

12-15-2017

# The Scotch Bard and 'The Planting Line': New Documents on Burns and Jamaica

Clark McGinn

*Centre for Robert Burns Studies, University of Glasgow*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McGinn, Clark (2017) "The Scotch Bard and 'The Planting Line': New Documents on Burns and Jamaica," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, 255–266.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss2/23>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

## THE SCOTCH BARD AND ‘THE PLANTING LINE’: NEW DOCUMENTS ON BURNS AND JAMAICA

Clark McGinn

Persecution hung over him; his farming labours were disastrous, and he determined as the last resort of a broken-down and discouraged man, to go to Jamaica as the overseer of a plantation. I think I see Robert Burns on a plantation, with a whip under his arm. I think I see Robert Burns following a gang of slaves, and chanting “A man’s a man for a’ that.” Poor Burns was in a very bad way, but he was not as bad as that.<sup>1</sup>

Scots tend to be fiercely defensive of the reputation and legacy of their National Poet, Robert Burns. However, sometimes there exist hard questions about his morality, not least of all around his scheme to flee Scotland in 1786 to find a new life in the slave colony of Jamaica. Since the bicentenary of the UK’s landmark *Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807* (47 Geo III c.36) there has been considerable research on Scotland’s direct contribution to the slave economy but also on Burns’s attitudes towards chattel slavery.<sup>2</sup> Slavery appears so antithetical to the popular conception of him as a poet who set brotherhood and equality as

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Ward Beecher (1859), quoted in James Ballantine, *Chronicle of the Hundredth Birthday of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: A Fullarton, 1859), 580. This article is revised from a preliminary report presented at the First World Congress for Scottish Languages and Literatures, Glasgow, July 4, 2014. My thanks to Patrick Scott for suggestions on adaptation for *SSL*.

<sup>2</sup> For the general role of Scots in the trade, see, e.g., in addition to the works cited below by Iain Whyte, Eric J. Graham, and T. M. Devine: Michael Morris, *Scotland and the Caribbean, c. 1740- 1833, Atlantic Archipelagos* (New York, Routledge, 2015). On Burns and slavery, see, e.g., in addition to works cited below by Nigel Leask, Corey E. Andrews, and Gerard Carruthers: my three-part discussion in *Burns Chronicle* (Spring 2010), 8-24; and Murray Pittock, “Slavery as a political metaphor in Scotland and Ireland in the Age of Burns,” in *Robert Burns and Transatlantic Culture*, ed. Sharon Alker, Leith Davis, and Holly Faith Nelson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 19-30.

cornerstones of his life, of his works, and of his legend to the extent that any questioning of Burns's attitudes to slavery remains highly emotive partly because there remain a number of aspects of his motivation and planning around emigration which remain unclear.<sup>3</sup> New documents, found in the Boswell Collection at Yale's Beinecke Library cast more light on this murky episode in the poet's complex life story.

The traditional view of a limited Scottish involvement in the infamous history of Black chattel slavery and the moral high ground that created has been dented as the complexity of our contribution as a nation to the triangular trade has been made apparent by a number of critical (in both senses) studies. The Scots were not spotless: as Sir Tom Devine sums it up: "few aspects of Scottish society at the time were insulated from the impact of the slave-based economies."<sup>4</sup> Nor was Burns insulated from them, for even before he planned emigration he unwittingly entered that supply chain as an apprentice flax-dresser, for the boom in Irvine's linen trade was directly driven by the burgeoning demand for cheap clothing ("Osnaburg cloth") for Jamaican slaves.<sup>5</sup>

This can clearly be seen in Burns's Ayrshire, a rich and influential county which had seen a significant influx of West Indian or Virginian plantocrats and East Indian nabobs.<sup>6</sup> Their patriation of often ill-gotten capital filled the void created by the collapse of the Ayr Bank in 1772 through which many landed families and professional men lost their estates. While regrets were expressed over the loss of some ancient lairds there was considerable relief that the county maintained its net stock of

---

<sup>3</sup> This strength of feeling can be seen in a complaint to the UK's Press Complaints Authority: *Mr Andrew Morgan v The Sun* (2012). "Mr Andrew Morgan complained ... that an article reporting on Burns Night inaccurately reported that the poet Robert Burns lived and worked in the West Indies in breach of Clause 1 (Accuracy) of the Editors' Code. Resolution: The complaint was resolved when the PCC negotiated the publication of the following correction: Rod Liddle's column of January 25 claimed that Robert Burns had lived and worked in the West Indies. In fact, this was not the case as Mr Burns accepted a post in Jamaica but changed his mind after successfully publishing his poetry. We are happy to set the record straight." See <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cases/adjudicated.html> (last accessed, 15 July 2017).

