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James Mackay

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*James Mackay*

“That Cursed Tax of Postage”:  
Robert Burns and the Postal Service

I had a keen interest in the history of the postal service, long before I developed an interest in Robert Burns, so it is not surprising that I should be intrigued by the effect the postal service of the 1780s and 1790s had on Burns. He was living at a time when the postal service was rapidly developing and we get some first-hand insights into its operation for the numerous references to the post in his voluminous correspondence, especially references to the high postal charges of the time.

A single-sheet letter traveling more than eighty miles cost fourpence which, in real terms (in the length of time taken to earn that sum) would be the equivalent of £4 in modern money. If a letter strayed over on to a second sheet, this automatically doubled the postage.

It was the duty of the postmaster at the nearest town (i.e. Dumfries, when Burns resided at Ellisland and afterwards moved into that town) to tax the letters before forwarding them. This involved the examination of letters to see whether they consisted of a single sheet or two or more sheets of paper—a time-consuming business. As an envelope would have counted as an extra sheet and doubled the postage it is hardly surprising that they were never used. Letters were folded carefully and sealed so that the address was written on the outer part of the sheet.

What may not be generally realized, however, is that in Burns’s day, the vast majority of letters were sent unpaid, it being considered extremely bad form to prepay the postage on letters, other than to lawyers and tradesmen. This it was the recipient, and not the sender, who was stuck with the postage.

As letters were charged by sheet and not by weight, it was vital to get hold of the largest sheet you could find. Writing to Mrs. Dunlop on 5 February 1789 Burns says:

I have rummaged every Stationer's shop in Dumfries, for a long and broad, ample and capacious, sized sheet of writing paper, just to keep by me for epistles to you; and you see, dear Madam, by this honest-looking page, that I have succeeded to a miracle.<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of a letter to the same lady, dated 6 December 1792, he confesses: "I see you are in for double Postage, so I shall e'en scribble out t'other sheet (*Letters*, II, 166)." Other letters bearing the endorsement "Single Sheet" on their outer cover contained, in fact, two leaves, thereby deliberately attempting (with some success) to evade the double postage.

Burns occasionally rails against the excessive postal charges of his day. In a letter to the Birmingham gunsmith David Blair (23 January 1789) he writes:

Long before your letter came to hand, I sent you, by way of Mr. Nicol, a copy of the book, and a proof-copy of the print, loose, among the leaves of the book. These, I hope, are safe in your possession some time ago. If I could think of any other channel of communication with you than the villainous expensive one of the Post, I could send you a parcel of my Rhymes (*Letters*, I, 360).

To the same correspondent on 27 August 1789 he rails against "that cursed tax of Postage" (*Letters*, I, 436).

At the end of a very long letter to Peter Hill, the Edinburgh bookseller, in March 1791, he writes: "I have just this moment an opportunity of a private hand to Edin', as perhaps you would not Digest double Postage—So, God bless you" (*Letters*, II, 79-80). On other occasions he apologizes to his correspondents for the length of his letters, knowing that if they run over to a second sheet the charge will be doubled.

Writing to Alexander Cunningham on 3 March 1794 he notes: "As I cannot in conscience tax you with the postage of a packet, I must keep this bizzarre [*sic*] melange of an epistle untill [*sic*] I find the chance of a private conveyance" (*Letters*, II, 285). On 25 June 1794 he wrote to Agnes McLehose "I have been rhyming a little of late, but I do not know if they are worth Postage" (*Letters*, II, 300). Sending the manuscript of his poems about the Dumfries Volunteers to Mrs. Dunlop in 1795 he apologizes, "I am afraid, Dear Madam, that this parcel will be a bad bargain, at the price it will cost you ere it reach you" (*Letters*, II, 367).

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<sup>1</sup>*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), I, 369. Henceforth *Letters*.

Sending letters by the hand of a friend, or even a perfect stranger who just happened to be traveling in that direction, was one way of getting around the embarrassing dilemma of landing one's correspondents with a charge for the privilege of reading one's letters. There are numerous references in Burns's letters to entrusting them to travelers, even casual acquaintances whom he had only just met for the first time.

On 5 February 1789 he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop:

I have received both your letters, and on the first, coming to hand, I would have written you by post, but as it rejoices my heart to send you a packet, I have waited for the return of one of my Mauchline friends who has been with me this week, to forward it without that cursed postage (*Letters*, I, 369-70).

