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James A. Mackay

New Developments in Burns Biography

When I was approached by Mainstream Publishing of Edinburgh to write a biography of Burns, my first question was “What can I possibly say that has not been said—many times—before?” Heaven knows, there has been an ample sufficiency of books about him. The Mitchell Library in Glasgow has over 900 biographies of Burns, or books which have a substantial biographical introduction to the songs and poems. Indeed, since my book was published in October 1992 there have been at least a dozen others. Only two so far appear to have any real merit, I am sorry to say: John Weir on Burns and freemasonry (an aspect of the poet’s life which has had rather scant coverage recently) and Gavin Sprott’s *Robert Burns, the Life, Times and Legacy*, which places Burns fairly in the context of his time and place. Most, though not all, of these recent books make use of some of the startling facts which I uncovered.

I could very easily have fallen into the trap which has beset almost every biographer since Dr. James Currie put pen to paper in 1800. Currie at least had the excuse that, apart from the brief hatchet-job by Robert Heron in 1797, not long after the poet’s death, he had not one before him; but everyone who came after Currie followed in his footsteps. Cromek, though dismissed by DeLancey Ferguson and Snyder as a liar and a cheat, deserves to be singled out for having done what no one did before him, that was to travel to the Burns country and interview the friends and relatives of the poet. As a result, his *Reliques* of 1808 contain much that is original, if unsystematic.

Lockhart (1828) and, above all, “Honest Allan” Cunningham (1834) set the trend for biographical writing that embellished the fact and thought nothing

of filling the gaps with the figments of their imaginations. Many subsequent writers trod in their footsteps, adding here and garnishing there, each adding his tuppence worth. The low point was reached in 1856 with the first edition of what came to be known as *The National Burns*, cobbled together by the Rev. George Gilfillan. Though Gilfillan subsequently toned down his worst excesses, sufficient remained to muddy the waters for many years and, indeed, much confusion has continued down to the present time.

Burns himself wrote: "Some books are lies frae end to end"¹ and, sadly, this has proved all too true of many of the books about him. Even worse, such works of popular reference as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* have served to convey the wrong impression about Burns: "The years in Dumfries were a period of dissipation and decay." That sentence appeared in the *Encyclopaedia* until David Daiches re-wrote the entry on Burns in 1974; yet these words were actually written by John Nichol in 1876—almost a century earlier.

In 1800 Currie wrote that the particulars respecting the illness and death of Burns were furnished by Dr. William Maxwell, the physician who attended him. This statement appeared as a footnote to a passage dealing with the poet's last illness, in July 1796; but later biographers misinterpreted it and assumed that Maxwell was the source of the entire seven preceding pages dealing with his health in general.

Thus Currie's assertion that Burns had been confined to the house by an accidental complaint from October 1795 to January 1796 was erroneously assumed to have derived from Maxwell, and was therefore incontrovertible. Not until the minute-book of the Royal Dumfries Volunteers came to light in 1902 did Burns's attendance at parades give the lie to this. So when we get to the passage dealing with Burns's exposure to the elements after a late-night boozing session, the fun begins. Currie's words were:

He dined at a tavern and returned home about three o'clock in a very cold morning, benumbed and intoxicated. This was followed by an attack of rheumatism which confined him about a week.²

Although the story of returning home from a late-night carousal may well be correct—we have ample testimony regarding the lateness of the hour when such parties broke up—it was exaggerated by later biographers, who claimed that Burns had fallen asleep in the snow—the fate which actually befell "Holly Willie" Fisher. McDowall (1867) could actually point authoritatively to the very spot, at the head of the Globe Inn Close, where the poet collapsed in the

¹"Death and Doctor Hornbook," *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 79. Henceforth *Poems*.

