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Notes and Documents: M. F. Maury and Burns; Burns's Edinburgh Edition

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Notes and Documents



"Get Burns By Heart"

January 25 is well known as Burns Day, but few have heard of Matthew Fontaine Maury, who is celebrated 11 days earlier in Virginia. Even those who know of him probably have no idea that he was an admirer of Robert Burns. In a letter recently uncovered, Maury gives advice to a young Midshipman, Hamilton Lieber, regarding appropriate reading material, including Burns's poetry.

M.F. Maury (1806-1873), a famous Virginian, was a largely self-educated man of remarkable accomplishments, especially in oceanography. He was supervisor of the Naval Observatory at the time he wrote to Lieber and had just published the *Wind and Current Chart of the North Atlantic* (1847). His charts, as he predicted, saved sailing time. For example, they reduced the trip from New York to San Francisco from 180 to 133 days—a valuable saving of time during the gold rush. His system of recording oceanographic data was adopted universally and won him the honor of many universities and foreign governments. Hamilton Lieber, the recipient of Maury's advice, was less

famous than his father, Francis Lieber, a man born in Berlin in 1800 who had fought at Waterloo and in Greece, had been arrested for being dangerous politically, and had come to Boston where he was involved in the plans for the *Encyclopedia Americana*. Later Francis Lieber held the chair of History and Political Science at South Carolina College (University of South Carolina). Hamilton Lieber fought in the Union army and held various military positions.

Maury advises the young Lieber to read the Bible, to read professional books, and to learn something every day, if only a new word from the dictionary. He warns Lieber against novels, comparing them to mint juleps in that they "enervate and unfit one for hard study or hard labor." Instead, he advises him to get a copy of Burns's poetry and specifically to memorize the "Epistle to a Young Friend." But he goes on to say that the "Epistle" is the only Burns poem he would recommend to Lieber at that time, for, "though it is the fashion to praise Burns up to the skies there is in my judgment a wide difference between Burns the poet & Burns the man, for in the character of the latter I find very little to admire or commend." The particular poem Maury recommends gives much of the same advice that Maury does in his letter—to beware immoralities, to use opportunities to achieve honor, to be polite to all but intimate with few.

Burns's poem was addressed to Andrew Aiken (d. 1831), son of Robert Aiken, to whom the poet dedicated his "Cotter's Saturday Night." Ironically, the May 1787 date of the poem indicates that Burns's moral advice to his young friend comes during both the poet's trouble with the Armour family and the poet's infatuation for "Highland" Mary. The Armour situation, for certain, was well known.

Following is a transcript of the letter, dated 30 May 1850 from the National Observatory in Washington.¹

My Dear Sir,-

It is true I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance, but I know your father by his distinguished reputation, and your friends have written me about you. The accounts they give have interested me in your behalf and I hope therefore that this fact will excuse me in your eyes for taking the liberty of writing you such a letter as I intend this to be.—

Good advice I know you have in abundance, you have been urged to read the Bible, to study its precepts, and to beware of all immoralities & the like. The affectionate solicitude of your friends has, I am sure, urged upon you these things—I do not mean to attempt to do what they have so kindly & earnestly done. I propose simply to offer you a few hints concerning the particular calling that you have chosen for yourself. Perhaps you may find them of some service occasionally—if so I shall be very proud.

Your future position in life & your standing in the navy depend upon the degree of energy with which you shall acquit yourself of the duties required of you as a Midshipman. If you be idle and inattentive now, you cannot hereafter recover the ground that you will lose. Let the opportunities now afforded you, pass unimproved and you cannot expect hereafter to contend, except at great odds, with your comrades for the honors of the profession.

Make it a rule to make everything while you are young, bend to your profession. The books that you read for amusement let them be professional books, instead of novels—which I hope you will *never* read—read the lives of eminent naval men. I commend to your particular attention ‘Mackenzie’s life of Decatur,² and the life of Admiral Coddington³—Take these two characters as your example, and always have them in your eye, make them in all things, except the duel & the course toward Barron your model.⁴

I say never read novels—because they are destructive to the wholesome habits of the mind as mint-juleps are to those of the body—they both enervate and unfit one for hard study or hard labor—and as a beverage both are very pleasant—But hate them both I pray you my young friend, for they are poisons.

Make it a rule to ask yourself at night what you have learned during the day, and do not be content until you get a reply, and always learn *something*, if it be only the meaning of a word, from the Dictionary.

Make it a rule to obey all orders promptly, and cheerfully. It is immaterial how disagreeable the officer giving the orders may be—or how unpleasant the duty, go about it cheerfully, never sullenly.

Sometimes you will find the Midshipmen disposed to turn on one of their fellows and "run him" as it is called. Make it a rule

never to join with them in this, for it not unfrequently ends, particularly in the navy, in downright persecution.