<sup>4</sup> T.M. Devine, "Conclusion: History, Scotland and Slavery," in T. M. Devine, ed., *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: the Caribbean Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 246-251 (p.247).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, The Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>6</sup> John Strawhorn, *Ayrshire at the Time of Burns* (Kilmarnock: Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 1959). .

wealth which is clearly part of the explanation of the silence of the rural west of Scotland generally in the years leading to Abolition.

When considering those contemporary opinions, it is interesting that Burns mentions the wealth of slavers only indirectly and more in response to personal inconveniences rather than in condemnation of their trade. In both "The Mauchline Wedding" and his spleenful "Ode, Sacred to the Memory of Mrs [Oswald] of [Auchencruive]," he lampoons his subjects with considerable verve, but fails to critique the slaver source of their fortunes.<sup>7</sup> The implication is that he did not see slavery as a repugnant way to create wealth in and of itself, and their slave connections were in effect invisible.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately for his reputation, a late (but possibly not even original) lyric, "The Slave's Lament," shows sympathy for the subject's plight, allowing posterity just enough evidence to give him the benefit of the doubt, or at least the Scots Law verdict of "Not Proven."<sup>9</sup>

While Burns's commentary on Jamaica's slave economy is almost silent, he did, of course, have one direct linkage. During the crisis in 1786 caused by his love and seduction of Jean Armour, in the midst of flying writs and warm recriminations, he sought an escape from his troubles. One of his patrons John Ballantine, knew Doctor Patrick Douglas who was able to offer Burns a fresh start by way of emigration to work on his Jamaican plantation with the not-impossible dream of a return to Ayr with a fortune to *épater les bourgeois* (or Jean's obstinate father.)

The core story of Burns and Jamaica has been widely accepted by biographers (basing themselves on Burns's letters, especially the

---

<sup>7</sup> James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I: 163-164, III: 1124-1125 ("The Mauchline Wedding"); and I: 446-447, III: 1292-1293 ("", see commentary, vol.iii, pp.1124-1125 ("Ode, Sacred to the Memory of Mrs [Oswald] of [Auchencruive]"). Interestingly Kinsley also omits reference to slavery. For the Oswalds' biographies, see Iain Whyte, *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 45-47; Eric J. Graham, *Burns & The Sugar Plantocracy of Ayrshire* (Ayr: Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 2009), 66-71.

<sup>8</sup> Nigel Leask, "Burns and the Poetics of Abolition," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Robert Burns*, ed. Gerard Carruthers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 47-60 (pp.51-55); Corey Andrews, "'Ev'ry heart can feel': Scottish poetic responses to slavery, from Blair to Burns," *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 4 (Spring/Summer 2008), at <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue4/index.htm> (last accessed 15 July 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Kinsley, II: 647-648. As the Scots had long since moved on from exporting Senegalese slaves to Virginia, Britain having lost control of both colonies by the date of the writing of this song, any contemporary controversy is diminished by setting it in a dystopian "auld lang syne."

Autobiographical Letter, and Gilbert Burns's Narrative).<sup>10</sup> It consists of five elements: first, Patrick Douglas offered Burns a job as an "assistant overseer" or "book-keeper" working for his brother, Charles Douglas, on his slave plantation near Port Antonio in north-east Jamaica; second, his salary was to be £30 annually, but thirdly, Burns had to secure his own passage; since he lacked the necessary nine guineas to buy the ticket another patron, Gavin Hamilton, persuaded him to publish his poems, using the subscription proceeds to pay for his journey and additional provisions and comforts. The fourth strand of the core story has Burns, estranged from Jean Armour, falling in love with 'Highland' Mary Campbell and proposing marriage (and possibly emigration) to her, which failed to come to pass when Mary died of fever in Greenock. Finally, Burns booked his passage on the *Nancy* from Greenock destined for Savannah-le-Mar on the south coast of Jamaica, but the success of the *Kilmarnock Edition* upset his timing and he was further advised to sail to a port closer to the plantation. He re-booked on the *Bell* from the same port but again missed her departure having gone to Edinburgh to arrange his second edition. At the turn of the New Year, 1787, he finally decided to let the third boat, the *Roselle*, sail from Leith without him as his poetic success and patronage within the Excise service gave him the opportunity of reuniting with Jean and raising their family together in Scotland.

