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Looking Again at James Currie's Inventory: The Other Side of Robert Burns's Correspondence

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Robert Burns Lives!

The Other Side of Robert Burns's Correspondence by Patrick Scott and Joseph DuRant

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This article is based on a talk recorded for a recent Project Symposium in late October at the University of Glasgow's Centre for Robert Burns Studies. For the past two years Joseph DuRant, a student at the University of South Carolina, has been working with Patrick Scott on the letters written to Burns. **Keep in mind these are letters "to" Robert Burns, not "from" Robert Burns.** Some Burns folks may have met Joseph at the Robert Burns Association of North America (RBANA) conference in Columbia last May, or perhaps in July at the World Congress for Scottish Literatures in Glasgow, or even when he visited Atlanta in September to hear Gerry Carruthers' talk at the local Burns Club. Their article provides an overview of one of the major manuscript sources on Burns's life and in it they share some of the discoveries of their research. An edition of letters written to Burns was the dream many years ago of Ross Roy and Ken Simpson, and this recent research by Patrick and Joseph is recognized as one of the preliminary steps in the significant University of Glasgow project, Editing Burns for the 21st Century. Patrick and Joseph have penned an excellent paper that you will both enjoy and learn from regarding "the other side" of Burns's correspondence – letters to the Bard. (FRS: 12.10.14)

Looking Again at James Currie's Inventory: The Other Side of Robert Burns's Correspondence

By

Patrick Scott and Joseph DuRant

In January 1797, as Dr. James Currie of Liverpool began work on what would become the 1800 *Works of Robert Burns*, he was faced with "a huge and shapeless mass" of papers. As he began to sort through them, he got a helper to make an inventory for him listing one group of the material, just over 300 "letters addressed to Robert Burns and in the poet's possession at the time of his death." Currie's inventory is a major source for Burns's life. Most of the 300 letters are now lost or destroyed, and for some 258 of them the summaries in the Currie inventory are the only surviving evidence. The manuscript itself is in the Burns Birthplace Museum, and for the past eighty years, it has been known to serious Burnsians through J. C. Ewing's transcription, first published in the *Burns Chronicle* in 1933, then issued separately with additional notes in 1938 (Fig. 1), and then reprinted by Ross Roy as an appendix to his *Letters of Robert Burns* in 1985. A small-print list of letters does not make for easy or casual reading, and Currie's inventory does not seem to be as fully used or appreciated as it ought to be. It seems time to look more closely at what it can tell us.

LIST OF LETTERS.			LIST OF LETTERS.	
No.	Date	From whom	Letters	
1786				
1	St. Margaret's Hill 6 September	Revd. George Lawrie to Gavin Hamilton	1 Including an extract of one from Dr. . . . poems & regrets his inability to clothe his . . . time before send him three of the poems . . . edition being all add off, the Doctor advise . . . extensive circulation.—Q. Is this the letter . . .	
2	Jeansie 10 July (Received 23 September)	John Hutchison	2 Has recd. one from Burns dated B . . . Will be glad to return the kindness . . . B. is the planting line, tho' he must . . . good advice—Thanks for account of h . . .	
3	Dalserston 4 October [1787]	P. Miller, Esqr., Esq.	3 Asks Burns to come & look at . . . if a better offer has occurred . . .	
4	Murchison 15 October	Mrs M. Kennedy	4 A need of thanks for a song	

Fig. 1: from J. C. Ewing, ed., *Robert Burns's Literary Correspondents* (1938).

We got interested in the inventory in connection with editing the letters written to Robert Burns. While the letters Burns wrote himself have long been collected, and have been edited to the highest standards, the other side of the correspondence, the letters written to him, has been relatively neglected by modern editors (Roy, 1993; cf. Mackay, 2001). More than fifty years ago, Ross Roy had hoped to edit both sides of the correspondence, but his publisher vetoed it. In the late 1980s, he resurrected the project, planning to edit the letters written to Burns, in collaboration with Kenneth Simpson. Patrick Scott became involved in 2008 in an effort to get editable text ready to be worked on, and Joseph DuRant joined the project in 2012, first as a student research assistant and now coeditor. A fuller history and overview of the project is forthcoming in the next volume of the *Burns Chronicle* (DuRant and Scott). The South Carolina preliminary edition, *Letters Addressed to Robert Burns, 1779-1796*, is now set up to be a first stage towards the Glasgow University team's long-term full-scale project which will for the first time bring together both groups of letters in a single series, under the general editorship of Gerard Carruthers, as *The Correspondence of Robert Burns*.

