

2004

# Burns's Other Poem for Jean The "Blue-Eyed Lassie"

Andrew M. Stauffer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stauffer, Andrew M. (2004) "Burns's Other Poem for Jean The "Blue-Eyed Lassie"," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 33: Iss. 1.  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol33/iss1/28>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

*Andrew M. Stauffer*

### Burns's Other Poem for Jean The "Blue-Eyed Lassie"

One of Robert Burns's most famous lyrics celebrates the "twa sweet een...sae bonny blue" of Jean Jaffray, daughter of Andrew, a clergyman of Lochmaben.<sup>1</sup> Written in 1788, this poem, entitled "The Blue-Eyed Lassie," first appeared in James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, Vol. 3 (1790), during the poet's lifetime, and has always been considered undeniably authentic.<sup>2</sup> A second poem that Burns apparently wrote for Jean has not been so fortunate. This song, typically known as "When first I saw fair Jeanie's Face," was first collected by Robert Chambers in his *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, Vol. 3 (1852), but has had only sporadic acceptance into the Burns canon. The W. E. Henley-T. F. Henderson Centenary Edition of 1896 offers the poem but with the following caveat: "the song is so poor that, had not Alexander Smith (edition, 1868), collated the text 'with a copy in the poet's handwriting,' we should have classed it with the improbables."<sup>3</sup> J. Logie Robertson includes it in his

---

<sup>1</sup>There is some disagreement about the spelling of the family name, which is not infrequently given as Jeffrey. However, Hew Scott's *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, revised edn. (1915) spells it Jaffray, and Maurice Lindsay follows suit in *The Burns Encyclopedia*, 3rd edn. (1980).

<sup>2</sup>For the bibliographical background of this poem, see *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), III, 1282-3. Henceforth Kinsley.

<sup>3</sup>*Complete Poems of Robert Burns*, 6 vols. (Boston, 1926), 5, 266.

*Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (Oxford, 1928), but William Wallace does not in the 1959 Bicentenary edition of the poet's works.<sup>4</sup> Neither James C. Dick nor Donald A. Low includes it in his modern edition of the songs,<sup>5</sup> and Kinsley omits it from the Oxford standard edition, not even finding a place for it in the section entitled "Undated Poems and *Dubia*." James A. Mackay, on the other hand, claims of the work that it was published "in all major editions except Kinsley who rejected it as spurious."<sup>6</sup> However evidence suggests that it has a stronger claim to Burns's authorship than has been realized.

According to Chambers, the song was first published in the *New York Mirror* in 1846, with the accompanying notation: "The lady to whom the following verses—never before published—were addressed [is] known to the readers of Burns as the 'Blue-eyed Lassie.'"<sup>7</sup> In fact, the poem appeared on the front page of *The Mirror* for November 22, 1845 (vol. 3, no. 59). Its New York publication makes more sense than is immediately evident, since Jean Jaffray had in 1791 married William Renwick, a Liverpool merchant, and the couple emigrated to New York soon thereafter, where she lived until her death in 1860.<sup>8</sup> The notation to *The Mirror* text states that the subject of the poem "still lives, honoured and respected, among us." Jean was widowed in 1808, and she became part of a literary circle that included a close friendship with Washington Irving. Thus it seems logical that the verses found their way from Jean Renwick's hands to the editors of *The Mirror* via one of the members of this group, possibly even Irving himself.

However, it has not been noticed that the poem had in fact been published in America over thirty years previous to its *Mirror* reprinting, having appeared in *The Analectic Magazine* for September 1813 (2, 263). Published in Philadelphia by Moses Thomas, *The Analectic* was edited by none other than

---

<sup>4</sup>*The Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1959).

<sup>5</sup>*The Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James C. Dick (London, 1903); *The Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. Donald A. Low (London, 1993).

<sup>6</sup>*The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, ed. James A. Mackay (Darvel, Ayrshire, 1993), p. 612.

<sup>7</sup>*The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, 1852), 3, 97.

<sup>8</sup>On Jean Renwick (née Jaffray), see S. Hellman's *Washington Irving, Esquire* (New York, 1925), 50-53; and *The Book of Burns*, ed. Charles Rogers, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1890), 2, 343-4. Rogers gives the date of her marriage as 1794.

