

University of South Carolina - Columbia

From the Selected Works of Patrick Scott

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Burns and the Edinburgh Gazetteer: A New Resource

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/patrick_scott/355/

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Rhona Brown, ed., *The Edinburgh Gazetteer: Radical Networks and Journalism in 1790s Scotland*. University of Glasgow, 2017: <https://edinburghgazetteer.glasgow.ac.uk/>

Most Burnsians know that, in late 1792, Burns's life came near to being upended, at least in part because of his well-documented contact with a newly-founded radical Scottish newspaper, the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*. For many of us, such 18th century newspapers are virtually inaccessible, often surviving in few copies, or in only a single copy. If they have been digitized, the digital version is usually hidden behind a pay wall. Happily, in this instance, a new project from the University of Glasgow means this very important early newspaper is now freely available. Dr Rhona Brown, at the University of Glasgow, has recently edited a digital edition of the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, from the first issue in November 1792 through to the last in January 1794, based on the most complete surviving set, in the Mitchell Library. These were dramatic months, as the Revolution in France led to the trial and execution of the Louis XVI, and as the British government cracked down on any advocacy of political reform as seditious.



Welcome

This online edition of the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*, a controversial and short-lived radical Scottish newspaper from the turbulent 1790s, was funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and supported by the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, and the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. It was edited by Rhona Brown of the University of Glasgow and was completed in 2017.

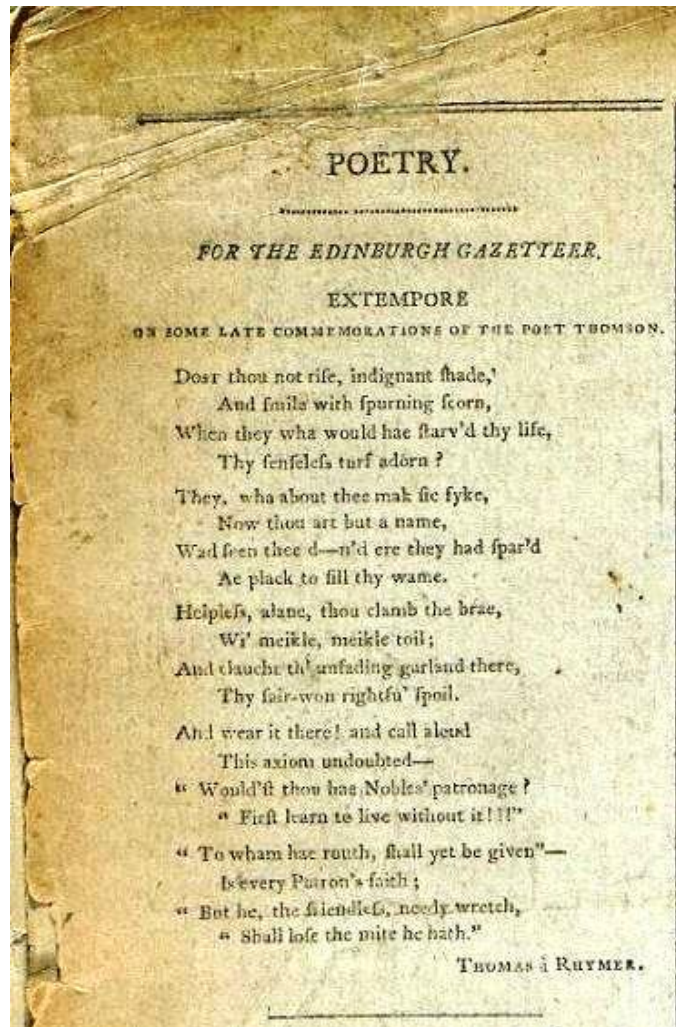
Detailed facsimile images of every available page of the *Gazetteer* can be viewed and zoomed into, and each page has been categorised with keywords to make it easier to focus on specific themes or people. In addition, the site features an interactive historical map of reform societies that are mentioned in the *Gazetteer*, an introductory essay describing the background to the *Gazetteer* and a list of selected further reading.



