



PROJECT MUSE®

'Sir, Yours this moment I unseal': A Burns Manuscript
Rediscovered in Paisley

Craig Lamont, David Weir

Scottish Literary Review, Volume 9, Number 2, Autumn/Winter 2017, pp.
85-95 (Article)



Published by Association for Scottish Literary Studies

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/678042>

**‘Sir, Yours this moment I unseal’: A Burns Manuscript
Rediscovered in Paisley**

Abstract

Following the discovery of a manuscript in Burns’s hand in the Archive of Paisley Museum and Central Library, new questions regarding the history of the piece had to be asked. The short rhyming reply opens ‘Sir, Yours this moment I unseal,’ but offers no information connecting the piece to anyone else. This short essay tracks the appearance of the work in nineteenth-century editions of Burns’s works and pieces together what we know about it. Thereafter, an attempt is made to clarify the provenance of the item and the literary connections around it, particularly those in Paisley at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The world came to terms with the death of Robert Burns by establishing hundreds of Clubs in his honour, many of which can boast some claim of pre-eminence. The first, in Greenock (1801), calls itself ‘The Mother Club’. Paisley Burns Club was founded in 1805, claiming precedence as the ‘first *formally* constituted’ club in the world. Robert Tannahill (1774–1810) was its first secretary, and William Motherwell (1797–1835) served as its president. There is, however, a substantial gap in the records of the Club – from 1837 until 1873 – whereas other Clubs such as Irvine (1826) maintain a long, unbroken history since their foundation. In healthy competition with one another, Burns Clubs, with their relics and manuscripts, create a network of cultural material connecting them around the globe. In this context, new discoveries are often made and new local histories are brought to light. This was the case in 2015, when a manuscript in Burns’s hand was rediscovered in the archives of Paisley Museum and Central Library. The eight-line rhyming reply, seemingly to a letter inviting Burns to a party, was thereafter confirmed as unique and authentic.¹ The manuscript was put on display in Paisley Museum from January until February this year as part

of Burns Night commemorations, a suitable showcase for Paisley in its bid to become the UK City of Culture in 2021. This essay will outline the history of the piece, tracking its appearance in different collected editions throughout the nineteenth century. Despite the lack of conclusive evidence with which to identify the addressee of Burns's reply, suggestions can be made as to the likely donors of the manuscript. In making these, we can also rediscover the active literary scene in Paisley in the last years of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth century. The manuscript itself reads:

Sir,
Yours this moment I unseal,
 An' faith I'm gay an' hearty!
To tell the truth, an' shame the deil,
 I am as fou as Bartie:
But Fooraday, Sir, my promise leal,
 Expect me o' your Partie,
If on a Beastie I can speel,
 Or hurl in a Cartie. —

yours Robert Burns

Machlin Mon: night 10 o'clock

Although no date is given, we can trace it to either 1785 or 1786, when the poet was located in Mossgiel Farm, Mauchline. The rhyming reply is rife with joviality: Burns admits that he is as drunk ("fou") as the devil ("Bartie"). He nonetheless accepts the invitation to the party, promising to make it by horse or cart, and signs it ten o'clock at night. On its own the manuscript offers no more than this basic narrative. However, as the poem began to appear in new editions of Burns's poetry, much more of the story unfolded.

The first appearance of the piece was in 1834 in Allan Cunningham's *The Works of Robert Burns; with his Life*. Printed in London, this eight-volume edition boasted the appearance of over forty poems and letters by Burns hitherto unpublished. It appears on p. 341 of the seventh volume, and is headed: 'To — ———.' There are several editorial insertions worth noting. Firstly, the subtitle 'Mossgiel,—1786' is printed above the reply and

Sir, Yours this moment I unseal,
An' faith I'm gay an' hearty!
To tell the truth, an' shame the deil,
I am as fow as Bartie:
But Foorfday, Sir, my promise leal,
Expect me o' your Bartie,
For a Beattie I can speel,
Or hiel in a Cartie.
yours Robert Burns
Machlin Mon: night 10 o'clock

