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Patrick Scott

University of South Carolina - Columbia

Gerard Carruthers

University of Glasgow

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BURNS AND THE “ALTAR TO INDEPENDENCE”: A QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY

Patrick Scott and Gerard Carruthers

Scholars who work on other authors are often surprised by the uncertainties of the Burns canon. The authenticity of his most famous poems is not in doubt; because Burns made fair copies of favourite poems for friends and patrons, there are multiple manuscripts of many poems, and there are thousands of genuine Burns manuscripts. However, for some poems there is no manuscript in Burns’s hand, no mention of the poem in the Burns correspondence, and no printed text from Burns’s lifetime. Sometimes, also, the only known manuscript surfaced long after Burns’s death, with no early provenance, so its own authenticity is in question.

One of the poems raising such issues has been Burns’s short “Poetical Inscription for an Altar to Independence,” seven lines for which neither James Kinsley nor any other Burns editor records a manuscript, and for which the sole known manuscript, auctioned in 1929, had no recorded provenance.¹ Commonly, research on disputed Burns manuscripts ends unhappily, when something once treasured as Burns’s autograph turns out to be a fake; untypically, the story reported here reverses that pattern, when a manuscript long stigmatized as a forgery can be shown to be authentic.

The “Poetical Inscription” is one of the poems written in the 1790s that show Burns’s continued and quite public commitment to the political ideals of the late 1780s. It has indeed recently been described as “apt proof of the poet’s continued radical commitment.”² Much of Burns’s political poetry is well-authenticated. For “Scots wha hae,” “A man’s a man, for a’ that,” and “The Rights of Woman,” Burns’s authorship is documented through multiple manuscripts, contemporary mentions, and lifetime publication. His

¹ James Kinsley, ed., *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), II: 797, III: 1486. Gerard Carruthers’s part in this research is in connection with the AHRC-funded project “Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century: Correspondence and Poetry” (AH/P004946/1).

² Andrew Noble and Patrick S. Hogg, eds, *The Canongate Burns*, revd ed. (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2003), 870. 9

four election ballads from 1795 supporting Patrick Heron for parliament, though not included in a Burns edition till Allan Cunningham in 1834, are extant both as contemporary broadsides and in autograph manuscript.³ But some other political songs attributed to Burns, such as “The Tree of Liberty” and “Why Should We Idly Waste Our Time,” have no documented link to him before the 1830s, and no extant manuscript in Burns’s hand.⁴ Government repression, it has been argued, and the sedition trials of 1793-1794, had forced Burns to conceal the real nature of his political beliefs, and once he was dead, the argument goes on, the manuscript record of his continuing radical politics was silently purged by his editor, James Currie.

However, the “Poetical Inscription” is different, because it had been attributed to Burns long before Cunningham. In fact, it had first been published by James Currie himself, as early as 1800.⁵ The “Poetical Inscription” is addressed to the same Patrick Heron on whose behalf Burns had written the election ballads, and Currie provided an explanatory subtitle giving the purported circumstances in which it was composed: “Poetical Inscription for an Altar to Independence at Kerrouchtry, the seat of Mr. Heron, written in Summer 1795.”⁶

The altar itself has never been found, and may never have been erected, and the date of the poem has been questioned, but because Burns’s support of Heron was on record and Currie had already included the poem among Burns’s *Works*, there is no obvious reason why Currie, or anyone else, would want or need to suppress this manuscript.

Yet there is always some residual doubt about the authenticity of a Burns poem if there is no contemporary manuscript and no contemporary mention

³ Kinsley, II: 775-786.

⁴ For contrasting arguments on “The Tree of Liberty,” see, e.g., *The Canongate Burns*, ed. Andrew Noble and Patrick Scott Hogg (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), 847-851; Gerard Carruthers and Norman R. Paton, “Did Burns write ‘The Tree of Liberty,’” in Johnny Rodger and Gerard Carruthers, eds, *Fickle Man: Robert Burns in the 21st Century* (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2009), 242-256; Corey E. Andrews, “Radical Attribution: Burns and ‘The Liberty Tree,’” *SSL*, 41 (2016): 174-190; and cf. also Patrick Scott, “The Early History of ‘Why Should We Idly Waste Our Prime,’” *Burns Chronicle*, 128 (2019): 38-49.

⁵ James Currie, ed, *Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols (London: Cadell & Davies, 1800), IV: 369.

⁶ See R.G. Thorne, “Heron, Patrick,” in R.G. Thorne, ed., *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons, 1790-1820*, 5 vols (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986): <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1790-1820/member/heron-patrick-1735-1803>; on the the Altar, see A. S. Morton, “Kirroughtree,” *Transactions of the Dumfries and Galloway Natural History & Antiquarian Society*, 3rd Ser., 20 (1935-36): 181-182.

