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ROBERT BURNS, THE CROCHALLAN FENCIBLES, AND THE ORIGINAL PRINTER OF *THE MERRY MUSES OF CALEDONIA*

Stephen W. Brown

The identity of the printer of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* has remained a mystery since the collection first appeared in 1799. His was a private effort, perhaps undertaken by subscription, but certainly not intended for the public commercial market. His title page is unambiguous in identifying his audience, and as we shall see his was crucially an *audience* rather than a *readership*: this was a book printed exclusively for the “use of the Crochallan Fencibles.” However, it achieved an immediate notoriety that its printer probably never anticipated and one which apparently arose even as the text was being set in type. If Ross Roy and Pauline Mackay are correct, news of the volume’s imminent appearance reached Burns’s first editor, Dr. James Currie, in Liverpool as he was correcting the proofs for his *Works of Robert Burns* in 1800.¹ Consequently he altered a letter from Burns to his friend John McMurdo that enclosed “a Collection of Scots Songs I have for some years been making.” To this Currie appended the disclaimer “very few of them are my [Burns’s] own,” with the apparent intention of dissociating Burns from the pornographic verses that are the hallmark of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*.² But there is no evidence that Currie ever saw this or any other disreputable song selection in Burns’s hand; nor is there any reason to believe that the “Collection of Scots Songs” sent by the poet to McMurdo was the one from which the 1799 *Merry Muses* was printed.

¹ G. Ross Roy, *Robert Burns and The Merry Muses* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), xiii; Pauline Gray Mackay, “Theories, Discoveries, and *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799),” *Burns Chronicle* (Spring 2011): 13-16 (p. 15).

² G. Ross Roy, ed., *Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), II: 137-138 and note on p. 138; hereafter referenced in the text as Roy, *Letters*. The original of the letter to McMurdo is reproduced in Roy, *Robert Burns and The Merry Muses*, xiii-xvi.

The case is the same with another scandalous manuscript supposed to have been copied by Allan Cunningham from Burns's original and discovered by Gershom Legman.³ Whatever its origin, it did not serve the printer of the 1799 *Merry Muses*, whose copy text has proven so elusive that Pauline Mackay thinks it may never have existed. *The Merry Muses*, she suggests, was probably printed from memory by someone who knew well the songs that had delighted Burns and his fellow Crochallans.⁴ As we shall see, it is more likely that *The Merry Muses* had its origins in a manuscript of sorts, but Mackay is correct nonetheless to remind us that print was merely a mnemonic medium for these *songs*, whose vitality derived from voice and not from holograph or type.

It is therefore fitting that much of the fame of *The Merry Muses* in the early nineteenth century depended upon rumours and piracies such as the dubious Dublin edition of 1804 and the derivative *Giblet Pye* collection of 1806. Both Wordsworth and Byron record their predictably diametrical responses to reading some sort of text that purported to be Burns's bawdy song book.⁵ Nothing, however, suggests that either saw an actual copy of the 1799 *Merry Muses*. And the original *Merry Muses* itself, after all, never claimed Robert Burns as its author or its compiler, either on its title page or anywhere else in its text. That is one reason why James Barke had proposed the subtitle "The Crochallan Song Book" for the first scholarly edition of *The Merry Muses*; his co-editor Sydney Goodsir Smith, however, did not follow through with his suggestion when the volume was published after Barke's death.⁶ And although only two copies of the Crochallan original are extant (one in the library of Lord Rosebery with a provenance dating back to the nineteenth century and the other only discovered in the mid-1960s and now part of the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina and reproduced in facsimile in 1999), knock-offs abound. Some, such as the nefarious "1827" edition (actually 1872) and the quasi-scholarly 1979 *Secret Cabinet of Robert Burns* derived their market from promoting the scandalous reputation of the enigmatic *Merry Muses*.⁷ Others, including M'Naught's morally motivated and rather sanctimonious edition in 1911 and the much

³ Gershom Legman, "The Cunningham Manuscript," in *The Horn Book: Studies in Erotic Folklore and Bibliography* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1964), 131-169.

⁴ Mackay, p. 17.

⁵ Legman, "The Merry Muses as Folklore," in *The Horn Book* (as in n. 4 above), 170-236 (p. 177-183).

⁶ Valentina Bold, "Introduction," in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia: A Collection* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2009), 15-84 (pp. 73-82).

