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Patrick Scott

Among the “radical” poems first attributed to Burns in the 1830s, the song “Why should we idly waste our prime” has always attracted scepticism.¹ It was not published by Burns himself or in his lifetime, it was never mentioned in his letters or other contemporary sources, and it survives in no autograph or other contemporary manuscript. There are reasonable explanations for why such songs might have been held back. James Currie and Gilbert Burns, the editors who had most access to Burns’s papers, had no reason in 1800 or 1820 to risk drawing hostile attention to Burns’s political comments. By the 1830s, when Cunningham and Chambers first printed “the ‘Poetical Inscription for an Altar to Independence’ and ‘The Tree of Liberty,’” the situation had changed.²

About “Why should we idly,” the 1830s editors were tentative or teasing. Instead of admitting it among the poems, both Cunningham and Chambers quoted the three stanzas in smaller print as a note or footnote, with discursive interruption, as something that had once been attributed to Burns in some previous unnamed source.³ Scott Douglas and Henley and Henderson printed it, but with dismissive comments.⁴ Among modern editors, Kinsley excluded it even from his “doubtful” category, and Mackay printed it only among the spurious poems, but the Canongate editors justified including it, even after comparison with an earlier non-Burnsian version, by suggesting Burns had improved the song, rather than written it.⁵ This line of investigation can now be taken further, by examining several other early versions of the song printed in England and Ireland. These vary in title, first line, tune, chorus or refrain, and number of stanzas, and one at least has long been attributed to another writer. The additional versions of “Why should we idly” discussed here do not solve its authorship; rather, they illustrate how such songs could be modified in oral and printed transmission, and the way earlier songs might be adapted in differing political situations.

The English versions emerge as a cluster in 1794-1795, connected with the treason trial of a Scottish-born radical, though there are at least two subsequent printings in radical song collections. When they specify a tune, it is the early 18th century English song satirizing political conformity, “The Vicar of Bray,” which has an eight-line stanza and a four-line refrain.⁶

¹ See e.g. Norrie Paton, “Letter to the Editor,” *Burns Chronicle* 2000 (Dumfries: Robert Burns World Federation, [2000]), 130; “Why Should We Idly Waste Our Prime,” *Burns Chronicle* (Winter 2002), 47-48.

² Cf. Ross Roy’s comment about this song that “Burns’s early enthusiasm for the French Revolution is well known,” and by the 1830s “readers were ready to accept him as the author of other radical verse,” but that we should not be “surprised to find spurious [i.e. non-Burnsian] revolutionary works attributed to him:” G. Ross Roy, “Poems and Songs Spuriously Attributed to Robert Burns,” *Études Écossaises*, 3 (1996): 11-24 (pp. 13-14); repr. in *Critical Essays on Robert Burns*, ed. Carol McGuirk (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1998), pp. 225-237.

³ Allan Cunningham, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns*, 8 vols. (London: Cochrane, 1834), V: 312-313; [Robert Chambers], *The Life of Robert Burns ... Here Considerably Extended* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1838), p. 49 note.

⁴ William Scott Douglas, ed., *Works of Robert Burns*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1877-79), W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson, eds., *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1896 [-1897]), IV: 57-58 and 107.

⁵ James Kinsley, ed., *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); James A Mackay, *Burns A-Z: The Complete Word Finder* (Dumfries: James Mackay Publishing, 1990), p. 731; Andrew Noble and Patrick S. Hogg, eds., *The Canongate Burns* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2001; revd. ed., 2003), pp. 825-829.

⁶ The tune is a hint, rather than a proof, of origin: English tunes were often included in late 18th century Scottish song collections, and “The Vicar of Bray” occurs, for instance, in *The Charmer*, 4th edition (Edinburgh: J. Sibbald,

The Canongate edition printed a five-stanza manuscript version of the song, beginning “Why should we vainly waste our prime,” that had been found in the London home of Thomas Hardy (1752-1832), the Scottish-born secretary of the Corresponding Society who was tried and acquitted of high treason in late 1794.⁷ The editors suggest that “Burns appears to have seen the original,” “evidently the work of a passionately radical poet,” arguing that “the differences between the two songs... ring true to expected improvements by Burns,” and that he “would have cut away the weaker verses,” so “the song can be added to the category of works he improved.” As Hardy’s counsel pointed out at the trial, the manuscript found at Hardy’s house was not in his hand but had been sent to him by some unknown person; there is no indication of its authorship. Moreover, the manuscript in the Public Record Office is a government-made transcript, not the original sent to Hardy.

