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Harriet Harvey Wood

Burns and Watson's *Choice Collection*

I feel on somewhat weak ground, writing about James Watson in a volume devoted to Robert Burns. Watson died more than thirty-five years before Burns was born. There is no evidence to indicate with any certainty that Burns ever saw Watson's *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Songs*. Yet the line of descent which links Watson's *Collection* with Burns's work is the chief justification today for claiming attention for what, without it, would, I have no doubt at all, be regarded as an ill-edited rag-bag of poems, many of them second-rate, unworthy the attention of a serious scholar. I should like, however, to consider what there is in it to justify its reputation as one of the most influential works in the history of Scottish poetry and, if possible, what influence, direct or indirect, it may have had on Burns.

Before looking more closely at the contents of the *Collection*, and what influence it may have had on later writers, it is necessary to look at what was going on at the time it was produced, and indeed at the man who produced it. This latter task is not easy, mainly because the materials for constructing a biography of Watson are extremely scanty. His date and place of birth are unknown (Aberdeen in 1664 have been guessed). There are no letters, no personal papers of any kind; there is no portrait. There are scrappy mentions of him in official records, and there is a mountain of paper connected with his continual law cases. This is of considerable interest to printing and bibliographical history but in personal terms proves only that Watson was litigation-happy, and was seldom without a guid ganging plea.

He is anonymous even beyond what one might expect in these circumstances. For example, he was clearly closely interested in and, we deduce,

sympathetic to the Darien Venture, and, in common with many of his compatriots, he deeply resented its failure, freely ascribed in Scotland to English jealousy of Scottish competition in the trade with the Americas. He published a number of poems and pamphlets on the subject, one of them seditious to the extent of getting him locked up in the Tolbooth, from which he was released by a sympathetic mob; but his name does not appear on the list of subscribers to the venture, although this list includes names ranging from the Duke of Queensberry to servants and apprentices, and one might certainly expect to find Watson's among them. Again, the Easy Club, of which Ramsay was a founding member, was started in 1712 to promote the general patriotic and cultural ideas and principles which Watson appears to have spent his life supporting; the fact that some members initially adopted sobriquets from *The Tatler* cannot, in the restricted Edinburgh of the day, be totally unconnected with the fact that Watson had reprinted it in 1710, nor is it possible to suppose that Watson, living just round the corner from Ramsay, did not know of the club's foundation; here again there is no evidence that he had any connection with a society which would appear to have been designed specifically to interest him. There was one member of the club who was a printer and operated under the alias of Andro Hart, but there is no evidence that this was Watson. The publications for which he is now mainly remembered—the *Choice Collection*, his preface to Jean La Caille's *History of Printing*—are so anonymously presented that his claim to their authorship has been disputed in favor of John Spottiswoode, Keeper of the Advocates Library, though the Spottiswoode theory is now largely discredited. We know when he died (1722), and we have his will and that is about all we do have.

What is known of him, therefore, must be deduced from his work and fortunately we can glean a certain amount from this. The Preface to the La Caille *History of Printing* is particularly informative on the subject of the Watson family (one reason why it seems perverse to attribute it to Spottiswoode, who could have little reason to devote so disproportionate an amount of space to one printer's family out of the many mentioned in it), and from it we learn that the Watson family had strong connections with Aberdeen, where his father was a merchant with a particular interest in printing, that his mother was a Dutchwoman, and that he himself was "design'd to be bred a Printer."¹ Aberdeenshire, indeed all the North-East corner of Scotland after the Reformation was traditionally Episcopalian (and indeed Catholicism lingered longer there than in many other places), and retained a particularly strong heritage of humanism and Latinity; it was notorious for its strong support for the house of Stewart; and it was one of the main centers of popular song in Scotland.

¹Watson's Preface to "The History of Printing, 1713," ed. W. J. Couper (Edinburgh, 1913), p. 16.