²*The Works of Robert Burns*, ed. James Currie. 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800), I, 219-20.

snow.³ George Gilfillan went further and stated that after leaving the Globe Inn, Burns went to a brothel and there behaved so disgracefully that he was forcibly ejected, stumbled into the hedge opposite, and fell asleep in the snow.⁴

That story has remained more or less unaltered right down to the present day. Fortunately, I remembered having studied the diaries of William Grierson, now preserved in the Dumfries Museum. Grierson kept a meticulous record of the weather in Dumfries, day by day. The very full details in his manuscript volume show that there was no frost, and absolutely no snow, in Dumfries in January or February 1796. In fact, the weather that winter was remarkably mild, though often accompanied by high winds. So that gives the lie to that particular story!

It was quite by chance that William Grierson's diaries have been preserved. So, too, with the day-book of Surgeon Charles Fleeming which was discovered in the eaves of the house at 49 Kirkgate in Irvine where he had practiced medicine between 1757 and 1798. This book was discovered in 1955 and is now in the care of Irvine Burns Club. The fact of its existence does not appear to have been publicized, but I am indebted to my very good friend John Inglis for having brought it to my attention.

Under November 1781 it contains a number of very interesting entries concerning one, Robert Burns, lint-dresser. It will be remembered that this was the period when Burns was living in Irvine, learning the craft of flax-dressing. From the poet's letters we know that he suffered a serious illness during the Irvine period, but its precise nature has long been a matter of speculation.

In the first place, for Burns to have called in a doctor at all is evidence of the seriousness of his illness. Fleeming visited his patient five times in eight days. The day-book records these visits and the medicine prescribed: first of all, on November 14, ipecacuanha and sacred elixir—a violent emetic and an equally powerful laxative. Purging and vomiting were then regarded as the preliminary treatment for “black bile”—or severe depression. At the second visit, on November 19, Fleeming prescribed an anodyne, probably an opiate employed as a painkiller or astringent. He returned on November 20, 21 and 22 to prescribe massive doses of cinchona, the dried bark of a South American tree which contained quinine in its raw form. This was the standard treatment for a high fever.

This could have been smallpox. Marion Hunter and Gilbert Baird asserted years later that Burns was pockmarked, but such scarring may have been

³William McDowall, *History of the Burgh of Dumfries, with Notices of Nithsdale, Annandale, and the Western Border* (Edinburgh, 1867), pp. 725-6.

⁴*The National Burns, Including the Airs of all the Songs...With an Original Life of Burns*, ed. George Gilfillan. 2 vols. (London, Edinburgh and Glasgow [1886]), I, xci. This work was issued at various dates, in parts, in 2 volumes, and in 4 divisions, but this passage always appears on the same page.

merely acneous. Had Burns contracted smallpox he would surely have mentioned it to Moore in his Autobiographical Letter. This was a townsman's disease which seldom infected country people, mainly because they usually contracted cowpox early in life.

Incidentally, although Edward Jenner did not publish his theories on vaccination till 1796, the belief that smallpox and cowpox were mutually antagonistic was widely held in country districts, and Burns himself was an enthusiastic advocate of some primitive form of inoculation, as testified by several of his letters. It seems reasonably safe to conclude that, whatever caused his high fever, it was not smallpox.

Similarly malaria, a disease often associated with seaports at this period, may also be ruled out because of its recurrent character—and Burns never mentioned such attacks in later life. The other disease that was more or less endemic in seaports at the time was typhoid. But in this illness fever attains its peak about the eighth day, which certainly does not tie in with Fleeming's visits from November 20 to 23. As Fleeming did not visit Burns after the latter date it must be assumed that Burns showed a marked improvement on that day—well before the usual signs of recovery in even mild typhoid cases.

