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"Fragments that Remain: 'A Verse by Burns,' the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, and David Sillar's Manuscript Rules"

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Fragments that Remain: “A Verse by Burns,” the Tarbolton Bachelors’ Club, and David Sillar’s Manuscript Rules

Patrick Scott

One of the most tantalizing problems for Burns research is the number of Burns-related manuscripts that were cut up so that nineteenth-century Burns collectors could own something, however small or fragmentary, in the poet’s hand or connected with him. It was much less likely to happen to the manuscripts of poems or songs, but it happened to many of the Thornhill excise documents, for instance, and to the expanded manuscript glossary Burns prepared for the Edinburgh edition. Fragments like these can be unglamorous, unlikely to leave much trace in the auction or sales records, and difficult to catalogue, and they can be even more effectively lost in large collections than in small ones. The National Distributed Burns Collection (now Burns Scotland), the related Westwood *Definitive Companion*, the digital images on the Birthplace website, the Burns items on Future Museum, and elsewhere, all represent important attempts to track such fragmentary material, but it remains elusive.

Sometimes one will find earlier references to a manuscript, only to have the trail run cold, and the successive strata of published information will be too lightly referenced to help track down the original source for verification, or even to make clear exactly what is being looked for, a complete manuscript or a fragment. One niggling example is the whereabouts of the manuscript rules for the Tarbolton Bachelors’ Club, which have twice been cited by Burns’s modern biographers, but which could not be located when the Oxford editors wanted to check the text. Unnervingly, the manuscripts section of the great Glasgow Memorial Exhibition had included an entry for “Rules and Regulations of the ‘Batchelors’ Club,’ Tarbolton, of which Burns was a member,” which were then owned by a Mr. Archibald Munro.¹ This may not however have been the original manuscript, because a few years before, the Scottish newspapers had reported the discovery of the manuscript records for a slightly later refounding of the Club, in 1786, involving Burns’s friend David Sillar, a member since 1781.² The first modern mention of

¹ *Memorial Catalogue of the Burns Exhibition held in the Galleries of the Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts ... from 15th July to 31st October, 1896* (Glasgow: William Hodge and T. & R. Annan, 1898), p. 182, item 1258. Mr. Munro, of 18, Minto Street, Edinburgh, also loaned, *inter alia*, a 1788 Burns letter to Robert Ainslie, manuscript poem by Clarinda, a gold brooch formerly belonging to Jean Armour, and a piece of the thorn tree from Montgomerie Castle: *Memorial Catalogue*, pp. 499, 155, 173, 105, and 95. A longtime Burnsian, Munro had written to the *Scotsman* in December 1882, retailing an elderly woman’s memories of meeting Burns in 1792, though her account was subsequently shown to be improbable (*Scotsman*, December 26, 1882; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, Tuesday, January 9, 1883, p. 2).

² “An Interesting ‘Find’ in Burnsiana—Minute Book of a Mauchline Debating Club,” *Glasgow Herald*, Saturday June 18, 1892, p. 6; *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, same date, p. 2; *Edinburgh Evening News*, same date, p. 2; *Aberdeen Journal*, Wednesday, June 22, 1892, p. 6.

the manuscript rules of 1780-1781 seems to be in the biography by the late James Mackay:

At the inaugural meeting the rules of the Club were drawn up. A copy exists to this day in Sillar's holograph, but without doubt Robert was the person chiefly responsible for drafting the rules, reproduced in full by Currie and much-quoted in part by all subsequent biographers.³

Mackay's footnote, however, refers the researcher only to the Currie text, not to a current location for the Sillar holograph. There is a similar reference in Robert Crawford's *The Bard*, saying that that the rules "surviv[e] in a version handwritten by David Sillar," while "reading very much as if Burns ... was their principal if not sole author."⁴ When the Glasgow team were editing the Tarbolton rules for the first volume of the Oxford Edition of Robert Burns, they hunted for Sillar's handwritten version but reported that "we have not been able to locate" it.⁵

However, fragments of such a manuscript do indeed survive, if not a complete manuscript. Their existence, and location, were reported in 1935, in a brief note in the *Burns Chronicle*, headed misleadingly "A Verse by Burns." The note, presumably by the editor J. C. Ewing, reads in full:

A VERSE BY BURNS

Two small portions of the "preamble" and rules and regulations of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club (instituted 1780), in the holograph of David Sillar, are preserved in the Alloway Burns Cottage Museum. On the reverse of one of the fragments are the following four lines in Burns's hand:

The greatness that would make us grave
Is but an empty thing.
What more than mirth could mortals have;
The cheerful man's a king.