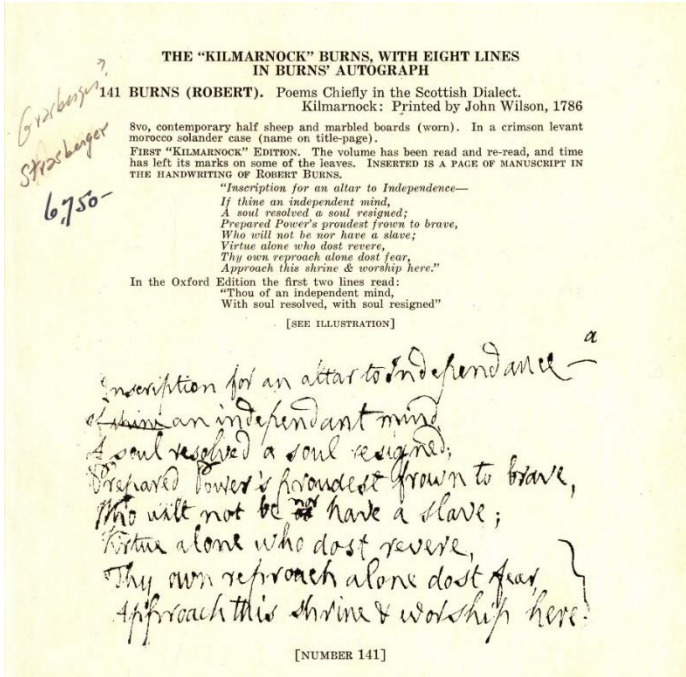


Fig. 1: “Inscription for an altar to Independance,”
 from *The Library of Jerome Kern* (Anderson Galleries, 1929)
 Matthew J. Bruccoli Collection of Mitchell Kennerley,
 University of South Carolina Libraries

in Burns’s letters. Late-surfacing manuscripts are always suspect, and the “Altar” manuscript first surfaced well after “Antique Smith” flooded the Burns manuscript market with fakes.⁷ Though Smith was exposed in 1891, many owners of Smith forgeries were then (and are now) reluctant to accept they were duped.

The “Altar” manuscript was first recorded in January, 1929, just before the Wall Street crash, when the composer Jerome Kern’s library was auctioned in New York, at the American Art Association/Anderson

⁷ See J. DeLancey Ferguson, “‘Antique’ Smith and his Forgeries of Robert Burns,” *The Colophon*, 4. 13 (1933), unpaginated; Gerard Carruthers and George Smith, “Daylight Rabbery: The story of Antique Smith’s Robert Burns forgeries,” *The Drouth*, 44 (2013): 10-15; for a Smith forgery offered at auction as genuine, see Patrick Scott, “Laying a Ghost: J. DeLancey Ferguson and ‘The Chevalier’s Lament,’” *Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century* (Centre for Robert Burns Studies, University of Glasgow, August 2019): <https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/patrick-scott-laying-a-ghost/>.

Galleries. The manuscript was bound into Kern's copy of the Kilmarnock Burns, and it was illustrated in the sale catalogue (Fig. 1).⁸ The Anderson Galleries were run by the irrepressible expatriate entrepreneur Mitchell Kennerley, and Kennerley's reputation for salesmanship means that catalogue descriptions from the Anderson Galleries must be treated with caution.⁹ Nonetheless, enhanced by the manuscript, Kern's Kilmarnock, in contemporary half sheep with marbled boards, fetched a substantial \$6,750. This remains the only recorded manuscript source for this poem.

For the next fifty years, Kern's Kilmarnock and the inserted manuscript disappeared into the shadows of private ownership. The purchaser in 1929 had been Irwin Strasburger, head of a Brooklyn printing firm. When Kinsley worked on his edition in the 1950s and 1960s, he did not apparently know about the manuscript or the Kern sale. Twenty years after Kinsley, the manuscript was recorded as genuine, based on the 1929 auction record, though without a current location, by the *Index of English Literary Manuscripts* (1986).¹⁰

Irwin Strasburger had died in 1953, but Clara Strasburger survived her husband by nearly thirty years, dying in November 1981. In June 1982 the Kern Kilmarnock was again sent to auction, this time at Sotheby's.¹¹ The 1982 Sotheby's catalogue differed significantly from the previous description:

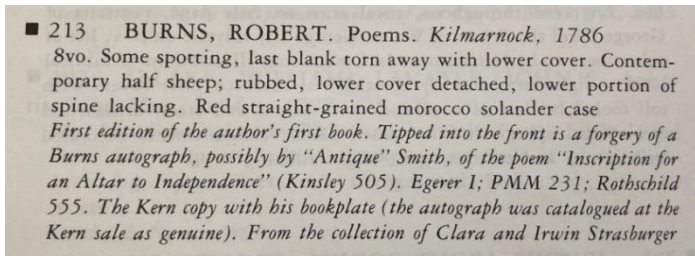


Fig. 2: The Kern copy as catalogued, June 1982.

