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Douglas S. Mack
University of Stirling

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James Hogg's First Encounter with Burns's Poetry

Douglas S. Mack

In his autobiographical “Memoir of the Author’s Life” (1832), James Hogg gives a wonderfully vivid account of his first encounter with Burns’s poetry. This event took place, Hogg tells us, in 1797, and he adds that, because of it, he “resolved to be a poet, and to follow in the steps of Burns.” Clearly, this passage in the “Memoir” is important for any assessment of Hogg’s own understanding of his literary career, and it is also of great potential interest with regard to the extraordinary impact of Burns among younger Scots in the closing years of the eighteenth century. However, as we shall see, there are some reasons to question the accuracy of Hogg’s story, and the present essay sets out to offer a new assessment of its factuality and real significance.

The relevant passage in the “Memoir of the Author’s Life” reads as follows:

The first time I ever heard of Burns was in 1797, the year after he died. One day during that summer a half daft man, named John Scott, came to me on the hill, and to amuse me repeated Tam o’ Shanter. I was delighted! I was far more than delighted—I was ravished! I cannot describe my feelings; but, in short, before Jock Scott left me, I could recite the poem from beginning to end, and it has been my favourite poem ever since. He told me it was made by one Robert Burns, the sweetest poet that ever was born; but that he was now dead, and his place would never be supplied. He told me all about him, how he was born on the 25th of January, bred a ploughman, how many beautiful songs and poems he had composed, and that he had died last harvest, on the 21st of August.

This formed a new epoch of my life. Every day I pondered on the genius and fate of Burns. I wept, and always thought with myself—what is to hinder me from succeeding Burns? I too was born on the 25th of January, and I have much more time to read and compose than any ploughman could have, and can sing more old songs than ever ploughman could in the world. But then I wept again because I could not write. However, I resolved to be a poet, and to follow in the steps of Burns.

I remember in the year 1812, the year before the publication of the “Queen’s Wake,” that I told my friend, the Rev. James Nicol, that I had an inward consciousness that I should yet live to be compared with Burns; and though I might never equal him in some things, I thought I might excel him in others. He reprobated the idea, and thought the assumption so audacious, that he told it as a bitter jest against me in a party that same evening. But the rest seeing me mortified, there was not one joined in the laugh against me, and Mr. John Grieve replied in these words, which I will never forget, “After what he has done, there is no man can say *what* he may do.”¹

In *Sir Walter: A Four-Part Study in Biography* (1932), Donald Carswell bluntly dismissed Hogg’s story about the recitation of “Tam o’ Shanter” by John Scott in 1797 as “a ... bare-faced lie.” Hogg was in his twenties in the 1790s, and he spent that decade working as a shepherd at Blackhouse farm on the Douglas Burn, a tributary of Yarrow. Carswell argues, convincingly, that in the 1790s “every intelligent peasant in Scotland” had heard of Burns, and that by 1797 Hogg would certainly have heard of him from his employer, Mr Laidlaw of Blackhouse.²

¹ Quoted from “Memoir of the Author’s Life” in Hogg, *Altrive Tales*, ed. Gillian Hughes, The Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (Edinburgh, 2003), pp. 17–18. Burns in fact died on 21 July 1796, not 21 August as Hogg states. Likewise, Hogg appears to have been mistaken in his belief that he shared Burns’s birthday, 25 January: see the note by Gillian Hughes on this point in her Stirling/South Carolina edition of *Altrive Tales*, p. 216.

² Cf. Donald Carswell, *Sir Walter: A Four-Part Study in Biography* (London, 1932), p. 180.

Further support for Carswell's view is provided by the fact that Hogg's 1832 account of his epoch-making first encounter with the poetry of Burns does not fit very well with what he writes in the much earlier version of his autobiographical "Memoir" published in *The Mountain Bard* of 1807. In the 1807 "Memoir," Hogg discusses his experiences as a teenager in the 1780s, before going on to describe his time at Blackhouse:

From Singlee I went to Elibank upon Tweed, where, with Mr Laidlaw, I found my situation more easy and agreeable than it had ever been. I staid there three half years, a term longer than usual; and from thence went to Willenslee, to Mr Laidlaw's father, with whom I served as a shepherd two years; having been for some seasons preceding employed in working with horses, threshing, &c.

