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The Coulter Collection of Burns Manuscripts

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In the Department of Manuscripts of the National Library of Scotland we are fairly used to members of the public bringing in for an opinion documents which they believe to be original manuscripts of Robert Burns. Some of these turn out to be common and well-known facsimiles, often framed behind dirty glass—"Robert Bruce's March to Bannockburn" is an outstanding example. Many are the owners who go away clutching their "Scots wha hae..." from great-granny's living-room wall, disappointed to be told that what they have is only a reproduction. Then there are the celebrated Alexander Howland ('Antique') Smith forgeries. These are more confusing as they are, unlike a facsimile, intended to deceive. They have to be examined patiently for tell-tale details such as the use of a steel pen, or the presence of letter-forms a little too laboured; or until one is sure that the strange, indefinable feeling of the thing being just wrong is indeed the proper judgement. The National Library has a good collection of 'Antique' Smith forgeries, and will very occasionally buy some such spurious document for the intrinsic interest that it has as a fine specimen of the forger's art, or else simply for the altruistic purpose of taking such an item off the market and out of the temptation of unscrupulous dealers and unwary autograph-hunters. And so it is with circumspection that we have
learned to view any "Burns manuscript" that turns up, especially if it is brought in casually by a passer by.

When in the summer of 1986 I was told that a gentleman in the entrance hall of the Library had a Burns manuscript which he wanted to discuss, I went up with the usual air of scepticism. It turned out that the visitor did not have the manuscript volume with him—he explained that it was a book containing several letters and poems—but offered to bring it in should we be interested. I explained the peculiar problems of forgery that beset Burns manuscript studies, and I was also very anxious to establish the potential vendor's title to dispose of this literary property: the book, it emerged, was not his but belonged to a relation.

When eventually the visitor returned with the volume, I was amazed. Here was a superb group of Burns manuscripts, all authentic, and several with a provenance which could be established up till about the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Some provided holograph texts for letters or poems of which no other manuscript was known. But if I was suspicious of the vendor's title, he also appeared distrustful of my reluctance to offer him outright what he was convinced the items were worth. There was something of an impasse. Independent valuation was a step which the visitor seemed unwilling to countenance. After some anxious days of communication between the Library, booksellers of the greatest respectability, and the stranger (who now seemed to be acting as agent for the actual owner who remained in Lockerbie) negotiations broke down. The album was withdrawn, the reason advanced being that the owner did not now after all wish to sell. Naturally we were disappointed. What we had established in the very short time available to us was that the finest collection of Burns material to have come on the market for years was in the hands of a private individual whose identity we had confirmed through the voters' roll. But as the circumstances of ownership and offer had been so confused and so provoking of suspicion on our part, we were in a way relieved that we were not liable to become embroiled in some legal dispute. For six months we heard nothing of the volume, and received no further approach about it. Then, without warning, the collection appeared in a Phillips (London) catalogue, and it was purchased for the National Library at auction on 11 December 1986, Phillips having satisfied themselves as to the legal ownership of the album. It is now catalogued as MS. 23150.

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The green morocco volume bears the bookplate of Adam Sim of Coulter. Sim was a noted collector of "objects rare, curious and antique" (as the Ordnance Gazetteer puts it),¹ and the collection which he had formed at Coulter Mains, in the parish of Culter, near Biggar in Lanarkshire, was dispersed at his death. Some of his coins, and prehistoric and Roman antiquities, are now in the Royal Museum of Scotland. What happened to this volume since it left Sim's collection remains obscure, though as at least two of the items in it are now known to have been in the possession of the Jardines of Castlemilk in the 1870s, the supposition must be that the album was acquired by the then head of that family from Sim's estate. The Castlemilk connection of two of the manuscripts was unknown to us at the time of our purchase, and only emerged when detailed textual study of the contents of the album was taking place. What remains unclear is when or how the volume passed out of the Jardine collection.² But at least we can say a good deal about the history, up till and including their acquisition by Adam Sim, of the individual Burns letters and poems which his album contains. There are in total three holograph manuscripts of poems and songs; three of letters (one of these being the letter as sent, and two being rough drafts); one fragment of glossary; one letter of Robert Tannahill and one of Allan Cunningham; and miscellaneous papers and news cuttings relating to sales of Burns manuscripts and to various Burns traditions, festivals, legends and the like.

