2012

"THE POETS WELCOME": AN UNRECORDED MANUSCRIPT BY ROBERT BURNS

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Robert Burns’s first child was born to Elizabeth Paton on May 22, 1785. Elizabeth Paton had been a servant in the Burns family at Lochlie in the winter of 1783-1784, but she did not go with them when they moved to Mossgiel in March 1784. Two days after the birth, the child, also named Elizabeth, was baptised. Early baptism was a common practice at this time when only about half the children born reached a first birthday. Elizabeth Paton herself went on to marry a local farmworker, John Andrew, in 1788. The child was brought up by Burns’s mother, until Burns’s death, and at the age of twenty-one received two hundred pounds from the funds raised for Burns’s widow and family.

Burns wrote a poem celebrating the birth of his daughter. Although friends and neighbours would have known about Burns’s child, the first mention of Elizabeth in his correspondence was in a letter to James Smith dated June 11, 1787. In the following months, Burns sent copies of the poem to two correspondents, the first to an unknown correspondent, on July 2, 1787, and the second with his famous autobiographical letter to Dr. John Moore of August 2, 1787. In Burns’s manuscripts, this poem has various titles: “A Welcome to a Bastart Wean,” “The Poet’s Welcome to His Bastart Wean,” and “A Poet’s Welcome to His Love-Begotten Daughter.” Burns altered the title as additional copies were required, perhaps varying the register to take account of the status and familiarity of the recipient.

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1 The text of this note was first written for a limited-edition keepsake, reproducing the manuscript, printed for the twenty-fifth annual conference of the Eighteenth-Century Studies Society, Columbia, SC, in April 2012. It is reproduced here, courtesy of the University of South Carolina Libraries, to make the manuscript more widely available to scholars (PGS).
Apparently Burns considered this poem to be personal because he did not publish it during his lifetime. The earliest publication of the poem was in a Glasgow chapbook *The Henpeck’d Husband* (1799), with the title “Burns’s Address to his Illegitimate Daughter,” and its first publication in book-form was in *Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns* (Glasgow, 1801), with the title “Address to an Illegitimate Child.” This last contains only six stanzas rather than eight, and the stanzas do not appear in the same order as they do in the manuscripts. The different stanza arrangement suggests that the publisher, Thomas Stewart, may have used another, hitherto untraced, manuscript.

In the poem Burns mentions problems with court and kirk. He would soon be in the eye of the kirk, because in July and August 1786 he was
obliged to stand and be rebuked in his church for the sin of fornication, although in that instance the sin had been committed with his future wife Jean Armour, not Elizabeth Paton.

The poem opens with Burns welcoming his daughter by assuring her that he will never be ashamed of her. The poet goes on to say that he has fought kirk and court for the wee lass because she is the “Sweet fruit o' monie a merry dint [occasion].” This is said without any hint of lasciviousness. Burns had written jovially elsewhere about his affair with Elizabeth Paton, but there is no suggestion in this poem of anything other than true paternal love for this “love-begotten” daughter. Burns certainly enjoyed writing erotic verse, and he made a collection of such material.
which we now know as *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799), but that represents a quite different strain in the complex makeup of Robert Burns. This poem is without doubt one of the most moving and important poems that Burns ever wrote.

G. R. R
A Note on the Manuscript

The Roy Collection manuscript is one of five in Burns’s own hand. Previously unknown to modern Burns scholarship, it was for many years in the private collection of the naturalist and collector John F. M. Dovaston (1782-1854), who had visited Burns’s widow Jean Armour during a visit to Ayrshire in 1825. It was listed in the auction of Dovaston’s library in Shrewsbury on February 4, 1910 (Book Prices Current, 1910), after which it disappeared again until 2011, when it was auctioned at Bonhams (Roy Davids Collection, Part II, Bonhams,
London, March 29, 2011, lot 33). The University of South Carolina Irvin
Department of Rare Books and Special Collections acquired it shortly
afterwards from the estate of the successful bidder, the British manuscript
dealer Michael Silverman.

Markings on the manuscript indicate that soon after Burns’s death it
had been available to, and transcribed for, Burns’s first editor, Dr. James
Currie. Currie did not however include the poem in his edition. It was not
among the manuscripts known to James Kinsley for his standard modern
edition, Poems and Songs of Robert Burns (3 vols., Clarendon Press,
1968), and it is not listed in the most comprehensive modern guide to the
Burns manuscripts, Margaret Smith’s Index of English [sic] Literary
Manuscripts (Mansell, 1986).

The eight, six-line stanzas of “The Poet’s Welcome” occupy three
pages (ff. 1r-2r) of the manuscript. The fourth page (f. 2v) has eight
further cancelled lines in Burns’s hand, giving the opening stanza of his
song “Musing on the ocean’s roaring,” which was first published as song
179 in the Scots Musical Museum, part 2 (1788). This manuscript
fragment was also unknown to Kinsley and unrecorded by the Index.

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