Robert Burns and The Merry Muses of Caledonia

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Robert Burns has a claim to fame in more than one area: author of what is considered to be the greatest short satire in the English language, “Holy Willie’s Prayer”; of what has been called the “Marseillaise” of Scotland, “Scots wha hae”; of lines which have become commonplace (“The best laid schemes o’ Mice an’ Men, gang aft agley” and “O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us”); of some of the greatest songs in the language, including what is the best-known nonpolitical secular song in the world, “Auld lang syne.” Burns is known as the National Bard of Scotland; his birthday is celebrated in hundreds of annual gatherings around the globe. Robert Burns also wrote bawdry, although there were persistent attempts to conceal this fact.

Burns led an uneventful life. The eldest of seven children, he became responsible for the family in 1784 at age twenty-five upon the death of his father, a tenant farmer. Robert and his brother Gilbert farmed Mossgiel in the parish of Mauchline in Ayrshire. In 1786 Burns decided that he would emigrate from Scotland to Jamaica, where employment was easy to find, in large measure because those who went out to oversee plantations rarely lived very long. Before going, though, he determined to publish some of the poems he had been writing for several years but none of which had ever been in print. Locally he already had a reputation as a rhymer, and the subscription bills were soon filled. In July his Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect appeared from the press of John Wilson of Kilmarnock in an edition of 612 copies. The book sold so well that in November Burns was unable to send six copies to Mrs. Frances Dunlop, who became his friend and confidante. Encouraged by the enthusiastic reception of his volume, he determined to extend his horizon and try a second enlarged edition in Edinburgh. He arrived there in December of
1786 and was immediately lionized by the literati and socially prominent until he left to take up farming at Ellisland in Dumfriesshire in June 1788. Not quite certain that he would make a good enough living as a farmer, Burns had taken instruction as an excise officer, and in September 1789 he began work at that calling also, riding up to two hundred miles a week. As he had feared, his farm turned out to be, as he called it, “a bad bargain,” so he moved to Dumfries in July 1790 to work as an excise officer in the port. He was to live there with his wife, Jean Armour, and their growing family for the remaining six years of his life. Never of robust health, Burns had been called upon to do the work of a man on his father’s farm while still only a boy and had gone on to do heavy work with his brother Gilbert on Mossigel and then on Ellisland. After his death, detractors had it that he died of drink, but the fact is that the cause of death was probably bacterial endocarditis added to rheumatic heart disease; those who claimed otherwise had their own moralistic reasons for tampering with the truth.

Robert Burns’s output divides naturally into two groups. Most of his early work consists of poems; most of his later creations are songs. The earlier period extends from 1774 (when he was fifteen) until the publication of the second edition of his poems in Edinburgh in 1787, and from then on he was mostly occupied with songs. But these tasks were by no means mutually exclusive: his first production was the song “Handsome Nell,” and he was well into his song-writing period when he produced the immortal tale of diablerie, “Tam o’ Shanter,” in 1790.

Both the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions of Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect consist principally of poems. The 1786 volume contains only three songs, the 1787 volume six additional songs as well as “John Barleycorn,” which the poet noted was “partly composed on the plan of an old song.” Burns certainly wrote several songs during this period, but it was as a poet, not a songwriter, that he wanted to make his name at the time. Once the first volume had appeared, he was hungry for wider recognition than his native Ayrshire afforded; by the time plans were going forward for the Edinburgh edition, he was looking beyond the borders of Scotland. We can deduce this by comparing the glossaries in the 1786 and the 1787 volumes. Poems and songs which appeared in the earlier volume were reprinted in the second edition, but the number of glossed words was smaller in the 1786 volume than in that of 1787. There are, of course, additional entries for the poems and songs which are new to the edition of 1787. Furthermore, Burns knew that his Edinburgh publisher William Creech had close ties with London and would be
sending copies to his agents A. Strahan and T. Cadell. In fact, by midsummer, the Edinburgh edition had sold so well that, despite a printing of probably 3,250 copies, plans were going forward for Strahan and Cadell to issue their own edition, which appeared in November 1787. We are not certain if Burns knew that there were piracies of his poems published that year in Belfast and Dublin (and in Philadelphia and New York in 1788), but from his earliest edition he was conscious of being Scotia’s Bard. Not only did this not prevent him from seeking a wider audience, it quite possibly gave him increased impetus to have readers outwith the Kingdom of Scotland.

