Robert Burns, Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, and the Mystery of the Master’s Apron

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/paulrich/7/
My subject for this 250\textsuperscript{th} birthday anniversary of Robert Burns (1759-1796) was to be one of Burns’ most recited works in Masonic circles and one of the artifacts most associated with his memory – the poem “The Master’s Apron”, and his Masonic apron enshrined in the celebrated museum in Dumfries. I find myself doubly embarrassed with good reason, because I now believe neither the poem nor the apron are his. A spurious poem and spurious apron for the 250\textsuperscript{th} birthday festivities, no matter how long famous both have been!

If you are an active Mason, the chances are that you have heard “The Master’s Apron: on many occasions.\textsuperscript{i} I particularly recall an evening years ago at lodge with the well-known Masonic historian Allen Roberts when a new apprentice received his apron along with by a spirited rendition of the poem from a senior past master. Allen and I thought it would be interesting to know what had prompted the great poet’s lines.\textsuperscript{ii} Finally getting to this research, I am sorry he is not with us; he would have vastly enjoyed the contretemps.

A proposed revised status of the poem and apron do not take away from the enthusiasm that Burns had for
Freemasonry, an enthusiasm which well suited his and Scotland’s liberalism at a time when: “Often associated with deism and sometimes with radicalism, Freemasonry was an important part of social life.”

The Masonic vision of universal brotherhood and freedom of belief profoundly influenced Burns, who joined at Tarbolton in 1781. He would be welcome as Masonry’s bard: “Masons also like poetry, having their own songs, odes and anthems.”

Throughout his lifetime a remarkably many of Burns’ friends and supporters were fellow Masons.

Why did the poem become so famous and travel around the world and, attributed to Burns, on hundreds of websites? The clothing of an initiate with an apron and the explanation of its symbolism is a highlight of Masonic rites. The verses are a perfect celebration of the event. “The Master’s Apron” is one of a group of very similar poems by Victorian amateur poets which compare the Mason’s apron favorably with the world’s greatest honors. These poems have common themes. D.W. Clements “The White Leather Apron” is a much recited piece: The white leather apron is more ancient by far Than the eagles of Rome, a symbol of war, Or the fleece of pure gold, by emperors given, A rich decoration for which many have striven.

Words in the secret ritual of initiation itself are echoed by these poems. They repeat the theme that no distinction can compare with the apron of a Master Mason. Likening the apron to the white robes worn by the Apostles, George Oliver wrote, “...Freemasons, when they invest a candidate
with this distinguished badge of their profession, tell him that it is the most exalted dignity that can be conferred…”.

The thought was to provide a light piece for the birthday gathering in Edinburgh, laced with anecdotes about the background of both the poem and the Dumfries apron. I did notice that the poem was not in the two editions of his work that were produced in his lifetime, and given the fact that his Masonic friendships helped promote his poetry, wondered why he had not included it. But the poem appeared as by Burns in Marie Roberts’ *British Poets and Secret Societies*, relying partly on William Harvey’s *Robert Burns as a Freemason*, and I noted a similarity in sentiment to his ‘Jacobite’ poem “Is There for Honest Poverty”, echoing that ‘the ribband and star’ are not the honors of a real man.

In Washington I thought I would find its place in the canon, because the Southern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry in the United States headquarters houses the William R. Smith Collection of Burnsiana. William Robertson Smith (1828-1912) emigrated from Scotland to Washington, where he was superintendent of the National Botanical Garden, a 30th degree Scottish Rite Mason, and an indefatigable collector of Burns. He was helped financially in his collecting by Andrew Carnegie, who after Smith died was instrumental in seeing the books placed the Scottish Rite’s building. It includes editions of Burns published in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.
Ms. Larissa P. Watkins of the Supreme Council library has produced for the 250th anniversary an exhaustive bibliography of the Smith books. As I slogged through edition after edition, she gave me a knowing look: if it was not in the tableful that I had examined, it wasn’t in any eighteenth or nineteenth-century edition of Burns.

Now, it is no easy matter to say that a poem was by Burns or wasn’t. Burns would dash off lines as a thank you for a book or even write on a window pane with a diamond. He collected Scotland’s folklore and recast old choruses and improved the lines for old tunes. He wrote pseudoanonymouls verses, and bad verses as well as wonderful ones. The quality could be uneven, so to reject a poem as his because it is not of the best is dangerous. In fact, Burns wrote about his own work that some of the poems were “puerile and silly”.

