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Robert D. Thornton

James Currie's Editing of the Correspondence of Robert Burns

The best known letter of Burns edited by James Currie in Volume One is the autobiography addressed to Dr. John Moore.¹ Unlike almost every other person suggested for the task of editing, Currie could have had the posted letter itself. Apparently he never accepted Moore's offer of it. Not interested in collating and without the time and the space even if he were, Currie had in Liverpool what he needed to go on confidently. "There are" he tells his readers:

Various copies of this letter, in the author's- hand-writing; and one of these, evidently corrected, is in the book in which he copied several of his letters. This has been used for the present, with some omissions, and one slight alterations suggested by Gilbert Burns.²

¹*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 133-47. This is the famous "autobiographical letter," by far the longest letter Burns is known to have written. The copy which the poet sent to Dr. John Moore is now in the British Library, and was used as copy text for both the original and the revised editions of Burns's *Letters*. Thornton used the first edition edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson; this article will use the 2nd edition. Henceforth *Letters*.

²James Currie, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns, with an Account of his Life, and a Criticism of his Writings. To which are Prefixed some Observations on the Character and Condition of the Scottish Peasantry*, 4 vols. (Liverpool, 1800), I, 57. Henceforth *Works*. After the

Currie's source, therefore, was a holograph copy in a book. One's first thought is of the first volume of the Glenriddell manuscripts. But that was not the source. Nor does it seem likely that Currie worked from Burns's original draft only, as James C. Ewing and J. De Lancey Ferguson believed. It seems more probable that the doctor had before him not only the original draft, but also at least one transcript of further improvement to which the poet could refer upon such occasions as his opportunity to acknowledge kindness of the Riddells by having some of his compositions copied out for them. If our supposition of something like a notebook is correct, we stand without Currie's source and cannot render a true account of what changes Currie made. What we can do is to assume that the copy of the letter to Moore in Burns's hand which Currie edited was close to the posted original as edited by Ferguson and that all differences between the two, when regarded collectively, may reveal the general pattern of Currie's editing, even though any single change may well not be Currie's, but Robert's, Gilbert Burns's, or John Syme's.

Introducing the letter to Moore, Currie writes:

In a composition never intended to see the light, elegance, or perfect correctness of composition will not be expected. These however will be compensated by the opportunity of seeing our poet, as he gives the incidents of his life, unfold the peculiarities of his character, with all the careless vigour and open sincerity of his mind (*Works*, I, 34).

Comparison of what Currie presents with what Ferguson presents reveals somewhat more than six-hundred variants for the more than five-thousand words. Currie seems to have regarded punctuation, particularly, as an editorial responsibility. More than a third of his variants have to do with adding or dropping a comma or introducing italics. Another sixth substitute lower case letters for upper as the first letter of common nouns within a sentence. Currie was a better speller than either Robert Burns or McCreery's compositor. Sixty-three times he corrects misspelling of words like "gardener" and "rattan" or moves, unpredictably, towards such advanced London spelling as "honor." His text offers some 243 examples of change in phrasing or outright deletion. It hits hard at solecism, lapses in time sequence, colloquialism, and turgidity; it softens phrasing where Burns puts in a bad light either himself or another person still alive at the moment of Currie's editing. The doctor's text suggests that as editor, Scotsman, physician, or Liverpoolian, Currie is not averse to adding pertinent information. In twelve instances his text changes thought as

death of Robert Burns in 1796 it was decided to bring out a set of his works which, it was hoped, would supply money for the poet's widow and children. James Currie (1756-1805), a Scottish doctor residing in Liverpool, was decided upon as editor, and he worked at the project from 1797 until the edition was published in 1800. The work was an immediate best-seller which went into further editions in 1801, 1802 and 1803, as well as an American piracy in 1801, during Currie's lifetime alone.

well as phrase. The best known of these is writing "my nineteenth summer" in place of "my seventeenth summer" upon Gilbert's information. Others are the substitutions of "lost half a crop" for "lost half of both our crops" and "poetry and virtue kept me for several years afterwards within the line of innocence" for "Poetry and Virtue never failed to point me out the line of Innocence." Two such changes pertain to Ayr: "My vicinity to Ayr was of some advantage" for "of great advantage" and "I formed several connexions with other youngers" for "I formed many connections with other Youngkers." If these changes are Currie's, perhaps the editor was remembering the feeble response of Ayr to the subscription or perhaps he was thinking of his own pride in Dumfriesshire or perhaps he was trying to protect both Burns and himself from the reader's superciliousness. This last possibility may explain the change in Burns's evaluation of time spent on the smuggling coast from "made very considerable alterations in my mind and manners" to "Made some alteration."

