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“Dear Burns”: Editing the Other Side of Burns’s Correspondence¹

Joseph DuRant and Patrick Scott

For the past two years, we have been working on the first scholarly collected edition of the letters written to Robert Burns. These letters have never previously been fully collected or edited as a whole, and, even when individual letters or groups of letters have been published, they have sometimes been difficult to keep track of. The edition, titled *Letters Addressed to Robert Burns, 1779-1796*, is admittedly preliminary, a first version based primarily on printed sources, that we expect in due course to be refined and superseded, but in the meantime it should prove useful in making these significant sources more accessible. On completion, the edition described here will be available both on the Web and as an inexpensive paperback.

The project was originally the brainchild, fifty years ago, of the late G. Ross Roy, of the University of South Carolina, who had hoped to include the letters written to Burns in his revised edition of Burns’s own letters. When he first proposed this, his publishers rejected the idea, but in the late 1980s, after he had completed the *Letters of Robert Burns*, he revived the project, joining forces with Kenneth Simpson, who had independently been planning a new edition of Burns’s correspondence with Mrs. Dunlop. Though Dr. Simpson visited South Carolina several times, both scholars were committed to other research, and little progress was made. In 2008, in preparation for a planned visit by Dr. Simpson in spring 2009, Patrick Scott became involved in the project, supervising a student, Lauren Deuell, who drew up a preliminary spreadsheet of available sources, assembled photocopies, and did the first rough work on print sources to create editable files.² In the event, health problems prevented Dr. Simpson’s visit, and plans to include the letters in the projected larger Glasgow-based collected Burns edition changed the context for this project. Once it became clear, in the fall of 2012, that the original editors would not be able to carry things further, Patrick Scott recruited Joseph DuRant, first to help restart the project, and then as co-editor.

Some of the issues to be faced in editing the letters addressed to Burns differ from those in editing the letters he wrote himself. Most important, letters by other people are much less likely to be preserved or traceable than Burns’s own letters, which have long been collected by individuals and libraries. Burns was a marvelous letter writer, thoughtful, playful, provocative, and often self-revealing.³ He became famous very quickly, and he died relatively young, and the letters he wrote were often treasured by

¹ Joseph DuRant’s participation was supported by an Explorer Scholars grant from the South Carolina Honors College and a Magellan Scholarship from the University’s Office of Undergraduate Research.

² OCR [Optical Character Recognition] works relatively well on straightforward modern printed texts or typescripts, but on earlier material, or material in complex page-formats, the digital text it produces can require extensive checking and reformatting.

³ On Burns as letter-writer, see J. DeLancey Ferguson’s introduction, in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), I: xxix-xxxix, partially reprinted in Roy, *Letters*, I: xliii-lx; and two essays by Kenneth Simpson, “The Impulse of Wit: Sterne and Burns’s Letters,” in *The Art of Robert Burns*, ed. R.D.S. Jack and Andrew Noble (London: Vision; Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1982), 151-190, and “‘Epistolary Performances’: Burns and the arts of the letter,” in Scott and Simpson, eds., *Robert Burns and Friends* (Columbia: USC Libraries, 2012), 58-67, at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol37/iss1/7/>.

their recipients. Over eight hundred of the letters he wrote survive, and, though additional letters still turn up, the main corpus is well mapped, with a modern scholarly edition to provide authoritative guidance to the letters themselves and as a starting point for locating the extant sources.⁴

Neither Burns himself nor the first generation of Burnsians was as careful to preserve the letters other people wrote to him. Indeed, even when he had kept the letters, after his death some correspondents retrieved their letters from his executors, and some seem to have destroyed them. But a surprising number of letters written to Burns do survive—493 in total, with some 235 at length and another 258 in contemporary extracts—, and a longstanding need in Burns scholarship has been for this other side of the correspondence to be collected. As Professor Roy wrote when seeking a publisher, “letters from the poet consisted of only half the story, because ... without his correspondent’s letter the reader cannot make sense” of what Burns wrote.⁵ More recently, James Mackay commented that:

The supreme drawback about the Oxford and Burns Federation editions of the poet’s letters ... is that they are both so one-sided. ... Even now, remarkably little is known regarding the correspondence which Burns received.⁶

For instance, Robert Burns’s autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore is one of the most studied letters of the poet, and is widely available. But, though the longest and most important, it is only one of eight letters that Burns wrote to Moore, and Moore in turn addressed at least seven letters to Burns with suggestions and advice for his poetry as well as his personal life, but the two sides of the correspondence have not been available together.

