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**GEORGE THOMSON TO ROBERT BURNS:
A NEWLY-IDENTIFIED MANUSCRIPT
LETTER-FRAGMENT¹**

Gerard Lee McKeever

A major portion of Robert Burns's oeuvre, both songs and letters, comes from his correspondence with the Edinburgh music collector and editor George Thomson. From September 1792 until his death in July 1796, Burns provided "poetical assistance" for Thomson's project to publish *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs*, in which each air was provided with a musical arrangement suited for the new piano forte and with two sets of words, one in standard English verse and the other in Scots.² Thomson's collection, published in parts between 1793 and 1818, would by 1846, after later additions and repackagings, include over 160 individual sets of verses either by Burns, or attributed to him.³

Yet Burns's work for Thomson remains in many ways one of the least understood aspects of his career, and the two men's exchange of letters is crucial to assessing Burns's achievement. Thomson's relatively expensive collections, designed for polite and affluent female consumers and paired with sophisticated arrangements by composers such as Haydn and Beethoven, can seem at odds with prevailing critical ideas about what is most to be valued in Burns's own work. The story of his engagement with Thomson will receive full reappraisal in Kirsteen McCue's forthcoming volume for the AHRC-funded *Oxford Edition of Robert Burns*, and work is underway reediting both sides of the Burns-Thomson correspondence for

¹ This article was written as an output of the AHRC project, "Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century" (AH/1003738/1), based at the University of Glasgow and led by Gerard Carruthers: see <http://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/>.

² James Currie, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns; with an Account of his Life*, 4 vols (Liverpool: Cadell, Davies and Creech, 1800), IV: 2; cited below as Currie.

³ Though Thomson's project came to encompass other national collections, including Welsh and Irish melodies, his Scottish series was the first and most important: George Thomson, ed., *A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs* (London: Preston, 1793-1818). On the bibliographical complexity of the project, see Kirsteen McCue's introduction, in *Songs for George Thomson* [*Oxford Edition of Robert Burns*, vol. IV] (forthcoming).

later volumes in the Oxford Edition. This note reports on new manuscript evidence from the relationship that was discovered during research for the Thomson songs volume.

The importance of the Burns-Thomson letters was recognized by Burns's first editor, James Currie, who gave up most of his fourth and final volume to printing both sides of the exchange. In Currie's words,

The letters of Mr. Burns to Mr. Thomson include the songs he presented to him, some of which appear in different stages of their progress, and these letters will be found to exhibit occasionally his notions of song writing, and his opinions on various subjects of taste and criticism. These opinions, it will be observed, were called forth by the observations of his correspondent, Mr. Thomson; and without the letters of this gentleman, those of Burns would have been often unintelligible (Currie, IV: vi-vii).

If Currie's edition established the significance of the letters for understanding Burns, it has also spawned a number of controversies, particularly over the reliability of the text Currie printed. After Burns's death in 1796, Burns's letters to Thomson were still in Thomson's hands, and Thomson's letters to Burns were returned to him by Burns's trustees before the main group of Burns's papers were forwarded to Currie. The correspondence in volume IV had been prepared for publication, not by Currie, but by Thomson himself. As Currie notes:

The whole of this correspondence was arranged for the press by Mr. Thomson, and has been printed with little addition or variation (Currie, IV: iii).⁴

That is, Currie had made "little addition or variation" to the text as Thomson had "arranged" it. How Thomson went to work can be deduced from his annotations on the original manuscripts of the Burns letters now in the Morgan Library, New York.⁵ In 1929, J. DeLancey Ferguson compared Thomson's redacted versions of what Burns wrote with these surviving manuscripts, concluding trenchantly that Thomson should not be viewed "merely as a well-meaning but silly meddler," but that he "stands convicted"

⁴ The circumstances by which Thomson got back his own letters for "arrangement" before he sent an edited version of the correspondence to Currie are outlined by Robert Donald Thornton, *James Currie: The Entire Stranger & Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), 335-6, and treated more fully in Thornton's unpublished book *James Currie as Editor: A Publishing History of The Works of Robert Burns, 1796-1800*.

