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**“THE HOPE THAT SOMEONE MIGHT PRESENT THEM
WITH A KILMARNOCK BURNS”: THE NATIONAL
LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND’S FIRST KILMARNOCK**

Robert L. Betteridge

By January 1949 the Kilmarnock edition of Robert Burns’s *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* had been available, albeit at increasing expense, for approximately 163 and a half years.¹ Remarkably in all this time neither the Advocates Library, nor subsequently the National Library of Scotland, had acquired a copy of this icon of Scottish literature. On January 17, 1949, a brief article appeared in newspapers across the country quoting the then-convenor of the National Library’s Board of Trustees, James Randall Philip.² Mr Philip had “expressed the hope that someone might present them with a Kilmarnock Burns,” a book which the newspapers were able to highlight “now fetches £2000.” The immediate result was a torrent of correspondence from members of the the public who, on reading the article, had searched their bookshelves and attics for the works of Burns.

Most of these letters to the Library, of which there are around 170 from the first few months of 1949, follow a similar formula, in which the correspondents state in which newspaper they saw the article, often referred to as an advert, and that they have what they think is, or may perhaps be, a Kilmarnock Burns. More often than not what was being offered was a different, later edition of the poet’s work, and some correspondents requested a valuation, something the Library could not do then and still does not provide. Newspapers cited, occasionally with a

¹ For the history of this work’s publication and afterlife see Allan Young and Patrick Scott, *The Kilmarnock Burns: a census* (Columbia,SC: University of South Carolina Libraries, 2017); for an overview of NLS early Burns holdings, see Robert Betteridge, “Robert Burns in Print at the National Library of Scotland,” *SSL*, 43:2 (Fall 2017): 328-334: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss2/30/>.

² Sir James Randall Philip (1900-1957) was called to the Scots Bar in 1945 and was Sheriff of Renfrew and Argyll, 1948-1955, and Sheriff of Perth and Angus 1955-1957. He became Convenor of the Library’s Board of Trustees in 1947 for a five year term and was knighted in 1953. Newspapers carrying the article are named below.

clipping attached to the letter, include: *The Evening Citizen* [Glasgow], *The Sunderland Echo*, *The Glasgow Herald*, *The Lancashire Evening Post*, *Southampton Daily Echo*, *The Belfast Evening Telegraph*, *The South Shields Gazette*, *The Halifax Courier*, *The Sheffield Star*, *The Evening Herald* [Dublin], *The Darlington Dispatch*, *The Evening Dispatch* [Birmingham], *The Irish Daily Telegraph*, *The Birmingham Mail*, *The Yorkshire Evening Post* and so on, reaching as far as *The Chicago Daily Tribune* of January 28. The letters are, for the most part, from Scotland, the North of England and both sides of the Irish border, but whether this reflects on the distribution of Burns editions, around the British Isles, the distribution of interest in Burns more generally, or the distribution of the article in press syndication, is something that might merit further investigation.

Not surprisingly, people became excited at the possibility that they might possess a valuable commodity such as the Kilmarnock Burns, and by the dream that if one edition of Burns could be worth so much, then surely another could have some considerable value. Such excitement was not unprecedented, as Young and Scott note, referencing an article in the *Aberdeen Journal* (January 26, 1935), which had “lamented the false hopes raised by newspaper reports of high auction prices for Kilmarnock editions”:

everyone who has the reputation for knowing anything about Burns has been informed by numerous correspondents that they are in possession of the rarity.³

So it was for the National Library, in late January and February 1949, as letters arrived from hopeful owners of copies of the works of Burns. To cope with the deluge, William Beattie, Keeper of Printed Books, had a typescript reply prepared that replicated the layout of the title page of the Kilmarnock edition. This contained instructions to the effect that if “the wording and the division of lines of print of the title-page of your copy of Burns are not exactly as shown above... I do not wish to consider acquiring it,” and adding the caveat that if even if it matched the wording and lineation “it may still only be a facsimile.” Correspondents such as Mr Parker of County Durham, who wrote “My parents are convinced they possess one of these first editions. I have seen it myself & can only describe it as being in good condition & brown leather bound,” show that Beattie’s reply was often the easiest way to deal with many of the letters.