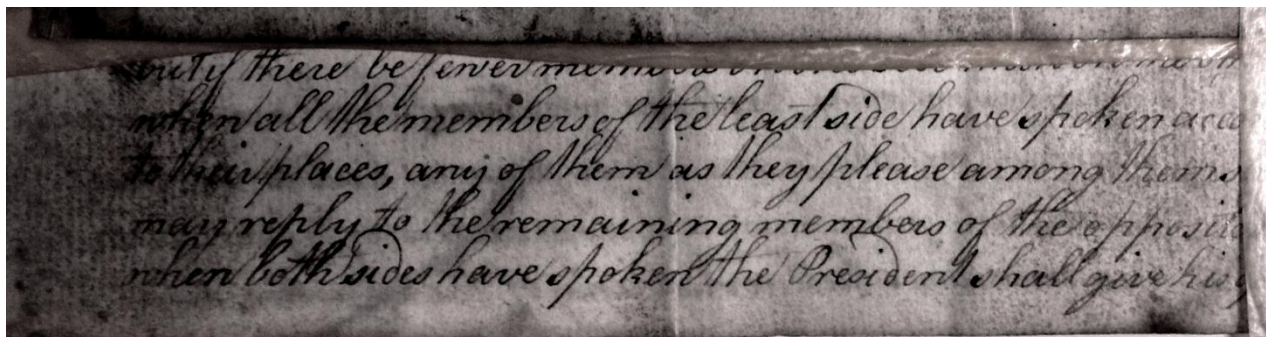
³ James Mackay, *RB: A Biography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1992, repr. 1993), p. 82. Earlier biographers had been more cautious: cf., e.g., about Rule 10, "the proper person for this society is a cheerful, honest-hearted lad," Snyder writes "There is no evidence that Burns himself wrote this paragraph, but it is clear he approved it; and, indeed, it is hard to believe that any member of the group save Burns could have coined the phrases": Franklyn Bliss Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), p. 71.

⁴ Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, A Biography* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 107, footnoted to Currie.

⁵ Nigel Leask, ed., *The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns, vol. I: Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 21, and cf. also p. 310, n. 27.

Could Ewing's note, rather than a missing full-length manuscript, be what lies behind Mackay's comment? The echo of the word "holograph" certainly suggests that possibility, despite Mackay's lack of citation.

The manuscript fragments reported in 1935 are still at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, as Accession 3.6698. I am indebted to David Hopes for seeking them out when I inquired and sending me photographs. The two passages from the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club rules are on two sides of the same slip of paper.



**Pl. 1: Rule 3, Tarbolton Bachelors' Club,
By kind permission of Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, National Trust for Scotland.**

One side, of five lines, a passage from Rule 3, is cut close into the wording at the top and right hand edges, leading to a partial loss of text:

But if there be fewer members...
when all the members of the least side have spoken acc...
to their places, any of them as they please among them...
may reply to the remaining members of the opposite...
when both sides have spoken the President shall give his ...⁶

The other side, of just four lines, a passage from Rule 7, has its wording intact and reads:

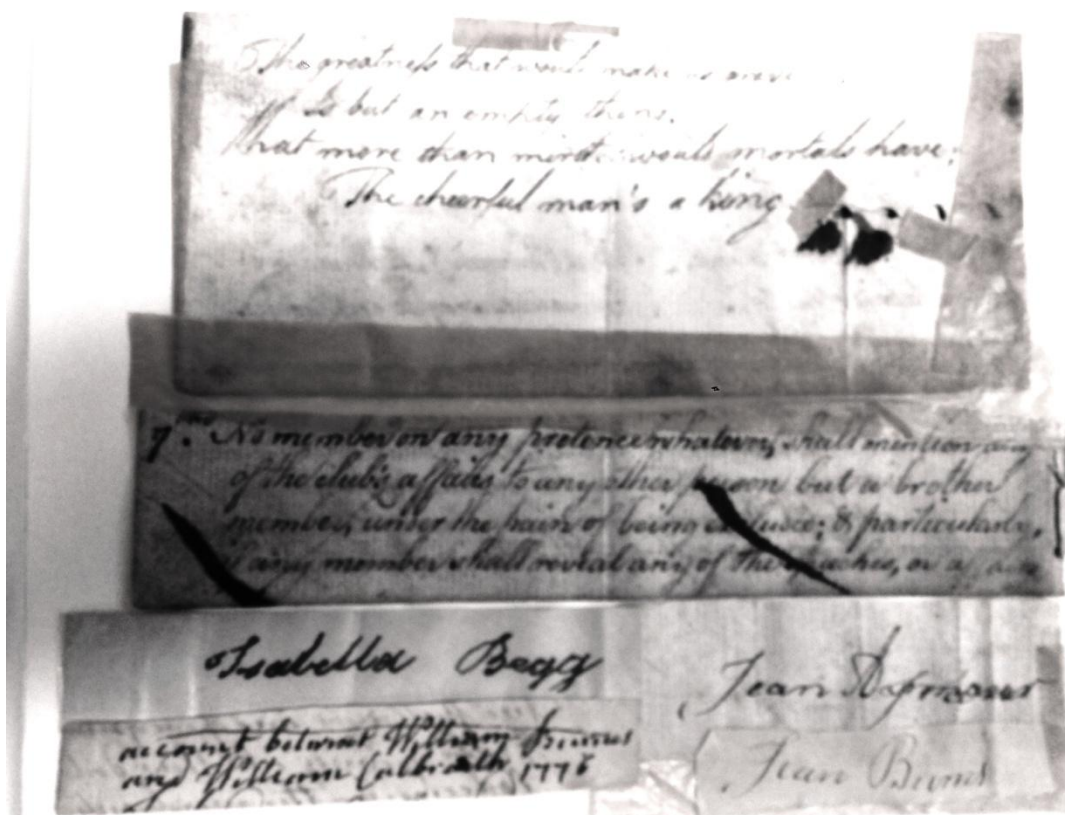
7. No member on any pretence whatever shall mention any
of the club's affairs to any other person but a brother
member under the pain of being excluded; & particularly,
if any member shall reveal any of the speeches, or affairs⁷

⁶ Cf. James Currie, ed., *Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Liverpool: J. M'Creery, 1800), I: 366.

⁷ Cf. Currie I: 368.

The text for these passages, if not always the punctuation, conforms exactly to that printed by Currie, and so also to the text in the new Oxford edition, and some large ink slashes across the second passage seem to be similar to those sometimes found on other manuscripts used by Currie in preparing his edition.

But the fragments of the Tarbolton rules are preserved with a group of other manuscript fragments. As now mounted, the rules come at the middle of the grouping, with other fragments above and below. Two fragments at the foot of the page are of limited interest: one with signatures for Isabella Begg, Jean Armour, and Jean Burns, and with the phrase “to fear in regard” on the verso; the other a very small scrap from a business document of “account betwint William Burns and William Galbraith 1776,” with three partial lines on the verso in which I could decode only the words “halfe-penny.”

