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Robert D. Thornton

Serge Hovey and the Others

PARDON! For me to write of Serge Hovey's edition of the songs of Robert Burns will make more sense if I begin with something of myself. When I graduated with a B.A. from Wesleyan University in 1939, I received the accolade of High Distinction in English by having submitted an honors thesis on the reading of Robert Burns. This Honors College study under the direction of Homer E. Woodbridge, Kittredge-trained at Harvard, made me certain that I should enter graduate study for the M.A. in English as a means of further developing my interest in Burns. In 1939 such purpose pointed in three directions: towards Northwestern University with Franklin Bliss Snyder, towards the University of Maryland with Robert Paysan Fitzhugh, and towards Western Reserve University with John DeLancey Ferguson. All three universities extended teaching fellowships; I chose Western Reserve mainly because I had spent so many hours with Ferguson's Oxford edition of the Letters where my attention had been upon the subject of the reading of Robert Burns as revealed in his letters.

The M.A. year under Professor Ferguson gave me the chance to submit several various studies in lieu of a formal thesis; all these studies centered upon Burns. One was continuance of widening the study of Burns's reading; another was my first serious regard for the songs. To pursue the latter, Ferguson, who like most Burns scholars knew nothing of music, sent me over to the College of Music where I was bound apprentice to a second mentor, Melville Smith, immeasurably gifted Professor of Harmony trained by Nadia Boulanger and *Prix du Disque* organist. Basically, with both Ferguson and Smith as my guides, I was to determine as exactly as possible the music to which Burns

composed his songs. What tune had he hummed over and over again before he started to write his lines? Even what version of what tune?

At year's end—over a straight scotch—Ferguson commanded, “Get out of here, go get a good Ph.D.” In his leaning towards Harvard, he pointed out that the Chairman of the Department of English in Cambridge was George Sherburn, like myself a Wesleyan alumnus. Professor Ferguson, moreover, was certain that if I chose to write my doctoral dissertation on Robert Burns, Sherburn would permit me to continue under the wings of Ferguson himself and of Smith. I did, indeed, matriculate in Cambridge; and Chairman Sherburn not only offered me a teaching fellowship but also enthusiastically supported the proposal that Ferguson direct my thesis.

Interrupted for more than four years by World War II, during which I served overseas as a Japanese Language Officer in Naval Intelligence, my dissertation on twentieth-century scholarship relating to the songs of Robert Burns was not completed until 1949, the year Harvard granted me her doctorate in Philology. By 1950 I was publishing articles on Burns's songs as an Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado. Six years later I published an essay titled “Sixteen Years with Robert Burns.” The next year I published the song-book titled *The Tuneful Flame: Twenty-five Songs of Robert Burns As He Sang Them*. Several years later my Riverside Burns published some forty more songs set to the music for which they had been written. By 1957 I had changed direction somewhat by accepting Mel Smith's offer to prepare ten or more Burns songs for a new Cambridge Record: these songs, one full side of the record, would be sung by the Metropolitan tenor Thomas Hayward with Smith at the harpsichord. Before this disc was marketed, Serge Hovey had sought me out.

Around 1958 Hovey had brought his rich background of musical composition to a new interest: the songs of Robert Burns. In that year he composed his “Robert Burns Rhapsody” and began *The Robert Burns Song Book*. New to the Burns game, Serge looked about for assistance. Naturally, he turned to DeLancey Ferguson; but Ferguson had recently died. Not unnaturally, the widow recommended that he get in touch with me. By then, Melville Smith was in Cambridge as the recently appointed Director of the prestigious Longy School of Music.

Early on I obliged Serge not only by looking over material for the song-book but also by accepting his request that I write the introduction to the work. Later on I lent a hand with the early Philo recordings for which Jean Redpath sang Burns songs as arranged by Serge Hovey. Such assistance extended through the years 1958 to 1973, the year Hovey completed his manuscript of the songs. Herein he had placed all 324 of Burns's lyrics matched to what he, Serge, had decided to be the variant of the tune intended; for each tune he had composed an accompaniment for the piano. What is more, he fully intended that his new book would be generously illustrated, would contain research notes, and would offer an historical background.

