presbyterian place of worship, dirty, narrow and squalid, stuck in a corner of old Popish grandeur such as Linlithgow and, much more, Melrose!” We can feel the poet’s indignation; he knew the ignominy of the cutty stool and the counterfeit piousness of the world’s Holy Willies.

Although he was a brilliant man, Nicol was no easy travelling companion. Burns complained in a letter to his cousin, James Burness of Montrose, that his friend had decided on another route so that they could not renew the acquaintance of the previous evening (*Letters*, I: 124). Still, the two men remained friends even after the trip which the poet felt was an unqualified success. “My journey through the Highlands,” he wrote to Patrick Miller on 28 September, “was perfectly inspiring; and I hope I have laid in a good stock of new poetical ideas from it” (*Letters*, I: 158). One of the sights which most moved Burns was the field of Bannockburn, which he visited on 26 August:

> Come on to Bannockburn ... the field of Bannockburn—the hole where glorious Bruce set his standard. [Here no Scot can pass uninterested.—I fancy to myself that I see my gallant, heroic countrymen coming o’er the hill and down upon the plunderers of their country, the murderers of their fathers; noble revenge and just hate glowing in every vein, striding more and more eagerly as they approach the oppressive, insulting, blood-thirsty foe! I see them meet in gloriously-triumphant congratulation on the victorious field, exulting in their heroic royal leader and rescued liberty and independence!]^{7}

There can be little doubt that this scene was in his mind when he wrote “Scots wha hae” six years later.

But these journals and Commonplace Books, interesting though they may be, give us a bare glimpse of Burns the man and artist. For most of our first-hand information we have to turn to the letters which survive either in MS. or in early printed form taken from MSS. which can no longer be traced. Unfortunately these latter are suspect both for what

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{^{7} The bracketed part is not with the MS. There was apparently an expanded version (location not now known) which was first used by Lockhart in 1828. The present text is from Ewing’s edition of the journal. [Cf. Leask, pp. 143-145. Eds.]}
early editors have, through the use of ellipsis, shown to be omitted, and what they have silently added. The classic example of this sort of tampering concerns a letter referring to Burns’s collection of bawdy poems and songs, first printed in 1799. The letter was first published by Currie in 1800, and was dated by him December 1793. In the letter, as published by Currie and all subsequent editors including Ferguson, we find the sentence “A very few of them are my own.” Unfortunately for Currie’s reputation, when the MS. turned up it contained no such sentence! Before a copy of the *Merry Muses* was discovered with a complete title page allowing us to date it positively, I had argued that it must have appeared in 1799 or very early in 1800 (both known copies contain leaves with watermarks dated 1799 and 1800)—early enough for Currie to become aware of its existence and insert “A very few of them are my own,” in order, as he thought, to protect the poet’s reputation.

Although the collection alluded to by Burns has disappeared (or been destroyed, as has been alleged), we have ample proof that Burns did, in fact, write and collect bawdry. So in the long run it has been Currie’s reputation which has suffered, not Burns’s.

Even an engraved facsimile is not beyond being tampered with. I have seen one such from which an entire sentence has been deleted and the two remaining parts of the letter brought together to look as though that was how Burns had penned it. The only reliable transcript then must be one which has been made directly from the MS. Fortunately we have a large number of these, and occasionally another MS. turns up which had been lost sight of for as much as a century; less frequently a completely new letter is uncovered.

In all we have slightly over 750 letters to help set the record straight. This sounds like a goodly number, but partly because of their distribution they are not quite as helpful in reconstructing Burns’s life as one might suppose. For example, only about forty letters survive which were written before 31 July 1786—the date of publication of the Kilmarnock volume—and of these one-half came from the six months preceding that date. In other words, less than two dozen letters survive which were written before the poet was twenty-seven.

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8 [In the 1985 *Letters*, I: 137-138, it is redated February 1792. Eds.]
10 [The figure in 2017 stands at just over 800 letters. Eds.]
In the next, or Edinburgh, period from August 1786 to November 1788, we find about 250 letters. As we should expect, this is proportionately the largest number. They come at a time when Burns was the toast of Edinburgh, and his busy social life required an increase in his letter-writing. Then, too, one supposes, people were more inclined to keep the letters they received from this ploughman with the ready sally and the flashing eyes who had written poems which set the whole of Scotland astir.

The not-quite-three years, from December 1788 to October 1791, during which Burns worked the soil at Ellisland and rode about 200 miles a week as an exciseman, find our poet penning about 200 letters, and finally during the Dumfries period, from November 1791 until his death in July 1796, there are about 260 letters.

Thus we account for about 750 letters, but I feel quite certain that 50 per cent or so of those he wrote either have not survived, or have not come to light. Certainly the humble people who subscribed to all the 612 copies of the Kilmarnock edition of the poems in the three and a half months from the time Burns first began circulating the subscription list (15 April) until the volume actually came out, would not be ones to preserve letters. Like the edition itself, of which I estimate not more than seventy-five copies survive, the poet’s letters were soon illegible, victims alike of damp, smoke and crowded living-space which were the commonplaces of peasant life at that time. Parenthetically, I might note that, just as far more letters were preserved by correspondents who came from a higher social order once Burns went to Edinburgh, so a correspondingly higher number of copies of the Edinburgh (1787) edition of the poems survive. Most of the people who purchased a copy of Burns’s poems in sturdy French grey boards at six shillings had libraries.