FIG. 1: 'Sir, Yours this moment I unseal',
Image courtesy of Renfrewshire Leisure Ltd on behalf of Renfrewshire Council

the initials 'R. B.' are printed below it, replacing 'Yours Robert Burns'. Finally, 'Machlin Mon: night 10 o'clock' has been removed. From this we can deduce that Cunningham saw fit to assign a date and a uniform style: the seventh volume contains several other letters from Burns, and removing the untidy manuscript comments are clearly part of Cunningham's editorial process. There are some textual variants that are worth mentioning for reasons that will become clear when we look at the third appearance of the piece. In the Cunningham edition, line two has been substantially revised from the original – 'An' faith I'm gay an' hearty!' – to the much clumsier 'And faith I am gay and hearty!' There are other variants: 'fou' has become 'fu' (1.4), and the first comma from 'But Foorfday, Sir, my promise leal' is wanting (1.5), as is the comma from the end of the same line. Then follows an editorial note, first explaining the background to Burns's use of the term 'Bartie'. Cunningham also offers the first insight into the provenance of the piece:

The original is preserved in the Paisley Library. The west of Scotland should be commended by all who write about Burns: his company was courted: his poetry was widely circulated: his memory revered, and every scrap of his writing treasured in his native district by high and low, rich and poor.²

It is important that this note spells out the two most crucial points at the centre of this essay. First, that the manuscript has been in Paisley for almost two centuries. Second, that after Edinburgh it is in the west of Scotland – in a sense wider than just Glasgow – where we find the formative literary culture in which Burns’s memory was immortalised. It is curious to note that in Egerer’s otherwise comprehensive *Bibliography of Robert Burns* (1964), aimed at listing the first appearances of Burns material, this piece does not feature.³ In Egerer’s description of the Cunningham edition, ‘Sir, Yours this moment I unseal’ is not noted in the list of original material for that volume. Normally, this implies that Egerer had listed it in a previous edition. On closer inspection it is nowhere to be found, neither in descriptions of previous editions or in his comprehensive ‘Index of Titles and First Lines’, implying it might have been missed. The piece was printed again in 1835 in Adolphus Wagner’s Leipzig edition of *The Works of Robert Burns*. As the subtitle to this edition suggests (‘with selected notes of Allan Cunningham’), Wagner’s edition offers no new information. The printing of the piece is a copy of Cunningham in every way.⁴

It was not until James Hogg and William Motherwell’s five-volume *The Works of Robert Burns* (Glasgow: 1834–36) that new information is provided. The title-page to the third volume is dated 1835. The piece, found on p. 311, is a much better likeness to the manuscript: Cunningham’s editorial insertion (‘Mossgiel, 1786’) and abbreviation (‘R. B.’), repeated verbatim by Wagner, have been removed and Burns’s sign-off (‘Machlin, *Monday night*, 10 o’clock’) are printed instead. Motherwell provides the following note:

The original MS. of the above card is preserved in the Paisley Library. We are informed it was presented to the library by the late Mr. John Clarkson, of M’Gavin and Clarkson, threadmakers, Paisley. To whom it is addressed, the MS. affords no clue. An inaccurate copy of it appears in Mr Cunningham’s edition of the Poet’s works.⁵

This note does much more than swipe at the poem’s earlier, less accurate

printing. It builds on the information already to hand and points towards the donor. And it is this mention of Clarkson and McGavin which leads us towards the literary network in Paisley to which this essay will return.

The history of the poem is further complicated by its reappearance in the 1843–44 edition of *The Works of Robert Burns* published by Blackie and Son. The piece is printed in both volume one (1843) and also volume two (1844). The note to its second appearance explains a biographical imperative:

The original MS. of the above characteristic note is preserved in the Paisley Library. It is not known to whom it was addressed. Though given among the Epigrams, &c., it is repeated here, as illustrative of the Poet’s fitful moods at this dark period of his history.⁶

If anything, it seems to be indisputable by this point that the manuscript has resided in Paisley the whole time and that, despite the work of several editors, the addressee remains unknown. However, in the contents to the second volume, the piece is listed as ‘To the same, Mauchline, “Yours this moment I unseal”’. The previous item on the contents list is ‘To Mr. David Bryce’, a shoemaker in Glasgow, to whom Burns wrote regarding his plans to travel to Jamaica in 1786. Here is a cause for potential confusion: the Blackie editor follows his predecessors in the footnote, making it clear that ‘it is not known to whom it was addressed’. Either it was an error to list the piece as ‘To the same’ or it was perhaps simply easier to package the rhyming reply in a timeline of correspondence following the letter to Bryce. Whatever the truth, little confidence can be given to the ascription of Bryce as addressee.

