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**ROBERT BURNS & JEAN ARMOUR, ELLISLAND, 1788:
A LETTER FRAGMENT IN THE ROY COLLECTION**

Patrick Scott

Though there are more than seven hundred known Burns letters, very few of them were written to his wife Jean Armour. Married people living together seldom need to communicate in writing, and postal charges in late eighteenth-century Scotland ordinarily fell on the recipient rather than the letter-writer. There are only four letters from Burns to Jean in the standard collected edition, all written at times when the couple were apart; two from 1788 in the first months of their marriage, when he was at Ellisland taking possession of the farm and she was still in Mauchline, a third writing home to her in 1789 when he was visiting Edinburgh, and the last in 1796, when he was at Brow Well just before he died.¹ Because Jean, and others, cut signatures and small segments from the letters, to give insistent visitors souvenirs of the poet, or perhaps from prudery, two of the four are known only in incomplete manuscripts, and no manuscript is known for his last letter to her.²

The Roy Collection has recently acquired a fragment from the first of the letters, dating from 12 September, preserving portions of Burns's text not previously known. Burns had been trying to find a temporary home near the farm so she could join him while the Ellisland house was being rebuilt. A month earlier, Burns had been in Mauchline for the Communion fair, when the minister and kirk session had given church recognition to their marriage.³ They were planning their future, and he had written to a Glasgow draper to order 15 yards of black silk for Jean to make a new

¹ G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed. revd., 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), I: 315-316, 328-329, 378; II: 390.

² A note on the manuscript of Burns's letter to Jean from Edinburgh, 20 February, 1789 (now in the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum), says that before she gave it to Dr Robert Hunter she removed the middle section as "related to private matters" (Roy I: 378).

³ Robert Chambers and William Wallace, eds, *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1896), II: 361-362; James Mackay, *RB: A Biography* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992), 426-427.

dress and petticoat.⁴ He had then returned to Ellisland for the hairst, and his letter of September 12 is in response to one Jean had written to him.

The main part of the letter has long been known. Burns opens affectionately (“I dreamed of you the whole night through”), warns her it will be another three weeks before he gets back to Mauchline, asks her to get one of Gilbert Burns’s cheeses sent to a friend, says he has been talking to his old landlady about table-linens and says she should get linen from Gilbert to make up (“damnable dear, but no outlaid money to us,” because of what Burns had loaned him); he also tells her about patrons and new poems, though the main poetry bit of the letter is largely missing. Earlier letters had shown him ordering black silk for her to have a new formal dress, and, commenting that the silk dress should be ready before he returns, he promises he will claim the *baiveridge* (duty, kiss) customarily allowed a young man on first seeing a young woman in a new dress.

The main part of the letter was first printed in truncated form by Waddell in the late 1860s, but editors have never had this fragment to add in.⁵ After Jean’s death the letter had been owned by her former maid, Mary MacLaughlan; Waddell says the maid had been given some of the furniture from Ellisland, and the letter was found in a dresser drawer. Sometime before Waddell used it, Mary (by then married and Mrs Nicolson) had already cut off portions of the letter to sell to collectors. In the 1870s, after her death, when Scott Douglas was at work, the truncated letter was owned by her husband Andrew Nicolson, a Dumfries shoemaker, who for a long time gained credit with Burnsians for refusing to sell, but after his death it was auctioned.⁶ Later it was among the Burns manuscripts owned by the Law family at Honresfield House, Littleborough, Lancashire.⁷ For his edition in 1931, therefore, Ferguson could work directly from the Honresfield manuscript for the main portion of the letter, but it was not

⁴ Roy, I: 304.

⁵ P. Hatley Waddell, ed., *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Glasgow: David Wilson, 1867-69), II: 217 (in part XXIII, February 1869).

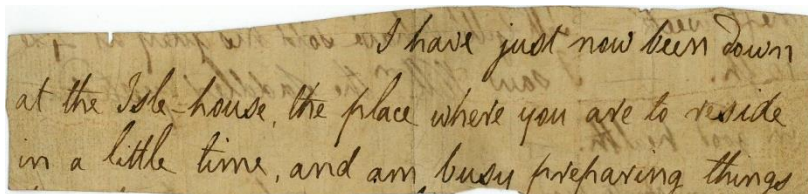
⁶ William Scott Douglas, ed., *Works of Robert Burns*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1877-79), V.156; “Sale of Burns’s Relics,” *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (January 26, 1888), 2.