I base my estimate, however, on firmer ground than supposition. There are, for example, in Burns’s own letters, and in letters to him, unmistakable references to letters which are now lost. As late as the 1860s there was an important sale of Burns MSS. in which letters were listed by date and addressee—and some of these letters, too, are now lost. But the most important evidence of lost letters is to be found in a document which first came to light in the 1930s when J. C. Ewing published it in the Burns Chronicle: a list of the letters which were sent to the poet, which Currie prepared when he was gathering material for his edition of the poet’s life and works. This list does not include the letters from George Thomson, Mrs Dunlop, Mrs M’Lehose and Mrs Maria Riddell, all of whom had requested the return of their letters shortly after
Burns was dead. In all, the document lists 300 letters written to Burns by 135 correspondents. What is most interesting about this list, perhaps, is that, of these 135 names, we have letters by Burns to only 80; thus we add 55 names to the list of the poet’s correspondents (assuming that these letters were answers to Burns or called forth answers), bringing the total of correspondents to 225.

Before discussing the contents of the letters, it may be interesting to examine briefly the history of their publication. The earliest printed letters were sent to newspapers, and one, to the Earl of Buchan, was published in 1791 in the Bee. The letter was accompanied by Burns’s “Address to the shade of Thomson.” No significant number of letters was published during the poet’s life; it was not, in fact, until Currie’s four-volume edition that we find a fairly large number: 178 in all, including 50 to George Thomson and most of those to Mrs Dunlop. Two years later, 25 letters to Mrs Agnes M’Lehose (Clarinda) were published in Glasgow and were the cause of a lawsuit which forced their removal from the market, but not before a certain number of copies had been purchased.

R. H. Cromek’s Reliques of Robert Burns added 74 in 1808; Hogg and Motherwell added 9 in their edition of 1834-6; Cunningham added 42 to his eight-volume edition of 1834, as well as completing the Border tour, which had been published in part by Currie, and also adding the journal of the Highland tour. In 1843 Mrs M’Lehose’s grandson added 23 Burns letters, as well as publishing his grandmother’s letters to Burns. Robert Chambers added 23 and 14 letters in his editions of 1851 and 1856; Hately Waddell added 30 in 1867, and Scott Douglas published 98 new letters and completed 22 in his edition of 1877. In 1896 William Wallace, revising the Chambers edition, printed another 42 for the first time, and then two years later he published the Burns-Dunlop correspondence, with 33 new letters, and 10 completed which had previously only been partially published; he also added Mrs Dunlop’s letters to Burns. In this century 13 were first published in 1926, and Ferguson’s edition of 1931 added about 70. Finally, the edition on which I am working will add about 30 and complete quite a large number.

When we turn to the letters themselves, one person deserves particular attention, although Burns only sent him eight letters which survive. He is Dr John Moore (1729-1802) of Stirling, who was living in London when his friend Mrs Dunlop sent him a copy of the Kilmarnock edition. In 1779 Moore had published A View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, & Germany, a work which was in its sixth edition by 1786. An equally successful work A View of Society and Manners in Italy
appeared in 1781. Moore was full of advice to Burns—including his insistence that the poet abandon Scots for English and “make himself master of the heathen mythology”—advice which Burns fortunately did not follow. This is not to suggest that Burns did not admire Moore; when Moore published a novel, *Zeluco*, in 1789, Burns was ecstatic over it, calling it “a most sterling performance” (*Letters*, I: 440). In his copy of the novel, which was sent to him by the author, Burns declared that passages were worthy of Fielding.

By far the most important item in the Burns-Moore correspondence is the long autobiographical letter the poet wrote on 2 August 1787, for this famous letter supplies a good deal of what would be otherwise unknown information about Burns—especially about his earlier years. Unfortunately it has been used several times to prove that Burns’s reading was only a thin veneer, but a glance at it will show that he was, in fact, well-read. In it he wrote:

My knowledge of ancient story was gathered from Salmon’s and Guthrie’s geographical grammars; my knowledge of modern manners, and of literature and criticism, I get from the Spectator.—These, with Pope’s works, some plays of Shakespear, Tull and Dickson on Agriculture, The Pantheon, Locke’s Essay on the human understanding, Stackhouse’s history of the Bible, Justice’s British Gardiner’s directory, Boyle’s lectures, Allan Ramsay’s works, Tayler’s scripture doctrine of original sin, a select collection of English songs, and Hervey’s meditations had been the extent of my reading (*Letters*, I: 138).

What people so often forget is that Burns is here recounting his life to the age of about twenty! Elsewhere in the letter he told Moore that the first two books he ever read “in private” were “the life of Hannibal and the history of Sir William Wallace.—Hannibal gave my young ideas such a turn that I used to . . . wish myself tall enough to be a soldier; while the story of Wallace poured a Scotish prejudice in my veins which will boil along there till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest.” (*I*: 135-136). At another point he mentions reading *Pamela and Ferdinand, Count Fathom* which gave him “some idea of novels.” Then it was “the very important addition of Thomson’s and Shenstone’s works; I had seen mankind in a new phasis” (*I*: 141); or again it was his “great pleasure” from reading *Tristram Shandy* and *The Man of Feeling* (*ibid.*). A turning-

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point came when “meeting with Fergusson’s Scotch Poems, I strung anew my wild-sounding, rustic lyre with emulating vigour.—” (I: 143). An interesting printed announcement lists some of the books in Burns’s library at the time of his death. In it we find, to name just a few, Blair, Kames, Adam Smith, Homer, Virgil, Tasso, Chaucer, Ramsay, Ossian, Fergusson, Percy’s Reliques, Smollett, Fielding, Henry Mackenzie, Shakespeare, Molière in French, and a translation of Schiller’s Robbers. This last work was published only in 1792.

