

1-1-2012

# AN UNRECORDED EARLY PRINTING OF ROBERT BURNS'S PATRIARCH LETTER

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### Recommended Citation

Scott, Patrick G. (2012) "AN UNRECORDED EARLY PRINTING OF ROBERT BURNS'S PATRIARCH LETTER," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, 147–150.

Available at: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/18>

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## AN UNRECORDED EARLY PRINTING OF ROBERT BURNS'S PATRIARCH LETTER

*Patrick Scott*

Robert Burns's only letter to his uncle Samuel Brown has been of special interest to biographers. Some have fixed on the word-play about his renewed sexual relationship with Jean Armour the previous autumn and the twins that resulted ("I engaged in the smuggling Trade and God knows if ever any poor man experienced better returns—two for one"); others, more respectably, on its notable concluding sentence about his marriage and his leasing of the farm at Ellisland:

I have taken a farm on the Banks of the Nith and in imitation of  
the old Patriarchs get Men servants and Maid servants—Flocks  
and herds and beget sons and daughters.<sup>1</sup>

The extended smuggling metaphor, and the jauntiness about extramarital pregnancy, might be thought especially appropriate to the uncle, who was twice involved in smuggling cases and had himself been admonished for premarital relations with his future wife.<sup>2</sup> The concluding patriarch passage oddly prefigures very similar language used by Mrs. Dunlop in a letter she wrote to Burns six months later, shortly after the birth of a grandchild:

You who increase like the patriarch Jacob will despise our poor  
single, long-looked-for production. Lord bless you and your wife,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Ross Roy, ed, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edition., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), I: 278: letter 240, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1788. For earlier and subsequent patriarch references in Burns, see "The Cottar's Saturday Night," line 101 (*Poems and Songs*, ed. Kinsley, 3 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968], I: 149, poem 72), verses quoted from Ramsay in a 1787 letter to 'Clarinda' (Roy I: 186, letter 163), and a song from *The Merry Muses* (Kinsley, II: 899, poem 609).

<sup>2</sup> James Mackay, *RB: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992), 57-58.

your sons and your daughters, your man and your maid servant,  
your ox and your ass, and all that is yours.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover there is a stubborn problem about the date that editors report the letter as carrying in the sources they report having transcribed.

The letter provides an instructive example of the sheer slipperiness of the textual evidence with which Burns editors have had to deal. No manuscript survives in Burns's hand, and it was nearly forty years after his death when the letter was first included among his writings, in one of the later, additional volumes of Allan Cunningham's edition.<sup>4</sup> This immediately raises a red flag: nearly eighty years ago, F. B. Snyder described Cunningham as "absolutely unreliable," adding "nothing he says should be believed without corroborating testimony."<sup>5</sup> Yet corroboration was slow in coming, and for another century Cunningham's text was reprinted *faute de mieux* in other Burns editions.

When J. DeLancey Ferguson edited his Oxford edition of the letters in 1931, the original manuscript was still untraced, but he was able to make "a number of highly probable minor corrections" to Cunningham's version from "a MS. copy in the possession of Mr. George Shirley, Dumfries."<sup>6</sup> The minor corrections are in fact all matters of punctuation, spelling or capitalization, not of actual wording, so what Ferguson was using might have been the version Cunningham had used, or a copy he had made, or even a copy from Cunningham's printed text. Cunningham had printed the letter as dating from 4<sup>th</sup> May 1789 (though commenting that Burns took a year to write to his uncle about his marriage); as editors from Robert Chambers onwards recognized, the references to Burns's marriage and leasing of Ellisland make this date clearly wrong.<sup>7</sup> Ferguson follows this correction without comment, reading 1788, but the error must surely cast doubt either on Cunningham's accuracy or on the trustworthiness of his source.

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace, William, ed., *Robert Burns and Mrs. Dunlop: Correspondence now published in full for the first time* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1898), 104 (see also 103, 106 [Roy, I: 331, letter 281]); cf. also Roy, I: 298, letter 257.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Cunningham, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns; with his Life*, 8 vols. (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1834), VII: 141.

<sup>5</sup> Franklyn Bliss Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 489.

<sup>6</sup> J. DeLancey Ferguson, ed., *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), I:221.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Chambers, ed., *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: W. and R. Chambers, 1851-52), III: 175; P. Hatley Waddell, ed., *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: David Wilson, 1867), II: 216; William Scott Douglas, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: William Patterson, 1879), V: 124.

