The First Publication of Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter'

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Cover Page Footnote
THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF “TAM ’O SHANTER”

Bill Dawson

As every Burnsian knows, Robert Burns’s tale “Tam o’ Shanter” was specially written in 1790 at the request of the antiquarian Francis Grose, and it was duly included in the second volume of Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland*, which was published in April 1791.¹ For over a hundred years, however, careful scholars have also noted that the poem had been printed in two Edinburgh periodicals dated a month earlier. In 1896, Henley and Henderson recorded that “Ere Grose’s work was before the public, the piece made its appearance in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for March 1791; and it was also published in the *Edinburgh Herald* of 18th March 1791.”² Kinsley describes the two periodical appearances as issued “when the second volume of the *Antiquities* was getting ready for press,” and Egerer implies a significant gap between the poem’s appearance in the periodicals and “when [it was] finally published in the *Antiquities*.”³ The exact sequence of events is important, because it affects whether editors of Burns should view the periodical texts as potentially having

independent authority. Scholars following Henley and Henderson may have been misled, because re-examination of the publication history suggests that Grose’s *Antiquities* was indeed the first published version of Burns’s tale.

There is no dispute about when the poem appeared in the *Herald* and *Magazine*, first in the *Herald* on March 18th, and then in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for March, which was published in the first days of April. Nor is there any doubt that the completed volume 2 of *Antiquities* was published in early April 1791. But the publication sequence behind these dates is complex. For instance, the title page of the first volume of Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland* is dated 1789, but the introduction that follows carries a paragraph that must clearly have been printed much later:

> To my ingenious friend Mr Robert Burns I have been variously obligated; he not only was at pains of marking out what was worthy of note in Ayrshire, the county of his honoured birth, but he also wrote, expressly for this work, the pretty tale annexed to Alloway Church.

At the very earliest, this passage must date from late 1790, after the poem was written, and a more likely date for the introduction is early 1791, when Grose had finished his work on both volumes. Then, immediately following the introduction to volume 1, there is an advertisement dated March 25, 1791, for a new work, the *Antiquities of Ireland*, that Grose planned to undertake in the summer of 1791, once volume 2 of his *Scotland* was complete, a further indication that the prelims to the “1789” volume were printed in 1791. In addition, most of the individual plates, along with the names of the artist and engraver, carry a date; 38 of the plates in the first volume are dated 1790, rather than 1789, and many of the plates in the second volume are dated 1790, not 1791. The engraving of Alloway Kirk, illustrating Burns’s poem, carries the date-line “Published May 1, 1790 by S. Hooper.”

The key to these apparent anomalies is recognizing that Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland*, like his other major works, was not initially published as a whole work, or even volume by volume, but serially, in

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4 Both the *Edinburgh Magazine*, and its older rival the *Scots Magazine*, appeared just after the month for which they were gathering information: see e.g. the *Caledonian Mercury* for January 4, 1789, which advertised the December 1788 *Edinburgh Magazine* as “just published.”

parts. This is made clear in one of the first advertisements for Grose’s work, in the Caledonian Mercury for January 3, 1789, when Grose announced the new work as forthcoming and invited subscribers to take it in parts as they were produced (see Fig. 1). At that point, the work was expected to be published in thirty-six parts, each with four views or engravings, or 144 engravings in all. Further advertisements followed in the Mercury, the Edinburgh Evening Courant and other papers, all announcing that the work was to be issued to subscribers in parts. By the time the work was completed more than two years later, it had run to 49 parts with a total of 189 engraved plates, plus two engraved frontispiece plates. While 49 parts might be expected to have had 196 plates, the difference can be explained either from some parts offering fewer than four plates, or as there being 47 or 48 regular parts, with the other part(s) providing the prelims and end-matter—title-pages, preface, indexes, appendices, etc.—that subscribers would need if they wanted to have the separate parts bound into volume form.