Towards the end of the letter Currie's text differs from Ferguson's with respect to four changes of thought. The first is by way of boosting Burns. The poet in speaking of his plans for the Kilmarnock Edition says, "I had pretty nearly as high an idea of myself and my works as I have at this moment" to which Currie's text adds the adverbial clause "when the public had decided in their favour." Somewhat later, Burns refers to his proposed first sojourn in Edinburgh as "rousing my poetic ambition." Currie's text changes this to read "opening new prospects to my poetic ambition," as though Edinburgh might make of Burns something other than a ploughman-poet. In describing the spirit of his first weeks in Edinburgh, Burns writes, "I was all attention 'to catch the manners living as they rise.'" The source of this quotation is unknown (perhaps Shenstone or John Moore himself); at any rate, Currie's version is "I was all attention to catch the characters and the manners living as they rise." Had "the characters" been given in italics, one might think that the quotation was being filled out; but as the phrase is not so given, one is left to believe that the interpolation is meant to suggest what the interpolator thought of Burns's powers as a poet and also what advantages Burns might find in Edinburgh as a poet. It is after this interpolation that one notes editorial deletion and admission of the substitute "whether I have profited, time will show."

With one exception major deletions in Currie's text come immediately after Burns has finished the story of his life where he begins to speak of Moore himself and of his amanuensis Miss Helen Maria Williams. The first deletion spares the reader Burns's self-description as a wight with evil star whom "riotous Passions" may still make "zigzag in his future path." Another protects the privacy of Miss Williams by giving "W" for last name. Two others remain to be identified: one is a major passage on the Jacobitism of Burns's ancestors, the other a bit of disparagement. A person can know why Currie would want to delete the lines on Jacobitism on account of himself as well as on the account of Robert Burns. Yet the editor deleted them on account of a third

party—Gilbert—only to publish them somewhat later in his first volume, on his own responsibility and with the following explanation:

This paragraph has been omitted in printing the letter, at the desire of Gilbert Burns, and it would have been unnecessary to have noticed it on the present occasion, had not several manuscript copies of that letter been in circulation (*Works*, I, 82).

Three asterisks rather than an explanation call attention to a last deletion. In reviewing the Irvine enterprise of flax-dressing, Burns speaks the following ill of Peacock his associate, which the Currie text rejects: “My Partner was a scoundrel of the first water who made money by the mystery of thieving” (*Letters*, I, 142). Printing such a remark could have helped defeat the main purpose behind the posthumous edition of *Robert Burns*.

Such a letter as Burns’s autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore reveals some of the conflicts amongst those persons in the twentieth century who have been critical of Currie. James Cameron Ewing was certainly no friend to James Currie; yet in a review of the Rev. Mr. James Muir’s *Robert Burns till his Seventeenth (Kirkoswald) Year*, Ewing wrote:

Mr. Muir condemns Dr. James Currie for having taken “unwarrantable liberties with a manuscript” of Burns’s letter to Moore, though Currie did nothing of the kind, for he made use of a manuscript which is quite clearly—for it is still in existence—the original draft of the famous letter.³

To read Ewing, one would suppose that there can be no question as to what Currie edited; and one would wonder how Ewing in supposed certainty could defend Currie, yet in obvious uncertainty fail to give Currie any benefit of doubt. Again, such twentieth-century scholars as Ewing decry Currie’s editing by means of allowing themselves wider liberties of deletion than the doctor allowed himself and by making as many changes in transcribing a letter taken from Currie’s edition as Currie may have made in transcribing from his source.

What we imagine true of Currie’s edition of the letter to Moore seems to hold true of his editing the 148 letters (113 by Burns and 35 by his correspondents) and eleven pages from the First Commonplace Book which comprise the 476 pages of Volume Two. This volume presents an advertisement; an index to the letters chronologically arranged, identifying correspondent and addressee, and including a résumé; an index to twenty-nine items of poetry

³James Cameron Ewing in *Burns Chronicle*, Second Series, VII (1932), 114-5. Henceforth *Burns Chronicle*.

appearing in the text; two lists of twenty-seven errata;⁴ and a two-page glossary. The main index shows, for example, eight letters to Maria from Burns and none, of course, from Maria Riddell. Where Maria is secondary, as in Burns's introduction of her to Smellie, she appears in the index as "Mrs. Riddel"; where she is Burns's addressee in an impersonal letter, she appears as "Mrs. R*****"; where she is Burns's addressee in a letter about his affection or their estrangement, she appears as "Mrs.—"; so Currie protected identity.

