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The Problem of Pseudonyms in the Burns “Lost Poems”

In Patrick Scott Hogg’s *Robert Burns: The Lost Poems* (1997) and in *The Canongate Burns* (2001) co-edited by Hogg and Andrew Noble (the latter book’s essential project being derived from the former publication) much is made of a pattern of pseudonyms to attribute to Burns a number of previously unnoticed poems.¹ It is the argument of what is to follow, however, that both books are precipitate in the setting down of their speculations since they have failed to consider serious impediments to their alleged pseudonym evidence. Implicit in my argument (and so let me be explicit about this issue) is my belief that in allowing the assertion of Burns’s authorship through the lens of less than rigorously worked through evidence, the Canongate Classics series has done a serious disservice to Burns studies and to Scottish culture and literature generally. It is imperative that the community of Burns scholarship engages with the work of Hogg and Noble as the *Canongate Burns* is an embarrassment in the face of the great developments in Burns critical and textual scholarship over the past seventy years. What follows attempts to demonstrate one area of the basic thinking which ought to have been done (and which could easily have been done) before the *Canongate Burns* was allowed to appear. The work below could be pursued much further, but really the onus is, or should have been, on Hogg and Noble to engage with the kind of simple findings I produce here.

¹Patrick Scott Hogg, *Robert Burns: The Lost Poems* (Glasgow, 1997); *The Canongate Burns* edited by Andrew Noble & Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh, 2001). Henceforth *Lost Poems* and *Canongate Burns*.

Apparently the most coherent pattern of pseudonyms to emerge from Hogg and Noble's work is the series "Agricola," "Agrestis" and "Aratus," all of which supposedly point to Burns the rustic bard or the ploughman poet. Agricola (or farmer) would seem to have the best chance of being an indicator to Burns's authorship since the poet's "Ode to the Departed Regency Bill" certainly appears in the London newspaper *The Star* of 17th April 1789 with this by-line appended to it.² It may be, then, that Burns did choose this pseudonym for the publication of the poem. However, there is another possibility that I want to consider and this is that Burns had nothing to do with the by-line. Burns complains in a letter of 23rd December 1789 to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham that "The Ode to the Regency bill was mangled in a Newspaper last winter."³ Given the loss of control over his material which Burns highlights, might it not be the case that the extremely licentious editor of *The Star*, Peter Stuart (fl. 1788-1805), simply chose the pseudonym Agricola for Burns?⁴

Lucyle Werkmeister is particularly interesting on Stuart. She explains how James Boswell fell foul of Stuart and his colleagues at the *Oracle* periodical, which accordingly published "some stupid lines" on Mr. Burke which it attributed to *Mr Boswell*. The *Oracle* was an anomaly. Although it was subsidized by the Treasury, it was conducted by friends of Sheridan and hence could usually be counted on to support one of his pranks. But in this instance, one suspects, the motive was extortion, for two years earlier Peter Stuart, then editor of the spurious *Star* and now editor of the *Oracle*, had printed "some stupid lines" on the Duchess of Gordon, which he attributed to Burns. Burns responded with "On the Duchess of Gordon's Reel Dancing" (*Poems*, II, 915), which the spurious *Star* accepted in lieu of the usual "correction fee," and the matter was adjusted. So Burns was not fully cognizant of Stuart's deliberate hand in the affair as Stuart's "extorting" of a poem from the poet shows. Werkmeister here is very suggestive toward the character of Stuart, a man, clearly, who interfered extensively and partially with material which came into his editorial hands.⁵

²*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 462-65; see III, 1301-1303 for details of publication. Henceforth *Poems*.

³*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 465. Henceforth *Letters*.

⁴Stuart had altered the poem to include an explicit attack on William Pitt. For full details of Stuart's relations with Burns, his altering of Burns's material for his own political ends and his somewhat maverick career as a journalist and political commentator, see *Poems*, III, 1302; *Letters*, II, 482; Maurice Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopedia* (London, 1980), pp. 347-8.

⁵Lucyle Werkmeister, *Jemie Boswell and the London Daily Press 1785-1795* (New York, 1963), pp. 27-8.

Burns had sent a copy of his poem to Mrs. Frances Dunlop on 3rd April 1789 explaining that this would be "the only copy indeed that I will send to any body except perhaps anonymously to some London Newspaper" (*Letters*, I, 392). If Burns wishes to maintain his anonymity, why would he choose such a seemingly thin pseudonym? A potential but equally problematic response to my own question might encompass a notion which Hogg and Noble have not explored which is that the pseudonym—to late twentieth-century eyes—so seemingly obvious in its pertinence to Burns was not necessarily so in Burns's time.