Many of the letters describe what are clearly 19th-century editions, with mentions of a life of the poet or an editor that quickly rule out any chance of the copy in question being a Kilmarnock, but which the correspondent hoped might still be of interest to the Library. The letters reveal a number

³ Young and Scott, 124.

of such editions that were not held by the Library and which the Library offered to buy. Mrs Gault of Belfast wrote on January 21 to inform the Library that she had the Philadelphia, 1846, edition published by John Locken.⁴ Mrs Gault was offered 10 shillings, but she decided not to sell and the Library is still without this edition. On March 21, Mrs Carroll of County Armagh wrote to the Library enclosing her copy of Burns's *Poetical Works* which the Library offered to buy for 4/6. She replied, adamant that "I would not part with it for so small a sum as 4/6 ... the book was printed before 1786 as you will see at the foot of the page when Distillers Act was passed." While other correspondents do not claim to have a pre-1786 Burns, several replies balk at the small sums that later editions were worth. Some editions, whether owned by the Library or not, were beyond acquisition. Mrs Marsh (née Burns) of Lancashire wrote on January 21 with some pathos that "I bought "Burns Poetical Works" for 6d off a second hand furniture dealer 23 years ago. I burned it to make the fire when we were short of paper in the war time 1942." Beattie reassured her that it was not likely to have been a Kilmarnock.

Replying to these letters must have been an onerous task for the Library, and this is acknowledged in a letter of January 25 to Marryat Ross Dobie, the Librarian, from M. C. Pottinger, Librarian of The Scottish Central Library for Students in Dunfermline, who forwarded a letter that had been misdirected there. Pottinger began "I do not think you will thank me for sending the enclosed letter to you, but nevertheless I suspect it is intended for you and not for me." More interestingly, as reflecting broader Scottish interest in the appeal, Pottinger added, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, with the report that

the other evening at a Burns function I found myself sitting alongside the Chairman of the Dunfermline Public Library Committee and I suggested to him that it was the moral duty of Dunfermline Public Library to hand over a copy of the Kilmarnock Burns, to the National Library of Scotland, but he seemed rather backward in being forthcoming!⁵

All these letters brought the Library no closer to owning a Kilmarnock edition. Alongside the appeal for a donated copy, the Library looked into buying a copy. In 1950, correspondence with the long-established London firm of booksellers Bernard Quaritch shows that the Library was pursuing copies offered at auction. In the sale at Sotheby's on November 14, 1950,

⁴ J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), 148 (Egerer 495).

⁵ The Dunfermline library's Kilmarnock, part of the Murison Burns Collection, was purchased for the Carnegie Library in 1921 by Sir Alexander Gibb; Young and Scott, 14, 111.

the Library authorized Quaritch as their auction agent to bid up to £750 on the Bute copy of the Kilmarnock (now Rozelle House Museum copy), which fetched £880.⁶ On Tuesday, November 14, 1950, when confirming that the October bid had been unsuccessful, Quaritch drew Beattie's attention to another Kilmarnock coming up for sale two weeks later, in New York on Monday, November 27. Though Quaritch shared no details about this second sale, it was to be at Parke-Bernet Galleries, once the largest auctioneer of fine art in the United States, bought out by Sotheby's in 1964.

Because the copy to be auctioned in New York had the original wrappers bound in, it was expected to fetch significantly more than the Bute copy. On Wednesday, November 15, Beattie passed Quaritch's letter up the line to Dobie, with a note to say "clearly it will be at least in the neighbourhood of £3000," adding that there is "an excellent copy" in Edinburgh University Library.⁷ Dobie, as Librarian, then sent a letter that same day to Philip, as Convener, asking "What action do you recommend? If we want a perfect copy, this may well be the last that will come into the market." The idea that this might be the last Kilmarnock to ever come into the market might seem rather short sighted, though since 1950 two further copies with wrappers or wrappers bound have been recorded at sale.⁸ Even so, Dobie advised against bidding and concluded his letter with a train of thought that still influences purchases in many libraries to this day:

I am not in favour of buying it. There is a good copy in the University Library which gives scholars all they want. As for our prestige, we shall do far more to maintain that by continuing to spend the £3000 on the kind of purchases we are regularly making.