Currie wrote his "Advertisement" to expose his predicament and his methods. He begins:

It is impossible to dismiss this volume of the correspondence of our Bard, without some anxiety as to the reception it may meet with. The experiment we are making has not often been tried; perhaps on no occasion, has so large a portion of the recent and unpremeditated effusions of a man of genius been committed to the press (*Works*, II, v).

In continuing, Currie describes how he has worked:

Of the following letters of Burns, a considerable number were transmitted for publication, by the individuals to whom they are addressed; but, very few have been printed entire. It will easily be believed, that in a series of letters, written without the least view to publication, various passages were found unfit for the press, from different considerations. It will also be readily supposed, that our poet, writing nearly at the same time, and under the same feelings, to different individuals, would sometimes fall into the same train of sentiment, and forms of expression. To avoid therefore the tediousness of such repetitions, it has been found necessary to mutilate many of the individual letters, and sometimes to excise parts of great delicacy—the unbridled effusions of panegyric and regard. But though many of the letters are printed from originals furnished by the persons to whom they were addressed, others are printed from first draughts, or sketches, found among the papers of our bard. Though in general no man committed his thoughts to his correspondents with less consideration or effort than Burns, yet it appears, that in some instances he was dissatisfied with his first essays, and wrote out his communications in a fairer character, or perhaps in more studied language. In the chaos of his manuscripts, some of the original sketches were found, and as these sketches, though less perfect, are fairly to be considered as the offspring of his mind, where they have seemed in themselves worthy of a place in this volume, we have not hesitated to insert them, though they may not always correspond exactly with the letters transmitted, which have been lost, or withheld (*Works*, II, v-vii).

* * *

⁴There are, as in Volume One, all too many uncaught typographical errors which indicate haste (e. g., p. 396 is marked "296").

In printing this volume, the editor has found some corrections of grammar necessary; but these have been very few, and such as may be supposed to occur in the careless effusions, even of literary characters, who have not been in the habit of carrying their compositions to the press. These corrections have never been extended to any habitual modes of expression of the poet, even where his phraseology may seem to violate the delicacies of taste, or the idiom of our language, which he wrote in general with great accuracy. Some difference will indeed be found in this respect in his earlier, and in his later compositions; and this volume will exhibit the progress of his stile, as well as the history of his mind (*Works*, II, viii-ix).

Careful planning and method, therefore, went into Volume Two. Currie's admission of mutilation has been held too bald by every reader like Dr. Anderson⁵ and every succeeding editor like Professor Ferguson. His admission of "very few" corrections of grammar (p. viii), moreover, is not to be taken literally, but rather as another instance of the editor's favoring his subject. Currie alters sentences by adding or omitting words, he sometimes rewrites whole paragraphs. He starches and irons Burns's language to make it more refined and precise, he combines different texts. He selects, generally, the most formal letters, and he deletes.

In Volume Two Currie employs asterisks to denote his 135 deletions, more than half of which delete a person's name, or substitutes asterisks for a dash (e.g. "a *godly woman* may be a—" [Burns, *Letters*, II, 147], "a *godly woman* may be a*****" [Currie, *Works*, II, 407]. Currie prefers to delete words like "damnable," "hell," and "accursed" or phrases like "trinity in unity" when applied to that which is secular. But he does not delete to the point of giving his reader a misconception of Burns's views on such subjects as religion and politics. In the following passage, for example, he lets Burns speak just as he was inspired by Antigua rum to speak to Alexander Cunningham, save for deletion of the names of the three titled families:

But of all Nonsense, Religious Nonsense is the most nonsensical; so enough, and more than enough of it. Only, by the bye, will you, or can you tell me, my dear Cunningham, why a sectarian turn of mind has always a tendency to narrow and il-liberalize the heart? They are orderly; they may be just; nay, I have known them merciful: but still your children of sanctity move among their fellow-creatures with a nostril snuffing putrescence, and a foot-spurning filth, in short, with a conceited dignity that your titled***⁶ or any other of your Scottish Lordlings of seven centuries standing, display when they accidentally mix among the many-aproned sons of mechanical life (*Works*, II, 406-7).

⁵James Anderson (1739-1808) edited *The Bee* between December 1790 and January 1794, to which Burns subscribed. Anderson invited the poet to contribute, but although Burns considered sending him his "Lament for James, Earl of Glencairn" this was never done.

⁶Burns wrote "Douglases, Hamiltons, Gordons," (*Letters*, II, 147).