Worse, his papers were scattered and after his death the literary remains faced his executors with “an undigested chaos”. As early as 1801, the Glasgow bookseller Thomas Stewart produced Poems Ascribed to Robert Burns, the Ayrshire Bard, Not Contained in Any Edition of his Works Hitherto Published. When Adolphus Wagner contributed a preface to an 1835 Burns collection, he looked apprehensively towards a forthcoming rival edition from James Hogg that would have a reputed 180 previously unpublished poems, consoling himself that they were possibly “scraped together out of the poet’s refuse”.

Burns reworked many old Scottish lyrics and “adopted
several methods of song-collection.”xxviii He solicited his friends and would “touch up the rather feeble social verses which they sent”. So we have a picture of him “patching half-forgotten fragments of old songs and stimulating others to write for him”xxix Since “The Master’s Apron” is a fiddle tune that was published as early as 1780 (by Robert Ross in *A Choice Collection of Scots Reels or Country Dancse*) Burns could have provided lyrics.xxx

Those who have edited collections of Burns have not had an easy time, as his output was prodigious and eclectic. For the Penguin Classics edition, Carol McGuirk noted “often the poet changed the text to personalize it for the recipient …”.xxxi Debates over what to include in the Burns canon still goes on, recently fueled by the studies of Patrick Scott Hogg, who found unacknowledged poems supporting the refocusing on Burns as a social radical, which Hogg placed in the exhaustive if controversial *Canongate Burns* edition that he edited with Andrew Noble in 2001.xxxii Patrick Hogg kindly replied to my inquiries about the authenticity of the poem:

“…I have just examined Kinsley's edition which has a Dubia section. The only Masonic work listed there is an interesting one called *A Masonic Song*, which I think somewhat cleverer than *The Master Apron*.

It is always foolish to jump to any conclusion then have to repent at leisure when the evidence contradicts one's first intuitions.

The meter, on examination, in my view is quite erratic even if it was meant to be a song. Burns would surely have
used an alternating rhythm of 8 then 6 syllables in such a song. It begins 8 then 7 syllables: there is no example of Burns employing this I have found. Then it becomes 7,7,8,8,8,7. For the first verse to be four lines, then the remainder to be 6 lines, then end with a 5 line verse would suggest an amateur poetic hand. Such a meter in Burns's hand, especially for a song, would have been written to match a musical melody he had learned. The poem therefore cannot have been written for a fixed known musical tune I know of. Correct me if I am on the wrong track. It reads clumsily too. Burns had a natural flow of easy language for his songs that is distinctive. I know of no other use of the word 'suld' as found here. So, my instinctive, intuitive reaction is that it is not his work. However, just because it is not good poetry does not mean it cannot be Burns's. He did write a lot of poor material too. The greatest of poet's do not always write in their best hand.

I would guess it is a late 19th century composition. Even if there was a holograph Mss I would suspect that to be written by Antique Smith to pass it off as a work of Burns simply to suit the Masonic Movement. That said, I reserve the right to be wrong and will investigate it further for you as I am intrigued by it.

…Burns's poem in the Kilmarnock edition, his Farewell to his fellow Mason's, is surely a far superior poem. Had The Mason's Apron surfaced from the original Currie collected Mss papers surely it would have appeared via one of the auctions in the 1860's or 1870's? Is there not an old fiddle tune called The Matron's Apron? Maybe it was composed by someone after they heard that old fiddle
As we shall see, Patrick Hogg was right, and it is a late nineteenth century composition. And not a very good poem.

‘The Master’s Apron’, appears as by Burns in Vol. 4 of the *British Masonic Miscellany*: ‘The following poem on “The Mason’s Apron” appeared in *The Freemason* of October 18th, 1902, as one of Burns’, although it is not included in the poet’s published works.” Robert F. Gould, a major Masonic historian of the early 20th century, in his 1906 *A Library of Freemasonry* identified the poem as by Burns: “The following is from [Burns’] talented pen”. In 1916, *The Builder*, a prominent Masonic magazine also pronounced the poem as coming from “the talented pen” of Burns. Carson Smith, who is FSA Scotland, dates the poem as 1786 and by Burns, in his essay “Scots and Freemasonry”, featured on the website of Lodge Royal Stirling No.76, -- which in 2009 is celebrating its 250th birthday as well.