Hardy’s trial attracted great public interest. Several shorthand reports were rushed into print, and each gives a slightly different version of the song. The differences are not mistakes, but signs that there were already multiple versions, because it is very likely that the shorthand reporters did not bother taking the song text down during the trial, but filled it in afterwards from a printed source or an informant.

The earliest printed transcript, by William Ramsey, was published in November 1794 immediately after Hardy’s acquittal. Ramsey mentions the song twice, and has the same text as in the PRO manuscript. The first mention, during cross-examination, prints only the first four lines of the song, titling them as “A Song addressed to Mr. Hardy,” and specifying the tune as “The Vicar of Bray.” Later in the trial, the Lord Chief Justice is recorded as having read out all five stanzas, matching the PRO manuscript in text, except that he omitted any refrain.⁸

The other two published trial-transcripts differ more significantly. The second printed transcript, by Joseph Gurney, differs in giving the full text of the song during the cross-examination, rather than later, but adds for all stanzas the repetition of lines 3-4 as a refrain, as found also in the Home Office transcript:

Come rouse to arms, ’tis now the time,
To punish past transgressions.⁹

The third transcript is arguably the most significant for assessing the Burns attribution. This is the shorthand transcript by Manoah Sibly, also printed in 1795, titled *The Genuine Trial of Thomas Hardy for High Treason*. Again, in Sibly’s account, the song appears in full during cross-examination, rather than during the judge’s summing-up. The Sibly version (Fig. 1) changes the first line, moving the adverb forward to better fit the tune, and simplifying the verb:

Why vainly do we waste our prime...

1782), vol. I, p. 110. While this tune requires a four-line refrain, neither the trial versions nor the one later attributed to Burns indicate more than two lines, but refrains were not always indicated fully.

⁷ Canongate, pp. 826-828, citing “recent research” on “Treasurer’s Solicitor’s Papers, Public Record Office, Kew,... (TS II/959/3505).” The song from the Hardy trial had earlier been excerpted, and its relevance noted to the Burns attribution, by A. Nikilyukin, “Forgotten Pages of English Poetry: The Poetry of the Corresponding Societies,” *Thomas Paine Society Bulletin*, 1.5 (Autumn-Winter 1973-1974), 18-26 (p. 17), reprinting an abridged English translation in *Soviet Literature* of Nikilyukin’s Russian article “originally published in *Voprosy literatury*, 3 (1958).”

⁸ William Ramsey, *The Proceedings in Cases of High Treason under as Special Commission...* (London: for James Ridgeway..., 1794), pp. 260, 601-602. The Lord Chief Justice commented that “such evidence could not be rejected, because keeping such papers by him is a reproach to a prudent man, and affords some evidence of the improper connections he makes.”

⁹ Joseph Gurney, *The Trial of Thomas Hardy for High Treason....* Vol. III (London: sold by Martha Gurney, 1795), pp. 9-10.

(Read by the Clerk of the Court.)

" A S O N G,

" Addressed to Mr. Hardy, Piccadilly.---Tune, *Vicar of Bray*.

" Why vainly do we waste our prime
" Repeating our oppressions?
" Come, rouse to arms, 'tis now the time
" To punish past transgressions.
" 'Tis said that Kings can do no wrong;
" Their murderous deeds deny it:
" And since from us their power has sprung
" We have the right to try it.
" Each patriot Briton's song must be,
" O give me death or liberty.
" The starving wretch who steals for bread
" But seldom meets compassion;
" And shall a Crown preserve the head
" Of one who robs a nation?
" Such partial laws we all despise,
" See Gallia's bright example;
" The godlike scene before our eyes,
" We'll every tyrant trample.
" Each patriot Briton's song will be,
" O give me death or liberty.
" Proud Bishops then we will translate
" Among priestcraft's martyrs;
" The guillotine on Peers shall wait,
" And Knights we'll hang in garters.
" These despots long have trod us down,
" And Judges are their engines;
" Such wretched minions of the Crown
" Demand the people's vengeance.
" Each patriot Briton's song will be,
" O give us death or liberty.
" Our Juries are a venal pack,
" See Justice topsy-turvy;
" On Freedom's cause they've turn'd a back,
" Of Englishmen unworthy.
" Now, once for all, the work begun,
" We'll clean the Augean stable;
" A moment lost we are undone,
" Come, strike whilst we are able.
" Each patriot Briton's song shall be,
" O give me death or liberty.
" The Golden Age will then revive,
" Each man will be a brother;
" In harmony we all shall live,
" And share this earth together.
" In Virtue's school enlighten'd youth
" Will love his fellow-creature;
" And future years will prove this truth,
" That man is good by nature.
" Then let us drink, with three times three,
" The reign of Peace and Liberty."