When Burns is in his cups, when he dwells upon the way of a man with a maid, when he unguardedly spouts republican sentiments, Currie deletes with a rather heavy hand and then adds a footnote to say:

The preceding letter explains the feelings under which this was written. The strain of indignant invective goes on some time longer in the stile which our bard was too apt to indulge, and of which the reader has already seen so much (*Works*, II, 316).

It is probably true that Currie's usual editorial practices in presenting a letter of Robert Burns did not deviate greatly for what becomes apparent by collating Ferguson's text of the letter to Peter Hill, [Ellisland, Mar. 1791] (*Letters*, II, 78-80) with Currie's text (*Works*, II, 165-9). Currie does not give a conjectural date, as did subsequent editors. He does not capitalize words like "great coats" and "cheese" within the sentence; he spells out "and" and corrects misspellings like "untill" and "confering." He omits the dash at sentence-end, he substitutes a dash for "damn'd." He adds two footnotes to clarify allusions. The one difference of moment is that Currie retains Burns's spelling out a personal name where mention is complementary, but uses a dash for all letters between the first and last of a personal name where the mention is uncomplimentary. Thus we have "S—e" for "Sommerville" who seems to have taken a long while to catch a point, but we have "Cunningham" as the "dearest" of common friends. Currie protects "Colon¹ Dunbar"⁷ not only with "D—r," but also by omitting "little" from the phrase "My facetious little friend"; he respects Smellie by omitting "Often" from "he too often is smarting at the pinch of distressful circumstances." What is most important, Currie changes neither the tone nor the objects of Burns's criticism.

The more serious the charge against editing of a Burns letter, the more likely that letter belongs to either the Mrs. Dunlop or the Maria Riddell correspondence. Both of these ladies steadfastly withheld from publication their own letters to the poet. Otherwise, we know that Maria permitted the doctor to use his own discretion about concealing her name; and we know that Mrs. Dunlop had a good deal to say about how Burns's letters to her were to appear, we suspect that she may have traded Currie somewhat the same privilege as Maria, and we are tempted to believe that the editor usurped somewhat more privilege simply because Mrs. Dunlop lacked Maria's sufficient cause of refusing permission to publish her letters. Probably Mrs. Dunlop as well as Currie is responsible for deletions of Burns' fiery comments upon French royalty and British sympathies for France; probably Currie alone is responsible for piecing together a letter to Mrs. Dunlop with sixteen lines of a letter to the Rev. Mr. Greenfield (*Works*, II, 48-51). Currie may have mis-dated several of the

⁷William Dunbar. *Letters*, II, 79.

letters to Mrs. Dunlop, as William Wallace affirms of this one.⁸ If he did, we have his notebook to show that such mis-dating could have arisen from the confusion of his having the letter in various forms with various dates.

One cannot be positive, where he chances to be, he chances to be dead wrong. The last letter in Volume Two is Burns's letter to Mrs. Dunlop, 12 July 1796, in which the poet anticipates his speedy death and to which Currie adds the following footnote:

The above is supposed to be the last production of Robert Burns, who died on the 21st of the month, nine days afterwards. He had however the pleasure of receiving a satisfactory explanation of his friend's silence, and an assurance of the continuance of her friendship to his widow and children; an assurance that has been amply fulfilled.

It is probable that the greater part of her letters to him were destroyed by our bard about the time that this last was written. He did not foresee that his own letters to her were to appear in print, nor conceive the disappointment that will be felt, that a few of this excellent lady's have not served to enrich and adorn the collection. (*Works*, II, 471-2).

The above note seems to be by way of taking Mrs. Dunlop off the hook after Currie had arrived at an understanding with her that she would have the return of her letters if she granted certain privileges with respect to publication of Burns's letters to her. But the chief point to be made, not conjectured, is that Duncan M'Naught, the second and most formidable editor of the *Burns Chronicle*, prejudicially rejected Currie's statement that Burns did hear from Mrs. Dunlop just before he died and labeled it "another proof of the unreliability of the Currie narrative."⁹

In little more than a year M'Naught was bound to write a retraction with fact, not fancy:

When arranging our notes for the above-named article, which appeared in last year's *Chronicle*, we overlooked an important one—inadvertently mislaid—bearing on the *last letter* Burns received from Mrs Dunlop, which contained a reference to a letter, or copy of a letter, preserved in the University Library, Edinburgh, which put beyond doubt that the Poet did receive a communication from Mrs Dunlop a day or two before he died.

* * *

⁸William Wallace, *Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop: Correspondence now Published in Full for the First Time With Elucidations* (London, 1898), p. 318.

⁹Duncan M'Naught, "Mrs Dunlop: Burns's Candid Friend" *Burns Chronicle*, XXVI (1917), 23.