It was, while serving here, in the 18th year of my age, that I first got a perusal of "The Life and Adventures of Sir William Wallace," and "The Gentle Shepherd;"... To give you some farther idea of the progress I had made in literature;— I was about this time obliged to write a letter to my elder brother, and, having never drawn a pen for such a number of years, I had actually forgot how to make sundry of the letters of the alphabet, which I had either to print, or patch up the words in the best way that I could, without them.

At Whitsunday 1790, being then in the nineteenth year of my age, I left Willenslee, and hired myself to Mr Laidlaw of Blackhouse, with whom I served as a shepherd nine years. The kindness of this gentleman to me it would be the utmost ingratitude ever to forget; for indeed it was much more like that of a father than a master; and it is not improbable that I should have been there still, had it not been for the following circumstance.

My brother William had, for some time before that, occupied the farm of Ettrick-house, where he resided with our parents; but having taken a wife, and the place not suiting two families, he took another residence, and gave up the farm to me. The lease expiring at Whitsunday 1793³ our possession was taken by a wealthier neighbour. The first time that I attempted to write verses, was in the spring of

³ The date for the expiry of the lease on Ettrick-house is given in the 1807 text as 1793, rather than the correct year 1804; this appears to be a printer's error caused by eye-slip (the year 1793 occurring in the next sentence).

the year 1793. Mr Laidlaw having a number of valuable books, which were all open to my perusal, I, about this time, began to read with considerable attention, and, no sooner did I begin to read so as to understand, than, rather prematurely, I began to write. The first thing that ever I attempted, was a poetical epistle to a student of divinity, an acquaintance of mine. It was a piece of most fulsome flattery, and was mostly composed of borrowed lines and sentences from Dryden's *Virgil*, and Harvey's *Life of Bruce*. I scarcely remember one line of it.

But the first thing that ever I composed that was really my own, was a rhyme, entitled, *An Address to the Duke of Buccleuch, in beha'f o' mysel', an ither poor fo'k*.

In the same year, after a deal of pains, I finished a song, called, *The Way that the World goes on; and Wattie and Geordie's Foreign Intelligence*, an eclogue: These were my first year's productions; and having continued to write on ever since, often without either rhyme or reason, my pieces have multiplied exceedingly.⁴

It is hard to see how Hogg could resolve to become a poet in 1797, if he was already writing poetry in 1794. What, then, are we to make of his account of his meeting with John Scott in 1797? In attempting to understand the nature of this passage, it is useful to bear in mind that its first appearance was in the version of the "Memoir" published in *Altrive Tales* in April 1832. Significantly, in the 1832 version of the "Memoir" Hogg made various alterations to the passage from the 1807 version quoted above, and these alterations seem designed to provide a better fit with the new story about his first encounter with the poetry of Burns. For example, in the 1832 version of the "Memoir" Hogg says that he began to write verse in 1796, although the 1807 version gives this date as 1793. Likewise, the 1832 version omits Hogg's detailed account of his "first year's productions" as a poet.

The story about the meeting with the "half daft" John Scott was written about thirty-five years after the event it purports to describe, at a time when Hogg was looking back over his long career as a writer while preparing a new version

⁴ Quoted from "Memoir of the Life of James Hogg" in Hogg, *The Mountain Bard*, ed. Suzanne Gilbert, The Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 11–12.

of his autobiographical “Memoir.” Interestingly, in April 1832, the month in which the new *Altrive Tales* version of the “Memoir of the Author’s Life” was published, Hogg signed a contract to write a book-length *Memoir of Burns*.⁵

Perhaps, then, given all the circumstances, the passage in the 1832 version of the “Memoir of the Author’s Life” about Hogg’s first encounter with the poetry of Burns should not be regarded as a sober factual account of an actual meeting with John Scott in 1797.⁶ Instead, it can be seen as something that is, in a way, even more interesting: a piece of Romantic myth-making, in which Hogg stakes a claim to be recognised as Burns’s successor in the role of spokesman for, and poet of, the Scottish people. The ploughman Robert Burns, “the sweetest poet that ever was born,” had died “last harvest;” and now John Scott passes on the flame to the young shepherd, James Hogg. Interpreted in this way, the story about John Scott in the 1832 “Memoir” provides an indication that Hogg’s literary career was, in some ways, defined and shaped by his intense desire, as shepherd-poet, to become the successor of the great ploughman-poet, Robert Burns.