It is unfortunate that Fleeming did not note down in his journal the actual ailment he was treating; but an examination of the other entries around the same date show that there was no typhoid in Irvine at that time. This leaves us with severe morbid depression—in other words, a complete physical breakdown brought on by psychosomatic causes. Against this background, therefore, we may read Burns's letter to his father, dated December 27, 1781, the only extant letter from the poet to William Burnes. In this, Robert says

The weakness of my nerves has so debilitated my mind that I dare not, either review past events, or look forward into futurity; for the least anxiety, or perturbation in my breast, produces most unhappy effects on my whole frame.⁵

And in his first *Commonplace Book*, Burns later wrote of a period when his spirit was broken by repeated losses and disasters: "My body too was attacked by that most dreadful distemper, a Hypochondria, or confirmed Melancholy."⁶

One of the canards in recent years—indeed, the novel *The Clarinda Conspiracy* by Alastair Campsie was based on it—is that the second set of twins born to Jean Armour in March 1788 did not die at or soon after birth, but survived, and moved to Ellisland with Jean and Robert, Junior. That, as a consequence, Burns lied to his Excise superiors, and obtained his post under false pretenses. The Excise regulations stipulated that candidates, if married, must

⁵*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 6.

⁶March 1784. *Robert Burns's Commonplace Book, 1783-85*, reproduced in facsimile, ed. James Cameron Ewing and Davidson Cook (Glasgow, 1938), p. 10.

have no more than two children. Actually, Burns was technically a bachelor at the time of his application, but even if his irregular marriage to Jean had been recognized, only Robert, the survivor of the first set of twins, was still living.

Campsie's proof that Burns lied is an extract from an Excise document listing the officers of the Dumfries Collection in 1789, wherein the number of people in the poet's family is given as six. By that time Burns and his wife had two sons—Robert and Francis—and Campsie assumed that the other two were the second set of twins, despite the fact that they are nowhere referred to in the poet's letters, nor are their names known to posterity. In fact the two others in the Burns household in 1789 were the poet's young cousins John and Fanny—a fact mentioned by Burns in a letter to James Burness of Montrose dated February 9 that year.

The mystery surrounding the second set of twins arose from the statement of Robert Chambers (1851): "The birth of these infants is not recorded in the parish registers of Mauchline—probably because they did not live to be baptised."⁷ Chambers has had the reputation of being a reliable biographer and no one ever thought to question this statement until recently. But following the assertion by Campsie that the twins lived and moved to Ellisland, I checked the matter with the records preserved in Register House, Edinburgh.

I found that, contrary to accepted belief, the burial register of Mauchline (p. 304) contained two identical entries of "Jean Armour, Child unbaptized," one on March 10 and the other on March 22. No charge was made for burial in either case, apparently the normal practice for stillbirths and burials of unbaptized infants. Putting this matter in perspective, it should be noted that this page records 19 burials between February 11 and May 11, and of these no fewer than seven were of unbaptized, new-born infants.

Because the doctrine of retrospective baptism of ancestors is central to Mormon faith, the Latter-day Saints have performed the Herculean labor of transcribing and microfilming all the parish registers of births and marriages, and computerizing the data which is now available on microfiche. I have found this to be a most helpful tool—a powerful magnet for drawing needles out of innumerable haystacks, sometimes with very surprising results. A few examples will suffice.

Burns's earliest composition, "O once I lov'd" (also known as "Handsome Nell," *Poems*, I, 3) is said to be a tribute to Helen Kilpatrick, daughter of the blacksmith of Parclewan, Dalrymple. In his Autobiographical Letter Burns does not identify the girl, but says that she was a year younger. The Dalrymple birth register, however, shows that Helen Kilpatrick was barely three weeks younger than Burns—so there appeared to be a discrepancy here. Subsequently I discovered that, following correspondence in *The Scotsman* in 1828, Helen

⁷*The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers; rev. William Wallace. 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1896), II, 310.

Blair was named as the heroine, and she is given in the editions of Burns between that date and 1851, when Chambers altered the name to Helen Kilpatrick, on the basis of information supplied by Isobel Burns, the poet's youngest sister. But Isobel was then eighty and was recalling an event which had occurred when she was only three or four (and could therefore have had no real, first-hand knowledge). Helen Blair, in fact, satisfied Burns's description to Moore, so I feel that she must be re-instated.