⁷ G. Ross Roy, "The '1827' Edition of Robert Burns's *Merry Muses of Caledonia*." *Burns Chronicle* 4th series, 11 (1986): 32-45; Bold, as above, p. 64.

admired Barke-Goodsir Smith-Ferguson effort of 1959, have endeavoured to contextualize the song collection, academically or otherwise, and thus to challenge its reputation as pornography while identifying Burns's actual contributions. But the many versions of the *Merry Muses of Caledonia* mostly demonstrate little or no acquaintance with the Crochallan text of 1799, other than pirating its rare brand and trading on its reputation for rudeness.

The problem with the *Muses*, however, was never actually its scandalous language but rather the way that language was misrepresented by its many imitators and re-inventors. Intended, as we have observed, in its first limited Edinburgh printing, for a private club already familiar with the material, the *Merry Muses* became instead, within a few years of its first appearance, a public text, its initial intimacy made scandalous and its familiarity turned to infamy by deeply flawed imitations. Bawdy songs are convivial, and thus the 1799 *Muses* needs to be understood, in the words of Valentina Bold, as a compilation of "performance texts" or "a set of songs," a perspective originally proposed by James Barke (Bold, 39, 83, 73-74). But the printed page necessarily misrepresents songs by failing to capture their 'live' milieu. Barke had planned to address this problem by including music in the 1959 edition but died before he could complete his efforts. In 2009, Bold included music for eleven of Burns's contributions in her new Luath edition for the fiftieth anniversary of the Barke-Goodsir Smith edition, fulfilling Barke's plan.

Of course, the original compiler of the Crochallan song book had no need to print the music: his readers had performed these pieces often and knew the tunes well. The lyrics on the page served merely to evoke an oral (and aural) experience shared by the Fencibles; they became pornographic when bastard editions began to appear for reading only, and most often reading behind closed doors. Bawdy songs, after all, are simply "what honest Nature says," as the title page of the 1799 *Merry Muses* observes, and reading them to oneself rather than singing them in good company is hardly a natural act. Boisterous song provided perhaps the most vibrant fraternal bond in eighteenth-century Scottish culture. It distinguished Scotland's Freemasons from those in England and on the Continent, where singing played only a minor and wholly ceremonial part. The ever-convivial James Boswell relished that aspect of Lodge meetings. He writes of one such occasion in February 1775 when Canongate Kilwinning visited Leith Lodge, recording how "my spirits were vigorous and I sung my nonsensical Scotch song 'Twa wheels'."⁸

⁸ James Boswell, *Boswell's Edinburgh Journals, 1767-1786*, ed. Hugh M. Milne (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2001), 190.

Whoever compiled and printed the 1799 *Merry Muses* must have appreciated the *joie de vivre* derived from such lively singing.

But what of that original edition? Who printed it? When, where, and why? Providing a book historian's solution to these questions begins with the title page of the 1799 *Merry Muses*. Of the two copies known to have survived, the Rosebery is damaged, with tears to the top and bottom of the title page that result in the loss of the imprint date. The Roy copy, on the other hand, is undamaged, and while its title page does not indicate a printer/publisher (understandable in the case of a scandalous text such as this one), it does say "Printed in the year 1799."⁹ Both title-pages bear the subtitle "A Collection of favourite Scots songs, Ancient and Modern; selected for the use of the Crochallan Fencibles." Several fonts are employed, and the title page for the *Merry Muses* is both playful and attractively designed in this respect, a far cry from M'Naught's "mean-looking volume."¹⁰ The phrase "Ancient and Modern" stands out especially, printed as it is in black letter of the sort that had become popular in the titles of ballad collections, a practice that Coleridge parodies in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The title page is completed with an epigraph which Corey Andrews would like to attribute to Burns himself:¹¹

Say, Puritan, can it be wrong,
To dress plain truth in witty song?
What honest Nature says, we should do;
What every lady does, — or would do.

Although, as Ross Roy pointed out, the printer's name has been scraped away or trimmed from the bottom of the last page in both extant volumes, most of what is necessary to identify that individual and to ascertain the publication circumstances is here on the title page, if we study it in the context of what is known about Burns's closest Edinburgh associates and what was transpiring in the capital's book trade in 1799-1800. While commentators now agree that the *Merry Muses* was published in Edinburgh and not Dumfries, the printer and his motivation in publishing the *Merry Muses* have remained open to considerable speculation, with

⁹ The Roy copy was first described, and the title-page reproduced, in G. Ross Roy, "The *Merry Muses of Caledonia*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 2:4 (1965): 211-212. Plate II also reproduces an enlarged image of the scraped imprint. For the story of its discovery, see G. Ross Roy, *Robert Burns and The Merry Muses*, xviii-xix.

¹⁰ Roy, as in n. 7, p. 44.

