

12-22-2022

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Recommended Citation

Scott, Patrick and Young, Ronnie (2022) "Robert Burns to Maria Riddell, a Lost Burns Manuscript and a Victorian Facsimile," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 48: Iss. 2, 207–214.

DOI: 10.51221/suc.ssl.2023.48.2.16

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol48/iss2/15>

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**ROBERT BURNS TO MARIA RIDDELL,
A LOST BURNS MANUSCRIPT
AND A VICTORIAN FACSIMILE**

Patrick Scott and Ronnie Young

The forthcoming *Correspondence* volumes in the Oxford Edition of Robert Burns will break with new ground in several ways, most obviously as the first edition to collect both sides of Burns's correspondence and as the first to provide the fuller annotation that readers now expect.¹ Less obvious may be the results of the project's systematic reexamination of the text of Burns's own letters. Despite the very real achievements of the previous Clarendon editors, J. DeLancey Ferguson in 1931 and G. Ross Roy in 1985, there remained even in Roy's revised second edition "over one hundred" Burns letter manuscripts seen by some previous editor "but of which the present whereabouts are unknown."² Readers of the new edition may be surprised at how many of these missing manuscripts the project team have managed to track down, but some still remain so far unlocated. Perhaps surprisingly, for a few of these the best extant source is now a Victorian facsimile of Burns's autograph.³

A case in point is Robert Burns's short cover letter some time in spring 1795 to Maria Riddell, sending her a miniature for her comment and

¹ Dr. Young's part in the research reported here is in connection with the *Oxford Edition of Robert Burns*, general editor Gerard C. Carruthers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012-), and the AHRC-funded project "Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century."

² J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931); G. Ross Roy, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., revd, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), I: lxiii.

³ Facsimiles of Burns letters and manuscripts are not systematically covered in the Burns bibliographies, especially facsimiles of individual Burns items included in more general autograph facsimile volumes. We have both been pursuing these independently; but see Joe Fisher, ed., *Catalogue of the Robert Burns Collection Mitchell Library* (Glasgow: Glasgow City Libraries and Archives, 1996), 112-113; and Patrick Scott, "A Neglected Source for Burns Manuscripts? Some Old Guides for Autograph Collectors," *Robert Burns Lives!*, 260 (December 2017), online at: https://electricScotland.com/familytree/frank/burns_lives260.htm.

asking for the return of a manuscript poem. The letter appears to have been undated, except for the note “Saturday, six P.M.,” and since it was sent by hand there would be no postmark. The first Burns editor to include it was P. Hately Waddell, in June 1868, who assigned it to 1795.⁴ Both Ferguson and Roy narrow this down to “[Spring 1795],” based on Burns’s reference to his health and to the miniature.⁵

Waddell and Ferguson were both using Burns’s manuscript, but by 1985 Roy was unable to track it down, and so far it has not been available to the Glasgow editors. Waddell gave his source as “From the original in the possession of Thos. Chas. S. Corry, M.D., Belfast,” phrasing ambiguous enough to cover him seeing the original, but equally working from it at secondhand, from a copy sent him by Corry or from the facsimile discussed below.⁶ It was one of four Burns-related manuscripts that James Gibson reported as owned by Corry, in his 1881 Burns bibliography, though other sources show that Corry had sold at least one of the four before Gibson published.⁷ The separate catalogue of Corry’s collection

⁴ P. Hately Waddell, ed., *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Glasgow: David Wilson, 1867-69), II: 61. Waddell’s edition was issued in parts, with this letter appearing in Part XV, June 1868; see Patrick Scott and Robert L. Betteridge, “The Part Issue of Hately Waddell’s Life and Works of Robert Burns,” *Journal of the Edinburgh Bibliographical Society*, no. 12 (2017): 67-84 (71).

⁵ Ferguson, II: 299 (letter 668); Roy, II: 354.

⁶ Dr. Thomas Charles Stewart [or Steuart] Corry (1825?-1896), MRCS London, M.D. Aberdeen, L.R.C.P. Edinburgh, a Belfast physician, public health reformer, concert promoter, and mineral water manufacturer, also edited *Irish Lyrics, Songs & Poems* (Belfast: J Allen, 1879, 2nd ed. 1884); see Linde Lunney, “Corry, Thoms Charles Steuart,” in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2009, entry revd 2010): <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.002069.v2>; Catherine W. Reilly, *Mid-Victorian Poetry, 1860-1879: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 109.