Mr. Erskine. Your Lordship will observe, this was a song sent to my client by somebody or other in a letter.

Fig. 1: "Why Vainly Do We Waste Our Prime," from Manoah Sibly, *The Genuine Trial of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1795).

More significant, however, is its treatment of the refrain, which is quite different from that given in the other texts from the Hardy trial. Four stanzas have variants on this new refrain, which in stanza one reads:

Each patriot Briton's song must be,
O give me death or liberty.¹⁰

This is varied slightly from stanza to stanza, changing "must" to "will" for in stanzas 2 and 3, and then to "shall" in stanza 4, and changing "me" to "us" stanza 3, and back again in stanza 4. Sibly's last stanza, however, has a quite different conclusion:

Then let us drink, with three times three,
The reign of Peace and Liberty (*ibid.*, p. 34).

The refrains in Sibly's 1795 transcript thus come close to, but are not exactly the same as, the last two lines for the first and third stanzas in the Cunningham-Chambers version. The version they attribute to Burns has the refrain for stanza 1:

Now each true patriot's song shall be
Welcome death or libertie.

and for stanza 3:

Then let us toast, with three times three
The reign of peace and liberty.

While this does not totally disprove the contention that Burns had revised the song from Hardy's trial, it would require that the major textual revisions Burns is said to have made to the PRO manuscript version, or to the version in one of the first two printed trial-transcripts, as he prepared a three-stanza version, were made in time, and reached London in time, to influence Sibly's five-stanza version, printed in London in 1795.

The variant refrains also draw attention to another unsolved issue in using the Cunningham-Chambers version. Both Cunningham and Chambers print a short second stanza, with just eight lines, not the ten lines they give for stanzas 1 and 2. Later editors provide a full-length stanza two, with the addition of the following couplet:

To-day is theirs,—to-morrow, we
Shall don the Cap of Libertie!

The first major Burns edition to give these additional lines is Scott Douglas's *Kilmarnock Popular* edition in 1871, but his only source-credit is to Cunningham.¹¹ The additional lines do not seem to occur in any of the 1790s versions.

Very shortly after Hardy's trial, yet another version of the song appeared, this time in Ireland. The "Belfast version" had four eight line stanzas, and no refrain, and the tune is no longer "The Vicar of Bray" but "Gilly Crankey."¹² It has also been given a new title, "Man is Free by Nature." In this revised form (see Fig. 2), it was included in the influential song collection,

¹⁰ Manoah Sibly, *The Genuine Trial of Thomas Hardy for High Treason*, vol. II (London: for J.S. Jordan, 1795), pp. 33-34.

¹¹ "Fragment of a Revolution Song," in William Scott Douglas, ed., *Kilmarnock Popular Edition. The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns. Arranged in the Order of their earliest Publication*, 2 vols. (Kilmarnock: James M'Kie, 1871), II: 392. Paton (2002), p. 48, suggests Douglas added the title and made the variations on his own initiative. This is also the first appearance of Scott Douglas's comment that the poem, "if really taken from Burns's MS," has "been merely transcribed from the pages of some wild *Magazine* of the period."

¹² On the change of tune as "providing a significant Scots-Irish context," see Mary Helen Thuente, *The harp re-strung: the United Irishmen and the rise of Irish literary nationalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), p. 255 n. 2. The same tune had recently been used with different words by Burns, in *Scots Musical Museum*, part III (Edinburgh: Johnson, 1790), p. 302 (song 292).

Paddy's Resource (1795), published in Belfast to strengthen support for the United Irishmen.¹³ Over the next few years, the collection was reprinted several times, including editions in Philadelphia in 1796, in Belfast in 1798, and in New York in 1798. The collection was compiled by James Porter (1753-1798), Presbyterian minister of Greyabbey, County Down, who for the previous year had been contributing patriotic verse to the more radical Belfast newspaper, the *Northern Star*. Many items in *Paddy's Resource* had appeared first in the *Northern Star*, but a search in the online version of that newspaper, and of its longer-established rival the *Belfast News-letter*, did not find any version of this song.¹⁴

The Belfast version differs from the English ones at several points, but it seems to be a deliberately revised version of the Sibly text. At least one of the smaller changes, in the first line, suggests that the song was already being modified through oral transmission, when “waste our prime” becomes the more colloquial “waste our time.” There is also a typo in line 24, with the ungrammatical “Demands,” instead of the correct “Demand.” But most of the smaller changes seem merely fussy or awkward, as in line 3, when “rouse to arms” becomes “haste to arms;” line 11 when “preserve the head” becomes “preserve a head;” line 16, where “We’ll” becomes “Let’s;” line 25, where “then” becomes “yet;” line 28, where “this earth” becomes “the earth;” and line 30, where “years will” becomes “ages.”

