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ROBERT BURNS, JAMES JOHNSON, AND THE MANUSCRIPT OF “THE GERMAN LAIRDIE”¹

Patrick Scott

It has long been recognized that Robert Burns’s collecting work on Scottish song concerned not only words but also airs. Both for James Johnson’s *Scots Musical Museum* (from 1787 on) and George Thomson’s *Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (beginning in 1793), his correspondence shows him both discussing the traditional airs for which he was collecting, improving or writing text and also, at least occasionally, reporting how he had learnt of a particular air or version of an air. What has been more difficult to pin down has been how and to what extent he himself supplied music to his two editor-publishers in written form. As James C. Dick long ago remarked, “The MSS. of most of his historical and traditional airs have disappeared, except for two or three pieces in his hand.”² Any fragments that can now be located are therefore potentially of great research interest.

Among recent additions to the University of South Carolina’s G. Ross Roy Collection is a small piece of manuscript music, headed “The German Lairdie” in what is unmistakably Burns’s hand. The manuscript fragment itself measures approximately 23.8 x 7.8 cms. It is mounted on a slightly larger piece of later, probably late Victorian or early 20th century, paper, clearly itself cut from a still larger sheet. With it is a

¹ The manuscript described here is reproduced by courtesy of the University of South Carolina Libraries. I had planned to co-author this note with Prof. G. Ross Roy. I should like to acknowledge helpful feedback on my draft from Prof. Murray Pittock and Dr. Kirsteen McCue, though neither is to be held responsible for my conclusions.

² James C. Dick, *The Songs of Robert Burns* (orig. publ. 1903: Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1962), xi n.1.

second piece of manuscript, 20.7 x 6.8 cms., in another, later hand, mounted on a piece of acidic card cut from a larger sheet, which reads:

Burns' Auto:

Written by Robert Burns and given by him to James Johnson the publisher of the "Scots Musical Museum," in which the poet took such a deep interest, and to which he originally contributed some of his best songs.

Burns's words to the air, beginning "What merriment has taen the Whigs?," confirm its Jacobite connection.³ In the *Jacobite Relics* James Hogg provides a much longer variant, beginning "What murrain now has ta'en the Whigs," taken from Walter Scott's collection.⁴ Kinsley acknowledges that Burns's words are probably an abridgement of an older text, and his scepticism about the text Hogg provides is rebutted by Murray Pittock's more detailed list of much earlier manuscript and printed sources.⁵ Burns's derivative and rather perfunctory version is not among his better songs, and Johnson never actually included it in the *Scots Musical Museum*. It is not indexed by Egerer, who aimed to note (and index) the first published appearance of all Burns items through 1900, and I have found it in none of the standard nineteenth-century editions.⁶ Both Dick (Song 349, pp. 336-337) and Kinsley took their text from manuscript, from the collection of Burns-Johnson correspondence in the British Library, the Hastie MS., which had been bequeathed to the then-British Museum in 1858 by Archibald Hastie, M.P.⁷ Burns's words

³ James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), II: 893, item 605; cf. also Donald A. Low, ed., *Songs of Robert Burns* (London: Routledge, 1993), 894-895.

⁴ James Hogg, ed., *The Jacobite Relics of Scotland, Being the Songs, Airs, and Legends of the Adherents of the House of Stuart, [First Series]*, ed. Murray G. H. Pittock, Stirling/South Carolina Edition, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2002), 146-147, and Hogg's note on p. 296.

⁵ Kinsley, III:1521; Pittock in *Jacobite Relics, First Series*, 466-467, and cf. also Murray Pittock, "Burns and Jacobite Song," in Kenneth Simpson, ed., *Love and Liberty* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1997), 308-314 (p. 311).

⁶ J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964).

⁷ British Library Add. MS 22307, f. 144v; cf. "The Late Mr. Hastie's Will," *Times* (November 18, 1857); 12A. Margaret M. Smith and Penny Bouhmela, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, III:1 (London: Mansell, 1986), 125 (BuR 339) record Dick as the first publication; Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg, in *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), I:937, head it as "First printed in Barke, 1955."

The German Lairdie

Burns' Auto:

Written by Robert Burns and given by him to James Thomson the publisher of the "Scots Musical Museum" in which the poet would such a deep interest, and to which he originally contributed some of his best songs.

had, however, been printed long before Dick published them, indeed even before Hastie's bequest, but had been buried among the "Additional Illustrations" to the 1839 Stenhouse edition of Johnson.⁸

The air, however, may be more significant than the text. In the interleaved edition of the *Scots Musical Museum* that Burns gave to Robert Riddell, he had commented on "The German Lairdie" air. He was praising "Mr. Marshall, ... the first composer of strathspeys of the age," and then adds:

I have been told by somebody who had it of Marshall himself, that he took the idea of his three most celebrated pieces ... from the old air, "The German Lairdie."⁹

In 1903, Dick believed that Burns had captured a version of this Jacobite air that had eluded all other collectors:

The tune, from the MS. of Burns now in the possession of John Adamson, Esq., of Brooklands, Dumfries, is not in any printed collection, is quite unknown, and is now printed for the first time (Dick 496).