Nevertheless, in addition to recording the meeting with John Scott in the 1832 version of his autobiographical “Memoir,” Hogg mentions this story on two other occasions. Arguably, this lends support to the factuality of the story. However, these two other accounts were both written after 1832, and in them Hogg may simply be referring back to what he wrote in the 1832 “Memoir.” One of the two other

⁵ See *The Collected Letters of James Hogg: Volume 3 1832–1835*, ed. Gillian Hughes, The Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (Edinburgh, 2008), pp. 63–64. This valuable but now little-known work first appeared in 1836 as part of the five-volume edition of Burns edited by Hogg and William Motherwell. Hogg’s *Memoir of Burns* is currently being re-edited for the Stirling/ South Carolina Research Edition of Hogg’s Collected Works.

⁶ Hogg has left two other accounts (both brief) of his alleged meeting with John Scott in 1797. However, these two other accounts were both written after 1832: see the relevant notes by Gillian Hughes on p. 220 of her edition of *Altrive Tales*.

accounts forms part of Hogg's note on "Tam o' Shanter" in the Hogg–Motherwell edition of Burns:

Of all the funny poems of Burns, this is my favourite one. It was the first of his that I ever heard, and it still remains highest in my estimation, which may in some measure be owing to the supreme youthful delight with which I first heard it. Though I have related the anecdote somewhere else, I may mention here, that in the summer of 1797, there was a man named John Scott, a great original, but accounted "rather harum-scarum ways," came to me on the summer hill. He had taken a fancy to me, and thought nothing of coming five or six miles out to the wild hills to visit, and well did I like to see him coming, he had so many songs and stories of all sorts. Among other things he recited *Tam o' Shanter* to me one day, and it is impossible to describe the delight and amusement that I experienced. I made Jock sit down and repeat it over and over to me until I learned it by heart. That was the first hour I ever heard any thing about Burns; I had heard an old man once mention his name, but all that he could or would tell me of him was, "Humph! where hae ye been a' your days that ye never heard o' Burns?" From that day to this I have regarded Tam o' Shanter as an inimitable poem.⁷

Hogg also refers to the John Scott story in a letter of 21 April 1834 to an unknown correspondent. This letter appears to have been written in response to an offer by Hogg's correspondent to provide copies of some original letters by Burns for the Hogg–Motherwell edition. Hogg writes:

I never felt more grateful to any human being than to you for the generous disinterested proffer you have made me of the original letters of my great and matchless predecessor which now that the whole nation has been ransacked over and over again I consider as a treasure. By all means send me a copy and keep the originals. Do you think I would suspect a gentleman of forging a single line or even a word who has shown such an interest in me? Besides the stile of Burns is so peculiar I could swear to any two lines of it either in poetry or prose. Cancel whatever you please for that has been found necessary through all his original letters to a great extent. Alas I never saw him! But it was not because I was too young to remember him but I was then a poor lonely

⁷ *The Works of Robert Burns*, edited by The Ettrick Shepherd and William Motherwell, 5 vols, (Glasgow, 1834–36), I, 203.

shepherd on the wild mountains of Ettrick Forest and had no communication whatever with the literary world and though we were contemporaries I never saw or heard of him till the year after he died when a kind of half daft chield Jock Scott came to me on the hill and recited me Tam o' Shanter. I was petrified with delight and never suffered him to quit me until I had it all by heart and whether it be from that first impression I cannot tell but it has been my favourite poem ever since. After I learned that we were both born on the 25th of Jan^r I determined to be his successor in Scottish poetry against all disadvantages and have at length attained that enviable distinction. But the queerest thing of all was that I had learned to identify myself so much with my predecessor that I expected to die at the same age and on the very same day of the month. So when the 21st of August began to approach I grew very ill—terribly ill and told the people who were waiting on me that I feared I was going to die. They said “they hopet no.” But before midnight I was so ill and so frightened that I was skirling and haudding by the blankets but after the 21st was fairly over I grew better. It certainly was rather a singular coincidence that we should both have been born on the 25th of Jan^r and both in the middle of terrible snow storms. What would I give to have a son on the 25th of Jan^r for I am sure he would turn out the greatest poet of us all. I have done all that I could to have a son on the 25th of Jan^r and I came so near it once that I had a daughter on the 23^d.⁸