The most substantial change, clearly a deliberate revision, is in the first four lines of stanza three, in redirecting the song from the guillotine to reform. In the London versions, these lines foresee violent revolution:

Proud bishops then we will translate
 Among priest-crafted martyrs
 The guillotine on Peers shall wait,
 And Knights we’ll hang in garters.

In stanza 3, the Belfast reviser focuses high-mindedly instead on church disestablishment and getting the bishops out of the House of Lords:

Proud bishops now we must translate
 From senate, see and pensions:
 Virtue alone must teach the state,
 In spite of King’s intentions.

¹³ [James Porter, comp.], *Paddy's Resource, being a Select Collection of Original and Modern Patriotic Songs, Toasts, and Sentiments Compiled for the Use of the People of Ireland* (n.p. [?Belfast]: n.p., Printed in the Year 1795), pp. 35-36. On *Paddy's Resource*, see, e.g., Thuermer, pp. 125-143; Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760-1830* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1996); Georges-Denis Zimmermann, *Songs of Irish Rebellion: Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs 1780-1800* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1967), pp. 35-43, and Terry Moylan, ed., *The Age of Revolution: 1776-1815 in the Irish Song Tradition* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000).

¹⁴ *Northern Star* (Belfast), searched through www.newspapers.com, January 25-26, 2018. Several of Burns’s poems also found their way into print in the longer-established rival newspaper, the *Belfast News-letter*, also checked on the same site. I am grateful to Kenneth Dawson for recommending the site, and to Dr. Carol Baraniuk, Dr. Jennifer Orr, and Professor James Flannery for answering my questions about research in this area. For background on Belfast newspapers, poetry and politics in this period, see also Thuermer, Whelan, and such individual studies as Liam McIlvanney, *Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002), pp. 220-240; Frank Ferguson and Andrew Holmes, eds., *Revising Robert Burns and Ulster: Literature, Religion, and Politics, c. 1770-1920* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), especially the essays by John Erskine and Carol Baraniuk; Jennifer Orr, *Literary Networks and Dissenting Print Culture in Romantic-Period Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2015); and Kenneth L. Dawson, *The Belfast Jacobin: Samuel Neilson and the United Irishmen* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2017).

MAN IS FREE BY NATURE.

Tune, "Gilly Crankey."

WH Y vainly do we waste our time,
Repeating our oppressions?
Come haste to arms, for now's the time
To punish past transgressions.
They say that kings can do no wrong;
Their murderous deeds deny it;
And since from us their power has sprung,
We have a right to try it.

The starving wretch who steals for bread,
But seldom meets compassion:
Then shall a crown preserve a head
Of one that robs a nation.
Such partial laws we all despise—
See Gallia's bright example;
The glorious scene before our eyes,
Let's every tyrant trample.

Proud Bishops now we must translate
From senate, see and pensions;
Virtue alone must teach the state,
In spite of Kings intentions.
Those despots long have trod us down,
And Judges are their engines;
Such wretches—minions of the crown,
Demands a People's vengeance.

The golden age will yet revive,
Each man will be a brother;
In harmony we all shall live,
And share the earth together.
In Virtue's school, enlighten'd Youth
Will love his fellow-creature;
And future ages prove this truth,
That **MAN IS FREE BY NATURE.**

Fig. 2: "Man is Free by Nature," from *Paddy's Resource* ([Belfast]: 1795).

Stanza 4 of the London version, attacking “venal juries” who have “turn’d a back” on Freedom’s Cause,” and urging immediate revolt (“Come strike, while we are able”), was more intractable, and it is omitted in the Belfast version, as also in the version from Cunningham and Chambers.

The most significant change, however, was to a single word, in the last line of stanza 5. In all other versions of the song, this had asserted “Man is good by nature.” In the Presbyterian north of Ireland, this becomes “Man is free by nature,” and the phrase then gives the song its new title.