⁵ Morgan Library & Museum, shelf-mark MA47 & MA50. From 1851 till their sale to J. Pierpont Morgan in 1906, the Morgan MSS of Burns's letters to Thomson had been owned by the Earl of Dalhousie, at Brechin Castle, and they are cited in earlier scholarship as the Dalhousie MSS (Ferguson, I: xlv; Kinsley, III: 966; Roy I: lxi).

of falsifying the record from “childish vanity” and “petty meanness.”⁶ Even less censorious critics would acknowledge that Thomson had made significant alterations to Burns’s letters, and that his redactions raise difficulties in letter-sequence and dating.

However, with very few exceptions, manuscript evidence is missing to assess how Thomson treated the other side of the correspondence, his own letters to Burns. Except as discussed below, volume IV of the Currie edition provides the only source texts for Thomson’s letters. It is unclear what happened later to Thomson’s original letters, or to the redacted versions or transcripts that he may have sent to Currie, for use in printing volume IV, and it is likely that almost all of such manuscript evidence underlying the 1800 text of Thomson’s letters was subsequently destroyed.⁷

Any manuscript for a Thomson letter to Burns that does survive is therefore of special value. To date, only one such has been noted in the Burns scholarship. This is the autograph manuscript of Thomson’s letter to Burns dated August 20, 1793, first published in a redacted version in the 1800 *Works*. The survival of the original manuscript letter was first reported in 1879, when William Scott Douglas included a much improved though still incomplete version of the letter in his edition, describing the manuscript, then owned by his publisher William Paterson, as “the solitary specimen of Thomson’s letters to our poet that is known to exist.”⁸ The claim was repeated by William Wallace in 1896, in his revision of the Robert Chambers edition.⁹ When the manuscript that Scott Douglas had used was rediscovered

⁶ J. DeLancey Ferguson, “Cancelled Passages in the Letters of Robert Burns to George Thomson,” *PMLA*, 43.4 (December 1928), 1110-1120 (1120); repr. in *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd ser., 4 (1929), 90-103 (101).

⁷ In Ross Roy’s summary, Thomson “got back his letters to Burns and probably destroyed the originals, while sending Currie altered copies”: G. Ross Roy, “Editing Robert Burns in the Nineteenth Century,” in Kenneth Simpson, ed., *Burns Now* (Edinburgh: Canongate Academic, 1994), 129-149 (132); cf. Roy, *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), II, 485. In reproducing Currie’s manuscript inventory of the letters in his possession written to Burns, Roy notes that it is very incomplete on the Thomson correspondence, listing only Thomson’s first letter to Burns (September 12, 1792), without providing any information on the subsequent fate of the manuscript letter itself (Roy, *Letters*, II: 395, 422).

⁸ William Scott Douglas, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1877-9), VI: 265-266. Scott Douglas speculates that this manuscript letter must have “fallen aside from the rest of the series, and was not returned to Thomson” (265), but since Thomson included a redacted text in the vol. IV series, the manuscript itself may have been in Thomson’s possession and so have “fallen aside” from his papers, not Currie’s.

⁹ Robert Chambers and William Wallace, eds, *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, rev. ed., 4 vols (Edinburgh and London: W. & R. Chambers, 1896), IV: 28.

in 2010, bound into a special extra-illustrated or graingerized set of the Scott Douglas edition, at Carskiesy House, near Campbelltown, a new transcription by Chris Rollie highlighted just how much Thomson cut and edited the letter before sending it to Currie and also showed that, in printing the letter from manuscript, Scott Douglas still omitted significant passages.¹⁰

To this single identified manuscript letter can now be added a second, an interesting single letter-page found on the other side of a Burns song manuscript in the Newberry Library, Chicago.¹¹ Because of the song, the existence of this second manuscript was recorded in the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, but the side with the letter has never apparently drawn the attention of Burns scholars.¹² The manuscript is a single leaf, and on the verso are the following lines in Thomson's distinct, neat hand:

Scottish ones, in the subject or the sentiment This is the case with a considerable number of them; though many no doubt are a little different—But, as I have probably observed to you before, Musical expression is a thing so ambiguous, that two sets of Verses altogether dissimilar will often suit the same Air equally well.—

Mr Clark speaks of two or three Airs which you have in manuscript—I should like to see them.

I remain with great regard
Yours G. Thomson

10th April 1793

While this is only the final page from a much longer letter from Thomson to Burns, the passage is characteristic of their exchange, tackling the issues involved in an appropriate marriage of verse and music. However, when Thomson prepared the letter for the Currie edition, he cut it drastically, to a mere half page of print, and this conclusion, with its striking comment on the ambiguity of music, is missing entirely from the published text.

