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Stephen W. Brown

William Smellie and the Reconciliation of Maria Riddell with Robert Burns

Sometime late in December 1793 or early January 1794 (the date is as obscured as the event itself), Robert Burns misbehaved to such an extent at a social gathering at Friars Carse that it seriously disrupted his friendship with two of the closest intellectual companions of his later life. He never did repair the breach with Robert Riddell, who would shortly pass away, and he only just managed to reclaim his intimacy with Riddell's sister-in-law, Maria, in the months before his own death. Remarkably, what took place that evening and the circumstances that led to the reconciliation with Maria Riddell have remained hidden from Burns's biographers.¹ The proto-Victorian values of early nineteenth-century Scotland that compelled so many of Burns's intimates to suppress or destroy their correspondence with him seems to have rendered this moment particularly silent. It has come to be known as "the rape of the Sabine women," and the few accepted facts suggest that after dinner, while the men indulged themselves in port and the women tea, it occurred to Burns and some of the other male guests that it might be amusing to stage a re-enactment of the Sabine episode to the surprise of the ladies. A dangerously inebriated Burns, it is claimed, acted his part too vigorously and was shown the door in disgrace. His apology to his hostess, Robert Riddell's wife Elizabeth—the dramatic

¹See especially Catherine Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns* (London, 1930), pp. 419-21; J. DeLancey Ferguson, *Pride and Passion* (New York, 1939), pp. 176-87; James Mackay, *RB: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 581-4; Iain McIntyre, *Dirt & Deity: A Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1995), pp. 349-56.

“letter from Hell,” written the following morning—survives as testimony to Burns’s own acknowledgment that as outrageous as his drunken conduct had often been in the past, nothing approached the ignominy of whatever had transpired at Friars Carse.²

If Burns hoped that the apology would restore his favor, he was seriously mistaken, and the incident led to his estrangement from the entire Riddell clan, including Maria who, although she may or may not have been present at the dinner party, felt sufficient familial solidarity to spurn Burns publicly. This would eventually awaken in him a particular vindictiveness towards her. Nevertheless, Burns was first inclined towards reconciliation and observed in an oft-quoted letter sent to Maria early in January 1794: “’Tis true, Madam, I saw you once since I was at W[oodley] p[ark]; & that once froze the very life-blood of my heart.—Your reception of me was such, that a wretch, meeting the eye of his Judge, about to pronounce sentence of death on him, could only have envied my feelings & situation” (*Letters*, II, 272). The theatrical charm of Burns’s plea for clemency was not sufficient to bring his correspondent around, however, and despite its literary cleverness, only a few days later, on 12 January, Burns writes to Maria again, but in a forebodingly different tone:

I return your Common Place Book.—I have perused it with much pleasure, & would have continued my criticisms; but as it seems the Critic has forfeited your esteem, his strictures must lose their value.—

If it is true, that “Offences come only from the heart;”—before you, I am guiltless:—To admire, esteem, prize and adore you, as the most accomplished of Women, & first of Friends—if these are crimes, I am the most offending thing alive.—

In a face where I used to meet the kind complacency of friendly confidence, now to find cold neglect & contemptuous scorn (*Letters*, II, 275-6).

The letter continues with what might be—especially considering Burns’s later conduct toward Maria—a veiled threat. It warns its correspondent that “while De-haut-en bas rigour may depress an unoffending wretch to the ground, it has a tendency to rouse a stubborn something the bosom.” That “stubborn something” would express itself in the lampoons Burns subsequently wrote and circulated, disparaging Maria Riddell. Desperately unhappy as Burns was with his loss of Robert Riddell’s companionship, he was forced to accept that such was the necessary outcome of his behavior at Friars Carse; however, he does not seem to have felt that Maria was justified in taking umbrage on behalf of her in-laws. Her sense of offense and his of injustice would grow into open warfare, even as Burns mourned the death of Robert Riddell’s friendship, and

²*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 271-2. Henceforth *Letters*.

then the death of Riddell himself. While Burns set about conceiving his libels of Maria in verse, she retailed hers of Burns through gossip across the dinner table.

Despite the prurient possibilities of the conflict between these two, it is in fact the sudden restoration of their friendship—apparently, at the instigation of Maria—that has become the keener focus for biographers. Yet no investigation thus far has been able to account for the reconciliation. There seems to be no primary documentation suggesting how a happy outcome was finally achieved for Burns and Maria Riddell sometime late in 1794 or early in 1795. Some solution in part may reside with the once close friend shared and, more importantly, trusted utterly by both combatants: William Smellie.