Some of the letters that Burns received, including some significant series of letters, have of course long been available.⁷ When Dr. James Currie compiled the *Works of Robert Burns* (1800), he included some sixty-nine letters from others to Burns, usually in extracts and sometimes heavily edited. The most extensive letter series in the Currie edition was of Burns’s own letters written to the song-editor George Thomson, but as discussed below Currie used the letters Thomson wrote back only selectively.⁸ Two other

⁴ G. Ross Roy, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁵ G. Ross Roy, “Proposal for an Edition of Letters to Robert Burns,” fax to unidentified recipient, January 3, 1994, G. Ross Roy Papers, University of South Carolina Libraries.

⁶ James Mackay, “Beyond the Letters of Burns,” in *Robert Burns & America, A Symposium*, ed. G. Ross Roy (Columbia, SC: Thomas Cooper Library; Kirkcaldy: Akros Publications, 2001), pp. 6-7 (from a talk given to the Robert Burns World Federation meeting, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, July 2001).

⁷ On the story of how Burns’s letters got into print, see Ferguson’s introduction (I: xxxix-xlix), partially reprinted in Roy, *Letters*, I: liv-lx, with Roy’s introduction (I: lxi-lxv); J. C. Ewing’s introduction to *Robert Burns’s Literary Correspondents* (1938; see n. 20 below); and two essays by G. Ross Roy: “Editing Robert Burns in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Burns Now*, ed. Kenneth Simpson (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 129-149; and “Editing Burns’s Letters in the Twentieth Century,” in *Robert Burns: Some Twentieth-Century Perspectives*, ed. R. H. Carnie (Calgary: Calgary Burns Club, 1993), 21-27.

⁸ R. D. Thornton, “James Currie’s Editing of the Correspondence of Robert Burns,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 35 (2007): 403–418, at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol35/iss1/30>. Because Currie added further material in the second edition (1801) and fourth edition (1803), Professor Roy preferred the fourth edition, as being the last of Currie’s life-time (*Letters*, I: vii); R. D. Thornton suggested that only the added material came from Currie, so that any subsequent variants in material first printed in 1800 were probably introduced by the typesetters. Further letters were also added in 1820. For this project, we used the earliest published text for letters from the Currie editions.

major correspondence series were subsequently collected for fuller publication as stand-alone editions: the “Clarinda” side of the correspondence between the poet and Mrs. Agnes M’Lehose, was first published by her grandson in 1843,⁹ though that edition raises textual problems, and the correspondence between Burns and his aristocratic patron Mrs. Frances Dunlop was published in 1898.¹⁰ Over the past two centuries, over forty other single letters to Burns have been included in biographies or editions of the works or in the *Burns Chronicle*. But the letters written to Burns have never been collected so that they can be read in one sequence alongside the letters he wrote himself.

The first phase of work after the project restarted centered on creation of the main text that would make up our edition. Joseph Durant checked the previously OCR-ed text against the photocopies and reformatted the letters to a standard template. We had originally hoped to follow the format of the 1985 Roy Letters, which had followed very closely Ferguson’s format from 1931; following discussion, we established a format more likely to match the needs of the Glasgow edition, based on the format in other recent collected scholarly editions of letters by Scottish writers, including the Carlyles, Stevenson, and particularly James Hogg.

Three special issues required research: conflicts of date, variants of text, and annotation. Sometimes, in different sources, letters would be given different dates, and even different texts, either slightly different or with large chunks appearing in one source that were not elsewhere, or large chunks clearly rewriting the equivalent passage in another. This necessitated comparing every resource available through the University’s G. Ross Roy Collection, or that we could track down elsewhere, as for instance in Peter Westwood’s multivolume set of facsimiles; in the Scottish collaborative digital resource, BurnsScotland, formerly the National Distributed Burns Collection; or in other on-line resources.¹¹ The source we have used for each letter is clearly identified in the first note after the text, and where we know of important textual variants between sources, or the whereabouts of the manuscript, we record that information.

