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Editing Burns's Letters in the Twentieth Century

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IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Plans to edit Burns emerged almost as soon as he was dead, and the first collected edition, prepared by James Currie, appeared in 1800. Currie had available probably more information about the poet than any subsequent editor. The edition was planned to raise money for Burns’s family, and Currie did not wish to offend any of those who contributed documents or information or who might be counted upon as subscribers to the edition. He therefore deliberately suppressed information which he had, making Robert Burns into the person Currie felt his readers wished to find. Nonetheless the edition, which netted £2,000 for the poet’s family, remains the starting point for any study of the poet. Appearing in 1800 the work was followed in 1808 by R.H. Cromek’s Reliques of Robert Burns which added a number of poems and letters to the canon. It was 1834 before another important edition supplemented our knowledge of the poet, when Allan Cunningham included a number of new letters and completed Burns’s journal of the Border tour as well as adding the journal of a tour in the Highlands.

In 1843 there appeared The Correspondence between Burns and Clarinda, completing the record, made public in part in 1802, of the poet’s relationship with Mrs. Agnes M’Lehose. She was by this time dead, as were almost all of the other people who had known Burns, thus making it easier for editors to gain access to new letters. An important name among these was Robert Chambers whose editions of 1851-2 and 1856-7 added a number of letters including most of those to Robert Graham of Fintry, known to Currie but not used. Hateley Waddell included thirty more letters in 1867, and in 1877-1879 William Scott Douglas added yet another 98 letters and completed 22, all of the latter being letters to George Thomson which Currie had truncated in 1800; of
the new letters there were also eighteen to Thomson. Reading these last letters today one wonders why Currie had felt it necessary to suppress them.

There remains only one other important nineteenth-century editor who increased our knowledge of Burns, William Wallace, who in a major revision of Chambers added forty-two letters in 1896, and then published *Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop* in 1898, with thirty-nine new letters, and completed seven; once again all of these had been available to Currie.

We see, therefore, that by the end of the nineteenth century the broad outline of Burns’s public life and thought was well known. There was, however, a more private Burns whose doings remained unknown. There were whispers, and as early as Currie there had been innuendo. The birth of Elizabeth Paton (the subject of “A Poet’s Welcome to his love-begotten Daughter”) was known, and the father’s Deed of Assignment in her favor had been published by Cunningham in 1834.

In 1931 J. De Lancey Ferguson’s *The Letters of Robert Burns* was the first major twentieth-century edition of the poet’s correspondence, and it is to that edition and my 1985 revision of it that I shall address myself. What important information have we learned about Robert Burns from these new letters or from previously-published letters of which significant portions had been omitted?

Ferguson made public information about two of Burns’s illegitimate children. The first of these is mentioned in a letter to Robert Ainslie, of about 1 June 1788. Burns encloses a letter and adds:

> Please call at the Ja’ Hog mentioned, and send for the wench and give her ten or twelve shillings, but don’t for Heaven’s sake meddle with her as a Piece… and advise her out to some country friends.

1 The girl in question was May Cameron, an Edinburgh servant, who was pregnant and out of work. On 30 June Burns followed up on the matter with Ainslie, writing, “I am vexed at the affair of the girl, but dare not enlarge on the subject until you send me your direction” (Letter 252). It is not surprising that this letter was suppressed. In fact Ferguson told me

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that, when it was discovered that he intended to publish it, a well-meaning, if misguided, minister in Scotland threatened him with a lawsuit if he did so.

May Cameron was not the only girl about whom Ferguson published new information. On January 6, 1789, the poet wrote again to Ainslie, this time about Jenny Clow, who had begun proceedings against the poet in a paternity suit:

I shall be in town in about four or five weeks, & I must again trouble you to find & secure for me a direction where to find Jenny Clow, for a main part of my busin[ess] in Edinr is to settle that matter with her, and free her hand of the process (Letter 295).

All save this and the succeeding paragraph had appeared in Cromek, but the secret had been kept for well over a century.

Burns’s well-known irregular marriage to Jean Armour is mentioned in a letter to James Smith of 30 June 1788 (No. 251), and this is the only letter to him not to have been published in the nineteenth century. There is also the famous “horse litter” letter, again to Ainslie (Letter 215), the full text of which was not made public until the first edition of the so-called 1827 edition of The Merry Muses, probably in fact issued in 1872. But that volume and its several reprints were privately printed and available only under the counter, so that very few Burns scholars and enthusiasts would have seen the full text of that letter until Ferguson made it available.

It has long been known that Burns had a taste for bawdy songs, and letters to intimate friends are sprinkled with them, either transcribed or written by himself. To Alexander Dalziel he wrote at about the turn of the year 1788 a letter which begins:

The carlin clew her wanton tail
Her wanton tail sae ready
“I learnt a sang in Annandale...” (Letter 304)

and only then goes on to the business of the letter.