Smellie had first drawn close to Burns in 1787 while printing the Edinburgh edition of the poems, a time when they indulged their common interests in freemasonry, Whiggish sentiments, ribald wit and drink. He was Burns's elder by almost twenty years and someone who had achieved a number of intellectual milestones without reaping any genuine financial return, his labors serving instead to enrich his publishers, including Colin Macfarquhar, Andrew Bell, William Strahan, Thomas Cadell, and William Creech. Such was the outcome of his editorships of the first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1768-71), Dr. William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* (1769), the *Thesaurus Medicus* (1778-9), and his translation of Buffon (1780, 1785). He had taken up a major role in the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review* (1773-6), acting as its primary editor and printer, as well as contributing numerous articles, only to look on while the libelous tendencies of his partner Gilbert Stuart undermined its potential. In every instance Smellie's own disorganization and tendency to set aside a project to pursue pleasure, both among family at home and friends in the tavern, had contributed significantly to his financial disappointment.

Burns with his own ever-present insecurities would have found a sympathetic companion in Smellie, this intellectually respected man with a quick wit, acid tongue, and original mind who despite his talents had failed because he was never truly accepted by his social betters. In Smellie's notorious club, the Crochallan Fencibles, Burns appears to have felt particularly at ease, producing for the delight of its members his most controversial work, *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799). Among his many achievements, Smellie was internationally recognized as a natural historian, and Burns introduced Maria Riddell to him in 1792 in the hope that he might help her publish the volume she had written on the natural history of Madeira and the Leeward Caribbean Isles. Smellie did not disappoint, printing the volume in a run of 500 copies for the bookseller and mutual Burns crony, Peter Hill, later that same year. In fact, Smellie found in Maria his first and only female friend. From 1792 until his death, he regularly exchanged correspondence with Mrs. Riddell, treating her as an intellectual equal who assented readily to his love of Godwin and his suspicion of government and organized religion, confiding in her about his

sorrows and disappointments, and exchanging with her stories about family, especially the emotional drama of parenthood. Smellie is never paternalistic with Riddell nor is there any hint of an older man's infatuation with a young woman who flattered him; Smellie was as incapable of infatuation as Maria was of flattery. Still the man who had turned down a serious business offer in London because he refused to venture beyond the suburbs of Edinburgh, made his first trip outside his home town at the age of fifty-two on Maria's urging. Even then, she had to send her carriage to deliver him to Dumfries.

Smellie was as irregular in his epistolary as in his business life, and his correspondents—the first John Murray prominently among them—constantly complain of his neglect.³ But he faithfully exchanged letters with both Burns and Riddell, and in 1794, at the height of their feud, the extant records show that he was in touch with both. Seven letters addressed to him by Maria Riddell survive and, although his biographer, Robert Kerr, notoriously recounts destroying all of Smellie's correspondence with Burns because of its unsavory nature, the one remaining example is dated, significantly for this discussion, March 4, 1794. The letter is printed in full by Kerr⁴—unlike the Riddell correspondence which, as we shall see, is strategically edited in places. It appears to be Smellie's response to a query Burns had sent to Peter Hill in February 1794, asking after "old sinful Smellie" (*Letters*, II, 278), and the fate of the second volume of his *Philosophy of Natural History*. The printer's reply seeks the poet's assistance in raising a subscription for his much-delayed book, venturing that Burns might write "a few lines...for the newspaper" which would be "the first ever written on a Prospectus."

In itself the letter is innocuous enough but the surviving draft is significant for another reason. Its copy text is written out on the back of a sheet bearing the partial manuscript of a legal deposition that had been printed in Smellie's shop in February 1794. In the margins of that document, and thus on the reverse of the Burns letter, Smellie has written the draft of another, one unnoticed by Kerr and never since recorded or published by Burns or Smellie scholars. The text of this letter begins at the bottom of the page, overlapping at points and interlining with the legal document and then moves to the top of the page, continuing on down the right margin to its conclusion. The script is small and closely confined by its space, but unquestionably Smellie's hand, and unambiguously decipherable with some effort, save for one word. It reads:

³See John Murray's *Correspondence with Smellie*, Murray Archives, National Library of Scotland, Letterbooks, 1773-6.