Actually, quite a number of the new facts dug up by Chambers, and accepted unquestioningly from 1851 till now, came from Isobel Burns and likewise have not stood up to critical examination. The most glaring example is Alison or Ellison Begbie, the mysterious recipient of the A and E letters of 1781. Chambers got the first name from the poet's song "Bonie Peggy Alison"⁸ and asked old Isobel some very leading questions. The five letters sent to "My dear E"⁹ were explained by the probability that Burns's enamorata was familiarly known as Ellison—though no one thought to question the likelihood of a young lady, as highly literate as she obviously was, spelling her name phonetically. This was only a suggestion by Isobel, but Chambers transmuted it into a hard fact.

Isobel could tell Chambers that the young lady was the daughter of a small farmer near Galston, that she was the housekeeper at Carnell when Burns courted her, and that he had written the song of similes, "The Lass of Cessnock Banks" in her honor. A search of the Ayrshire birth registers revealed that Alison, as a Christian name, did not come into fashion till the 1830s, and Ellison was equally conspicuous by its absence. An examination of the Galston registers revealed not a single family named Begbie, though it was a common name in the adjoining parish of Kilmarnock. On the other hand, there were three families surnamed Gebbie—same six letters but a slightly different arrangement. Alexander Gebbie and his brother Thomas had daughters named Elizabeth, born in November 1761 and July 1762 respectively.

I subsequently traced the careers of both girls and eliminated the elder of the two. Elizabeth the younger was born at Pearsland, a small farm near Galston village. Burns's last letter to "My dear E" hints that she had chosen someone else and was about to leave the district. The marriage registers show that Elizabeth Gebbie married Hugh Brown at Newmilns in Loudoun parish on November 23, 1781. Newmilns is, in fact, about a mile north-east of Pearsland. Hugh Brown was a man of more mature years, seven years older than Burns, and a stocking-maker to trade. To an ambitious girl who had not

⁸"And I'll kiss thee yet, yet," *Poems*, I, 406, where the name Peggy Alison appears.

⁹Of the five letters in this group only the first is known in MS, and was originally published by William Scott Douglas in 1877; the other four were first published by James Currie in 1800. Only the third and fourth bear the salutation "My dear E."

yet reached the age of twenty, he must have seemed a more dependable prospect than the son of Auld Lochlie.

Hugh and Elizabeth had two daughters in Loudoun parish, but then they vanish. Where did they go? With a surname like Brown the quest seemed hopeless. But now, enter Richard Hartley Cromek, whose *Reliques* were published in 1808. Cromek, though much maligned by later scholars, did a considerable amount of legwork and in one instance tracked down the lass of Cessnock Banks¹⁰ to Glasgow where she was then residing. He, in fact, was the first to publish the song, taken down from the lady's own lips. Burns never published it in his lifetime, and it did not appear in a wholly accurate version, from a manuscript of the poet, until 1839.

Cromek thus pointed me in the direction of Glasgow, and here I found Hugh Brown who, in the 1807 directory, was a stocking-maker at 74 King Street. A search of the Glasgow registers revealed Elizabeth, Junior, born in 1789 and Hugh, Junior in April 1791. Elizabeth Gebbie died in 1823, by which time Hugh was a very considerable hosiery manufacturer. Hugh, Junior, who inherited the business, moved to a splendid mansion in Park Circus, Kelvingrove, in 1856. Clearly Elizabeth Gebbie had been a shrewd judge of character—or business sense at least—when she chose Hugh Brown and rejected Robert Burns.

Miss Gebbie was probably known familiarly as Betty or Lizzie, but in the early summer of 1781 Burns was under the spell of *A Sentimental Journey*, and we may assume that he bestowed on her the name of Sterne's heroine Eliza. Then "Eliza Gebbie" could easily have been garbled into "Ellison Begbie" in Isobel's memory—her own married name was Begg, which may have helped to confuse her.