Lodge Burns Dundonald No.1759 in Tarbulton itself, sporting Burns’ birthdate as its number, is one of many lodges that feature the poem as by Burns and dating from 1786 on their web site. Some like Huguenot Lodge No.46 in New York State “update” what they think is Burns: “There’s many a badge that’s very grand; With ribbon, lace and tape on; Let kings and princes wear them all, Give me the Master’s apron!”.
Unfortunately the authorship by Burns is constantly being reinforced by the Masons. Even research lodges have perpetuated the myth.\textsuperscript{xxxix} How these attributions to Burns proliferate is shown by Alex Hall’s recent monograph on Masonic aprons which reproduces the poem as by Burns from the Grand Lodge of British Columbia website, but drops the caveat on the Grand Lodge site that the poem does not appear in collections.\textsuperscript{xl} The Masonic Poets Society features the “Apron” in its Burns pages.\textsuperscript{xli} Stephen Dafoe reproduces it as a Burns item in his collection of Masonic poems, \textit{Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part}, and even adds an ‘English translation’.\textsuperscript{xlii}

In the May 2009 issue of \textit{The Northern Light}, which goes to all Scottish Rite Masons in the Northern Jurisdiction of the rite in the United States, there is an article by Jeffrey Croteau, the Masonic scholar and head of the library and archives of the Northern Jurisdiction, which cites “The Master’s Apron” by Burns as an example of his Masonic ties.\textsuperscript{xliii} The Grand Lodge of Iowa has had a booklet which it presented to candidates of Masonic poems, including the alleged Burns poem. Not all Masons however have viewed the poem with respect: “I have always hated that ‘poem’ and its attribution to RB, even although a friend, who knew not what he was doing, bought and presented to me a beautiful laminated printed version of the "poem" when I was installed as Master of my Lodge a few years ago. I gritted my teeth and said thanks, and desisted from pointing out how awful the "poetry "was…”The longer that this pathetic poem did the rounds of Masonic gatherings, appeared on napkins, was laminated
into presentation pieces, given as the "party piece" at Masonic Harmonies and was recited at Burns Suppers in masonic lodges, the more credence it was being given and the more acceptance as being part of the canon…”

Strong evidence that it is not by Burns has been the refusal by many editors over the years to include the poem in collections. A new tool, web bulletin boards, have questioned its authenticity; in 1999 the General Triva Scotland list had a correspondence about the poem which noted that it was not by Burns. Albert Mackey (1807-1881), the great Victorian Masonic scholar, wrote extensively about Burns and Masonic poetry and never mentioned the poem. Nor does Dudley Wright in his comprehensive book *Robert Burns and Freemasonry* (Simkin Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., London, 1921).

There is ample evidence that the poem is not by Burns if one just looks. We live in a ‘Google age’ as vast reams of material are scanned, and a few minutes computer search is enough to demolish forever notions that the poem is by Burns. Original sources previously inaccessible are ours to plumb. Immediately on asking about the poem on the web I receive the following response:

“PostPosted: Thu Feb 19, 2009 3:02

…As for the poem "Master's Apron"..... he never wrote this, and it does not appear in any anthology or volume. It does however, show up printed on the backs of Burns Supper programmes, on coasters at Masonic dinners etc.
There are many Masons who genuinely believe that Burns wrote this bit of doggerel, but he definitely did not. – David Y

The poem was printed in an American periodical *The Granite State Monthly* in 1882 as by Henry Oakes Kent. (1834-1909) “Written as a sentiment at a public banquet of North Star and visiting lodges, at Lancaster…. It turns out that Kent was very proud of “The Apron”, and it is listed in his auto-biography, in the *Genealogical and Family History of the State of New Hampshire* (by Ezra S. Stearns and William Frederick Whitcher, 1908) available on the web: “…his ballad ‘The Master’s Apron,’ widely known of Masons.” The lines appear as by Kent in 1902 in a much circulated fraternal humor book *Goat Rides, Butts and Goat Hairs*,¹ which is still in print.

Kent felt the call of the muse on many occasions. If he lacked poetic ability he did not lack industry. In the *Genealogical and Family History* we are told, “Colonel Kent has not confined his activity in literature entirely to prose, but has written some gems in verse that would be a credit to a poet of acknowledge reputation…”. His military service in the American Civil War and a successful legal career did not interfere with producing enough lines to earn pages in *The Poets of New Hampshire* in 1883, where his magnum opus on the hundredth anniversary of the town of Lancaster is perhaps surpassed by his celebration of a child’s birth: *When the bright autumn had gathered its harvest, Ripened and blest by the rays of the sun, Crowning our garner, with fruitage the fairest, Dear little Bernie’s*
existence begun. liii