It is satisfactory to be assured that the Dunlop correspondence continued to the very last, and that Dr Currie's statement regarding the last letter addressed to Burns by her is absolutely correct.¹⁰

Currie, we repeat, could and did make mistakes; but, we repeat, he did not lie. Very infrequently he transposed material from one Burns letter to one correspondent to another Burns letter to another correspondent; and even more infrequently he did join parts of two different letters to the same correspondent. That he would do so, without the slightest acknowledgment, may be a marvel to us in this century; but, with respect to James Currie, it is not ground to argue that what is undiscoverable today in original letter, extant draft, or extant copy was not in any Currie source and is, therefore, a figment of imagination, an untruth.

It was, perhaps, in February 1792 that Robert Burns sent John McMurdo his collection of bawdry. Currie dates the note which accompanied this collection "December, 1793" and includes in his transcript (*Works*, II, 425-6) the sentence "A very few of them [the bawdy songs] are my own." Unable to trace the original manuscript in the 1930s, Ferguson had to take the letter to McMurdo from Currie's edition after adding "Dumfries" to the date.¹¹ In 1952, however, Ferguson finally came upon the posted letter in the library of the Union League Club, New York, to find that "the much-used sentence [A very few of them are my own] was missing: so he charged Currie with tampering, "meddling," and making an interpolation "in a class by itself." What Ferguson's reader is led to infer from the discovery is, first, that Currie unwarrantably concocted "A very few of them are my own" to whiten Burns and, secondly, that Burns composed a good deal more bawdry than had been ascribed to him hitherto. If inference there must be (and there must because evidence is still missing and each passing year leaves less hope of recovery), then it seems more logical today to assume that Currie had the key sentence from another source and inserted it from that source into the proper context of the letter to McMurdo; or else he had the disclaimer on an authority which he accepted as unimpeachable. Even the flurry of interest in *The Merry Muses* taken by Ferguson, James Barke, Sydney Goodsir Smith, and Gershon Legman leaves "A very few of them are my own" as pretty much the truth of the matter. Ferguson could offer only "about a score of pieces...directly based on Burns's own manuscripts",¹² and Legman could speak of only twelve as surviving in

¹⁰*Burns Chronicle*, XXVII (1918), 5, 6.

¹¹*Letters*, II, 137-8. Where Currie and Ferguson dated the letter December 1793, in the revised edition of Burns's letters the date has been entered as Feb. ? 1792.

¹²*The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, ed. James Barke and Sydney Goodsir Smith, "With a Prefatory Note and Some Authentic Burns Texts Contributed by J. DeLancey Ferguson"

Burns's own handwriting and could only surmise that twenty other pieces of bawdry are of Burns's composition.¹³

Volume Four probably gave Currie the most pleasure because it was here that he worked with Scottish song. Introductory pages (*Works*, IV [i]-[xxiv]) once more attest that Currie wrote with an eye to his reader; for they present not only preface, index of materials, and list of errata, but also cues as to the contents of each letter in the Burns-Thomson correspondence, indexes to the poetry by title and first line in alphabetical order, and appropriate glossary. Three sections make up the text: (1) ninety of the Burns-Thomson letters, fifty-eight of which are the poet's (*Works*, IV, [1]-268); (2) forty-seven songs from Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, without the music (*Works*, IV, 269-348); and (3) thirty-three heretofore unpublished pieces by Burns (*Works*, IV, 349-406). More than one hundred footnotes by Currie, many of them remarkable in excellence as well as extent, explicate this text.

One merit in publishing the Burns-Thomson correspondence was that these letters included the text of some twenty-nine Burns songs and parts of some sixty others; one demerit was George Thomson himself. Currie writes in his Preface, "The whole of this correspondence was arranged for the press by Mr. Thomson, and has been printed with little addition or variation" (*Works*, IV, iii). If we accept this statement at face value, as, I think, we must, such transpositions as that which takes a passage from No. XXIII to introduce No. XXXIX are more probably manipulations of Thomson than of Currie.

How and why George Thomson provided Currie with the letters are the subjects of a typically penetrating article by DeLancey Ferguson.¹⁴ Working at the Morgan Library with fifty-five of Burns's letters to Thomson, Ferguson notes that twelve of these letters contain cancelled passages amounting to approximately three hundred words. "The passages are not merely cancelled; they have been almost—in a few cases wholly—obliterated by spiral sweeps of a broad-nibbed pen" (Ferguson, p. 1110). These cancellations are not by Burns nor are they by Currie, whose "actual tampering with the manuscripts was limited to bracketing passages which he intended to omit, or occasionally drawing a line through a naughty word" (Ferguson, p. 1111). They are obviously by Thomson, for almost half of them represent "outspoken criticisms of Thomson's taste, or even...a flat refusal to comply with his nagging demands for revisions" (Ferguson, pp. 1114-5). In the light which Thomson's treatment of

(Edinburgh, 1959), p. xvi.