This identification also solves another mystery, the heroine of the song which opens, "From thee, Eliza, I must go" (entitled "Song," *Poems*, I, 15) which previous editors have associated with either Elizabeth Barbour or Elizabeth Miller in Mauchline, without ever having reconciled the discrepancy of the song having been composed before 1782 (on Burns's own admission to Moore)—three years before either of these girls swam into his ken, and ignoring brother Gilbert's comment that the new song was one of Robert's earliest compositions. Certainly the two stanzas would fit Burns's mood at the time Miss Gebbie turned him down. The five letters appear to have survived only as drafts, so the identity of the recipients can only be confirmed if and when the actual letters are discovered. Hitherto it has been assumed that all five were addressed to the same girl, but it must now be supposed that the first letter was, in fact, written to someone else.

¹⁰"Song," *Poems*, I, 17. The title varies. Sometimes it is called "The Lass of Cessnock Banks," although that phrase does not appear in the song.

The Mormon microfiche enabled me to clear up numerous other mysteries. Some of them were of minor or peripheral importance, such as the full names of Andrew Whelpdale, husband of Jean Lorimer; the date of the marriage of Gilbert Brown and Agnes Rainie (maternal grandparents of the poet) and the details of Gilbert's two subsequent marriages and numerous progeny; the details of Margaret "Peggy" Thomson, daughter of Robert Thomson, baptized in November 1762; details concerning Samuel Peacock of Irvine and his wife Agnes McDowgal; and the birth and marriage of Richard Brown of Irvine. Light is now shed on the antecedents of Ann Park and her subsequent history; and May Cameron, whom Burns once referred to as "my Peggy" now turns out to be Margaret Cameron, who did not actually bear Burns a child, and in fact married her cousin Mungo Forbes.

The parish registers reveal that Jean Gardner of Irvine, sometimes regarded as one of the poet's mistresses, was thirteen years older than him, having been born in September 1746. Even Agnes Craig, Mrs. MeLehose, who gave the impression in later life that she was younger than Burns, was actually a year older—we have records of both her birth and baptism in the Glasgow registers.

But the most dramatic discovery is that concerning the rather shadowy young lady known to posterity as "Highland Mary." There has been more mystery surrounding this girl, and more arrant nonsense written about her, than she really merits. The maiden pure, divine, whose love redeemed Burns from his baser nature, the Beatrice to his Dante, was the byewoman at Coilsfield and, on the testimony of John Richmond, was "kept" for a time by Captain James Montgomerie. Indeed, as will become clearer in a moment, she may well have been the heroine of the song known as "Montgomerie's Peggy" ("Fragment," *Poems*, I, 28).

All that was definitely known of this girl until now was that she was born at Dunoon, the daughter of Archibald and Agnes Campbell, and that she moved with her family to Campbeltown. From the outset, she seemed quite an enigma. Archibald and Agnes had eight children (according to Robert Chambers, 1851), or five (Catherine Carswell, 1930), or four—Mary, Robert, Annie and Archibald (all other writers). Mary was the eldest (all writers except Archibald Munro, 1896, who says Robert was the eldest). Most writers say that she was born at Dunoon, but Cunningham (1834) gave Ardrossan and William Gunnyon (1865) says Ardentinnny.

She was born in 1763 (Hilton Brown, 1949, Maurice Lindsay, 1954, and most writers since 1950), 1764 (some 19th century writers), 1768 (Chambers, though with some reservation). The ever-cautious Franklyn B. Snyder (1932) merely gives her dates as ?–1786, and other biographers, such as George Gilfillan (1856), do not hazard a guess at all.

Some authors give the move to Campbeltown as taking place in 1776, but Munro says specifically that the family moved at Whitsun 1773. Munro even had a deposition from Archibald Mains saying that he had known Janet Clark,

a schoolmate of Mary's in Dunoon who remembered her as good at her school-work and a very gentle girl.

It seems strange that Chambers, or his informants, had taken the trouble to examine the Dunoon parish register for the marriage of Archibald and Agnes in June 1762, but that none of the nineteenth-century biographers had examined the register of births. Or did they? The doubt expressed by Chambers over 1768 implied that a search was made and nothing was found that tied a Mary Campbell to Archibald and Agnes. To be sure, there *was* a Mary Campbell born in Dunoon that year, on October 23, to be precise, but her parents were an Archibald Campbell and Janet Brown. Still, the father's name was right enough, therefore this must be Highland Mary—hence the 1768 date so positively accepted by Archibald Munro who wrote a very substantial biography of her.

