Washington Irving and "To a Mountain Daisy": An Anecdote of Robert Burns in America

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

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In June 1863, Charles Augustus Davis, a New York City iron merchant, financier, and literary man, wrote a detailed reminiscence of his late friend Washington Irving and addressed it to Pierre M. Irving, a nephew of the author then completing a lengthy delegated biography of his uncle. This letter, which the biographer had solicited from Davis as an intimate of the elderly Irving with special knowledge of his "idiosyncrasies," comprised a rich collection of acute general observations, exemplary anecdotes, and quoted correspondence; but owing to limitations of space, Pierre M. Irving was unable to include in his Life and Letters of Washington Irving more than a small fraction of the memoir. The remainder of Davis' letter, which is still unpublished, includes accounts of several incidents from various periods of his long acquaintance with the amiable author. One of these, dating from 1852, is a report of Irving's undertaking to authenticate, if possible, a new reading in Robert Burns' "To a Mountain Daisy" proposed by an "intelligent Scotch gardener" in Davis' employ. While it was intended to demonstrate Irving's "avoidance of controversy and ... industry to seek the truth," the anecdote also reveals his familiarity with

1. A prominent citizen who was on terms of friendship with many of the dignitaries of his day, Davis (1795-1867) has since been virtually forgotten. He enjoyed a modest literary reputation as the pseudonymous author of the satirical Letters of J. Downing, Major, Downingville Militia, to his Old Friend, Mr. Dwight, of the New-York Daily Advertiser (New York, 1834), and of occasional writings afterward. His civic and social activities are frequently mentioned in The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851, ed. Bayard Tuckerman (New York, 1889), passim. Davis met Washington Irving in 1852 and at Irving's death in 1859 was among his closest friends.

2. 4 vols. (New York, 1862-65), IV, 114-17. The single item selected for publication was an anecdotal summary of a few days Davis had spent during the summer of 1852 in company with Irving at Saratoga Springs, a fashionable watering place in upstate New York.

3. The letter is in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library. All quoted passages attributed in the text to Charles Augustus Davis are from this manuscript and are published with the permission of the New York Public Library: Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

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the writings of Burns and suggests the popularity of the poet among widely separated social classes in the United States of the 1850's. For these reasons, and because Irving's lifelong admiration of Burns' poetry has received so little comment elsewhere, Davis' piquant account of Irving and "To a Mountain Daisy" is presented here.

The extensive and well merited critical attention to the relationship between Irving and Sir Walter Scott has perhaps tended to retard due recognition of the American author's interest in the works of Burns. Curiously, even Pierre M. Irving, the knowledgeable recipient of Davis' long letter, referred to the poet only once in his four-volume Life and Letters. 4 That oversight has since been partially rectified by Stanley T. Williams, Irving's indefatigable modern biographer, who has pointed out his youthful knowledge of Burns and even speculated that, in the spritely Salmagundi papers (1807-08), he may have reproduced certain unspecified "character-types" from the poems. 5 Setting aside such questions of indebtedness as these, however, it is at least clear from other evidence that Irving continued thereafter to share the popular enthusiasm for Burns' satires and lyrics. During his tour of Scotland in 1817 — shortly after his first meeting with Scott, in fact — he made a pilgrimage to the poet's birthplace at Ayr; and in "Abbotsford" (1835) he briefly described the visit, "a whole morning about 'the banks and braes of bonnie Doon,' with [Burns'] tender little love-verses running in [his] head." Irving recalled that while examining the ruins of Kirk Alloway, he encountered a local resident, a "poor Scotch carpenter," who proved to be well versed in the popular songs of the country. "Finding the purpose of my visit," he wrote, this man "left his work, sat down with me on a grassy grave, close by where Burns' father was buried, and talked of the poet, whom he had known personally. He said his songs were familiar to the poorest and most illiterate of the country folk, 'and it seemed to him as if the country had grown more beautiful since Burns had written his bonnie little songs about it.'" 6 In later years, at home in the United States and with his European wanderings behind him, Irving still kept in sight an apt reminder of Burns. The walls of Sunnyide, his home near the bank of the Hudson River a few miles north of New York City, were covered by an ivy plant brought there from Melrose Abbey by his friend Jane Jeffrey Renwick, Burns' "Blue-eyed Lassie."