⁴Robert Kerr, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings, and Correspondence of William Smellie*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1811), II, 356-7. Henceforth *Smellie*.

Madam

I am at a loss to know what you meant by the conversation you had last night. If you think the Gentleman you alluded to would be guilty of the fault you imputed to him, I am bold enough to inform you that you are in a most egregious mistake. All the acts you alledge [*sic*] are ill founded. I urge you this in passing that you may keep a better tongue in your heid and avoid a great & [libelous] insolence.

Otherwise I can assure you although the company you are in, aided by your beauty, may agree with you out of politeness, [they] will think very little of your impudence and want of common sense. This is a caution which you may either or not, just as you please, consider as a mark of friendship. The intention is so. Take it up in what light you please. I want no answer or communication with you whatever on this subject.⁵

We have records of letters from Smellie to some one hundred individuals, of whom examples to eighty-six survive in manuscripts. Of these correspondents only one is a woman, Maria Riddell. It is, therefore, reasonable to surmise that the “madam” of this terse note on the back of the Burns letter is also Mrs. Riddell, whom Smellie always addressed as “dear madam.”

The legal deposition came into Smellie’s printing house in late February and the letter to Burns is clearly dated March 4. The note to “madam” could thus not have been written before the last week of February, and probably was composed—based upon evidence in Smellie’s known correspondence with Mrs. Riddell—sometime after the March 4 epistle to Burns. Otherwise one would expect Smellie to have scribbled the note on the blank side of the deposition, rather than crowding it into the margins surrounding that text. Kerr in fact prints a letter from Smellie to Maria dated March 3 which is a cheery piece that makes no mention of troubles with Burns. A subsequent letter, also in Kerr and dated May 3 (*Smellie*, II, 185-7), expressed Smellie’s grief upon reading Maria’s news of Glenriddell’s death on April 21. He goes on in this letter to voice his surprise at Maria’s apparent desire to get quit of [her] friends,” calling it an “enigma which, in your next, I hope you will explain.”

Whatever Maria had written in that April 21 missive about her current disenchantment with her small circle of friends at Dumfries, Smellie felt compelled to congratulate her on “maintain[ing] a dignified firmness of mind, which does honour to your natural good sense as well as to your acquired knowledge.” If the note to “madam” was, as I have argued, intended for Maria, then its admonishing tone and terseness must be subsequent to the admiration of this May 3 correspondence, thus assigning it a possible date in late May or June. What is more, Maria’s desire to be quit of her Dumfries friends

⁵*William Smellie: Manuscript Papers in the Collection of the National Museums of Scotland*, revised edn., ed. Stephen W. Brown (Edinburgh, 2001). Familiar Correspondence: Burns-Riddell, 4 March 1794. Henceforth *Manuscript Papers*.

and Smellie's pleasure upon learning that she has maintained her dignity and natural good sense may refer to the feud with Burns and his circulation of the lampoons on Maria in Dumfries during the previous weeks. If so, it is probable that Smellie was prompted to scratch out his succinct and stern warning to "madam" sometime in late May using whatever paper was free to hand in his printing shop—as was his common practice throughout his life—and the loose sheet from the deposition must have presented itself for that purpose. The letter to Burns (March 4) on the reverse is thus only a curious coincidence. That the sheet would have still been in the printing house a few months after its first arrival is consistent with Smellie's business character. His surviving papers offer many examples of letters drafted on old accounts. Like most printers, Smellie never wasted paper. Nor did he ever bother to keep a letter book. Even his literary and scientific manuscripts, where they are extant, are often found scribbled into the empty spaces and margins of old proof sheets and discarded copy texts.

But what was the immediate impetus for the "madam" letter? The answer may again lie in part with passages in Maria's extant correspondence which Kerr suppressed when he printed the letters. Smellie refers to "the conversation you had last night," which was obviously recounted to him by an intermediary, since Maria was in Dumfries and he in Edinburgh at the time. The news of that troubling conversation was likely brought to Edinburgh by Fergusson of Craigdorrach, Glenriddell's cousin. He was a frequent visitor to both Friars Carse and Woodley Park, and advised Robert Riddell's widow Elizabeth on the settlement of her husband's estate, so that he was even more than usually present in Dumfries throughout 1794 and well into 1795. Maria often raises Craigdorrach's name and her last surviving letter to Smellie (February 9, 1795) identifies Fergusson as having thwarted attempts by her and her husband Walter to claim Friars Carse from Elizabeth: "yr friend & our gude Cousin Craigdorrach has fairly parried all our endeavours to rescue the family Seat from the Hammer."⁶ Kerr edits out the details of this circumstance when he publishes the letter. Furthermore, throughout 1794 Smellie and Craigdorrach—another Crochallan Fencible—met regularly to discuss the critical state of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Smellie having been elected Secretary that year after the death of James Cumyng, and Craigdorrach being one of the Society's few active members.