The “views” all had to be engraved on copper plates, and printed individually, and by law the plates carried the engraver’s name and a date. A much longer lead-time was needed to produce the engraved plates than to set a page of type, and the plates were prepared (and therefore dated) as each illustration became available for engraving. The dates range from late 1788 through to March 1791, in a rough progression, slightly ahead of part publication. Individual illustration may indeed have been available for separate purchase ahead of publication in the relevant parts. As an extreme instance, two plates of Inchcolm Abbey dated November 1788, appear at the end of volume 2, which even in number form would have been published well over two years later. In short, the presence of a date on an engraving is not a reliable guide to the publication date of the relevant part.

Each part included also, with its four plates, several pages of explanatory text, averaging twelve pages (six leaves) of text per part, separately printed from letter-press in three pairs of two leaves. The text could run from part to part, rather than each part being complete in itself.

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6 Grose’s mode of publication was noted briefly, but without mention of Burns or Burns’s poem, in the life of Grose accompanying Kay’s portraits, but its significance seems to have been overlooked by Burnsians: see James Kay, A Series of Original Portraits (Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1877), II:47 (same text repeated in 1885 ed, II:45); reprinted in John D. Ross, All About “Tam o’ Shanter” (New York: Raeburn, 1900), 47.
Fig. 1: Advertisement for Grose’s Antiquities of Scotland, from *Caledonian Mercury* (Saturday, January 3, 1789), p. 4.
so that it is not always obvious from the later bound volumes at which page a part started or ended.\(^7\) Confirmation that a set of the *Antiquities* was in fact originally purchased in parts and bound up later can sometimes be found by the presence of old stab-holes in the inner margins, because parts were normally stitched (stabbed) through the pages themselves, about a quarter inch from inner edge of the page, rather than through the folds, as in the binding of regular books. When the parts were bound, the old thread was removed from the stabbed gatherings, but the holes remain. Pairs of matching stab-holes opposite each other on facing pages indicate the middle of a number-part; single stabholes without a counterpart on the opposite page indicate the beginning or end of a number-part.

Given that Grose’s *Antiquities* was issued in parts, it becomes possible to recalculate the date of first publication for the part containing the engraving of Alloway Kirk and of Burns’s poem. Between January 1789 and April 1791, newspaper advertisements or announcements for the *Antiquities* are intermittent. Grose’s publisher Hooper frequently issued part-works at weekly intervals, but by mid-July, 1789, almost 28 weeks after the first part had been announced, the advertisements are only for parts I – VIII, a rate of one part every three weeks.\(^8\) In reality, publication must have been irregular, with long gaps in production, especially while Grose was travelling in Scotland in the summers of 1789 and 1790, gathering material for the later numbers. Nonetheless, an approximate date for the “Alloway Kirk” number can be calculated. The “Alloway Kirk” engraving was Plate 115 of the 189 plates, which at four plates per number, would put it in part 29. If one looks instead at text, the work was paginated continuously through the whole series, not in two separate sequences for the future volume issue, and “Tam o’ Shanter” appeared on pp. 199-201 of 304 regularly-numbered pages of text, not counting the introductory material, and supplements of additional notes at

\(^7\) Although Grose included instructions to the binder after the index at the front of vol. I, these were not always followed: Where Grose had relatively little to say about the buildings illustrated, later bound sets may have gathered six or more engraved plates in a single sequence, rather than having them spaced evenly as in the part-issue. For this article, I have consulted two copies in the Roy Collection, as well as my own copy.

\(^8\) *Caledonian Mercury* (Saturday June 13, 1789), p. 1; cf. the similar advertisement in the same paper on Thursday, August 6, 1789.
the end of each volume. If all parts had similar numbers of pages, pp. 199-202 would have appeared in part 31 or 32 of the 49 parts. After “Alloway Kirk,” at the lowest calculation, there would be at least seventeen further parts to appear before the volume was completed. Since Hooper is unlikely to have published parts at less than weekly intervals, we can estimate that the number with “Alloway Kirk” would have to have been published in London sometime in December 1790. Moreover, if Grose and Hooper were pushing to finish the project so quickly that they could publish the final seventeen numbers in little over three months, we can infer that they would be able to print Burns’s poem very quickly once he had sent it to Grose.

