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“At Whigham’s Inn”: Mrs. Provost Whigham’s Lost Kilmarnock, the Allan Young Census, and an Unexpected Discovery

**by
Patrick Scott**

There are still many poems attributed to Burns for which basic information seems elusive. One of these has been the short poem “At Whigham’s Inn, Sanquhar,” first included among Burns’s poems in the editions by Henley and Henderson and Chambers and Wallace, both published in 1896.¹ While the 1896 editors noted the poem as originally scratched by Burns into a window pane at the Queensberry Arms in Sanquhar, where Edward Whigham (1750-1823) was innkeeper and later Provost, they seem to have relied for their text on a recent article in the *Burns Chronicle* for 1896, issued late the previous year.² The 1896 article mentioned that, in addition to the window pane itself, still in Sanquhar, there was a transcription of the poem in a copy of the Kilmarnock that Burns had presented to Mrs. Whigham, which was then owned by a Mr. J. R. Wilson.³ Just six lines long, the poem extols the virtue and hospitality of Whigham’s home:

Envy, if thy jaundiced eye,
Through this window chance to spy,
To thy sorrow thou shalt find,
All that’s generous and kind,
Friendship, virtue, every grace,
Dwelling in this happy place.⁴

There is no external evidence for dating the poem, but it has generally been assigned to 1789, when Burns was establishing a home at Ellisland for Jean and his own young family. As Bill Dawson has pointed out, a good number of the “window poems” attributed to Burns are spurious, but “At Whigham’s Inn” has been accepted as authentic by all recent editors, who like their predecessors have relied for their text on the 1896 article.⁵

¹ W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, eds., *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1896 [-1897]), II: 245 and 436n.; Robert Chambers and William Wallace, eds., *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1896), IV: 439.

² Kirkwood Hewat, “Burns and Upper Nithsdale,” *Burns Chronicle*, 1st ser., 5 (1896), pp. 86-97 (p. 93). On Burns’s friendship with Whigham, see David Purdie, Kirsteen McCue, and Gerard Carruthers, eds., *Maurice Lindsay’s Burns Encyclopaedia*, 4th ed. revised (London: Robert Hale, 2013), p. 330.

³ In 1896, the window-pane was reported as being “owned by the representatives of the late Mr. David Barker,” who also owned other Burns material (Hewat, pp. 93-94); in 1988, it was said to be in New Zealand: James Mackay, *Burns-Lore of Dumfries and Galloway* (Ayr: Alloway, 1988), p. 144; but see also below.

⁴ James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I: 459.

⁵ Bill Dawson, “Burns’s Inscriptions on Windows, Part 1: Inscriptions on the Tours,” *Burns Chronicle*, Winter 2012, pp. 4-12; Kinsley, *loc. cit.* and III: 1300; 59, and note at III: 1300; James A. Mackay, ed., *The Complete Works of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed. (Ayr: Alloway Publishing, 1990), p. 350; Andrew Noble

This past summer, new evidence about the poem has surfaced, casting light not only on the text of the poem, but the degree to which it might be authentic Burns. I have been working with Allan Young to update and bring to publication his census of the surviving copies of the Kilmarnock edition, undertaken some years ago but never published.⁶ Mr. Young's original research has held up very well, and we do not expect the total number of surviving copies to edge up very much (though we have found some). He and I would both be delighted if any *Chronicle* reader can send us information or leads to help in locating further copies, perhaps in smaller libraries or still in private ownership. Most of the research this past few months, however, focuses on finding out more about copies previously recorded, as for instance at auction or in one of the major Burns exhibitions.

