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Burns Letters and The Currie Notebook

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Early in the year 1797 Dr James Currie was more or less sure that he would edit the works of Robert Burns. Having all but made up his mind, the doctor purchased a notebook in which he might enter his thoughts on the poet.¹

Obviously the notebook was an early device by which Currie kept track of snippets from letters which he considered significant for his presentation of the Burns correspondence. Seven such fragments appear, not one of which appears in the Life and Works of Robert Burns (1800). Three are by Burns as variants of what J. DeLancey Ferguson gives in his Oxford Edition. A glance at all seven tells something of Currie's editorial policies.

The first extract is from a letter of Burns to the Rev Mr Greenfield; it seems to have been intended for a discussion of Burns's pride in himself and his poetry. There is no reason to assume, one might add, that Currie would have published this letter had Greenfield not been demitted his charge because of flagrant conduct in 1798. How the editor had the piece is anybody's guess, but assuredly it was not as given in the Don Manuscript transcript (Letters, I, 59). Currie copied what follows:

Edr. Spring 1787. Burns to Greenfield "I was ever among my rustic compeers marked for ungraceful manner & unsubmitting pride; wh. has lost nothing by being a little spited at the world. I am willing to believe my abilities deserved a better fate than the very shades of life; but to be dragged forth with all my imperfections on my head to the full glare of learned & polite observation, was what I am afraid I shall have better reason to repent."

I mention this to you once for all that
When proud fortunes ebbing tide recedes you may bear me witness that when my bubble of fame was at the highest, I stood unintoxicated with the inebriating cup of public favour, looking forward with rueful resolve to the hastening time when the blow of envious calumny should dash it to the ground, with all the eagerness of vengeful triumph.

¹Mr William R. LeFanu has provided me with a microfilm copy of this notebook which belongs amongst his family papers. The manuscript consists of forty-seven pages (8½" x 4¾") numbered in pencil by Mr. LeFanu on the recto only, consecutively by odd number from 1 to 47. Pages [24] and [32] are blank. Very scanty internal evidence offers only the roughest guide to date of entry.
Again

Never did Saul's armour sit so heavy on David when going to encounter Goliath, as does the encumbering robe of public notice with which I am invested. [Notebook, pp. 29-(30)].

Some of the differences in phrasing between this extract and the letter as it appears in Ferguson's Oxford Edition may be attributable to Currie, who would have preferred 'inebriating cup of public favour' to the more personal 'inebriating cup in my hand.' Furthermore, omission of such a phrase as 'in the Confessor style, to disburthen my conscience' could be predicted of Currie. But what can one say for certain about Currie's opening sentence which is not in the Oxford? Perhaps nothing. And what can one say of the contradiction in date between the two? Only that because mood and sentiments echo those of letters to Mrs Dunlop, Lawrie, and Moore in January-February 1787, Currie's date may be the more accurate.

The second extract is from another letter by Burns, this time to Lady Elizabeth Cunningham; its chief importance lies in what it reveals of Burns's commitment to the family at Mossgiel. This extract, too, bears a date different from that given in the Oxford Edition (I, 289-91) and contains variants from the mailed letter to suggest that Currie either worked from an earlier draft by Burns or else made slight additions and changed phrasing. The former alternative seems more likely for the unused extract pinched with quotation marks that it is:

Oct. 88 Extr. of a letter from Burns to Lady E. Cunningham.

"Indolence & reverie excepted I thank God
"there is no species of dissipation which
"I cannot set at defiance. The indolent
"reveries of a bemused mind, are indeed
"the sins that easily beset me, but like
"the noxious damp that annoy miners, I
"am afraid they are evils that necessarily
"rise from my very profession." x x x x

"I have a brother who supports my
"aged mother a still younger brother and
"three sisters on a farm. On my return
"from Edin' I found him in consequence
"of a dear farm & some other misfortunes
"on the brink of ruin. As my father left
"us a little Commonwealth, & with his
"expiring breath desired us to keep
"together & support one another, their
"cause is undoubtedly mine; so I advanced
"them nearly one half of their little
"capital, which has placed them I hope
"in a state of permanent Comfort [Notebook, pp. (34)-5]."
Following this, Currie paraphrased two sentences of Burns from his letter to Mrs. Dunlop (Letters, I, 261) which he dated "Sept. 28. 88,"² So much for the notebook and Currie's extracts from letters by Burns.

Four extracts were made from letters by Burns's correspondents to remain today as something more than a token of how very extensive Currie's sources were and of how incompletely undescribed they are. In 1930 James Cameron Ewing wrote in the Burns Chronicle (p. 12):

None of the letters addressed to him [Burns] by former schoolfellows at Kirkoswald appears now to be in existence. That need not occasion surprise. We may safely conclude that all of them were destroyed at the time of the poet's proposed migration to Jamaica. . . .