Here, as elsewhere with letters that Thomson had cut severely, Currie feared readers would get confused when on a subsequent page they found Burns writing back in response to comments Thomson had left out. To help readers negotiate the difficulties, instead of expanding Thomson's version, Currie added his own footnotes, thus simultaneously red-flagging discontin-

¹⁰ Chris Rollie, "Recently-Rediscovered Burns Manuscripts: Scott Douglas and his publisher," *Burns Chronicle*, 127 (2018), 44-74 (63-68). The Carskiesy volumes are privately owned.

¹¹ Like the MS. from Carskiesy, the Newberry letter, one of five MSS now separately housed (shelf-mark Case MS 7^o), was previously preserved by being bound into an extra-illustrated volume, the catalogue noting: "These autographs, now in a solander case, were once inserted in the Library's copy of J.S. Storer, *Views in North Britain illustrative of the works of Robert Burns* ... London, 1805 (Case Y 12 .B 603)."

¹² Margaret Smith and Penny Boumelha, eds., *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* (London: Mansell, 1986), III.1, 186 (BuR 1200).

I
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 with a considerable number of them; though many no doubt are
 a little different. But, as I have probably observed to you before,
 Metrical expression is a thing so ambiguous, that two sets of
 Verses altogether dissimilar will often suit the same Air
 equally well.

Mr. Clark speaks of two or three Airs which you
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 10th April 1793

The surviving final page of George Thomson's letter
 to Robert Burns, 10 August 1793
 (image courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago)

uities in Thomson's version. The result is a kind of dialogue between the text and letter-sequence as Thomson had sent it for printing and the footnotes and additions that Currie added. For the letter dated 10 April, 1793, Currie added a footnote to Thomson's very abbreviated text, explaining and defending, but also highlighting, Thomson's redactions:

The original letter from Mr. Thomson contains many observations on the Scottish songs, and on the manner of adapting the words to the music, which, at his desire, are suppressed. The subsequent letter of Mr. Burns refers to several of these observations.¹³

The frequent brevity of Thomson's letters as printed in the Currie edition suggests that many other passages were similarly cut, so this new manuscript is a chance to see behind the published text into the editorial process. Currie implies here that the cuts were due to Thomson's modesty and self-effacement, and perhaps Thomson did indeed feel that the lion's share of space should be given to Burns. Perhaps he decided that the technical discussion between himself and the poet was too detailed for a general readership, exposing too much of the inner dynamics, the trade-offs, of the project.

A further possible motive for this specific cut could perhaps have been to reduce inconsistency. In a later letter Thomson would contradict his comment here about "altogether dissimilar" verses suiting a particular air "equally well." With a further eighteen months of editorial experience, Thomson reflected that

It would seem an incongruity to provide the same air with merry Scottish and melancholy English verses! The more that the two sets of verses resemble each other in their general character, the better (November 15, 1794, in Currie, IV: 199).

Yet the brevity of the letter as Thomson published it might also suggest that for this letter he was working from a very incomplete manuscript.

As well as the content of the letter-fragment, the physical manuscript itself is significant, because its combination of two texts, one on each side of the leaf, casts new light on a longstanding puzzle about the sequence in which the letters and songs were arranged for the 1800 edition. Thomson's letter is written on what has long been treated as the back or verso of the

¹³ Currie, IV: 61n; for another instance of Currie repairing the gaps left by Thomson's redaction, cf. the two versions of "Wandering Willie" (IV: 48 n.-50 n.), where Currie's footnote makes it clear that Burns did not accept all the alterations Thomson had made to his song. Yet another is the extract from "Yestreen I got a pint of wine" (IV: 60 n.) that Currie added in a footnote when Thomson's redaction of a letter retained Burns's comments on a nameless song, but left the song itself unspecified and unquoted: see Patrick Scott, "What Colour was Anna's Hair?," *Burns Chronicle for 2020* (forthcoming).

leaf, and on the other side, conventionally recorded as the recto, is Burns's song "The Soger's Return" or "When wild war's deadly blast was blawn."¹⁴ It seems much more likely that Burns would write out a song for Thomson on the back of one of Thomson's letters than that Thomson would use the back of a Burns song manuscript for writing a letter to Burns. Apparently the poet—perhaps low on paper—simply reused a blank page from one of Thomson's letters to write out his song.