¹³The *Merry Muses of Caledonia; Collected and in Part Written by Robert Burns*, ed. G[ershon] Legman (New Hyde Park, NY, 1965), p. xxxiii.

¹⁴J. DeLancey Ferguson, "Cancelled Passages in the Letters of Robert Burns to George Thomson," *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 43 (1928), 1110-20. Henceforth Ferguson.

these letters sheds on his character and motives, Ferguson exculpates Currie and convicts Thomson "not only of childish vanity, but of petty meanness and of a deliberate disregard of the dying wish of the poet who had devoted time and energy, without material recompense, in furthering his schemes" (Ferguson, p. 1120).

One of the most convincing evidences of Currie's deep-seated and constant loyalty to Robert Burns is the manner of his writing sixty-odd footnotes to the Burns-Thomson correspondence. Doubtlessly, Currie had no use for Clarinda, James Johnson, or Creech, because he judged that each had been untrue to Burns. He had little use for George Thomson as arbiter of Burns's songs. Burns had asked Thomson, "Who shall decide, when Doctors disagree?"¹⁵ Currie answered, as editor, that he would decide by means of footnotes cutting the ground from under Thomson to leave the poet his own way. So Thomson proposed alterations in "Scots wha hae," Burns declined, and Currie defended Burns:

The reader will have observed, that Burns adopted the alterations proposed by his friend and correspondent in former instances, with great readiness; perhaps indeed, on all indifferent occasions. In the present instance, however, he rejected them, though repeatedly urged, with determined resolution. With every respect for the judgment of Mr. Thomson and his friends, we may be satisfied that he did so. (*Works*, IV, 130).

Pleading for Burns "the privilege of superior genius" (p. 132), Currie opposed Thomson. The doctor wins Burns's case by entering into the record verse after verse from the many manuscripts of songs in his possession. Thus he adds a fourth stanza to "Here's a health to ane I lo'e dear" with the notes:

In the letter to Mr. Thomson, the three first stanzas only are given, and Mr. Thomson supposed our poet had never gone farther. Among his MSS was, however, found the fourth stanza, which completes this exquisite song, the last finished offspring of his muse (*Works*, IV, 262).

At almost every turn, Currie seems to be in opposition to Thomson. He cannot approve of Thomson's desire to weed out that which identifies locality as "Gateslack" or "Dalgarnock" in "Last may a Braw Wooer":

In the original MS this line runs, "He up the *Gateslack* to my black cousin Bess," Mr. Thomson objected to this word, as well as to the word *Dalgarnock* in the next verse. Mr. Burns replies as follows.

"Gateslack is the name of a particular place, a kind of passage up among the Lawther hills, on the confines of this county. Dalgarnock is also the name of a ro-

¹⁵*Letters*, II, 248, quoting Alexander Pope, *Moral Essays. Epistle III*, line 1.

mantic spot near the Nith, where are still a ruined church and a burial-ground. However, let the first line run, *He up the lang loan, &c.*"

It is always a pity to throw out any thing that gives locality to our poet's verses (*Works*, IV, 249).

For the line "Altho' the night were ne'er sae wild," in the song beginning "When o'er the hill the eastern star," Currie defends his inclusion of "wild" as follows:

In the copy transmitted to Mr. Thomson, instead of *wild*, was inserted *wet*. But in one of the manuscripts, probably written afterwards, *wet* was changed into *wild*, evidently a great improvement (*Works*, IV, 9).

Oftentimes the disagreement is over only a word, sometimes it is over a complete song. Currie's footnote to the text of "Will ye go to the Indies, my Mary" reads, "This song Mr. Thomson has not adopted in his collection. It deserves however to be preserved" (*Works*, IV, 13). What Thomson suppressed of Burns, Currie was sometimes willing to suppress also. Currie's political views were Burns's; nevertheless, he had to go along with Thomson in suppressing most of that letter of the poet leading to such stanzas as

Auld Kate laid her claws on poor Stanislaus,
And Poland has bent like a bow:
May the deil in her a— ram a huge pr-ck o' brass!
And damn her in h-ll with a mowe!

What Thomson suppressed of his own, Currie was obligated to suppress; but he did not have to like it, and he could mention the fact of suppression in a footnote:

The original letter from Mr. Thomson contains many observations on the Scottish songs, and on the manner of adapting the words to the music, which, at his desire, are suppressed (*Works*, IV, 61).

