The Text of Maria Riddell's Sketch of Burns

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The Text of Maria Riddell's Sketch of Burns

Maria Riddell's sketch of Burns is justly esteemed, and although deficient in its assessment of his poetry few would question the judgment of Henley and Henderson who wrote that as a study of the man it is "so admirable in tone, and withal so discerning and impartial in understanding, that it remains the best thing written of him by a contemporary critic"; or of F. B. Snyder who called it "the most reliable source of accurate, first-hand information concerning Burns's character and demeanor during his last five years." But in spite of the late De Lancey Ferguson's study of the history of this sketch, there still remain several bibliographical puzzles, which I intend to present here with the intent of adding something to Prof. Ferguson's study and in the hope that readers may communicate new information which would help in my preparing a definitive text. I shall first give the facts and then list the puzzles.

The sketch was first published, on the evidence of James Currie, in The Dumfries Weekly Journal (henceforth DWJ), perhaps on Tuesday, August 9, 1796, two days after its completion on August 7 and just two weeks and a half after Burns's death. Since no copies of this weekly seem to be known to have survived for this year, the text and the date of the first printing are at present unknown.

There does exist, however, corrected trial sheets of the sketch, with-


2 PQ, XIII (1934), 261-266.

3 From the dateline appended to the sketch in James Currie, Works (1800), I, 266, where is also found the place of composition, "Annandale," the river valley near Dumfries in which is situated Halleaths, Maria Riddell's home at the time. The early periodical printings of the sketch which I have seen do not carry a dateline at all. August 7 is Sunday; DWJ appeared on Tuesdays.

4 Neither the present County Librarian of Dumfries nor the Scottish Central Library know of any copies, and all the likely catalogues and checklists of periodicals fail to indicate a copy.

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out date or title, signed "Candidor." These are not proof sheets for DWJ, as they have been previously called, because the type, width of columns, and length of page are radically different from those of an issue of DWJ of early 1798 which I have inspected. Maria Riddell probably had it set up by a printer as a step in preparing it for DWJ. It is corrected by John Syme, Maria's and Burns's mutual friend.6

The next appearance of the sketch was in two parts in the London Courier and Evening Gazette of 18-19 August 1796, where we find a text which follows—but for about a dozen small deletions, additions, and stylistic changes—the early trial sheets, including most but not all of Syme's few marginal corrections. Since the changes in the text from the trial sheets are clearly authorial, Maria Riddell probably made them on the copy delivered to DWJ, whose text then served as copy for the Courier. There is the possibility of course that she made some changes in the DWJ copy before despatching it herself to the Courier. The sketch as it appeared in the London Courier was copied in periodicals without change at least three times in as many months.7

James Currie probably used the DWJ rather than the more generally

5 The same signature appears in the versions published in Courier and Evening Gazette (London) 18-19 Aug. 1796, Edinburgh Evening Courant 22 Aug. 1796; but there is no signature at all to the printings in The European Magazine of Oct. 1796 nor The Aberdeen Magazine of Nov. 1796. The trial sheets, now in the Burns Cottage Museum (see Catalogue, 1962, item 213), were found by Davidson Cook in a London bookshop.

6 John Syme informed Alexander Cunningham on Aug. 18, 1796, that "Mrs. W. Riddell... has written and got printed a long story which she calls 'A few Sketches.' She brought the proof sheets to me... [to] help her correct it." Syme found the piece "quite impossible" and urged her not to publish it probably because he thought her frank and impassioned treatment of Burns's failings would do his reputation and the subscription for his family no good. But the sketch had already appeared in DWJ, for we must accept James Currie's statement of its first printing there on a date before its reappearance, as we shall see, in the London Courier on the very date of this letter. Therefore we must believe that Syme chose not to mention a mere provincial printing when he hopes that "it wilt not gain admission into the Magazines etc. she intends sending it to" (Burns Chronicle, XI [1936], 42; see also Robert D. Thornton, James Currie, the Entire Stranger, Edinburgh and London, 1963, pp. 316-317, 343-344).