A not very high mountain in New Hampshire is named for him, liii but his moment in history was as an aide at Gettysburg to President Lincoln when Lincoln delivered the famous address, which Kent invariably noted in his Who’s Who entries. An unsuccessful candidate for Governor of New Hampshire, liv he was both a York and Scottish Rite Mason. He was active for many years in North Star Lodge in his town of Lancaster, Grand Lecturer of the Grand Lodge of New Hampshire, Grand Commander of the Knights Templar in New Hampshire, and presided over the founding of the Lodge of Perfection of the Scottish Rite lv (All the bodies in which he served are still in existence.) Contemporaries praised his geniality, presence, and “personal magnetism”. lvi His “Burnsian imagery” in the poem reflects the great influence Burns had in America. When Andrew Jackson ran for President in 1828, supporters chorused Let auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind, and Jackson be our President And Adams left behind. lvii

The opinion of a Burns authority like Patrick Hogg about the poem as a poem remains paramount, because one could not rule out the extraordinarily remote possibility that Kent had seen a Burns fragment that remains lost. lviii Kent’s authorship of course needs the same scrutiny as the supposed authorship by Burns. Professor Patrick Scott, who is custodian of the remarkable Burns collection at the University of South Carolina, warns that the publication of the poem as by Kent is subject to certain strictures. lx
Appropriation would not possibly seem plagiarism, for literary fastidiousness has varied by time and place. Recall Thomas De Quincey’s accusations of Coleridge’s plagiarism and the comments that followed by Professor James F. Ferrier in the pages of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. What if somewhere there is a gold watch with a Masonic dial that when its back springs open after a century reveals the lines of “The Master’s Apron” as written by Burns for a presentation? A correspondent wrote on the Burns Country Discussion Board, “Its style is wrong, it doesn’t scan, its wording is suspect…It’s doggerel, pure and simple.”

If the poem is suspect, so possibly is the apron which is touring Britain as part of the BBC sponsored celebration of the 250th. It was not the gift to Burns of the composer and antiquarian Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe as sometimes reported. Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe was a child when he was supposed to have given it to Burns. He was however a Freemason. Robert Cooper, Curator of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, informs me that the Grand Lodge of Scotland records show that Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe (1781-1851, became a Mason in Lodge Canongate Kilwinning No.2 in 1816. (Sharpe appears as Sir Mungo Malagrowther in Sir Walter Scott’s The Fortunes of Nigel.)

Now second thoughts about the apron’s provenance have been expressed in the Scottish press as a result of this paper being listed in the conference program:

“Doubts about the authenticity of the apron at present
being shown around Scotland as being the genuine Masonic apron of Robert Burns are nothing new ("Row as authenticity of Burns's apron is called into question", The Herald, April 4). It does not surprise me in the slightest that Burns scholars are beginning to express doubt about its origins. The apron has long been attributed as having been presented to the Bard by Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe. This attribution should have rung alarm bells before now.

Sharpe was 11 years old in 1791 when the apron was allegedly presented, and 16 when Burns died. More probably if the apron was presented to Burns it was by Sharpe’s father, Charles Sharpe, but the gift has been attributed to Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, who subsequently became famous in his own right in the field of the arts in Scotland.

Quite why this discrepancy in dates should not have been noticed until comparatively recently, when it came to light during a discussion on the internet forum of the World Burns Federation, is a puzzle. But one thing is certain and that is that, whether or not the apron was ever in Burns' possession, he did not get it from C S Sharpe. The apron in the possession of the Grand Lodge of Scotland has far better provenance and should be considered to be the genuine article.”

Partly the confusion has arisen because of some assuming that the apron belonged to Charles Kirpatrick Sharpe and not to his father, Charles Sharpe of Hoddam. The better known son has been seized upon as
The father was born Charles Kirkpatrick, and he changed his named to Charles Sharpe when a relative, Mathew Sharpe, willed him the Hoddam Estate in Dumfriesshire. He is usually referred to as Charles Sharpe of Hoddam. (Sometimes “Hotham”.) He could very well have presented the apron to Burns, if one accepts that it is genuine.

The curators of the Dumfries Museum and Camera Obscura in which the apron usually reposes has been very helpful and forthcoming in this discussion. Ms. Joanne Turner writes:

“…Nothing is known of the apron until c.1840, when a Mr Heywood was in company with a gentleman from the Theatre in Whitehaven sometime around 1840. The gentleman had possession of the apron and gave it to Mr Heywood. Upon his death, Mr Heywood passed the apron on to his son, Mr Edwin Heywood. In 1860, Mr Edwin Heywood sold the apron for 5 [pounds] to a Mr James Dees, a dealer in Whitehaven. The letters from Mr Edwin Heywood to James Dees state that his father genuinely believed the apron to be authentic. (we have 4 letters from 1860). It came into the possession of the donor's brother, a Mr T H- who died in July 1990, through a female friend of the family who had been given it by her father.