I examined the Dunoon register of births and was puzzled to find that only three Mary Campbells had been born in the parish in the course of a decade—two in 1759 (too old) and the other in 1768; the parents in none of these cases accorded with Archibald and Agnes. A systematic search from 1762 onwards, when the couple got married, revealed an entry of a baptism dated March 18, 1766, of one Margaret Campbell, lawful daughter of Archibald Campbell and his spouse *Anne* Campbell.

Doubtless this entry was overlooked, or ignored, because the baby's name was wrong and the mother's name did not accord with the Agnes of the marriage entry. But the fact that both parents had the same surname ought to have been a clue, even in Argyll, the Campbell clan country. No other entries for Archibald and Agnes or Anne Campbell appear in the Dunoon registers. Although the girl died in October 1786, the death registers of Greenock have not survived.

The birth register of Campbeltown parish, however, reveals that Robert was baptized on February 3, 1769, the parents being named as Archibald Campbell and Agnes Campbell. This proves that the move to Campbeltown must have taken place before that date, and therefore Highland Mary could not have been the Mary Campbell that Janet Clark remembered from her school days.

Two other entries in the Campbeltown register were Ann, daughter of Archibald and Ann Campbell (1772) and Archibald, whose parent were similarly named (1778). From this I deduce that Agnes was commonly known as Annie, hence the confusion over these baptismal entries. Her second daughter was habitually known as Annie and was clearly meant to be named after her.

Since writing my biography of Burns, I have been pursuing the ancestry of Agnes Campbell in order to prove, or disprove, the legend that Highland Mary worked for one David Campbell, a relative of Agnes, who was allegedly minister of Lochranza in the Isle of Arran. Aside from the fact that David Campbell did not go to Arran till the 1790s, I did discover that Agnes's mother was

called Margaret, and in accordance with the custom of the period, therefore, Agnes had named her first-born after her own mother.

So now we shall have to get used to calling this girl "Highland Margaret." How or why did the girl's name get changed? The likeliest answer is the Scottish habit of a casual approach to names. Margaret in Gaelic is Maighread (pronounced Myrat), while Mary is Mairi (Marry). The similarity, to Lowland ears, may explain how Margaret Cameron also came to be known as May.

Cromek (1808) was the first to identify the heroine of the songs "Highland Lassie O" and "Highland Mary" with a girl called Campbell, and naturally assumed her name was Mary. Burns himself was unusually reticent on the subject, and even deliberately altered the chronology of the affair to put others off the scent. The name Mary, first adopted merely to give euphony to the song which begins "Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary" ("Song," *Poems*, II, 656), sung to the tune "Ewe Bughts Marion," may have enabled him to exorcise the painful memory of a girl whose death he felt responsible for.

Two other mysteries surround this girl. Did she marry Burns, and did she die in childbirth?

Regarding the first, we have a rather bland statement by Burns to Robert Riddell, that they took a fond farewell on May 14, 1786. Cromek is the source of the tale of the farewell by the River Faile, and the curious business about the exchange of Bibles over the purling brook, much embellished by Cunningham and later writers, and a popular subject of sentimental Victorian paintings. But even in high summer, the Faile is far too wide for people with the longest arms to reach across and touch each other, a fact ignored by the Burns devotees who erected a monument nearby in 1921. Just as the document written by Burns and given to Jean Armour has been held to be a valid certificate of marriage, so too the exchange of Bibles, and the inscriptions on their fly-leaves, might be crucial evidence of such a binding contract.

No Bible given by the girl to Burns has survived. If it ever existed, I do not doubt that he would have prudently got rid of it when he settled down with Jean. The pocket Bible he gave the girl was a tiny two-volume set and much has been made of the biblical quotations and Masonic marks on the fly-leaves, which some scholars regard as tantamount to a marriage promise.