Not so, this foregone conclusion! Currie had at least one letter, which still may turn up with several more:

Extract of a letter from Mr W. Niven [William, 1759-1844] to Burns

Maybole 34. Janr [78]8

Do you remember that when we were at Kirk-Oswald together, we used every day to argue on some subject or.

I remember also that Mr Roger [Hugh Rodger, 1727-97, the boy's schoolmaster] having heard of it, mentioned it in the public school, & got a Horselaugh at us, whom however we soon turned by entering the field with him & two or three of the most learned of his pupils & running him & all of them down by dint of oratory [Notebook, p. 33].

Directly beneath, Currie copied a sentence from a letter of William Dunbar, who in his last years was Inspector-General of Stamp Duties in Scotland:

W Dunbar to Burns March 88

— I believe the conversation would not have flagged, unless an inequality of spirits had risen on my part like the Ghost of Banquo to push us from our seats.

Little is known of the Kirkoswald episode of Burns's life, and not much is known of the poet's hasty trip back to Edinburgh in March 1788 except that his purpose was to conclude a settlement with Creech as quickly as possible and return to Jean who had just lost both of their recently born twin daughters. Under these circumstances it may not be imagined that Burns joined Dunbar as he presided over a meeting of

²Notebook, p. 35. This paraphrase reads: 'Extr. of a letter to Mrs Dunlop Sep. 28. 88—says—Mr Graham [Robert, 12th Laird of Fintry, 1749-1815] answered my letter the very day he received it, "and I am quite at a loss to say whether his answer was more polite or kind."'
the Crochallan Fencibles, rather that the distressed poet got together with his lawyer friend for legal advice and bolstered spirit, perhaps on the evening of March fourteenth. Slight as they are, the Niven extract and the Dunbar should come as welcome evidence to any future biographer of Robert Burns.

On 15 March 1789 Burns wrote Graham of Fintry (Letters, I, 334-5) promising him a 'Nith salmon fresh' if he would come to Ellisland and commenting upon Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations. Currie's notebook contains an extract from Graham's reply:

Graham of Fintry to Burns 19 July 1789.

"I am glad you like Smith's book
"(the Wealth of Nations) because I look
"on it as a certain mark of a good
"understanding. There is certainly more
"information in it than in any book that
"ever was published, and I consider myself
"as exceedingly fortunate in having in my
"power what you covet so much the oppor-
tunity of having Mr Smith's opinion on
"any given subject within 20 hours at
"latest, and often the moment that I desire
"it: so that if you have any enquiries to
"make of him let me know, and I will en-
deavour to satisfy you. With regard to the
"present circumstances in France I can tell
"you that it has been his opinion from the
"beginning that Necker had undertaken a
"task to which he was unequal; and the
"other day he said 'you will see that he
"will fail, for tho' a very honest man
"and a good banker he has neither the
"arts of a Richlieu to manage the people
"nor the nerves of a Cromwell to attack
"the Throne' & he has now brought him-
self into the dilemma of doing the one
"or the other without being aware of that's
"being the consequence of chusing a side

[Notebook, pp. 37-(8).]

Graham of Fintry and his wife are represented in Currie's Works by letters and verses of Burns. Had Currie found more room, he might have chosen to include the exchange of letters on Smith's book despite Graham's turning the subject upon the violence in France during that furious summer of 1789.

There is less chance that Currie was the man to publish the last extract, even if he had permission, which he probably had not. That the passage was transcribed into the notebook is by way of Currie's having
sought to understand Burns's frame of mind after first settling at Ellisland:

Gilbert Burns to Robt
6 Aug. 89
—Not that I would have you give up your
farm which I am afraid may be your idea,
as I knew that you are a little disgusted
with the cares of farming, & your poetic
sensibility & love of ease makes you
think that you cannot too much avoid
that which gives you uneasiness" he goes
on to argue very sensibly agt. giving it
up. [Notebook, p. 39.]

Currie does not allude to his acrimonious difference between the two
brothers nor does he quote Robert's answer (Letters, II, 1), 'But let it
[Ellisland] go to hell!' He chooses, instead, to explain the neglect of
the farm softly as an outcome of entrance upon Excise duties: 'But his
farm no longer occupied the principal part of his care or his thoughts.
It was not at Ellisland that he was no win general to be found" [Works,
I, 201]. Such tempering-tampering is characteristic of James Currie's
dirling.

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