The apron was presented to Burns by Charles Sharpe of Hoddam who was himself a musician and poet, as well as being Master of the Lodge and Provincial Grand Master of Dumfriesshire. The apron is described as being of: “...chamois leather, very fine, with figures of gold,
some of them relieved with green, others with a dark red colour, while on the underside of the semi-circular part which is turned down at the top, is written in a bold fair hand - - "Charles Sharpe of Hotham to Rabbie Burns, Dumfries Dec 12 1791 However, the authenticity of the apron has been questioned because of the fact that the inscription refers to Burns as "Rabbie" and not "Robert". Burns was not generally referred to as "Rabbie" until a later date."\textsuperscript{lxxii}

This must be compared with the remarks in \textit{The Burns Encyclopedia} that Burns gave the actor Grant the apron which he had received from Sharpe, who in turn gave the apron to Edwin Holwell Heywood in 1810.\textsuperscript{lxxiii} In the world of important paintings, the appearance of a valuable canvas with no direct link to its alleged origins always causes difficulty. The debate which ensued after I voiced my initial doubts found “Rabbie” on an inscription to be suspect.\textsuperscript{lxxiv} Still, the inscription to Rabbie could have been added later.\textsuperscript{lxxv}

So we are marking the 250\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns by talking about a poem that he didn’t write and an apron that he didn’t wear. While this appears disappointing, it emphasizes the purposes of the Edinburgh congresses, which are to promote a high level of scholarship.\textsuperscript{lxxvi} For many years Masonic “history” has been out of step with mainstream scholarship.\textsuperscript{lxxvii} Edinburgh has mightily advanced the cause of bringing Masonic research into the mainstream.
We do have here in Edinburgh in the Grand Lodge for all of us to see today the apron that I am totally convinced he did wear. I think he would have vastly enjoyed the humor of it all, and give him a closing word, for in “To a Mouse,” which he certainly did write, he remarks famously in words all historians should take to heart:

*The best laid schemes o' mice an' men*  
Gang aft a-gley,  
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promised joy.

*Still thou art blest, compared wi' me!*  
The present only toucheth thee:  
*But, oh! I backward cast my e'e*  
On prospects drear!  
An' forward, tho' I canna see,  
I guess an' fear!

Thank you for your hospitality, for your good humor, and for your tolerance!

Paul Rich

Edinburgh, May 30th, 2009
Ther's mony a badge that's unco braw;
Wi' ribbon, lace and tape on;
Let kings an' princes wear them a' —
Gie me the Master's apron!

The honest craftsman's apron,
The jolly Freemason's apron,
Be he at hame, or roam afar,
Before his touch fa's bolt and bar,
The gates of fortune fly ajar,
`Gin he but wears the apron!

For wealth and honor, pride and power
Are crumbling stanes to base on;
Eternity suld rule the hour,
And ilka worthy Mason!
Each Free Accepted Mason,
Each Ancient Crafted Mason.

Then, brithers, let a halesome sang
Arise your friendly ranks alang!

Guidwives and bairnies blithely sing

To the ancient badge wi' the apron string

That is worn by the Master Mason!

ii Alan Roberts was a leading exponent of a more scholarly Masonic research, so debunking of time worn stories is something that he certainly favored.


iv Crawford, 95.

v Crawford, 99, 155, 164


“Carrying with it so rich a freightage of symbolism the apron may justly be considered ‘more ancient than the Golden Fleece or Roman Eagle, more honourable than the Star and Garter,’ for these badges were too often nothing more than devices of flattery and the insignia of an empty name.” H.L. Haywood, *Symbolical Masonry: An interpretation of the Three Degrees*, Southern Publishers, Kingsport (Tennessee), 1923, 146-147.


xi George Oliver, The Masonic Apron and Its Symbolism in Freemasonry, (Extracted from Signs and Symbols Illustrated and Explained in a Course of Twelve Lectures on Freemasonry), Kessinger Publishing, Whitefish, Montana, 137.

xii A great deal of fun can be had in exploring the theosophically-bent literature concerning the apron. Frank C. Higgins, for example, went to great lengths to show how aprons were the link with the Egyptian and Mayan origins of the Craft. For a comprehensive reprint of his c.1912 pamphlets and essays see Frank C. Higgins, The Cosmological Freemasonry of Frank Higgins: The Cross of the Magi, an Unveiling of the Greatest of All Ancient Mysteries. & A.U. M. "the Lost Word" & the Beginning of Masonry, Forty Papers on the Hidden Mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry, Sacred Science Institute, Idyllwild (California, where else?) 2006. “The candidate’s first investiture with the Apron is symbolic therefore of his Ego’s entrance into this world…”. William L. Wilmshurst, The Masonic Initiation, John M. Watkins, London, 1957, 90. I knew a professor and fellow Mason in Mexico who seriously asserted that wearing the apron at lodge was a necessary protection against the dangerous rays that would be present during the meeting.