G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries

⁸ *The Library of Jerome Kern, New York City* [Part One] A-J (New York: The Anderson Galleries, 1929), 39, lot 141; J.C.E., "Burns in the Auction Room," *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd ser. (1930): 24. For press coverage of the sale, see Allan Young and Patrick Scott, *The Kilmarnock Burns: A Census* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Libraries, 2017), 118-119, with refs in n. 238.

⁹ For an exculpatory account, see Matthew J. Bruccoli, *The Fortunes of Mitchell Kennerley, Bookman* (San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

¹⁰ Margaret M. Smith and Penny Boumelha, comps, *Index of English Literary Manuscripts*, III, part 1 (London and New York: Mansell, 1986), 156 (BuR 772).

¹¹ *Fine Printed Books ... Property of Various Owners* (New York: Sotheby, June 25, 1982), lot 213.

Inscription for an altar to independence
 of those on independent mind
 second resolve a soul resigned,
 prepared lower if honor's crown to brave,
 they will not be ~~not~~ have a slave,
 virtue alone who dost reverse,
 thy own reproach alone dost fear
 approach this shrine & worship here.

Autograph of Robert Burns

Fig. 4: Autograph manuscript for Robert Burns, "Inscription for an Altar to Independence," J.M. Shaw Collection, Florida State University. Image courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, Florida State University Libraries.

When the auction came, with the manuscript now labelled a fake, and with the book itself in poor condition (“rubbed, lower cover detached”), the famed Kern Kilmarnock went unsold. Soon afterwards it was bought by a Florida collector, John Mackay Shaw, for the Burns collection he donated to Florida State University. The published catalogue of the Shaw collection followed Sotheby’s cataloguer in again describing the manuscript as a forgery, “possibly by Antique Smith.”¹²

There, at least in the public record, the matter stood for the next forty years. In 2016, Allan Young and Patrick Scott were finishing up the census of surviving Kilmarnock editions, sent draft entries to the relevant libraries for checking; and subsequently learned, just in time to revise the Florida State entry, that librarians there had revisited the manuscript insert and that it was now again believed to be authentic.¹³ The library also sent a scan of the manuscript (Fig.4, overleaf), and soon afterwards, when Gerard Carruthers was on a research visit to South Carolina and discussed it with Patrick Scott, he identified a detail that confirmed the manuscript’s authenticity.

When the manuscript was reproduced in the Kern sale catalogue, it had been cropped. At the bottom of the page, the line added in an unknown later hand attesting that this is Burns’s autograph is of no independent authority; its positioning as a caption, rather than as an endorsement on the verso, suggests that at some point the manuscript may have been framed for display or inserted in an album. However, the small fainter annotation squeezed in at the top (Fig. 5) is more significant:

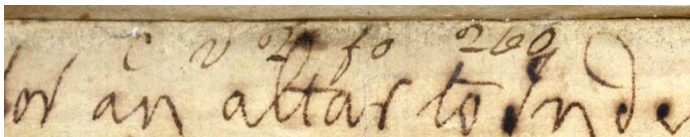


Fig. 5: Detail from “Inscription” Manuscript

Image courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, Florida State University Libraries.

When James Currie was editing the first collected Burns edition, he was working largely from Burns’s own manuscripts. He had them transcribed, adding a distinctive cross-reference on the manuscript itself to show

¹² John Mackay Shaw and Frederic Korn, *Robert Burns: An Inventory of Burnsiana in the John M. Shaw Collection* (Tallahassee, FL: Robert Manning Strozier Library, Florida State University, 1982), item 1.

