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# Editing Robert Burns in the Nineteenth Century

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## **EDITING ROBERT BURNS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

*(1994)*

Most people think of editing as collecting together a series of essays by other people to form a more or less unified whole, or of a single person collecting or selecting the output of a single author, arranged in a particular order (chronological, subject matter, and so on), to which the editor may or may not add notes. But there is a good deal more to being an editor than that. In almost every edition the editor has had to make choices, sometimes the author himself acts in this capacity; having produced variant readings of a text, he at some later date opts for the one or the other. John Masefield, for example, could never quite decide how he wanted the opening line of his best-known poem "Sea Fever" to read. In the first edition it is "I must down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky," but this was later amended to "I must go down to the sea again, to the lonely sea and the sky." Some later printings, however, return to the earlier readings, while some retain the amendment.

So one could argue that the earliest form of editing is that which the author applies to his own creations. Robert Burns made such a choice in "The Holy Fair" when at the suggestion of Hugh Blair he changed the original reading in the 1786 edition:

For \*\*\*\*\* speels the holy door,  
Wi' tidings o' s-lv-t—n

to read "tidings o' d-mn-t--n" in the edition of 1787 (Kinsley I: 132, ll. 101-102). Using major editions of 1800, two in 1834, 1856, 1877, two in 1896, and the two major twentieth-century editions of 1968 and 1986, I find that they all give the reading "damnation," but that three of these

editions do not indicate the earlier “salvation.”<sup>1</sup> At the end of the poem, the word “houghmagandie” is glossed as “fornication” in the 1800 edition, but the word is not glossed in one of the 1834 editions and is called “loose behaviour” in the other. Thereafter it is again glossed as “fornication.”

We can assume that Burns preferred “damnation” as more descriptive of the fire-and-brimstone type of preaching which was done at these holy fairs, because the reading was retained in Burns’s day in both the 1793 and 1794 editions of his poetry, and we know that he used a set of sheets of the earlier of these editions in setting up the 1794 one.

In the two lines which I quoted above there is another form of editing exercised by the poet: in 1786 and 1787, the name “Moodie” is indicated \*\*\*\*\*. Half concealing a proper name in this way was, of course, commonplace in the eighteenth century, but it certainly was also a form of self-censorship or silent editing on the part of the author. Of the seven nineteenth-century editions I noted earlier, only James Currie in 1800 followed Burns with the use of asterisks—from caution, no doubt.

There was another form of editing, the intervention of others than the author to make alterations in a text. One of the best-known of these concerns “Tam o’ Shanter” where in the manuscript that Burns sent to Francis Grose for inclusion in the *Antiquities of Scotland* (Vol. II, 1791), Burns added after:

Wi’ mair o’ horrible and awefu’,  
Which even to name wad be unlawfu’ (Kinsley II: 561, ll. 141-142)

these four lines:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Works of Robert Burns; With an Account of his Life*, ed. James Currie, 8th edn. 4 vols. (London, 1820), III, 33; *The Works of Robert Burns; With his Life*, ed. Allan Cunningham, 8 vols. (London, 1834), II, 107; *The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. the Ettrick Shepherd [James Hogg] and William Motherwell, 5 vols. (Glasgow, 1834-6), I, 30; *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1856-7), I, 266; *The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. William Scott Douglas, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1877-9), I, 272; *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, rev. William Wallace, 4 vols. (Edinburgh & London, 1896), I, 361; *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W.E. Henley and T.F. Henderson, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896-7), I, 40; *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 132; *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, ed. James A. Mackay (Alloway, 1986), p. 136. Further references to these editions will appear in the text. The editions of 1968 and 1986 were noted to show continuity into this century, but will not be cited further.

Three Lawyers' tongues, turn'd inside out,  
 Wi' lies seam'd like a beggar's clout;  
 Three Priests' hearts, rotten, black as muck,  
 Lay stinking, vile, in every neuk.