We gather other facts from this letter too—information which helps us better to understand the poet. Here, for instance, we are introduced to the conflict between the stern Calvinist father and the gifted misunderstood son which was to colour much of his life. Here, too, we see his introduction to the tales and songs of “devils, ghosts, fairies, brownies, witches, warlocks, spunkies, kelpies, elf-candles, dead-lights, wraiths, apparitions, cantraips, giants, enchanted [sic] towers, dragons and other trumpery” (I: 135) by an old maid of his mother’s, who must surely have sowed the seeds of “Tam o’ Shanter” in the youngster’s mind—perhaps the tale itself came from her.

So although Moore does not appear to have influenced Burns to any noticeable extent, we must be grateful that this literary friendship prompted Burns to write his long, rambling autobiographical letter, surely one of the most important Burns documents in existence.

The letters which Burns exchanged with Frances Anna Wallace Dunlop (1730–1815) form the largest collection extant. Originally preserved at Lochryan, both sides of the correspondence are now at the Morgan Library in New York. Mrs Dunlop first wrote to Burns shortly after the publication of the Kilmarnock edition, ordering a half-dozen copies. The poet held Mrs Dunlop in high esteem, and certainly enjoyed her company—for instance after spending four days as her guest in December 1792, he wrote that these were “four of the pleasantest I ever enjoyed” (Letters, II: 170). But Mrs Dunlop was an elderly widow with a grown family, and was inclined to look upon Burns as a wayward son who needed constant reminders to be on his best behaviour, reminders mixed with pious exhortation. This motherly feeling was perhaps increased owing to the fact that Mrs Dunlop was estranged from her eldest surviving son, who was married to Eglintoune Maxwell, sister to the Duchess of Gordon. So, fond though he may have been of her, Burns no doubt found her letters something of a bore. One is constantly struck by the unequal length of the letters: to Mrs Dunlop’s three-, four-, five-, and even eight-page missives, Burns frequently sent off a one-page reply,
scrawled in haste, and promising a long letter soon, which was never written. This is not to suggest that only the poet’s letters are interesting: Mrs Dunlop was a highly intelligent woman; her letters are full of politics, literature, gossip, and fascinating details about day-to-day life. Nor are Burns’s letters to her all short notes; one of the finest letters he wrote was to his friend and patron on New Year’s Day 1789.

A good deal of what Burns had to say to Mrs Dunlop concerned politics. He felt that he could share his innermost thoughts with her; for instance he wrote more openly to her of his true feelings about the French Revolution than he did to any other correspondent. It was, in fact, this unguardedness which led him to dismiss the guillotining of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette as “the delivering over a perjured Blockhead & an unprincipled Prostitute to the hands of the hangman” (Letters, II: 334). This was more than friendship could bear, and an estrangement clouded the last eighteen months of the poet’s life. It should be said that four of Mrs Dunlop’s sons served in the army and two of her daughters had married French Royalists.

More interesting to the student of literature are Burns’s comments on what he is reading and on his poems, copies of which he frequently enclosed. He sent her the first recorded copy of “Auld Lang Syne” on 7 December, 1788, with the enigmatic comment, “Light be the turf on the breast of the heaven-inspired Poet who composed this glorious Fragment!” (Letters, I: 345). It is generally accepted that Burns reworked the “fragment,” although how much of the song is his own is far from clear. He also sent her the first recorded copy of “Tam o’ Shanter,” although it seems likely that Captain Francis Grose was sent an earlier MS. Among other great poems the poet sent to his friend are “Scots wha hae,” the “Lament of Mary Queen of Scots,” and “Flow gently sweet Afton.”

Burns’s letters to George Thomson (1757-1851) form the second great collection. In 1792 Thomson began collecting material for A Select Collection of Original Scotish Airs, and enlisted Burns’s aid in the task, offering to pay him “any reasonable price” for his contributions. Thomson’s request was that Burns should remake old songs and add new ones to airs which had no words, or for which the words were, in Thomson’s phrase, “absolutely indecent” (Scott Douglas (1877) VI: 215-16). It should be recalled that Burns had, since 1787, been sending new and rewritten songs to James Johnson for his Scots Musical Museum; in fact Burns was, to all intents, editor of that work. But Johnson’s work was unpretentious, whereas Thomson spoke of an elegant collection—
historically we recognize that the *Scots Musical Museum* is by far the more significant work.

With his characteristic enthusiasm Burns promised Thomson as many songs as he should need, provided that the words were Scots. “If you are for *English* verses,” he wrote, “there is, on my part, an end of the matter” (*Letters*, II: 149-150). Nor would he hear of accepting money, saying that his songs were “either *above*, or *below* price” (*ibid.*). Thomson was not the one to pass up a good thing, and, apart from a few trifling gifts, Burns only once received any payment for the songs he sent.