Washington Irving from January 1813 to 1815.<sup>9</sup> During this period, Irving was a frequent visitor at Jean Renwick's and a good friend to both her and her son James.<sup>10</sup> What's more, he complains in a December 1812 letter to James about his impending editorship of *The Analectic*, calling the magazine a "vile far-rago—a congregation of heterogenous [*sic*] articles," and lamenting the difficulty of filling its monthly issues with material.<sup>11</sup> The Renwicks very likely responded to similar complaints in the ensuing year by supplying Irving with the lines by Burns. At the least, as Jean's intimate and the editor of *The Analectic* when the song appeared, Irving would not have published it without verifying its authenticity with the Renwicks.

A headnote to the Burns poem in *The Analectic* reads, "We have been favoured with the following song in manuscript. It is from the pen of ROBERT BURNS, and has never before been published" (2, 263). This was not Moses Thomas's only literary coup. With the assistance of Irving, Thomas established his importance as an early publisher of Byron's poetry from 1813-1820, both in *The Analectic* and in various editions issued from his Philadelphia press.<sup>12</sup> *The Analectic* is also remembered for first publishing anonymously under the title "Defence of Fort McHenry" in November 1814 the verses by Francis Scott Key that would become the national anthem of the United States. Thus in the decade 1810-1820, Thomas and his editors demonstrated both the desire and the ability to publish new or hard-to-find poetry, of which the lines to Jean Jaffray seem to be an early example.

In his edition of *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, Alexander Smith presents the poem in question and adds a tantalizing note: "The text has been collated with a copy in the Poet's handwriting."<sup>13</sup> No other editor has located this copy, and in any event, a copy in Burns's hand is no guarantee that the song was composed by him, given his habit of collecting, copying, and reworking Scottish songs. But without other evidence, we have no compelling

---

<sup>9</sup>For more on *The Analectic Magazine*, see F. L. Mott's *A History of American Magazines 1741-1856* (New York, 1930), pp. 279-83.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, *Letters from Washington Irving to Mrs. William Renwick and to Her Son* (New York, 1918).

<sup>11</sup>Washington Irving: *Letters, Volume I: 1802-1827*, ed. R. M. Aderman, H. L. Kleinfield, and J. S. Banks (Boston, 1978), p. 349.

<sup>12</sup>On Moses Thomas and Byron, see A. M. Stauffer, "New Light on Byron's Regency Verse in America," *Byron Journal*, 28 (2000), 31-38, and Peter Accardo, "Byron in America to 1830," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 9.2 (1998), 5-60.

<sup>13</sup>*Poems, Songs and Letters being the Complete Works of Robert Burns*, ed. Alexander Smith (London, 1868), p. 607. The Globe Edition.

reason to exclude this poem from the Burns canon. Certainly it should have at least qualified as one of Kinsley's "Undated Poems and *Dubia*." In his Preface he describes his rationale for including certain questionable poems,

which were published by nineteenth-century editors, apparently from manuscripts, but for which no manuscript authority can now be found.... Where the source of a poem is uncertain, but I have been unable to reject it on stylistic grounds, I have accepted the early attribution—though sometimes with reluctance (Kinsley, I, vi).

Like Henley and Henderson, Kinsley seems to have decided the song is not worthy of Burns and thus has rejected it on stylistic grounds. Yet given the several indications we have of its authenticity, such a rejection seems precipitous, particularly given the variant stylistic features in *The Analectic* version.

*The Analectic* version differs in several respects from the one offered by *The Mirror* and the editions of Chambers and Smith, all three of which present texts that are virtually identical. What follows is a collation of the substantive differences in *The Analectic* text, excluding variations in punctuation and spelling:

Line	<i>Mirror</i> / Chambers / Smith	<i>Analectic</i>
Stanza 1		
1	fair Jeanie's	my Jeany's
2	tell	think
3	went	gaed
4	they almost	had nearly
5	trim, sae	trim and
6	All	Ilk
8	a lover.	her lover.
Chorus		
1	bliithe, sae	bliithe and
Stanza 2		
2	Hopetoun's wealth	Hopeton's pride
3	brow,	fate,
4	humbler	softer
7	belted	peer or
Stanza 3		
1	fear	doubt
2	sweet Jeanie's	my Jeany's
4	maun	can
6	Forth	Nith

In addition to the alteration of the first line of the poem (which affects our way of referring to this song without a title), significant variants appear in each stanza. In *The Analectic* text, the possessive phrases of stanza one, "my Jeany" and "her lover," replace the more general "fair Jeanie" and "a lover." In stanza two, we hear of "Hopeton's pride" in *The Analectic* as opposed to his "wealth."