¹³ Email from Rory Grennan to Patrick Scott, August 29, 2017; Young and Scott, *Census*, 16-17. We are grateful to Rory Grennan and others at Strozier Library, Florida State University, for their help.

indicate, not where the poem or letter occurs in the published Works, but to the volume and folio number (here “C v 2 fo 260”) where the transcription could be found in Currie’s own ledgers or notebooks. Many Burns autographs of undoubted authenticity, including several in the Roy Collection, have similar annotations.¹⁴

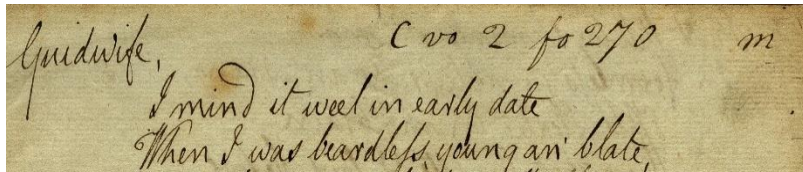


Fig. 6: Detail from Burns, “Answer to the Guidwife”
G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries

Currie’s transcriptions themselves do not seem to survive, but such annotations on a Burns manuscript show that Currie used it for his edition, and where more than one manuscript of a poem survives the annotations show which one Currie used. When such manuscripts are set alongside Currie’s printed text, they suggest that Currie’s transcriptions, even though many were apparently delegated to Currie’s teenaged son Wallace, must have been generally accurate as to wording, but less so as to spelling and punctuation. Knowing which manuscript Currie used helps identify the minor changes or normalizations that were introduced by Currie, Wallace Currie, or the printer.

The collation below compares Burns’s “Inscription” manuscript with Currie’s published text. While subsequent editors introduced further changes, notably to the title and the spelling of Kerrouchtry, and some adjusted punctuation in a way that matches Burns rather than Currie, none seem to have been based on the manuscript itself or on other independent sources.

Title: Inscription for an altar to Independance] *MS*; POETICAL
INSCRIPTION FOR AN ALTAR TO INDEPENDENCE *At*
Kerrouchtry, the seat of Mr. Heron Written in Summer 1795.
1800

- 1:** Of thine] *MS*; Thou of *1800*
independant] *MS*; independent *1800*
- 2:** A soul resolved a soul resigned] *MS*; With soul resolv’d, with
soul resign’d *1800*

¹⁴ The full manuscript is reproduced in Patrick Scott, “The Roy Manuscript of Burns’s Answer to the Guidwife of Wauchope,” *Burns Chronicle for 2020*, 129 (2019): 10-20 (14-15); other manuscripts marked in this way include the Roy manuscripts of “The Poet’s Welcome” (C v2 fo 279, reproduced in *SSL* 38) and “To Mr. Syme” (C v2 fo 295, in *SSL* 45.2).

3: Prepared Powr's] *MS*; Prepar'd pow'rs 1800

4: ~~or~~ nor] *MS inserted*; nor 1800

7: &] *MS*; and 1800

Currie's annotation has several implications for discussion of the poem. In textual terms, first, it provides reassurance that there was a manuscript of "Inscription for an Altar" long before Antique Smith. Second, it supports the Florida State library staff's assessment that the Kern (Strasburger, Shaw) manuscript is indeed authentic. Third, it allows a future editor to distinguish between what Burns wrote and what Currie added or changed: an editor who wanted to give the text as it was first published would stay with Currie, a traditional or diplomatic editor who wanted to give what Burns wrote and stuck with the manuscript would get a much shorter title, and fewer apostrophes, but would be stuck with the spellings "independance" and "independant."

As often with textual study, the manuscript also provokes critical questions. Burns's praise for the "man of independent mind" takes on an additional connotation when applied to an 18th century member of a deeply divided parliament, where an "independent Member" carried special meaning. How independent of party or government patronage was Patrick Heron? Heron had been out of parliament since 1774 and only got his seat back in 1795, as M.P. for the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, with the backing of Henry Dundas. Burns praises the man who "will not be nor have a slave," but in March 1796 Heron would vote against the abolition of the slave trade.¹⁵ Is Burns praising Heron himself, or the generic man of independent mind? Is the praise descriptive or aspirational? There is much more to know about Burns's attitude to Heron and his relationship with him, and new research forthcoming, based on the recent discovery of a Burns-annotated edition of his poetry, begins to shed light on Burns's investment in Heron. The conundrum of Heron voting against the abolition of slavery, despite all his vaunted credentials as a "Whig," begins to become explicable. Most likely, Burns saw Heron as an avatar of "liberty" due to the latter springing from revered Covenanting stock. In precisely that year, 1795, Burns (as his lines on "The Solemn League and Covenant" demonstrate) was in revisionist historical mode, reading the Covenanters—post-French Revolution—as doughty defenders of freedom. Again in 1795, as "Is there for honest poverty" ("A Man's a Man") shows, Burns was in hot poetic quest for "the man of independent mind."

University of South Carolina

University of Glasgow

¹⁵ *History of Parliament*, as in n. 6 above.