The Burns-Thomson correspondence was first published in the fourth volume of Currie’s edition of Burns in 1800. Thomson got his letters back from the poet’s widow shortly after Burns’s death, and by the time Currie was putting together the edition of Burns’s works, he had to rely on Thomson for Burns’s letters to him, and for copies of his letters to Burns. Now Thomson was a vain man, and after Burns’s death he wished to appear in the best possible light, so he made a selection of his own letters and heavily scored through passages in Burns’s which would reflect poorly upon him. He later claimed that he had destroyed the copies of his own letters; it seems probable that he also destroyed some of Burns’s. Otherwise how would we explain the fact that we have in August 1793 seven letters, some of several pages, five in September, then one on 29 October, one some time in December, and the next some time in May 1794, and this at a time when Burns was sending many songs to Thomson—in one letter he discusses seventy-four songs with the editor. To be at this pitch of creativity and then to get one letter back in six months, followed by one or more letters a month, is just not believable. Internally, too, there is strong evidence that there were other letters—letters which, no doubt, Thomson did not wish to see published.

Time has not been kind to Thomson, and the ink which he used to score out passages in Burns’s letters has faded unequally with the ink used by Burns, so that we can now make out almost all of these cancelled passages. Many of them refer to Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum*, a publication of which Thomson was apparently jealous. One example will suffice. On 19 October 1794, Burns wrote to Thomson as follows:

My dear Friend,

By this morning’s post I have your list, & in general, I highly approve of it.—I shall, at more leisure, give you a critique on the whole: in the meantime, let me offer you a new improvement, or rather, restoring old simplicity, in one of your newly adopted songs.
O when she cam ben she bobbit, (a crochet stop here)
—Burns’s comment
O when she cam ben she bottit; (a crochet stop)
And when she cam ben, she kist Cockpen,
And syne denied that she did it.—(a crochet stop)
This is the old rhythm, & by far the most original & beautiful.—
Let the harmony of the bass, at the stops, be full; & thin & drop-
ping through the rest of the air; & you will give the tune a noble & striking effect.—Perhaps I am betraying my ignorance; but Mr.
Clarke is decidedly of my opinion.—He goes to your town....

(Letters, II: 315).

The interesting point in this passage, it seems to me, is that it shows Burns to have possessed a not inconsiderable knowledge of music, although he modestly deferred to Thomson in the field. The latter apparently felt he would look better with such passages altered, so that we find it appearing in Currie’s edition thus:

By this morning’s post I have your list, and, in general, I highly approve of it. I shall, at more leisure, give you a critique on the whole. Clarke goes to your town....

Other passages show Thomson tampering with the texts Burns had sent him. The most outrageous example of Thomson’s meddling concerns “Scots wha hae” which Burns first sent him about 30 August 1793. In its first form the final line of each stanza was short:

Scots, wha hae wi’ WALLACE bled,
Scots, wham BRUCE has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victorie.

The final lines of the five subsequent stanzas are:

2 Chains & Slaverie.—
3 —Let him turn & flie:—
4 Let him follow me.—
5 But they shall be free!
6 Let us DO—or DIE!!!

Thomson’s answer, which he dated 5 September in his copy to Currie, speaks of Burns as sending “verses that even Shakespeare might be proud to own.” He did not like the tune Burns had proposed (“Hey, tattie tattie”) and proposed instead “Lewie Gordon.” He also added:

Now, the variation that I have to suggest upon the last line of each verse (the only line too short for the air) is as follows:

Verse 1 Or to [glorious] victory.
2 Chains [chains] and slavery.
3 Let him [let him] turn and flee.
4 Let him [bravely] follow me.
5 But they shall [they shall] be free.
6 Let us [let us] do or die.

If you connect each line with its own verse, I do not think you will find that either the sentiment or the expression loses any of its energy.

The only line which I dislike in the whole of the song is ‘Welcome to your gory bed!’ Would not another word be preferable to ‘welcome’?\(^{13}\)

To this Burns answered, in a letter postmarked 3 September 1793:

I am happy, my dear Sir, that my Ode pleases you so much.—Your idea, ‘honor’s bed,’ is, though a beautiful, a hacknied idea; so, if you please, we will let the line stand as it is. I have altered the song as follows (Letters, II: 237).\(^{14}\)

Burns then copied out the poem once more with the following changes:

1 Or to glorious victorie
2 Edward, Chains & Slaverie!
3 Traitor! Coward! turn & flee!
4 Caledonian! on wi’ me!
5 But they shall be—shall be free!
6 Forward! Let us Do, or Die!!! (ibid.)

The date of this letter is puzzling, for the poet is here answering on 3 September a letter which Thomson did not write until 8 September. We can only assume that Thomson, either through a slip or for some unknown reason, misdated the copy of his letter which he supplied to Currie. The sequence of the exchange can, of course, be doubted. Thomson’s reply, dated 12 September, is as follows:

One word with regard to your heroic ode. I think, with great deference to the poet, that a prudent general would avoid saying anything to his soldiers which might tend to make death more frightful than it is. ‘Gory’ presents a disagreeable image to the mind; and to tell them ‘Welcome to your gory bed,’ seems rather a discouraging address, notwithstanding the alternative which

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\(^{13}\) Scott Douglas, VI: 283-284. The words added by Thomson are bracketed and italicized.