All these factors clearly influenced Watson's career. At what stage in his life his father abandoned trading for printing is not certain but in 1685 (when Watson must have been about twenty-one), he purchased a printing house in Edinburgh and obtained from Charles II, in repayment of a financial debt incurred during Charles's exile, the gift of being the King's Printer after the expiry of the current Anderson monopoly. Since this still had some years to run, he was presumably thinking as much of his son's printing future as his own when he asked for this gift. The following year his premises were invaded by an Edinburgh mob, and James II, who by then had succeeded his brother, installed him in the precincts of Holyrood House for his protection. Whether it was this fact or his own religious convictions that caused him to be known as "the Popish printer" is not certain; it may have been both. The taint of Catholicism was to cling to him and to his son throughout both their lives, though it is fairly certain that, whatever he was at the beginning of his life, his son spent most of it as a Protestant, probably an Episcopalian. Whether, as in the case of Charles II, this was for reasons of policy is not known. Certainly, as a professed Catholic, he could hardly have printed Bibles and other publications with the authority of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, as he did, especially after 1688.

Our Watson set up his own printing house in 1694, seven years after his father's death, and for the next five years pursued an uneventful career, printing journals and pamphlets as well as legal, medical and other learned books. The names of Dr. Alexander Pitcairne and John Spottiswoode appear among his earliest customers. They, together with the names of other known acquaintances such as Robert Freebairn and Thomas Ruddiman, suggest his membership of a circle of professionals and scholars, men of Latinist, Jacobite and Episcopalian sympathies, many of them connected, as he was himself, with Aberdeenshire and the North-East. As the century drew to a close, his output changed character slightly. He printed Fletcher of Saltoun's *Defence of the Scots Settlement at Darien* three times in 1699, as well as other items related to that ill-fated venture. In the same year he printed Sir Robert Sibbald's *Provision for the Poor in time of Dearth and Scarcity*, a reminder that by this time Scotland was in the middle of what are known as "the seven ill years," when harvests failed and poverty, famine and pestilence were endemic throughout the country. As news of the failure of the Darien venture trickled back, his acknowledged publications took on a more controversial aspect. His unacknowledged ones (and no doubt many pamphlets came from his press which prudently did not carry his imprint) appear to have been even more questionable. The pamphlets which caused him and his collaborator, Hugh Paterson, to be imprisoned in the Tolbooth do not appear in the bibliography of his press. He and Paterson, after their liberation by the Edinburgh mob, returned to stand trial (Watson was defended by Spottiswoode though, as he pleaded guilty, his advocate could do little for him) and were exiled from Edinburgh for a year and a day. Watson went to Glasgow, where he carried on printing in the

Gorbals, returned to Edinburgh in 1701 and resumed his career. By this time the debate over the Union with England was starting. A joint commission started discussions on a treaty of union in 1702; the last independent Scottish parliament met in May 1703, and in 1705 passed the Act for a Treaty with England; and in February 1706 Queen Anne nominated the thirty-one commissioners who were to represent Scotland in the negotiations at Westminster, which began in April and ended in July. The Articles of Union were published later in the year. In the first week of August, Part I of Watson's *Choice Collection* appeared on the bookstall of John Vallange. Subsequent parts appeared in 1709 and 1711, the third part concluding with the words "The End of the First Volume." There was to be no second volume.

Throughout the Union debate, as during the Darien disaster, Watson's other publications had hinted which way his sympathies lay. His publication of pamphlets such as *Scotland reduced by Force of Arms and made a Province of England* and *A Pil for Porkeaters or a Scots Lancet for an English Swelling together with The Englishman's Address to his Pock-pudding* do not suggest enthusiasm for the proposed union. It has to be remembered that Scotland had had fairly recent experience of Union with England under Cromwell's protectorate, and had not found it an encouraging experience—"as when the poor bird is embodied into the hawk that hath eaten it up," as one contemporary observer had put it. Given the political context in which it appeared, it is not difficult to see the *Choice Collection* as a rather more subtle piece of anti-union (or perhaps rather pro-Scottish) propaganda. In 1705 and 1706, anti-union feeling in Edinburgh ran so high that at times the city was virtually under mob rule and known union supporters were threatened in the streets. The publisher's Preface to the collection, advertising the book as "the first of its Nature which has been publish'd in our own Native Scots Dialect"² reinforces the idea that Watson intended it as an overtly patriotic and nationalistic enterprise—or at least as a reminder to his countrymen of a part of their national heritage which seemed in danger of being forgotten, or drowned by the flood of "Collections of Miscellaneous Poems in our Neighbouring Kingdoms and States" (*Choice Collection*, I, iii), as he puts it in his Preface. It also suggests that Watson, realizing that political resistance was unlikely to be effective, was turning to a more literary form of nationalism.