⁷ James Gibson, *Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Kilmarnock: J. M’Kie, 1881), 273; Of the other three items listed by Gibson as in Corry’s collection, the most important, Burns’s letter to Maria Riddell (from [Mar.? 1795], in Roy, II: 342-343, letter 658, as unlocated), was sold at Puttick and Simpson, London, June 5, 1878 (reported in *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, June 7, 1878, 2); it was later owned by R.B. Adam of Buffalo (*Autograph Poems and Letters of Robert Burns*, Buffalo: privately printed, 1922, 69-72), from whose collection it was used by Ferguson (II: 289-290), and then sold by Adam to Dr. A.S.W. Rosenbach in 1924, in whose collection it remained (*Guide to the Robert Burns holdings in the Rosenbach Museum & Library*, 20 January 2021, 22-23: *EMs 462/26.30). For the fate of a second letter from Corry’s collection, see Valentina Bold and Nancy Grose, “‘What was become of Mr Burns’ children’: Jean Armour’s 1804 letter to Maria Riddell, a New York junk shop, and serendipity,” *Scottish Literary Review*, 2.1 (2010): 117-133. Also with a possible Corry provenance, not listed by Gibson, is Burns’s letter Burns to Maria Riddell, c. June-July 1795, in Roy, II: 361-362, now in the Cowie

made after his death in 1896, presumably for a sale, was not unfortunately available to us.⁸ In the early 1920s, the manuscript of this letter was owned by the great Burns collector John Gribbel of Philadelphia, who allowed Ferguson to use it for his edition.⁹ Gribbel died in 1936, and his collection was sold off in four major auctions at Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York, but we have not found this letter in any of the four Gribbel sale catalogues. By the time Ross Roy was working on the letters, however, in the 1960s and 70s, the manuscript's ownership was unknown, and we have found no record of it having been offered for sale since.¹⁰ The manuscript letter itself must survive somewhere, and, ideally, this note will encourage someone to communicate information about the letter's current institutional or private ownership to the Glasgow editorial team. Meantime, however, the best source for the letter text, and the earliest available source, is the Victorian facsimile reported here.

The Burns facsimile appeared in 1864 in a very wide-ranging collection of facsimile manuscript material, *The Autographic Mirror / L'Autographe Cosmopolite*. The original London publisher was Vincent Brooks (1815-1885), already recognized as a skilled lithographer. In 1867, Brooks would buy out a rival firm, Day and Son, in 1867, adding their name to his subsequent publications, notably for his large-format photo-lithographic facsimile edition in 1868 which reproduced Handel's manuscripts for the *Messiah*.¹¹

As the alternative title indicates, Brooks aimed to market the work to both British and European collectors. The work was published in parts, reducing the upfront capital costs for both publisher and purchasers. Each

Collection, National Library of Scotland.

⁸ *Catalogue of books, portraits, autograph letters, &c., the library of the late Doctor Corry, Belfast* (Bangor: printed at the "North Down Herald" Office, 1896).

⁹ Ferguson, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ See, e.g., *American Book Prices Current* and *Rare Book Hub*, the two searchable databases of book auctions and dealer catalogues currently available. An image of the letter was included in Peter Westwood's *Definitive Illustrated Companion to Robert Burns*, 8 vols. [15 parts] ([Irvine]: for the Distributed National Burns Collection Project, 2004 [-2008]), IV: 2613, but without indicating if he was reproducing direct from the manuscript (and if so, where it is), or, as in other instances, from a facsimile or other intermediate source.

¹¹ Frederic Boase, *Modern English Biography*, 6 vols (London: privately printed, 1892; repr. Frank Cass, 1965), I: 421; *Edinburgh Evening News* (October 9, 1885), 4 ("the well-known chromo-lithographer"); *Fac-Simile of the Autograph Score of Messiah: An Oratorio* (London: Vincent Brooks, Day, & Son, for the Sacred Harmonic Society, 1868). Brooks's son Frederick Vincent Brooks joined him in the business, printing the first *Vanity Fair* cartoons in 1869, and was followed by two grandsons: "A Master Lithographer," *The Times*, 11 August 1921, p. 13.

issue or number included sixteen pages of lithographed manuscripts, often with several items to a page, with background information about the writer in letter-press. Initially, the letter-press material appeared alongside the document on the same page, but by the third number the two were separated, and the lithographs and letter-press formed two different sections, on different weights of paper, with the background material in double columns, in English and French.¹² The first numbers cost sixpence, but by the summer the price had doubled to one shilling. Nonetheless, the venture seems to have been deservedly successful. It was widely advertised and noticed, drawing praise both as “cheap and excellent” and for “the fidelity of the reproduction”; it was, said another reviewer, “an idea ... as successful as it is obvious.”¹³