\(^{14}\) [This date is from Ferguson; in the 1985 Letters, Prof. Roy re-dated this letter September 8, based on re-examining the postmark. Eds.]
follows. I have shewn the song to three friends of excellent taste, and each of them objected to this line, which emboldens me to use the freedom of bringing it again under your notice, I would suggest:

Now prepare for honour’s bed
Or for glorious victory! (Scott Douglas, VI: 286).

Exasperated, Burns came back with a near ultimatum: use the song the way he wanted it, or omit it from the collection:

‘Who shall decide when Doctors disagree?’—My Ode pleases me so much that I cannot alter it.—Your proposed alterations would, in my opinion, make it tame.—I am exceedingly obliged to you for putting me on reconsidering it; as I think I have much improved it.—Instead of ‘Soger! hero!’ I will have it to be—‘Caledonian! On wi’ me!’—I have scrutinized it over & over; & to the world, some way or other, it shall go as it is.—At the same time, it will not in the least hurt me, tho’ you leave the song out altogether, & adhere to your first idea of adopting Logan’s verses (Letters, II, 248).

Several months later Burns put it bluntly to Thomson, “Pray are you going to insert ‘Bannockburn,’ ... in your Collection? If you are not, let me know; as in that case I will give ... [it] to Johnson’s Museum” (Letters, II: 302).

Reading the exchanges, it becomes evident that Thomson “edited” the copies of his letters which he sent to Currie; nowhere, for example, do we see him mention the “Soger! hero!” to which Burns objected. Burns apparently sent the song to Johnson, where it appeared in Vol. 6 of the Scots Musical Museum in 1803, set to a ballad tune by William Clarke.\(^{15}\) Thomson, who first published it in 1799, used “Lewie Gordon” as the air. When James Currie published his Works of Robert Burns in 1800 the public became aware of the disagreement between Burns and Thomson and, according to James C. Dick, the public “demanded that the original words should be printed with its own tune,”\(^{16}\) so in a subsequent volume of his Select Collection (1801) Thomson reverted to the original words to the tune “Hey tuttie, taitie.” Never one to admit gracefully that he had been wrong, Thomson prefixed the words with this note: “The Poet originally intended this noble strain for the Air ... but, on a suggestion from the Editor ... who then thought ‘Lewie Gordon’ a fitter tune for the

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words, they were united.... The Editor, however, having since examined the Air ‘Hey tuttie, taitie’ with more particular attention, frankly owns that he has changed his opinion” (Scott Douglas, VI: 254). And so at last this great song of Burns’s was joined with the tune which the poet had so unerringly chosen for it.

So that I do not appear unduly prejudiced against Thomson, it should be pointed out that both Haydn and Beethoven, who were enlisted to arrange music for this collection, had difficulties with the editor, who felt that he could improve on their settings. At one point Thomson requested changes in Beethoven’s melodies, whereupon the composer replied on 19 February 1813 (the original letter is in French):

I am put out that I have not been able to comply with your wish. I am not used to retouching my compositions; I have never done this, as I am convinced of the truth that any partial change alters the character of the composition.\footnote{[Ludwig von Beethoven, \textit{Letters}, ed. Emily Anderson, 3 vols. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1961), I: 405. Eds.]} Incidentally, it is perhaps as well that Burns agreed to produce songs for Thomson free of charge, because Beethoven also had financial difficulties with his Scottish editor. For example, on 29 February 1812, he complained to Thomson that, whereas he was being paid only three ducats per song, Haydn had personally assured him that he was receiving four. He added, “As for Monsieur Kozeluch who delivers you each song with accompaniment for two ducats, I compliment you and the English and Scottish editors when they have seen them.\textit{(ibid}, I: 361). Thomson did, in fact, send £5 to Burns on 1 July 1793, with the comment:

As I shall be benefited by the publication, you must suffer me to enclose a small mark of my gratitude, and to repeat it afterwards when I find it convenient. Do not return it for, by Heavens! if you do, our correspondence is at an end (Scott Douglas, VI: 254).

Scott Douglas aptly suggests in a footnote to the letter that Thomson probably added the last sentence \textit{ex post facto}. The poet’s reply was characteristic of his pride and at the same time shows us how deeply concerned he was that this should really be a labour of love—“either above, or below price,” as he had said:

I assure you, my dear Sir, that you truly hurt me with your pecuniary parcel.—It degrades me in my own eyes.—However, to return it would savour of bombast affectation; But, as to any more traffic of that Dr & Cr kind, I swear, by the HONOUR which crowns the upright Statue of ROBT BURNS’S INTEGRITY!
On the least motion of it, I will indignantly spurn the by-past transaction, & from that moment commence entire Stranger to you!—BURNS’S character for Generosity of Sentiment, & Independance [sic] of Mind, will, I trust, long outlive any of his wants which the cold, unfeeling, dirty Ore can supply: at least, I shall take care that such a Character he shall deserve— (Letters, II: 220).