It should not be forgotten just how revolutionary such an undertaking was at that time. No printed collection of miscellaneous poems had previously been published in Scotland, with the possible exception of Arthur Johnson's *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* (Amsterdam, 1637, but perhaps printed in Scotland) which consisted entirely of poetry in Latin, and John Forbes, Elder's, *Cantus, Songs and Fancies* (Aberdeen, 1662), which was primarily a song-

²James Watson's *Choice Collection of Comic and Serious Scots Poems*, ed. Harriet Harvey Wood. 2 vols. STS, 4th Series, 10, 26 (1976, 1991), I, iii. Henceforth *Choice Collection*.

book. And Watson was proposing to produce a collection, not just of Scottish poems, but of Scottish poems *in Scots*. It is important to remember here not just the increasing dominance of the English language in seventeenth-century Scottish poetry (which indeed Watson's own collection was to demonstrate), but also the place of Latin in literature of the time. For many of Watson's contemporaries (e.g., one of the best known, Dr. Archibald Pitcairne), the choice of literary medium was not English or Scots but English or Latin; and for those of Watson's circle, of patriotic, Jacobite, Episcopalian leanings, the choice would most frequently be Latin. As Ruddiman's biographer has written of Pitcairne's *Selecta Poemata*, "Once again it had been shown that a Scottish poet writing in Latin could achieve a linguistic assurance and sophistication not available to him in English or Scots."³ Ramsay, in his 1721 Preface to the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, written shortly before Watson's death, in effect excuses his own use of the vernacular by pleading his ignorance of Latin and Greek, implying that for Scottish patriots who wished to avoid English, Latin was a natural first choice.

The late seventeenth century has been unkindly regarded as one of the periods of least activity and thus of least interest to historians in the pre-Union stretch of Scottish history, and there is much to support this point of view. But it is not wholly deserved, and there were movements in the undergrowth which point ahead to the flowering of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and provide a context for Watson's own activity. The development between the Restoration and the Union of a professional middle class in Scotland has been commented on by a number of critics. To quote one of them,

In 1660 Scotland lacked, and by 1707 had developed, an intelligentsia—made up largely of lawyers, doctors, academics and ministers. The emergence of such a group of thinkers, and the institutional and intellectual developments associated with them, was the most significant development of late 17th century Scottish culture.⁴

And he ascribes this evolution to a period of comparative domestic peace, increase in wealth and the security of a property-based social structure. Certainly the record of the time supports the view: the period between 1660 and 1707 saw the foundation of the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal Botanical Garden, the Royal College of Surgeons, new chairs in mathematics, botany and medicine at the University of Edinburgh (which itself received a Royal Charter), the Library of the Faculty of Advocates, now the National Library of Scotland, and many other comparable organizations. A period which saw an

³Douglas Duncan, *Thomas Ruddiman: A Study in Scottish Scholarship of the Early Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1965), p. 19.