Recently, the Burns Birthplace Museum has made available scans of the inventory manuscript (Fig.2). As digitized, the inventory comprises some 25 double-page scans with entries for some eight to twelve letters on each scan; two of the scans are of single pages with fewer entries. The basic information provided in the inventory for each letter is a number, the place from which the letter is sent, the date (month and day), the name of the person writing to Burns, and then, the most tantalizing part, brief notes about the letter and/or extracts from it. Ewing's transcript reproduced this format very closely, except in the lay-out of the final column of notes and extracts, where he ran together in paragraph form successive short and incomplete phrases that had originally been on separate lines; the right hand margin of each page is damaged, with the loss of varying amounts of text. With a little practice it is possible to enlarge and enhance segments of the manuscript to make the individual entries easier to check against Ewing's version. For this article, we have given references to Ewing's numbering, but we have cross-checked each entry discussed against the digitized manuscript.



Fig. 2: The Original Manuscript of the Currie Inventory at the Burns Birthplace Museum
<http://www.burnsmuseum.org.uk/collections/transcript/1336>
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The importance of the inventory is the way it fills in the gaps in what would otherwise be a very one-sided story. For most of the past two hundred years collectors, editors, and libraries have been much more eager to get hold of, and to preserve, letters written by Burns himself than the letters he received, and (if we exclude letters now known only from their appearance in Currie's 1800 *Works*) more than four times as many letters by Burns survive than letters written to him. At the time of his death, however, the balance was much more even, because Burns himself had preserved the heap of letters that after his death were sent on to Currie. Indeed, Burns had kept even more letters than Currie listed: by the time the inventory was made, several groups of letters that Burns had kept, such as the letters from George Thomson, Maria Riddell, and Agnes M'Lehose, had already been returned to their senders, by one of the Burns trustees or as part of a deal for Currie to get Burns's own side of the correspondence. Even so, the inventory often rebalances the story.

One example of this rebalancing is Burns's correspondence with his brother Gilbert. The three letters that Burns wrote to Gilbert (September 17, 1787; January 11, 1790; and July 10, 1796) are of course in the Ross Roy edition. Three letters from Gilbert to Robert are known from other sources: January 1, 1789, in Currie's 1800 edition; August 6, 1789, printed by the late R. D. Thornton, in *Studies in Scottish Literature* in 1969; and September 4, 1790, printed in Hatley Waddell's often-neglected Victorian edition and then in the *Burns Chronicle* in 1963. But the Currie inventory gives another thirteen letters, bunched in 1789 to 1790, so that in those two years, while we have records of just two letters from Burns to Gilbert, we have thirteen or fourteen from Gilbert, a much more detailed framework for assessing their interaction.

A second example illustrates Burns's relations with the Scottish aristocrat, the eleventh Earl of Buchan (1742-1829), active in promoting Scottish antiquities and heritage in the 1780s and 1790s. On Burns's

side, the relationship was fairly formal, and he made multiple drafts for his first letter to Buchan, dated February 7, 1787. It was the first of three widely-spaced letters: in August 1791, he wrote to Buchan enclosing his “Address to the Shade of Thomson,” and in January, 1794, he wrote again, this time enclosing for Buchan’s aristocratic enjoyment his song “Bannockburn” (“Scots wha hae”), now commonly interpreted as radical or revolutionary. Without the inventory, we would have just two letters the other way, from Buchan to Burns. Interestingly their dating shows that Buchan, not Burns, had initiated their first two exchanges of correspondence: Buchan had written a first fan letter to Burns on February 1, 1787 (in Chambers-Wallace), and in a letter of June 17, 1791, Buchan had invited Burns, as the leading living Scottish poet, to supply an ode to Thomson’s memory, for the unveiling of a bust of Thomson (letter in Currie, 1800). What the Currie inventory adds, however, is the record of two further letters from Buchan to Burns in September 1791, and then three more letters in 1794-1795, the first expressing approval of “Scots wha hae,” and the others showing a continuing interest in Burns’s welfare during a period in which Burns is often depicted as alienated from the Scottish aristocracy who had previously been his patrons. Instead of just five letters, including three from Burns, the inventory documents the exchange of ten letters, seven from Buchan.