These lines were removed from the poem when it was reprinted in Burns's edition of 1793 upon the advice of Alexander Fraser Tytler, himself a lawyer.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps where the lines appear in the poem they do contradict what the poet has said in the preceding line, because Burns claims that the mere naming of them "wad be unlawfu'," so that the poem may in fact benefit from omitting them, although Tytler's suggestion that the passage be removed was probably a question of giving offence rather than improving "Tam o'Shanter" as a work of art.

I have mentioned censorship, and it must be admitted censorship and editing overlap, and continue to overlap in almost all of the editions of Burns's work which I shall consider in this essay. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century editor saw no impropriety in thus "cleansing" the mouth of Scotia's Bard. Keeping back from the public poems which he had written was, in Burns's case, just being prudent—thus "Holy Willie's Prayer" was published only once (in 1789) during the poet's lifetime, and that was surely a piracy of which he knew nothing. The serious question of editing Burns's work arose only after his death.

Soon after Burns's funeral friends realised that his family would be destitute unless assistance was forthcoming. An edition of his works was agreed upon, the profits from which were to be made over to Mrs Burns. We need not here go into the difficulty there was in finding someone, preferably someone who had known Burns quite well, to take up the task of editing the poet's works; it suffices to say that finally the job fell to Dr James Currie (1756-1805), a native of Dumfriesshire who had spent most of his working life in Liverpool. Certainly Currie knew Scotland and the literature of the country, although he had met the poet only once.<sup>3</sup> Currie set about collecting material for his edition, which was to be a major biography and was to include all of Burns's poems and songs as well as

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<sup>2</sup> [After this essay was written, Professor Roy purchased Tytler's copy of the separate printing ("proof sheet") of the Grose pages, on which Tytler marked these lines for deletion; the marked copy is now in the Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries. Eds.]

<sup>3</sup> See R. D. Thornton, *James Currie, the Entire Stranger, and Robert Burns* (Edinburgh & London, 1963).

his correspondence (Robert Heron had published *a Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* in 1797 but it ran to only a few pages and is today of interest only to the literary historian). In the event Currie turned up very few new poems, relying on the two-volume set of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* of 1793 and James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, five of the six volumes of which had appeared by the year of Burns's death. In order to write a biography Currie needed, in addition to direct contact with friends, to have available letters from and to the poet. Like most people of the period, Burns had kept most of his, but it was not uncommon for correspondents to request the return of their letters when the addressee died, and it is not improbable that some were returned in this way. Apparently Maria Riddell exchanged the poet's letters to her for hers to him, and she appears to have destroyed them. The most notorious collection of Burns's letters to be withheld, and quite understandably, were those to Mrs. Agnes M'Lehose (the famous "Clarinda") from her "Sylvander." These love letters to a woman whose husband was still living, although not with her, were published in part in an unauthorized edition in 1802, but it was not until 1843 that the lady's grandson published a complete edition of the Clarinda-Sylvander correspondence.

What Currie came up with was a goodly number of letters both from Burns and to him. Once he had used the letters, he does not appear in several instances to have kept them together, because individual letters and manuscripts of poems have emerged from a number of places and are now to be found in various collections throughout the English-speaking world. Perhaps the most unexpected place to find a Burns manuscript is in France at the Bibliothèque Municipale in Nantes.

One major collection of letters, which occupies the entire fourth volume of Currie's edition, is the correspondence between Burns and George Thomson, editor of *A Select Collection of Original Scottish [sic] Airs*, which appeared in eight parts between 1787 and 1818, to which Burns devoted an enormous amount of energy, writing, re-writing, and collecting songs and selecting others for Thomson to use from anywhere he could lay hands on them. Thomson apparently got back his letters to Burns and probably destroyed the originals, while sending Currie altered copies. At the same time, he very heavily scored through certain passages of Burns's letters which Thomson did not want the public to see. Here we have, then, the earliest example of tampering with a text which is to go before a reading audience. The work starts without delay in Burns's first letter to Thomson. In September 1792, the latter had written to Burns in

Dumfries asking if he would collaborate in the undertaking, and offering to pay “any reasonable price you shall please to demand.” Note the word “reasonable,” for Thomson was a prudent man; we find him bickering over money with Beethoven at a later date when the musician supplied some arrangements for the edition. To this letter Burns replied on 16 September, happily accepting the invitation, and adding (for Burns was not prudent in the way in which Thomson was), “As to remuneration, you may think my Songs either *above or below* price; for they shall absolutely be the one or the other.— In the honest enthusiasm with which I embark in your undertaking, to talk of money, wages, fee, hire, &c. would be downright Sodomy of the Soul!”<sup>4</sup> To this expression Thomson appended a note: “I presume Dr C. will think it right to substitute some other word for Sodomy,” so the equally prudent Dr Currie printed “prostitution of the soul!” (IV, 5).