Thomson sent no more money. We can imagine the anguish it cost Burns to write Thomson on 12 July 1796, a few days before his death, “After all my boasted independance [sic], curst necessity compels me to implore you for five pounds.—” (Letters, II: 389). Burns had written that he was threatened with jail over a debt, but the MS. is docketed in Thomson’s hand, for Currie’s use, “This idea is exaggerated—he could not have been in any such danger at Dumfries nor could he be in such necessity to implore aid from Edinr.” (Morgan Library; Letters, II: 220, n. 1).18

The Burns-Thomson exchange did one thing for the poet—it made him re-examine some of his work more critically and thus helped him to become even more master of his art. Johnson allowed Burns a completely free rein in the Scots Musical Museum; Thomson sometimes forced Burns to better a song. Unfortunately most of Thomson’s collection appeared after the poet’s death, and, in fitting words to tunes, Thomson paid little attention to Burns’s instructions. It should be noted here that Burns always wrote a song with a particular tune in mind, which he even noted on the MS. In an often-quoted passage, Burns told Thomson how he wrote songs:

untill I am compleat master of a tune, in my own singing, (such as it is) I never can compose for it.—My way is: I consider the poetic Sentiment, correspondent to my idea of the musical expression; then chuse my theme; begin one Stanza; when that is composed, which is generally the most difficult part of the business, I walk out, sit down now & then, look out for objects in Nature around me that are in unison or harmony with the cogitations of my fancy & workings of my bosom; humming every now & then the air with the verses I have framed: when I feel my Muse beginning to jade, I retire to the solitary fireside of my study, & there commit my effusions to paper; swinging, at intervals, on the hind-legs of my elbow-chair, by way of calling

18 [Since this essay was published, Clark McGinn has established that Burns was not exaggerating: see “Burns and the Bank Manager: Robert Burns in the Shadow of the Debtor’s Prison,” Burns Chronicle for 2017, 126 (Nov. 2016): 4-30. Eds.]
forth my own critical strictures, as my pen goes on (Letters, II: 242).

The letter from which this excerpt was taken contains the poet’s comments on seventy-four songs; it affords us one of several opportunities to assess Burns’s meticulousness in collecting and rewriting the traditional songs of Scotland, and at the same time to appreciate the breadth of the poet’s knowledge about his country’s songs and music. Considered as a whole, the letters Burns wrote to Thomson form the most important single collection in existence; their value is only slightly marred by the pretty obvious tempering of Thomson in the versions he claimed to have sent to the poet.

James Johnson (d. 1811), to whom Burns wrote twenty-one letters which survive, was a much more obscure figure than Thomson. He was by trade an engraver and music-seller, and began publication of his Scots Musical Museum in 1787. The work on Vol. I was probably well advanced before Burns met him, for the poet contributed only three songs to it; subsequently Burns was virtually the editor, contributing some 200 songs to the remaining five volumes. Neither Johnson nor Thomson paid Burns for his contributions, and as we have seen Burns did not want payment. Although, as was mentioned, Thomson’s Select Collection was a much more prestigious publication, within himself Burns knew that the Museum was a far more important work. A few weeks before his death he wrote to Johnson:

Your work is a great one; & though, now that it is near finished, I see if we were to begin again, two or three things that might be mended, yet I will venture to prophesy, that to future ages your Publication will be the text-book & standard of Scotish Song & Music—(Letters, II: 381-382).

Burns never wrote anything like that to Thomson. Nearly two hundred years later this is still the greatest single collection of Scottish songs with music.

This complete frankness on the part of Burns is what makes these letters to Johnson more human in a way than are those to his other musical editor. We always sense a certain wariness on the poet’s part when he is addressing himself to Thomson. With Johnson he could be quite uninhibited; there was not the barrier of position and money to stand between them.

When he was about to leave Edinburgh in May 1787, Burns wrote Johnson, regretting that they had not come to know each other better, for,
he added, “I have met wt few people whose company & conversation
gave me so much pleasure, because I have met wt few whose sentiments
are so congenial to my own.—” (*Letters*, I: 114). They obviously met
again, for in his last letter, quoted above, Burns wrote: “Many a merry
meeting this Publication has given us.”

Johnson apparently kept a look-out for song books which he passed
on to Burns. On 28 [July?] 1788, the poet says he hopes to get “some fine
tunes from among the Collection of Highland airs which I got from you” (*Letters*, I: 299). In another letter he inquired if Johnson had any other
tunes to send him (*Letters*, I: 339). About October 1792, he asked
Johnson to have a copy of the *Museum* (by this time four of the six
volumes had been published) interleaved and bound up as he had had
done for Robert Riddell, so that he could “insert every anecdote I can
learn, together with my own criticisms and remarks on the song,” adding,
“A copy of this kind I shall leave with you, the Editor, to publish at some
after period, by way of making the *Museum* a book famous to the end of

The best thing that can be said of this friendship is that Johnson made
no attempt ever to have his way over Burns in matters of songs, or the
music to which they were to be set. At one point the poet exclaimed, “I
have sent you a list that I approve of, but I beg & insist that you will
never allow my opinion to overrule yours” (*Letters*, I: 398-399). Johnson
must have recognized, however, that Burns’s genius was the surest guide,
and published the songs which Burns had written or collected just as the
poet sent them to him. In this he differed, of course, from Thomson; it is
his use of Burns’s text as it was sent which makes the *Museum* a more
reliable source than the *Select Collection*.