It might seem obvious, therefore, to incorporate the letters from the Currie inventory into the new edition. The argument against doing so was that the inventory gives, at best, fragments of the letters, not the letters themselves. While the original manuscript inventory from which Ewing worked has been in the Burns Birthplace Museum for close to a hundred years, before that it had suffered significant water damage, with significant loss of text down the right hand margin of each page, that is, the portion of the inventory that gives the notes and extracts from the letters. One of the first entries that caught our attention was from John Hutchison, writing to Burns from Jamaica on July 10, 1786, when Burns was still planning to emigrate (Fig. 3: Ewing, letter 2):

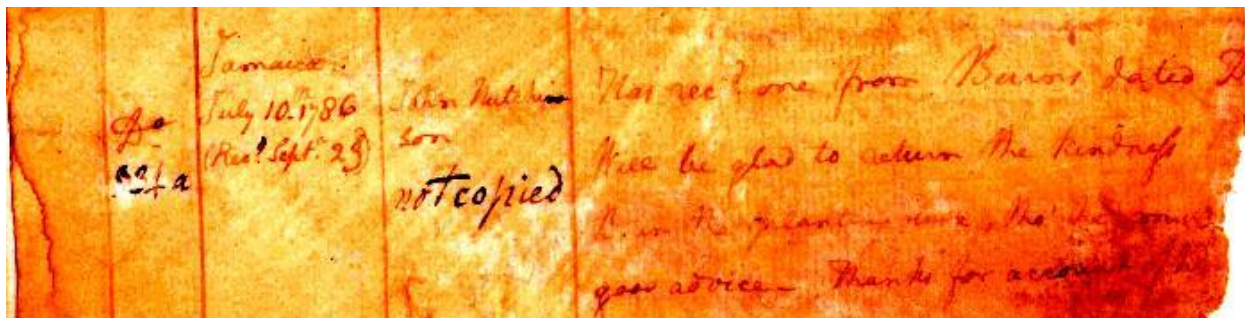


Fig. 3: Currie entry for letter from John Hutchison to Burns, July 10, 1786
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The Ewing entry reads only: “Has recd. one from Burns dated D... Will be glad to return the kindness... B. in the planting line, tho’ he must... good advice.—Thanks for account of h....” These brief extracts, however, begin to make more sense when set alongside Hutchison’s two later letters to Burns (June 14, 1787, in Currie; October 15, 1788, Ewing letter 71), and also Burns’s own letter to his friend Capt. Richard Brown in February 1789 (Roy II: 245). Burns had clearly written to Hutchison in December 1786 for information about Jamaica, and Hutchison comments on his own work for “B,” John Brownriggs, a planter of St. Ann’s Parish (see the letter to Brown). Each letter took three to six months to receive, and a similar time for its sender to get the reply: Burns didn’t get this letter of Hutchison’s till October 1786, and by then the success of the Kilmarnock volume had made Hutchison’s advice redundant.

Not all exchanges took so long. For example, in August 1788, Burns had a much brisker exchange with Robert McIndoe, a Glasgow silk merchant (Fig. 4 below). On August 5th, Burns, suffering from the after-effects of the Mauchline Fair, wrote to McIndoe ordering 15 yards of black lutstring silk “such as they use to make gowns and petticoats” (Letters I: 304), on August 7 McIndoe dispatched it with the carrier and a cover note (Ewing, letter 63), and on August 13, followed up with a letter either setting the price or

perhaps acknowledging payment (Ewing, letter 64). Presumably these letters were sent by carrier rather than the more costly mail.