Make it a rule never to offend nor to seek cause of offence in the conduct of others. Be polite to all, familiar with but few.

Do not be quick to take offence, you will never find a gentleman who will willfully & without any cause real or imaginary offend another. Therefore whenever you imagine yourself aggrieved either by an equal or a superior officer—when you are in doubt as to whether offence were intended or not, go straight up to him, state the case and ask the meaning of intentions. Never let imaginary offences, slights or cuts find a place in your breast—they sour the disposition—Ask to have them explained at once, and in asking be always polite,—Never show temper.

The rule in the Navy is to treat everybody as a gentleman until he proves himself to be otherwise. It is a good rule—observe it well. You will sometimes hear the opinion expressed that it is necessary for a young officer to establish his courage by fighting—Now believe me my young friend, that the courage to stand up and be shot at, is the poorest sort of courage. He only is truly brave who has the courage to do right—This is the highest quality of bravery that a military or any other man can possess.

The doing right, the acting up to principles may sometimes seem to you to be inexpedient, or it may have the appearance of making you unpopular—but let me assure you that it is unwise & always wrong for a man to have enmity in his breast between himself & his conscience. Never trim.

When principle is involved be deaf to *expediency*—It is a dangerous word to all classes of men. I would if I could teach you almost to hate it.

Do you ever read poetry—indulge the taste for that rather than for novels. But whether you ever read poetry or not, I must ask you to get a copy of Burns, and read—no—get by heart the little epistle beginning:—

"I long have thought my honest friend
 'A something to have sent you"—

There are some fine stanzas in this epistle. It is almost the only one in the whole collection that I would advise you to read *now*,

for though it is the fashion to praise Burns up to the skies there is in my judgment a wide difference between Burns the poet & Burns the man, for in the character of the latter I find very little to admire or commend.

But there is one verse in this epistle which I would have you repeat whenever you leave college walls or the ship's side—It commences.—

"Never attempt the illicit rove—"

Pardon me my young friend if I have said anything to wound your pride, or to hurt your feelings, and believe me your sincere well wisher.

M.F. Maury

Laurel E. Ensminger
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NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina for permission to publish this letter from their Francis Lieber Collection, and Oswald F. Schutte for locating the letter.

² Maury probably refers to Capt. A.S. Mackenzie's *Life of Stephen Decatur* (1846). Decatur (1779-1820) won great fame in the Tripolitan War and the War of 1812.

³ "Admiral Coddington" is probably Sir Edward Codrington (1770-1851), a British admiral whose controversial victory at the Battle of Navarino (October 1827) decided the independence of Greece by the destruction of the Ottoman fleet. A Memoir of his life was published in 1873, but much earlier he had written an account of some of his activities.

⁴ Stephen Decatur served under Captain James Barron in the Tripolitan War and participated in two duels during that time.

Burns's Second (Edinburgh) Edition

We know from Burns's correspondence that the second edition of his poems, sold by, but not published by, William Creech in 1787, attracted more subscribers than anticipated. In a letter to Mrs. Dunlop of 22 March 1787 the poet mentions a "third" edition because "the second was begun with too small a number of copies.—The whole I have printed is three thousand." The second and third editions are the so-called "skinking" and "stinking" editions, well known to bibliographers and collectors, which were apparently published on 17 April. For want of more precise information it has been assumed that there were 1,500 copies of each state printed. Of this number about 2,900 were subscribed for, including 500 copies for Creech. J.W. Egerer argues in his *Bibliography of Robert Burns*¹ that Creech had difficulty disposing of his 500 copies and that he sent some of them to London, where they were sold by A. Strahan and T. Cadell before their London edition of 1787 appeared. All of the numbers which Egerer and earlier scholars suggest are approximations.

An interesting MS. may give us a closer approximation. On an unpublished letter of 13 Feb [1788] from Henry Mackenzie to Burns² the poet has jotted down the following figures:

1000
500
1500
250

This total suggests that this may have been Burns's calculation of the number of copies printed. The 1000 would have been the additional names which came in on the subscription lists, the 500 the copies subscribed for by Creech, the 1500 the initial printing (the "skinking" variant), and, perhaps, the 250 the number of copies to be sent to London.

There is no proof that these numbers had anything to do with the print run of Burns's poems, but no other solution comes to mind. Certainly it could not refer to any sum of money; Burns never made that much in his life. That 250 copies were planned on for the London market would fit in with Egerer's conclusion that copies were sent there before the London edition could be

printed, and would also suggest that Creech's estimate that he could sell 500 copies in the Edinburgh market was not far off the mark.

G.R.R.
University of South Carolina

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¹ (Edinburgh, 1964), pp. 12-17.

² This letter is in my possession. It will be published in the forthcoming edition of Mackenzie's literary correspondence edited by Horst Drescher.