⁷ William Scott Douglas, ed., *Works of Robert Burns*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1877-79), V.156; “Sale of Burns’s Relics,” *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (January 26, 1888), 2; Davidson Cook, *Burns Manuscripts in the Honresfield Collection of Sir Alfred James [Joseph] Law* (Glasgow: for private circulation, 1928), 30-31 (Honresfield MS xviii); cf. Patrick Scott, “A ‘Lost’ Collection of Burns Manuscripts: Davidson Cook, Sir Alfred Law, and the Honresfield Collection,” *Burns Chronicle*, 125 (2016): 34-49.

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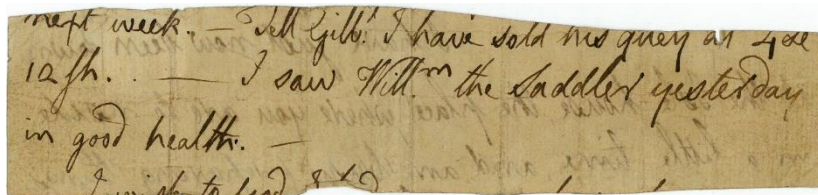
available for Roy to use for the 1985 edition.⁸ That main portion of the letter is now among the Burns MSS (the Blavatnik Honresfield Collection) bought last year for the National Library of Scotland and the Birthplace.⁹

Even though it is very short, the new fragment links to several aspects of Burns's life. The front side tells Jean about the house he was trying to rent, the Isle house; like the silk dress, the word "reside" suggests a (perhaps playful or self-ironizing) sense that the Burnsese were moving up in the world socially:¹⁰



I have just now been down
at the Isle house, the place where you are to reside
in a little time, and am busy preparing things

The other side gives news for and about his own family, and his business relationships with his brother Gilbert (1760-1827), who had taken over as tenant of the Mossgiel farm, providing a home for their mother, their sisters, and two of Burns's surviving children.



⁸ J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1931), I: 254-255.

⁹ The Sotheby's list of Honresfield MSS, including Burns, is at: https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/fnl/file_asset/file/106/The_Blavatnik_Honresfield_Library_manuscripts.pdf. The main body of this letter is BH4G5.

¹⁰ Cf. also Burns's account of Mrs. Millar welcoming at Dalswinton, because he had married Jean "in circumstances something similar to her own, when she commenced Mrs Millar" (*Letters*, I: 305).

next week.— Tell Gilbt I have sold his grey at 4£
 10sh.— I saw Willm the Saddler yesterday
 in good health.—
 I wish to lend

The horse of Gilbert's that Burns sold would, like the cheese and linen, be counted towards repaying the substantial loan that Burns had made to Gilbert for rent money. The loan had come out of Burns's earnings on the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh editions, and by 1788 Burns could have used it for his own farm. Most of the loan would still be outstanding years after Burns's death. The reference to "William the saddler" may be affectionately ironic. William Burns (1767-1790), Burns's younger brother, planned to become a saddler. In August 1788, Burns had written to his lawyer friend Robert Ainslie for help finding William an apprenticeship in a saddler's shop. However, it was not till the following spring, in March 1789, that William found his first job with a saddler at Longtown, Cumberland, moving from there to work for a saddler in Newcastle, and then to London, where he died in July 1790.¹¹

This recovery of this previously-unrecorded letter-fragment seems timely, for several reasons. The Ellisland years (mid 1788-to late 1791) were probably the best years for Robert and Jean's marriage, and also among his most productive post-1786 years as a poet and songwriter.¹² Recently-discovered archival materials about the Ellisland house and farm have shown that Jean was to play a bigger role there than has previously been recognized.¹³ The Glasgow Burns edition is nearing publication of the relevant letters volume, which will be the first ever to put back the fragment Mary MacLaughlan snipped away in the mid-19th century. Most significantly, the fragment makes Jean's role at Ellisland, and Burns's relationship with her, seem less invisible and more tangible.

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¹¹ The Roy Collection also has Burns's letter from Ellisland to William Burns, London, May 16, 1790, another MS not available to Ferguson or Roy (see *Letters*, II: 39).

¹² See, e.g., ch. 4, "Ellisland," in Patrick Scott, *Robert Burns: A Documentary Volume* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale/Cengage, 2018), 230-285.

¹³ On the Ellisland documents discovered at Barnbogle Castle, see e.g., Gerard Carruthers, *The Conversation* (online, January 24, 2023); *History Scotland* (online January 23, 2023), *BBC News* ((online January 23, 2023), etc.