One of the most interesting disagreements which Burns and Thomson had concerned the wording of “Scots Wha Hae,” to use the song’s popular title. Burns sent the song to Thomson probably on 1 or 2 September 1793, telling him that it was to be sung to the tune “Hey tutti taitie,” claiming that it was the air to which Bruce’s warriors marched to Bannockburn. The words he sent began:

Scots, wha hae wi’ Wallace bled,  
Scots, wham Bruce has aften led,  
Welcome to your gory bed,—  
Or to victorie.—

In his answer Thomson downplayed the air, saying, “I never heard any one speak of it as worthy of notice” (Currie, IV, 115). In place of it Thomson asked Burns if they could not substitute ‘Lewie Gordon’ which had a longer final line, and would allow the first stanza to read “Or to *glorious* victorie,” and he went on to propose changes for each of the six stanzas, including such wooden lines as, “Let him, *let him* turn and flie,” “But they shall, *they shall* be free,” and “Let us, *let us* do, or die!” (IV, 115-116). A few days later Burns sent another version of the song to Thomson who was still not satisfied, although it would appear that the text of his answer to Burns which Thomson sent to Currie was deliberately incomplete. Finally, Burns answered, quoting Pope, “Who shall decide, when Doctors disagree?,” and rejecting Thomson’s proposed

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<sup>4</sup> *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 149. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

alterations (*Letters* II: 248).<sup>5</sup> Currie, when he edited this exchange, obviously sided with Thomson and appended a footnote to the first version of the song, "A more finished copy will be found afterwards" (IV, 110). Posterity, of course, has decided otherwise.

It must be admitted that Currie was preparing an edition which would appeal to a broad general public. In the event 2000 copies were sold, so that it was no doubt permissible for him to omit some of Burns's brief comments on songs he was considering for inclusion in Thomson's work. In fact, Currie alerts the reader to this in a footnote when he says of these lists, "All his [Burns's] remarks of any importance are presented to the reader" (IV, 117). But Thomson and Currie obviously conspired to maintain a picture of a pure, if one is not to say emasculated, poet. A letter of September 1793 includes a reworking of Tom Brown's "Caelia's Rundlet of Brandy" from D'Urfrey's *Pills to Purge Melancholy* which opens with these lines:

The other night, with all her charms,  
My ardent passion crowning,  
Fair Celia sank within my arms  
An equal transport owning.—

Burns then goes on to mention several other songs, including one of which he says, "take the following old Bacchanal," whereupon he sets down a sixteen-line song beginning "Deluded swain, the pleasure/ The fickle Fair can give thee," all but four lines of which are his own. Thomson, however, notes to Currie, "*Nothing* in this letter for the general eye, nor are any of the Songs Mr Burns's own, except the first which is too warmly coloured. G. T."<sup>6</sup> Currie heeded the admonition, and in his edition we find all mention of the "too warmly coloured" song deleted without, as Currie sometimes did, any indication that material had been omitted. Ironically, though, Currie did include all of "Deluded swain" even though Thomson had believed Burns's statement about its being traditional (IV, 135-6).

One of the most interesting pieces of editing which I have come across is a letter to Burns's friend John Ballantine of 18 April 1787 concerning a shipment of copies of the Edinburgh edition of his poems. The letter was not reproduced in early editions, but a facsimile of it was published in the "Stothard" reissue of the 1820 Currie. One usually

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays*, Epistle III, line 1.