Our goal is to match these older reports with current ownership, to answer the question Mr. Young posed in the *Chronicle* in 2011: "Where Are They All Now?" When I was checking the Princeton University library web-site for information on a Kilmarnock donated there in 1949, I saw a very short catalogue entry that seemed to be a second copy. It turned out to be an acquisition record for a damaged and incomplete Kilmarnock that the library had purchased in 2012 but not yet fully researched. One of the Princeton rare books staff, Jennifer Meyer, kindly sent me a detailed description, and photographs.⁷

These make clear that Princeton had bought Mrs. Whigham's Kilmarnock, and they let us piece together its previous history. Following the 1896 article, the copy was loaned by Mr. Wilson for the Glasgow Burns exhibition in 1896, and briefly described in the great *Memorial Catalogue*.⁸ Fourteen years later, it was auctioned at Sotheby's, in July 1910, and described in more detail: "wants all before p. 11, pp. 203-206, some leaves stained and a few torn," "orig. half binding," inscribed "This copy of Burns's Poems was presented to Mrs. Provost Whigham of Sanquhar by the Immortal Author Robert Burns," with a transcription at the end of "six lines written by Burns on a pane of glass at the Queensberry Arms, Sanquhar." Inserted in the copy in 1910 were a letter dated 1863 from Robert Burns, "the Poet's son," relating to the Poet's funeral, a notification of the

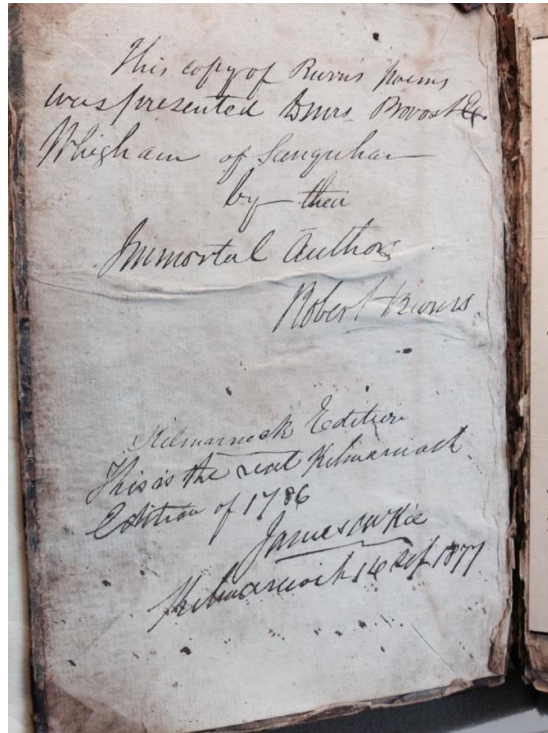
and Patrick S. Hogg, eds., *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2001; revd. ed., 2003), p. 711.

⁶ Allan Young, *An Enquiry into the Locations of the Extant Copies of Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, by Robert Burns, Printed by John Wilson, Kilmarnock, 1786 (The Kilmarnock Edition)* (Drafts: December 2003; revised, September 2008; revised, March 2009); *List of Owners of Known Extant Copies* (July, 2009); "612 'Kilmarnock' Editions: Where are they all now?," *Burns Chronicle* (Summer, 2011), pp. 4-5.

⁷ The images in this article are reproduced courtesy of Rare Books, Princeton University Library. I should like to thank Jennifer Meyer for her help with this inquiry.

⁸ *Catalogue of the Burns Exhibition Galleries of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts, 175 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow* (Glasgow: William Hodge, 1896), p. 415; *Memorial Catalogue of the Burns Exhibition held in the Galleries of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts ... from 15th July to 31st October, 1896* (Glasgow: William Hodge and T. & R. Annan, 1898), p. 400, item 1224.

funeral for Jean Armour in 1834, and an unrelated letter from Mary Carlyle Aitken.⁹ Sotheby's knocked the copy down for £26 10s, to J. W. Hornstein, the London book dealer who sold the Glenriddell Manuscripts to John Gribbel.