The second phase of research involves annotating the letters. Joseph also began drafting annotations for notable individuals, places and events, as well as any literary allusions that the letter writers made, especially to Burns’s own poetry, the classics of English literature, and the Bible. As Robert Thornton and John Robotham have shown, Burns’s reading was quite wide-ranging, so that many allusions that earlier editors perhaps thought would be recognized by everybody are increasingly opaque even to academic specialists.¹² While the allusions in Burns’s poems are often fully annotated in modern editions, there is already a problem for students with the very sparse annotation in the standard editions of Burns’s own letters, and very few of the letters written to

⁹ William M’Lehose, ed., *The Correspondence between Burns and Clarinda with a Memoir of Mrs. M’Lehose* (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1843).

¹⁰ William Wallace, ed., *Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop; Correspondence Now Published for the First Time, with Elucidations* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), with additions in the New York edition (2 vols., New York, Dodd, Mead, also 1898).

¹¹ Peter J. Westwood, comp., *The Definitive Illustrated Companion to Robert Burns*, 8 vols. in 15 parts (n. p.: Distributed National Burns Collections Project, 2004).

¹² Robert D. Thornton, *The Reading of Robert Burns as Reflected in his Letters and Poems* (unpublished thesis, Wesleyan University, 1938); John S. Robotham, “The Reading of Robert Burns,” *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 74, no. 9 (1970): 561-576, repr. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Carol M. McQuirk (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1998): 281-297.

Burns have ever been annotated at all. However, once we had identified a phrase as a possible literary or Biblical allusion, tracking it down has been made easier with the availability of on-line resources. Annotating these allusions now will make Burns more accessible to future readers and students.

The other aspect of annotation, the identification of people and places mentioned in the letters, has proved more difficult. A boiler-plate paragraph recycling a standard biographical reference source for every person mentioned would be overkill and would soon get repetitious. Ferguson and Roy both resolved the problem by having a separate biographical appendix, giving paragraph-length accounts of all Burns's regular contacts (Ferguson, II: 336-376; Roy, II: 436-488). Ideally, annotations would point out the aspect of the person's life or relationship to Burns most relevant to the particular letter, and in due course Burns scholars will no doubt catch these points of relevance, but they are difficult to recognize in the early stages of a big project. Though we have not taken a final decision, our provisional decision is to give only very brief identifying notes, a phrase or two at most, leaving readers who want to know more to refer to the Roy appendix, the *Burns Encyclopaedia*, or similar tools.

In gathering materials for the *Works*, Currie had needed the cooperation of Burns's friends and correspondents, both to get back Burns's letters from those to whom he had written, and for permission to publish the letters others had written to Burns. In some cases, as with Clarinda, cooperation was refused; in others, there was hard-nosed bargaining. From September 1792, when Burns was contributing to the first parts of George Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice*, he and Thomson frequently exchanged letters, with Burns contributing entirely new sets of words as well as edited texts. Their correspondence was substantially published by Currie in his fourth volume, but not before Thomson had selected and improved the version Currie could work from. Burns's side of the exchange, totaling over fifty letters, has since been carefully reedited to modern standards, but the thirty-one surviving letters from Thomson to Burns, heavily edited and rearranged to make Thomson seem more professional and literary, remain problematical. So the trustees could get their hands on Burns's letters to Thomson, John Syme had given Thomson back his own letters, and Thomson himself reworked the edited text that Currie would print. In the text and letter-sequence that resulted, Thomson will refer to something Burns will not mention till a later letter, or a Thomson letter will fail to ask a question that Burns replies to in the next letter of the published series. Unlike Burns's letters, Thomson's original letters do not survive to help sort out these questions. Though the manuscript of one original Thomson letter has recently been discovered, Thomson seems to have destroyed almost all the letters he got back.