<sup>6</sup> See *Letters*, II: 249, where full details of Burns's sources are set out.

accepts a facsimile as a genuine representation of what was written, but the entire second sentence has been removed. It reads “I have no acquaintance with Forsyth; and besides I believe Booksellers take no less than the unconscionable, Jewish tax of 25 pr Cent. by way of agency” (*Letters*, I: 105), so it is not surprising that the editor did not want it to appear. True there were unobtrusive asterisks where the deletion has been made, but these are so small that on the original facsimile they might be taken for periods made by the author himself. When I first compared a photocopy of the original manuscript, which is in the Bodleian Library, with the facsimile, I learned a lesson about so-called foolproof evidence.<sup>7</sup>

My last example of Currie’s editing consists of adding rather than deleting a sentence to a text. Today it is well known that Burns wrote a collection of bawdy poems known as *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, but to the potential audience for his 1800 edition Currie went to great pains to hide from his readers the facts about the poet’s involvement with such material, just as certain letters in which Burns openly avowed having had sexual affairs were kept from the public. Burns had written and collected bawdy poetry for some time, as a letter to his friend, John M’Murdo, makes clear. The letter accompanied “a collection of Scots songs,” and Burns tells M’Murdo that “five or six glances of them will probably more than suffice you” (II: 438). A glance at the manuscript shows that Currie made some trivial alterations to the text and added one sentence: “A very few of them are my own.”

I had puzzled for years about this. We know that Currie withheld letters altogether, and that he deleted passages when he did not deem the material in them to be appropriate for the general public. Why then, I wondered, had he not just ignored the letter altogether, working the passage about the money (which had acutely embarrassed the poet) into the biography? The reason became apparent some years ago. The first edition of *The Merry Muses* had been known in only one copy, that of the Earl of Rosebery, but the volume was imperfect, wanting the date on the title-page, which is torn. In those days paper was watermarked with the date of manufacture, and the Rosebery copy has leaves watermarked 1799 and 1800, leading scholars to assume a date of 1800. When I was able to purchase another copy of the book I was surprised to find that the date on the title-page was 1799, although the leaves were watermarked both 1799 and 1800. Accepting the 1799 date for the title-page is not a

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<sup>7</sup> [The original MS and Stothard facsimile are reproduced in *Burns Now*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp. 136-137. Eds.]



great problem, because papermakers might start using the new year's date late in the previous year. Now it became clear to me why Currie had tampered with Burns's text. Through his Scottish connections he must have heard of the publication of *The Merry Muses*, perhaps even owned a copy, and realised that the best way to protect Burns from accusations of being a pornographer would be to publish the offending letter, but to try to whitewash Burns with the inserted sentence.

The story does not end there. Under-the-counter editions of *The Merry Muses* proliferated, particularly one falsely dated 1827, but probably published in 1872, which went through a number of editions through 1930. These editions contained Burns's material, but also including material which was not by Burns, together with two letters from Burns. One of these, to the poet's Edinburgh friend Robert Ainslie, described in graphic detail Burns's love-making with Jean (*Letters I*: 250-251). To put rumours to rest about Burns and *The Merry Muses*, the Editor of the *Burns Chronicle*, Duncan M'Naught, prepared an edition of *The Merry Muses*, subtitled *A Vindication of Robert Burns, in Connection with the Above Publication and the Spurious Editions Which Succeeded It* (1911). ... With this volume Currie would appear to have carried the day. There was one problem. Instead of using the known copy of the first edition of *The Merry Muses* and incorporating Currie's manufactured disclaimer, the editor copied the poems from the so-called 1827 edition. This text, however, included Burns's letter to Ainslie, and whereas M'Naught could deny that Burns had written many (and by inference any) bawdy songs, there was no way that he could find another author for Burns's letter. When the sheets were printed, prudence took hold, and the leaf (pp. 137-8) containing the letter was cancelled and the volume bound up without it.

With this we can leave James Currie and his edition of Robert Burns. Misguided as an editor by today's standards, he was not different from others in his time.