As early as 1969 Serge had been diagnosed as being afflicted with Lou Gehrig's disease. Eventually this malady deprived him of all movement and speech before it took his life in 1989. During his last years I tended to lose track of him: his family close to Los Angeles, mine close to New York. I remained fully aware, however, that the Redpath-Hovey records were still coming out irregularly, just as I was vaguely aware that *The Robert Burns Song Book* remained unpublished. A second union arrived in 1993, when Serge's widow Esther wrote me a long letter.

Dr. Esther Hovey had just retired from a forty-three-year career in higher education. Her B.S. in Music Education had been taken at Hunter College; her Ph.D. in Early Childhood Education had been conferred by the University of Southern California. Her retirement from a professorship at the California State University in Long Beach had been triggered by Serge's death. Both Esther and her son Daniel regarded this loss as a challenge to promote Serge's music. High on their list of objectives was the publication of the songs.

As a college undergraduate Esther had majored in Music. Daniel had been granted his degree in Music by the California Institute of Arts. Independently he had studied piano, computer systems, digital keyboards, and recording. It had been he who had kept the Redpath-Hovey recordings moving along. At Serge's death Esther and Daniel had founded the Hovey Music Company; being himself a composer, arranger, and archivist, Daniel had been named Musical Director of the new company. Esther's long letter had been written not only to bring me up to date, but also to ask if, once again, I would be willing to lend a hand.

The mother and son had already approached several publishers, such as Oxford, the University of Aberdeen, and the University of Edinburgh, to determine if any one of them would undertake publication of the songbook. No matter the publisher addressed, the answer was much the same: first, commendation for a very impressive manuscript; second, rejection on the ground that publication of so much music represented prohibitive cost. The Hoveys found answer to their dilemma in the question, "Why not print the book ourselves?" They purchased a Power Mac, Hewlett-Packard Laser Printer, the sophisticated Finale Music Notation Program, and the Soutane Font.

Originally, Serge had left a manuscript of eight chapters. In the first two, he wrote upon Burns's method with songs and upon *The Scots Musical Museum*. Chapters three through eight presented the 324 songs of Burns with Serge's pianoforte accompaniments. Otherwise the papers included a preface, commentaries, detailed suggestions for copious illustrations, research notes, and a separate volume titled Additional Notes, a volume full with other research notebooks, scholarly data, findings, and wishes for final publication. On all sides one recognizes how carefully Hovey studied and analyzed primary and secondary sources including music manuscripts and works by Dick, Kinsley, Barke, Daiches, Keith, and many another. Any reader would remark how closely Serge had examined the music in such collections as the Bremner,

Gow, Thomson, Oswald, Craig, etc., and how clearly he had referenced all sources, taking time to compare them with one another and then to explain his rationale for the conclusions he drew regarding the variants of the tunes and words which he finally chose for his vocal-piano arrangements.

It had been Serge's intent to create an attractive Burns songbook for a broad audience, a songbook with playable, singable arrangements. The spirit of the whole was intended to be in marked contrast to the customary scholarly mode. Most of the songs in the manuscript are presented on two pages: Serge's arrangement in his beautiful musical calligraphy on one page; the lyrics, an illustration, and a sentence or two of enlightenment, such as an excerpt from a letter or another bit of colorful information, on the other page.

Both with a background in music, mother and son are fully capable of preparing and proofreading the music for the edition contemplated. But what of the notes? Systematically inclusive of all data, they had been typed or hand-written and then pasted on 8½ x 11-inch paper where they were intertwined with direct quotations from sources as well as with Serge's analyses, conclusions, feelings, etc. as to how each song should be treated musically. Whereas Esther and Daniel felt themselves thoroughly competent to handle the music, they felt the need of asking somebody to check out the commentary. So it was that Serge's wife approached me.

"Do you want the job?" This initial question was followed by a host of others. Would I assist with the research notes? Would I suggest and correct throughout the manuscript? Would I do the bibliography? Would I work on the glossaries? the indices? Would I bring my Introduction up to date? In short, would I serve as Consulting Editor of the work in hand? I returned answer with my agreement to aid however I might.