Crawford, 383, 384.

Roberts relies heavily on Harvey, *British Poets*, op. cit.


Descriptions of the collection’s value have been criticized as overblown: Frank R. Shaw, “Review,


xxii As a fiddle tune “The Master’s Apron” appears over two centuries in versions, often as a reel, but there is no known connection with Burns or the poem. It was a favorite of the Scottish fiddler Duncan McKerracher (1796–1873), the "Dunkeld Paganini" who played it wearing his Masonic apron. “Mason's Apron” is also a Scottish country dance. See “A Celtic Reel With Masonic Feel”, Glen X. Mason (obviously a nom de plume), “A

xxiv “In a letter, dated May 1794, to Riddell's sister in which Burns requests the return of the poetry volume, he refers to its contents as 'a collection of all my trifles in verse which I had ever written ... some of them puerile and silly ...'. This is somewhat insincere and in reality Burns was highly aware of the value of his poems, but it shows his keenness to have returned to him a volume he knew to contain a great compilation of some of his best work. After Burns's death the two volumes were sent to his biographer, Dr James Currie. In 1913 they were sold to an American collector, John Gribbel of Philadelphia, who generously gifted them to the Scottish people. They formed one of the first items to be presented to the National Library of Scotland in 1926. “Manuscripts in the National Library of Scotland, The Glenriddel Manuscripts: MSS 86 and 87”, http://www.nls.uk/burns/mainsite/burns/glenriddell.htm

After my immersion in Burns, I feel that perhaps we should give more weight could be given to the work done on him by James Currie, despite his bowdlerizing and excisions. He talked first hand with many who knew Burns.

*The Works of Robert Burns, With Selected Notes of Allen Cunningham, a Biographical and Critical Introduction, and a Comparative Etymological Glossary to the Poet, by Dr. Adolphus Wagner*, Frederick Fleischer, Leipzig, 1835.

Since he collected folk verse, even lines in his hand would not necessarily be lines by him.


Crawford, 172. “…a Masonic friend, who commented that many Burns supporters nowadays would not tolerate any link between Burns and Irish radicals then because of political problems in
our times. He thought my life might be at risk from a few fanatical Burns supporters due to finding material some would not want to know about.”
Hogg, Robert Burns, 351.

xxxiii From: ps.hogg@blueyonder.co.uk
Subject: Re: poems - master's apron
Date: February 8, 2009 8:55:38 PM EST
To: rich@hoover.stanford.edu

xxxiv From: ps.hogg@blueyonder.co.uk
Subject: Re: poems - master's apron
Date: February 9, 2009 7:03:45 PM EST
To: rich@hoover.stanford.edu

The sentiment is a little Burnsian in its ideals but as a poem/lyric it is quite bad. A genuine poet who knows the poetic structure of meter as well as Burns did could not have written something so amateurish even if he was plastered with port or red wine. Okay so Burns had a few Mason's Apron's to his name. But to foist this lyric upon him is going a bit far. Burns talked of his rhyming mania; his inner skill of going over and over material in his head to craft it out before placing it on paper - or doing so once a first draft was on paper. This has hardly got touches of his genius anywhere at all sadly. Even one flash of true intellect would come through in a line or so if it were Burns' work. I would love to say it is his work and give you good sound reasons why, but truth be told I think it is
a very bad lyric he could never have written. That said I don't think he would have minded it being sung at Masonic meetings since the sentiment itself is far more tolerable than the poetic merit of the piece.

Sorry I have drawn a blank.

Patrick


“Perhaps it was due to this fondness for Masonry that he composed the poem entitled ‘The Mason’s Apron’. Robert Kerr, “Robert Burns, the Mason”, Paper No. 85, Educational Lodge No.1002, A.F. & A.M. of Minnesota, May 1974.


2009.

xliv However, checking out every supposed Burns squib would be a lifetime’s work and then some:

From: ps.hogg@blueyonder.co.uk  
Subject: Re: from paul rich  
Date: May 10, 2009 4:53:13 PM EDT  
To: rich@hoover.stanford.edu

Hi Paul

Yes we did consider some other works but not The Apron! Time did not allow completely exhaustive researches. We only did a year and a half’s work on the Canongate; a full reappraisal of the canon would have taken several years. I had merely heard of it, so I think you have provided the definitive word on the subject!