Burns is likely to have emphasized the former attribute, given his opinion of the Earl of Hopetoun in 1791. As he wrote to Cunningham regarding Hopetoun's persecution of schoolmaster James Clarke,

Lord Hopetoun...has sworn his destruction; irritated as he justly is, that any Plebian & the son of Plebian, should dare to oppose his—*existence*—a trifling affair! against his Lordship's high & mighty will.<sup>14</sup>

Here as in the poem, pride is the Earl's defining characteristic.

Burns's dislike of Hopetoun mirrors his feelings regarding Henry Dundas, whom he mentions in the first line of the second stanza: "Had I Dundas's whole estate." Burns is here referring to Henry Dundas (1742-1811), Member of Parliament for Midlothian 1774-90 and Home Secretary 1791, whom Maurice Lindsay describes as "for nearly thirty years...the most powerful man in Scotland."<sup>15</sup> Snubbed by Henry's brother Robert in 1788, Burns wrote to Cunningham a few years later of his dislike of the whole family: "I never see the name, Dundas, in the column of a newspaper, but my heart seems straitened for room in my bosom.... I feel my face flush, & my nether lip quivers" (*Letters* 2, 81). Thus his references to both "Dundas's wealth" and "Hopetoun's pride" in the poem grow out of a personal antagonism, despite the apparently enviable attributes of those figures.

In addition, *The Analectic* reading in stanza three, line six—"Nith" rather than "Forth"—makes more geographic sense. Burns imagines Jean going "east" or "west," which describes movement between the Nith and Tweed Rivers; the Forth lies to the north of both. Furthermore, Burns was living at Ellisland farm in Dumfriesshire from 1788-91, and his property was located on the banks of the Nith River. Add to this the fact that Jean Jaffray lived with her father at Lochmaben, about ten miles away on the other side of the Nith, and it becomes clear that the *Analectic* reading is the preferable one.

The *Analectic* text has a certain authority as the first published version, but ultimately Smith's version carries more weight, on the strength of his having consulted the now-lost manuscript which apparently duplicated *The Mirror* publication almost exactly. Nevertheless, if Irving did receive a manuscript copy from Jean Renwick, it too was most likely one given to her from the hand of the poet. If authentic, the poem was written around 1791, perhaps when Burns learned of Jean's impending marriage to William Renwick. The final stanza seems to indicate this, as the speaker fears that "some happier swain/ Has gained sweet Jeanie's favour," and imagines her leaving her family and native village: "gang she east, or gang she west." As opposed to the passion-

---

<sup>14</sup>*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy. 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), 2, 134. Henceforth *Letters*.

<sup>15</sup>*The Burns Encyclopedia*, 3rd edn. (New York, 1980), p. 114.

ate love-or-death declaration of "The Blue-Eyed Lassie," this song for Jean has a valedictory character; "may every bliss be her's," the speaker declares, "Though I can never have her." Burns may have presented the poem to Jean as a kind of blessing on her engagement, and as a farewell.

The first published version of the poem—that is, the version printed by Washington Irving and Moses Thomas in *The Analectic Magazine* for September 1813—is given here:

WHEN first I saw my Jeany's face  
I could na' think what ail'd me,  
My heart gaed fluttering, pit a pit,  
My een had nearly fail'd me.  
She's ay sae neat, sae trim and tight,  
Ilk grace does round her hover:  
Ae look depriv'd me o' my heart,  
And I became her lover.

She's ay ay sae blythe and gay,  
She's ay sae blythe and chearie,  
She's ay sae bonnie, blythe and gay;  
O gin I were her dearie!

Had I Dundas's whole estate,  
Or Hopeton's pride to shine in,  
Did warlike laurels crown my fate,  
Or softer bays entwining;  
I'd lay them all at Jeany's feet  
Could I but hope to move her,  
And prouder than a peer or knight,  
I'd be my Jeany's lover.

She's ay ay, &c.

But sair I doubt some happier swain  
Has gain'd my Jeany's favour,  
If sae, may every bliss be her's,  
Though I can never have her.  
But gang she east, or gang she west,  
'Twixt Nith and Tweed all over,  
While men have eyes, or ears, or taste,  
She'll always find a lover.

She's ay ay, &c.