⁴Hugh Ouston, "Cultural Life from the Restoration to the Union," *History of Scottish Literature*, Vol. II, ed. Andrew Hook (Aberdeen, 1987), p. 12. Henceforth Ouston.

interest in and expansion of learning on this scale cannot have been as devoid of intellectual excitement as has sometimes been supposed. And there is ample evidence that the motive force behind most of these developments was, in large part, and in the words of Sir Robert Sibbald, himself one of the chief movers in this professional evolution, “a mutual desire of benefitting and adorning [our] country by the preservation of its historical and literary treasures” (Ouston, p. 14). The names and work of the men who were foremost in this movement—Sibbald himself, Pitcairne, James and David Gregory, Sir George Mackenzie and others—occur regularly in the bibliography of Watson’s press, and it is not difficult to see Watson’s own career as yet another manifestation of ideals described by Sibbald. Both his introduction to the *History of Printing* and his *Choice Collection* were, in their more humble way, his contributions to the preservation of Scotland’s historical and literary treasures as much as Viscount Stair’s *Institutes of the Laws of Scotland* or Sibbald’s *Scotia Illustrata*. Watson’s Introduction to the *History of Printing*, like the Preface to the *Choice Collection*, states his object quite clearly:

I entertain a settled well grounded Hope, that the Perusal of this [treatise] will inspire us all with a noble and generous Emulation of equalling, nay, exceeding, if we can, the best Performances of our laudable Ancestors in the employment. That since our Native Country has at present as many good Spirits, and Abundance of more Authors than in any former Age; we may make it our Ambition, as well as it is our Interest and Honour, to furnish them with Printers that can serve them so well, that they need not, as many of our former Authors have been forc’d to do, go to other Countries to publish their Writings, lest a learn’d Book should be spoiled by an ignorant or careless Printer.

If patriotic fervor was his motivation for publishing his *Collection*, however, it has to be admitted that his efforts were only partially successful. The contents of the *Choice Collection* are a mess—and so is the arrangement of them. Watson was no editor, not just by present-day standards but even by the best eighteenth-century standards, such as those of Lord Hailes. The best editorial fact that we know about him is that he was, as far as can be deduced, a very faithful transcriber of his sources. He set out, largely, I believe, for political reasons, to produce a collection of Scots poems in Scots; he ended up with a mish-mash of material, part Scots, part English, partly in Scots, partly (even the Scots poems) in English. He clearly worked in a hurry, and used whatever sources came most easily to hand, and they were very often (though not always) extremely corrupt. There is no evidence that he undertook anything in the way of scholarly research. In the Preface to Part I, he acknowledges his indebtedness to “the Researches of some Curious and Ingenious Gentlemen, who take pleasure in keeping several comic and Diverting Poems by them” (*Choice Collection*, I, iv); and it is likely that he was helped by long-standing acquaintances, such as Pitcairne, Spottiswoode and Ruddiman. For Parts II and III he advertised for copy and there is every reason to suppose that he simply

accepted anything he was offered from private song-books and commonplace books and set it up in print as he received it. The fact that many such offerings were not only English but *in* English does not seem to have perturbed him, notwithstanding his advertised intention of publishing poems, "in our own Native Scots Dialect." It is only Part I of the *Choice Collection* which comes anywhere near fulfilling his original intentions, though there are items of interest in parts II and III also.

Taking the three parts together, most of what he actually printed can be split up into four categories:

1. Older poems in Scots: in this section he included poems such as "Christ's Kirk" and "The Country Wedding" (this last in a late and very corrupt form), Montgomerie's "Cherrie and the Slae" and some other shorter Montgomerie poems as well as his splendid "Flying" with Patrick Hume of Polwarth, two long and tedious poems by Montgomerie's contemporary, John Burel, and the anonymous "Robert III's Answer to Henry IV of England." Despite his undertaking in the Preface to copy from the most correct manuscripts, all of these have been taken from late and very corrupt printings.

2. Later, mainly seventeenth-century, poems in Scots, such as Sir Robert Sempill's "Piper of Kilbarchan" and his son Francis's "The Blythsome Wedding," Hamilton of Gilbertfield's "Last Dying Words of Bonny Heck, a Greyhound in the Shire of Fife," and two anonymous poems, "The Mare of Collingtoun" and "Speech of a Fife Laird," together with even later derivatives such as the epitaphs on Sanny Briggs and William Lithgow. Most of the sources of these can be found on contemporary broadsides.