When a new series was launched in June 1865, under a new London publisher Alfred Ives, an expanded subtitle promised *Inedited Autographs of Illustrious and Distinguished Men of Past and Present Times; Sovereigns, Statesmen, Warriors, Divines; Historians, Lawyers, Literary, Scientific, Artistic, and Theatrical Celebrities*, and Ives could list copublishers or distributors in Paris, Brussels, Leipzig, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. At that time, the weekly numbers could also be purchased as monthly parts, at a very modest 2 shillings a part, or 2s. 4d. including postage. A year later still, the project had been taken over by Cassells, Petter, and Galpin, who had offices both in London and New York, and the French title was dropped from the title-page, and *Inedited Letters of ...* became *Autographic Letters and Sketches of ...*. The net was cast wide in defining who counted as illustrious, distinguished or celebrated, with autographs ranging from, e.g. Mary, Queen of Scots, Shakespeare, and Charles I, to Queen Victoria, Walter Scott, Byron, Pius IX, Maria Edgeworth, Dickens, Tennyson, Carlyle, Garibaldi, and Disraeli, as well as Napoleon, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee,

¹² The bibliography of the part-issues and volumes is complex, with differing titles, subtitles, and publishers listed on a lithographed title-pages, printed volume title-pages, and the covers and headers of individual parts; in summary, *The Autographic Mirror...*, 4 vols (vols 1-2: London: Vincent Brooks, 1864-1865; vol. 3: London, Paris, etc.: Alfred Ives, Galignani, et al, 1865; vols 3-4, and reissue of vols 1-2, London and New York: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1866). For this article we used holdings in the National Library of Scotland, the University of South Carolina’s Robert L. Wickenheiser Collection of John Milton, Ronnie Young’s personal copy, and Patrick Scott’s copy of the Burns segment, in addition to partial sets online from EBSCO (part 1, American Antiquarian Society) and Hathitrust (vols. 3-4, University of Illinois).

¹³ *Morning Herald* (February 25, 1864), 6; *Notes & Queries*, 3rd ser. 6 (September 10, 1864): 220.

Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis. Sets are not uncommon in libraries, but understandably many copies are incomplete.

The Burns letter appeared in Part X of the *Autographic Mirror*, advertised as available on July 1, 1864.¹⁴ Burns was the only poet or writer among 14 assorted celebrities featured in the number, and errors in the letter-press biographical note show suggest that whoever prepared it had little knowledge of Burns. The letter-press does, however, confirm that in 1864 the manuscript was already owned by Dr. Thomas Corry of Belfast, pushing the provenance and first publication back four years earlier than when it was used by Waddell.

More important, of course, is the facsimile itself. Before photolithography, Burns facsimiles, whether copperplates, lithographs, or wood engraving, all involved someone imitating Burns's handwriting, perhaps from a tracing or the image from a camera lucida.¹⁵ While these processes might all seem likely to lead to distortions, and the copyists for the most part, copyists not only give a faithful reproduction of the original wording but also show small corrections and slips of the pen. It is quite usual for the penstrokes in a facsimile to appear shaky or overcareful by comparison with Burns's later bold hand, but at this point in Burns's life, if the pen strokes seem shaky, that might be attributed, as Burns admits, to illness.

In the absence of the original letter, it is not possible to use paper or ink analysis to confirm the authenticity of Dr. Corry's letter, and so of Brooks's facsimile. We have found no provenance record for the letter before Brooks's lithographic facsimile in 1864, but the facsimile is more than twenty years before Antique Smith and the heyday of Burns forgery, removing one cause for doubt, and Corry's ownership of a second well-authenticated Burns letter to Maria Riddell suggests he could have acquired the two letters from the same source. A sceptical editor might question whether the final PM and RB were Burns's own, or a later addition, but Burns did sign short notes with his initials. In short, there seems no reason to doubt that this facsimile was based on the original manuscript letter.

Even such a short letter raises problems in dating and annotation. No editor has risked an exact date for this letter, so its place in the sequence of Burns's letters to Riddell remains uncertain. The "Mrs. Scott" whom Burns

¹⁴ *Morning Post* (Friday, July 1, 1864), 8; *Morning Herald* (July 2, 1864), 1. The *Mirror* had started out, on February 20, 1864, publishing 3 numbers a month, but adjusted that to two in early March. *Globe* (February 16, 1864), 1; *London Evening Standard* (March 3, 1864), 3.