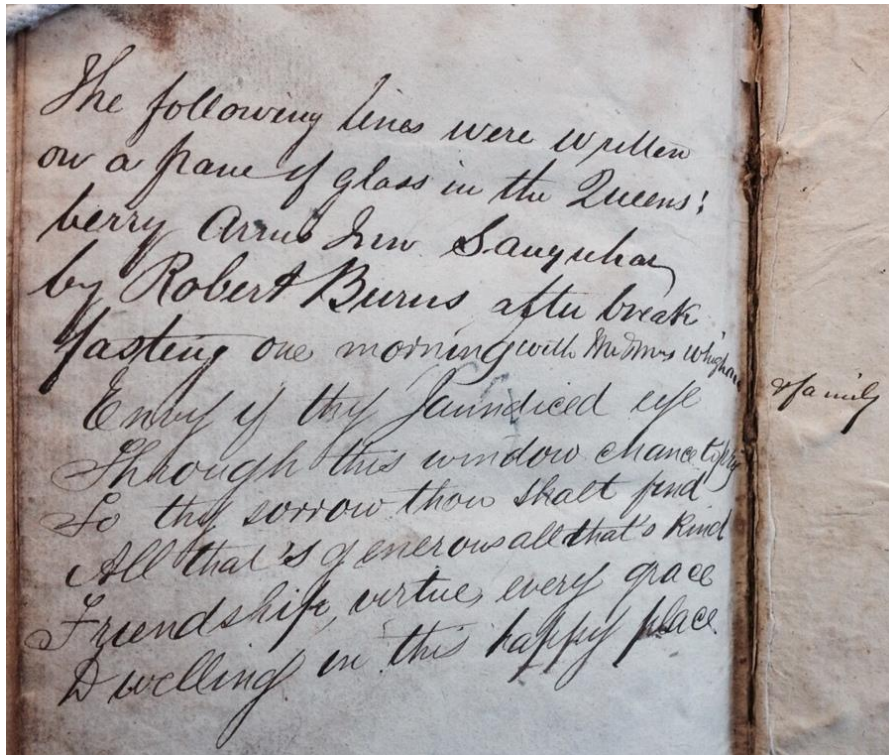


Pl. 1: Inscription ca. 1977, on the front pastedown, Mrs. Provost Whigham's Kilmarnock
Courtesy of Rare Books, Princeton University Library

For the next hundred years, the Whigham copy seemed to have disappeared from the public record, until it turned up at Princeton in 2012, with the binding more battered, missing a few more pages, and without some of the previous inserted material, but recognizably the same copy.¹⁰ The inscription on the front pastedown (inside cover) (Pl. 1) reads as reported in 1910, with only one minor difference (“their” for “the”). A note certifying the copy as a true Kilmarnock, signed by the Burnsian James M’Kie, at the foot of the front pastedown, is dated September 14, 1877, suggesting the date at which the then-owner was trying to add documentation of the copy’s provenance. The transcription, on the back free endpaper (Pl. 2), gives the poem as it was printed in 1896, again with two small variants, in line 2 (“pry” for “spy”) and in line 4 (“all that’s kind” for “and kind”):

⁹ *Book-Auction Records*, 7 (1910), p. 509; cf. *Book Prices Current*, 24, 1910, p. 683. This was not a rock bottom price--in May 1911, a stained copy, lacking the last four pages, but apparently still with its title page, sold at Sotheby's to another dealer for just £3: see *Book Prices Current*, 25 (1911), p. 503.

¹⁰ Jennifer Meyer reports the copy now lacks not just the title page and the last four leaves (pp. 233-240), but also pp. 1-12, 29, 47, 203, 205, 219, 221, and 223, probably extracted to “perfect” other Kilmarnocks in which those leaves had been lost or damaged.



Pl. 2: Transcription of "At Whigham's Inn": rear endpaper, Mrs. Provost Whigham's Kilmarnock
 Courtesy of Rare Books, Princeton University Library

Certainly, even if the copy itself had indeed been a gift from Burns, none of this added material has any immediate link to Burns himself or to Whigham. By 1877, even Whigham's son John, who remembered Burns, had been dead more for more than twenty years.