Harder evidence for this earlier publication date comes from the letter that Francis Grose himself wrote to Burns on January 3, 1791, which begins:

Dear Sir,

The proof Sheet came safe to hand, and I thank you for the dispatch you made in sending it.

I shall be very happy at receiving the Kilwinning, as I hope to finish my Scotch Work this Spring, at least all but the Western Isles.

Herewith you will receive some proofs of the pleasant Tale of the Grey mare’s Tail, together with some Numbers of the Governor’s Antiquities....

Am I ever to hope to see you in London?...

The “Tale of the Grey mare’s Tail” is of course “Tam o’ Shanter.” Burns had originally suggested to Grose that he include “Alloway Kirk” in the Antiquities in the summer of 1789 and had sent him the three prose tales about the kirk in summer the following year. He sent Grose the

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9 There is a significant anomaly in page numbering at the end of vol. I, which ended its regular page-sequence on p. 170, and then has four pages numbered *173-*176, while vol. II starts on p. 171, suggesting that Grose added these extra pages after the first parts of vol. II had been printed, perhaps only when prelims and indexes were being printed for the eventual volume publication.


recently-completed “Tam o’ Shanter,” which he described as “one of the Alloway-kirk Stories done in Scots verse,” in a letter dated December 1, 1790 (Letters II:62). Grose’s letter indicates that within a month of Burns sending the poem, it had been set in type, a “proof sheet” had been sent to Burns and returned, and the text corrected. The “proofs” mentioned in Grose’s third paragraph were the twelve off-prints of his poem that Burns received and would distribute to friends, proving that the poem was in final printed form by (at the very latest) January 3. The “Governor” was Grose’s favoured name for Capt Robert Riddell, and the “numbers” were recently-published parts of the Antiquities, to which Riddell was presumably a subscriber. “The Kilwinning” was an illustration (“draught”) that Burns had promised to get for Grose, and that he had mentioned in his own previous letter.

The separately-printed copies of the “Alloway Kirk” pages that Grose sent are mentioned in a number of Burns’s own letters from February 1791, and he writes differently about them when sending copies to correspondents in Scotland and London. When sending some poems, including the off-print, to Archibald Alison, on February 14th, Burns assumes that Alison will not have seen it, writing “I inclose you some poetic bagatelles of my late composition.— The one in print is my first essay in the way of telling a Tale” (Letters, II: 71). However, when writing to a correspondent in London, Dr. John Moore, on February 28, Burns shows that he knows that by then the poem would already have reached Grose’s London subscribers:

I do not know, Sir whether you are a Subscriber to Grose’s Antiquities of Scotland.— If you are, the inclosed poem will not be altogether new to you.— Capt’ Grose did me the favor to send me a dozen copies of the Proof-sheet, of which this is one.— Should you have read the piece before, still this will answer the

12 When sending the MS poem, Burns wrote to Grose that he did not expect there was time to send him a proof before publication, though “otherwise I should like to see them” (Letters, II: 63). If the “proof sheet” that Burns had returned was indeed for “Tam o’ Shanter,” and not for previously-printed Ayrshire descriptions on which Grose wanted Burns’s comments, then this timetable indicates a very tight turnaround time for transmission of proof between London and Ellisland.

13 The section on Kilwinning appeared in vol. II, pp. 212-214, of the Antiquities, or around part 34. Grose (Antiquities I: xix) says that the sketch of Kilwinning Abbey was provided by Captain Henry Hutton, “from an ancient drawing, before the building of the present spire.” The published plate is dated “Published as the Act Directs Feb. 26, 1790, by S. Hooper.”
principal end I have in view: it will give me another opportunity
of thanking you... (Letters II: 72).14