Like Currie, George Thomson appears not to have followed directions to burn some of the songs. Burns wrote Thomson:

Making a poem is like begetting a son: you cannot know whether you have a wise man or a fool, untill you produce him to the world & try him.—For that reason I send you the offspring of my brain, *abortions* & all; & as such, pray look over them, & forgive them, & burn them (*Letters*, II, 305).

At this point Currie inserted a footnote containing a comment by Thomson and one by himself:

This Virgilian order of the poet should, I think, be disobeyed with respect to the song in question, the second stanza excepted. *Note by Mr. Thomson.*

Doctors differ. The objection to the second stanza does not strike the Editor (*Works*, IV, 159).

Currie published the song in its entirety on pp. 156-7 of Vol. IV, and Thomson included it in his *Select Collection*, Vol. IV, Part 2 (1805).

Thomson like Currie was unwilling to shoulder such responsibility. Unlike Currie, George Thomson was not steeped in Scottish song and lacked that taste necessary to delight in Burns's songs as the poet chose to own them. Enthusiastically Currie piles up variants, notes where lines have been borrowed from old ballads and where they are wholly original, and compares old songs with Burns's new versions. Where he makes a mistake is often where others have been mistaken, as in the instance of his accepting Burns's word that *he* had composed "Behold the hour, the boat arrive."¹⁶ Currie's obvious relish continues beyond mere explication to score a point, for example, in his wit combat with Maria. After printing Burns's "Canst thou leave me thus, my Katy," the editor offers the following footnote:

To this address in the character of a forsaken lover, a reply was found on the part of the lady, among the MSS of our bard, evidently in a female hand-writing; which is doubtless that referred to in p. 117 of this volume. The temptation to give it to the public is irresistible; and if in so doing, offence should be given to the fair authoress, the beauty of her verses must plead our excuse (*Works*, IV, 207).¹⁷

[Here Currie prints sixteen lines of the song which begins "Stay my Willie—yet believe me"]

It may amuse the reader to be told, that on this occasion the gentleman and the lady have exchanged the dialects of their respective countries. The Scottish bard makes his address in pure English: the reply on the part of the lady, in the Scottish dialect, is, if we mistake not, by a young and beautiful Englishwoman (*Works*, IV, 207-8).

To supplement these songs given in the Burns-Thomson correspondence, Currie selected a third of the songs of Burns first published in James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, including such obvious favorites as "Of a' the airts," "John Anderson," "Tam Glen," "Willie brew'd a peck o' maut," "Flow gently, sweet Afton," "O my Luve's like a red, red rose," and "Ye banks and braes o'

¹⁶David Walker shows in his article "James Christie, Dollar," in *Burns Chronicle*, Third Series, XI (1962), 63-72, that the *Edinburgh Magazine* for 1744 contains the song from which Burns extracted almost verbatim his song.

¹⁷On p. 117, in a letter from Burns to Thomson of September 1793, the poet mentions "Roy's Wife" (more generally known as "Roy's Wife of Alldivaloch"). Currie does not identify the author.

bonnie Doon." If he had had space for a fuller treatment, he probably would have asked Elizabeth Riddell for permission to make use of her late husband's interleaved *Museum*; she would not have denied him.

Currie describes his editing of the *Museum* songs as follows:

In his communications to Mr. Johnson, to which his name was not in general affixed, our Bard was less careful than in his compositions for the greater work of Mr. Thomson. Several of them he never intended to acknowledge, and others, printed in the *Museum*, were found somewhat altered afterwards among his manuscripts. In the selection which follows, attention has been paid to the wishes of the author as far as they are known. The printed songs have been compared with the MSS, and the last corrections have been uniformly inserted. The reader will probably think many of the songs which follow, among the finest productions of his muse (*Works*, IV, 269).

Collation of Currie's text with Johnson's suggests that "last corrections" include inverting two lines of Johnson's "The Birks of Aberfeldy," changing the phrase "Roaring by" to "Still around" in his "Strathallan's Lament," improving "There's wild-woods grow" to "There wild-woods grow" in his "Of a' the airts," twice correcting "the gither" to "thegither" in his "John Anderson," significantly altering the firth stanza of "A Vision," and adding to that poem a complete stanza. Such changes are to be thought of as having been made upon the authority of Burn's last revisions as contained in Liverpool manuscripts. Other changes, supposedly, are Currie's. The editor improves and corrects punctuation, he does away consistently with idiosyncratic capitalization, he prefers "bonnie" to "bony" or "bonie," and he continues his strange reverence for *Till*. Save for the last, these practices agree all but unanimously with those of standard twentieth-century editions. Currie's changes are neither arbitrary nor numerous, there being only one in "Willie brew'd a peck o' maut" ("lee lang" to "lee-lang") and four in "Afton Water" ("Fair" to "fair," "Cot" to "cot," "River" to "river," and "ev'ning" to "evening"). In fourteen notes, Currie identifies place names and heroines, offers to date a song or to describe its occasion, notes variants, and rejects what he considers spurious.

