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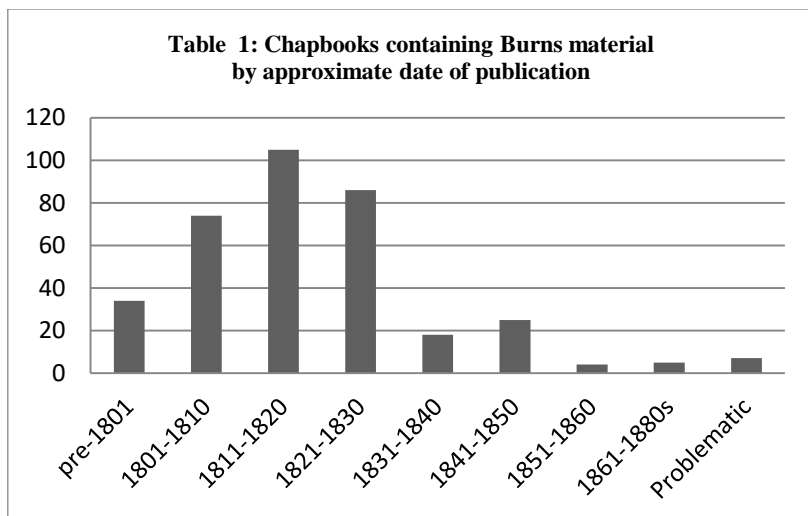
BURNS AND CHAPBOOKS: A BIBLIOGRAPHER'S TWILIGHT ZONE

Iain Beavan

The simple phrase, "Burns and chapbooks" conceals a cluster of interwoven problems, both practical and theoretical. Moreover, most of what can currently be said with any degree of confidence are statements of the achingly obvious, so that the best approach to be adopted may be not to attempt any rounded view, but simply to offer a series of more specific observations.

Some initial, provisional identification of chapbooks containing Burns's compositions might provide a reasonable foundation, but even that seemingly straightforward enterprise is laden both with assumptions, and questions of definition. Researchers need to make a start on ascertaining the number of chapbooks that can be reasonably identified as containing material attributable to Burns. The number so far reached, 358 (excluding those of Brash & Reid, and Stewart & Meikle) spread over a century from the 1780s to the 1880s, can only represent the number that are most readily identifiable (Table 1). This number (358) of chapbook titles (putting aside any subsequent thorny complication of identifying states, impressions, editions) was arrived at by adopting the records of the National Library of Scotland's online catalogue as a baseline, against which the catalogues and listings of other major libraries were compared, including (not limited to) Glasgow University's Chapbooks Database; *ESTC*; *COPAC*; the Bodleian Library, Oxford University; the British Library; and Newcastle University Library. In the United States, searches included catalogues and relevant databases of the University of South Carolina libraries; the Lilly Library, Indiana University; the Newberry Library; and the Huntington Library. In Canada, searches included the online catalogues of the University of Toronto; University of Guelph; and McGill University. In itself, this is not a difficult task; merely painstaking, and subject to very considerable inevitable overlaps, depending on an individual institution's contribution to, say, *COPAC*, though worth it, if only for raising questions.

What does the distribution look like of Burns appearances in chapbooks, by date? During Burns's lifetime, six or seven chapbook titles, and a few broadsides were printed, and not all in Scotland. Purely as an example, we can cite *A garland of new songs containing I. Sally in our Alley. II. Pretty Sally's kind answer. III. Green grow the rashes. IV. The Highland laddie*, which was produced in Newcastle upon Tyne, almost certainly by the Angus family, major chapbook printers.¹ Overall, though, the number of eighteenth-century chapbooks rises to 34, though this figure excludes the 26 penny publications of the Glasgow firms of Brash & Reid and Stewart & Meikle.



The output figures have at least two notable features. First, there is the apparent fact that the absolute majority of chapbooks containing Burns material appears to have been printed before the 1820s, and second, the figures indicate a considerable slump from the early 1830s. The question immediately arises as to why. Does it add up to a falling away of Burns' popularity? This may be a contributory factor, but it is assuredly not the whole answer. Also occurring was the decline of the chapbook form itself, as it was threatened and squeezed by a number of major nineteenth-century social, economic and cultural factors.