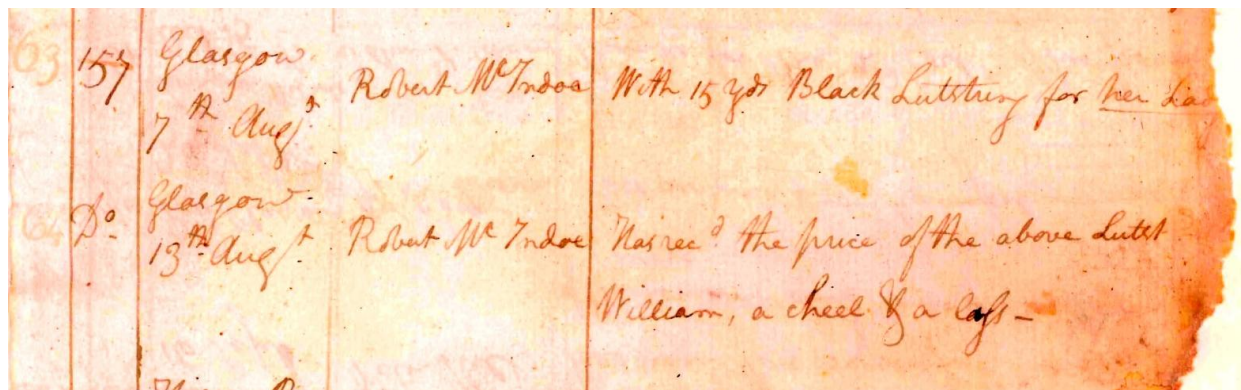


Fig. 3: Currie entries for letters from Robert McIndoe to Burns, August 7 and 13, 1788
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Sometimes, Currie's inventory, instead of extracts, gives a note about the correspondent. One entry where we would like to know more is about a letter from William Meikle, from July 13, 1789 (Ewing, letter 101), annotated simply "Letter from a poor man ...". But in other cases even brief fragments can offer valuable information. A letter of August 29, 1789, from Burns's contemporary, the poet David Sillar (Ewing, letter 114), is annotated: "Is going to print 1000 copies of his own ... posing—Sends the letter by Mr. R...marine character—". This inventory entry is the only clue to the eventual print-run for Sillar's long-delayed *Poems* (1789), printed, like Burns's own, by John Wilson of Kilmarnock, which was prefaced by the first appearance of Burns's "To the Author" ("Second Epistle to Davie," Kinsley I: 240-241). The large print-run is partial explanation of why Sillars lost money on the book and was imprisoned for debt. It is intriguing to speculate that the "Mr. R..." who carried the letter and led Sillars to comment on "marine character," might have been the same Capt. Richard Brown to whom Burns wrote about John Hutchison.

Even the briefest entries can raise puzzling questions about Burns's own writing. One of the songs traditionally credited to Burns, but for which his contribution has recently been disputed, is "Ca' the Ewes" ("As I gaed down the water-side," Kinsley I: 369-370), first published in *Johnson's Scots Musical Museum* in 1790. Burns never claimed it was his original composition, but he did assert that he had collected it from oral performance, and then added to it. In September 1794, Burns gave George Thomson an account of the song's origin: "it was owing to me that it ever saw the light. —About seven years ago I was well acquainted with a worthy little fellow of a clergyman, a Mr Clunzie, who sung it charmingly; and at my request, Mr. Clarke took it down from his singing ... I added some stanzas" (*Letters* II: 305-306). Mr. Clarke was Stephen Clarke, the Edinburgh organist who arranged the music for Johnson, and Mr. Clunzie or Clunie was at that time a schoolmaster in Fife. Burns wrote a quite different version of the song for Thomson's *Select Collection*, beginning "Hark the mavis' evening sang" (Kinsley II: 738-739). What has caused recent dispute is renewed interest in the Muirkirk poet, singer, and tavern-keeper Isobel or Tibbie Pagan (1741-1821). There's apparently no version of "Ca' the Yowes" in the only life-time volume of Pagan's work, *Collection of Songs* (Glasgow: Niven, 1808), or any published attribution to Pagan in Burns's lifetime, but in 1821 John Struteers's *Harp of Caledonia* headed the song "Pagan" (*Harp*, I: 133), and in 1825 Allan Cunningham printed a version close to Burns's as being "partly old, partly new," with the comment that "what is new was written by a gentleman of the name of Pagan" (*Songs of Scotland*, III: 275-276). William Paterson, in his *Contemporaries of Burns* (1840), calls Pagan the "reputed authoress" of the song, though he also notes that Pagan's performance repertoire included along with her own compositions "many of the best of Ramsay and Burns" (Paterson, pp. 113, 120). The attribution to Pagan is made less ambiguously in 1853 by William Stenhouse, in his *Illustrations* (pp. 315-316). By the 1880s, John D. Ross printed Pagan's version of the song as dating from 1773, without giving evidence for the early date. Kirsteen McCue, reviewing the issue some years ago, concluded that "There is much similarity

between the versions, but ... no way of proving the song was originally Pagan's" (McCue, pp. 45-46).