¹¹ Corey A. Andrews, *Literary Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Club Poetry* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen, 2004), 335.

most now proposing that someone associated with the Crochallan Fencibles no doubt did the job.¹²

The Fencibles are well known to Burns scholarship: the drinking club was established at Daniel Douglas's tavern in Edinburgh's Anchor Close by the learned printer and *bon vivant*, William Smellie, who introduced Burns to the group while setting the Edinburgh edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, in his shop at the foot of the same close. The history of the Crochallans, however, is rather like that of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*: both have been much talked about, but few facts have been indisputably established in either case. Despite Harry Cockburn's early, cursory efforts, Davis D. McElroy's seminal account, the work of Burns's many biographers, and especially the recent and detailed examination by Corey Andrews of Burns's relationship to the Crochallans, we still have little idea of the extent of the membership, when the club began, or when it ceased to meet.¹³ Indeed, while it is common practice among scholars to assume that the club died with its founder William Smellie in 1795, the title page of its "song book" suggests that its members still had a "use" for the selection in 1799-1800. Burns was definitely a regular at the gatherings through the two winters of 1786-1788, and spent sufficient time with Smellie for the printer to have enlisted the poet among "some of the first literary characters in Scotland" as a projected regular contributor to a proposed Whig newspaper called the *Scottish Chronicle*.¹⁴ The Edinburgh publisher Charles Elliot would have provided the necessary capital to launch the venture, Smellie would have been the printer, and significantly, the first issue was planned for Guy Fawkes Day, 5 November 1788. Although this project failed, it clearly indicates the extent to which Burns and Smellie had become not just close friends but also social and political allies. Burns came to rely on Smellie for advice at crucial moments in his life, and Smellie would travel to Dumfries to see Burns in 1792, leaving Edinburgh for the first and only time, at the insistence of Maria Riddell,

¹² See, e.g., Corey A. Andrews, "The Clubbable Burns: Sentimental Scottish Nationalism and Robert Burns," *Lumen* 21 (2002): 105-130 (p. 120).

¹³ Harry Cockburn, "An Account of the Friday Club, Written by Lord Cockburn, Together with Notes on Certain Other Social Clubs in Edinburgh," *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 3 (1911), 164-5; Harry Cockburn, "Taverns and Clubs of Old Edinburgh," *Scots Magazine* (December 1935), 219-21; D.D. McElroy, "The Literary Clubs and Societies of Eighteenth-Century Scotland and their Influence on the Literary Productions of the Period from 1700-1800," unpublished dissertation (University of Edinburgh, 1952), 540-45; and Andrews, as in n. 11, chapter 3.

¹⁴ Robert Kerr, *Memoirs of the Life, Writings and Correspondence of William Smellie*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1811; Repr. Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996), 2: 225-26. Subsequent references in text or notes as Kerr.

who had herself made Smellie her most trusted confidant in the 1790s.¹⁵ Burns and Smellie corresponded until the printer's death in June 1795, less than a year before the poet's own in 1796, and Burns described Smellie with a rough affection that presents the learned printer as the very personification of the Fencibles' club:

...Crochallan came;
The old cock'd hat, the brown surtout the same;
His grisly beard just bristling in its might,
'Twas four long nights and days from shaving-night;
His uncomb'd, hoary locks, wild-staring, thatch'd,
A head for thought profound and clear unmatch'd:
Yet, tho' his caustic wit was biting rude,
His heart was warm, benevolent and good.¹⁶

The term "Fencibles" refers satirically to the home guard units that arose in response to alarm brought on by the American War of Independence and then continued during the French Revolution; its mocking deployment here reflects an ongoing sympathy for republicanism among a certain sector of Edinburgh's Whig intelligentsia – a sympathy Burns and Smellie would persist in long after it ceased to be fashionable or even politically safe.¹⁷ The club's members adopted mock military ranks, and included many of Smellie's prominent acquaintances in the legal and learned communities, and in particular many of the founders and supporters of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (1782). Among those who assisted Smellie in establishing the club was Dr. Gilbert Stuart (Smellie's literary intimate before Burns). The Crochallans who became the poet's confidants and with whom Burns would correspond after his departure from Edinburgh were William Dunbar, Charles Hay, Robert Cleghorn, Henry Erskine, Fergusson of Craigdorrach, William Nicol, and Robert Graham, all of whom were also Freemasons. Maria Riddell's husband Walter may have attended when he was in Edinburgh. But William Smellie appears to have been the club's driving force as its "Sargent-at-Arms" [sic] or disciplinarian (Kerr 2: 255). In his capacity as the club's "recorder," he would also have been the guardian of any

¹⁵ Stephen W. Brown, "William Smellie and the Reconciliation of Maria Riddell with Robert Burns," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 35-36 (2007): 331-338; and Kerr, 2: 352.