During his stay in Edinburgh the poet met a music engraver, James Johnson, who was working on a national collection of the songs of Scotland, *The Scots Musical Museum*, to which Burns was encouraged to contribute. By May 1787, he sent Johnson the first of at least 177 songs which he was to furnish, almost a third of the six hundred which appeared in the *Museum* between 1787 and 1803. Because not all of the correspondence from Burns to Johnson survives, there may be other works by Burns in the *Museum* which have escaped the notice of scholars. It must also be recalled that in Burns’s day there was an enormous body of folk song in the oral tradition and Burns, who was steeped in this material, carefully mined it for suitable matter. Publication of traditional poems and songs was at that time in its infancy (Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* had appeared only in 1765), and Burns, recognizing the importance of getting this disappearing lode into print, pioneered the assembling of it. The craftsman in Burns refurbished a good deal of what he came across in the oral tradition, rounding out a line, supplying a better line, sometimes using only a fragment of the original to be incorporated in a complete song. Bishop Percy had done this before, and Sir Walter Scott was to follow suit in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* at the outset of the nineteenth century. In this sense Burns was a creator, not a conservationist—his concern was to leave the world a work of art. There is still uncertainty about his contribution to some songs; there is no uncertainty about the quality of the product.

James Johnson was a humble man and readily deferred to Burns in editorial matters; in fact after the first volume, which was nearing completion when he became a contributor, Burns was virtually the editor. Two months before his death Burns wrote to Johnson, clearly treating him as an equal in the production of *The Scots Musical Museum*: “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 Scottish Song & Music” (Letters, II: 381-382). Underlining Burns’s influence in the affair, the fifth volume of the Museum appeared shortly after his death, but without the poet’s enthusiasm the sixth and final volume did not appear until 1803. The work was a popular one; Burns mentions in a letter to Johnson that a Dumfries singing master has learned several songs from it “which he sings on all occasions” (Letters II: 370).

But Johnson’s Scots Musical Museum was not the only musical enterprise with which Burns became associated. In September 1792 Burns received a letter from George Thomson inviting him to collaborate on a plan for “collating and collecting the most favourite of our national melodies for publication” and asking the poet to write “twenty or twenty-five songs” for which he offered to pay “any reasonable price you shall please to demand” (Currie, IV: 1-3). Thomson mentioned that the accompaniments were to be supplied by Pleyel, but before Thomson was finished music by Haydn and Beethoven had been added to what was to become A Select Collection of Original Scotish [sic] Airs. Whereas Johnson was a craftsman, Thomson was chief clerk to the Board of Trustees in Edinburgh and distinctly conscious of his social superiority to the poet. Burns felt this too and sometimes deferred half mockingly to him.

Nevertheless Burns was pleased and flattered by Thomson’s request and immediately accepted, but he was adamant in his refusal of any remuneration: “my Songs,” he wrote, are “either above, or below price” (Letters, II: 149). And so began for Burns his second collaboration in song collecting, refurbishing, and writing. He continued to work with Johnson, frequently supplying the two editors with the same material.

During both his poetic and song-writing periods, Burns was composing underground material. As in every other literature, the Scots had a long tradition of bawdy poetry, much of it passed down in the oral tradition as song. The subject matter of these effusions was as diverse as life itself: the motif could be overtly or covertly sexual; it could be political or legal; it could deal with war or the martial arts. Because the Scottish Reformation had been quite vicious, it was not uncommon for Protestants to write obscene words to be sung to Roman Catholic airs, with the obvious intention of insulting their religious counterparts. Tavern life, with its predominantly male conviviality, played an
important role in keeping such poems, and especially such songs, alive. Various clubs met in these taverns, including the one in Edinburgh owned by Daniel Douglas, where the Crochallan Fencibles gathered. This club, of which Burns was a member, was founded by William Smellie, who printed the Edinburgh edition of Burns’s poems and was the editor and principal author of the first edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Burns wrote a poem about Smellie, and referred to him in a letter as an “old Veteran in Genius, Wit and B[aw]dry” (Letters, II:10). Apparently only one letter from the poet to Smellie survives, but according to Smellie’s biographer, Robert Kerr, several were destroyed as being “totally unfit for publication.” It is quite possible that Smellie had a hand in the production of the first edition of The Merry Muses.¹

There were two social Edinburhgs when Burns was there in the late eighteenth century, the one Rabelaisian as noted above, the other that of the salons, where the literati shared tea with genteel ladies, although, of course, many men including Burns frequented both of these worlds. There was a third society which played an important role in the Scotland of Burns’s day, the Freemasons. Burns had joined St. David’s Lodge in Tarbolton in 1781 and remained a Freemason until his death. When he was in Edinburgh, he was made a member of Canongate Kilwinning Lodge, and the contacts he made there ensured his entry to the society of the literati.