Although Robert Hartley Cromek published an entire book containing material which had been overlooked by Currie, his *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808) will not be discussed in detail because most of the material which appeared in his book did so for the first time, although he did complete a letter from Burns to William Chalmers of 27 December 1786 which had first appeared in Currie (*Letters I*: 75-76). Oddly enough there seems to have been no reason for Currie to delete the passage, which is a somewhat wordy comment on St John the Divine, other than to save

space. Included also in the *Reliques* are eleven letters to Margaret Chalmers (not related to William) whose father had a farm near Mauchline. According to Cromek, "The following fragments are all that now exist of twelve or fourteen of the finest letters that Burns ever wrote."<sup>8</sup> Cromek goes on to say that the letters had been destroyed without saying how he managed to obtain the fragments which he printed. It is possible that he had access to the manuscripts before they disappeared—if so, then he was responsible for our having only a portion of the letters as they were written.

The next major edition of Burns was the work of Allan Cunningham, himself a poet. It appeared in eight volumes as *The Works of Robert Burns; With his Life*, and was published in London where Cunningham had moved as a young man. Like Currie's, Cunningham's first volume contains the life, a biography which has aroused a great deal of adverse comment during this century; perhaps the best-known is that in Franklyn Bliss Snyder's *Life of Robert Burns*:

This biography certainly pictures Burns more or less as he actually was, but is absolutely unreliable as regards specific facts.

Anything that Cunningham says may be true; nothing that he says should be believed without corroborating testimony.<sup>9</sup>

Since the volume of biography is ancillary to the seven of work by Burns, we need not spend our time hunting out his biographical omissions and fabrications.

Although Cunningham claimed in the Preface to the first volume that he had arranged Burns's works, "as much as might be in the order of their composition,"<sup>10</sup> he did not, in fact, keep very rigorously to this claim. Poems from the editions of 1786, 1787, and other sources are printed in no apparent order and there is a section in the third volume under the heading "Epitaphs, Epigrams, &c., &c." Cunningham says further in his Preface: "Of verse, one hundred and odd pieces will be found in this edition, which are not in Currie's octavos" (I, v), and this is true, but that is not to say that he was printing them for the first time. In fact only eight poems in Cunningham are published for the first time, and none of these is a major work.

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<sup>8</sup> *Reliques of Robert Burns*, ed. R. H. Cromek (London, 1808), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> F. B. Snyder, *Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1932), p. 489.

<sup>10</sup> *The Works of Robert Burns; With his Life*, ed. Allan Cunningham, 8 vols. (London, 1834), I, v.

According to the editor, 6000 copies of the first volume were sold when a second edition of it was called for. Early in 1835 the first volume only was reissued, and in a new Preface Cunningham wrote that there were many Burns MSS which had “remained till now in manuscript—nay, such was their abundance, that the hitherto unknown and unacknowledged poems, songs, and letters, contained in this edition alone, would make a separate volume of great and abiding interest” (I, viii). Note the repeated implication that he has added genuinely new poems and songs.

The strength of Cunningham’s edition lies in the forty-two previously unpublished letters which he added to the canon. I have already mentioned the most important new letter—it is the one to Robert Ainslie, here published incomplete, to be completed in *The Merry Muses* of 1872 (VI, 241-2). It seems probable that Ainslie still had Burns’s letters and allowed Cunningham to have access to them. Another absent letter of about 1 June 1788 to Ainslie concerns May Cameron who was pregnant by Burns, but whether Cunningham declined it, or Ainslie withheld it, is not certain. In his later years Ainslie became conservative and quite pious, dissociating himself from the young poet with whom he had caroused in earlier times.

There was an expanded version of the Border Tour of May 1787 which had first been published in Currie, although even Cunningham left the work incomplete. Burns’s Tour in the Highlands of August and September 1787 was also published, although this manuscript seems to have disappeared. Finally, and this is an important addition, Cunningham included notes to the poems and songs, and occasionally to the letters. To the poem ‘Hallowe’en’ the editor added 129 lines of notes as well as quoting John Mayne’s poem of the same name which was published in 1780, and which Cunningham suggests may have influenced Burns. Given that Jean died in the year of the edition, and that Agnes M’Lehose, about whom Cunningham wrote in the biography but without publishing her letters, lived until 1841, there is a good possibility that the editor obtained some of his information from people who had known Burns. The remainder he got from his own imagination.

