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Reviews


The text of this edition is a facsimile of the 1799 ('1800') book, of which only two copies have been recorded. (Mr. Legman's title-page describes the Earl of Rosebery's copy as 'the unique original'; but Professor Ross Roy recorded a second one in this journal in April 1965. The Roy copy bears the date 1799, but 1800 watermarks suggest delayed publication.) Mr. Legman's is the first really practical modern edition: that by S. G. Smith et al.—1959; now available in paperback—is a modified reprint of the 1799 poems arranged editorially in groups, with new texts and additional pieces (some from holograph). To the 1799 text Mr. Legman adds six songs, four from manuscript and two from The Giblet Pye (c. 1806); he does not persuade me that there are good grounds for attributing any of them to Burns, and there are stylistic arguments against most of them. Mr. Legman's long introduction is formally a general essay on Burns, but he gives most attention to the poet's collection and revision of traditional bawdry, his original work in this kind, and the Cunningham transcript of Burns's collection which Mr. Legman discovered some years ago in a British Museum copy of the Merry Muses. It seems certain that a manuscript gathering was given by Burns to James Gracie of Dumfries, and copied in part by Allan Cunningham, with the permission of Gracie's son, about 1815; and that the Cunningham transcript represents all that is left of Burns's collection. Mr. Legman's text is followed by a substantial but uneven commentary (pp. 135-259); a bibliography of the Merry Muses 1799-1965, which is much more detailed and systematic than Mr. Egerer's treatment of this series in his recent Bibliography of Robert Burns; and a glossary which is competent but minimal. (To hold the gate (p. 308) is not to 'keep one's virginity,' but to 'stick to the road,' 'prosper'.)

Mr. Legman's discussion of the Cunningham transcript in his introduction and notes is based mainly on his fuller account in The Horn
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Book: Studies in Erotic Folklore and Bibliography (New York, 1964, pp. 129-236). Since I have lately summarised his argument and accepted his main conclusion, in Renaissance and Modern Studies, ix (1965), 5-21, I shall not go over the same ground again. In that essay I also set out my arguments and speculations about the authenticity of the Merry Muses texts; these are soon to appear in a fuller form in my commentary for the new Oxford edition of Burns's Poems; and I shall therefore draw attention here only to new material and to points on which Mr. Legman and I disagree.

The least satisfactory part of the book is the biographical introduction, though it has the spasmodic force and illumination familiar to readers of Mr. Legman’s other work. He makes far too much of Burns’s ‘alienation and malaise’ in Edinburgh and the consequent ‘drying up of his real roots in the life of nature and the soil.’ Burns was well aware of being ‘a raree show,’ and half-accepted the stereotype of the noble savage: ‘I know very well, the novelty of my character has by far the greatest share in the learned and polite notice I have lately got; and in [English] I am not vain enough to hope for distinguished Poetic fame’ (to Dr. Moore, January 1787); ‘too surely do I see that time when the same tide will leave me, and recede, perhaps, as far below the mark of truth’ (to Mrs. Dunlop, 15 January 1787). But Mr. Legman sees rightly that Burns’s work for folk-song ‘saved’ him; and this view, though it is to be expected from a critic chiefly concerned with the songs, is a sound corrective to the traditional view that a great poet of manners degenerated into a whittler of cherry-stones.

Mr. Legman emphasises Burns’s remarkable identification with women and with their emotions... one of the crucial elements in the poetic temperament; but it is uncritical to use this, as Legman does, to confirm Burns’s authorship of dubious poems. If emotional identification with women is characteristic of poets, it is not peculiar and distinctive in Burns. The case against Mr. Legman here need not be made at length, but it would offer in evidence—from the erotic genres alone—a number of street songs and ‘wicked’ pieces written for Restoration actresses, from Pills to Purge Melancholy (1719-20); fragments collected by David Herd from Scottish tradition (Songs from Herd’s Manuscripts, ed. Hans Hecht, 1904, nos. xxv-xli); and songs in the Merry Muses which cannot reasonably be ascribed to Burns—Ellibanks, As I cam o’er the Cairney Mount, John Anderson my Jo, Ye’ve get a Hole to Hide it in, The Ploughman, The Mowdiewark, Andrew an’ his Cuttie Gun, Jockey was a Bonny Lad, and Tail Todle.