Currie reserved the final section of Volume Four for "such other of his poems, not before published, as seemed not unworthy of seeing the light" (*Works*, IV, iii). Here the reader finds "The Battle of Sheriff-Muir," the monody on Maria, the sonnet on Glenriddell, "The Inventory," "O wert thou in the cauld blast," "Does haughty Gaul invasion threat," the epistle to Colonel De Peyster, "Address to the Tooth-ache," "Jockey's ta'en the parting kiss," "Ken ye ought o' Captain Grose," and twenty-three more pieces. We presume that Currie gave these poems just as he had them in the manuscripts, save for the text of the poetical address to William Tytler, for such limited editing as that of the *Museum* songs, and for appending eighteen footnotes. By substituting in the poem to Tytler "K— G—" for "King George" and "Q—" for "Queen" and by omitting the last three lines of

But why of that Epocha make such a fuss,
That brought us th' Electoral Stem?
If bringing them over was lucky for us,
I'm sure 'twas as lucky for them,¹⁸

Currie saved a poem at the expense of toning down some of its heterodoxy. Tytler had not obeyed Burns's injunction: "Burn the above verses...as any little sense that is in them is rather heretical" (*Letters*, I, 112). Nor did Currie.

Trying in this century to understand James Currie as the eighteenth-century biographer and editor of Robert Burns introduces quandary. Many critics now damn the doctor for *not* burning as the poet directed and then damn him for burning, without the least proof of his ever having done so; they chide his deletions on pages full of their own; they charge him with failure to cite sources, while they tuck away some of those sources at the back of a desk drawer and remain unwilling to turn their own cards face up; they falsify him as teetotaler by disregarding such evidence to the contrary as his joyful invitation to Graham Moore promising grog "as good as ever"; they cause him to appear incapable of sympathy for Burns by ill-informedly dwelling upon his boyhood apprenticeship in the Virginia tobacco trade, while they remain silent upon Burns's admission that if fate had taken him to Jamaica, he might have become a "poor Negro-driver"; they condone in his personality weaknesses "which seem in painful discordance with the idealism of the indwelling spirit" without once opening the book of his life; they insist that his is a "debauched" view of Burns, while they borrow from his life of Burns to the point of mere paraphrase; they would riddle his editing, just as though they knew what he edited. Consistently wrong about the man, they have been consistently wrong about the biographer and editor.

James Currie's 1800 Edition of Robert Burns is as true as James Currie's life. To doubt the truth of either is to wring Cromek's cry from the doctor's spirit: "God help that Man who runs after Poets & their Productions!"

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Robert D. Thornton is well known to Burns scholars as the author of *James Currie, the Entire Stranger and Robert Burns* (1963) and *William Maxwell to Robert Burns* (1979), these men being respectively the editor of the first collection of Burns's works, and a republican doctor who had been present at the execution of Louis XVI and who attended Burns in his last illness.

¹⁸*Works*, IV, 352; *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 333.

Thornton edited and transcribed *The Tuneful Flame: Songs of Robert Burns as he Sang Them* in 1957. A major work by Thornton, "James Currie's Robert Burns: A Publishing History of the First Edition, 1797-1800," unfortunately remains unpublished. There are only two copies of this 891-page illustrated typescript which dates from 1970. One of these is deposited in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, and the other forms part of the Thornton Bequest at the University of South Carolina. When it was decided to publish an excerpt from Thornton's study, the question as to which portion of it would be the most rewarding had to be resolved. Most of the poetry which Currie included in his edition had already appeared in 1786, 1787, 1793, in James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* (five of the six volumes had appeared by 1800) or in George Thomson's *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (of which four of eight parts had been published). As a result most of the poetry which Currie included had appeared elsewhere at an earlier date. As regards Burns's correspondence, however, almost none of it had been in print before Currie. Vol. 2 of Currie is given over entirely to the poet's correspondence, with the exception of that which he had with Thomson concerning the *Select Collection*. It was therefore decided that the portion of Thornton which deals specifically with the editing procedure followed by Currie in publishing Burns's letters, would be reproduced, modified where necessary, as an article. I am responsible for the editing, but Thornton approved the result and read proof before he died.

GRR