On 25 March the same year to the same lady he writes, "as I have a boy, my herd, going for Ayrshire tomorrow morning, & who will be at Kilmarnock, I shall make him go so much farther & leave this at Dunlop" (*Letters*, I, 387). So the poor boy was put to the trouble of an additional fourteen miles for the round trip merely to deliver this letter.

In July 1790 he prevailed on Captain Grose to carry a letter to Professor Dugald Stewart. Tennant of Glenconner was the bearer of a letter written by Burns to Robert Cleghorn on 29 August 1790 (*Letters*, II, 48), while John Wilson carried a letter to John Somerville at Edinburgh the following month. Other bearers of letters from Burns to his friends include "a poor fellow of a sodger & tells me he is going to Ayr" (*Letters*, II, 83) who provided the opportunity for him to send some poems to John Ballantine.

A letter of 4 July 1791 is addressed to the Revd Thomas Smith of Auchinleck "Favor of Mr Ferrier" and explains:

I fell in just now with a pleasant, jolly fellow, a gentleman of your cloth, a Mr Ferrier from Paisley, a man who may be stiled, a Body, or rather, a *Corporation* of Divinity; and he has obligingly promised to convey you this dry scrawl (*Letters*, II, 100).

James Clarke, the Moffat schoolmaster, was often used by Burns as a postman, and he is mentioned as the bearer in letters to Peter Hill and Robert Riddell. In a long letter to George Thomson dated July 1794 he concludes, "Another friend of mine goes to town in a week or so, when you shall again have another packet of nonsense" (*Letters*, II, 303).

A letter to Robert Cleghorn from Dumfries in January 1796 mentioned, "This will probably be delivered to you by a friend of mine, Mr Mundell, surgeon, whom you may remember to have seen at my house" (*Letters*, II, 374). A letter to James Johnson in Edinburgh about 1 June 1796 bears the endorsement "Per favor of Mr Lewars" who was also intended as the bearer of anything by return. "The gentleman, Mr Lewars, a particular friend of mine, will

bring out any proofs (if they are ready) or any message you may have" (*Letters*, II, 381).

The excessively high rates of postage, of which Burns justifiably complained, encouraged the illegal carriage of letters. The freight traffic of the country was in the hands of numerous carters and carriers. So long as they confined their business to parcels they did not break the law, but many of them conveyed letters. Such smuggling was regarded as a serious offense, punishable by a fine of £5 a time, but this did not deter the traffic. It was illegal to enclose a letter in a parcel, but it was perfectly permissible to send a letter separately by carrier, so long as it accompanied a parcel. Such letters had to be endorsed in the lower left-hand corner to that effect.

This regulation was intended to cover bills of lading and other freight documents, but inevitably the point was often stretched. Thus we find a letter from Burns to Peter Hill on 29 January 1796 endorsed on the cover "wt a kipper salmon." The letter itself reads: "By the chaise, the driver of which brings you this, I send your *annual KIPPER*" (*Letters*, II, 373). Elsewhere in Burns's correspondence there are references to letters sent with a pound of Lundiefoot snuff (to John M'Murdo in 1788—*Letters*, I, 340), with seven samples of local limestone to William Nicol in 1790 (*Letters*, II, 27).

The Fly was a light stage-coach which plied thrice weekly between Dumfries and Edinburgh. In a letter of 16 April 1792 to William Creech, Burns writes: "If the thing were possible that I could receive the Proof-Sheets by our Dumfries Fly, which runs three times a week, I would earnestly wish to correct them myself" (*Letters*, II, 140). To George Thomson he wrote in October 1794: "I would be obliged to you if you could procure me a sight of Ritson's Collection of English Songs, which you mention in your letter.—I can return them three times a week by the Fly" (*Letters*, II, 320). And to Peter Hill on 30 May 1795 he wrote, "Send me, by the very first Fly or Coach for this Place, three copies of the last edition of my Poems; which place to my account" (*Letters*, II, 359).

From Burns's letters we also learn much about the various carriers. To an unidentified correspondent he wrote from Mauchline on 29 September 1788, "I send you the book, dear sir, along with this letter, by our Mauchline Carrier... Drop me a line, by post or return of Carrier, if the book comes to hand" (*Letters*, I, 324-5). Writing to James Johnson on 15 November 1788 Burns informed him that the Mauchline carrier was Connel "he puts up at Campbell's Grassmarket" (*Letters*, I, 339), while John Smith, the Glasgow bookseller is asked to send books "by John Glover, Carrier to Dumfries" (*Letters*, I, 355).