In Scottish terms the pseudonym Agricola was, in fact, strongly associated with a man with whom Burns came to have some personal correspondence and this was James Anderson (1739-1808). Burns was very much an admirer of Anderson, writing to him after an introduction had been arranged via Thomas Blacklock to express his admiration for the "elegant prospectus" for *The Bee, or Literary Weekly Intelligencer*, and after Anderson had invited Burns to contribute to his fledgling periodical (letter of November 1790, *Letters*, II, 60). The invitation seems to have included the offer to Burns of a free subscription in return for contributions since the poet asks to be put down as "a Subscriber bona fide" (*Letters*, II, 60). Burns ventures the opinion that *The Bee* will be an "addition to Scottish literature worthy of a place with any thing it yet can boast" (*Letters* II, 60). He also writes:

As to any assistance that I can give you, I am afraid it will all evaporate in good wishes.—My fingers are so wore to the bone in holding the noses of his Majesty's liege subjects to the grindstone of Excise that I am totally unfitted for wielding a pen in any generous subject" (*Letters* II, 60).

Given Burns's admiration for Anderson, and the familiar, ironic tone which he adopts towards his own work with the Excise, and given that *The Bee* published radical essays and poems, it is strange that Burns seems never to have contributed anything of a political nature for publication in this trusted source. This fact alone might well cast doubt on the Hogg-Noble thesis that Burns was contributing radical work to other Scottish periodicals of the period. Would Burns, then, simply appropriate Anderson's pseudonym for himself for the London press?

In 1777 Anderson had published his *Miscellaneous Observations on Planting and Training Timber-trees* under the name Agricola. A series of eleven letters first published in the *Edinburgh Weekly Amusement* from 1771-1773, this material appeared later in book form as a result of its original popularity.⁶ This work, clearly, arises out of the literary milieu of Tobias Smollett's

⁶*Miscellaneous Observations on Planting and Training Timber-trees; Particularly Calculated for the Climate of Scotland in a Series of Letters*. By Agricola (Edinburgh, 1777).

Expedition of Humphry Clinker (1771) and the desire for Enlightened agricultural improvement. Anderson adopts his classical-rustic mantle as one of a new breed of cultured men in Scotland and elsewhere involved in vigorous debate centered on the new science of economics. A good example of the type is William Ogilvie (1736-1816), Professor of Humanity at Aberdeen University from 1765. His agrarian radicalism (Anderson was likewise intensely interested in the economics of the countryside and innovation therein) is expressed in his *Essay on the Right of Property in Land* (London, 1781) which reverberated amidst the political circumstances of the 1790s.⁷ The combination of interest in economics, radical politics and humanist learning found in Anderson and Ogilvie is a cultural phenomenon which has been noticed by commentators on the intellectual history of eighteenth-century Scotland.⁸ The Preface to Vol. 3 of *The Bee* (1791) nicely sums up the kind of cultural figure Anderson cut:

James Anderson, LLD, FRS, FAS.S., Honorary Member of the Society of Arts, Agriculture, &c. at Bath; of the Philosophical, and of the Agricultural Societies in Manchester; of the Society for promoting Natural History, London; of the Academy of Arts, Science and Belles Lettres, Dijon; and Correspondent Member of the Royal Society of Agriculture, Paris.

A distinctive part of Anderson's economic literacy was his difference with Adam Smith on free trade. For instance, we find in *The Bee* for February 23rd 1790, Anderson's "Thoughts on the Corn Laws by the Editor," which disagrees with Smith's opposition to bounties on exports of grain.⁹ There is a particular reason that I believe this to be of possible significance. Hogg and Noble claim that an epigram published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for September 1790 and signed Agricola is by Burns. This runs as follows

Death and Hermes of late in Elysium made boast,
That each would bring thither what earth valued most:
Smith's Wealth of Nations Hermes stole from his shelf;
DEATH just won his cause—he took off Smith Himself.

Agricola (*Canongate Burns*, p. 445).

⁷See Noel Thompson, *The Real Rights of Man: Political Economies for the Working Class 1775-1850* (London, 1998), pp. 15-19.

⁸See Charles F. Mullett, "A Village Aristotle and the Harmony of Interests: James Anderson (1739-1808) of Monks Hill," in *Journal of British Studies*, 8 (Nov. 1968), 94-118; and Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity 1689-c. 1830* (Cambridge, 1993), especially p. 249.