Recently discovered correspondence between the Douglas brothers casts some doubt on the accuracy of that summary. The Douglasses of Garallan were an old Ayrshire family from Carrick, the southern division of the county. Like many Ayrshire folk of that time they had had extensive trading and family links with Virginia and when those networks were disrupted by American independence, their business focus switched to the Caribbean. The older sibling, Patrick (1728-819) as a second son had been trained as a "chyrurgeon apothecary" in the late 1740s.<sup>11</sup> As his elder brother predeceased their father, on the latter's death in 1776 Patrick inherited the family estate and with it, one of the few parliamentary votes

---

<sup>10</sup> Robert Burns to Dr John Moore, 2 August 1787, in G. Ross Roy, ed, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985), I: 133-146; James Currie, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols, (London: Cadell & Davies, 1800), I: 58-79. Carol McGuiirk provides a succinct chronology from this "Core Story" in her *Reading Robert Burns: Texts, Contexts, Transformations*, (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), xv-xvi.

<sup>11</sup> Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale Library General Collection of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell Family Papers 1653 – 1807, MS GEN 972, [cited below as "Beinecke, PCDB"], Box 1, Folder 2479, Indenture Between Mr Robert Johnston and Patrick Douglas, Whitsunday 1746.

for Ayrshire, supporting the Tory interest.<sup>12</sup> The family's fortunes had been overshadowed by the failure of the Ayr Bank, where he was an investor and kin to partners in Messrs Douglas Heron & Co. Patrick managed to hold onto both his Ayrshire and Jamaican properties through the financial accommodation of the powerful burgh politician and banker John Ballantine (1743-1812), who helped him avoid financial cataclysm. Doctor Patrick (as he was known) appears to have been a gregarious man being both a Freemason (serving as Master of Ayr Kilwinning Operative Lodge, 123) and a member of the wicked Beggar's Benison society.<sup>13</sup> He served for four years as surgeon to the West Lowland Fencible Regiment and was promoted lieutenant in 1796.<sup>14</sup> He is remembered fondly in Burnsian circles as a guest at the first Burns Supper in Burns Cottage, Alloway in 1801.<sup>15</sup> He died at Garallan in 1819.

His younger brother, Charles, left Scotland as a young man to become the resident manager of their Jamaican investments on the north east of the island a few miles inland of Port Antonio. The main plantation was Ayr Mount, with its complement of sixty-five slaves, centred on its mansion house Springbank and a smaller animal pen called Nightingale Grove. Charles died at Springbank in 1815.<sup>16</sup>

On Doctor Patrick's death, his heiress was his only daughter Jane. She had married Hamilton Boswell, a cadet of the Boswells of Auchinleck, assuming the surname of Douglas Boswell. After the death of Sir Alexander Boswell of Auchinleck in a duel in 1822, the two branches became financially intertwined and the Garallan papers were joined with the Auchinleck muniments. Many have followed the footsteps of Professor Pottle around the Boswell papers in the Beinecke Library at Yale, but few (if any) have looked at the Garallan archives. These contain correspondence from Charles to Patrick, including three previously undiscovered letters, and Dr Patrick's diaries relating to this period of Burns's life, which complement the two letters in the Burns Birthplace

---

<sup>12</sup> James Paterson, *History of the County of Ayr*, 2 vols (Ayr: James Dick, 1847), I: 363-364.

<sup>13</sup> Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale. General Collection of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boswell Collection Addition [cited below as "Beinecke, BCA"] GEN MSS 150, Box 27, 762.