¹⁶ *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), II: 588.

¹⁷ Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002), 181, 196.

minutes or correspondence, a detail that will be essential to the circumstantial evidence identifying the printer of the *Merry Muses*.

The bookseller Peter Hill, a close friend of Burns, was another Crochallan officer during the club's later years. He was no doubt "enlisted" by William Smellie during Hill's indenture as an apprentice bookseller under William Creech, when Creech and Smellie were business partners. Several scholars, including James Kinsley, Legman, and more recently Carol McGuirk, have identified Hill as the probable editor and printer of the 1799 *Merry Muses*.¹⁸ However, Hill was not a printer, and the limited, rather high-quality run required for the private publication of *The Merry Muses* would have best been undertaken by someone who owned and operated a printing house, as William Smellie had done. Although Ross Roy's intuitions are correct in linking the elder Smellie to the publication of *The Merry Muses*, the printer's death in 1795 obviously excludes him from being the printer – but not his printing firm and his successor, something overlooked by scholars to this point.¹⁹ Smellie's son Alexander succeeded to his father's business and was himself a Crochallan, the club's only "legacy," in fact. But if Alexander Smellie was the printer of the 1799 *Merry Muses*, did he act on instructions from Peter Hill, and was Hill necessarily the source of the manuscript from which the text was printed, as Legman has suggested? Some of the poems that went into *The Merry Muses* can be found in letters Burns wrote to club members, and the crucial missive to John McMurdo in February 1792 indicates that at least one Burns holograph collection of bawdy verses existed at Dumfries and was circulated by the poet.²⁰ Legman also argues for another Dumfries manuscript which Allan Cunningham claims to have transcribed and which Legman suggests was sold by Burns on his deathbed to a local banker named Gracie for £50, but Pauline Mackay, among others, has persuasively challenged this conjecture.²¹

There is nothing, however, to connect the manuscript mentioned in the McMurdo letter or the one behind the Cunningham transcription to the "Collection of Favourite Scots Songs ... for use of the Crochallan Fencibles" printed in Edinburgh in 1799. Nor is there any need for such a connection. There is, however, sufficient circumstantial evidence to reconstruct the provenance for an alternative holograph source for the

¹⁸ Kinsley, James. "Burns and *The Merry Muses*." *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 9 (1965): 5-21; Legman, as in n. 3 above, 162-166; Carol McGuirk, "Jacobite History to National Song: Robert Burns and Carolina Oliphant (Baroness Nairne)," *The Eighteenth Century*, 47 (2006): 253-287 (259, 284).

¹⁹ Roy as in n. 1, viii.

²⁰ Roy, *Letters*, II: 137-138.

²¹ Legman, as in n. 3, 160-167; Mackay, as in n. 1, 15.

1799 Edinburgh edition. We know that Burns wrote regularly to William Smellie after he left Edinburgh, although only two examples of their correspondence survive: a letter from Burns to Smellie on 22 January 1792 (Roy, *Letters*, II: 130-31); and one from Smellie to Burns on 4 March 1794 (Kerr 2: 356-57). The poet often enquired after Smellie in letters to other Crochallans, especially the bookseller Peter Hill. Robert Kerr, who inherited from Alexander Smellie the responsibility for writing his father's biography in 1809 (published in 1811), describes having been presented by Alexander with an abundant Burns-Smellie correspondence, which Kerr destroyed, with the observation that "many letters of Burns to Mr Smellie ... being totally unfit for publication, and several of them containing severe reflections on many respectable people still in life, have been burnt" (Kerr 2: 250-51). It seems reasonable to assume that letters containing verses with sexually explicit lyrics would have been "totally unfit for publication" in the judgment of the proto-Victorian Kerr. Kerr also remarks in passing that Alexander Smellie had entrusted Maria Riddell with much Burns correspondence on the understanding that she would forward the bundle "to Dr Currie, for insertion in his well drawn life of the Ayrshire bard" (Kerr 2: 350). If Burns was regularly sending offensive material to Smellie, it seems reasonable to assume that this would have included bawdy songs for the use of the Crochallan Fencibles, to spice up their gatherings and put them in mind of their absent (and playfully obscene) friend. Who better to receive such communications than the club's secretary and correspondent, William Smellie, described on one occasion by Burns to Peter Hill as the squadron's "old Veteran in Genius, Wit and B—dry" (Roy, *Letters*, II:78-80) and on another as "old sinful Smellie," whom Burns imagines to have given up on any prospects for the next world in favour of "coming on with this [one]" (Roy, *Letters*, II: 278).