These circumstances point to a probable scenario in which Maria Riddell in the late spring of 1794, while in Craigdorrach's company at Friars Carse, made some less than complimentary claims about Robert Burns who, at that time, was circulating scurrilous verses and gossip about her, as mentioned earlier. Their feud would have been at its zenith. Although her audience may

⁶*Manuscript Papers*, 9 February 1795. Compare with *Smellie*, II, 389.

have appeared amused by Maria's scandalous conversation, her cousin by marriage, returning to Edinburgh the next day and meeting with Smellie—who by all accounts held regular nightly levees in various taverns—reported what she had said about Burns in other than a sympathetic fashion. Retiring to his printing house after the encounter with Craighdorrach, Smellie immediately drafted a terse, admonitory note to Maria, chastising her and warning her about the gentleman she had apparently defamed. Smellie's papers contain several late night memoranda, often displaying the effects of his over-indulgence. And the record shows that Smellie had burned enough bridges in the passion of his youth to know well the folly of not keeping "a better tongue in [one's] heid." He also knew from experience that in a public dispute society supports the combatant whose status serves them best and in Dumfries and Edinburgh that individual would be Burns not Riddell. She, after all, was the English incomer who would eventually return to England. And Smellie's caution would derive from his own close encounters with social superiors whose public politeness was fraught with dangerous hypocrisies.⁷ The whole of the Crochallan Fencibles' activities were an assault on such polite conventions, and that satirical mandate is no doubt what made Burns such a loyal member of the club. Furthermore, Smellie held Burns in the highest regard and would have found it hard to accept that his close friend and social ally had stooped to abuse the one lady whom they both so admired. The tone of the piece clearly assumes an intimacy between author and recipient, one well enough established to justify the use of such words as "insolence" and "impudence" without fear of giving offense. Such intimacy is indisputably characteristic of Smellie's relationship with Maria. Unless Smellie's social circle was sufficiently complicated to contain another "madam" and "gentleman" in the midst of a public feud about whom he cared enough to enter their fray—and such is unlikely—then the subjects of this letter must be Mrs. Riddell and Burns.

If we accept that the compelling and dramatic letter to "madam" was sent by Smellie to Maria Riddell after May 1794, then we can postulate a possible impetus for Maria Riddell's reigning in her anger with Burns. There is certainly no one other than William Smellie who can claim to have been equally close to both Burns and Riddell. Furthermore, Maria's fondness for Smellie and, crucially in this instance, her respect were strong enough to ensure that she would heed his advice, no matter how stern. Scholars are well aware that her intimate knowledge of Burns was sufficient for her to produce a memoir

⁷Three instances quickly come to mind: Momboddo's betrayal of Smellie during the *Edinburgh Magazine and Review* libel crisis in 1776; Kames's abandonment of him later that decade during Smellie's pursuit of the professorship in Natural History at Edinburgh University; and Buchan's disloyalty during the confrontation with John Walker over Smellie's proposal to deliver public lectures on Natural History under the auspices of the Society of Antiquaries.

that remains one of the most insightful and honest accounts of the poet's life.⁸ But they often are unaware that her affection for Smellie equally endured after his death. Smellie's son Alexander was guided by Maria's counsel in producing two posthumous volumes and a memoir out of his father's literary estate. There could have been no one better placed to influence Maria Riddell than William Smellie, the male midwife to her first book and most loyal companion of her intellectual life. And this long-overlooked letter to "madam" suggests that he may have been the one to persuade her to relent in her scandalous battle with Burns.

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⁸*Dumfries Journal*, August 1796. No copy of this issue appears to have survived. It was reprinted by James Currie in his *Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800), I, 247-59. Maria revised it for inclusion in Currie's second edition of 1801.