The pragmatic, or cautious, or negative, views of the National Library professional staff, Beattie and Dobie, were not shared by Philip, as lay Convener of the Trustees. On Thursday, November 16, presumably the same day he got Dobie's letter, Philip wrote to Lord Macmillan.⁹

⁶ Now the Rozelle House Museum copy; Young and Scott, 39 and 136. The Library's bid had been cautious, but not absurdly low: in 1940, a fine edition had sold for \$3,900 [then £780]; Young and Scott, 131.

⁷ Beattie had presumably been keeping track of Kilmarnock prices, and perhaps researched further ahead of the October sale, but his immediate estimate for the New York sale, made the morning he received Quaritch's letter, and in the event three times too high, seems to have been accepted unquestioningly by everyone else involved. The correspondence assumes that hammer-price at auction represents actual cost, without allowance for agent's fees, or shipping.

⁸ Young and Scott, 163-164, 9-10, 43.

⁹ Hugh Macmillan, Baron Macmillan (1873-1952), QC 1912, assistant director at the Ministry of Information in 1918 (under John Buchan), Lord Advocate 1924,

Macmillan had led the committee that saw the formation of the National Library of Scotland in 1925, and in 1950 he was chairman of The Pilgrim Trust.¹⁰ Philip asked Macmillan's assistance in raising funds "from Scotsmen in the South" to purchase the copy coming up for sale at Parke-Bernet, telling him the Library could only commit or raise £1000 towards the expected price of around £3000. Philip's urgency was essential given that there were just eleven days before the auction in New York, but one passage in the letter highlights the growing pressure the Library felt to acquire a Kilmarnock Burns:

The Library has never possessed a Kilmarnock Burns. The Standing Committee have been concerned about this, as first-class copies now go up for sale very seldom; and there is a real risk that if the National Library does not obtain one soon it may never secure a copy.

Though Philip referred to the Library's failed bid at Sotheby's in October, he commented that the Bute copy was "not of first-class quality and would scarcely have been adequate for the National Library."

On Monday, November 20, Lord Macmillan replied to Philip full of enthusiasm for "the exciting news that a copy of the Kilmarnock Burns is to be sold in New York on the 27th. It is certainly desirable that this fine copy should be secured for the Scottish National Library." He confirmed that the Pilgrim Trust was prepared to contribute up to £2000 and gave the Library the go ahead, "if you are so advised," to instruct Quaritch to bid on the Library's behalf. He seems also to have contacted Quaritch directly himself. On Tuesday, November 21, Beattie received another letter from Quaritch confirming that the copy was "excellent ... in every way" and that the auctioneers' estimate was \$2000-\$2500, which Quaritch felt was "very much too low," and that they understood "from the Pilgrim Trust that you are contemplating giving us a bid of considerably in excess of this estimate." Beattie was able to reply to Quaritch to say he had "heard that Lord Macmillan has been in touch with you on the matter" and that "the Trustees are prepared to bid up to that limit [of £3000] ... and I am accordingly authorized to request you to act on their behalf up to that amount."

Lord of Appeal from 1930, briefly Minister of Information 1939-40, president of the Scottish Text Society, and one of the founders of the Stair Society.

¹⁰ The Pilgrim Trust, founded in 1930 by the American Edward Harkness, supported "social welfare projects, preservation of buildings and countryside, and the promotion of art and learning." Macmillan, like John Buchan, had been a founding trustee, and chaired the trust from 1935 to 1952.