We were given the remit to recontextualise Burns into the radical culture of the 1790's…

xlv I want to thank A.J. Morton for incisive comments and first calling attention to the Grant State Monthly web site as well as to other members of the Burns Country and Burns Club web discussion boards. See Julia Belgutay, “Robert Burns Ode ‘penned by American’”, The Sunday Times, 10 May 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article6256836.ece
Jeffrey Croteau writes: “Obit for Kent in 1909 Proceedings of Grand Lodge of NH mentions ‘He delivered Masonic orations at Lancaster in 1860 and Whitefield in 1879. He was presented with a Past Master’s jewel by North Star Lodge in 1880.’ (p. 173). I mention this because the oration date of 1860 and the PM jewel date of 1880 both seem like possibilities for the year for the St. John’s Day oration. I realize that The Granite State Monthly gives 1880 as the date, of course, but I notice in his obit that he was Grand Lecturer for the GL in 1860 and 1861, as well as being WM of North Star Lodge No. 8 in 1860, so it’s easy to see that 1860 (rendered 1880 by mistake) is a possibility. I haven’t tracked down any pamphlet yet that records either the 1860 or the 1880 event, but I mention the 1860 date as
either another red herring or useful info. I also noticed in the obit in the Proceedings of the Grand Commandery KT of NH that Kent was ‘editor and proprietor of the Coos Republican from 1858 to 1870.’ I thought that might be a potential source for more Kent poetry” Jeffrey Croteau to Paul Rich, email, 12 May 2009.


liii An account of climbing Mount Kent:
http://www.alpinedave.com/mt_kent/mt_kent.html

liv ”Henry O. Kent for Governor: New Hampshire Democrats Make him Their Candidate”, New York Times, 7 September 1894,
http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9F0DE0DB1531E033A25754C0A96F9C94659ED7CF


“Few will quarrel with the proposition that direct external evidence may be equivocal. ..And the further we get from the author, the more questionable does external testimony become.” ...Sherbo [Arthur Sherbo, “The Uses and Abuses of Internal Evidence”, *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, LXIII, 1959, 5-22.] seems to feel that scholars are excessively skeptical about internal evidence and not sufficiently skeptical about the external variety. But an experienced scholar will surely be intelligently skeptical about both types and will bring to bear upon all attributions a stringent analysis. To pit external against internal evidence is to set up a barren and unprofitable dichotomy.” David V. Erdman and Ephim G. Fogel, *Evidence for Authorship: Essays on Problems of Attribution*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (New York), 1966, 70-71.

“I'm just a bit surprised that the contrary view is widely enough asserted to need full-scale refutation, but if it is, then it's worth a careful clear review of the (non)-
evidence. I can confirm at least that the poem/song doesn't get included or discussed in any of the regular sources I use to track known Burns dubia, spuriosa, or other apocrypha (see below). Someone soaked in Burns can have a good sense whether attribution is likely, but I don't *ultimately* trust claims to be able to distinguish between a real Burns poem and a 'fake' one (forgery, pastiche, or innocent imitation) on stylistic grounds ('quality') alone, especially for minor or occasional verse from a poet whose oeuvre was as varied as Burns's. What I think confirms the late 19th c or even early 20th century dating is that the poem doesn't crop up in the 19th century books on Burns as mason (I only looked at a couple but it would be echoed in all of them if the attribution to Burns was around by 1840, even if the song wasn't really by Burns). In the 19th century or early 20th century (as indeed today), many of those attending masonic or Burnsian occasions would be capable of casting their own tribute to Burns or Burns as mason in verse form, or even as a song with newlywritten, or newly-adapted, words for a known tune; such occasional verse-tributes often got into newspapers, and then floated around as clippings or recitations, free of their actual authors or originating circumstance.” Email, Patrick Scott to Paul Rich, 7:48 PM EDT, 13 May 2009.


Burns wrote Charles Sharpe of Hoddam a letter under a fictitious signature, enclosing three stanzas, written to what he calls "a charming Scots air" by Sharpe: "You, I am told, play an exquisite violin, and have a standard taste in the belles letters." William Anderson, *Scottish Nation* (1859-66) 3:445-46.

Alas, the stanzas are not from "The Master’s Apron".

"Rich, who will put his case at the conference in Edinburgh, said he became convinced that it was a fake while researching a birthday speech about Burns for the event. The apron is inscribed, “Charles Sharpe of Hotham to Rabbie Burns, Dumfries, Dec 12 1791”, but authorities on Burns say the poet was never known as ‘Rabbie’ during his lifetime. Dr Gerard Carruthers, director of
Glasgow University’s Centre for Robert Burns Studies, agrees: ‘He was known under other names, but not this, not while he was still alive.’”


lxviii See http://www.scran.ac.uk/database/record.php?usi=00-000-027-122-C


lxx There appears to be no early engraving showing the Dumfries Sharpe apron. The much reproduced Two Brother Scots in the National Musuem by James McGregor showing Burns and Sir Walter Scott has both clad in simple aprons. National Museums Scotland H.1995.656. So does the Pietre-Stone: Review of Freemasonry engraving of Burns, although accompanied by the poem.