Who made the Belfast revision? The obvious answer would be James Porter himself, as the primary compiler of *Paddy’s Resource*, and the major changes would fit with his political views. While Porter was executed in the aftermath of 1798, it is generally agreed that he had not in fact advocated violence or taken up arms. However, a more prominent name has long been attached to this song, that of Thomas Russell (1767-1803), the ex-Army officer who had cofounded the United Irishmen in 1791, been imprisoned from 1796 to 1802, and executed after joining Robert Emmet’s failed rebellion in 1803.¹⁵ Improbably, in a repeat of what had happened when Hardy was arrested in London, the authorities in Ireland when they searched Russell’s papers also discovered a manuscript of the same song and also preserved it as useful evidence of his treasonous intent.¹⁶ The manuscript was in Russell’s hand, and it shows him trying out a number of variants. For instance, his first refrain read:

Let each Hibernian prayer then be

O give us death or Liberty.

This was followed in the manuscript by two more:

Then let us sing with 3 times 3

The reign of peace and Liberty.

and

Then let us sing with hearts so free

Ah, give death or Liberty.

Then let our song forever be

Our choice is death or Liberty.¹⁷

The writer who first printed these variants in the late 1940s took them as showing that Russell himself had written the song, but the sequence of variation in the London versions makes it much more likely that Russell was revising the Sibly text than that the influence was the other way round. The first refrain above is an Irish twist on Sibly’s refrain for stanzas 1-4, the second is a variant (substituting “sing” for “drink”) on Sibly’s refrain for stanza 5, and the third is an expanded version of the first. There is a manuscript version in Russell’s hand of the preface to *Paddy’s Resource*, and he seems to have contributed other songs and poems, so it seems reasonable to take the Belfast revision, “Man is Free by Nature,” as being Russell’s work.¹⁸

¹⁵ On Russell, see e.g. James Quinn, *A life of Thomas Russell, 1767-1803 : a soul on fire* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2001); Francis P. Gallagher, *A Blood-Red Autumn: Thomas Russell and the Irish Rising of 1803* ([Castlewellan, Co. Down]: Fairythorn Press, 2003).

¹⁶ National Archives of Ireland: Reb. Papers, 620/25/136 (Quinn, p. 115, n. 24). .

¹⁷ For these variants, see Helen Landreth, *The Pursuit of Robert Emmet* (New York, London: McGraw Hill, 1948), p. 164. Mary Helen Thuente (pp. 140, 162) follows Landreth, though more cautiously, in attributing authorship to Russell..

¹⁸ Quinn, pp. 111-112; for the manuscript preface, see National Archives of Ireland: Sirr Papers, 868/1, f. 61 (Quinn, p. 115, n. 23); on Russell’s contribution of anti-slavery songs to *Paddy’s Resource*, see Dennis Carroll, *The man from God knows where : Thomas Russell, 1767-1803* (Dublin: Garton, 1995), p. 114.

There is a gap of forty years between the song's first appearance in London and Belfast and its attribution to Burns by Cunningham and Chambers. During this period, Russell's Belfast version was recurrently available, but the differences of text mean that it could not lie behind the Cunningham edition.¹⁹ As noted above, the early version most clearly anticipating Cunningham-Chambers was that in the Sibly trial transcript. This, too, had been picked up by an anthologist. With its distinctive refrain "O give us death or Liberty," and with a new title "Song. Death or Liberty," Sibly's version was included in the second edition of R. Thompson's *A Tribute to Liberty*, an English collection of radical verse "Sacred to the Rights of Man," undated, but probably published in 1798.²⁰

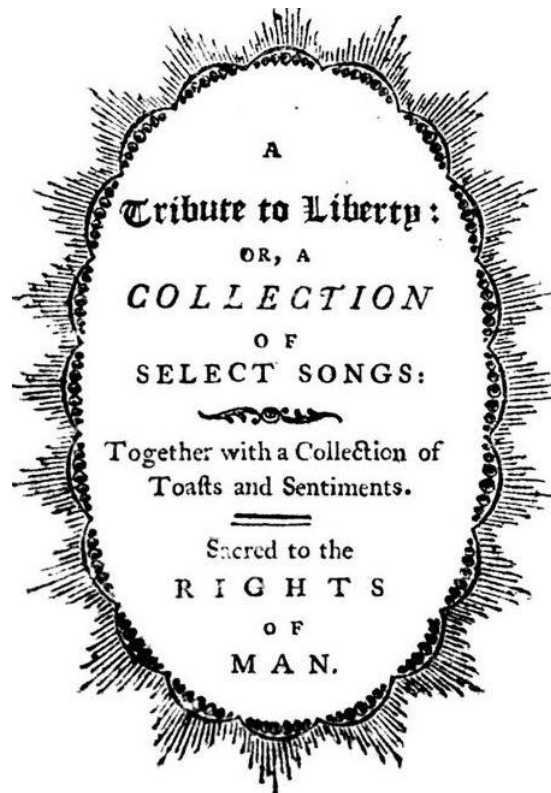


Fig. 3: Title-page from *A Tribute to Liberty* (London, 1798), including "Song. Death or Liberty."