If this premiss is granted, then the hypothesis follows that Alexander Smellie may have used letters from Burns to his father containing bawdy poems, as well as his father's own transcripts of songs regularly enjoyed at the Douglas Tavern gatherings, in assembling the content of *The Merry Muses*, and that those manuscripts were among the Burns-Smellie correspondence subsequently purged through fire by Robert Kerr, something, as we have seen, that James Currie also did with similar material given into his care. It is also possible that Maria Riddell who, as we shall see, was Alexander's trusted adviser in the matter of the publication of his father's posthumous work, might well have been aware of the plan to print *The Merry Muses* and been the one who passed this information along to Currie, with whom she corresponded and for whom she served as the go-between in Currie's dealings with Alexander Smellie. If there was another manuscript collection beyond the one sent

to McMurdo, William Smellie is the most probable candidate to have compiled and retained it in his capacity as the Crochallans' secretary and also as a close correspondent of Burns. Indeed William Smellie is more likely than any other of Burns's correspondents to have had his own collection of bawdy songs. After all, there is no disputing the fact that much of the content of *The Merry Muses* did not originate with Burns and is simply part of the traditional canon of such verse, or "favourite Scots songs," as the title page of the Crochallan selection asserts. Smellie, we know, was a collector of popular songs from at least the mid-1760s, when he assisted William Auld with editing and printing the first compilation of songs specifically marketed to Freemasons in Scotland, and he continued to print anthologies of that sort until his death in 1795. Unlike its equivalents in England where only Masonic anthems were printed along with Lodge handbooks, the Auld-Smellie selection included extensive examples of traditional lyrics of the sort collected by Thomas D'Urfey, James Watson, and Allan Ramsay.²² Smellie had an ear for song and an eye for its appearance in print; he not only compiled, edited, and printed Masonic collections in 1761, 1763, 1765, 1768 and 1772, but continued to print popular song books for various booksellers throughout the 1780s and 1790s, including reissues of Ramsay.

We may thus with some confidence establish the following circumstantial narrative up to this point: Alexander Smellie, the only identified member of the Fencibles in 1799 who was a professional printer and thus had the experience to make the best financially of a very limited but high quality run, and who also had exclusive access to his father's manuscripts which included a considerable ribald correspondence with Burns — confirmed by Robert Kerr — was the printer best-placed to have both compiled and printed the original *Merry Muses*.

But why 1799 and not immediately after the close deaths of Smellie and Burns in 1795 and 1796 respectively, when the Crochallans were supposed to have been disbanding and the collection of bawdry would have been an appropriate and timely memorial? The best explanation for the date of publication again lies with the identification of Alexander Smellie as the editor-printer. When his father died in 1795, Alexander was advised by Maria Riddell (the only female friend Burns and Smellie had in common) to act quickly in editing and publishing his father's literary remains. In a letter dated 13 September 1795, Maria gently chides Alexander for his delay in procuring a publisher since his father's death in June because "even imperfect fragments, from the pen of a favourite

²² Stephen W. Brown, "Singing by the Book: Eighteenth-Century Scottish Songbooks, Freemasonry, and Burns," in *From Compositors to Collectors: Essays on Book-Trade History*, ed. John Hinks and Matthew Day (London: British Library, 2012), 261-278.

author, are greedily sought for when he is no more.” She continues by observing that “these kinds of things ... lose half their *vogue* if kept back too long” (Kerr 2: 393-99). Alexander Smellie followed Maria’s advice and went about the task of putting his father’s literary estate in order. But the undertaking went slowly: William Smellie was not an organized man, to which his surviving manuscript papers attest.²³ His eldest son not only took after his father in this respect but excelled him in his love of leisure life, including a passion for golf that would have baffled his father. In 1798, Alexander was chosen by the Burgess Golfing Club “to perform the feat of clubbing a ball from the pavement of Parliament Square over the weathercock of St Giles’ steeple into the High Street.”²⁴ He also married in 1796 (again after seeking advice from Maria Riddell), and would understandably have been distracted from the task of securing his father’s posthumous legacy by more intimate affairs, if not by public feats of athleticism.

