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G. Ross Roy
University of South Carolina

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REVIEWS

Robert Burns. *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*. Ed. by James Barke and Sydney Goodsir Smith, with a Prefatory Note by J. DeLancey Ferguson. New York. G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1964. 224 pp. \$5.00.

One of the effects of the maudlin sentimentality which surrounded Burns for over a century was the deliberate suppression of anything which might take him from the pedestal on which the idolators had placed him. The result was a wholly unreal picture of the poet. Other illustrious men were allowed their mistresses, but any liaison in which Burns was involved was kept as secret as possible. Burns's own frankness about these "transgressions," and the generous arrangements he made (including adoption) for his bastard children furnish ample proof of his own honor. It was not until DeLancey Ferguson's collected edition of Burns's *Letters* (Oxford, 1931, 2 vols.) and Franklyn Bliss Snyder's *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1932) that there was an unexpurgated edition of the correspondence and a biography which did not either try to vindicate the poet at almost every turn or, as some of the earlier critics had done, try to show how Burns's death was hastened by intemperance and incontinence. It is worth noting, incidentally, that contemporary reports of Burns's death make no mention of its being "early" or that Burns had died young. To die before one's thirty-eighth year in the Scotland of the eighteenth century was not at all uncommon; that Burns lived as long as he did in view of the hardship of his early life and the then state of medicine is what is perhaps remarkable.

For a generation after Ferguson's edition of the correspondence (at times every bit as racy as any of the poetry) had been published scholars waited for a reliable edition of the bawdy poetry. Since James Currie published his first edition of *The Works of Robert Burns* (Liverpool, 1800, 4 vols.) it had been known that Burns collected bawdy songs, but a conscientious effort was made by the "establishment," including Currie himself, to suppress the songs and to claim that Burns had only collected, not written, most of them. These efforts went so far on the part of Currie that he falsified one of Burns's letters.

At about the same time as Currie was preparing his edition of Burns a book bearing no printer's name or year (but *c.* 1800) was printed—*Merry Muses of Caledonia; a Collection of Favourite Scots Songs, Ancient and Modern; selected for use of the Crochallan Fencibles*. With it the *Merry Muses* controversy was born, a controversy by no means settled. Supposedly Dr. Currie still had all the Burns MSS.

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in his possession in 1800, including the collection of bawdy songs Burns mentions in a letter, so the question arises how the printed version was set up. It is unthinkable that Currie would have allowed this to be done could he have prevented it. Prof. DeLancey Ferguson in his introductory "Sources and Texts of the Suppressed Poems" argues that the texts for this edition were not taken from the holograph copy in Currie's hands, but were supplied by someone who had had them from Burns. This would explain inaccuracies, omissions and untypical additions. The whereabouts of the original MS., of course, remains a mystery. Perhaps it was destroyed by Currie or some other zealot.

If Currie indeed had the MS. collection, and the printed version was not taken from it, he must nevertheless have known that a published version of the *Merry Muses* had (or was about to) come out. Thus one might argue for dating the work late 1799 or early 1800. Sydney Goodsir Smith in his "Merry Muses Introductory" notes that two leaves of the unique copy of this edition, now in the collection of the Earl of Rosebery, are watermarked 1799 while eight are watermarked 1800. This would point to a probable date of publication some time during December 1799 or January 1800—there is little to choose between these dates, the likelihood of a printer over-estimating his needs and having 1799 paper left over is as great as it would be that he underestimated it and had to dip into his 1800 stock prematurely. It is unlikely, however, that his estimate would be out by much more than a month. If, then, the *Merry Muses* was out by January 1800 Currie would have had time to alter Burns's letter of December 1793 to Joan M'Murdo in which he, Currie, interpolated the sentence (Burns was writing of his bawdy song collection) "A very few of them are my own," as Currie's edition of Burns came out only in June of the year, with the dedication dated May 1, 1800. Had Currie not known that an edition of Burns's bawdry had been, or was about to be, published, rather than add the above noted sentence he would surely just have discarded the entire letter, which he was under no compunction to print. This point has been developed at some length because this reviewer does not feel that Ferguson, in his "Sources and Texts of the Suppressed Poems" goes far enough in his conclusions concerning this earliest edition of *The Merry Muses*.¹