To James Johnson (19 June 1789) he adds a postscript:

If you send a parcel, direct to the care of Walter Auld, Saddler, Dumfries; & write me at the same time by post to let me know what Carrier you have employ'd as they are careless rascals" (*Letters*, I, 417)

And Mrs. Dunlop is warned (31 December 1792) “Your books I will send, but I wish to wait for a confirmed frost; as I know too well how much the carelessness of Carriers is apt to injure books in wet weather” (*Letters*, II, 172).

The commonest method of saving your correspondents the burden of postage, however, was to abuse the franking privilege which had been enjoyed by peers of the realm and members of parliament since 1654. Originally it was sufficient for the MP merely to endorse the lower left-hand corner of the wrapper with his signature, but there were so many cases of MPs signing blank sheets in bulk to oblige their voters that the regulations were tightened up in 1764, requiring the member to write the name and address of the recipient, and later on they were even obliged to add the date of posting as well, writing it out in words as a further deterrent.

Burns makes several references to “obtaining a frank” from the local MP, Sir Robert Laurie, a cousin of Robert Riddell. Alexander Cunningham who, as a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh, was no stranger to the subtleties of the franking system, seems to have made frequent use of it in sending his letters free of postage. Burns replied on 4 May 1789 alluding to this practice:

Your *duty-free* Favor of the 26th April I received two days ago.—I will not say, I received it with pleasure; that is the cold compliment of ceremony; I perused it, Sir, with delicious satisfaction.—In short it is such a letter that not you, nor your friend, but the Legislature, by express Proviso in their Postage laws should frank” (*Letters*, I, 404)

Writing to Cunningham 11 March 1791 Burns apologizes for the length of the letter: “I foresee that it will cost you another groat [fourpence] of postage” and then goes on: “By the way, you once mentioned to me a method of franking letters to you, but I have forgot the direction” (*Letters*, II, 81). One wonders whether this referred to another method of evading postage, namely the direction of letters *to* people who enjoyed the franking privilege.

One of those officers of state who did have a franking privilege was William Kerr, Secretary of the Post Office. That the highest-ranking postal official in Scotland was quite ready to abuse the system was borne out by some of the correspondence between Burns and Mrs. Dunlop. She was obviously on intimate terms with Kerr, for several letters from Burns were addressed to her, care of William Kerr, Post Office, Edinburgh and subsequently forwarded to Mrs. Dunlop at Dunlop House or Moreham Mains at no charge. In a letter of 7 December 1788, Burns writes: “I shall give you the verses on the other sheet, as I suppose Mr Ker will save you the Postage” (*Letters*, I, 342). When Kerr had to spend some time in London on official business this cozy arrangement was temporarily suspended, causing both Burns and Mrs. Dunlop no end of annoyance, as their letters reveal. A letter to Dr. Moore in London had to be sent by hand of a friend, “as Franking is at present under a temporary death” (*Letters*, II, 36), alluding to Kerr’s inconvenient absence.

The point about the MP having to date the wrapper of a franked letter could also be most inconvenient. On 27 September 1791 Burns wrote to Robert Riddell at Friars' Carse:

dare I trouble you, if you meet with the Member, to get me a Frank,  
"October the second, 1791  
"Colonel Fullarton of Fullarton  
"Fullarton-house,  
"Irvine"—

I am to send the Colonel some things, beside the Whistle; & do not wish to put him to expense (*Letters*, II, 110).

The frank was duly forthcoming, for Burns wrote to Fullarton on 3 October (the actual date endorsed on it by the MP):

I have just this minute got the frank; & next minute must send it to Post, else I purposed to have sent you two or three other bagatelles, that might have amused a vacant hour (*Letters*, II, 114).

Having obtained a frank, therefore, Burns had to dash off a letter before the due date had expired, and he used this circumstance to explain the haste or shortness of his letters. To Lady Henrietta Don he wrote on 23 October 1791: "The Post is just going, else I would have taken the opportunity of the frank, & sent your Ladyship some of my late pieces" (*Letters*, II, 119). And to George Thomson on 26 October 1792 he makes a similar excuse:

"I intended to have given you, & will soon give you, a great many more remarks on this business; but I have just now an opportunity of conveying you this scrawl, postage-free, an expence that it is ill able to pay" (*Letters*, II, 154).