The Currie inventory, however, throws another source into the mix. On January 31, 1788, Burns had received a letter from Charles Elliot, in Dalkeith, annotated in the inventory "Incloses 'Ca' the ewes to the know.... Lads o' Gala water." There's no Charles Elliot in the usual Burns sources, and Ewing (p. 5) calls him "Unknown in Bursiana." As with "Ca' the yowes," there are two versions of "Galla water," a first, traditional one, "Braw braw lads o' Galla-water," perhaps lightly edited by Burns, that appeared in Johnson's *Scots Musical Museum*, II (1788) (Kinsley III: 1421), and then a new or at least very much reworked version by Burns, beginning "Braw, braw lads in Yarrow braes," published in Thomson's *Select Collection*, I (1793) (Kinsley, II: 675-676). What is most significant perhaps about the inventory entry for the Elliot letter is that it links together Burns's involvement with the two songs, when he was contributing to Johnson's second volume. But it also complicates his account of collecting "Ca' the yowes" from Mr. Clunzie's oral performance.

As mentioned above, one reason that the inventory entries are fragmentary is the damage along the right margin of each page. It helps in guessing what has been lost if you rearrange Ewing's paragraph format for the annotations to something like the manuscript layout, line by incomplete line. For example, the inventory records an undated letter to Burns from the Dumfries actor-manager John or James B. Williamson (Fig 5: Ewing, letter 302).

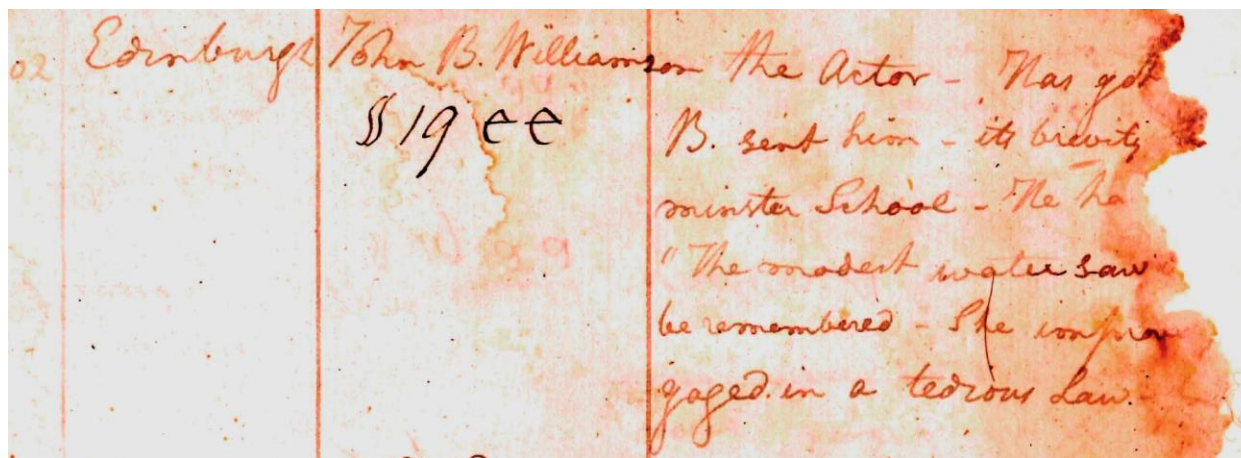


Fig. 5: Currie entry for letter from John B. Williamson to Burns, undated [? 1792]
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Williamson was writing from Edinburgh, but Burns's acquaintance with him was greatest in 1792-1794 when Williamson and his future wife Louisa Fontenelle appeared at the Dumfries theatre. As the image above shows, in the manuscript, the summary of Williamson's letter looks something like this:

the Actor—Has got...
B. sent him—its brevity...
minster school—He had...
"The modest water saw its...
be remembered—She improves...
gaged in a tedious Law-

What becomes visible in this layout is that, not just one or two words, but a minimum of four or five, must be missing from each line. Some of this missing text can be guessed at, but guessing just raises new questions. In the opening lines, what had Burns sent to Williamson that was notable for its brevity? In the final two lines, who was the "She" who asked to be remembered, and was improving? And what was the

“tedious Law-suit that Williamson reports?

However, with the availability of so much older material in digital form, some of the puzzles in the Currie inventory are now solvable. For instance, the middle lines in the Williamson fragment, with the incomplete quotation beginning “The modest water ...,” can be definitively completed. Williamson was quoting an epigram attributed to the poet John Dryden, when he was a boy at Westminster School, and was assigned a verse-composition about the wedding in Cana in Galilee, where Christ turned the water into wine. Dryden famously turned in just one great line, “The modest water saw its Lord and blushed.” (Later scholarship has instead attributed the epigram to Richard Crashaw, but Williamson would have known only the traditional Dryden anecdote.) The full précis of the letter must have been something like this:

the Actor—Has got [the verses about **** that]
B[urns]. sent him—its brevity [recalls John Dryden’s as a boy at West-]
minster school—He had [been set verses on the Miracle at Cana and wrote]
“The modest water saw its [Lord and blushed.” Louisa asks to]
be remembered—She improves [in health each day. I am en-]
gaged in a tedious Law-[suit with ****.]