Even to George Thomson, when Burns was sending him material for the Select Collection of Original Scotish Airs, the poet could not resist inserting the occasional bawdy song. One of the best-known of these is “Why Should na Poor Folk Mowe,” which was sent to both Robert Cleghorn and Thomson, but whereas these two letters (Nos. 527 and 632) were published by Douglas and Currie respectively, no edition contained the ribald poem until Ferguson. Thomson, usually rather straight-laced, did endorse his copy, “What a pity this is not publishable.” I shall return to Burns and bawdry when I discuss my own edition of the letters.
Another interesting aspect of the poet’s relationship with Thomson concerns the manuscripts the latter turned over to Currie, where the Burns-Thomson correspondence makes up an entire volume. Thomson retrieved and edited his own letters (these are not now known to exist), and he also scored through passages in Burns’s letters which did not show him, Thomson, in as favorable a light as he wished. He also deleted passages about James Johnson, with whom Burns was collaborating on *The Scots Musical Museum*. For some reason Thomson appears to have been jealous of this second preoccupation and doctored Burns’s letters so that the name does not appear. The ink used by Thomson has faded, leaving some illegible; many of these were restored in Ferguson, and I added a few more, leaving only a couple still undecipherable.

It is interesting to see Burns the untried poet turning to John Ballantine in the first known letter from Burns (Letter 26), to ask for advice on which poems to include in his edition. Burns speaks of a “parcel of pieces,” adding, “To tell the truth I am almost decided against them all I here send, except The Fragments that begin, When Guilford good etc….and, Green grow the rashes,” both of which were in fact excluded, appearing only in the Edinburgh edition the following year. It is a pity that we don’t have a more complete list of these poems. In the same letter Burns mentions having sent along “Death and Doctor Hornbook” of which he wrote, “I send it merely to amuse, as it is too trifling and prolix to publish.” Apparently the Edinburgh literati did not think so, as it also appeared in the Edinburgh edition. Despite lampooning the subject of the poem, John Wilson, schoolmaster of Tarbolton and amateur medical adviser, Burns did all that he could to find him employment in Edinburgh as we see in two new letters in Ferguson (Nos. 420 and 421), letters which give the lie to the nineteenth century claim that Wilson was destroyed by Burns’s satire.

We learn also that Burns was contemplating a second edition, probably again with his Kilmarnock publisher John Wilson, as early as 27 September 1786 (Letter 49), before the first review of the book appeared in the October issue of the *Edinburgh Magazine*. In a letter of 5 September 1788 to Mrs. Dunlop (No. 267A), we find the first transcription of the final form of “To Robert Graham, of Fintry.” Burns had earlier sent her a first draft of the poem (Letter 260).

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The letters mentioned above are of major importance, others touch on almost every facet of Burns’s life. The publication in 1931 of Ferguson’s edition of the letters set a standard of editing such that I found no reason to depart from it a half century later as I was preparing my edition. From that time on, every important book on Burns drew from Ferguson’s edition. These include Ferguson’s own biography of Burns, as well as books by Franklin Bliss Snyder, David Daiches, Thomas Crawford and Robert T. Fitzhugh, to name only the best-known among them.

Following in the footsteps of De Lancey Ferguson was a daunting prospect, but I was fortunate in having the help, encouragement and friendship of this fine scholar from the time in 1960 when the idea of a revised edition first came into being. My only regret is that he did not live to see my edition, which is dedicated to him, in print. By the time I was working on the letters, standards of what could be published openly had vastly altered—for instance after the last private edition in 1959, *The Merry Muses* was finally published commercially in the United States in 1964 and in Great Britain the following year. Thus when James Kinsley’s *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* was published in 1968 all of Burns’s bawdy material was included, and I was thus able to refer readers to a standard edition for poems which appeared in letters. For instance the ribald “My girl she’s airy, she’s buxom and gay” was sent in a letter to Ainslie in July 1787 (No. 122A),

By far the most important new letter in my edition was sent to John M’Murdo about February 1792. M’Murdo was Chamberlain to the Duke of Queensberry at Drumlanrig, and after the poet’s death one of the trustees of the funds raised for the family which accrued from the publication of Currie’s edition. The passage is of such importance that it must be quoted in full:

I think I once mentioned something to you of a Collection of Scots Songs I have for years been making: I send you a perusal of what I have gathered.—I could not conveniently spare them above five or six days, and five or six glances of them will probably more than suffice you.—A very few of them are my own. 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, and I should be sorry that any unfortunate negligence should deprive me of what has cost me a good deal of pains (Letter 499A).

