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Original Sources and Modern Sources on Burns's Songs

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Original Sources and Modern Sources on Burns’s Songs
By Dr. Patrick Scott, PhD

Everyone “knows” or sings or hums the most famous of Burns’s songs, and we mostly absorb new ones from recordings, rather than books. Finding out more about a particular song can be confusing and frustrating. In many collections of Burns’s poetry, the tunes are given just as a note under the song title; “Air—Afton Water,” or “Air—Hey Tutiel Tutiel.” This was the situation that the American composer Serge Hovey faced in the 1950s when he resolved to research the tunes that Burns had in his head as he composed or revised or polished the words we now find inevitable.

The two main sources for the original song tunes are James Johnson’s Scots Musical Museum (six parts, each with a hundred songs, 1787-1803) and George Thomson’s Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs (five vols., each with twenty-five tunes, 1793-1818).

Johnson’s project, in which Burns became heavily involved only from part II, was in a smaller format, with words and music printed all in one process, and giving only a simple bass line beneath the tune or air, expecting that the accompanist would improvise an elaboration. Many modern commentators and performers prefer the simplicity of Johnson’s version, arguing that they are more authentic, and they have been the basis for several modern recording series (including Jean Redpath’s a capella series and the Greentrax series produced by Fred Freeman). There have been several modern reprints of Johnson, most notably in two volumes in 1991 with an introduction and index by Donald Low.

Thomson’s project, in which Burns was involved from the beginning was in a much larger format, with the music reproduced as engraved copper plates, with quite elaborate arrangements that Thomson had commissioned from well-known composers, including Haydn and Beethoven. Thomson often printed two alternate sets of words for a tune, one in Scots and one in English. In both Johnson and Thomson, many of the lyrics are not by Burns, but by other, earlier poets. Thomson’s versions were frequently reprinted, sometimes under variant titles, in the years following publication, and his versions underlie much later Victorian sheet music and earlier twentieth-century concert recordings, but there is no easily-available modern reprint of the original engraved music. The only modern recording based on Thomson seems to be for the songs on which Haydn worked. Thomson was fairly high-handed in making his own changes both to words and music, and modern Burnsians sometimes disparage Thomson, but for some songs his volumes preserve the version in which Burns himself had been most directly involved.

For Burns’s own ideas about the songs, you have to go to two further sources, his comments in his correspondence, particularly the extended exchanges with Thomson during his years in Dumfries (first published in 1800 in volume 4 of the Currie Works of Robert Burns) and the manuscript notes he made in an interleaved copy of Johnson’s Scots Musical Museum, first published in 1808 in R.H.Crome’s Reliques of Robert Burns (and also reprinted as an appendix to the Low reprint of Johnson). What Serge Hovey tried to do was to get behind all these early sources to recreate the tunes as Burns would have heard them sung or performed before he composed his words. For that, Hovey examined a range of earlier Scottish musical sources, often arrangements of song tunes for instrumental performance, as in the arrangements by the famous Scottish fiddler Neil Gow. When Hovey began, there was little guidance to these sources: the most important were James C. Dick’s still useful The Songs of

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Robert Burns (1903) and Robert D. Thornton's slim study The Tuneful Flame (1957).

For the modern Burnsian, there is much more help available. The most comprehensive sources for researching any particular Burns song are the three-volume Oxford Poems and Songs, ed. James Kinsley (1968), and Donald Low's mammoth one-volume Songs of Robert Burns (Routledge, 1993). Kinsley's music is very simply presented; Low's edition had music arranged by the Edinburgh music historian David Johnson. Both provide quite full annotations on the tunes, and both are now very expensive. Hovey himself completed research and piano accompaniments for all the songs, and two volumes (from a projected four) have been published (MelBay, 1996-2001), with a selection of his annotations. Hovey's published arrangements, though based on the same research, are simpler than his more interpretative arrangements for Jean Redpath's famous series of Hovey recordings (1973-1989).

For most of us, the most practical modern source is probably still the one-volume version of Kinsley (Oxford, 1969 etc.), which includes tunes with the songs, but no notes. One modern Burns text, Carol McGuirk's Penguin (1993, repr. 2005) also includes music and notes for selected songs. Despite all the recent scholarship on Burns, and the many competing recordings, there's still little consensus on the best approach to recreating this aspect of his work, and (as with the poems) we can be grateful it is possible to enjoy and admire his songs without having to resolve these deep-running debates.