<sup>14</sup> Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale Library General Collection of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell Family Papers 1653-1807 [cited below as "Beinecke, PCDB"], MS GEN 972, Box 1, Folders 2479, Patrick Douglas, Commission as surgeon, 25 April 1792, and Commission as lieutenant, 12 January 1796.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton Paul, *The Poems & Songs of Robert Burns, with a Life of the Author* (Air: Wilson, McCormick & Carnie, 1819), 295-312 (p.295).

<sup>16</sup> Graham, as in n. 7 above, p.12.

Museum often quoted in the poet's biographies. Like much of Burns scholarship, these letters do not give definitive answers, and may open more questions, but they do cast a different light on the core story and make its stance less certain as to the poet's *bona fides*.

Here are the key extracts from these letters as they bear on the story.

**Letter 1: Charles to Patrick, 29 November 1785.**<sup>17</sup>

Dear Brother,

... I wrote to Mr McWilliam to tell you to send me an active young lad to look after my Cattle & Negroes with a Dog or a Bitch. I hope you will sent him By Capt[ai]n Ramsey or Capt[ai]n Bowen as they both come here or much any other that comes to this side.

... yours most affectionately,

Cha<sup>s</sup> Douglass

**Letter 2: Patrick to Charles, 23 February 1786.**

This reply is missing, but we can tell, from Letter 3 below, that Patrick replied to Charles on 23 February 1786 without making any suggestion of a candidate.

**Letter 3: Charles to Patrick, 29 May 1786.**<sup>18</sup>

This was a chaser apparently written before the receipt of Patrick's 23 February reply.

I have been very much disappointed in your not sending me the young Lade I wrote for I promoted the Man I had thinking he would have been here by now & I have no body attending my place which is a great loss to me as I cannot be often at home; I suppose you can get a young Lade that can write a little & would be glad to get ten or Twelve pounds; perhaps Less; what I meant is a young Active Lade that can read & write that he may be able to read ~~any~~ the Letters I send to him & write me Answers of what he is doing; if I should be kept away from Home I would not wish him too young I could get enough here at 16 years old would bond for Seven years for their Cloths and for five pounds and Anon but I do not like their Connections, Send one by the first ship that comes to Manchioneal, Port Antonio or Annatto Bay, ~~Kingston or~~ Port Morant.

**Letter 4: Charles to Patrick, 19 June 1786.**<sup>19</sup>

Charles writes again, with a repetitive, not to say nagging quality.

<sup>17</sup> Beinecke, BCA, GEN MSS 150, Box 3/folder 111.

<sup>18</sup> Beinecke, BCA, GEN MSS 150, Box 3/folder 112.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Burns Birthplace Museum [RBBM], Letter, Charles Douglas to Patrick Douglas, Object Number 3.6138.

... by the by I never heard of the News Papers you gave him to send, if you want to send me any then give it to Capt[ai]n Bowen, Ramsay, or any other coming to this side of the Country.... The young fellow I want is one that can write & read and be able to answer a letter, if I wrote to him whether I am abroad. A post boy or hind lad; may get enough for 10 or 12 pounds a year or less.

**Letter 5: Charles to Patrick, 8 August 1786.**<sup>20</sup>

This letter has no mention of the potential employment need.

**Letter 6: Patrick to Charles, 26 October 1786.**

On the back of Letter 5 is a draft of the reply (headed "Answer") from Patrick to Charles. This draft has not previously been transcribed or quoted. Amongst the various responses to Charles's requests, Doctor Patrick writes:

I intended to have sent out your man you wanted by Captain Cathcart but have delayed by your hand or till Capt[ain] Bowen sails.

**Letter 7: Patrick to Charles, 30 December 1786.**

This letter is also missing.

**Letter 8: Charles to Patrick, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1787.**<sup>21</sup>

Dear Brother,

I am this day favoured with yours of 30<sup>th</sup> Dec[embe]r last.... I am very well Satisfyd that you have Changed my Man, I want no warm heads & Poets must have them; the other Lad will do for me.

... yours affectionately

Cha<sup>s</sup> Douglass

So where do the new documents leave us? Burns is not named, but it is surely safe to assume that there was only one poet being considered by the Douglas brothers for a post in Jamaica, so what can be gleaned from these letters in terms of the core story outlined above?