⁹*The Bee* 1, 304-12 (especially, pp. 305 and 310). Henceforth *The Bee*.

The commentary in *The Canongate Burns* suggests that we have here a "mixture of respect and irony" (*Canongate Burns*, p. 445), but I am far from convinced. Hermes is the patron of pickpockets which suggests a somewhat reductive attitude to Smith's treatise, and the flippant manner with which Smith's demise is treated does not easily square with Burns's well-known respect for the newly-dead philosopher.¹⁰ Ultimately, of course, identification in the case of this small squib is rather difficult to argue wholeheartedly for with regard to either Anderson or Burns though I think the case for the former is at least as strong as the latter; with typical recklessness, however, the text is placed confidently by Hogg and Noble in the mainstream of their *Canongate Burns* and not in a dubia section.

There is one other intriguing appearance of the pseudonym Agricola and this occurs in a journal dedicated to opposing political radicalism, the *Anti-Jacobin, or Weekly Examiner* for 5th March 1798, twenty months after Burns's death. Here in a letter Agricola writes of the need for "a well-regulated and prudent economy" and is fiscally very knowing in general.¹¹ The author talks also of having been previously "almost a Democrat, or at least an *Anti-Pittite*" (p. 585). The economic literacy could be significant with regard to Anderson, who had published radical material in *The Bee* earlier in the decade. Given no known political *volte face* on the part of Anderson, it is more probable, however, that Agricola is, in fact, another person very interested in economic and political matters—Peter Stuart, whose previously anti-Tory credentials, as in the case of so many during the 1790s, changed so that certainly by 1805 he was a staunch supporter of Henry Dundas. A credible hypothesis is that Stuart is responsible for utilizing the pseudonym Agricola in the *Star* and the *Anti-Jacobin* and that James Anderson utilizes the same name in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Alternatively, a completely different individual may be the author of both the pieces in the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *Anti-Jacobin*. One can speculate, however, that the editors of *The Canongate Burns* are not interested in exploring such possibilities in a version of that blinkered cultural phenomenon identified as long ago as 1811 as "Burnomania."¹²

¹⁰For instance, Burns, in a letter of 13th May 1789 to Robert Graham, said of Smith and his *Wealth of Nations*: "I could not have given any mere *man*, credit for half the intelligence Mr Smith discovers in his book" (*Letters*, I, 410).

¹¹*The Anti-Jacobin; Or, Weekly Examiner*, No. 17 (March 5th 1798), 585.

¹²William Peebles coined this term in his *Burnomania: The Celebrity of Robert Burns Considered* (Edinburgh, 1811). Several lines of Peebles's poem, "Burns Renowned," really ought to have been taken seriously by the too credulous editors of *The Canongate Burns*:

The pseudonym *Agrestis* (rustic) is adduced by Hogg and Noble as a clue to Burns's authorship of the two poetic variations on a theme entitled "The Ghost of Bruce."¹³ Kenneth Simpson has written of these very pedestrian pieces:

As G. Ross Roy has pointed out: "Burns was proud of several of his 'protest' songs and sent copies to his friends (e.g. "Scots Wha Hae" to Mrs Dunlop, politically his antithesis); to others he mentioned their existence." Yet there is no mention in any letter of any of the poems for which his authorship is claimed by Hogg. And to take but one example, "The Ghost of Bruce": given that Burns was so positive about "Scots Wha Hae" (his "pitch of enthusiasm on the theme of Liberty and Independence") it seems unlikely that almost simultaneously, he would rework the same material into a manifestly inferior version.¹⁴

It is all too typical of the *Canongate Burns*, appearing more than three years after Simpson is writing, that it simply fails to respond to the objections of Roy and Simpson.¹⁵ Also, Hogg and Noble fail to note the appearance of the *non-de-plume* *Agrestis* in Anderson's *Bee*. In an editorial of 2nd March 1791, we find the following commentary:

Agrestis complains of the brutality of some persons, who, with a view, as they think, to preserve their own dignity, require from people of an inferior station degrading marks of debasement or humility:—and reprehends with great justice of severity, the insolent meanness of a young man of this sort, who permitted a poor old man with a few grey hairs in his head, to stand *uncovered* beside him for quarter of an hour in the street while it rained hard; the gentleman as he called himself, being screened all the while by his umbrella. Such disregard to the feelings of another, surely marks a meanness of soul that ought to be execrated by everyone (*The Bee*, 1 [March 2, 1791], 364).