I was anxious to examine the Bibles, as some early accounts stated that the names of the contracting parties appeared on the fly-leaves, but had been defaced by the girl's family. Through the good offices of John Inglis and Sir Bryce Knox, Lord Lieutenant of the county, I was able to take the Bibles to Strathclyde Police Laboratory. Below Burns's name the inscription appeared to be the girl's name—M.....ll. I hoped to clear up the mystery of Mary or Margaret, but the answer turned out to be something completely different—"Mossgavill," the archaic spelling of Mossgiel.

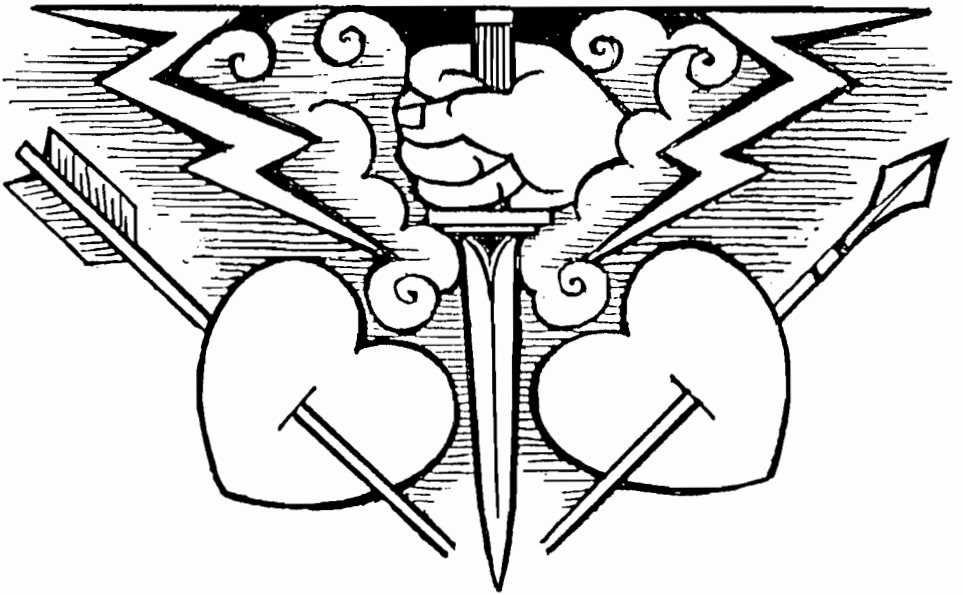
That, in itself, was an interesting discovery. Burns only used this spelling in his letters during the early part of 1784; from then onwards he always used Mossgiel. This spelling, underneath his own name, put the inscription of name

and place in 1784—two years before he met the girl. Turning the pages of the little Bible, we discovered three blank pages at the back of one volume and faint pencil marks, which had been subsequently erased, were discerned. Using the technology now available to forensic science it was possible to read the pages in the unmistakable handwriting of Robert Burns. Without the ESDA technique (available in Britain only to the Metropolitan Police in London), it was not possible to read the full text, but sufficient remains to indicate that the pages were covered with random jottings of a laundry-list nature, made over a considerable period.

In other words, what has till now been regarded as a Bible purchased specifically to give to Miss Campbell as a parting gift, and perhaps a marriage pledge, turns out to be nothing more than the poet's own pocket Bible, purchased in 1784 and carried around for the better part of two years, before he gave it to her. Her own name does *not* appear on it, far less any statement which, by any stretch of the imagination, could be taken as a declaration of marriage.

The mystery that is as yet unresolved concerns the remains of an infant found in Highland Mary's grave when she was disinterred in 1920. It would require a further disinterment to examine whatever is in that coffin and do a DNA match with some article of clothing belonging to Burns—the sweatband of his hat or a lock of his hair—to do a genetic comparison. Perhaps some day a desire to satisfy universal curiosity will overcome a natural reticence about disturbing the dead, and settle this controversy for once and for all.

Glasgow



severed hearts
A Gray 1996