It was only after all the relevant parts had been published that Grose’s
Antiquities was offered for sale in volume form, volume I from the
summer of 1790, and volume 2, from mid-April 1791. The part issues
cost either 3s. 6d. (for large paper copies) or 2s. 6d. (for small paper), per
part, a total of £4 4s. or £3 for 24 parts, while the equivalent volumes
each cost £5 or £3 11s. 6d., in boards. I have not found advertisements for
volume 1 in Edinburgh newspapers and magazines between January 1789
and April 1791, but the volume was reviewed in two London periodicals,
the Critical Review and the European Magazine.15 As noted above,
Grose’s introduction to volume I, with its tribute to Burns, could hardly
have been written before December 1790, and is probably one of the last
sections to be published. The binder’s instructions in this last-printed
section indicate that it replaced the simple index of views that had been
prepared when vol. I was sold separately in summer 1790: “N.B. the old
index must be cancelled” (Antiquities, II: iv). Following completion of
the whole part issue, the second volume was advertised for sale in volume
form and reviewed in the same periodicals.16 It is worth noting, in view of
the prices given above, that the press advertisements in late April and
May 1791, offering the Antiquities in “two large handsome volumes,”

14 A second letter the same day shows that Burns routed his letter to Moore and
the off-print (“one of my latest productions”) through the Rev. George Baird, then
in London, giving Baird permission to include the poem in his projected new
edition of Michael Bruce’s poetry, a fundraiser to support Bruce’s mother
(Letters, II: 76; cf. Baird’s request to Burns, February 8, 1791, in Currie, II:342-
344); on March 29, Moore acknowledged receiving “the printed verses on Alloa
Church [sic]” (Currie II: 351). Burns sent off-prints also to Alexander Dalziel, on
March 10 (Letters, II: 77) and to Alexander Fraser Tytler, who received it (via the
Edinburgh bookseller Peter Hill) on March 12 (Currie II: 330); Tytler’s offprint,
with his autograph corrections, is in the G. Ross Roy Collection, University of
South Carolina Libraries.

15 Critical Review or Annals of Literature, 69 (June 1790): 657-667; vol. 70 (July
1790): 74-79; vol. 70 (August 1790): 139-148 (“we shall look forward with some
impatience to the completion of his design,” p. 148); cf. European Magazine or

appendix to vol. 2, 557-567; European Magazine, 20 (July 1791): 45-54.
also announce that the work was again being offered, for the convenience of new subscribers, as forty-nine weekly numbers.  

The probable publication order for the early printed texts of Burns’s “Tam o’ Shanter,” therefore, was, first, in the part-issue of Grose’s *Antiquities of Scotland*, in December 1790 or early January 1791; second, in the *Edinburgh Herald*, on March 18; then in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for March 1791 (published at the beginning of April); and lastly (without variation of text) in the volume form for volume II of the *Antiquities*. As long as the Edinburgh periodical texts were thought to have been published first, editors have struggled to establish how Burns’s poem reached the two periodicals, attempting to identify from minor variations of text a manuscript source from which the Edinburgh printers could have worked.

Manuscript transmission, from Burns to the Edinburgh periodicals, was not on the face of it improbable. The publisher and editor of both the *Edinburgh Herald* and the *Edinburgh Magazine* was the same man, James Sibbald (1747-1803), who had written the very first review of Burns’s Kilmarnock poems, in the *Edinburgh Magazine* for October 1786, to whom Burns had written warmly in January 1787 (*Letters*, II: 77-78), and whose bookshop Burns had frequented while in Edinburgh.

For many years, the source of the periodical texts was asserted to be the Adam manuscript of the poem, now in the Rosenbach Library and Museum in Philadelphia, which is endorsed in an unknown hand “This M.S. copy of ‘Tam o’ Shanter,’ which Burns gave to the late Mr: De Cardonnel Lawson, in 1790 a few days after they met at their friend’s Mr. Riddell’s of Friar’s Carse ... seems to be almost the first copy the Poet gave away, as it has the lines on ‘Lawyers and Priests’, which were altered in the copies afterwards printed.”

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17 See e.g. *Caledonian Mercury* (Saturday April 30, 1791), p. 1, headed “TO THE NOBILITY AND GENTRY OF SCOTLAND.”