The first element is the nature of his role: Gilbert described his brother's duties as "as an assistant overseer, or as I believe it is called, a book-keeper."<sup>22</sup> This description contains a degree of sanitisation, for previous research has clearly shown that the "bookie" was not exempted from the crimes of slavery. More than that, the letters show clearly that the role offered is a significantly inferior position in the capacity of a "poor negro Driver," the more accurate description of the role that he used in

<sup>20</sup> RBBM, *Letter, Charles Douglas to Patrick Douglas*, Object Number 3.6139.

<sup>21</sup> Beinecke, BCA, GEN MSS 15, Box 3/folder 113.

<sup>22</sup> Currie, I: 76.



writing to letter to Dr. Moore.<sup>23</sup> If he sailed to Jamaica, Burns was not destined to an indoor life learning double entry accounting; the job paid him to inflict human suffering personally using a dog and a whip (see Letter 1). As he had foreseen in his “Epistle to John Rankine,” with apparent equanimity, he would be “herding” slaves as “buckskin kye.”<sup>24</sup>

The second element revolves around his remuneration: the job did not pay £30 sterling per annum. Charles Douglas, as short of cash as he was of patience, was looking for a cheaper solution than he could find on the island and sought a lad from Scotland costing a third of that amount: budgeting an annual payment of only £10 or £12 see (Letter 3). In *Gilbert's Narrative*, no salary is mentioned and the only contemporary evidence for a £30 salary of comes from a letter from John Hutchison of Jamaica replying to a lost letter from Burns. We do not know who Hutchison was, nor how Burns was introduced to him, however this letter is part of a wider correspondence which commenced in early 1786 when Burns was seeking initial advice on starting for Jamaica ‘in the planting line.’<sup>25</sup> The only letter between them which survives in full transcription is dated 14 June 1787, responding to Burns’s of 2 January 1787:

you acquaint me you were engaged with Mr. Douglas of Port Antonio, for three years, at thirty pounds sterling a year; and I am happy some unexpected accidents intervened that prevented your sailing with the vessel, as I have great reason to think Mr. Douglas’s employ would by no means have answered your expectations.... I am very confident that you can do far better in Great Britain, than in Jamaica.<sup>26</sup>

Burns is playing with ambiguity. We know from Letters 3 and 4 that Charles was under financial pressures and so could not afford that amount. As is not uncommon even today, on his résumé, Burns appears to have

---

<sup>23</sup> *Letters*, I: 144.

<sup>24</sup> Kinsley, I: 63, line 65.

<sup>25</sup> J.C. Ewing, ed., *Robert Burns's Literary Correspondents, 1786-1796: A Chronological List of Letters Addressed to the Poet, with Precises of their Contents* (Alloway: Burns Monument Trustees, 1938): Letter 2: Hutcheson to Burns, 10 July 1786 (received 23 September); Letter 71, Hutcheson to Burns, 15 October 1788. The letters are missing and only a damaged summary remains. In between these, Burns replied to Richard Brown, 24 February 1788, in *Letters*, ed. Roy, I: 245. Ewing Letter 2 references “B. in the planting line.” Carol McGuirk has suggested that this “need not refer to the poet’s emigration.... [It] could even be referring to Burns’s farming activities in Scotland.” (McGuirk, *Reading*, p.200), but “the planting line” is a clearly established contemporary euphemism for the Jamaican sugar trade: see, e.g. Robert Heron, *A Letter to William Wilberforce* (London: Jordan and Maxwell, 1806), p.142 or John Stewart, *An Account of Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: n.p., 1809), 141, 147.

<sup>26</sup> Currie, II: 92-93.

clearly exaggerated not only his job title, but his salary, too (by claiming to earn annually what he would be paid over the three years). It is also interesting that Burns wrote to Hutchinson the same week as Patrick wrote to Charles about the change of plan (letter 7)—was Burns attempting to get a sympathetic story out in Jamaica before Charles heard the news?