We are not, of course including this kind of conjectural reconstruction in the edition, but we are including such finds as the Dryden quotation in the annotation.

The solution to one brief and puzzling entry in the Currie inventory turned up unexpectedly, right here in South Carolina, in the G. Ross Roy Collection. The entry records a “letter” to Burns from the Scottish lawyer Alexander Fraser Tytler, writing from George Square, Edinburgh, and dated simply “March 10,” without a year (Fig. 6: Ewing, letter 277).

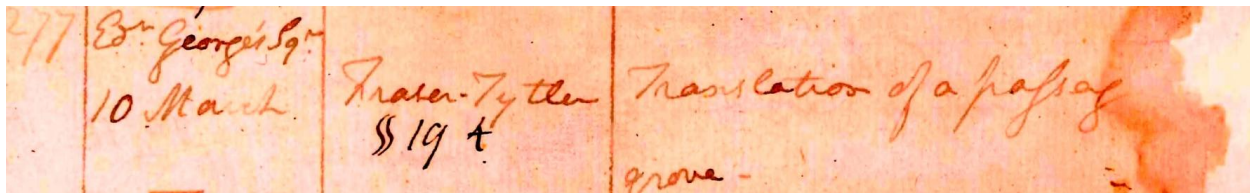


Fig. 5: Currie entry for letter from Alexander Fraser Tytler to Burns, undated [? 1787]
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The Currie summary reads, in its entirety, “Translation of a passage ... grove—” A few years ago, Professor Roy bought the original two-page manuscript passage that Tytler had written out for Burns, headed “Translation of a passage in the Third Book of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, describing a Druidical Grove” (Sudduth, p. 2).



**Fig. 3: Alexander Fraser Tytler, autograph note to Robert Burns, March 10 [? 1787].
Courtesy of the G. Ross Roy Collection, University of South Carolina Libraries**

The topic would have interested Burns: in late summer 1787, he reported to his brother Gilbert that he had been “through the heart of the Highlands ... down the Tay, among cascades and Druidical circles of stones” (September 17, 1787: Roy I: 156). But the manuscript has a revealing cover-note showing why Tytler was sending it: “Mr. Fraser Tytler’s Compliments to Mr. Burns sends him the translation from Lucan which was mentioned last night.” The translation itself, in the same hand, appears to be Tytler’s own, that he had made when discussing pre-Christian celtic religion in his lectures as part-time professor of Universal History at Edinburgh University, and it turns up word-for-word in the later published text of Tytler’s lectures (*Universal History*, Bk. V, ch. 6). The whole episode gives an interesting sidelight on Burns’s ability to engage with the literati of Enlightenment Edinburgh, and it deepens the picture of Burns’s continuing relations with Tytler, as for instance when he sent him copies of “The Whistle” and “Tam o’ Shanter,” and when he adopted Tytler’s suggested revision to the latter poem.

Although Ewing provided some brief annotation on selected entries in his 1938 edition, the Currie inventory seems never to have been fully researched and annotated. The examples given here are just that, examples. Our project is called “a preliminary edition” for a good reason: that we do not expect to solve in one step every puzzle that the inventory presents. Some of the puzzles may never be solved, but as so often in questions about Burns, it is also likely that relevant information is already on record, somewhere, in a footnote or paragraph in one of the thousands of books and articles about Burns. Finding it is easier now that a lot of the major printed sources have been digitized, but it still means trying to make the links between the fragmentary pages of the inventory manuscript and the information that is out there. In addition, nearly all our research for this project so far has had to rely on printed sources, not on the letters themselves. James Currie’s inventory gives notice that there were once manuscripts for many more letters. We see research on the letters written to Burns as a two-stage process, and our hope is that the preliminary edition will encourage other Burnsians to share information that we missed, both with us and, more important, with the Glasgow project editors, as they start work on the correspondence volumes for the new Collected Burns. We would particularly like to hear from Burnsians, collectors, or librarians, who can help us and the Glasgow editors locate additional manuscripts of letters written to Burns.

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