Dick did not however print the Burns air unaltered:

The music from the MS. is obviously imperfect, and wants two bars in each of the two sections to complete the rhythm. These I have added by repeating the fifth bar and doubling the measure of the sixth in each of the two sections (*ibid.*)

Beside the music itself, Dick described his version as "Corrected from *Burns's MS.*" (Dick, 336). Neither Kinsley nor Low had located the Adamson manuscript, and they both therefore had to rely on Dick in printing Burns's air, though Low notes that Dick had "revised" it.

The mention of Adamson, however, makes it clear that the fragment now in the Roy Collection is indeed the same one used by Dick, and its reappearance will therefore allow future editors to work from Dick's source, rather than his altered version. A few years before Dick's book, Adamson had loaned his "German Lairdie" manuscript for display in the great Glasgow Exhibition of 1896, and it is listed in the exhibition

⁸ *The Scottish Musical Museum ... originally published by James Johnson ... and now Accompanied with Copious Notes ... by the late William Stenhouse with some Additional Illustrations*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Blackwood; London: Cadell, 1839), V: 455. .

⁹ R. H. Cromek, ed., *Reliques of Robert Burns: consisting chiefly of original letters, poems, and critical observations on Scottish songs* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1808), 260-261.

catalogue, though without illustration.¹⁰ Although the printed catalogue entry differs in tone from the handwritten description that accompanies the manuscript, it would seem likely that the description, and perhaps also the mounting itself, dates from the time of the exhibition loan. After Dick had used it, it seems to have disappeared for most of the century, till it was auctioned by Phillips in 1992, and bought by a British dealer. In September 2012, it was purchased for the Roy Collection from Lion Heart Autographs of New York.

Oddly enough, the other, rather similar, piece of music manuscript that Adamson exhibited in 1896, music for Burns's "Wha is that at my bower door," has since also been offered at auction, and it was fully illustrated in the accompanying catalogue.¹¹ The later handwritten description with "Wha is that at my bower door" is very similar to the one with "The German Lairdie." The reappearance of both Adamson manuscripts together will allow more informed discussion of their exact relationship to Burns himself. No one from 1896 onwards has questioned that the two titles are written in Burns's hand; "Wha is that at my bower door" was published in James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*; and given other similarities there seems therefore no reason to doubt the provenance indicated in Adamson's notes, that both these music manuscripts were indeed sent by Burns to Johnson.

Where opinion has differed over the years has been about whether the music is also in Burns's autograph. Dick clearly believed, or at least implied, that this was Burns's manuscript hand, and neither Kinsley nor Low seems to question his assertion. However, with so little Burns musical manuscript available for comparison, others have been more cautious. Serge Hovey, excited by Dick's implication that he had taken "The German Lairdie" "from an original Burns manuscript (i.e. from the

¹⁰ *Memorial Catalogue of the Burns Exhibition Held in the Galleries of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts .. 1896* (Glasgow: William Hodge, 1898), 150; item 1025.

¹¹ "Wha is that at my bower door": *The Roy Davids Collection, Part II, Poetry ... vol. 1: A-K, Wednesday 10 April 2013* (London: Bonhams, 2013), 92-93 (lot 81); cf. *Memorial Catalogue*, 156; item 1063. Though the Davids catalogue does not note it, this fragment had been reproduced over eighty years ago, but had been confusingly miscaptioned as "The Wee German Lairdie": see Catherine Carswell, *The Life of Robert Burns* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), facing p. 416. For Burns's song, see *Scots Musical Museum*, part 4 (1792), song 337; Dick, 164, 413-4 (without noting the Adamson MS); Kinsley II:356, item 356.

poet's own musical handwriting),” did not doubt “the authenticity of the tune,” but nonetheless noted that “The MS has since been lost.”¹² The *Memorial Catalogue* entries hedge their bets, describing the two items in identical words as “Music for ... with title in the handwriting of Burns.” The Phillips cataloger in 1992 stayed with the same description, making no claim as to the music being in Burns's autograph.

In the recent Bonham's catalogue, however, the veteran manuscript expert Roy Davids asserts firmly that, in the parallel manuscript for “What is that at my bower door,” Burns himself wrote both title and tune, together with the instruction “Lively.” If Davids's attribution is accepted, then there is a basis for reassessing the musical hand in “The German Lairdie” as also potentially Burns's own. The two Adamson music manuscripts, so briefly and tantalizingly listed in the *Memorial Catalogue*, have represented a question-mark on the margins of Burns editing. With publication of the Roy Davids/Bonham's catalogue and this note, scholars of Burns's music now have available illustrations of both Adamson manuscripts, and so the materials with which to carry discussion further.

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¹² Serge Hovey archive: *Songs of Burns*, vol. 8, part 2, item 3 (Irvin Department, University of South Carolina Libraries).