¹⁵ For a more general discussion, cf Patrick Scott, as in n. 3 above.

Was accident, meeting with M:^{rs} Scot on
the street, & having the miniature
in a Book in my pocket, I send you
it; as I understand that a servant of
yours is in town. — The painter, in
my opinion, has spoilt the likeness. —
Return me the bagatell per first
opportunity. — I am so ill as to be
scarcely able to hold this miserable pen
to this miserable paper —
Saturday, six, P.M. RB

**Robert Burns, letter to Maria Riddell [1795], in *Autographic Mirror*,
Lx (July 1, 1864), leaf 59; image courtesy of the Robert L. Wickenheiser
Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries.**

met in the street in Dumfries remains unidentified, but she must have been known to both Burns and Riddell, since she told him that one of Riddell's servants had come into town. Though it might refer to the portrait, elsewhere Burns uses the dismissive or self-deprecating word "bagatelle" ("a trifle, a thing of no importance") for one of his own poems that he had shared in manuscript with a correspondent. If he is using it that way here, it is frustrating not to know which of his recent poems he wanted Riddell to return to him, and why.¹⁶

More frustrating still, though, is Burns's mention of "the miniature" that accompanied the letter. Roy, and most recent commentators, identify

¹⁶ See, e.g., Burns to Agnes McLehose, December 6, 1787, Roy, I: 181; to Helen Craik, January 12, 1790, Roy, II: 128; "To the Publisher of a Newspaper," February 25, 1796, Roy, II: 377.

this as the Reid miniature now in the Scottish Portrait Gallery.¹⁷ In the other letter to Riddell owned by Corry, from the same general time-period but also undated, Burns mentioned he had been sitting for his portrait to Alexander Reid (1747-1823), that Reid's miniature was "by far the best likeness of me ever was taken," and that if Maria visited Reid's studio, Reid would show it to her, though Burns wanted both "the Miniature's existence and its destiny" to be "an inviolable secret."¹⁸ In a letter to George Thomson, Burns describes Reid's miniature as "the most remarkable likeness of what I am at this moment, that I think was ever taken of anybody."¹⁹

However, in the shorter letter discussed here, he comments that the "painter has, in my opinion, spoiled the likeness." The Reid miniature in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, is in water colour on ivory, so if Reid botched his final brush-strokes and spoiled the likeness, that should be visible. If the reference here is not to the Reid miniature, what spoiled likeness could it be? Ferguson, who identified the Reid miniature with a quite different Burns portrait then owned by Oliver Barrett, offered no annotation to either letter. Waddell, writing before the Scottish National Portrait Gallery miniature was known, identified the reference here as to a portrait of Burns's eldest son, one of the soon-discredited Kerry Miniatures he had featured in his edition, and explained Burns's critical comment quite differently, saying it seemed "to refer to the miniature of the Poet's eldest son, which is an admirable likeness of the boy; but no likeness in such a case ever satisfied a parent."²⁰

Given their greatly increased monetary value, it is perhaps surprising that there are still Burns letters for which no manuscript can now be found. As this example shows, one recourse is to find out if there was ever a

¹⁷ An enlargeable digital image is available on the National Galleries of Scotland site: [https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/1957?subjects\[30515\]](https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/1957?subjects[30515]). The identification of it as being Burns by the Edinburgh collector and art-dealer W.F. Watson (who bequeathed it to the gallery in 1886, and Watson's primary evidence was a glued-on bookplate linked to Burns's Excise superior John Mitchell. The reference in Burns's letter to Thomson that the miniature was in Edinburgh "getting itself be-crystallized etc." also matches the Watson miniature. Basil cautioned the identification was "presumption, not proof": Skinner, *Burns: Authentic Likenesses*, revd ed. (Darvel: Alloway, 1990), 13.

¹⁸ Roy, II: 343.

¹⁹ Roy, II: 356.

²⁰ Waddell, II: 61; cf. Waddell, II: Appendix, lxxiv. Waddell does have the full text of Burns's other letter to Riddell, with the positive comment on the miniature, so cannot have seen Corry's manuscript of that. On the third mention, in Burns's letter to Thomson, Waddell also references the Kelly miniature; Waddell, II: 102n. and Appendix, lxviiv.

facsimile. Because of the way such facsimiles were produced and sometimes cropped, caution is proper, and there is no good or comprehensive guide to help find or evaluate the Burns facsimiles. Nonetheless, Victorian facsimiles represent a valuable source for Burns research that is still largely untapped.

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