7 See note 5 above. A recent scholar has seen a final installment of an account of Burns signed "Candidor" in the Aug. 25th issue of the liberal London newspaper the Telegraph and states that one installment appeared in the now missing issue of Aug. 18, the very day of the first installment in the Courier. This appears to be Maria Riddell's sketch (Lucyle Werkmeister, "Robert Burns and the London Daily Press," MP, LXIII [1966], 333).
available Courier version as the basis of the text he published in the first edition of the Works (1800). We are led to this belief not only by Currie's statement, "the following article appeared in the Dumfries Journal," but by the presence of the dateline in his version, which did not appear in the Courier. He made scores of small changes, mostly stylistic, on his own initiative. This is proved by Maria Riddell's awareness that Currie was "correcting Scotticism" and putting her ideas "into a good English garb," by her disappointment at the result when it appeared, and by all the many variants in his text which depart from a common reading of both the trial sheet and the Courier.

Upon Maria's insistence, Currie allowed her to print what she called "my own corrected Sketch" in the second edition of the Works (1801). Maria Riddell's concern shows how much she valued this sketch both as a brilliant example of her writing and as a just vindication of Burns's memory. This final redaction, made without Currie's supervision at all and delivered by Maria directly to W. Davies, one of the publishers in London, is a thorough working over of Currie's text of 1800, in which she accepts most of Currie's changes, but occasionally makes a new change or goes back to the readings of the trial sheets, the Courier text, or both, mainly to improve the style but at times to soften the fervor of her utterance made so soon after the death of Burns.

Professor Ferguson's important point should be repeated in passing here, that the most commonly available text of the sketch, that printed in William Scott Douglas's edition (1879) and copied by Wallace's revision of Chamber's edition (1896) is a composite of uncertain provenance and of no authority.

This takes the matter somewhat further than Professor Ferguson did in 1934. We now must take as authoritative not only the trial sheet and Maria Riddell's final redaction of 1801, but also the early version of the Courier, which probably reproduces fairly accurately the lost or

8 I, 254-266.
9 Burns Chronicle, XXXII (1923), 37, 80.
10 Maria's letter of 19 Sept. 1800, pub. in Burns Chronicle, XXXII (1923), 82.
11 I, 247-259.
12 Burns Chronicle, XXXII (1923), 82.
33 PQ, XII (1934), 263; the worthless Douglas version is unfortunately also the copy-text of the recent beautifully printed and bound limited edition by Thomas Rae, Robert Burns: A Memoir (Greenock: The Signet Press, 1966).
unlocated version in DWJ. Further, we must identify the earliest version as a trial sheet and not a proof sheet for DWJ, an important point, because now we know that Maria Riddell emended considerably the trial sheet before publication in DWJ or the DWJ text for publication in the Courier. Also we must recognize that since Currie used as his copy not the text as it appeared directly from the corrected trial sheet but the text modified by the author in DWJ, he made somewhat fewer unauthorized changes than otherwise we would charge him with; further that most of these changes Maria accepted, since she used the 1800 text as copy for her final redaction.

But there still remain some puzzles which would be solved if the issue of the DWJ in which the sketch first appeared could be found. The copy for a definitive text should clearly be the one which represents Maria Riddell's final judgment, that is the version which appeared in Currie's second edition of Works (1801). But the editor should give all but stylistic variants from the earlier authoritative versions, that is variants from the trial sheet, the first publication in DWJ, and (if it differs from DWJ) the sketch as it appeared in the Courier. To be complete the editor would have to know the relation of the trial sheet to the DWJ text and the latter to the Courier text. Obviously, the discovery of the issue of the DWJ in question would be welcome to all who value Maria Riddell's warm-hearted but clear-headed tribute to Burns.

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