This song and the air for which Burns wrote it are mentioned several times in the correspondence. The air itself, "The Mill, Mill, O," was well-known, but none of the earlier song-texts were deemed suitable for Thomson's collection. In his first letter to Thomson, in September 1792, Burns had denounced one set of English verses for the air, beginning "To Fanny fair could I impart," as "insipid stuff, ... that would doubly disgrace" Thomson's project (*Works*, IV: 4; Roy, *Letters*, II: 149), and in an earlier letter in April 1793, Burns had commented:

The original song, 'The Mill, mill O' though excellent, is on account of decency, inadmissible ... still I like the title; & I think a Scots song would suit the notes best; & let your chosen song, which is very pretty, follow (*Works*, IV: 58; Roy, *Letters*, II: 205).

The song-text he subsequently sent was "The Soger's Return," and in the Thomson-Currie ordering of the letters, Burns's comment that "I send you also a ballad to the Mill mill O" occurs in his reply to Thomson's letter of April 10, undated but positioned immediately next in the printed sequence (*Works*, IV: 62-65 (64); Roy, *Letters*, II: 198). This makes a very plausible time-line for the exchange of letters, and for where this manuscript fragment fits into it.

Two things have clouded the sequencing. First, despite the clear reference to Burns sending the song after April 10, the song itself appears in the 1800 *Works* several pages earlier, immediately following Burns's letter to Thomson of April 2 (*Works*, IV: 51-54).¹⁵ Currie recognized that the song was being printed out of sequence, for he added a footnote to the later letter, signed "E." for editor, giving the item number for the song, and so redirecting the reader to the earlier page.

The second doubt about the dating and sequence suggested above comes from the dating and arrangement of Burns's letters to Thomson in the

¹⁴ James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), II: 685-687 [K 406].

¹⁵ Another song mentioned in the same April 10 letter, "Meg o' the Mill," is also brought forward from its logical place at *Works*, IV: 65, appearing instead at IV: 54-55, though in this case the later footnote includes not only a cross-reference to the earlier item number, but also a critical comment, with the whole footnote signed as "Note by Mr. Thomson."

standard modern editions. When Currie first received the mass of Burns's manuscripts, in January 1797, he noted dating as among the editorial difficulties he would confront:

Not one of the copies of his [Burns's] own letters is dated; and therefore a stranger cannot arrange them in order of time, ... Persons perfectly acquainted with the poet might be able, from the contents of these MSS., to form a pretty exact notion of their date, and thus supply the deficiency; but a stranger cannot do this.¹⁶

In the 1800 *Works*, Thomson's letters are usually dated, but Burns's letters for April 1793 are not. Ferguson, followed by Roy, worked out a revised letter-sequence for the Burns letters.¹⁷ In this reordering, the undated letter in which Burns refers to sending Thomson "The Soger's Return" (letter XXI, IV: 62-65, in 1800) becomes letter 554 (Roy, *Letters*, II: 195-199). This moves it ahead of Burns's letter to Thomson on 7 April (letter XIX, IV: 55-60 in 1800), which becomes Ferguson's and Roy's letter 557 (Roy, *Letters*, II: 204-207). If the song was sent earlier than the 7 April letter, it was also sent earlier than Thomson's letter of 10 April, requiring the implausible scenario that Thomson wrote his letter on the back of Burns's song.

Significantly, no manuscript of "The Soger's Return" is with Burns's letters to Thomson in the collection at the Morgan. One possibility is that the Newberry manuscript of "The Soger's Return" is the one Burns sent to Thomson. The song text in the Newberry manuscript largely matches that printed in 1800, which incorporates the same corrections seen on this manuscript.

Yet it seems socially inept or atypically arrogant for Burns not only to have recycled Thomson's letter, but to send it back to Thomson. It seems more likely that what Burns wrote on the back of Thomson's letter was a draft, and that what he sent to Thomson was a different fair copy manuscript, incorporating corrections he had made on the draft.¹⁸ In that scenario, what

¹⁶ William Wallace Currie, ed, *Memoir of ... James Currie, MD, FRS of Liverpool* (London: Longman, 1831), I: 277.

¹⁷ For continuity of reference, only the Roy edition is cited here, but cf. J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931). Though Ferguson does not footnote a reason for the re-dating, or mention it in his preface, this reordering seems to originate with him; the three letters were still in the sequence used in 1800 in Scott Douglas, VI: 239-247, and in Chambers-Wallace, III: 408-411, 415-417.