3. Seventeenth-century Scots poems in English—those of Aytoun, Drummond and Montrose. For the Aytoun and Montrose poems particularly he has provided good texts not available elsewhere. We have Francis Sempill appearing again with "The Banishment of Poverty" and an early version of "Old Lang Syne" (in two parts and 80 lines) which may also be by him. Here we also have Sir George Mackenzie's "Celia's Country House and Closet," English translations of George Buchanan's "Epithalamium" on the marriage of Queen Mary to the French Dauphin and his "The Poor Client's Complaint" (if that can be called a translation which is enlarged from the twelve lines of the original Latin to over one hundred), "Hallow my Fancie," ascribed here to William Cleland, and a Latin-English poem on "The King and Queen of Fairy," translated by Archibald Pitcairne under his pen-name Walter Dennestone but not by him. Here too, for lack of anywhere better to put it, we might include, as well as Drummond's "Forth Feasting," his macaronic "Polem-Middinia." There are also conventional funerary tributes on John, Earl of Errol, Sir Charles Maitland of Pittrichie and Lady Callendar.

4. Poems in English, some of which are unattributable and most of which are probably English—and it should be said here that there is often considerable difficulty in distinguishing between poems which should come into this category and those which should be in the previous one. Here we have a

ribald poem on Charles II's mistress, Lady Castlemaine, found in almost every English commonplace book of the period, a paraphractical translation of one of Ovid's "Amores," almost certainly by an English poet, possibly Sedley or Oldham, "A Disswasive from Women," "A Lover's Lamentation," "The Constant Lover," "The Indifferent Lover," "The Careless Lover," "The Tunnice-Court," which has been ascribed to Montrose and thus perhaps should be in the previous category, and a number of other items of varying degrees of merit. There is one particularly charming poem, "The Election," the syntax of which particularly suggests a Scottish origin and demonstrates the difficulty of categorization in this peculiar collection:

Some loves a Woman for her Wit
 Some Beauty does admire,
 Some loves a handsome Leg or Foot
 Some upwards does aspire;
 Some loves a Mistress nice and coy,
 Some Freedom does approve;
 Some like their Persons to enjoy,
 Some for Platonick Love.
 Some loves a Widow, some a Maid,
 Some loves the Old, some young;
 Some love until they be betray'd,
 Some till they be undone:
 Some love for Money, some for Worth,
 Some love the Proud and High;
 Some love for Fancy, some for Birth,
 Some love, and knows not why.
 Some love the Little, Plump and Fat,
 Some love the Long and Small:
 Some loves for Kindness, and 'tis that
 Moves me beyond them all. (*Choice Collection*, III, 71)

This is perhaps a forerunner of Leporello's catalogue aria in *Don Giovanni*.

One of the interesting things about a survey of Watson's contents is not what he did include but what he didn't. We have already noted his omission of most of the really distinguished early Scottish poetry, and given the scarcity of prints and manuscripts of much of it in his day, this is not very surprising, though his omission of Barbour and Blind Harry, not to mention Sir David Lyndsay and Gavin Douglas, all frequently printed during the seventeenth century, is a little odd. He might well have left them out for this very reason, though his inclusion of Montgomerie, reprinted even more frequently, indicates that this was probably not the case. He did not include any street or folk ballad material, which is even more surprising. Equally, and more fortunately, he did not include any of the topical and political ephemera which occupy so much space in the contemporary English collections to which he refers in his Preface, and for this we can be grateful.