A few years later, too late for Ferguson to use, J. C. Ewing produced a slightly longer, though once again misdated, text of the letter with more substantive variants, based, he wrote, on "a copy of the original in the possession of Mrs. Munro, Glasgow."<sup>8</sup> Ewing's stated provenance has perhaps a calculated ambiguity, leaving it uncertain whether Mrs. Munro of Glasgow owned the original letter, which had been copied for Ewing, or whether what she owned was itself a copy. Whichever Ewing meant to be the case, Ewing's text shows up the prudishness of Cunningham's version, which had cut out Burns's reference to his uncle's and aunt's shared enjoyment of their "good old ordinary," and dropped Burns's reference to his relationship with Jean proving "D—md dear." But Ewing's text has its own problems: it is addressed from "Masgiel" (a form not otherwise known in Burns), not Mossgiel as in Burns's other letters, it retains the incorrect date of 1789, rather than 1788, and like Cunningham's text it is based on an original (or maybe copy) that no other scholar has seen.

When Ross Roy tackled the patriarch letter for his 1985 Clarendon edition, Burns's original manuscript was still untraced, and neither the copy used by Ferguson nor the manuscript used by Ewing was available for examination; he had to break his general practice of recollating each letter against manuscript, and make do with the text as Ewing had printed it, including the heading Masgiel. His source note describes Ewing's version as "from a privately-owned copy of the letter in another hand," suggesting some further source of information, perhaps from Ferguson having made enquiry at the time of Ewing's article. In dating the letter "1789 [1788]," he comments tartly that "both sources [Cunningham and Ewing] accept the 1789 date which is impossible."<sup>9</sup> (Roy I: 278n).

In short, for this letter, neither of the major modern scholarly editors could base their work on firsthand examination of an unimpeachable early source (though both were scrupulous in documenting the nature of the sources with which they had had to work).

It comes as something of a relief, therefore, to discover that there is indeed a much earlier source for the patriarch letter, and that it closely parallels Ewing's text of 1939. In the G. Ross Roy Collection at the University of South Carolina, there is a single volume from a short-lived Ayrshire magazine, *The Kilmarnock Mirror and Literary Gleaner*, donated by Professor Roy in 2001 shortly after he had purchased it from a dealer. In June 1819, in the first number of its second volume, this magazine printed the full text under the heading "Original Letter of Burns," with this introduction:

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<sup>8</sup> J. C. E[wing], "Letters of Robert Burns." *Burns Chronicle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 14 (1939): 6-10; pp. 8, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Roy I: 278n.

The following letter seems to have been written by the poet, after the birth of his twin children; and immediately before his marriage with Miss Armour. The part of the country in which his uncle resided, was notorious for smuggling—and it is “on this hint he speaks.”<sup>10</sup>

The *Kilmarnock Mirror* letter is substantially the same as Ewing’s version, except in punctuation and capitalization. Despite the introductory headnote, and its reference to the birth of the twins in March 1788 and Burns’s marriage in April 1788, it retains the incorrect date 1789. Rather than omitting “D----md” as Cunningham seems to have done, it substitutes a row of asterisks. It follows the conventional spelling for Mossgiel.

More interestingly, it adds an address below the signature that appears neither in Cunningham nor Ewing: “To Mr. Samuel Brown, Ballochneil Miln” (that is, mill). While Samuel Brown is often described as “of Kirkoswald” (where Burns went to study surveying and lodged with the Browns), Samuel and his wife lived at Ballochneil, about a mile further down the road, where Margaret’s father Robert Niven had a farm and mill.<sup>11</sup> While the other variants might have been made by the *Kilmarnock Mirror*’s editor or printer, it seems unlikely that either would add an address that was not in the manuscript from which he was working, so either Ewing missed off this line from the manuscript or copy he was printing or the version in the *Mirror* derives from yet another source.

This early printing does not significantly alter the text any future editor must use (which must be either Ewing’s or the *Mirror*’s), but it does provide reassurance in utilizing the text that Ewing printed. The puzzle remains, of course: what has happened to the manuscript owned in 1939 by Mrs. Munro of Glasgow, and was it “the original manuscript” or indeed (as Ross Roy had been informed) “a copy in another hand”?

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<sup>10</sup> “Original Letter of Robert Burns,” *Kilmarnock Mirror and Literary Gleaner* 2:1 (June 1819): 18.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Lindsay, *The Burns Encyclopaedia*, 3rd ed. (London: Robert Hale, 1980), 36-37; Robert Crawford, *The Bard. Robert Burns, A Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 69-70.