More detailed information arrived before and after the package of the first five songs. Volume I (Country Life) would begin with a Foreword by Esther. This volume would continue with my Introduction followed by the first eighty-five songs with their piano accompaniment. Volume II (The Lasses) would present seventy songs; Volume III (High Society) would have eighty-seven songs; Volume IV (Friends), eighty-two songs and an Index describing alphabetically by first line all 324 songs and their place in the edition. Tentatively, the first volume would appear in 1996; the second and third, in 1997; the last, in 1998.

Most recently came word that each song is to be numbered before its title; marginal glosses are to appear within the text; and a complete glossary and bibliography are to conclude Volume IV. This last volume will also offer four indices, one of which will include Serge's references to his sources for the lyrics and the tune set forth in a system of codes and abbreviations that refer to the bibliography; the other three will give titles of songs; names of tunes; first lines of verse.

Basic decisions beyond these had to be made. What types? What size fonts? How to use italics? As these were being decided upon, Daniel added

last endings for the piano where needed, while Esther checked the sequence of verses and chorus on the lyric page so that singer and pianist would be together. She also edited the background commentaries which Serge had placed under the song titles, this editing consisting primarily of shortening or making other minor revisions.

A final arrangement for the printing could not be determined until Esther and Daniel had hired Mr. Ron Hess, a music copyist. Under mutual agreement, Esther and Daniel would start by reviewing Serge's original manuscript and his research notes for the song in question; then Daniel would proofread initially the music and add second endings as required. Esther in the meantime would proofread the lyrics and notes for corrections and inconsistencies. Then Ron would transfer both music and lyrics to a computer disc using the Finale Notation Program and the Soutane Font. Next Esther and Daniel would do the fine proofreading—every word, comma, dot, dynamic—so that Ron might incorporate the same on the computer. At this stage, all would be express-mailed to me for suggestions before being returned. Finally, a copy would be made on "good" paper. Hopefully, by then, a publisher would have been found, one with both enthusiasm and imagination, ready to sit down to discuss design, where to place words and music and illustrations appropriately.

Having just returned the first five songs to California, I can speak of the joy it is to be part of this unique enterprise. Serge Hovey is one of four authors to make a major book of the songs of Robert Burns, the other three being James C. Dick, James Kinsley, and, most recently, Donald A. Low. Neither Kinsley nor Low reveals any ability to deal understandably with music. On the other hand, both Dick and Hovey knew music, were musicians; of the two, Hovey, a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, had the deeper, wider knowledge as well as the gift to compose. These two musicians could approach Scottish song as Robert Burns did: with the music, to be hummed over and over again before any thought was given to the words. Dick wrote of his edition in the Preface to his 1903 landmark:

[The airs] form an epitome of Scottish music which probably would have been more attractive to the general reader with pianoforte accompaniments. But this is not a music book in the modern sense, only a quarry for the constructive composer and for the student of folk-song.¹

The difference between Dick's work and Hovey's is that Dick offers a research book to benefit the Burns scholar bent over an oak table in any university library, whereas Hovey offers the very book which Dick seems so wistfully to turn his back upon: a music book in the modern sense, an attractive song-book with the complete songs of Robert Burns. It may well be that James Dick

¹James C. Dick, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (London, Edinburgh, Glasgow & New York, 1903), p. xxi.

knew his limitations, that he could not compose the arrangements necessary. Obviously, Hovey could and did.

First and foremost, the five songs of Hovey present simple, sympathetic, meaningful piano accompaniments; conversely, Dick, Kinsley and Low present only the bare melodic line without even that suggestion for harmony offered by James Johnson's *pedal bass* in *The Scots Musical Museum*. Hovey's manuscript, in the main, consists of 324 tunes with suitable accompaniment for the piano; Dick includes 319 tunes with an additional four tagged "Unknown." Parenthetically, nobody has identified them still. Kinsley gives 356 tunes; Low, only 303.

In his Preface Kinsley acknowledges the help of some twenty-eight authorities; amongst the names, those of persons like Cedric Thorpe Davis stand out as individuals qualified in music. How many such authorities aided Kinsley or to what extent Kinsley had to depend upon them is never made clear. The same may be said for Low whose own Preface is filled with acknowledgment of similar indebtedness to such individuals as Ruzena Wood of the National Library of Scotland's Music Room, to Dr. David Davidson for help with "difficult problems," and to Dr. David Johnson as "musical copy-editor." Dick had no need to recognize such aid; neither did Serge Hovey.