1xxi I want especially to thank Ms. Turner and the Dumfries Museum for their helpfulness.

1xxii From: Joanne.Turner@dumgal.gov.uk
Subject: RE: from professor paul rich
Date: March 25, 2009 5:27:59 AM EDT
To: rich@hoover.stanford.edu


1xxiv “As you probably know, the names Burns used himself were: Robin, Rab, Rab Mossgiel, Rab the Rhymer, Robert, and in his formal letters, Robt. In correspondence to Clarinda, he was Sylvander, and in one letter to Ainslie, he signed off with 'Spunkie'! The misnomers 'Rabbie' and 'Robbie', were probably created and foisted on him posthumously in the 1800's, when his genius became widely recognised.
However, as some other Bard has reflected: *What's in a name? That which we call a Rose By any other name would smell as sweet.* "James", Burns Country Discussion Board at [http://www.robertburns.org/discussions/viewtopic.php?t=428](http://www.robertburns.org/discussions/viewtopic.php?t=428), accessed 11 May 2009.

The debate about “Rabbie” as a name used in his lifetime for Burns is unresolved:

“Re: ‘The Poem "The Master's Apron’
Postby davidry » Mon May 18, 2009 12:37 am

...on the subject of the use of "Rabbie Burns" inked on the said apron, and in the opinion of Gerald Carruthers (if reports in the press a couple of weeks ago are accurate) being sufficient in itself to throw doubt on the authenticity of the apron - I agreed that "Rabbie" as a term for RB was unknown in his lifetime, and had always believed that he was either known as "Rab" or "Robert", or sometimes "Rob", but I have now found a letter from Maria Riddell to Creech the publisher (quoted in MacKay's book) in which she refers to a gathering at Friar's Car-se where "Robie Burns" was present. Given that Maria was English, and upper class, it's not a great leap of logic to suppose that the locals called him
"Rabbie", at least sometimes. Maybe "Rabbie" is not the 19th century addition that we have all thought it to be! Or could it have been a pet name that only Maria used?

Davidry


A.J. Morton writes, “With slight reluctance, I can reveal that Robert Burns was known as 'Rabbie' before the end of the 18" century and (very possibly) shortly before his death in 1796. The name 'Rabbie' was printed, with direct reference to the Bard, in an Epistle written for Burns and included in Robert Anderson's 1798 Poems on Selected Subjects. The name 'Rabbie' is used twice. It is alleged, by Anderson, that it was sent to Robert Burns in June 1796 - shortly before his premature death in July. If so, this is evidence that at least one contemporary, a poet no less, knew Burns as 'Rabbie Burns'. The two 'Rabbie' excerpts are included here:

Wow man, auld Scotia mourns for ye

And Scotia unco sad may be.
Sin Burns, wha sang wi' merry glee.

Now quats his quill i Rise, rise, let frien's and faes a' see

Ye're Rabbie still.

From Epistle I: To Robert Burns (printed 1798, allegedly written 1796)

Haith, few can write sae now a-days!

Sic sentiment throughout doth shine,
Sic sweetness steals thro' ilka line.

Had Rabbie kenn'd
Thou sae had penn'd.

He'd gi'en thee mickle praise.

Nor is it totally out of the question that Masonic periodicals may harbour an undiscovered Burns poem: “There is a reasonable probability for Hogg's general case that there are such poems out there waiting to be identified, though even Hogg himself would now assert only degrees of probability in his specific attributions, and other Burns scholars have been accepting of even these modified claims. The Canongate edition of Burns, ed. by Hogg and Andrew Noble, includes some of Hogg's new attributions and also at least one of the poems long attributed to Burns, though on rather uncertain evidence – ‘The Tree of Liberty,’ for which the Canongate editors make a decent case, though still short of certainty.” Peter Scott email op cit.


Surely of all the major poets, Burns is the one least to be criticized on the grounds of originality because his great originality was his collecting and use of Scottish music and lyrics: “His songs, traveling across oceans with their melodies but often without an author’s name, spread through the English-speaking world…Who had written them, few people knew or cared. That’s the bardic consummation. And that is how Robert Burns would have wished it.” Neal Ascherson, “How Does it Add up”, Review of The Bard by Robert Crawford, London Review of Books, 12 March 2009.