As the Library's Trustees had previously authorised a bid of up to £1000 for the Bute copy, it was hoped that this authority would be extended towards a bid for the upcoming New York sale. On November 22, a letter that Dobie wrote to W. R. Cunningham reveals that acquiring a Kilmarnock Burns was not equally important to all the Library's Trustees.¹¹ Dobie and Philip had been whipping up support for the auction bid, and Dobie noted that "The Lord President, Dickinson, Peddie, and Dover Wilson have agreed heartily; Muirhead with amusement rather than enthusiasm; Lord Crawford very reluctantly. Philip is tackling the other Edinburgh members of the Committee in the course of the day."¹² Cunningham's reply of the following day begins with an association of the Bards, observing that

What the First Folio is to the B.M. [i.e. British Museum] that, in the eyes of most Scots (if not, quite, in mine), ought the Kilmarnock Edition of Burns to be to the National Library, and I think you ought to go for the perfect copy available, without limit.

He closes with a P.S. noting that if the sale was in London, rather than New York, it would not have fetched nearly so much though this is not consistently borne out by looking at auction prices in the decade leading up to the sale.¹³

With the Library committed to bid, Beattie wrote to Quaritch on Friday November 24 (three days before the sale), amid what appears to be rising excitement, requesting that any successful bid be kept out of the press "until after the meeting of the Standing Committee on 11th December or even until after the Annual General Meeting of the Trustees on the 29th January." Quaritch acknowledged this request the following day and let Beattie know that "we do not anticipate receiving any information until at least about mid-day Tuesday," the day after the sale, and that they will convey the result of the auction "by telephone to yourself." The next document in the file is a Western Union cablegram from a Harper,

¹¹ Dr William Ross Cunningham (1890-1953), Librarian, Glasgow University Library 1925-1951 and the University's appointee on the Board of Trustees.

¹² These men were members of the Library's Board of Trustees, appointed ex officio or co-opted: The Lord President of the Court of Session at the time was Thomas Mackay Cooper (1892-1956); William Croft Dickinson (1897-1963) was the Sir William Fraser Professor of Scottish History and Palaeography at the University of Edinburgh; Coventry Dick Peddie (1863-1950) was an advocate and Secretary to the Northern Lighthouse Commissioners from 1901-1929; Professor John Dover Wilson (1886-1969) was a scholar of Renaissance drama; Muirhead I have been unable to identify but possibly Sir John Spencer Muirhead (1889-1972), President of the Law Society of Scotland in 1950; Lord Crawford was David Lindsay, 28th Earl of Crawford (1900-1975).

¹³ Young and Scott, pp. 130-135.

evidently Quaritch's man in New York, with the simple announcement "BOUGHT BURNS TWENTYSEVEN HUNDRED DOLLARS". This was "about £965" as Philip was able to write to Lord Macmillan on 28 November, adding "I think that we have made a surprisingly good bargain." Appropriately on St Andrew's Day, Macmillan replied to Philip noting that "it will not now be necessary to invoke the assistance of the Pilgrim Trust." Though the assistance of the Pilgrim Trust was not in the end required, its support undoubtedly gave the Library the confidence to enter the auction, as was acknowledged by Philip in his reply to Macmillan on December 1. The acquisition of a Kilmarnock Burns clearly gave Philip a great deal of satisfaction, and he records its acquisition in his Journal entry for 28 November 1950, noting which trustees had displayed enthusiasm for the auction and those who were not so keen, and that Dobie and Beattie's attitude changed on the news of "the excellent bargain we had made."¹⁴

Between December 4 and 12 there is some discussion between Beattie and Quaritch about the preferred method of transporting the book from New York and how best to avoid "the Christmas rush." On Quaritch's advice the book is sent by "air mail insured." Dobie, clearly full of festive cheer, sent a handwritten note to Beattie on December 20, complete with a charming illustration of Santa Claus riding above the rooftops in his sleigh, to let Beattie know that he had informed Lord Macmillan that the book would be sent by air. On December 21, Quaritch informed Beattie that they had received the book in London, and Beattie replied two days later asking that Quaritch "send it addressed to me, marked 'personal' and fully insured." The book left London on December 28 and was accessioned at the Library on December 30.