The same year, 1834, saw the first two of five volumes which made up *The Works of Robert Burns*, edited by James Hogg and William Motherwell. These contain poems and songs, as does the third volume; Burns’s correspondence forms the continuation of Volume III and Volume IV. The final volume came out in 1836, consisting mainly of the

posthumous "Memoir of Burns" written by Hogg, who had died the previous year. Unfortunately the "Memoir" is poorly regarded by modern Burns scholars. As it happens, I own one volume of Currie's 1820 edition which has been very extensively annotated in Hogg's and other hands for use in the Hogg and Motherwell edition, but as this is to be incorporated into the Stirling/South Carolina edition of the Works of James Hogg, I shall not delve further into what editorial alterations were made by the editors of the edition which appeared between 1834 and 1836.

Robert Chambers (1802-71) was the next editor who produced an important edition of Burns's works. With his brother William he was first bookseller and then publisher in Edinburgh. In 1838-9 he brought out *The Life of Robert Burns*, *The Poetical Works* and *The Prose Works of Burns* in a popular and inexpensive edition called "The People's Edition." These were expanded and combined into a four-volume set in 1851-2 and in its final form in 1856-7. As is the case with earlier collected editions, most of the new material which appears in Chambers consists of letters, although he did add a few new poems. The most important poetic material is the additional stanzas of "The Vision," a poem which had been first published in the Kilmarnock edition in 1786. According to Chambers the additional stanzas were retrieved from a manuscript recently discovered. To the text as originally printed he added no fewer than fourteen stanzas, only one of which was admitted to the canon by James Kinsley in 1968. The almost forty new letters include an important group to Robert Graham of Fintry, who as a Commissioner of the Scottish Board of Excise was influential in Burns being appointed to that body. Probably the most important letter from Burns to Graham was written on 31 December 1792, when Burns's loyalty had been called into question, and the poet wrote to his benefactor to save his job, but that letter had been first published by Cromek in 1808. A letter from Burns to George Thomson also appears in the fourth volume of 1852. Thomson must have supplied the text of it to Chambers shortly before he died in 1851, and he apparently withheld a sentence of Burns's. The poet mentioned that he was returning material to Thomson with "alterations & remarks on the margin of each song" (IV, 202). The omitted sentence follows: "You may perhaps think me hard as to 'Cauld kail in Aberdeen,' but I cannot help it" (Letters, II, 384-5). The new letter adds little to our understanding of the relationship between the two men, but it underscores the vanity of Thomson in wishing to be seen in the best possible light by readers of his correspondence with Scotland's greatest poet.

Chambers' edition was a popular one which remained in print in various forms until it was completely revised by William Wallace in 1896. Chambers was the last major editor who had the opportunity to be in touch with people who had known the poet. His method of weaving poems, letters and his own narration into one long biography of Burns makes accurate the title *Life and Works*. It also makes it a rather dated text for the scholar of today.

The publication in 1843 of *The Correspondence between Burns and Clarinda*, edited by Agnes M'Lehose's grandson, made available almost all of those torrid epistles, and so for the first time readers could judge the affair from all the known evidence.

William Scott Douglas was the editor of an edition of the poetry and prose which appeared in six volumes between 1877 and 1879. It is an important edition, with three volumes of poetry and the remaining three devoted to the correspondence, both poetry and prose set out in chronological order. According to the Preface the editor's plan is to publish "the author's text with critical exactness, unabridged and untampered with, and recording the numerous and interesting variations in his manuscripts and several authorised editions" (I, vii). He goes on to say that he and his publisher (the firm of William Paterson) have made every effort to locate Burns manuscripts and to collate them with printed texts. Returning to "The Holy Fair," we find some contradiction with this claim: names of people are filled in without indication that they replaced the asterisks in the first edition; the substitution, however, of "damnation" is noted in a footnote with "Altered from 'salvation' by suggestion of Dr Hugh Blair" (I, 272), but the editor does not say that the word "salvation" did in fact appear in 1786. True to his declared policy, a manuscript of the poem in the British Museum was consulted and variants noted.