Early in his rhyming career Robert Burns became aware of and began writing erotic poetry. The earliest erotic poem Burns is known to have written dates from 1784. It opens:

My Girl she’s airy, she’s buxom and gay,
Her breath is as sweet as the blossoms in May (Poems, I: 60).

It does not appear in The Merry Muses and was not in print until 1938. This interest led him in two directions: he wrote bawdy versions of well-known poems and songs, but he also wrote “proper” words for older erotica. Perhaps the best-known example of this latter pursuit is “John Anderson, my Jo,” which Burns first published in volume 3 of The Scots Musical Museum (1790). This song was extant in Scotland in its unpurified version well before the poet’s time and was still alive in the oral tradition of Scotland after World War II. It appears in one of its older forms in The Merry Muses.

¹ [Since this essay was written, Stephen Brown has shown that the first edition of The Merry Muses was most probably printed by William Smellie’s son Alexander: see Studies in Scottish Literature, 38 (2012): 92-107. Eds.]
In addition to his membership in the boisterous Crochallan Fencibles, Burns made no secret of his interest in erotica. There were the bawdy poems which he had circulated in manuscript, of course, but he was also open with his correspondents about this interest. In a letter of December 20, 1789, to Provost Robert Maxwell, Burns dismissed subjects which might be appropriate for a serious letter, deciding upon his topic by saying, “I intend to write BAUDY!” He then wrote out the text of “Auld Sir Symon,” after which he added, “You see, Sir, I have fulfilled my promise: I wish you would think of fulfilling yours, and come & see the rest of my Collection” (Letters, I: 462). Thus we see that Burns was collecting what was to become The Merry Muses well over six years before his death. He was not furtive about the enjoyment he found in bawdy verse either. He sent his friend Robert Cleghorn a ballad of his entitled “Act Sederunt of the Session” with the comment, “Well! the Law is good for something, since we can make a B---dy-song of it. . . . There is, there must be, some truth in original sin.—My violent propensity to B- --dy convinces me of it” (Letters, II: 255).

Burns was not prudish when it came to religion and bawdry either. In a letter to George Thomson he told his editor “at the Reformation, the Reformers burlesqued much of the old Church Music with setting them to bawdy verses . . . the common name for this song is, Cumnock Psalm.” The poet then transcribed the song in his letter and ended, “So much for the Psalmody of Cumnock” (Letters, II: 308). To which Thomson added the note, “Delicate psalmody indeed.” Never one to let a good tune go to waste and knowing that Thomson could not publish the words he had sent him, Burns wrote new ones to the old tune and sent them to Johnson, who published them under the title “A Lassie all Alone” in the Scots Musical Museum in 1796.

The later eighteenth century was a fertile time for political satire, and Burns gleefully joined in by producing both standard and bawdy samples of the genre. One of the best known of the latter, sent to Thomson in July 1794, was built around the political situation in Europe at the time; the ever-cautious Thomson endorsed the song—”What a pity this is not publishable”—and so the song first appeared in print in The Merry Muses, with the title “Poor Bodies do Naething but M-w” [fornicate], frequently known by part of its first line, “When Princes and Prelates” (Poems, II: 668). Burns was by no means averse to sending copies of his bawdy productions to friends, so he made more than one copy, of which
one contains an additional stanza that would certainly have landed the poet in trouble had it come to official notice that an officer of the excise would produce such a thing. It goes:

But truce with commotions and new-fangled notions,
A bumper I trust you’ll allow
Here’s George our gude king and Charlotte his queen
And Lang may they tak a gude mowe!
This good-natured dig at the British royal family, tying them to Europe, would seem more natural in Scotland, where the disaster of Prince Charles in 1746 and the harsh treatment of Scots, particularly Highlanders, were by no means forgotten in Burns’s time, and it was not forgotten either that this was done under a monarch whose roots were Hanoverian.