Both of the other major sets of correspondence also raise textual issues. Almost all the original manuscripts for the one hundred letters that Mrs. Frances Dunlop wrote to Burns are preserved in the Morgan Library, New York. The 1898 edition, edited by William Wallace, was in general very reliable as to actual wording, but Wallace 'normalized' the presentation of the text, rather than reproducing the full eccentricity of Mrs. Dunlop's spelling and punctuation. One of the few points of disagreement between Ross Roy and Kenneth Simpson was how best to deal with Mrs. Dunlop's letters. In general they had planned to edit the letters to Burns by the same methods and to the same standards that Professor Roy had used for the letters Burns wrote. For Burns's side of this exchange, he

had re-collated Wallace's text against the Morgan manuscripts, to present exactly what Burns wrote, words and presentation alike. Dr. Simpson, however, felt that this would distract readers from recognizing the literary merit of Mrs. Dunlop's letters; he had planned to check Wallace's text against the manuscripts, to ensure that Wallace's wording was accurate, but not to restore the vagaries of Mrs. Dunlop's spelling. For practical rather than aesthetic reasons, this preliminary edition will follow Dr. Simpson's plan, but a future full scholarly edition is likely to follow Professor Roy's editorial methodology.

Perhaps Burns's best-known letter-series is his correspondence with Agnes M'Lehose, for which they used the pennames Sylvander and Clarinda. The correspondence makes a coherent story and so has been reprinted several times by itself.¹³ The bulk of the letters fall in a period of only a few months, from December 1787 to March 1788, but within that period the pair sometimes exchanged multiple letters in a day. Mrs. M'Lehose had retrieved the originals of her letters, and as in other exchanges Burns's letters far outnumber the twenty-five Clarinda letters for which we have a record. Some of Burns's letters were first printed in 1802, in an unauthorized edition that Clarinda managed to get withdrawn, but the remainder and her own letters were not published till 1843, after her death.¹⁴ The original letters were then sold off quite cheaply at auction, either as separate items or in small lots, so they are widely scattered among different libraries and collectors; the Roy Collection has two original letters from Burns to Clarinda, and one from Clarinda to Burns that was not included in the 1843 edition.¹⁵ Clarinda herself, and later biographers and editors treating the Sylvander-Clarinda relationship, have sometimes changed dates and re-ordered letters within the correspondence, without the reason always being obvious. It is hoped that returning the Clarinda letters to the larger biographical context will help resolve some of these questions.

One additional group of sixteen Clarinda letters, printed in the 1850s as an appendix to a one-volume reprint of Cunningham's edition, supposedly came from the library of the eccentric English bibliophile Sir Egerton Brydges (1762-1837).¹⁶ This appendix gives significantly different versions of half the Clarinda letters, with letters re-dated and with the text rewritten in attitude and style. The Brydges collection also contains what purports to be the first letter in which Mrs. M'Lehose suggested the pennames under which the rest of the correspondence would be written; this letter is so helpful to biographers that it has frequently been quoted as authentic, but it occurs in no other

¹³ The first and defining edition was by William M'Lehose in 1843 (n. 9 above), reprinted New York: Bixby, the same year, but cf. also: Amelia Josephine Burr, ed., *Sylvander and Clarinda: the Love Letters of Robert Burns and Agnes M'Lehose* (New York: George H. Doran, [1917]); Raymond Lamont-Brown, *Clarinda: the Intimate Story of Robert Burns and Agnes MacLehose* (Dewsbury: Martin Black, 1968); Donny O'Rourke, ed., *Ae Fond Kiss: the Love Letters of Robert Burns and Clarinda* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Robert Burns, *Letters Addressed to Clarinda* (Glasgow: Niven, 1802), repr. with intro by G. Ross Roy, Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2009), available at: <http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/sldp/clarinda.html>. On the early publication history, see James C. Ewing, *Robert Burns's Letters Addressed to Clarinda: a History of its Publication and Interdiction with a Bibliography* (Edinburgh: for private circulation, 1921), and cf. Pauline Mackay, "'Prudes, pirates, and bills of suspension,' the correspondence of Burns and 'Clarinda,'" *Burns Chronicle* (Spring 2005), 11-14.

¹⁵ This and other Burns manuscripts in the Roy Collection are now accessible on the Web at: <http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/sldp/burns-manuscripts.html>.

¹⁶ Allan Cunningham, ed., *The Poetical and Prose Works of Robert Burns ... with original pieces from the collection of Sir Egerton Brydges, Bart.* (London: Charles Daly, [1855]); see Mackay, as in n. 13, and J. C. E., "Letters of Clarinda to Sylvander, A Burns Mystery," *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd ser., 9 (1934), 72-77.

source or archive.¹⁷ The Egerton Brydges appendix therefore poses bizarre problems for the modern editor. Brydges had been dead some time before the earliest appearance of letters in Burns bibliographies, but he had owned his own press and for over forty years he had issued reprints of literary source-materials for collectors in limited editions.¹⁸ Repeated searches have found no trace of such earlier publication. The versions from the Brydges collection seem like intentional re-writes and re-dating, perhaps by a publisher or editor to get around copyright restrictions on the versions published in 1843, or perhaps Clarinda's own rewriting after Burns's death, for an edition she never produced, that she intended to bolster her image for posterity.