The third largest group of letters from Burns are those he wrote,
mostly under the pen name of Sylvander, to Nancy M’Lehose, who used
the name Clarinda. Burns met her in Edinburgh in December 1787, where
she was living under the patronage of her cousin, Lord Craig, after
unsuccessfully trying to make a go of life with her wastrel husband. It
was love at first sight on both sides, with Clarinda trying to dampen the
poet’s ardour. For a while they exchanged daily letters—at the height of
the infatuation four letters passed between them in twenty-four hours.
Apart from a bit of Edinburgh gossip, we gain little from those letters; in
fact they are somewhat of an embarrassment to serious Burns scholars.
The late Professor Ferguson has called the Edinburgh relationship a “hot-
house atmosphere,” and he was right. Almost immediately after leaving Edinburgh we find the poet’s letters dropping off so completely that it was a year before he wrote her again. In 1791 there was a brief flurry of letters from Burns, but by this time he was safely married and settled into his Excise position in Dumfries. One letter stands out above all the rest: written on 27 December 1791 (Letters, II: 125), it consists of a short paragraph and three songs: “Behold the hour, the boat arrive” (Poems, II: 713-714), an undistinguished song; “Thou gloomy December,” which opens with the lines:

Ance mair I hail thee, thou gloomy December!
Ance mair I hail thee wi’ sorrow and care!
Sad was the parting thou makes me remember:
Parting wi’ Nancy, O, ne’er to meet mair! (Poems, II: 590)

The third song was also written for Clarinda, and is one of the greatest love songs in the language—“Ae fond kiss,” with its superb lines:

Had we never lov’d sae kindly,
Had we never lov’d sae blindly!
Never met—or never parted,
We had ne’er been broken-hearted (Poems, II: 592).

But these lines were written after Burns realized that nothing could ever come of his feelings for Clarinda; with great art he avoided over-stepping the bounds of nostalgia into maudlin sentimentality. How time and distance had enabled Burns to shape his feelings can be judged by reading Burns’s letter of 12 January 1788:

You talk of weeping, Clarinda: some involuntary drops wet your lines as I read them. Offend me, my dearest angel! You cannot offend me—you never offended me. If you had ever given me the least shadow of offence, so pardon me my God as I forgive Clarinda. I have read yours again; it has blotted my paper.... Forgive, my dearest Clarinda, my unguarded expressions. For Heaven’s sake, forgive me, or I shall never be able to bear my own mind (Letters, I: 205).

The impression one gathers in reading this correspondence is that the poet struck a pose; as Burns himself wrote to Agnes M’Lehose, “I like the idea of Arcadian names in a commerce of this kind” (Letters, I: 189). And this is what the entire relationship was: an imaginary pastoral, insubstantial and unreal, the stuff of dreams.

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Another woman to whom Burns wrote quite frequently (twenty-three letters) was Maria Riddell (1772-1808), who was the sister-in-law of Robert Riddell, for whom Burns prepared the Glenriddell MSS. Maria was a woman of taste and charm and, until he was banished by both Riddell families for some drunken misbehaviour of which we have no details, she exerted a considerable influence on him. Unfortunately, Maria’s letters to Burns do not appear to have survived—she requested their return after the poet’s death.

The earliest correspondence we have between Maria and Burns is probably of February 1792, at which time they were apparently already on quite friendly terms. An interesting early note on vaccination is found in Burns’s question, “has little Mademoiselle been innoculated with the Small-pox yet? If not let it be done as soon as it is proper for the habit of body, teeth, &c.” (Letters, I: 135). In playful mood Burns wrote to tell her that he had managed to obtain for her (he was an Excise officer, remember) a pair of French gloves which she coveted but was unable to get: “You must know that French gloves are contraband goods, and expressly forbidden by the laws of this wisely-governed realm of ours” (Letters, II: 199).

At times Burns appears almost jealous of Maria; there certainly was a flirtation between them if nothing more serious. A falling out over Burns’s outrageous behaviour occurred late in 1793 or early in 1794, and led Burns at one point to address her in the third person and even to write one of the most unworthy pieces he ever composed, “Pinned to Mrs R—’s carriage—”:

If you rattle along like your Mistress’s tongue,
Your speed will outrival the dart:
But, a fly for your load, you’ll break down on the road,
If your stuff be as rotten’s her heart (Poems, II: 731).

One can only hope that Maria never saw such an unworthy product of the poet’s pen; in any case, by about March 1795 the friendship was resuming its earlier cordiality; later that spring the poet sent a miniature of himself for Mrs Riddell to inspect, and some months later she sent him some poetry of hers to peruse. Immediately after the poet’s death Maria published a memoir of her friend which T. F. Henderson has called “the best thing written of him by [a] contemporary critic.”

These then are the major collections of letters by Burns which survive. His letters to his superiors and patrons are neither more nor less

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20 Henley and Henderson, II: 421.
fawning than those of any other petty employee of the century. These letters could be roughly classified as official correspondence and dismissed.

A less extensive series of letters, which are, however, most interesting, are those from Burns to Peter Hill (1754-1837), a man whom Burns had met as a clerk in Creech’s bookshop, and who later went into business for himself as a bookseller. Burns’s letters to him give us a good idea of the works the poet wanted to read. In a letter of March 1790, for instance, he ordered for the local library which Robert Riddell supported the following items:

- The Mirror—The Lounger—Man of feeling—Man of the world (these for my own sake I wish to have by the first Carrier) Knox’s history of the Reformation—Rae’s history of the Rebellion 1715—Any good history of the Rebellion 1745—A display of the Secession Act & Testimony by Mr. Gibb—Hervey’s Meditations—Beveridge’s thoughts—& another copy of Watson’s body of Divinity (Letters, II: 19-20).