To get a closer look at Hovey's standing among his predecessors, we might base our comparisons upon the early Burns song "There was a lad was born in Kyle," the first of the five songs sent me from California. What can we say of the music?

Since Hovey's volumes are for the pianist as well as the singer, they will rest easily where they belong: on the piano rack. None of the other publications—the Dick, the Kinsley, the Low—does. Hovey's print for both music and words is black and clear; the accompaniment, not difficult. Dynamics, terms of performance, and terms of procedure are where expected and more than adequate. "Pace," for example, is indicated by the customary mark pointing out quarter notes per minute (here 120), not merely with a Kinsley "Brisk" or a Low "Lively."

Daintie Davie is the tune to which Burns set his "There was a lad." Dick and Kinsley found the music in William McGibbon's *A Collection of Scots Tunes* (Edinburgh, 1746); Low found it in Johnson's *Museum*. Hovey's editors have not as yet got to the point of copying out sources; however, in this instance, the source appears to have been McGibbon, perhaps as taken indirectly from Dick.

The two pages of Hovey's accompaniment for *Daintie Davie* everywhere bear traces of a professional composer committed to a goal: to offer whoever opens the book what he requires to be able to enjoy a Burns song fully. So each word of the lyrics is handled carefully, precisely by syllables, each to a note or notes of music; so a second ending is composed for the last stanza of "There was a lad," this ending encompassing some five extra measures.

The same care is evident throughout all five of the songs in question. Permit me to mention one or two other examples. Hovey works out everything to a "T." He heightens both the ease and the pleasure of the performer. Regard the last stanza, for instance, of "A sun is sunk in the west." Do you note the additional "O, whither" of the first line? What a jolt any singer would receive were he to be singing this line as given by Dick, Kinsley, or Low! Such gasping in despair for more tune! Not with the Hovey, though. For his final stanza, he thoughtfully adds ten measures to the tune, more than enough to accommodate the extra words.

Again, for "The Ploughman" Hovey and Kinsley provide music for the chorus. Dick and Low do not. In addition, Low seems to have omitted mistakenly the key signature of E^b. As a last example of Hovey's genuine desire to make all enjoyable, one might turn to "My father was a farmer." Dick and Low offer no music for the chorus whatsoever; indeed, neither so much as suggests that the song has a chorus. Kinsley offers no music, but he does offer, after the first stanza of the poetry, the words "Chorus Row de dow &c." "Row de dow &c.": nothing else for the nine full measures of music belonging to the chorus alone. What a long, what a vague "&c.!" Is it not like the "&c." of the chorus for the first song of *Love and Liberty* with its "Lal de daudle &c." followed by nothing else for seven and more measures of music; or like the "&c." for the seven measures following the second song's only guide to the chorus: "Sing, Lal de lal &c." Knowing Hovey, one has no surprise for his having worked out a complete, fun-loving example of nonsense founded upon the mere suggestion "Row de dow &c." of James Kinsley, an engaging pattern that requires nine more measures of accompaniment as well as several more handfuls of gobbledygook.

If there is any one aspect of the Hovey music which this singer, at any rate, is thankful for, it is the sensible tessituras of the arrangements. Hovey's songs are pitched where the typical singer lives. Compare the range of his "There was a lad" with Kinsley's. Again and again, Kinsley devilishly summons up from the vasty deep a tessitura fit only for a Metropolitan Opera coloratura or a eunuch standing tiptoe on the kitchen stool and singing falsetto. Why does Kinsley make his Burns songs so unsingable? Perhaps—to be as kind as possible—in order to reflect the fact that tune after tune comes from a book of tunes without words, dance tunes like reels calling not for a voice, but for a violin or, so very often, a German flute. High registers are nothing for either of these two instruments. Playford, Oswald, McGibbon, Bremner, Peacock, Aird, all specify either violin or German flute, sometimes both. All served as Burns's sources. So, quixotically, Kinsley takes the voice right off the top of the page. Just as quixotically, he otherwise delights in switching keys, in transposing so as to gain height and to be different from every other modern editor of the songs; moreover, he characteristically patches the lyrics from several different sources.