As the letters written to Burns were not preserved with as much diligence as the letters of the poet himself, many letters addressed to Burns survive only in printed fragments. In January 1797, as James Currie began work on his edition, he was faced with "a huge and shapeless mass" of papers, and he got an amanuensis to make an inventory of just over 300 "letters addressed to Robert Burns and in the poet's possession at the time of his death." This inventory, which not only recorded the correspondent and date, but also gave brief notes on the content of each letter, arrived in due course in the Burns Birthplace Museum. As can readily be seen from the digitized version, by then it had suffered significant water damage, so that parts of each page are lost and the extracts are therefore tantalizingly incomplete.¹⁹ Despite these gaps in the text, the list was transcribed by J.C. Ewing for publication in the *Burns Chronicle* in 1933, issued separately in 1938, and reprinted as an appendix to the Roy Letters in 1985.²⁰ For some 258 letters written to Burns, the summaries in the Currie list are now the only surviving record, and we took the decision to include them in the main chronological letter sequence, rather than segregating them in an appendix.

Currie's list has unique importance, not only because of the number of letters it includes, but because of the range of Burns's correspondents that it records—well-known figures like Dr. Moore, or Graham of Fintry, or Glencairn's sister, Patrick Millar of Dalswinton, or the Earl of Buchan, but also many individuals who are otherwise completely unknown in Burns scholarship; for instance, there are extracts from business letters from a stonemason and a draper. There are also relationships of recognized importance in which we would otherwise only have Burns's voice, as with the fifteen letters to Burns from the Edinburgh bookseller Peter Hill, or the thirteen letters to Burns from his Edinburgh publisher William Creech, all preserved only in the Currie list. And there are wonderful one-off finds, such as the single letters to Burns from the poet and ornithologist Alexander Wilson or the actor-poet Gavin Turnbull or the Dumfries actor-manager J. B. Williamson ("Esopus"). The fragmentary nature of the Currie summaries makes annotation difficult, but even the fragments can fill in much about Burns's life if appropriate connections are recognized.

¹⁷ Cunningham, p. 548.

¹⁸ Mary Katherine Woodworth, *The Literary Career of Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1935); Tony Appleton, *The Private Press of Lee Priory* (Brighton: n. p., 1978).

¹⁹ James Currie, "Inventory of letters addressed to Robert Burns . . .," MS, Burns Birthplace Museum, Alloway: at <http://burnsscotland.com/items/m/ms-inventory-of-letters-addressed-to-robert-burns-and-in-the-poet%E2%80%99s-possession-at-the-time-of-his-death.aspx>.

²⁰ J.C. Ewing, "Burns's Literary Correspondents, 1786-1796," *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd ser., 8 (1933): 18-77, reprinted with additional material as J. C. Ewing, ed., *Robert Burns's Literary Correspondents, 1786-1796: a chronological list of letters addressed to the poet, with precis of their contents* (Alloway: Burns Monument Trustees, 1938); Roy, *Letters*, II: 399-433 (Appendix I).

As mentioned above, before his death, Dr. Roy had been invited, and agreed, to collaborate in editing Burns's letters for the new multi-volume edition of Robert Burns, based at the University of Glasgow, and published by Clarendon Press. The intention is that the Glasgow edition will in due course bring both sides of the correspondence into a single, three-volume sequence.

We are collaborating with this plan and have already shared with the Glasgow project our preliminary digital texts of the letters written to Burns. Because the correspondence volumes are planned for publication later in the Glasgow series, we plan also to make the letters written to Burns separately available in preliminary form, both in print-on-demand hard copy and in digital form. We still have a fair bit of proof-checking and further annotation to do before that, but we hope this report, and the release of the preliminary edition, will spur the discovery of further letters that have so far escaped attention, and of manuscript sources for the many letters to Burns that are at present only known from early printed sources or as extracts in the Currie list.