Again in *The Bee* there is a letter dated 12th October 1791, and designated as coming from "western Caledonia" signed *Agrestis*, on the "unmanly vice of swearing." *Agrestis* writes:

A Wilkes, a Pindar, Paine, and Burns,
Have venders, purchasers, inspirers,
Have imitators, friends, admirers (pp. 101-102).

¹³*Lost Poems*, pp. 105 & 105-6; and *Canongate Burns*, pp. 464 and 469.

¹⁴Kenneth Simpson, "Stushie Rescues Forgotten Talent from the Shadow of the Master," *The [Glasgow] Herald* (October 28, 1998), p. 12.

¹⁵*Canongate Burns*, see pp. 465-6 and 470-2.

Human nature is not so bad at the bottom, but sober reason & calm reflection, if summoned up to her assistance in due time, will, in general, be found very sufficient to counteract all the foreign stimuli of immorality or vice.... I am neither, sir, a clergyman, nor pedagogue (excuse my provincial dialect) (*The Bee*, 6 [Dec. 22, 1791], 254-5).

Given the location of the letter and the reference to "provincial dialect" one might wonder if there is a certain impersonation of the Burns of sensibility going on. Is this the case also with the two fussy, melodramatic "Ghost of Bruce" pieces which appeared in the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*? If either of the two Agrestis personae were at this game, it seemed to fool no-one at the time.¹⁶

Let us turn to a much more certain discovery. In *The Lost Poems*, Hogg's A1 poem, "On the Year 1793," published in the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* carries the pseudonym Aratus (*Lost Poems*, pp. 78-9). Hogg is alerted to this piece yet again by the principle of pseudonyms which might be linked to the rustic Burns (Aratus means ploughed) and ultimately by little else. Referring to one of Burns's annotations in verse found in John Syme's copy of the "Della Cruscan" section of the *British Album* and written in the year 1793, Hogg insists that "the bard's lines are the only poetry from the period of the 1790s which bear any resemblance to 'On the Year 1793.'" ¹⁷ Ludicrous as such a claim is in itself (we are talking about very standard and even mediocre versifying of the period at large in both pieces), it is also very precisely untrue. Let us observe the first four lines of "On the Year 1793":

Thou, *who* from dust alone couldst man create,
And *bade th'* immortal soul his being animate!
At *whose command* sub-marine mountains rise,
And *towering* Aetna's smoke obscures the *skies!*¹⁸

What Hogg seems not to be aware of is a politically radical pamphlet entitled, *A Voyage to the Moon Strongly Recommended to all Lovers of Real Freedom* (1793) published in London and authored by "Aratus." This text is in the British Library and is to be found listed also among interesting items of Uto-

¹⁶There are also two other items carrying the pseudonym of A-----S (which may denote Agrestis," or another name sometimes appearing in *The Bee*, Amicus). There is a letter on America which deals with slavery (3 [May 23, 1791], 96-101) and there is "Observation by A-----S concerning Pitt" (3 [June 1, 1791], 135). James Anderson's periodical was very receptive to work critical of Pitt's government and supportive of the abolitionist movement.

¹⁷[Annotations in verse] Poem B, *Poems*, II, 693; *Lost Poems*, p. 79.

¹⁸*The Edinburgh Gazetteer* 8th January 1793 (cited in *Lost Poems*, p. 78).

pian literature on the web site of the New York Public Library. *A Voyage to the Moon* is a prose fantasy in which a man ascends in a balloon and observes a world of eight million snakes ruled over by economically exploitative Great Snakes. Clearly, we have here a thin allegory for economic and political conditions in Great Britain during the 1790s. At one point, we are given a poem appealing to the deity and complaining of the injustice created by humanity. For anyone who cares to explore, there is a string of similarities with "On the Year 1793." Here is the entire sequence:

Him, *who* could space unlimited define,
 Who *bade th'* obedient sun on us to shine!
 At *whose command* the spiral vortex *rise*
 In *tow'ring* columns, to the vaulted *skies!*
 That pow'r Omnipotent! At whose desire
 Yon burning mountain pours a stream of fire!
 Fields, cities, vineyards, towns, together fall
 In one vast ruin, at his sacred call!
 Him, at whose bidding, earthquakes dire, no more
 From liquid floods create a new-born shore;
 Or pompous cities, (by their fury hurl'd,
 Quick disappear, and seek another world;
 Or dive, where monsters innocently play,
 And whirl-pools spring, more terrible than they!
 Him, at whose bidding, all these tumults cease,
 And noise terrific turns to silent peace!
 Can Despots war with this eternal pow'r,
 Who bids the sacred flame illumine ev'ry shore? (p. 13)