¹⁸ Kinsley, III: 1429, suggests that the then-unlocated MS Nicolas used in 1839 was "probably a draft, since Burns allowed the *S[elect] C[ollection]* text to stand, with a few alterations," in the copy he annotated for Miss Graham of Fintry (now in the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum). The minimal nature of those annotations,

is now the Newberry manuscript would have stayed among Burns's papers, not Thomson's, and so have passed from John Syme to Currie, and thence to the care of William Roscoe and Currie's son William Wallace Currie. The provenance of many other Burns manuscripts can be traced back to the dispersal of the Currie collection in the 1830s.

This scenario is supported by the auction record and by the textual history of the song. The *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* notes that this song, with the letter-fragment, was listed in 1854 among William Pickering's manuscripts, sold at Sotheby's in December 1854.¹⁹ In the 1830s, between the first two-volume Aldine Burns and the much improved second three-volume edition, Pickering had acquired an astonishing cache of Burns manuscripts:

Upwards of TWO HUNDRED LETTERS OR POEMS, in Burns's own hand-writing, were purchased, many of which had never been printed; while some of those that had been already published afford important variations, and, occasionally, supply even entire stanzas.²⁰

So large a number of manuscripts almost certainly came from the Currie papers in Liverpool, and one of the manuscripts with important variations was "The Soger's Return." For the 1839 edition, Pickering's editor, Harris Nicolas, collated the song "with a copy in the Poet's own hand," giving variants from the 1800 text as footnotes.²¹ Later editors such as Henley and Henderson and Kinsley duly noted these variants, but never found the manuscript that Nicolas references.²² Unsurprisingly, in light of the 1854 auction catalogue, the 1839 variants correspond to the uncorrected song text in the Newberry manuscript, so taking the known provenance for the letter-fragment back to the 1830s.

This reconstructed time-line for the song manuscript, and the conclusion that Burns reused Thomson's letter, sets a *terminus a quo* of April 10 for when Burns wrote the Newberry manuscript of the song, and so the earliest date that he could have sent a revised copy, or, less probably, this draft, to Thomson. If this dating is accepted, then there is a strong case for re-examining the Ferguson-Roy sequence for the Burns-Thomson

however, may simply prove that Burns felt compelled to address only the most obvious of the editorial changes Thomson had made.

¹⁹ *Index*, III.1, 186, as in n. 12 above; *Catalogue of the Collection of Manuscripts and Autograph Letters formed by the late Mr. William Pickering* (London: Davy, [1854]), 28 (lot 285). [I wish to acknowledge help from Dr. James Caudle in locating the relevant Pickering sale catalogue. Ed]

²⁰ *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (London: Pickering, 1839), I: vii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, III: 50 n, and 51-54.

²² W.E. Henley and T.F. Henderson, eds, *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, 4 vols (Edinburgh: T.S. and E.C. Jack, 1896), III: 452; Kinsley, II: 685-687.

correspondence in April 1793, moving letter 554 back after 557, and restoring the sequence given in the 1800 *Works*.

As this example shows, there are benefits, even for the editing of Burns's own letters and poems, in looking at both sides of his correspondence. Both the Ferguson and Roy editions gave only the Burns letters, excluding letters written to him, though Roy had initially wished to include them and later made plans with Ken Simpson to edit the letters to Burns separately. More recent research on this project at South Carolina by Patrick Scott and others has now been shared with the Glasgow team, and separate publication is no longer planned.²³ The relevant volumes of the Oxford Edition will therefore offer the first scholarly edition of the full *Correspondence of Robert Burns*.

Kirsteen McCue's forthcoming Oxford volume will provide an in-depth, contemporary perspective on Burns's song work for Thomson's *Select Collection*. Murray Pittock's recent Oxford edition of James Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* has covered the other chief portion of the poet's song activity.²⁴ This discovery suggests that more Thomson letters, individually or even as a larger archive, may survive and might yet resurface, to encourage further reassessment of Thomson's role as editor and to challenge preconceptions about both partners in a publishing project to which Burns committed some of his best-known songs.

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²³ See Patrick Scott and J.C. DuRant, "'Dear Burns': Editing the Other Side of Burns's Correspondence," *Burns Chronicle* (2015): 6-14.

²⁴ Murray Pittock, ed., *Scots Musical Museum*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).