There is one important preliminary matter to be considered. Should the Brash & Reid (and Stewart & Meikle) publications be categorised as

¹ ESTC T40472; T40473, provisionally dated 1790 and 1795 respectively; cf. also *A new song called the Five Carlins*, T176981, provisionally dated, London, 1790.

chapbooks at all? Indeed, we are presented with a question, as yet still open, but in many respects more relevant, as to whether they were considered as chapbooks at the time of publication. In some important material and supplementary textual respects (imprint, quality of type and impression; paper, introduction and advertisements) they undoubtedly stand apart from works usually described as chapbooks.

Adam McNaughtan has fairly described the penny productions of Brash & Reid as showing “pretensions beyond the usual run of chapbooks.”² Indeed, a level of disingenuousness may be detected in Brash & Reid’s own claim that their “chapbooks” were issued without any view of forming a separately issued multi-volume collection.³ But notwithstanding how they are, or were, regarded, Brash & Reid developed a publishing pattern already adopted by others, not least, and somewhat ironically, by the Cheap Repository Tract movement: in other words, the production of individual tracts, subsequently bound into a separately-sold composite volume, with an overall title-page.⁴ Very clearly, Brash & Reid, and other printers, had an acute perception that a number of overlapping socio-economic readership groups were potentially interested in Burns, and that his texts could profitably be packaged up and marketed in various ways.

There are many examples of this pattern. In Newcastle, the Angus family brought out two editions of a slip-song, with a noticeably divergent text, *The Soldier’s Return*, 1793 or thereafter.⁵ Yet a few years later, in 1802, and aimed at a more affluent group—and possibly also at local circulating libraries—they produced a 490-page edition of Burns’s poems; and about eight years after that, a chapbook song collection that included Burns material.

Thomas Oliver (later, Oliver & Boyd) of Edinburgh did likewise. In 1801 the firm published not only an edition of Burns’s poems, but also an

² Adam McNaughtan, “A century of Saltmarket literature, 1790-1890,” in *Six centuries of the provincial book trade in Britain*, ed. Peter Isaac (Winchester: St Paul’s Bibliographies, 1990), 165-80 (p. 166). Cf. J.C. Ewing, *Brash and Reid, booksellers in Glasgow, and their collection of Poetry, Original and Selected* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1934); G. Ross Roy, “The Brash and Reid Editions of ‘Tam o’ Shanter,” *Burns Chronicle*, 98 (1989): 38-44; G. Ross Roy, “Robert Burns and the Brash and Reid chapbooks of Glasgow,” in *Literatur-im-Kontext ... Festschrift für Horst W. Drescher*, ed. Schwend, Hagemann, and Volkel (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 53-69.

³ *Poetry; original and selected*, vol.1. (Glasgow: printed and sold by Brash & Reid, [1796]), p.2.

⁴ Sandro Jung, “The Glasgow poetry chapbook, 1796-1799: Brash and Reid’s ‘Small selections’, ... and the Stewart and Meikle Burns chapbooks,” *Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, 10 (2015): 87-107 (pp.90-92).

⁵ *ESTC* T197130; T197131.

8-page *Holy Willie's prayer*; the next year saw another 200-page edition of the *Poems*, followed, in 1803, by *The Cotter's Saturday night*; and in 1808 by a 12-page *Tam O'Shanter*.⁶ Researchers should be aware of the likely rarity of some of these editions. The present writer has traced only one copy of the 1808 Oliver & Boyd's *Tam O'Shanter*.⁷ This is not to say that it is a textually important edition; but its existence even in only one copy points not only to the rarity of survival but to the broader contemporary availability of Burns's compositions and the contexts in which they appeared.

There an almost self-evident point to be made here. It relates to the generally accepted length of a chapbook. It is usually regarded as having 8, 12, 16, maybe 24 pages, but beyond that, it starts to stretch the accepted use of the word. The implications are obvious: at best, chapbook editions of Burns either comprise a very limited selection (as with the various Burns's "songster" chapbooks); or devote the text to one of his longer compositions (e.g. *Tam O'Shanter*); but by far the most common pattern is for a single, short piece to be included in a set of "Excellent New songs" or similar. And, in that respect, Burns's shorter compositions are ideal material for chapbooks, though it does also mean that his material is diluted with other songs and poems. And, overall, it is not at all infrequent to find just one piece by Burns amongst many others.