Thus it was midway through 1799 before Alexander began to advertise in the Edinburgh newspapers for subscribers to a volume of his father’s unpublished writing entitled *Characteristical Lives of Kames, Gregory, Smith and Hume... together with a Dissertation and Three Essays*. Later that same year he printed volume two of William Smellie’s *The Philosophy of Natural History* after a fruitless struggle for four years to find a London partner. In December 1799-January 1800 and continuing through March 1800, the Edinburgh newspapers carried several advertisements from Alexander Smellie announcing the publication of *Characteristical Lives*. He also placed advertisements offering the remaining stock of his father’s previously-published works and other titles for which the elder Smellie had once held the copyright. These included the 1773-1776 *Edinburgh Magazine and Review*, the first two volumes of the *Thesaurus Medicus*, a pamphlet on the Scottish jury system, the translation of Buffon’s *Histoire Naturelle*, and the history of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, together with volume one of that Society’s *Transactions*. Alexander was making whatever he could of his father’s literary remains, but not merely for financial gain: the returns could only have been modest, if there were any at all, and the firm was prospering under Alexander’s guidance more than it had under his father’s direction. The effort was because he revered his father’s memory and that of the famous men who had featured in his life. This would definitely have been the moment for Alexander to print anything of

²³ William Smellie Manuscripts, 1760-1800, Archives of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

²⁴ William Scott Douglas, “Notes and Biographical Sketches,” in *Modern Athenians: A Series of Original Portraits of Memorable Citizens of Edinburgh ... by Benjamin W. Crombie* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1882), 149.

significance that survived from William Smellie's extensive exchanges with Burns.

Among the advertisements in Edinburgh's newspapers during the autumn of 1799 was one announcing a biography of William Smellie to be written by his son and published early in 1800. Some eighty pages of manuscript notes for that biography are still extant in Alexander's hand, with an inscription indicating that they were eventually passed along to Robert Kerr for use in his account of the printer's life.²⁵ When Alexander was finally in a position in 1799 to follow Maria Riddell's advice, however, the moment of the elder Smellie's literary fame had passed, and his posthumous works were not enthusiastically received. But in taking action to print all of his father's most important manuscript papers, the nostalgic significance of the Burns material would not have been lost on Alexander, who was just seventeen when he first met the bard and who perhaps became a Crochallan alongside Burns, in 1787. Publishing the salacious songs that Burns had sent to his father would thus have been timely in a private and personal sense. If Alexander had missed "the vogue" as Maria Riddell termed it for his father's posthumous market, the timing of the *Merry Muses* edition fitted perfectly with the vogue for Burns in 1799-1800.

Furthermore, and perhaps most persuasively, an examination of the watermarks in surviving copies of both the *Characteristical Lives* and the second volume of the *Philosophy of Natural History* indicates that Alexander Smellie did indeed seize the moment when he finally committed to printing his father's last works alongside the Crochallan song book. Three copies of the *Lives* have been analyzed with the assistance of Professor Patrick Scott at the University of South Carolina and Dr. William Zachs in Edinburgh. One examination copy is held by the Thomas Cooper Library while the other two are in private collections. The *Lives* is an octavo, printed in half sheets and all three of the examined copies have gatherings with watermark dates of 1796, 1797, 1798, and 1799, with at least twenty gatherings bearing the 1799 date in each volume. The Carolina copy has been severely trimmed to accommodate a modern binding, making it impossible to determine much about the watermarks beyond their dates. Of the other two, one traces its provenance to the eighteenth-century American jurist and North Carolina delegate to the Continental Congress, John Sitgreaves (1757-1802) and is disbound but retains the remnants of a contemporary trade binding along its spine; the second is still in its original eighteenth-century binding of half sheep, with marbled boards, and it bears the stamp of New College

²⁵ Alexander Smellie, "Notes towards a Memoir [of William Smellie], 1796-99," in William Smellie Manuscripts, 1760-1780, Archives of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Edinburgh.

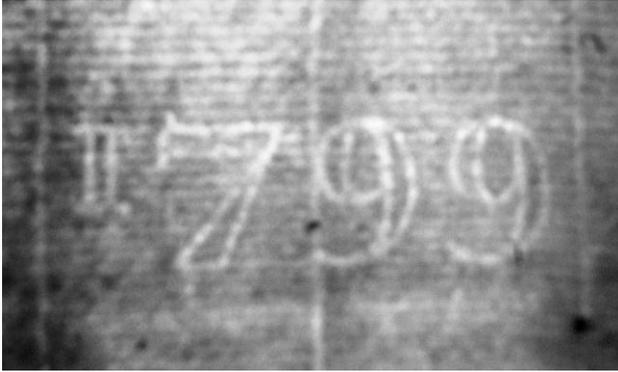


Fig. 1: Watermark from William Smellie, *Philosophy of Natural History*, vol. II (Edinburgh, 1799), printed by Alexander Smellie. *South Carolina College Library*.