¹ Since writing the above a copy of the first edition of *The Merry Muses* has come into the possession of the reviewer. It is dated 1799. For a description of this volume see pp. 211-212 of this issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

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The next important edition of *The Merry Muses* placed Burns's name on the title page. The work is dated 1827 but an examination of the book (especially type and paper) suggests that 1872 would be more accurate; the book was carelessly printed but it seems incredible that such an error on the title page could be unintentional. (Egerer, in his bibliography, suggests earlier dates for two undated editions.) As the 1827 was an almost clandestine production the editor showed little preoccupation with accuracy, and the Burns texts are badly garbled. But worse was yet to come.

Several privately printed, and frequently undated, editions followed, one as inaccurate as the next. Genuine Burns bawdry was often dropped to make space for poems which Burns in his wildest flights could not possibly have written. Take the following example, from an edition in this reviewer's possession entitled *The Merry Muses of Robert Burns* (N.P., n.d., but post-1907):

As Sylvia on her arm reclining,
In a shady, cool retreat,
All in dishabille, designing — fal, la!, &c.
To elude the sultry heat;
All in dishabille, designing
To elude the sultry heat.

And so on for five more stanzas. Surely Burns could never have written this! Scholars, of course, were not taken in by this type of publication, and to the prurient minded it little mattered whether the name on the title page was that of Burns or someone else.

A far greater disservice was rendered by Duncan McNaught, who, as Editor of the *Burns Chronicle*, brought out a sort of "official" edition of *The Merry Muses* under the auspices of the Burns Federation in 1911. The title page bears the words *A vindication of Robert Burns* and it is plain that this thought was uppermost in the editor's mind. (Once again, incidentally, there is no place of publication listed, and the editor has not signed his work.) Instead of reproducing the 1800 version, as the edition claimed it was doing, McNaught took readings from the 1827 edition (highly suspect) or from emendations made by William Scott Douglas which McNaught must have known were not Burns's, or, even worse, at times the editor appears to have inserted his own changes. Apparently no bibliographical study mentions that the 1911 *Merry Muses* was originally to have included Burns's famous letter to Robert Ainslie of March 3, 1788, first published in the 1827 edition. The letter was even printed (it was to have formed pp. 137-138 of the book) but was withdrawn before issue. Obviously it would

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be more difficult to "vindicate" a man who could write such a letter, and it would be incompatible with Currie's "A very few of them are my own," which found its way into the introduction to the volume.

The present edition (which was first privately issued in Edinburgh in 1959) presents Burns's lyrics without hypocrisy or exaggeration; the words which we know Burns wrote are printed exactly as he wrote them, those which he copied from other sources are faithfully reproduced, and those which he did not write are so indicated. This work is particularly important in view of Burns's dedication to collecting and refurbishing or rewriting the folksongs of his country. Many of the versions to which he put hauntingly beautiful words had been too "earthy" to be publicly printed in their earlier versions; here we have those originals.

In addition to the scholarly essays by Professor Ferguson and Sydney Goodsir Smith there is an essay on "Pornography and bawdry in literature and society" by the late James Barke (not Sir James, as the jacket would have it). In his essay Barke covers Scottish folksong and bawdry in a broad sweep which, while it adds little to our understanding of Burns or *The Merry Muses*, provides an example of that lively style which made his fictionalized life of Burns so popular.

Much still remains to be done in this area of Burns scholarship. Some questions will not be answered until Burns's "Merry Muses" MS. turns up (if it ever does); other questions arise on which a close study of early song-books and chapbooks would doubtless shed much light. Any such study would necessitate reference to a standard text. This edition of the *Merry Muses* establishes it.

G.R.R.