In trying to give the world a completely accurate version of Burns's poems Scott Douglas faced the problem which every editor eventually faces: what to do when there are two or more texts which do not agree. Take, for example, the poem which the editor entitles "A Poet's Welcome to his Love-Begotten Daughter," first published in 1799 by Stewart & Meikle of Glasgow (where it carried the title "Burns's Address to his Illegitimate Child"). It differs considerably from the version to be found in the Glenriddell MS. Unfortunately the latter does not contain the stanza

Lord grant that thou may ay inherit  
Thy mither's person, grace, an' merit,  
An' thy poor, worthless daddy's spirit,  
Without his failins,

'Twill please me mair to see thee heir it,  
 Than stocket mailens (I, 73)

which Scott Douglas includes. Technically a manuscript source should outweigh a printed one as copy-text, but Scott Douglas wisely included the stanza, adding a note which said, "By some inadvertency, as we suppose, Burns, in transcribing the poem, had omitted Stewart's closing verse...which is so fine that it cannot be dispensed with" (I, 73-4). Later Scott Douglas was vindicated when another manuscript in Burns's hand was forthcoming, and it contained the lines missing in the Glenriddell text.

Thus, although not adding significantly to the poetic canon, Scott Douglas did give readers a much more reliable text. Where the edition really stands out is in the new letters by Burns which are added in Volumes IV-VI. There are no fewer than ninety-eight new ones, the most notable collection being eighteen hitherto unpublished letters from Burns to George Thomson, and in addition Scott Douglas completed twenty-two others—letters which had originally appeared in Currie. We are not surprised to find one letter which Thomson had withheld from Currie in which Thomson had returned "Scots Wha Hae" altered as he saw fit. In reply the poet told his editor that to alter the line "Welcome to your gory bed" as Thomson wished would not do. "Your idea 'honor's bed' is, though a beautiful, a hackney'd idea; so, if you please, we will let the line stand as it is" (VI, 284). It is interesting to note that either Thomson withheld or Currie chose not to publish (probably the latter) some letters or portions of letters which are neither indiscreet nor do they show Thomson in a bad light *vis-a-vis* Burns. For example, the letter which Burns wrote in January 1795 appears in Currie (IV, 216-9) and contains the entire text of "For a' That, and a' That," but omits a paragraph saying how busy he (Burns) had been because of the illness of the Supervisor of Excise, and writing admiringly of a copy of Pindar which Thomson had sent him. In supposedly completing the letter, Scott Douglas omitted the poem which Burns had sent, his "Ode to Spring" (VI, 333), although he does refer the reader elsewhere in the edition. When we look this up, however, we find that Scott Douglas's version shows only one of three stanzas (III, 17), and that one emasculated. In a lengthy footnote Scott Douglas quotes the first line of the poem (with a crucial word omitted) with the following comment, "Reader, we can follow the bard no farther in this very original 'Ode'" (III, 18). Neither Currie nor Scott Douglas included the first sentence Burns wrote to Thomson after the ode, "Now for decency" (*Letters*, II: 336).

With the centenary of the poet's death approaching, plans were set afoot to capitalise on the event: there was a huge exhibition in Glasgow, speeches aplenty and several editions of Burns's works. The long popularity of Robert Chambers's *Life and Works of Robert Burns* naturally suggested a revised edition of that work. The set came out in 1896 retaining the name of Chambers, and crediting the revision to William Wallace. The poetry remained much as it had been presented in earlier editions and over forty new letters were collected and woven into the narrative as had been the case in earlier editions. As we have come to expect, Wallace was discreet in quoting Burns. A letter to Robert Ainslie after they had parted when Burns was on his Border tour, dated from Newcastle on 29 May 1787, has a passage which reads, "In the words of the Highlandman when he saw the Dell on shanter-hill in the shape of five swine – 'My hair stood and my p— stood, and I swat & trembled'" (*Letters*, I: 119), which becomes the tamer "My hair stood . . . and I swat and trembled" (Wallace, II, 118), although the editor was honest enough to indicate his deletion with an elipsis. As I mentioned with respect to Chambers, the inclusion of both poetry and letters in the narration may be an annoyance to today's reader, but for several years it was rated the most important of all editions of the complete works.