I propose here to ignore all the last category and concentrate on the rest, because although some of what Watson printed appears at first sight to fulfill; his original nationalistic intentions, more careful examination reveals a different situation, and I do not only refer to the fact that much of it was in English. The really interesting thing about the *Choice Collection* is the extent to which it supports the idea of a common British song culture, in which poems, songs and song-settings traveled freely back and forth between England and Scotland long before the Union took place. Thomas Crawford has commented on the popularity of English ballads and songs in Aberdeenshire as early as 1775; given Watson's Aberdonian origins, it seems probable that they were popular there 100 years earlier than that, and Crawford himself points to the inclusion of English songs in Forbes' song-book, *Cantus, Songs and Fancies* (an Aberdonian production, incidentally) as early as 1662. Many of Watson's poems provide further support. Take, for example, from Part I, "Hallow my Fancie," attributed by Watson in part to William Cleland, the young Cameronian Colonel who died at the battle of Dunkeld. Watson prints a version consisting of seventeen stanzas. The earliest recorded version of it was registered in England under the title, "Ha, Ha my Fancy" in 1639. The earliest surviving version of it, also in England, is in Bishop Percy's Folio MS, generally regarded as having been compiled c. 1650, and consists of six stanzas only. A slightly later version, in which Percy's text had already begun to gather accretions, survives in the Douce Collection and was probably printed between 1663 and 1674. By 1641, a broadside in the Roxburghe Collection indicates that it had already begun to be parodied, notably by Robert Wild. All these appear to be indubitably English productions. Another Roxburghe broadside, titled *The Bedlam Schoolman*, also English, and dated c. 1700 by the STC, gives the seventeen-stanza version printed by Watson though without any acknowledgment to Cleland. Watson took his version from the collection of Cleland's poems printed in Edinburgh in 1697 by Cleland's friends after his death. The fact that the poem had achieved popularity in Scotland is further indicated by the appearance of a setting for it in the Balcarres Lute Book (c. 1690). The point at issue here is not whether Cleland wrote the nine stanzas attributed to him; he probably wrote eight of them. It is that Watson, when he included it, may not have been aware of its English origins, although the text he printed is indubitably English, even the Cleland part.

A poem with a similar history is "Lady Anne Bothwell's Balow" in Part III. Since a version of a Lutheran hymn in *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* is set to the tune of "Baw lula low," the refrain of the poem, as early as 1567, it is reasonable to suppose that the tune and words to go with it were current in Scotland by then, though the words may have been, probably were, quite unlike Watson's. Like "Hallow my Fancie," a version of it appears in the Percy Folio; versions or extracts from it appear in another five English sources at various points in the seventeenth century. What is certain is that, by 1650 and probably earlier, it was also well enough known in Scotland for there to be two inde-

pendent versions of it with slightly different meters in a Laing MS in Edinburgh University Library (1625-49), indicating that there were originally two independent poems on closely similar themes. There is another Scottish text, with musical setting, of one of them in the Alexander MacAlman Music Book (c. 1656). A confused conflation of the two Laing MS texts was printed in a late seventeenth-century English broadside of which there is a copy in the Roxburghe Collection; this gives seventeen stanzas, as opposed to Watson's thirteen; but it was no doubt from a conflated print of this nature that he took his text. Again, this, like "Hallow my Fancy," is essentially an English text.

There are many other examples in Watson of this kind of pan-British ancestry. Montrose's famous poem, "My Dear and Only Love," has a similar line of descent. In some cases it is the words which have traveled, in other cases the settings or the meters. Francis Sempill's "The Banishment of Poverty" is indubitably his; but the tune to which it was intended to be sung, "The Last Good Night," is English. Nothing could be more authentically Scottish than Alexander Montgomerie's "The Cherrie and the Slae"; but the complicated meter in which it is written appeared first in England in a song, "The Nine Muses," dating probably from 1565. The most obvious example of this kind of cultural commerce (and the most interesting, in the context of a Burns Conference) is Watson's most famous stanza form of all, the Burns stanza or Standard Habbie, so named from its use by Robert Sempill for his famous poem, "The Life and Death of the Piper of Kilbarchan," better known as the "Epitaph on Habbie Simson." Its antecedents in Provençal and medieval English poetry are now a matter of common knowledge, as is its use in much earlier Scots poetry. But Watson did not know this, and it is arguable that his inclusion of "The Piper of Kilbarchan" in his collection, and his legacy of the stanza form in which it is written was one of his most important and significant services to Scottish literature.