It would appear from all this that Hogg's admiration of Burns was so great as to be almost obsessive. Nevertheless, it also seems clear that he did not wish to be a mere imitator of his “great and matchless predecessor.” Instead, he aspired to make his own distinctive contribution as he followed in Burns's footsteps. In the 1832 “Memoir,” this point is made explicit in the final paragraph of the story about John Scott, when Hogg writes: “I remember in the year 1812, the year before the publication of the ‘Queen's Wake,’ that I told my friend, the Rev. James Nicol, that I had an inward consciousness that I should yet live to be compared with Burns; and though I might never equal him in some things, I

⁸ *The Collected Letters of James Hogg: Volume 3 1832–1835*, ed. Gillian Hughes, The Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (Edinburgh, 2008), p. 214.

thought I might excel him in others." *The Queen's Wake* was the book-length poem that established Hogg's reputation among his contemporaries, and he no doubt mentions it here in order to provide backing for his audacious claim that, in some ways, he might even outdo Burns. Audacious as it is, however, this claim does not amount to evidence of an ambition to replace Burns as the pre-eminent bard and spokesman of the non-elite people of Scotland. Instead, as he looks back over his literary career in his revised autobiographical "Memoir" of 1832, the author of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is simply asserting that it had been his ambition to try to continue Burns's project, and that he had attempted to do so, not as an imitator, but in his own distinctive way.

Hogg's sincere regard for Burns is given eloquent expression in his poem "Robin's Awa!," with which he concludes his *Memoir of Burns*. "Poor Jamie" (Hogg himself) "blunders an' sings as he can," but "at the blithe strain there was ane beat them a',— / O there's nae bard o' nature sin' Robin's awa!":

Robin's Awa!

AIR—"There will never be peace till Jamie comes hame."

By The Ettrick Shepherd

AE night, i' the gloaming, as late I pass'd by,
 A lassie sang sweet as she milkit her kye,
 An' this was her sang, while the tears down did fa'—
 O there's nae bard o' nature sin' Robin's awa!
 The bards o' our country, now sing as they may,
 The best o' their ditties but maks my heart wae;
 For at the blithe strain there was ane beat them a',—
 O there's nae bard o' nature sin' Robin's awa!

Auld Wat he is wily and pleases us fine,
 Wi' his lang-nebbit tales an' his ferlies langsyne;
 Young Jack is a dreamer, Will sings like a crow,
 An' Davie an' Delta, are dowy an' slaw;
 Trig Tam frae the Heelands was aince a brow man;
 Poor Jamie he blunders an' sings as he can;
 There's the Clerk an' the Sodger, the Newsman an' a',
 They but gar me greet sairer for him that's awa!

'Twas he that could charm wi' the wauff o' his tongue,
 Could rouse up the auld an' enliven the young,
 An' cheer the blithe hearts in the cot an' the ha',—
 O there's nae bard o' nature sin' Robin's awa!
 Nae sangster amang us has half o' his art,
 There was nae fonder lover an' nae kinder heart;
 Then wae to the wight wha wad wince at a flaw,
 To tarnish the honours of him that's awa!

If he had some fauts I cou'd never them see,
 They're nae to be sung by sic gilpies as me,
 He likit us weel, an' we likit him a',—
 O there's nae sickan callan sin' Robin's awa!
 Whene'er I sing late at the milkin my kye,
 I look up to heaven an' say with a sigh,
 Although he's now gane, he was king o' them a',—
 Ah! there's nae bard o' nature sin' Robin's awa!⁹

⁹ *The Works of Robert Burns*, edited by The Ettrick Shepherd and William Motherwell, 5 vols, (Glasgow, 1834–36), v, 287–88. A manuscript of these verses, in Hogg's hand, is now in the Roy Collection.