An important document in the history of The Merry Muses is a letter the poet wrote to John M’Murdo, accompanying the manuscript of that collection. The letter is tentatively dated from Dumfries in February 1792; it reads:

John M’Murdo Esq: Drumlanrig
with a parcel

Sir,

’tis said that we take the greatest liberties with our greatest friends, & I pay myself a very high compliment by the manner in which I am going to apply the remark.—I have owed you money longer than ever I owed it to any man.—Here is Kerr’s account, & here is the six guineas; & now, I don’t owe a shilling to man or WOMAN either.—But for these damned, dirty, dogshear’d, little pages, I had done myself the honor to have waited on you long ago.—Independent [sic] of the obligations your hospitable kindness has laid me under, the consciousness of your superiority in the ranks of MAN & GENTLEMAN, of itself, was fully as much as I could ever make head to; but to owe you money, too, was more than I could face.

I think I once mentioned something to you of a Collection of Scots Songs I have for some years been making: I send you a perusal of what I have gathered.—I could not conveniently spare them above five or six days, & five or six glances of them will probably more than suffice you.—When you are tired of them, please leave them with Mr Clint of the King’s Arms.—There is not another copy of the Collection in the world, & I should be sorry that any unfortunate negligence should deprive me of what has cost me a good deal of pains.

I have the honor to be,

Sir,  
Your deeply indebted & ever grateful humble serv’t

ROB’ BURNS

Dumfries
Monday six o’clock

The publication of this letter is interesting. It passed through the hands of James Currie, the editor of the first collected edition of Burns’s works,
which appeared in four volumes in 1800. Currie was preparing the edition for the benefit of the poet’s widow and children, who eventually received a comfortable sum from it. Not wishing to offend any of the middle-class subscribers, the editor was very careful about what was included and what was silently dropped. Thus the edition includes none of the bawdy verse Burns had written, and letters were excised where this was deemed prudent. This Currie would have done, no doubt, with the passage about the poet’s “Collection of Scots Songs,” were it not, I believe, that he had heard of the publication of The Merry Muses in 1799 and so decided to retain the offending second paragraph in the letter. But he added the sentence “A very few of them are my own” after the words “five or six glances of them will probably suffice you,” thus deliberately leading several generations of readers into the mistaken belief that Burns’s disavowal was true.2

As late as 1911 the Burns Federation, under the editorship of Duncan M’Naught, brought out an edition of The Merry Muses which carried the subtitle A Vindication of Robert Burns.3 It is quite possible that M’Naught was unaware of the M’Murdo letter, but the whole tone of his “Introductory and Corrective,” which he signed “Vindex,” is such as to make the reader believe that Burns had very little to do with writing or collecting bawdry. My edition of The Letters of Robert Burns (1985) was the first to give the text of the letter in its correct form;4 the original manuscript is now in the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina. Without access to the correct text of the letter and the knowledge that The Merry Muses was published before 1800, it would not have been possible to draw my conclusion about Currie’s reason for tampering with the letter. It is indeed fortuitous that the book and the letter now form part of the same collection.

A few words about the contents of The Merry Muses. The first thing that will be noted is that Robert Burns’s name does not appear on the title

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4 [Letters II: 137-138, based on a photocopy of the manuscript, and citing also J. DeLancey Ferguson, “Burns and The Merry Muses,” Modern Language Notes, 66, pt.7 (November 1951), 471-473. Eds.]
page or elsewhere within the book. The first edition to use the poet’s name is dated 1843, and even then the name is only on the running title, not on the title page. The first time Burns’s name is printed on the title page is in the edition circa 1872, which is spuriously dated 1827. It reads: *The Merry Muses. A Choice Collection of Favourite Songs Gathered from Many Sources, by Robert Burns.* It is interesting to note that the words “of Caledonia” have been dropped at the same time that the poet’s name has been associated with the book. There were several reprints of this text at various dates, all claiming to have been issued in 1827.