Given the thematic similarity and the similarity in form (including the strong lexical coincidences which I have italicized in the two poems), the probability is that the Aratus of "On the Year 1793" and of *A Voyage to the Moon* are one and the same. Why would anyone intent on plagiarism deviate to the small extent that either piece does and still employ the same pseudonym? Alternatively, is it possible that Burns wrote a hitherto unattributed essay in fantasy published obscurely in London? This would actually be a very exciting possibility, but it seems unlikely that no suggestion of such a piece should be known until now.

Who is Aratus? I do not know, but it is intriguing that in Hogg and Noble's *Canongate Burns* the poem, "On the Year 1793," is silently lost again. We really should be told why this piece so abruptly disappeared, especially when the editors claim that "only two of Scott Hogg's discoveries have been found to be certainly not by Burns."¹⁹ Curiously, though the piece is men-

¹⁹*Canongate Burns*, p. xcvi; given that this statement occurs in a section entitled, "Editorial Policy and Practice" one might have expected the omission of "On the Year 1793," unless

tioned in a note in the *Canongate Burns*. Discussing the aforementioned annotative quatrain by Burns, which the editors call, "Lines in a Lady's Pocket Book," Hogg and Noble claim that the four lines of this piece "are very close in sentiment and expression to the poem *On the Year 1793*, [sic] printed in *The Edinburgh Gazetteer* on 8th January, 1793 and if inserted at the end of that poem, seamlessly complete it" (*Canongate Burns*, p. 787). As Carol McGuirk has written of *Robert Burns: The Lost Poems*, "the work is marred by Hogg's failure to consider Burns's characteristic prosody—Hogg counts syllables but never discusses emphasis—by overly literal readings and over-praise of the texts he has found, and by the absence of footnotes to provide precise documentation." It is on these bases that she adds that "Burns probably did not write 'On the Year 1793,' 'Lines on Ambition' and other works that Hogg defends as certainly by the poet."²⁰ While "On the Year 1793" itself is missing from the *Canongate Burns*, the implied argument surrounding it, of which McGuirk is so rightly dismissive, remains in place. This is a very mysterious state of affairs.

The work of Hogg and Noble is, it would appear, insensitive to a rife and diffuse culture of radical creative writing during the 1790s. Aratus, seemingly, sends material to an Edinburgh newspaper as well as publishing in London. The probability is that Aratus is English, or at least is based in England. Hogg and Noble (though it is unclear, finally, whether the *Canongate Burns* means us to believe that "On the Year 1793" is by Burns or not), assume that they are mining an exclusively Scottish seam of writing when dealing with the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* and this desperately narrow outlook is confirmed as Burns is alighted upon as author.

Clearly, there is a large hole in the supposed "evidence" for pseudonyms in the work of Hogg and Noble. My own work on the "lost poems" has, most emphatically, not been a huge or systematic labor. One suspects that the Scottish newspaper material from which other "lost poems" are culled would be more difficult to investigate, though it is entirely possible that some enterprising researcher will make discoveries here too. My comments in the foregoing piece, along with my previous discoveries about Alexander Geddes (it is actually extraordinary that Hogg should previously have been unaware of Geddes in his search of the radical newspapers of London for at least one other Scottish poet X, as he puts it, as an alternative to Burns) represent what will hopefully be my entire word on the affair. I am not alone in having serious reser-

entirely accidental, to be dealt with here. Two other poems from the "A" list of *The Lost Poems* simply fail to appear in the *Canongate Burns*: "Address to Justice" (*Lost Poems*, pp. 170-1) and "The Remonstrance and Petition of Rover, A Poor Dog" (pp. 207-8). Have Hogg and Noble discovered that these pieces are not by Burns?

²⁰Carol McGuirk, review of *Robert Burns: The Lost Poems* in *Eighteenth Century Scottish Studies Society Newsletter* (1998), p. 14.

ventions about the *Canongate Burns* and the so-called “lost poems” findings. For me to do any more than I have, however, would be to invest too much negative energy, and it is now up to others to confront, in all good faith, the claims made by Hogg and Noble. For others not to do so risks exposing Burns studies to ultimate ridicule since the project and its now very substantial publication have lacked scholarly rigor.

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