By far the most important holograph in the Sim album is the "Epistle to John Lapraik" (MS. 23150, ff. 1-2v). The text of this manuscript is reproduced below as Appendix I. There are many variants from the text as established by Kinsley (I, 57), and some few from the copy of the poem made for the First Commonplace Book in 1785.³ Ferguson and Roy note (I, p. 25, under 19 C (1)) that the manuscript of this fine verse-epistle is not traced: therefore in the absence of the First Commonplace Book which was in the Law Collection before 1939, the present manuscript constitutes our only holograph text. (It should be recorded, in passing, that


Adam Sim was offered the chance to buy the Second [Alloway] Commonplace Book in 1862. This was then in the possession of the Edinburgh bookseller James Stillie of 78 Princes Street, who wrote to Sim on 30 December (f. 25) describing the volume and setting its price at 50. "Will this tempt you?", Stillie enquired. Probably it did; but Sim, never a man to part with his money very freely, did not buy.) The Sim manuscript preserves the original epistolary structure of the Lapraik poem with salutation, ending and signature. At the end of the poem the following note has been added: "This sheet is the Original epistle written and signed by the hand of Burns and sent to John Lapraik Muirkirk— In 1799 I was in the old Bard's house, and he seeing me such an enthusiastic admirer of Burns, presented me with the sheet. John Pollock." The final lines of the present holograph were reproduced in facsimile by W. Scott Douglas in his edition of 1877 (Vol. I, opposite p. 115). The manuscript was then in the possession of Robert Jardine, Castlemilk, Lockerbie [afterwards Sir Robert Jardine of Castlemilk, 1st baronet].

The second of the verse items in the album (ff. 8-8v) is the only known manuscript of "O'er the Moor amang the Heather" (Kinsley, II, 635). J.C. Dick noted that this song was entirely unknown until it was printed as number 328 in Vol. IV of Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum* (1792) "from Burns's MS." It is this manuscript which, until now, we have lacked. Burns had, of course, taken the song down from Jean Glover. Collation of this Burns holograph with the text in *The Scots Musical Museum* shows that Johnson followed the manuscript exactly (even down to the exclamation marks in the final stanza), save only for "thegether" as the last word in the first stanza before the chorus, though this is printed correctly as in the manuscript ("thegither") as the last word of the chorus to the first stanza. The manuscript bears below Burns's title a contemporary note of the location of the song in *The Scots Musical Museum*.

The third verse manuscript (f. 9) is "The Sons of old Killie" (Kinsley, I, 128). This is the actual holograph from which Cunningham took the text printed in the fourth volume of his edition of *The Works of Robert Burns* in 1834 (p. 32). Cunningham transcribed, not wholly accurately, the later note which is written below Burns's verses. This actually reads: "NB This song wrote by Mr. Burns was sung by him in the Kilmarnock Kilwinning Lodge in 1786 & given by him to W. Parker who was then Master of the Lodge. W. Parker." The manuscript, which is laid down and is now mounted on a folio of Sim's album, was once in a frame; and on f. 9v is some documentation illustrating the provenance of this particular holograph. The documentation is in the form of the original backing of the