The Edinburgh Gazetteer project home-page: <https://edinburghgazetteer.glasgow.ac.uk/>

Burns's documented contact with the *Edinburgh Gazetteer* was intense but quite brief. Even before it began publication, Burns had seen the prospectus, reprinted in the first issue, which claimed to support neither political party, but the NATION, and the British Constitution, though not to its defects or corruptions, and denied all attempts "to inflame the minds of the people" (*Edinburgh Gazetteer*, November 16, 1792, p. 1). On November 13, 1792, Burns wrote enthusiastically to its editor, William Johnston, about subscribing, and he followed up Johnston's response by sending him a brand new poem. The project includes, in their original format and

context, Burns's two known contributions to the *Gazetteer*, both previously unpublished before Johnson printed them: his "Extempore On Some Late Commemorations of the Poet Thomson" (published in the November 23 1792 issue), and "The Rights of Woman—An occasional Address spoken on her Benefit Night, Novr 26th, at Dumfries, by Miss Fontenelle" (in the following issue, on November 30).



Burns's "Extempore on Some Late Celebrations" in the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*

Eighty years after Burns's death, Scott Douglas asserted that Burns sent the *Gazetteer* a third Burns poem, "Here's a health to them that's awa."¹ At least in the longer, later text, the poem, a political appropriation of a older Jacobite song, toasts the same parliamentary leaders that Burns favoured in late 1792, but Scott Douglas did not claim the poem was ever printed in the paper, and no contemporary evidence has yet been reported for Scott Douglas's statement that the later text was from a manuscript Burns had sent to Johnston.

¹ William Scott Douglas, *Works of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Paterson, 1877-79), III: 98.

Almost of equal interest with the two Burns items, because less well known, is the essay by Robert Riddell that Burns sent to Johnston (also published on November 30, 1792). Writing under the pen-name "Cato," Riddell urged the Landed Interest to support constitutional reform to counter the influence of "*another class ...corrupted by the blandishments of a peerage,*" who got their money and influence "from successful government contracts, from extensive commands in the East Indies, or from fortunate speculations in purchasing and letting the funds of the Nation." He concludes:

If the Landed Interest of Scotland will firmly unite, in bringing forward a bill to Parliament, to correct these abuses, it will equally redound to their honour in asking, as it will to the glory and honour of the British legislative bodies, in granting redress to a brave people, who have at all times shewn their zeal to support their King and Constitution (*Edinburgh Gazetteer*, Nov. 30 1792, p. 4).

It doesn't sound especially radical, but the *Gazetteer* also printed detailed reports on local and national pro-reform meetings and resolutions and petitions under the broad banner of the Friends of the People. In November 1792, Johnston's mail was already being intercepted by the authorities. By the end of December 1792 Burns's recent contact with the *Gazetteer* was part of the evidence provoking an Excise Board enquiry into his seditious ideas. The rebuttal Burns wrote to Graham of Fintry included a rather disingenuous whitewash denying his previous enthusiasm for Johnston's paper (see *Letters* II: 174). In February 1793, Johnston, a respectable ex-army officer with a house in the Edinburgh New Town, was imprisoned for contempt over the paper's reporting of a local sedition case, and at the end of the year his successor as editor, Alexander Scott, would be charged with seditious libel, flee the country, and turn government spy.²

This is an excellent open-access project that deserves to be widely used, because it encourages the interested user to browse complete four-page issues. As Dr Brown comments in her introduction, the pages of the *Gazetteer* allow the reader "to explore the newspaper's people – its editors, printers and contributors and, through them, the protagonists of sedition trials and Reform Society members – and to uncover the radical networks of 1790s Scotland." It has, for instance, very extensive coverage of the indictment and trial of Thomas Muir of Huntershill, and Dr Brown suggests that the *Gazetteer* shows the beginnings of courtroom reporting in Scotland.³ The *Gazetteer* carried an impressive mix of Scottish news along with news of London and French politics. Almost anyone browsing these issues, news items and advertisements as well as high-profile parliamentary and courtroom speeches, will gain a fresh sense of the world that Burns and his readers were experiencing during these crucial if bewildering years.

² Bob Harris, "Johnston, William,," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004, 2008).

³ Cf, also Rhona Brown, "Thomas Muir and the *Edinburgh Gazetteer*: reporting n the 'friend of the people' before and after his trial," in Gerard Carruthers, and D. Martin, eds., *Thomas Muir of Huntershill: Essays for the Twenty-First Century* (Edinburgh: Humming Earth, 2018).