Wallace followed this feat with another important edition whose title speaks for itself: *Robert Burns and Mrs Dunlop Correspondence now Published in Full for the first Time* (London, 1898). Having access to the collection of manuscripts formerly at Lochryan, but by 1898 in the Adam Collection in Buffalo, New York, Wallace was able to add to the substantial number of letters to Mrs Dunlop which were published by Currie an additional thirty-three letters, and to give the full text of several more. It seems likely, though, that one letter was either not available or that part of it was deliberately ignored by Wallace. That is the extended letter which Burns wrote between 20 December 1794 and 12 January of the following year. A small part of the letter had appeared in Currie, but not the part in which Burns wrote to Mrs Dunlop about Dr John Moore's letter to him concerning the execution of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette: "I cannot approve of the honest Doctor's whining over the deserved fate of a certain pair of Personages.—What is there in the delivering over a perjured Blockhead & an unprincipled Prostitute into the hands of the hangman . . ." (*Letters*, II: 334).

When I mentioned Wallace's edition as the most important edition of the complete works, I was not including the final nineteenth-century

collection I shall mention. This was William Ernest Henley and William F. Henderson's *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, another centennial offering which appeared in four volumes during 1896 and 1897. The edition added eleven formerly uncollected poems, but the great strength of this work was in the annotation. Henley had good Edinburgh connections, and it was no doubt a coup for the publishers (T. C. & E. C. Jack, of Edinburgh) to get him to collaborate. As far as we can tell though, the editing was done by Henderson, and from a certain point of view it remains the best edition there is yet. (I am not forgetting James Kinsley's 1968 edition.) Where Henderson excels is in tracing the roots of Burns's poems, and almost half of each volume is given over to notes. For example, Henderson takes the sixteen lines of "A Red, Red Rose" and shows that almost every phrase in the song had been published before Burns did so. A short quotation will make the point:

Now fare thee well my Dearest Dear,  
 And fare thee well awhile,  
 Altho' I go I'll come again  
 If I go ten thousand mile,  
 Dear Love,  
 If I go ten thousand mile. (III, 403)

This is from a black-letter ballad which long predates Burns. Henderson, like everyone else, can only marvel at how Burns took undistinguished verse and wove it into truly great poetry.

Henley, for his part, wrote his famous essay entitled simply "Life, Genius, Achievement" in which he set out the poet's claim to fame, and while so doing tried to debunk a good deal of the falsity which had grown up around him. Once the essay appeared in 1897 there was an outcry from all over Scotland and elsewhere claiming that Henley had treated Scotia's Bard unfairly, but that is another story. In their Preface the editors had written that they wanted to produce a text which was "as nearly complete as existing canons of taste will permit" (I, v) and that this text should be "as nearly classic as a systematic and, in so far as might be, an exhaustive collation of authorities—books, proof-sheets, tracts, broadsides, periodicals, and MSS—could secure" (I, v-vi). In a phrase which would have made Hugh MacDiarmid happy, the editors say that their annotations go to show that Burns was "not the founder of a dynasty, but the heir to a flourishing tradition and the last of an ancient line..." (I, vii).

To sum up, then, we find that the editing of Burns over a century was much like the editing of other poets, with the important difference that he



wrote in a dialect unknown outside Scotland, and not well known within—the proof of this last statement lies in the fact that he felt it necessary to append a glossary to his Kilmarnock edition, when its sale was not expected to reach much beyond Ayrshire. Early in the nineteenth century censorship applied to passages which might give offence, either for political or social reasons. As these reasons for eliminating such passages became less important, cleansing literature of passages which were obscene or sexually descriptive, even suggestively so, became a greater editorial concern. I have said nothing about editors who were so willing to add poems to the Burns canon that they accepted obviously spurious work of third-rate quality—these were acts of over-zealousness. Burns's editors operated, as Henley and Henderson stated, within the "existing canons of taste." They served as well as they were able to.