So where does this get us—or, rather, where did Watson's rather miscellaneous rag-bag get Scottish poetry? Further perhaps than this rather disparaging account might seem to imply. Whatever the weaknesses of the collection, it is probable that Watson produced a fairly accurate snapshot of what was available and read in the way of Scots poetry in the Edinburgh of his time. If one turns away from what Watson did not include (the work of the most distinguished writers of earlier centuries), and considers only what he did print, it becomes clear that he shaped the course which Scottish poetry was to take for the rest of the century. We may not know whether Burns ever saw the *Choice Collection*, but it is perfectly clear that Ramsay knew it, and leaned heavily on it in the compilation of his own *Tea-Table Miscellany*. It is debatable whether Ramsay, with his editorial tamperings and his rewritings of old songs, taken from Watson's pages or elsewhere, contributed more or less to the development of Scottish poetry than Watson did with his accurate transcriptions of corrupt texts. Less, in my view. Ramsay had an advantage that Watson did not have, in his access to the treasure-house of early Scottish poetry in the Ban-

natyne MS; but it is also to be noted that *The Ever Green*, the collection which he based on Bannatyne, had little success in his own lifetime, compared with the *Tea-Table Miscellany*, which was so heavily influenced by Watson, and which was so frequently reprinted. Watson took what was blowing around the streets of Edinburgh and perpetuated it in a more permanent form; and it is the cumulative effect of the collection which has proved durable, more so than the effect any individual poem could have had on its own. He contrived to select (probably more by chance than good management) precisely those poems which best illustrated the continuity of the Scottish poetic tradition; the fact that few of them were great poetry is in this context unimportant.

"The history of Scottish poetry is different from that of English," wrote W. P. Ker. "It is the history of forms establishing themselves and being followed closely by writers of poetry."⁵ The forms perpetuated by Watson were to shape decisively the work of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns, to whom he passed on models which were to influence their best work. In his pages, his successors were to find poems of popular revelry and conviviality, such as "Christ's Kirk" and "The Blythsome Wedding," poems which on the one hand go back to folk tradition of the Middle Ages and on the other look forward to Fergusson's "Leith Races," Burns's "Holy Fair" and, in the further future, Tennant's *Anster Fair* and Robert Garioch's "Embroidered the Ploy." They found the Habbie Simson epitaph tradition, which led forward to the epitaphs on Maggie Johnson and Lucky Spence; in "The Mare of Collingtoun" and "Bonny Heck," they found the tradition of the death and dying words of animals which also looks back to the medieval fabliau tradition and to poems such as Lyndsay's *Testament and Complaynt of the Papyngo* and indeed further back, to late Latin exemplars such as the *Testamentum Porcelli* and forward to poems like "The Death and Dying Words of Poor Mailie." They found the "Christ's Kirk" meter, and *The Cherrie and the Slae* meter, and it should be noted that it was Watson's version of the "Christ's Kirk" stanza, corrupt as it was, with the mutilated bob-wheel ending, that survived. Ramsay's additional cantos to *Christ's Kirk on the Green*, published in 1718, used this shortened version, though after he found the original form in the Bannatyne MS, he printed this in *The Ever Green*. But the form used by Fergusson and Burns is Watson's. Most valuable of all, they found Standard Habbie which gave us "Holy Willie's Prayer" and "Braid Claith" and "The Daft Days." And in most cases it was the legacy of Watson that seemed to inspire the most important work in those who followed him. The metrical ingenuity of the verse epistles in Standard Habbie which passed between Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield must rank among the best of what Ramsay ever wrote, and the short career of Robert Fergusson indicates what might have been made of the vernacular tradition which Watson handed down if he had had longer to develop it. There can have

⁵*Form and Style in Poetry* (London, 1966), p. 201.

been no greater tragedy for Scottish vernacular poetry than Fergusson's death at the age of twenty-four. But Standard Habbie had a late flowering in the hands of Stevenson who showed in the Scots poems of *Underwoods* what it was still capable of one hundred years ago and pronounced, in "The Maker to Posterity," the final epitaph on Watson's endeavor to perpetuate poetry "in our native Scots Dialect":

Few spak it then, an' noo there's nane.
My puir auld sangs lie a' their lane,
Their sense, that aince was braw an' plain.
 Tint a' thegither,
Like runes upon a standin' stane
 Amang the heather.

British Council, Emerita