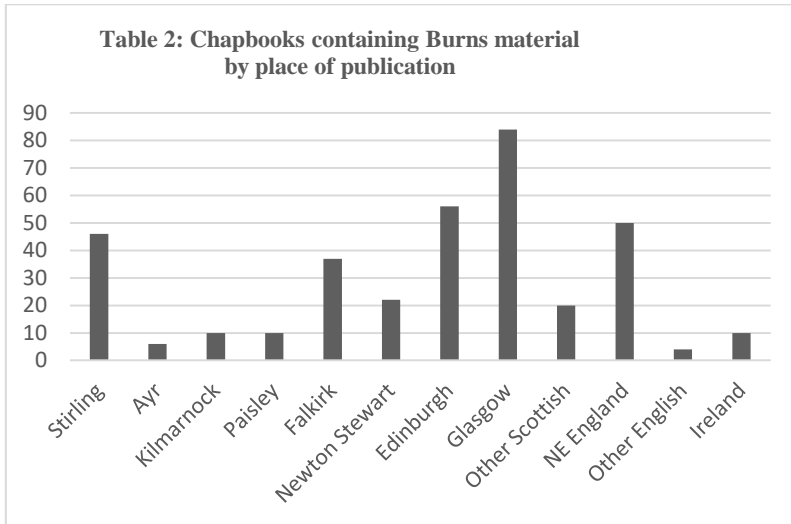
Investigations as to where the chapbooks were printed and by whom, generate a line-up of the usual suspects. The location of the highest production of chapbooks containing Burns's material was (unsurprisingly) Glasgow, at $\geq 23\%$, though if one to include other towns in the Central Belt and Clyde Coast (including Falkirk, Stirling, Paisley) and exclude Edinburgh, the percentage jumps to nearly 50%; and with Edinburgh added in, to 65% (Table 2).⁸

The high level of chapbook production in north-east England (the growing conurbations around Newcastle, Durham and Alnwick), is well recognised, but deserves continuing attention with over 40 titles containing material by Burns, many of them by printed by John Marshall of Newcastle, mostly collections of new songs (garlands). And, like the printers of Glasgow (though to a much lesser degree) those of Newcastle continued to produce chapbook-like material containing Burns compositions, up to and beyond the 1850s.

⁶ See e.g. Egerer 54 & 55; Egerer 66.

⁷ Chapbook collection in the Lilly Library, Indiana University; this chapbook contains a striking misprint in the very first line of the poem: "champan billies" for "chapman billies" (p. [3]).

⁸ Brash & Reid and Stewart & Meikle publications are omitted from these totals.



In Glasgow, after the efforts of Brash & Reid and Stewart & Meikle, the printing of chapbooks containing Burns material was continued in the first decade of the nineteenth century, by firms like the Robertson family of the Saltmarket, regarded as almost archetypal chapbook printers, and Robert Hutchison, who was established in the same street.

In Edinburgh, one early nineteenth-century name stands out, that of John Morren, based in the Cowgate, though most of the city's chapbooks, like those from Glasgow, just bore the frustratingly vague imprint, though typical of the form of publication "Printed for the Booksellers."

But a far bigger problem looms over the whole topic. What is attributable to Burns? There are at least 13 chapbook editions with a generalised title of "Burn's songs / popular songs / songster;" but within the song collections (and these constitute the great majority of the 358 titles) Burns is only occasionally privileged by having his name attached to a composition, or added to a title-page; and the specific example presented by the poet opens up a more generalised question.

Far from celebrating or extolling a discrete composition within a chapbook collection of songs, status or attention was relatively infrequently paid to the creator. The individual composition was not invested with any special quality or importance of being created (or assumed to have been created) by any individual. This 'anonymity' feature has been long recognised by many scholars, but in the case of chapbooks, this absence is often compounded by the printer or wholesaler remaining unnamed. It is as though the song collection is made available to the

public, divested and bereft of any allusion or reference to creation or identity. The association of the text with a particular author could have affected how it was approached and read, yet this particular context was rendered unavailable to a chapbook reader.⁹ There are multiple possible reasons for this: legal (avoidance of copyright claims); an assumed ephemerality of some songs; many had passed into print from an oral culture, wherein ballad texts were more fluid, and concepts of a ‘standard’ or ‘authoritative’ version were inappropriate; an equivocal attitude – that continued well into the nineteenth century – towards composers, creators and adaptors (e.g. Burns, Tannahill) of ‘national song’ or ‘national poetry’. Thus John Stuart Blackie, ‘Of all the species of the genus *Volkslied*...the most largely acknowledged is the Scotch’, and ‘In Shelley’s poetry you always see Shelley...but in “Bonnie Jean” and “Wandering Willie,” though you may know that there was a Burns, you never feel personally that he is there. In his songs...Scotland is everywhere, Burns nowhere’.¹⁰

Within a decade of Burns’s death, his compositions were appearing in many song chapbooks. We should perhaps consider that the naming of an author or adapter is being viewed the wrong way around, and think about the implications for chapbook printer and reader in breaking with a long settled convention and identifying the creators of individual pieces.

