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N. C. Craig Sharp

Robert Burns's Missing Weekend, Hogmanay 1786

Robert Burns added twenty-two poems to those in the 1786 (Kilmarnock) edition to make up the 1787 (Edinburgh) Edition. Only three of these were completed or composed in Edinburgh: "To a Haggis," the "Address to Edinburgh" and the stanzas inscribed "To Miss L---." He must have thought well of the last poem to include it. The date and location of his poem to Susan Logan, along with its provenance, provide a most interesting clue to the fact that he did not spend Hogmanay 1786 in Edinburgh. On the contrary, he was in or near Ayr for the New Year.

On Monday 27th November 1786, Burns had set off for Edinburgh, stopping overnight roughly halfway there for a dinner party organized by Archibald Prentice at Covington Mains. He arrived in the Grassmarket on the Tuesday, and so far as is recorded, he did not leave Edinburgh's environs until May 1st, when he rode to Covington, as noted by Prentice,¹ possibly as a trial run on his newly purchased horse, Jenny Geddes. On May 5th he set off with Robert Ainslie on his tour of the Borders.

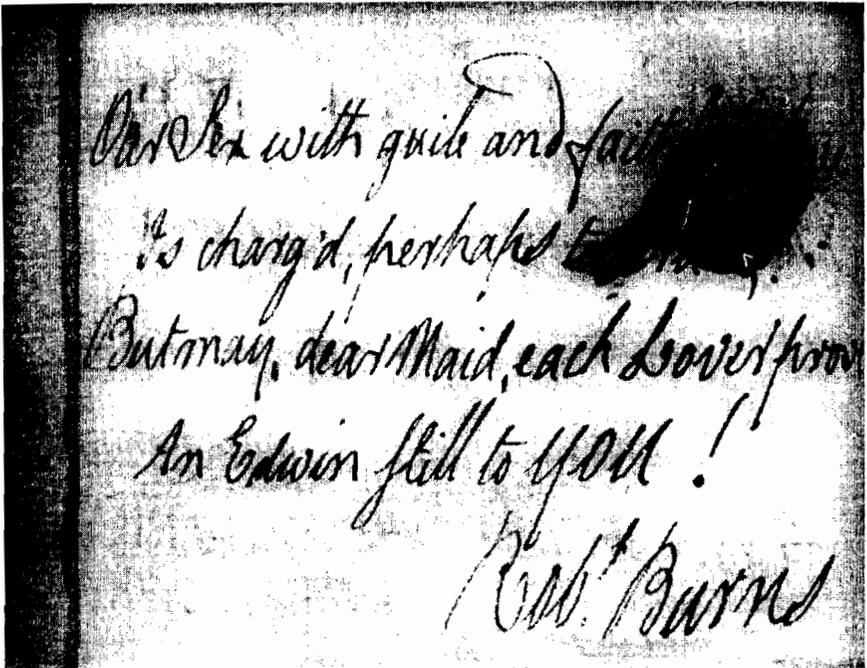
No biographer mentions any visit back to Ayrshire within those five months, yet there is good evidence to suggest that Burns spent Hogmanay 1786 in or around Ayr, and that he dined at the villa Park, in Ayr, with William Logan and his mother and two young sisters, Susan and Jane, aged about

¹See James Mackay, *RB A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 303. Henceforth Mackay.

Edin. of January 1st, 1787
To Miss Susan Logan
Park

Again the silent wheels of Time
& their annual round have driv'n
And you, tho' scarce in maiden bloom
Are so much nearer Heaven.

No gifts have I from Indian crafts
To the infant year to hail;
Should you more than India bring
For Edwin's simple tale.



eleven and ten respectively (or even younger—Susan was described as then a very young girl by her younger sister Jane many years later). Logan, a lieutenant on half pay (he became major in 1794) was excellent company, a good violin player—“thairm-inspirin, rattlin Willie” Burns called him²—and a man whose company Burns enjoyed, as indicated by the verse epistle he wrote for him, sent on October 30th 1786, which includes the lines, “Faites mes baise-mains respecteuse, / To sentimental sister Susie,” and which concludes:

But when in Ayr, some half-hour's leisure,
Be't light, be't dark,
Sir Bard will do himsel the pleasure
To call at Park (*Poems*, I, 302).

A month later Burns was in Edinburgh, yet a month after that he paid the unrecorded visit back to Ayr which is the subject of this article. The evidence

²“Epistle to Capn Willm Logan at Park” in *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 300. Henceforth *Poems*.

for this visit is as follows: Burns inscribed the poem “To Miss Susan Logan / Park” headed “Edinr January 1st, 1787” (Fig. 1) in a copy of James Beattie’s *Poems on Several Occasions* (Edinburgh, 1786), which reads:

Again the silent wheels of Time
 Their annual round have driven,
 And you, tho’ scarce in maiden prime,
 Are so much nearer Heaven.

No gifts have I from Indian coasts,
 The infant year to hail;
 I send you more than India boasts,
 In Edwin’s simple tale.