There is no known compiler of the text of the original edition of *The Merry Muses*, and of course not all the songs are by Burns, nor are all of the bawdy productions by him included, as was noted above. Twelve of the songs which appear in *The Merry Muses* exist in the poet’s hand, and there are another nine among the assembled poems which were collected but not written by him. Beyond this it becomes a good deal more difficult to say with assurance which of a number of poems and songs attributed to the poet are his; at the far end of the spectrum there are works which have been published as his which are known not to be genuine, and others which from internal evidence suggest very strongly another author.

The last stanza of a poem entitled “The Bower of Bliss” which appeared in the 1799 volume should convince anyone familiar with Burns’s writing that he would be incapable of penning anything this bad:

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THE MERRY MUSES OF CALEDONIA

THE MERRY MUSES OF CALEDONIA;

A COLLECTION OF
FAVOURITE SCOTS SONGS,
Ancient and Modern;
SELECTED FOR USE OF THE
CROCHALLAN FENCIBLES.

Say, Puritan, can it be wrong,
To dree plain truth in witty song?
What honest Nature says, we should do;
What every lady does,—or would do.

PRINTED IN THE YEAR
1799.

Title-page from The Merry Muses of Caledonia (1799)
G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries
O! let my tender, trembling hand,
The awful gate of life expand!
With all its wonders feast my sight;
Dear prelude to immense delight!
Till plung’d in liquid joy profound,
The dark unfathom’d deep I sound;
All panting on thy breast recline,
And murmuring bliss that bower of thine.

Burns did send the text of this song to William Stewart in July 1788, claiming it to be “the work of a Rev’d Doctor of the Church of Scotland,” but did not identify him further (Letters, I: 292).

The Merry Muses, then, it will be seen, is an uneven mixture of songs unmistakably bearing the stamp of Burns’s genius and productions by others of considerably lesser quality. In addition to its value as a collection typical of the erotica of the time, it gives us an unequaled look at the type of poetry Burns knew, wrote, and collected.

The copy reproduced in facsimile by the University of South Carolina Press came into my possession in 1965, and is one of only two known copies. Previously, the work was known in only one copy, which belonged to Albert Edward Harry Mayer Archibald Primrose, sixth earl of Rosebery (a photographic copy of it is now in the National Library of Scotland), and was incomplete, lacking the half title and missing the words “The” at the top of the title page and “Printed in the Year 1799” at the bottom. At the end of the Rosebery volume, the table of contents (pp. 123-27) is also wanting. The last page of my copy had a printer’s name on it, but unfortunately the page was apparently deliberately defaced so that the name could not be read. When it came into my possession, The Merry Muses had been bound about 1840 in tree calf with some unrelated plates sewn in. That which was facing the title page is an unidentified pornographic engraving entitled “See School of Venus”; the seven others are original Thomas Rowlandson erotic engravings, each with a bawdy poem. An additional plate had already been removed. As these plates had nothing to do with the original volume and particularly because I was to be interviewed by the British Broadcasting Corporation, which wished to zoom in on the title page, I had the plates removed and separately encased in a similar binding.

The volume turned up when Sydney Goodsir Smith was sitting in an Edinburgh pub in 1965 with a copy of a recently issued edition of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* which he, James Barke, and J. DeLancey Ferguson had originally edited for publication by private subscription in 1959 to commemorate the bicentenary of Burns’s birth.\(^8\) With changes in the law, this edition was allowed to be openly published in the United States in 1964 and in Great Britain in 1965. The Barke-Goodsir Smith-Ferguson volume has as frontispiece a reproduction of the mutilated title page of what was then the only known copy of *The Merry Muses*, the Rosebery copy. The book was being passed around when a working-class drinker said that he had a copy like that at home. When challenged by Goodsir Smith, he left and returned with the copy which I acquired shortly after. The story does not quite end there either. Returning to the United States I was disconcerted when the customs officer at New York showed considerable interest in books a colleague with whom I was traveling had purchased abroad. Mindful that laws on pornography had only very recently been liberalized, I was particularly fearful of his seeing the Rowlandson plates, but I was able to divert his attention from the book to purchases I had made in the duty-free shop which exceeded my allowance.

With the transfer of my collection of Burns, Burnsiana, and Scottish poetry to the University of South Carolina through a gift/purchase agreement, the 1799 edition of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* became the property of that institution. By good fortune the letter from Burns to John M’M urdo discussed here became available recently, and it has been added to the G. Ross Roy Collection as an appropriate companion to one of the greatest and certainly the rarest of all Burns books.