Chapbook title-page woodcuts cuts were of limited direct help to readers, as Burns was one of very few figures who were depicted in a woodcut (he shares this questionable honour with Napoleon, John Knox, Prince Charles Edward (the Young Pretender) and Queen Victoria) and then only on the mid-nineteenth-century “Burns’s song books,” or similarly titled items, and not within the more common song collections.

The single largest overall difficulty is, however, one of simply identifying a printed piece as being Burns’s. Variant titles are a significant problem, either in themselves, and compounded when they consist of older (pre-Burns versions) or even worse, when versions from the older tradition and Burns’s adaptations were published broadly contemporaneously.

Morren’s *Five excellent new songs, The Cumberland courtship...the rigs of barley...the Irish oyster girl* published about 1800 provides a good example. It includes “The rigs of barley” in a text that is recognisably Burns’s. The first (well known) complication is that the song often appears under the title of ‘The corn rigs’ (or the ‘The corn rigs are bonny’).

⁹ See, for example, Michel Foucault, “What is an author?,” in his *Essential works ... 1954-1984*, v.2: *Aesthetics, method and epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), 205-22 (pp. 210-11). The very material nature of the work combined with the lack of information regarding its creation might be regarded as markers as to the type of publication it was, and how it might have been read.

¹⁰ John Stuart Blackie, *Scottish Song* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1889), 6, 21-22.

A different chapbook, *Now Westlin Winds...* (Edinburgh, 1820), includes (according to the title page) “The rigs o’ barley,” yet in the text it is headed “It was upon a Lammas Night” and is Burns’s version. That same year, another Edinburgh printed chapbook appeared with the *Crazy Jane to which are added ... Corn Rigs are Bonny*, but this time it gave the version of “Corn rigs” that goes back to Allan Ramsay and his *Gentle Shepherd* of 1725, and so is obviously the version that appears in eighteenth-century chapbooks and broadsides.

Yet three years earlier, and to finally complicate any assessment of textual transmission, the chapbook, *The corn rigs are bonny ...* (Stirling: printed for, and sold by, John Fraser, 1817) offers up Burns’s version.

And it would be incautious to assume, even if a composition is identified as appearing under a variant title, that the text is necessarily what you might entirely anticipate. In the chapbook, *A new song called Auld Scotia free, to which are added, O Helen thou art my darling, The lovely lass of Allan-down*, “The lovely lass of Allan-Down” is actually Burns’s “The Gowden Locks of Anna,” except it isn’t, as her hair colour has become raven. It was produced in Airdrie about 1830 by the firm of J. & J. Neil, the standard of whose presswork was relatively low even for chapbook printers (though this may not have mattered to purchasers.).

It would also be incautious to assume that Burns’s compositions were thought marketable only with other song collections. There are at least two nineteenth-century chapbook editions, emanating from Falkirk and Stirling, of *The prophecies of Thomas the Rhymer* (a text that goes back to the 1690s if not before) that also contain shortened versions of “The Cotter’s Saturday Night.”¹¹

Burns’s adaptations of earlier material are well recognised, but where is this material? A good example here is “Charlie, he’s my darling,” which is fairly innocuous in Burns’s hands, but a much earlier version can be traced back to an Aberdeen broadside printing of 1775 or 1776, is longer (16 verses) and is vastly more sexually explicit.

In his paper, Prof Scott rightly drew attention to the largely untapped sources of Burns-published material. His observations can be fully supported: if ‘Burns and chapbooks’ proves a problematic phrase, then, ‘Burns, broadsides, song sheets and slip songs’ is likely to be considerably worse: some 200 have been rapidly identified without extensive bibliographic searching.

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¹¹ A third printing of *Thomas the Rhymer* with a version of “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” (Kilmarnock: Crawford, 1826) is yet to be examined.