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frame, which bears notes in the hand of Gabriel Neil of Glasgow (editor of Zachary Boyd's *Zion's Flowers*), in whose possession the manuscript was when Cunningham was compiling his edition. Neil wrote: "A Copy of this Song was given by me to Allan Cunningham who printed it in his Edition of the Works of Burns; besides having supplied Mr C with much original information illustrating the life of Burns incorporated by him in the Biography of the Poet—for which see his letters to me—G N." Neil had headed the sheet with this note on provenance: "The Handwriting of Robert Burns. This specimen presented to me by John Parker Esquire of Aslop near Kilmarnock whose Father was one of the earliest patrons of the Poet." Neil also added a note on the tune of the song: "'Tune Shawn-boy' supposed to be the same as 'Marquis of Granby' at least it bore this title in his time in Queen Anne's Reign—'Over the Water to Charlie' is also the same—The word in Irish signifies *Shawn John, boy* yellow, or *Yellow John*." Sim appears to have bought the manuscript, framed, at the sale of Neil's library and collection on 9 October 1862: the cover of the sale catalogue is pasted into Sim's album.

The first of the letters in the volume (ff. 3-4) is the holograph manuscript of Ferguson and Roy, I, 256 (to George Lockhart, 18 July 1788). A missing original Burns text is thus supplied, and that of a good letter to the bargain. This is the actual manuscript which Douglas reproduced in facsimile in 1877 (Vol. V, opposite p. 141) and which he used to correct Cromek's text; though in facsimile the whole letter appears to occupy one side of a folio sheet, whereas in reality it is a quarto with the turn of the page being made at line 14 ("falls of Bruar/to his Grace of Athole..."). Like the manuscript of the "Epistle to John Lapraik," this document was, when Douglas was at work, in the possession of Robert Jardine at Castlemilk. Sim bought this letter at the sale of William Pickering's collection at Sotheby & Wilkinson's, 12-13 December 1854. It was a modest purchase in a sale which included some superb Burns lots: the manuscripts of "Scots wha hae...," "The Brigs of Ayr," and "Auld Lang Syne" were among some 36 letters and many autograph poems. Sim kept in his album a newspaper report of the sale which printed a selection of prices paid (f. 5), together with a letter from the man who had actually bid on his behalf in Sotheby's rooms. On 14 December 1854 Patrick Fraser wrote from London (ff. 6-7):

I have great pleasure in sending you what I consider, and trust that you will also consider, a most interesting letter of Robert Burns, the result of my purchase for you at 48/-. I selected this letter as well for its intrinsic merit, it being very illustrative of certain points in the Poet's character; as also, because of the names of the parties so floridly spoken of.
Surely the Bailies cannot be your neighbours i.e. the same family—if so, the letter will be doubly valuable to you.

It was fortunate for your purse that you had limited me. I was sorely tempted to bid for "Scots wha hae" written in a fine bold hand, as if the Poet had written in great energy. It went for 30!!! The other prices took their average from yours.

F. 12 is a folio sheet of Excise Office paper bearing on the recto a holograph draft letter to Francis Grose (Ferguson and Roy, II, 408) and on the verso a similar, though much shorter draft to Professor Dugald Stewart (Ferguson and Roy, II, 409). The manuscripts of both these letters have been untraced in modern times, and their appearance now is very welcome. In the case of the first, we have had to rely on Cromek's text alone (no. XLVII). No indication has been given in any edition of Burns's letters that the surviving holograph is only a draft. But collation now shows that Cromek's text is accurate except in matters of capitalization and punctuation. For the second letter (to Stewart), Douglas provided our text, though he gave no source. Collation here, too, indicates the general correctness of the letter as we find it today in Ferguson and Roy, except for one omitted word, which is "still" before "more precarious" in the discussion of Grose's available time and the state of his health.