There is no discussion between the Douglas brothers of how Burns's fare was to be paid, so the third element of the Core story appears to support Gilbert's report: "As [Burns] had not sufficient money to pay his passage ... Mr Hamilton advised him to publish his poems in the meantime by subscription, as a likely way of getting a little money to provide him more liberally in necessities for Jamaica."<sup>27</sup> In his letter to Dr. Moore, Burns affirmed that:

I was about to indent myself for want of money to pay my freight.  
So soon as I was master of nine guineas, the price of wafting me to  
the torrid zone, I bespoke a passage in the very first ship that was to  
sail<sup>28</sup>

While this narrative may well be the truth and certainly Charles consistently frets about cash and Patrick does not refer in his journals to any payments to the poet other than subsequent subscriptions for the Edinburgh edition, it seems strange that the wealth of John Ballantine did not stretch to £9 9s as a final poetical patronage, but bankers are kittle cattle.<sup>29</sup>

There is nothing discussed in the letters between the Douglasses about the candidate bringing a wife, so the speculation about Mary Campbell going to the West Indies with the poet (the fourth strand of the core story) is false.<sup>30</sup> It is possible that Burns lied outright to her, as he had to others over the nature of the job and its emoluments and it would not be the first—or the last—time that his strict truthfulness to women could be questioned. Perhaps she did believe that she might go, but that would have

---

<sup>27</sup> Currie, I: 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Letter*, I: 145.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Douglas's name is missing in the Edinburgh edition subscribers' list, but as an end note makes clear "Some subscriptions are not yet come to hand, and perhaps some have been mislaid" (Burns, *Poems*, Edinburgh: Creech, 1787, xlvi).

<sup>30</sup> In the Interleaved Musical Museum, Burns annotated his song "My Highland Lassie O," as referring to "our projected change of life," which must mean marriage, but the poem itself shows the poet "on a distant shore" while his love remains "within the glen": Kinsley, I: 252-253, III: 1182-1183. Much later, he described the inspiration of his song, "Will Ye Go to the Indies My Mary" as a "farewell of a dear girl ... when I was thinking of going to the West Indies": Kinsley, II: 656-657. While marriage may have been contemplated, Mary's travel furth of Scotland was not.

been a highly unusual arrangement and certainly one unsanctioned by his employer.<sup>31</sup>

The fifth segment of the core story covers the complexities of the poet's proposed itinerary. Charles was insistent that his "boy" take passage to one of the north-eastern or eastern ports of Jamaica (Letters 1, 3 particularly, and 4). As Burns tells the story, he booked a ticket with Captain Smith on the *Nancy* departing the Clyde to Savannah le Mar (on the wrong side of Jamaica) and was subsequently encouraged to take a more direct route by some Jamaican friends of Doctor Patrick, Mr. & Mrs White, when he visited Garallan on 13th August.<sup>32</sup> Dr. Patrick's manuscript journal confirms the gist of the story, though absent any details:

[August] 13. Sunday a wet forenoon & Very Wet afternoon & [indecipherable] at night, Mr & Mrs White dined with me.

14. Monday ... paid 9 Sh[illings] for Burns's poems.<sup>33</sup>

However, Burns's explanation seems inconsistent, as being against Charles's express instructions to sail to the North coast, and also because the *Nancy* had been scheduled to sail by the 10<sup>th</sup> yet he was at Garallan on the 14th.<sup>34</sup>

Burns tells us that he rebooked a voyage with Captain Cathcart on the brigantine *Bell*, scheduled to depart by the end of September out of Greenock for Port Morant, about 20 miles south of Ayr Mount.<sup>35</sup> Yet, even that is not simple, for it was Doctor Patrick (see Letter 6) who had delayed Burns's travel arrangements until "Captain Bowen" (or possibly "Bowie"—the handwriting is indistinct) sailed unless Charles expressly agreed to the passage on the *Bell*, which was not given prior to its sailing on 7 October.<sup>36</sup> Letter 6 does, however, confirm that his candidate was still committed to the journey in late October even after (perhaps even because of) Jean Armour being delivered of the poet's twins. Burns wrote to a friend at the end of September: "my departure is uncertain, but I do not think it will be till after harvest."<sup>37</sup> This timing clearly contradicts Burns's statement that his emigration schemes were "overthrown" upon receiving a

<sup>31</sup> Graham, p.13, and cf. an unsigned article, "Burns' Jamaica Connexions," reprinted from the *Glasgow Herald*, in *Burns Chronicle*, 1st ser., 12 (1903): 79-83.