Let's get along. Now, what of the poetry for all this music that Burns hummed over and over until he knew every nuance by heart?

Of course, Dick, Kinsley, Low, and Hovey edit with differences; obviously, for example, when it is a matter of punctuation. Hovey, more interested in providing a songbook which everybody can enjoy rather than one more scholarly edition which another scholar may or may not consult, can afford, as Dick, Kinsley, and Low cannot, to be up to date by relying principally upon standardized punctuation of the Freshman English variety. Kinsley of those editors under consideration comes closest to reproducing the various, idiosyncratic flourishes typical of the eighteenth-century manuscript.

Dick presents the Burns songs by means of eleven categories; Hovey orders them by means of four. Kinsley and Low try their best to place them by date of composition.

For "There was a lad," Dick, Kinsley, and Low give Cromek's *Reliques* as their source; Hovey, generally, follows the Cromek of Dick. All four specify *Daintie Davie* as their tune, placing the ascription underneath some form of the title, every one different from every other. Only Cromek and Hovey have no number before the title, Hovey merely because his work awaits final disposition of a publisher. Numeration of lines is in accordance with each editor's preference. Cromek and Dick number neither lines nor stanzas. Hovey numbers by stanzas; Kinsley and Low by every fifth line. Dick and Kinsley offer no glosses with the text; Low glosses at the foot of the last page of a song's text. Most effectively of all, Hovey glosses marginally to the left of the pertinent verse. Low provides, roughly speaking, a third of a page of notes after his glosses. Dick and Kinsley comment copiously and significantly: Dick at volume end, Kinsley in a complete separate volume, the 663-page Volume III of the Oxford Edition. Hovey for this same "There was a lad" gives only a meager twenty-five words, relevant and illuminating, but not primary to purpose.

Not Dick, not Kinsley, not Low follow exactly his source of Cromek's *Reliques*, only in small measure because Cromek begs correction of several obvious mistakes and substitutes four asterisks for Burns's bawdy phrase of two words.

One might develop his comparison by beginning textually with the song's chorus, which Cromek presents italicized after both the first and last stanzas. Dick and Low place the chorus first. Kinsley, like his source, places the chorus after the first stanza. Cromek or no Cromek, not Dick, not Kinsley, and not Low, as twentieth-century editors, place the chorus *after* the last stanza. On the other hand, Hovey calls for the chorus to be repeated not only after the sixth and last stanza, but also after the second and fourth stanzas as well.

Punctuation-wise we get our anticipated disagreements. A case in point is in the chorus of "There was a lad." All, like Cromek, italicize throughout. Dick, however, offers not a single one of the nine apostrophes in Cromek. Kinsley offers all nine. Low omits the four in line 2 and the one in line 3, but strangely includes the two in line 4. One may best understand Hovey's reliance

upon an extra comma here and there if he keeps in mind that Hovey, unlike any of the others, accepts the responsibility of making his version as singable as possible. His aim is to entertain; by the way, so was Robert Burns's.

It is in the third stanza that one comes upon direct discourse which lasts, off and on, right down to the final word of the last stanza. Only Hovey, meaningfully, according to current usage, sets off this direct discourse throughout. Kinsley and Low omit all quotation marks as did Cromek; Dick uses them like Hovey until the very last stanza where he goes it alone by committing the mistake of forgetting that he was "in" direct discourse.

Low, alone, commits the mistake of printing "core" for the correct word "score" in line 2 of stanza 5. Kinsley, alone, introduces controversy by using "Stir" instead of "Sir" as the last word in stanza 1, line 1; in so doing, he passeth all human understanding.

Finally, with respect to the words of "There was a lad," Hovey has not so much as a blush in restoring the words "lie aspar" to the line "Ye'll gar the lasses lie aspar," (with legs wide apart). Like the other three editors, he has no place for Cromek's bashful asterisks.

My enthusiasm is unbounded for the opportunity of having a bit to do with moving this Hovey family venture along to publication. After all has been said and done, when all four volumes are on the market, due justice will have been given, finally, to the songs of Robert Burns and to the memory of Serge Hovey. Can anyone name any other tribute more befitting this bicentenary than such promise of merry sunshine?

SUNY, Emeritus



I have heard the mavis singing —
A Gray 1994