The final Burns autograph item in the Sim album (f. 10) is a fragment of glossary. The slip (one of numerous such pieces which have come on the market over many years, and which appear as collections are broken up or as someone suddenly realizes what they are—just as so many other such slips must have been destroyed in ignorance of their significance) contains but six dialect words and their definitions. Despite the later inscription at the bottom of the fragment to the effect that the glossary is from the first (Kilmarnock) edition of Burns's poems, the manuscript is in fact a portion of the glossary to the Edinburgh edition of 1787.5

Two other manuscripts of Scottish literary interest are included in the Sim album. One (f. 13) is a previously unpublished letter of Robert Tannahill on the subject of meetings of the Paisley Burns Society in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and of poetical effusions commissioned for such events.6 This is transcribed here as Appendix II. The other (f. 16) is a letter of Allan Cunningham to the publisher James Cochrane, dated 8 October 1834. Cunningham discusses the final contributions to his

5I am indebted to Professor G. Ross Roy for helpful discussion of these portions of glossary.

6The letter is not in David Semple, The Poems and Songs and Correspondence of Robert Tannahill (Paisley, 1876).
eight-volume edition of Burns to be published that year: "I have completed the Glossary: it will make about one hundred pages, and cannot fail I think to be acceptable I think [sic] to all the purchasers of Burns." (In fact the glossary in Vol. VIII occupies pages 223-316). Cunningham continues with some thoughts on the illustrations in the last volume, including D.O. Hill's frontispiece showing the town and harbour of Ayr which he considered "admirable." (Hill had made all the topographical illustrations for the edition.) Cunningham also sent with the letter to Cochrane the original manuscript of "The blue-eyed lassie" (Kinsley, I, 232; the MS. is now in the Alloway collection)—"I gaed a waefu' gate yestreen"—so that a facsimile might be made of it. "Tell the engraver to take great care of it: if he soils it or spoils it he will be infamous in this world and damned in the next." This facsimile (published in Vol. VIII, opposite p. 160), together with the silhouette and engraving of Burns's seal (Vol. VIII, opposite p. 188), would add greatly, thought Cunningham, "to the attractions of our last appearance."

National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh

APPENDIX I

f.1 Sir,

While breres and woodbines buddin' green,
An' Paitricks scraichin' loud at e'en,
An' mornin' Pussie whuddin' seen

Inspire my muse;

This freedom in an unknown frien'

I pray excuse. —

On Fasten e'en we had a rockin'
To caw the crack an' weave our stockin',
An' there was meikle fun an' jockin'

Ye needna doubt,

At length we had a hearty yokin'
At sang about.—

There was ae sang amang the rest,
Aboon then a' it pleas'd me best,
That some kind husband had addrest

To some sweet wife;

It touch'd the feelings o' the breast
A' to the life.—
I've scarce heard ought I loo'd sae weel,
The style sae tasty an' genteel,
Thought I can 'his be Pope or Steele,
    Or Beattie's wark;
They told me 'twas an odd kind chiel
    About Muirkirk.—

My heart was fidgein' fain to hear't
An' sae about him a' I speir't,
Then a' that ken't him roun' declar't
    He was a devil,
But had a frank an' friendly heart,
    Discreet an' civil.—

That set him to a pint of ale,
And either douse or merry tale,
Or rhymes, or sangs he'd made himsel,
    Or witty catches,
'Tween Inverness, an' Tiviotdale,
    He had few matches.—

Then up I gat an' swoor an aith
Tho' I sud pawn my plough an' graith,
Or die a cadger-pownie's death
    At some dyke back,
A pint an' gill I'd gie them baith
    To hear your crack.—

But first an' foremost I sud tell,
Amaist sin' first that I cou'd spell
I've dealt in makin' rhymes mysel
    Tho rude an' rough,
But croonin' at a pleuch, or flail,
    Do weel enough.—

I am nae Poet in a sense
But just a Rhymer like by chance,
An' hae to learnin' nae pretence
    But what the matter?
Whene'er my muse does on me glance
    I jingle at her.—

Your Critic fo'k may cock their nose
An' say "how can you e'er propose
 "You wha ken hardly verse by prose
    To mak a sang?"
But by your leave my learned foes
    Ye're may-be wrang.—
What's a your jargon o' your schools,
Your latin names for horns, an' stools,
If honest Nature made you fools
What sairs your grammars?
Ye'd better ta'en up spades an' shools,
Or knappin' hammers.—