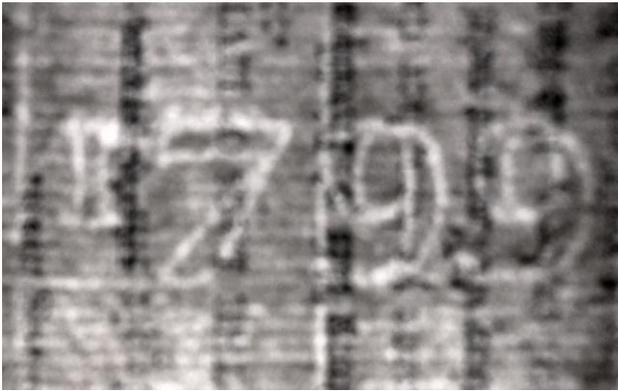


Fig. 2: Watermark from *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (No place: no publisher, 1799). *G. Ross Roy Collection*.

Library, Edinburgh. Neither of these copies has been trimmed since their first binding and the paper in both has *fleur-de-lys* watermarks as well as the previously stated dates. These features are essentially consistent with the recorded descriptions of the watermarks in the Rosebery and the *Roy Merry Muses*.²⁶ *The Merry Muses* is a duodecimo in half sheets, and the watermark dates in both copies are essentially the same, with the first few

²⁶ J. W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 77; G. Ross Roy, as in n. 9 above, 211-212.

gatherings reading 1799, and the subsequent ones 1800. The Rosebery copy suffers from having been aggressively trimmed.²⁷ The Roy copy, however, retains much of its original paper size and consequently has additional watermarks visible, including the *fleur-de-lys* that appears in two of the examined copies of the *Characteristical Lives*. What is more, a preliminary study of two copies of the 1799 quarto edition of volume two of the *Philosophy of Natural History* indicates that the paper used to print its last few gatherings also has a 1799 watermark and a *fleur-de-lys* design. The close similarity of the watermark dates and the recurrence of the *fleur-de-lys* leave little doubt that the paper used to print the *Lives*, the *Philosophy* and *The Merry Muses* came from a single manufacturer. All three works also appear to have used paper from the same 1799 batch at various stages in their print runs. Two of these titles, the *Lives* and the *Philosophy*, were indisputably printed in Smellie's shop in 1799. If we accept that the *The Merry Muses* was printed at least in part on the same paper as those other two titles, then it follows that it must have been printed by the same firm at roughly the same time, with the *Muses* perhaps being printed at the end of the calendar year, thus accounting for its use of paper with an 1800 watermark in its final gatherings.

Alexander Smellie had certainly chosen the right moment to print the Crochallan song book: 1799-1800 was an auspicious period for issuing Burns's literary remains of all sorts. William Creech, with his London partners Cadell and Davies, would publish a third edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, now in two volumes, and Currie's four-volume *Works* was eagerly awaited. On 26 July 1800, the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* advertised that "the Subscribers to Burns's Works are respectfully informed that they will be furnished with their Copies by Mr A. Cunningham, No. 3 South Bridge; who has taken charge of delivering the subscription copies for the Sole Benefit of the Widow and Children of the Bard." A further advertisement signed by Alexander Cunningham was placed in Edinburgh's papers on 20 September 1800 apologizing to the "Subscribers to the Poems and Posthumous Works of Robert Burns" for "unavoidable delays" in the publication and urging that they console themselves in the knowledge "that the Widow and Children of the Bard are to reap the full advantages of their generous intentions." It is possible that Alexander Smellie's rather attractive printing of the *The Merry Muses* also served to raise funds towards supporting Burns's family; although the scandalous nature of the poems themselves answers well to Maria Riddell's notion of "imperfect fragments," the text of *The Merry Muses* is rather carefully set out in a clear font and a clean style not usual in publications of this sort, an effort that would have caused the

²⁷ Egerer; Kinsley, as in n. 18, p. 7.

compositor some pains and demonstrates a genuine respect for the contents and its audience.

Meanwhile in Glasgow, Brash and Reid were publishing their own collected Burns, and Chapman and Lang would print the first complete edition of Burns's controversial ballad opera, *The Jolly Beggars: A Cantata* (1801). But Currie's edition was not the only effort by the trade to raise funds for the poet's widow and children: that same year saw a subscription proposal for two prints of David Allan's illustrations for Burns's *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, with "equal halves of the profits of the undertaking" to be shared by "the Orphan Families of the Poet and Painter." Subscriptions were to be "taken throughout Scotland and the Original Drawings displayed at the shop of Watson, Carver and Gillies, South Bridge, Edinburgh." This advertisement appeared on the front page of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* (20 September 1800), identifying Paton Thomson in London as the engraver, with Robert Wilkinson of London and Forbes & Finlay of Glasgow as publishers.