<sup>32</sup> *Letters*, I: 44 (to John Richmond, 30 July 1786); I: 47 (to James Smith [14 August 1786]).

<sup>33</sup> Beinecke PCDB, MS GEN 972, Box 1, Folder 2474/4, Patrick Douglas, Journals and Day Books, 1785/1786.

<sup>34</sup> *Glasgow Mercury*, 6-13 July 1786, quoted in Gerard Carruthers, "Robert Burns and Slavery," in *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Johnny Roger and Gerard Carruthers (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2009), 163-175 (p. 164).

<sup>35</sup> *Letters*, I: 49-50 (to John Richmond, 1 September 1786).

<sup>36</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 25 September 1786.

<sup>37</sup> *Letters*, I: 54 (to [John Kennedy], 26 September 1786).

letter from Doctor Blacklock (dated 4 September) advising him to pursue a second edition.<sup>38</sup> This faulty time line was echoed by Gilbert in writing to Mrs Dunlop:

The reception however which his poems met with in the world, and the friends they procured him, made him change his resolution of going to Jamaica, and he was advised to go to Edinburgh to publish a second edition. On his return in happier circumstances, he renewed his connexion with Mrs Burns, and rendered it permanent by a union for life.<sup>39</sup>

The biographers say that Burns booked passage on the *Roselle* from Leith to Kingston, under Captain Liddell, although this plan is once again outside Charles Douglas's instructions (Letter 3 has Kingston clearly deleted as an option.) Be that as it may, this third ship departed on 23 December, without Burns on board.<sup>40</sup> It would seem that Doctor Patrick was not aware of Burns's change of plans ahead of the sailing as he wrote only on 30 December to his brother to advise him. The letter is missing, but Letter 8 gives the gist, with Charles describing the dropping of the poet as his brother's idea, not Burns's. The change of candidates sounds more like the exasperation of an employer over a ditherer rather than the poet choosing to relinquish the job offer.

The Douglas brothers changed plans and recruited an orphan boy from a family acquaintance in Scotland and for Burns the rest is history, or at least myth. The Douglas letters and journals are tantalisingly vague, but it seems clear enough that the traditional biographical narrative is not the whole story. Burns's few comments are clearly at odds with the Douglas correspondence. The job offered to the poet was more vile than we had imagined and was to be undertaken for paltry sums. He certainly represented it as a better outcome than that to his friends.

From these new documents, it looks as if Robert kept his options open to the last moment and only turned down the offer (possibly in a formal written resignation or simply by not taking up his berth on the boat) in late December 1786. Much as it grieves me, these new-found letters can easily be read to show that Robert Burns sought to prosper from chattel slavery and only dropped the opportunity because a better offer came along, not because of any moral scruples over human suffering.

*Centre for Robert Burns Studies, University of Glasgow*

---

<sup>38</sup> *Letters*, I: 145.

<sup>39</sup> Currie, I: 78-79.

<sup>40</sup> *Caledonian Mercury*, 23 December 1786.

**APPENDIX: MANUSCRIPT SOURCES CONSULTED**

Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale Library General Collection of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boswell Collection Addition, MS GEN 150, Box 3, folders 111 to 113, *Correspondence between Charles Douglas and Patrick Douglas*.

\_\_\_\_\_, Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell Family Papers, 1653 – 1807, MS GEN 972, Box 1, Folder 2471/10, *Patrick Douglas, Journals, 1799 – 1804*.

\_\_\_\_\_, Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell Family Papers, 1653 – 1807, MS GEN 972, Box 1, Folder 2479, *Indenture Between Mr Robert Johnston and Patrick Douglas, Whitsunday 1746*.

\_\_\_\_\_, Patrick Charles Douglas Boswell Family Papers, 1653 – 1807, MS GEN 972, Box 1, Folders 2474/1 - 11, *Patrick Douglas, Journals and Day Books, 1778 – 1807*.

Robert Burns Birth Place Museum, *Letter, Charles Douglas to Patrick Douglas, 19 June 1786*, Object Number 3.6138.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Letter, Charles Douglas to Patrick Douglas, 8 August 1786*, Object Number 3.6139.