Thus, in light of these few testimonies to Irving’s admiration of Burns over many years, the claim of Charles Augustus Davis that late in his life he was “of course familiar with every thing from Burns’ pen” comes as no surprise. In 1852 Irving shared with the “intelligent Scotch gardener” in New York City, as he had with the “old Scotch carpenter” at Ayr years before, a relish for Burns’ poetry which even the “authorities” were unable to stifle.

In the following excerpt from the letter of Charles Augustus Davis to Pierre M. Irving, New York, June 1863, I have regulated Davis’ garbled punctuation. The footnotes to the passage are my own.

Among my rambling recollections of our lamented friend, I recall a little incident which may illustrate a leading feature of his character: his readiness to listen to any thing that interested or amused him, his avoidance of immediate controversy but his quiet industry to seek the truth. It happened to me that in conversation with an intelligent Scotch gardener in my employ (in planting trees and shrubs in Gramercy Square) I found he came from Ayrshire and was quite familiar with the writings and character of Robert Burns; and in the course of quoting and reciting what he conceived to be among the best specimens of Burns’ poetry, he recited “The Mountain Daisy” [sic]. And I noticed that instead of using the words “the stour” in the third line he substituted “this stour”—insisting that “stour” was a misprint, that he knew the very field where Burns was “plouin’,” and being billy he could only plow in stoups—round and round; otherwise the furrows would be channels for water and become gullies, or in other places, damps, to hold the water in “puddles.” He seem’d so earnest and pertinacious, and his reading so natural, and noting after all the difference of a misprint was simply changing an “e” to an “i,” I yielded to him for the sake of hearing a true Scot read with the real Scotch pronunciation a poem of rare beauty from the pen of Robert Burns: “Wee—modest—crimson tipped—flower” (enunciating each adjectival separately, slowly and distinctly). Meeting Mr. Irving a few evenings afterward, I narrated to him this little incident which, coupled with the mode of “plowin’” as

7. Davis’ home, for many years a resort of the literati of New York City, was at 1 University Place.

8. The first stanza of “To a Mountain-Daisy, On turning one down, with the Plough, in April—1786,” follows:

    *Wee, modest, crimson tipped flow’rs,*  
    Thou’s met me in an evil hour;  
    For I maun crush amang the stoure  
    Thy slender stem:  
    To spare thee now is past my pow’r,  
    Thou bonie gem.

*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley [Oxford, 1968], 1, 228. I have encountered no evidence to support the gardener’s substitution.
graphically sketched by the honest old Scotch gardener, interested
him exceedingly. He was of course familiar with every thing
from Burns’ pen, but this was a new reading to him. “If
authorities are not against the old gardener,” said he, “I’ll do my
best to couple his name with ‘The Mountain Daisy’ and he shall
have all the credit of this new reading.” It was quite midnight
before he left us that evening, and at eight o’clock next morning
I found on my breakfast table a letter bearing a carefully written
superscription and a big seal in wax—showing pretty clearly
that it had been written near a lamp or taper, and if so after mid-
night and before morning:

Wednesday 8 Decr 1852
Worthy and dear friend

Lest you shd make another philological “sower” at the tail of
Burns’ plough, I send you a colation [sic] from Dr. Jamieson’s
Scottish [sic] Dictionary (Edinburgh Edition MDCCCXLI)*:

sower—sower—sower—sower—sower—sower dust in a state of motion, pronounced

sower,

“Yestreen I met you on the moor
Ye spak na, but gae by like stoure
Burns IV. 286.”

This term is also used, but improperly, with resp. to dust that is
laid,

“My books like useless lumber ly
Thick cover’d owre wi stour, man
A. Douglas. Poems. page 41”

Hoping the above may suffice to put the plough in the right
furrow, I remain
As ever thine
Dryadust

I note this little incident as an illustration of his courtesy and
his industry. He no doubt knew authorities were against the
honest and enthusiastic Gardener, but he would not mar a harm-
less and agreeable confab by controversy at the time. He seem’d
to enjoy it as others did, and as soon after as he could (under
sanction of authority) blew me and my Scotch gardener to the
winds.

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    . . . , ed. J. Currie (Liverpool, 1800), IV, 286.
11. From “To a Friend on the Hard Times,” in Poems, Chiefly in the Scot-