Burns's songs were also very much discussed in the newspapers throughout 1799 and early 1800 with over two dozen full-column advertisements announcing the forthcoming third and fourth volumes of *Scotish [sic] Songs with Symphonies and Accompaniments by Pleyel and Kozeluch*. One ad in particular stood out in the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* for Saturday 12 January 1799, emphasizing that, in these volumes, songs of an "exceptionable kind are excluded," and quoting Burns's deed of assignment of copyright to the effect that "all the songs of my writing, published and to be published by Mr George Thomson are so published by my authority. And moreover that I never empowered any other person to publish any of the songs written by me for his work. And I authorize him to prosecute any person or persons, pirating or publishing any of those songs without his consent." The deed was reprinted by Thomson from Burns's original letter of August 1793, and does not appear in his January 1794 preface (Roy, *Letters*, II: 227). Later ads cease to mention "exceptionable" songs, referring instead only to "doggerel and insipid lines." This may, perhaps, be further evidence that word was circulating in Edinburgh's rather small book-trade community about the intention to print the Crochallan songs, most obviously "exceptionable" and some hardly more than "doggerel." Thomson, as scholars such as Ross Roy have often observed, knew of Burns's predilection for this particular genre of verse and had received bawdy songs as mock contributions to his compilation of original airs, including the lyrics for "Poor Bodies do Naething but M-w" in July 1794.²⁸ Was Thomson aware that Alexander Smellie was about to print material some of which had

²⁸ G. Ross Roy, *Robert Burns and The Merry Muses*, ix-x.

originally been sent to him and might thus be subject to Burns's "deed of assignment of copyright," even though Thomson had considered those items unpublishable? If so, then his reaction to being scooped by another song collection, especially a disreputable one, echoes Currie's concern over his stewardship of another aspect of the Burns brand. Even if that conjecture is rejected, we can at least still surmise that the flurry surrounding the forthcoming volumes of *Scottish Songs* largely by Burns would only have encouraged Alexander Smellie to act all the more promptly, if he were ever to memorialize his father's (and his own) musical intimacy with Burns while "the vogue," as Maria Riddell had called it, was at its zenith.

The years 1799 and 1800 provided the historic foundation for the Burns industry that would follow. If Alexander Smellie had been dilatory in bringing out his father's posthumous works, the clatter of Burns activities during those two years would finally have roused him. And certainly the promise of Currie's edition with its benevolent subscription in the name of the poet's surviving family might have prompted whoever was best placed to print *The Merry Muses* to consider its publication seriously. Peter Hill, who was the chief conduit between Burns and Smellie in the 1790s, might have supported Alexander Smellie by organizing a subscription among the Crochallans to help defray the costs of the venture. As a publisher-bookseller, Hill would have been accustomed to such undertakings. And although the content and history of the songs that would eventually make up that volume were not designed for a public audience, the individuals for whom the songs had been collected might well have seen a subscription for their private printing as a way of raising something more towards the funds to support Jean Armour. If nothing else, a subscription would have legitimized in part the questionable nature of the material in the *Muses*.

To sum up, the editor-printer of the original *Merry Muses* of 1799 was probably Alexander Smellie, the son of one of Burns's wittiest carousing companions. Watermarks indicate that the paper upon which *The Merry Muses* was printed comes from the same batches that Alexander used for two of his father's posthumous works, the *Characteristical Lives* and volume two of the *Philosophy of Natural History*, which we know with certainty were produced in his shop in 1799. Furthermore, Alexander was a Crochallan himself and had in his possession his father's "disreputable" correspondence with Burns, as well as his own memories of the songs that he had sung as a young man in Douglas's tavern with his father's trusted and distinguished friends. The volume Alexander Smellie printed is a fellow performer's enduring testimony to the good times that song afforded the Crochallans and that Alexander had enjoyed in the company of a father he appears to have worshipped. In some ways, perhaps, *The*

Merry Muses is as much a memorial to that father as to the poet who was his dear friend and who had provided the epitaph for that father's tombstone in Greyfriars Kirkyard: "here lies a man who did honour to human nature." The song book would have recalled viscerally for Alexander Smellie and the surviving Crochallans in 1799 their animated evenings together and the essentially social nature of being human.²⁹

²⁹ I would like to express my appreciation to Patrick Scott and Dr. William Zachs for helping me to examine watermarks, and for their counsel and that of *SSL*'s anonymous reviewer in my revision of this article.