At the same time he asked Hill to send him for his own use second-handed, or any way cheap copies of Otway’s dramatic works, Ben Johnson’s [sic], Dryden’s, Congreve’s, Wycherly’s [sic], Vanbrugh’s, Cibber’s, or any Dramatic works of the more Moderns, Macklin, Garrick, Foote, Colman, or Sherridan’s.—A good Copy too of Moliere in French I much want.— Any other good Dramatic Authors in their native language I want them; I mean Comic Authors chiefly, tho’ I should wish Racine, Corneille, & Voltaire too (Letters, II: 20).

Even more interesting are the letters to his friends, some a little above him, some a little below him on the social scale. To those people, as to no one else, Burns could write as he really thought; they could neither give him anything nor take anything from him, so there was no need to write painfully correct letters. Nevertheless, these letters are almost always in English rather than Scots. To one or two intimate friends he occasionally wrote in the vernacular; among these was William Nicol. The best of these letters came to the High School master from Carlisle during his Border tour:

Kind, honest-hearted Willie,

I’m sitten down here, after seven and forty miles ridin, e’en as forjesket and forniaw’d as a for foughten cock, to gie you some notion o’ my landlowper-like stravaguin sin the sorrowfu’ hour that I sheuk hands and parted wi’ auld Reekie.

I hae dander’d owre a’ the kintra frae Dumbar [sic] to Selcraig, and hae forgather’d wi’ monie a guid fallow, and monie
a weel-far’d hizzie.—I met wi’ twa dink quines in particlar, ane o’ them a sonsie, fine fodgel lass, baith braw and bonie; the tither was a clean-shankit, straught, tight, weel-far’d winch, as blythe’s a lintwhite on a flowerie thorn, and as sweet and modest’s a new blawn plumrose in a hazle shaw.

I was gaun to write you a lang pystle, but, Gude forgie me, I gat myself sae notouriously bitchify’d the day after kail-time that I can hardly stoiter but and ben.

I’ll be in Dumfries the morn gif the beast be to the fore and the branks bide hale.

Gude be wi’ you, Willie! Amen (Letters, I: 120).

It may be that the Bard was a wee bit fou’, but in his cups or not he had an unsurpassed command of the vernacular.

Among other correspondents to whom there are a dozen or so surviving letters is Alexander Cunningham (d. 1812), a Writer to the Signet and friend of his Edinburgh days, who played a leading role in promoting a subscription for Burns’s family. Of the “great folk” we can single out James Cunningham, fourteenth Earl of Glencairn (1749-91), an early patron of Burns, whose death removed a man who had managed to help without offending. For him Burns wrote his fine “Lament for James Earl of Glencairn.” There was also Robert Graham, twelfth Laird of Fintry (1749-1815), who, as Commissioner of the Scottish Board of Excise, secured the poet’s appointment to the Excise. It was to him that Burns turned when he was informed that his conduct with respect to his political views was being investigated. In a letter dated 31 December 1792, Burns implored Graham, on behalf of his family, more than for his own sake, to spare him from dismissal (Letters, II: 168 169). It is an embarrassing letter to read even at this distance in time; Burns was obviously distraught at the prospect that he could be almost summarily dismissed, and humbled himself to avert disaster. In a letter written five days later he denied point by point the allegations that he was “disaffected,” and we have no doubt he was telling the truth (Letters, II: 172-175). Certainly Burns was sympathetic to the ideas of parliamentary reform and Republicanism (little distinction was made between the two at this time), and he was dissatisfied with the government, not as conceived but as it at that time functioned. Put succinctly, Burns was not disloyal; he was imprudent.

What sort of man, then, emerges from the letters? Those to his patrons and men whom he considered well above himself are certainly the least human, couched, as they are, in the formal language of proper letter-writing so admired and copied in that period. Beneath the formal style,
however, one can detect a man who is not without a sense of his own dignity, a pride which would not let him stoop to servility. He lived at a time when the humble-born could expect nothing except through patronage, and so he asked help of those he respected. His letter to the Earl of Glencairn of February 1788 requesting the earl to secure him an Excise post is a good example of Burns’s style. He finishes the letter: “I am ill-qualified to dog the heels of Greatness with the impertinence of Solicitation, and tremble nearly as much at the idea of the cold promise as the cold denial” (Letters, I: 224). The poet had sized up his man, and the post was secured without Burns having to humble himself.

To his friends, and occasionally, as to Thomson once or twice, we have the real Burns emerging. He was one of the great conversationalists of his age, and to intimates his letters were an extension of this talent. He was generous, sometimes to a fault, but he was also canny, as every tenant farmer had to be to survive. He had an inexhaustible love and tenderness for his children—legitimate and “love-begotten” alike. He was only mildly radical in his political views, although he is frequently quoted out of context to try to place him in a posture he would never have adopted. Above all he was witty and earthy; he made no secret to his friends of his interest in bawdy poetry. To reject this is to deny part of what made him a great humorous poet and a great love poet.

Finally there is something intangible which attracts us to Robert Burns. “Who touches this book, touches a man,” Walt Whitman said of his Leaves of Grass, and this is the feeling we take away with us after reading Burns’s letters. Across the centuries a living presence reaches out and touches our hearts with wonder that this simple man could find so much beauty in his harsh world.