On 25 August 1793 he wrote to Mrs. Dunlop:

I have got a Frank for you, my dear Madam, but I have unfortunately miscalculated the time.—The Post goes in ten minutes, so, to fill up my paper to the decent length of a letter, in such a moment of time, I shall write you a song which I composed the other day (*Letters*, II, 232).

Even Burns's letter of 5 January 1793 (*Letters*, II, 172-5) to Graham of Fintry defending himself against charges of sedition and republicanism was sent under cover of a frank which Robert Riddell had obtained from the MP. By 1794, however, Burns had a direct source of franks, in the youthful person of Patrick Miller, Junior, son of the poet's landlord at Ellisland, who had recently been elected to Parliament. Burns wrote to Mrs. Dunlop on 20 December 1794: "As I hope to get a Frank from my friend Miller, I shall, every leisure hour, take up the pen, & gossip away whatever comes first: Prose, or Poetry; Sermon, or Song" (*Letters*, II, 332).

George Thomson, publisher of *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*, became chief clerk to the Board of Trustees in Edinburgh, an official appointment which carried with it the franking privilege. This enabled Burns to communicate with Thomson, "I know your letters come post free to you so I trouble you with the enclosed which, as it is a business letter please cause to be delivered at first convenience" (*Letters*, II, 360). What precisely Burns referred to as a "business letter" is not known, but he clearly meant an enclosed letter which he wanted Thomson to frank and forward on his behalf.

I should like to finish with some remarks concerning the postmarks on Burns's letters. Until 1800 the postmarks used in the post towns of Scotland consisted of the name of the town—and nothing else. The only datestamps were used in Edinburgh which, conversely, did not use its name. It was not until 1853 that the first datestamps incorporating the name Edinburgh were adopted. Edinburgh, along with London and Dublin, had small circular marks with a line across the middle. A two letter abbreviation of the month appeared in one segment and the digits of the day of the month appeared in the other. This datestamp, known as a Bishop mark (after Colonel Sir Henry Bishop, Postmaster General at the Restoration, who invented it), was applied on letters coming from Edinburgh, but also to letters going to Edinburgh from other parts of the country prior to delivery.

This point is very important to bear in mind, for it has a bearing on the correct dating of two letters of Burns addressed to James Johnson. The first one is merely endorsed by Burns "Weden Noon." The Bishop mark was not clearly struck and all that can be deciphered is -E / 24. Ross Roy, Editor of the two-volume Oxford edition of Burns's *Letters*, 1985, deduced that this letter was written on Wednesday 24 February 1796 (*Letters* II, 69) because February 1796 was the only month in which the 24th fell on a Wednesday. This has given rise to intense speculation as to why Burns was so very tardy in writing to Johnson regarding the billheads for the Globe Tavern which he had ordered from Johnson in a letter of August or September 1795 (*Letters*, II, 368-71).

In fact the letter written on a Wednesday would have reached Edinburgh on a Thursday. And as 24 September 1795 was a Thursday it seems to me that the Bishop mark should have read SE / 24. Instead of being incredibly slow to respond to a letter from Johnson, presumably written in late August or early September 1795, Burns was actually relatively prompt. The phrase "the unfortunate reasons of my long silence" threw scholars off the scene, and it was assumed that this referred to the poet's illness over the winter of 1795-6, but it is more probably a reference to the loss of his daughter Elizabeth Riddell Burns the previous autumn, when letters from Burns were few and far between.

By moving this letter to Johnson back four months, it follows that Burns's next letter to Johnson, which Ross Roy tentatively dated March 1796 (*Letters*, II, 378), must also be re-assigned to the autumn of 1795, either late September or early October, because it refers to the plate used for Hyslop's billhead.

This matter of the correct interpretation of a datestamp may seem trifling, but sixty years later a similar confusion in datestamps in which the final E alone was visible probably saved young Madeleine Smith from the gallows, so these little matters can assume enormous importance. Had the letter in question been correctly dated, the evidence that she poisoned her lover Pierre l'Angellier would have been irrefutable. But doubt over this crucial matter was sufficient for the jury to bring in a verdict of Not Proven. Incidentally, as a result of scathing comments by the trial judge on the poor quality of the Glasgow postmarks, two things happened. Anthony Trollope, then a rising young official of the Post Office, was sent from London to reorganize the Glasgow postal service, and Pearson Hill, son of Rowland the postal reformer, was inspired to invent the world's first cancelling machine so that henceforward postmarks would be perfectly legible every time.

*Glasgow*