In fact, if one reads carefully, the 1896 article never claims to have taken the poem directly from the window-pane, or even from Mrs. Provost Whigham's Kilmarnock. The paragraph about the poem in the article was taken *verbatim* from James Brown's *History of Sanquhar*, published five years earlier.¹¹ The first published reference to the verses that I have found is in 1886, when the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* reported that a newly-published guidebook to Sanquhar had printed two new epigrams by Burns, both scratched on window-panes at the inn, one ("Ye gods, ye gave to me a wife") taken from the window pane itself (then "in the possession of the present proprietor"), the other ("Envy if thy jaundiced eye") having been "procured ... from Miss Allison, a granddaughter of Provost Whigham, who repeated them from memory," because "a few years ago, when the house was undergoing repair, one of the panes was accidentally

¹¹ James Brown, *A History of Sanquhar, ... to which is added the Flora and Fauna of the District* (Dumfries: J. Anderson, 1891), p. 266.

broken.”¹² Miss Allison’s memory closely matches the transcription in the Kilmarnock, except for line 3 (“wilt” for “shalt”). Either the transcription in the copy at Princeton, or Miss Allison’s version, must surely now constitute the “best” source for the poem.

However, while I was looking for these earlier published references, I found something else. The search turned up a scholarly article from 1906, in German and apparently unknown to any recent Burns editor, that identified “At Whigham’s Inn” as a slightly-modified version of an earlier but frequently-reprinted epigram by the early 18th-century poet and dramatist John Hughes (1677-1720):

*Written in a window of Wallington-House,
then the seat of Mrs. Elizabeth Bridges, 1719.*

Envy! If thy searching eye
Thro’ this window chance to pry,
To thy sorrow thou shalt find
All that’s gen’rous, friendly, kind,
Goodness, virtue, ev’ry grace,
Dwelling in this happy place:
Then if thou wouldst shun this sight,
Hence for ever take thy flight.¹³

There seems little reason to doubt that the verses known as “At Whigham’s Inn” were once scratched on the inn window-pane in Sanquhar, and perhaps they were even scratched there by Burns. Certainly, as the transcription in Mrs. Provost Whigham’s long-lost but newly rediscovered Kilmarnock attests, they were treasured by the Whigham descendants. But if it was Burns who incised them, they were in the nature of an apt quotation in tribute to the Whighams, rather than an original poem. After all, he never published them, or claimed authorship. Editors of Burns’s songs are accustomed to a spectrum of originality, from songs Burns wrote from scratch, through ones that he reworked heavily or to which he added a new stanza, to ones where he merely tinkered with the odd word here or there. A work can be to some degree authentically Burnsian, without being wholly, or even mainly, by Burns. It would be good to have such categories for some of Burns’s shorter epigrams. Perhaps instead of being swept away as spurious, “At Whigham’s Inn” could be given a similar partial reprieve, but it should no longer be included among Burns’s own works.

¹² *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Wednesday, August 25, 1886, p. 2; William Wilson, *The Visitor’s Guide to Sanquhar & Neighbourhood* (Sanquhar: Wilson [1886]), which I have not yet seen. The second poem mentioned, “Ye Gods, ye gave to me a wife,” is so dubious or spurious as to be omitted both from Kinsley’s Dubia section and Mackay’s Appendix B, in his *Burns A-Z* (Dumfries: Mackay Publishing, 1990); it had been widely published long before Burns was born, as in, e.g., *The Hive, A Collection of the Most Celebrated Songs*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (London: J. Walthoe, 1733), II: 156.

¹³ Otto Ritter, “Burnsiana,” *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, 117 (1906): 47-57 (pp. 48-49), citing John Hughes, *Poetical Works* (Edinburgh, 1779), I: 113, and cf. also Hughes, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 2 vols. (London: Tonson, 1735), II: 166.