A set o' silly senseless hashes
Confuse their brains in Colledge classes,
They gang in stirks an' come out asses
Thus sae to speak,
An' then they think to climb Parnassus
By dint o' Greek.—

Gie me ae spark o' nature's fire
That's a' the learnin' I desire,
Then tho' I drudge through dub an' mire
At pleuch or cart,
My muse tho' hamely in attire
May touch the heart.—

O for a spunk o' Allan's glee,
Or Ferguson the bauld an' slee,
Or tight Lapraik, my friend to be
If I can hit it,
That wou'd be lear enough for me
If I cou'd get it.—

Now, Sir, gif ye hae frien's enow,
Tho real frien's I b'lieve are few,
Yet if your catalogue be fow
Ise no insist,
But if ye want ae frien' that's true
I'm on your list.—

I winna blaw about mysel,
As ill I like my faults to tell,
But frien's an' fo'k that wish me well
They sometimes roose me,
Tho I maun own as mony still
As far abuse me.—

There's ae wee faut they whiles lay to me,
I like the lasses, Gude forgie me,
For mony a plack they weedle fae me
At dance or fair;
May be some ither thing they gie me
They weel can spare.—
At Machline race, or Machline fair,
I sud be blythe to meet you there;
We'll gi'e ae night's discharge to care
If we forgather,
An' hae a swap o' rhymin' ware
Wi' anither.—

The four gill chap we'll gar him clatter,
An' kirsten him wi' reekin' water,
Syne we'se sit down an' tak' our whitter
To cheer our heart;
An' faith we'se be acquainted better
Before we part.—

Awa ye selfish, warl'y race,
Wha (think) that havins sense an' (grace)
Even love, an' friendship must give place
To catch th' plack;
I dinna like to see your face,
Nor hear your crack.—

But ye whom social pleasure charms,
Whose hearts true, generous frien'ship warms,
Who hold you, beings on the terms
"Each aid the others:"
Come to my bowl, come to my arms
My frien's, my brothers.—

But to conclude my lang epistle,
As {my au}ld pen's {worn to the gristle},
Twa lines frae you wad gar me fistle,
Who am most fervent,
While I can either sing or whistle,

Your friend
and servant

Mossgeil near Machline } ROBERT BURNES
April  1785
APPENDIX II

Mr John Struthers,
Gorbals,
Glasgow

Paisley 26th Sep†. 1807

Dear Sir,

I embrace this opportunity of writing you a few lines by our friend Borland. there was a meeting of the Burns' Society here two weeks ago, and, altho' I was not there, I understand they are relying solely on you for an Ode at next Anniversary, therefor, you will much disappoint us all if you do not furnish us with one. for my own part, I have no thoughts of attempting one line more on the subject, having done what I reckon sufficient for one hand already.—You recollect my advising you to try something in the sonnet style, I send you a little M.S. volume for perusal, I think its contents, in general very pretty—they are the productions of a Mr Paterson, now Minister of the Burgher Congregation, Anan, the originals fell by chance into my hand, and I thought them worthy copying—there are a few incorrect lines in them, which you will notice, and which the author can easily amend—you may keep them till I see you.—Enclosed is a copy of the first sonnet I ever tried, it appeared some time ago in the Caledonian, if you don't like the subject I hope you will pardon my officiousness as, I assure you, it proceeded from a good motive, it was sent to Mr Fulton anonymous and written for me by a friend, so that its insertion could not be owing to any kindness he may have for its author. A few lines from you soon, informing me how Mr Paterson's sonnets please you—and whether we may depend on your kindness for an ode will give me a particular gratification.

I am,

Dear Sir,

With high regard,
Yours most sincerely.
ROBT. TANNAHILL.