Our Sex with guile and faithless love,
 Is charg’d, perhaps too true;
 But may, dear Maid, each Lover prove
 An Edwin still to YOU!³

Edwin is, of course, the upright hero of Beattie’s long poem “The Minstrel.” However, it is the provenance of the Susan Logan poem which provides the main interest in this context. This consists of two separate autograph provenances (in the present author’s possession) written by Susan’s younger sister Jane Mackenzie, in 1841 and 1843. A literal transcription of the 1841 item, maintaining the line order, reads:

Beattie’s Poems, the very same vol. Burns sent my sister from Edinburgh, he had taken Supper in my brothers house, the night before, was to set off in the morning in the Coach or Conveyence used at the time—1787—to publish his first small Vol. of Poems—he sat next my sister at Supper—she a very young girl, but more than Common intellect, in the course of Conversation he regretted, she did not know Beattie’s poem “The Minstrel!”—which he for the first time had only lately read—he set off next morning for Edinb. bought Beattie’s poems, wrote that most elegant little poem on the blank leaf standing in the book sellers Shop—made up his parcel, took it to the coach—and sent it off—She had never seen him before, nor ever afterwards—the writer of this, remembers well the night of the Supper, & the begging for leave to sit up, to see the man everybody spoke so much about, and I do remember his face quite well—

Jane Mackenzie 1841

³*Poems*, I, 319, where the text differs in some minor ways with the above transcription, which is taken from the original in the present author’s possession.

My former name Jane Logan, youngest Sister to Susan Logan who received the Poems from Robert Burns. I do this for the benefit of my dear grandson William Macquhae not yet three years old—having lost his mother—When I die he has little chance of knowing anything of former times or people.

March 10 1841

Jane Mackenzie wrote another very similar statement two years later, with the additional comment about Burns that: "He had gone immediately to the shop & bought it. Wrote that beautiful little poem on the first leaf and sent it off with the return of the coach." Jane Logan Mackenzie would then have been in her mid-sixties, with which the handwriting appears consistent, and it is in a nineteenth-century hand, hence this seems to be a genuine provenance. Admittedly, it is written from the memory of a very young girl, well over fifty years later, but it was a memory of a most extraordinary event in the household.

Thus, if the "next morning" was January first, when Burns set off and sent the Beattie volume "with the return of the coach"—and he very clearly wrote the date—then the previous evening, when he had "taken Supper in my mother's house" (i.e. Park in Ayr) must have been Hogmanay 1786. This prompts some questions, particularly: Are there any other records of his journey? If not, was he deliberately keeping it quiet, and if so, why? Secondly, why did he journey from Edinburgh to Ayr?

Regarding records: In some dozen biographies, from Lockhart⁴ in 1828, to Hecht⁵ and Carswell⁶ in the 1930s, to Mackay⁷ and McIntyre⁸ in the 1990s, no mention is made of Burns leaving Edinburgh and environs from November 28, 1786, until May first, when he rode to Covington Mains to see Archibald Prentice, his November host. Burns is not even recorded as mentioning this May visit to anyone, but Prentice had the farmer's habit of keeping a farm journal, and noted tersely on May first, "Cold land. Making bear [barley ale]. Mr Burns here" (Mackay, p. 303). So here was another, albeit shorter journey which Burns made without leaving any (surviving) personal record.

⁴John G. Lockhart, *The Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1828), frequently reprinted.

⁵Hans Hecht, *Robert Burns: Leben und Wirken des schottischen Volksdichters* (Heidelberg, 1919). Trans by J. Lymburn as *Robert Burns: The Man and his Work* (London, 1936).

⁶Catherine Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns* (London, 1930).

⁷James Mackay, *RB: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992).

⁸Ian McIntyre, *Dirt and Deity: A Life of Robert Burns* (London, 1995).

Cromek⁹ makes no mention of Hogmanay 1786, nor does Burns refer to it in his second Commonplace Book. Between November 29 and February 24 Burns wrote twenty-nine letters which still exist or have been reliably recorded. In none of the thirteen letters written before Hogmanay, nor any of the first sixteen written after it, is any intention to travel to Ayr alluded to, nor is mention of such a journey made afterwards. It is worth considering some of these letters. Burns sent a letter to William Chalmers in Ayr on 27 December, yet made no mention that he was coming there within a few days. He wrote: "I am, and have been, ever since I came to Edinr, as unfit to write a letter of humour, as to write a commentary on, The Revelation of St John the Divine,"¹⁰ which indicates an unsettled state of mind. A highly significant letter is the short communication to James Burnett, Lord Monboddo:

I shall do myself the honor, Sir, to dine with you tomorrow, as you obligingly request.—

My conscience twitting me with having neglected to send Miss Eliza a song which she once mentioned to me as a Song she wished to have—I enclose it for her; with one or two more, by way of a peace-offering (*Letters*, I, 76-7).

What is important about the Monboddo communication is that in the collections of Burns's letters (and in the index of the Watson Collection in the National Library of Scotland which contains the letter), it is dated conjecturally as 30 Dec. 1786. But if this date is accurate, and the letter an acceptance to spend Hogmanay with Monboddo, Burns could not also have been taking a Hogmanay supper with the Logans in Ayr.