That is how the letter reads in Currie and every subsequent edition. But in the manuscript, the sentence “A very few of them are my own” does not appear. Why did Currie, who omitted a great deal of material, print the
letter at all? I feel almost certain that he had heard of or seen a copy of the first edition of The Merry Muses, which we now know was published in 1799. Knowing this, Currie wanted to get Burns off the hook.

There are other references to this collection; Ferguson published a letter to Robert Cleghorn (No. 416) in which the poet asks after his “Collection of...Songs”. It is a great pity that the manuscript of this collection is not known to exist, and that a large proportion of the poet’s bawdy poetry and songs thus exists only in his letters. One would expect that he did not transcribe several of the songs which were in the collection because, as we have seen, he just sent along the collection to his cronies.

Interesting things about the farm at Ellisland appear in the 1985 edition, including Burns’s first letter to Patrick Miller from whom he rented it (Letter 78A), although at the time of writing (15 January 1787) Burns was in Edinburgh and had not yet seen it. Once he had visited the farm he wrote in another new letter to Miller that he would take a lease to begin at £50 a year, but he did say, “the farm is so worn out, and every bit of it, good for any thing, is this year under tillage...” (Letter 214A). Poor Burns was to find out that his estimate of the farm was all too accurate. Despite the enthusiasm he displayed for Ellisland in many of his letters before he moved in on 11 June 1788, he had his misgivings and as early as October 18th he wrote to Ainslie, “I am not entirely sure of my farm’s doing well. I hope for the best: but I have my Excise Commission in my pocket...” (Letter 279, first published in Ferguson).

Despite his preoccupations Burns continued his active collaboration with Johnson on the Museum and in September 1792 began work with Thomson on the Select Collection. In 1789 he met Francis Grose to whom he promised a contribution to accompany Grose’s drawing of Alloway Kirk in the latter’s Antiquities of Scotland (2 vols., 1789-91). My edition contains the letter which accompanied the manuscript of “Tam o’Shanter” and in which the poet wrote, “Inclosed is one of the Aloway-kirk Stories, done in Scots verse.—Should you think it worthy a place in your Scots Antiquities, it will lengthen not a little the altitude of my Muse’s pride” (Letter 427A of December 1, 1790). The poet’s reference to “one of the Aloway-kirk Stories” has to do with an earlier letter Burns had sent to Grose (No. 401) in which he told the antiquarian in prose three traditional tales about the kirk, one of which became “Tam o’Shanter”. Although in his letter transmitting the manuscript to Grose Burns wrote, “I am afraid it will be impossible to transmit me the Proof-
Sheets, otherwise I should like to see them,” Grose apparently did send them to him. In a letter first published in Ferguson. Burns wrote to Cleghorn, “I inclose you a proof-sheet, one out of a dozen I got from the Publisher, to give among my friends” (Letter 473).

Burns was not so fortunate with his Edinburgh publisher William Creech, who was known throughout the capital for being tight-fisted. He makes reference to trying to get his money from Creech in several of his letters. On January 24, 1788, Creech still had not settled accounts with the poet for his 1787 volume (published 17 April), and Burns, in desperation, sent him a letter in which he said:

when a business, which could at any...time be done in a few hours, has kept me four months without even a shadow of anything else to do but wait...on it, 'tis no very favourable symptom that it will be soon done, when I am a hundred miles absent. At any rate, I have no mind to make the experiment, but am determined to have it done before I leave Edinr (Letter 185A).

Creech apparently still delayed, for on 12 March 1788 Burns wrote to Agnes M’Lehose, “I have just now written Creech such a letter, that the very goose-feather in my hand shrunk back from the line” (Letter 222B). Burns had problems with booksellers also, as we see from two letters to John Smith, Jr., of Glasgow. On 18 July 1788 the poet reminds him that he owes for nine copies of the Edinburgh edition of the poems, and on 17 January 1789 he still owes Burns (Letters 256A and 296A). Of course Burns could be dilatory himself, as we see from his letter of February 1792 paying two years after he had received it an account for £5/10/- to erect a stone for Robert Fergusson (Letter 495). The 1985 edition also completes letters from the poet to Maria Riddell, where earlier editors had felt that he was being too intimate (see Letters 554A, 595, 595A).

There are of course other letters which appeared for the first time in Ferguson’s edition and in mine. There is the only known letter to Henry Mackenzie (Letter 101A), and a letter to Bruce Campbell (No. 284) enclosing “Fête Champetrec” for James Boswell, but those letters which I have mentioned are among the most important. One may wonder if there are many others still to be made public; the answer appears to be that several letters which were known in the nineteenth century, but of which no transcription exists, are probably still extant. Burns did not usually neglect his correspondents, so did he only write one letter between May and late August 1792? I doubt it. Perhaps a treasure trove of letters waits to be discovered by some other fortunate editor.