In 1818, the Gurney transcript of Thomas Hardy's trial, giving the song with the refrain "Come rouse to arms," was reprinted in Cobbett's *State Trials*.²¹ In 1820, the same version of the song,

¹⁹ See, in addition to the reprints of *Paddy's Resource* already noted, [James Porter], *Billy Bluff and Squire Firebrand with a Selection of Songs* (Belfast: Re-printed for the Purchasers, 1812), pp. 113-114. Surprisingly, the song is not included in R.R. Madden, ed., *Literary Remains of the United Irishmen of 1798* (Dublin: J. Duffy, 1887), perhaps because he knew it wasn't by Russell.

²⁰ [R. Thompson], "Song. Death or Liberty," *A Tribute to Liberty; or, A Collection of Select Songs: Together with a Collection of Toasts and Sentiments. Sacred to the Rights of Man* (n.p.: n.p., [1798]), pp. 80-81. ECCO/ESTC and WorldCat give the date as 1798, while Google has 1795. I did not find the song in the same compiler's previous edition, *A Tribute to Liberty: or A New Collection of Patriotic Songs; Entirely Original ... Sacred to the Rights of Man* (London: Printed and sold by Thomson, 1793): date from title-page, though WorldCat gives 1795.

²¹ See T.B. Howell, T.J. Howell, William Cobbett, et al, *A Complete Collection of State Trials...*, vol. 24 ... 1794 (London: Longman, et al., 1818), p 761.

titled “Come rouse to arms,” without mention of Hardy, and headed “Written at the commencement of the French Revolution, was included in a Newcastle song book, *The Wreath of Freedom*.²²

There is a haunting postscript to this complex publication story. On May 1, 1820, three days after they had been found guilty of high treason, five of the radical “Cato Street Conspirators” were hung in London, outside Newgate prison. One of them was James Ings, an unemployed butcher who had been scraping a living selling radical pamphlets. As he was led to the scaffold, James Ings, it was reported, “cried ‘Huzza’ three times” and “then commenced singing ‘O give me death or liberty!’,” which drew “a partial cheering from the top of the Old Bailey.”²³ It seems likely that the song continued to circulate in oral form for many years after its printed appearances in 1794-1795, resurfacing with each resurgence in British radicalism, and its reappearance in 1820, after Peterloo, both in Newcastle and on the scaffold outside Newgate, begins to bridge the gap between the 1790s and its first recorded attribution to Burns in 1834.

The evidence discussed here, though fuller than in any previous account, remains patchy. There must surely be further versions of the song out there, perhaps in one of the unstamped newspapers from the early 1830s, that could pin down the source Cunningham was using. Given how closely the Cunningham-Chambers text follows the Sibly transcript version, even if a manuscript in Burns’s hand were now to be discovered, it could no longer prove Burns’s authorship, or even that he was responsible for any major revisions. What is now clear, however, is how widely distributed the song had been in the 1790s, and how freely it was recycled and modified for different occasions or publishing contexts. This is a way of thinking about texts or “authorship” that is well established in studying folk song and performance song, but it is not usually applied as fully to variation or attribution problems in printed texts.²⁴ With a text like “Why should we idly,” it only highlights the sheer difficulty of establishing a claim for Burns’s authorship. The historic yes-no question, “Did Burns write ‘Why should we idly waste our time?’” may never be fully answered. More significant, perhaps, is what this song tells us about Burns’s reputation, because, from the 1830s and intermittently ever since, at least some Burnsians have very much wanted it to be a song that Burns might have written.

²² *The Wreath of Freedom, Or Patriot's Song Book, Being a Collection of Songs in Favour of Public Liberty* (Newcastle: J Marshall, 1820), pp. 21- 22.

²³ *Scots Magazine*, May 1, 1820, p. 84.

²⁴ Though see Murray Pittock, “Who wrote the *Scots Musical Museum*?,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 42.1 (Spring 2016): 3-27.