Burns’s ‘expurgations,’ says Mr. Legman, were indeed ‘nothing other
than an unconscious continuation of the older Scottish religious attempt to drive the Devil out of folksong, his motive being not 'religion' but 'patriotism' (pp. xxxviii-ix). But his motive was surely the common-sense one of getting as much of the poetic and musical tradition into print as public taste would tolerate. Nor was the printing of 'expurgations' suppression of the old bawdry, so powerfully current in rural and urban society: some of Burns's 'polite' songs set to 'bawdy' airs cannot have been—or have been intended to be—listened to with complete composure in the drawing-room. (Cf. Boswell's 'inward laugh' when he heard Ambrose Philips's 'Blest as th' immortal Gods is he' sung to the air Black Joke; Boswell in Search of a Wife, 1957, pp. 148-9.)

Notes on the Commentary. The Fornicato. Mr. Legman records the Law MS but passes over its claim to be an 'improved' or 'final' version. Put Butter in my Donald's Brose: Mr. Legman follows Henley and Henderson in accepting this as Burns's, but only by treating Burns's letter to Thomson on this song ('I have been told that it was composed by a lady') as an artistic fib; there was no need for Burns to lie to Thomson about such a matter. Green Grow the Rashes O: 'gringo' is Sp. 'gibberish,' not a derivative from the title of this song carried to America. Comin' o'er the Hills o' Coup: the argument that the related stanzas in Blyth Will and Bessie's Wedding were added by Burns seems to me unnecessary and weak. O Saw ye my Maggy: Mr. Legman follows S. Goodchild in taking 'the amusing stanza iii' to be a later addition by Burns; but it is anti-romantic and inappropriate, and goes counter to the authority of the Abbotsford MS. Gie the Last her Fairin'; notes would have been useful on the orgiastic customs associated with 'fairing,' and on Burns's earlier use of the rhyme 'brandy/koughmagandie' at the close of The Holy Fair. Poor Bodies do Naomi but M-a: Mr. Legman supports my own view of the textual problem here—that the Maser printer may have had (?holograph) copy with Burns's own additions, emendations, and cancellations—against Professor Ferguson; but he does not argue the matter through. The Rantin' Dog: it is not made clear that '... Love-Begotten Daughter' and '... Bastart Wean' are variant titles of The Poet's Welcome.

The Commentary is marred by some unnecessary digressions into Old Testament legend (pp. 149-50), the classical and French antecedents of the Lady Rosebery epigram (pp. 171-4), de stupratorìne in somno (p. 195, with an editorial confession!), and the folklore of public hair (pp. 236-40).

Mr. Legman rightly dismisses the fragments in the Aldline edition
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(1839) as Cunningham's forgeries—a valuable by-product of his work on the Cunningham transcript—though the 1959 editors of the Merry Muses regard them as Burns's expurgations. (It is more than half a century since Henley and Henderson wrote them off (Centenary Edition, iv. 76) as 'mere excerpts from The Merry Muses . . . beggared of piquancy and significance."

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Despite Fergusson's perennial popularity, it is not surprising that this is the first full length critical work on his poetry. For until our own generation, thorough critics have not dealt at all with Scots poetry. The tradition itself has gone unexamined. Perhaps only in this century has Burns been treated critically and appreciated as a significant poet whose work is worthy of real literary study.

Since literature always exists as part of a tradition and since any wide-ranging historical studies of Scottish literature have been, to date, inadequate, the reader must admire Dr. MacLaine's insightful comprehension of the whole. Not only does he give Fergusson his place between the past and future, but he relates, with profundity, the Scottish to the English tradition, extremely important in a study of the poet. At the same time he concentrates on the intrinsic values of the poetry at hand, analyzing appreciatively poem after poem, much in the manner of Daiches on Burns. This method gives the volume value as a reference work, though Dr. MacLaine never boils over with too many explicative details of a trivial nature; he is always able to generalize in such a way that the reader is aware of the comparative values of any single poem. Explications are generous, substantially treating any single poem, the ten pages given to "Auld Reikie" serving as an example.

The author depicts a poet whose own knowledge of the Scottish tradition was not at all superficial. For instance, he discusses at length

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