Of course, writing fifty-five years after the event, Jane Logan herself could have made a mistake. For example, Burns had sent a letter dated Moss-giel 20th November 1786 to John Ballantine: "I shall be happy to have your opinion on Friday first, when I intend being in Ayr" (*Letters*, I, 66). The Friday in question would have been the 24th of November. Did he go on to the Logans later? And did Jane get the impression that he was going to Edinburgh on the next morning, the 25th, rather than the 27th? However, this would not square with her claim that Burns went to buy the Beattie immediately on arrival in Edinburgh, and sent it off "with the return of the coach." The Beattie is clearly dated January 1st 1787, and this dating is repeated in the 1787 Edition. Perhaps Burns wrote a covering letter explaining that he had bought the wee volume and had inscribed the poem in the shop, before sending it off.

⁹R. H. Cromek, ed., *Reliques of Robert Burns; Consisting Chiefly of Original Letters, Poems, and Critical Observations on Scottish Songs* (London, 1808).

¹⁰*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 75. Henceforth *Letters*.

A letter to Henry Erskine, conjectured as “End of December 1786,” says nothing about an intended journey or absence. The earliest post-Hogmanay letter could be that to James Sibbald dated “Lawn market Friday morn,” conjectured as January, whose earliest Friday was the 5th, and Burns makes no mention in it of having been away.

Possibly the most significant letter of all is one to Gavin Hamilton dated Edinburgh 7th January 1787. This was first published in 1838 by Robert Chambers, but the manuscript has not been traced. More importantly, only a portion of the manuscript survived at that time.

...To tell the truth among friends, I feel a miserable blank in my heart, with want of her, and I don't think I shall ever meet with so delicious an armful again. She has her faults; and so have you and I; and so has every body (*Letters*, I, 78).

What preceded that is missing. In that portion, had Burns told Hamilton that he had seen Jean Armour earlier that week (presuming it is she to whom he is referring)?

Another significant letter is that dated “Edinburgh 11th January 1787” to the Mauchline doctor John Mackenzie, who was not only a very good friend of Burns (it was in his house in 1788 that Burns and Jean Armour first set up home), but he had married Helen Miller, one of Jean's companion “Mauchline belles.” Of all people, one would think that Burns would have mentioned an Ayrshire visit to him. But he made no reference to it. A letter to John Balantine dated “Edinburgh, 14th January 1787” told of a proposed journey to Dumfries, but again nothing about a visit to Ayr. The correspondent to whom Burns might have written about personal matters, Mrs. Frances Anna Dunlop, was sent a substantial letter dated “Edinburgh 15th January 1787,” but it contains nothing whatever about Ayr or Jean. Finally, a letter to “My D^r Countrywoman” (presumed to be Margaret Chalmers) and conjectured to have been written in January contains the lament:

I was once a zealous Devotee to your Sex, but you know the black story at home. My breast has been widowed these many months, and I thought myself proof against fascinating witchcraft...” (*Letters*, I, 81).

This would appear to contradict a visit to Jean Armour. On the other hand, perhaps he would not have thought to mention her to another woman.

Between the time-spread in question of 29 November 1786, to 24 February 1787, when Burns might reasonably have mentioned his Hogmanay visit to Ayr, he wrote twenty-nine letters, none of which makes any mention of proposed or recent travel.

In his Introduction to *The Letters of Robert Burns*, editor G. Ross Roy writes: “The letters in these volumes give us a pretty good picture of Burns's life, but there are still unanswered questions which new letters might answer” (*Letters*, I, lxxv). Yet not entirely, as Burns has made reference to another event

which “alludes to a part of my private history, which it is of no consequence to the world to know” (*Poems*, III, 1241). This comment relates to the heroine of his song “Yon wild mossy mountains,” presumably referring to a true incident in his life, quite possibly the Lothian farmer’s daughter “whom I have almost persuaded to accompany me to the west country, should I ever return to settle there” (*Letters*, I, 79). Burns is not on record as telling anyone about his Hogmanay journey, and one might ask “why not?” other than its being part of his “private history,” a burgeoning celebrity’s desire for some privacy.

The other question about the poet’s trip to Ayr is: Why did he go at all? What urgent demand drove him to buy an expensive seat in a coach, in mid-winter, at the festive period of Hogmanay, to travel from Edinburgh to Ayr? Was it that Jean Armour’s twins, born on 3 September 1786, were ill, and he wanted to see them? Was he missing Jean unbearably, as he suggested to Gavin Hamilton? Yet if either was the case, why spend precious hours (and possibly the night) with the Logans? In order to reach the Logan’s house, Burns had to travel some eight miles beyond Mauchline, or Mossgiel. Perhaps he simply missed Ayrshire company, represented by the convivial wit and violin playing of “thairm-inspirin, rattlin Willie,” and what drove him westwards to his home district and friends was a Scottish Hogmanay angst. Further facts may come to light, to suggest both why he went to Ayr, and why he appears to have kept it private. Possibly there is a connection.

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