In the Report by the Standing Committee to the Trustees for the Year 1950, dated January 10, 1951, Philip was able announce the acquisition publicly:

Your Committee have the pleasure to inform you that at a sale held in New York on the 27th November they bought a copy of *Poems, chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, by Robert Burns, Kilmarnock, 1786. This copy is in remarkably fine condition, being entirely uncut except for 1/16 in. shaved from the top edge and having paper wrappers preserved in a morocco binding.¹⁵

In the years to come there were further flurries of post to the Library in response to Burns articles in the press, notably following the appearance of

¹⁴ NLS Acc.4157/1 pp. 495-496.

¹⁵ National Library of Scotland, *Report by the Standing Committee to the Board of Trustees and Report by the Librarian for the Year 1950* (Edinburgh: The Library, 1951), p. 3.

an article in January 1959 which ran in several national newspapers. This piece reported Beattie's identification of several supposed Kilmarnock editions as facsimiles: one found by an Annan schoolboy and offered by a Dumfries firm of booksellers, one submitted by Mr. Hugh Simpson of Annan and one which had been on view at Dumfries Museum for several months.¹⁶ The content of these letters is very similar to those of a decade before from early 1949, often prompting the standard reply that the Library is unable to give valuations and that as a later edition it would be of very little monetary value. Other inquiries required more specific checking. A typical reply of February 16 indicated the scale of work this created:

I am sorry to have kept your little volume of Burns for so long before replying, but I am sure you will understand when I tell you that we have had queries during the last three weeks concerning over a hundred copies of Burns.

However, the effort involved in going through the correspondence again allowed the Library to add several other late 18th and early 19th-century editions to its collections including, in this iteration: Belfast: William Magee, 1790, for 15 shillings from Mr. R. N. Baxter of Hamilton; Edinburgh: for Cadell, Davies and Creech, 1797, for a guinea from Miss D. M. McIntosh of Hertfordshire; Belfast: William Magee, 1800, for a guinea from C. G. Sandy of Surrey; Dundee: F. Ray, 1802, for 30 shillings from Mrs Anderson of Bonnybridge; London: William Clark, 1831, for 8/6 from Mrs McLuckie of Kilwinning.¹⁷

In July 1963, the appearance of yet another newspaper article which noted the high prices paid for Kilmarnock editions reproduced the same kind of letters to the Library as received on previous occasions, though this time there were only 26. The article had reported that a Kilmarnock edition "has been discovered by Mr William McSherry, of Shawfoot, Southwick, Kirkcudbrightshire, in whose home the volume had been lying for years. The book ... bears the handwritten copperplate signature 'Thomas Brotherton, Maghill, 1787.'"¹⁸ A. Wilson of Dumfries, acting on behalf of McSherry, sent the book to the National Library for confirmation that it was a genuine Kilmarnock edition. It was verified as such, the copy in question lacking the title and following three leaves suggesting it was the one sold at Sotheby's on 26 October 1971.¹⁹ Though the Library did not

¹⁶ See for example *The Times* January 20, 1959, p. 10.

¹⁷ NLS shelfmarks: NG.1168.a.3; NG.1168.b.2; NG.1168.a.11; NG.1168.a.6; NG.1174.b.10

¹⁸ *The Glasgow Herald*, July 27, 1963, p. 6 (reprinted in *The Sunday Mail*, July 28).

¹⁹ Young and Scott, pp. 142-143. Young and Scott do not record a current location for this copy; the missing leaves may have been replaced.

make any move to acquire the imperfect Kilmarnock, this round of correspondence did produce the offer from John McVie of Edinburgh to donate the Glasgow: Thomas Duncan, 1801 edition of the *Poems*, which the Library happily accepted.²⁰

In the following year Philip's original wish that someone might present the Library with a Kilmarnock edition was fulfilled thanks to Mrs John Cowie of Glasgow whose copy was accessioned on 6 June 1964. This too is a fine copy and this second, Cowie, copy is now available to read online via the National Library's website.²¹

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²⁰ NLS shelfmark: NG.1169.h.37; Egerer 28 (pp. 85-87).

²¹ <https://digital.nls.uk/poems-chiefly-in-the-scottish-dialect/archive/74464614>.