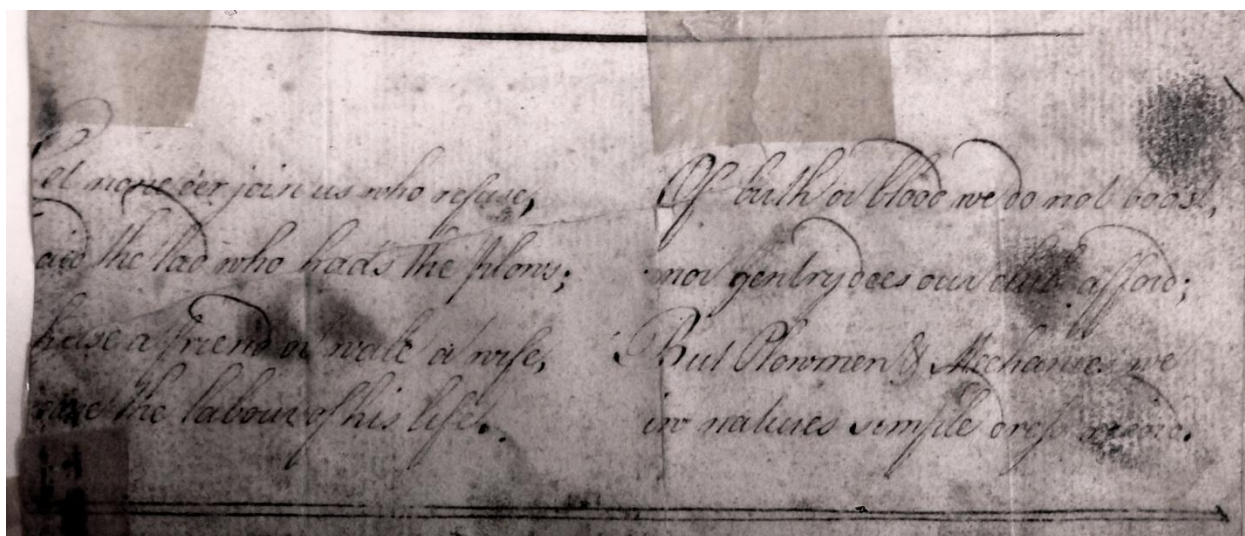


Pl. 2: Page of mounted fragments, including a stanza by Isaac Bickerstaff in Burns's hand, and Rule 7, Tarbolton Bachelors' Club,
By kind permission of Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, National Trust for Scotland.

At the top of the page is a single piece of paper, with verses on both sides. One side (as shown in Pl. 2) has the verse printed by Ewing in 1935 as being by Burns, or at least as being in his hand. The verse's egalitarian message and recommendation of

cheerfulness might seem appropriate both to the Tarbolton club and to Burns's own sense of sociability, but these lines are not by Burns, not even on the embroidered outer fringes of the Burns apocrypha: they come from Isaac Bickerstaffe's popular and frequently-reprinted play *Love in a Village* (1762).

On the other side of the top fragment, however, are two verses, in a different and more formal hand. The second stanza is familiar, because it was printed by Currie as an epigraph for the history of the Club. The first stanza is not familiar, though, because Currie did not include it, perhaps because the fragment was clipped close on the left hand edge making the beginning of the lines unclear: it is easy enough to fill in the missing words.



**Pl. 3: Prefatory stanzas, Rules of the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club,
By kind permission of Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, National Trust for Scotland.**

Let none e'er join us who refuse,
[To] aid the lad who hods the plow;
[To p]lease a friend or wale a wife,
[These] are the labour of his life.

Of birth or blood we do not boast,
nor gentry does our club afford;
But Plowmen and Mechanics we
in nature's simple dress accord.⁸

⁸ The reading, here, "accord," is based on a photograph, not examination of the fragment itself; Currie, and all citations since, print "record." Both rhyme words seem a bit desperate, but "accord" fits the theme.

The second, better-known stanza, has recently been claimed for Burns himself, but Currie's comment is vague both about its authorship, and the near-contemporary evidence of Josiah Walker attributes it instead to David Sillar.⁹ The very early connection of the second verse with the Tarbolton Bachelors' Club, from its use in Currie, make it at least plausible that the top fragment was also once part of the dismembered club history and regulations represented in the middle fragment. If so, then the stanza in Burns's hand from Bickerstaffe on the verso of the top fragment, the two stanzas in a different hand on the recto attributed to Sillar, and the regulations themselves, were all written out for and cut out from the same document, presumably when, a Currie attests, Sillar copied out the original rules. The three together certainly confirm the sense of the club's ethos inferred from other sources.

It is hard sometimes to forgive the Victorian autograph hunters and relic-collectors whose eagerness once encouraged the naïve owners of original manuscript material to cut it up into small collectible shreds. But cut it up they did, though happily many of the dispersed shreds have survived, more treasured, perhaps, by their individual owners than they might be in a large institution. I would urge any Burnsians who themselves own such fragments to share scans or other copies with the Birthplace, the Center for Robert Burns Studies at Glasgow, or another major Burns project or collection, in case they can provide the crucial missing piece for a larger picture.

⁹ Walker's comment reads: "a few verses are prefixed, which are not, as Dr. Currie presumes, from the pen of Burns. They were contributed by Mr. David Sillars <sic>." See [Josiah Walker], in *Poems by Robert Burns*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: printed for the trustees of the late James Morison, by John Moir, 1811), I: xlv-xlvi, cited also in Robert W. Chambers, revised William Wallace, *Life and Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1896), I: 66, footnote. For recent attribution of the second stanza to Burns, see, e.g., Andrew Noble and Patrick S. Hogg, eds., *The Canongate Burns*, revd. ed. (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003), p. 644: "Found in the hand of Burns, these lines are almost certainly his," or, more cautiously, Nigel Leask, *Robert Burns and Pastoral Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 12; and Leask, ed., *Commonplace Books*, p. 310, n. 28.