1827: the Lawson came later) was an Edinburgh antiquary, who himself published a *Pictorial Antiquities of Scotland* that eventually stretched to four volumes (1788-1793). More significantly, de Cardonnell shared his own research with Grose and accompanied him on site visits (Grose, *Antiquities*, I: xx), and Burns had used de Cardonnell as a conduit to forward a letter to Grose. De Chardonnel lived in Edinburgh, so if he had been given the ‘Tam o’ Shanter’ manuscript by Burns, and knew it was imminently forthcoming in Grose, there is no intrinsic barrier to supposing him to be James Sibbald’s source for the poem. But the later note on the Adam MS. is certainly inaccurate about when and how de Cardonnell had received it, because Burns had not written the poem when Grose visited Friar’s Carse. Moreover, based on the collation of variants, Kinsley dates the Adam MS as being a relatively late copy. The specific variant cited in the endorsement as evidence for its early date (the four subsequently-cancelled lines after line 142) is shared, not only by the two Edinburgh periodical texts, and the other early Burns manuscripts, but also by the text in Grose’s *Antiquities* (and by the special proofs or off-prints that Grose sent to Burns at the beginning of January).

A much simpler explanation of how “Tam o’ Shanter” reached James Sibbald’s papers is that a printed text, either one of Burns’s twelve “proof” copies or the relevant number-part of Grose’s *Antiquities*, had arrived in Edinburgh and that Sibbald was reprinting the poem from the text in Grose. We know that Tytler, for instance, had seen the poem, via Peter Hill, by March 10, 1791, a full week before it appeared in the *Edinburgh Herald*. Both the *Herald* and the *Edinburgh Magazine* were avowedly on the look-out for literary news, and there was no question of copyright clearance or intellectual property for individual poems, once

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20 Completion of de Cardonnell’s first two volumes is noticed in *Scots Magazine* (December 1788), 29.
21 The letter to Grose is not extant, but it is mentioned by Burns in a later letter to Alexander Findlater (undated, but assigned to late 1790 in *Letters*, II. 47-48).
22 Kinsley identifies six manuscript versions. Margaret M. Smith and Penny Bouhmela, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, III:1 (London: Mansell, 1986), 174 (MS BuR 1029-1036) list seven MSS and a transcript, but with the current location for two items now unknown.
they had appeared in print: like other eighteenth-century editors, Sibbald had no qualms about simply reprinting any material he thought noteworthy. Almost all the variants collated by Kinsley (as EM or EH, with the Antiquities collated as Grose and the proof-sheet as 91) show the three texts as being identical, and none of the small number of variants in which the two Edinburgh periodicals differ from Grose are ones that would clearly indicate them as being authorial, rather than simply the kind of variation a printer might make in setting type, or the printing-house “Corrector” might make on an in-house proof. Common variants from Grose shared by the two Edinburgh periodicals indicate that the Edinburgh Magazine text reprinted that in the Herald. Little editorial weight need be given to the presence in one, or even both periodicals of an odd variation of spelling, punctuation, or a speech form that a printer might change without any outside authorization, because there is no reason to think that the Edinburgh periodical texts were based on any source other than Grose.

For well over a hundred years, careful Burns scholars have been skirting round this issue, making clear that they knew about the Edinburgh periodical versions, anxious not to give a false priority to the text of “Tam o’ Shanter” in Grose’s Antiquities of Scotland, and anxious to take into account the possibility that the two Edinburgh periodical texts might preserve some independent variant reading that came from Burns himself. But the problem never really existed. Grose’s Antiquities was published serially, in number-parts, and the number-part with “Alloway Kirk” was published at the latest by early January 1791. While it remains a theoretical possibility that James Sibbald had obtained for the Edinburgh periodical printings an unusually exact manuscript copy of the version Burns sent to Grose, it is much more likely, given this revised sequence of publication dates and the very small variation between the Grose text and the periodical texts, that Sibbald’s text was set directly from the Grose number-part or separate proof-sheet. Burns, after all, had written “Tam o’ Shanter” specifically for publication in Grose’s Antiquities of Scotland, and it now seems that it was indeed first published in the form he had intended.

Alloa