In 1896, the centenary of Burns’s death, the piece appears in volume four of the Chambers/Wallace edition, *The Life and Works of Robert Burns*, and in volume two of Henley and Henderson’s *The Poetry of Robert Burns*. In Chambers/Wallace the piece is titled ‘Extempore Reply to an Invitation’ (p. 319) and in Henley and Henderson is titled simply ‘Reply to an Invitation’ (p. 88). The note for the latter edition offers the most recent information, and is therefore used in the note to the last major complete edition of Burns’s works by James Kinsley in 1968. It reads:

Written, doubtless, in a tavern. It was published in Hogg and Motherwell; and the original MS. in the possession of the Paisley Burns Club agreed with the printed version.⁷

This note connects the Paisley Burns Club to the manuscript for the first time and allows us to speculate more about the literary circles in Paisley. In the *Memorial Catalogue* of the 1896 Burns Exhibition the manuscript is described as a ‘Rhyming Acceptance of Invitation, in the handwriting of the Poet’, confirming, seemingly, Henley and Henderson’s note, that the manuscript was lent in 1896 by the Paisley Burns Club.⁸ The Rev. James Thomson’s article ‘Robert Burns and Paisley’ published in the 1923 *Burns Chronicle* offers some insight into the connection. In an account of the Paisley Burns Club’s relics, ‘two pieces of verse in Burns’s handwriting’ are described. The song, ‘O guid ale comes’, is said to have been donated in 1821 by Robert Archibald (or, more commonly, R. A.) Smith (1780–1829). Details of the ‘reply to an invitation’ are tantalisingly sparse: ‘How the Club came by it is not recorded, but some considerations suggest that Motherwell was the donor’.⁹ This uncertainty and lack of sources effectively throws the Club’s ownership into doubt. That Motherwell was a member but failed to mention the Club’s connection with the manuscript in his note suggests ruling out the Club entirely. What is more, the piece is absent from the ‘Catalogue of the Property of the Club’ (1923), in which ‘O, guid ale comes’ and ‘Sir, o’er a gill’ are listed.¹⁰ From here we can pinpoint the problem: it is only ‘O, guid ale comes’ which is mentioned in both of the above accounts, suggesting there may have been some past confusion between ‘Sir, o’er a gill’ and ‘Sir, Yours this moment I unseal’. The former is an epistolary poem to John McAdam of Craigengillan, written at around the same time as the latter, and also beginning ‘Sir’. The mention of a ‘card’ in the first line of ‘Sir, o’er a gill’, coupled with Motherwell’s mention of ‘the above card’ in relation to ‘Sir, Yours this moment I unseal’ underlines the likelihood of an error being made in the descriptive chronicling of this manuscript. All of this leads to Clarkson and McGavin, the two names mentioned in Motherwell’s tentative note. While Clarkson is named as the donor, it is McGavin whose connections with the literary scene in Paisley deserves more attention.¹¹

William McGavin (1773–1832) was born in the parish of Auchenleck, Ayrshire, which is about five miles from Mauchline. He moved to Paisley with his family when he was ten years old and was apprenticed to a weaver two years later. He is said to have worked with the Paisley printer and bookseller John Neilson in 1790 for three years, before eventually becoming a thread manufacturer. His time in Glasgow was more prolific, wherein a

heated series of letters inspired the weekly periodical, *The Protestant*, named after his pseudonym.¹² However, here is not the place to delve deeper into his literary career, which includes new editions of Howie’s *Scots Worthies* (1827) and Knox’s *History of the Reformation* (as chief editor). In 1834 a monument to McGavin was erected in the Glasgow Necropolis [Fig. 2]. In Robert Brown’s *Paisley Poets, v. 1* (1889), more information on McGavin’s time in the town is provided. He witnessed the burning of the libellous poem ‘The Shark’ by his friend Alexander Wilson (1766–1813), better remembered today for his work as an ornithologist in the United States. Brown also notes that in 1793, the year McGavin left Neilson’s book business, he helped found the ‘first’ Paisley Philosophical and Literary Association and read essays at their meetings. His partnership with Clarkson in thread manufacture is described as ‘unsuccessful’. Perhaps this failure encouraged his move to Glasgow in 1799.¹³

W. M. Metcalfe’s *A History of Paisley* (1909) takes note of the various societies and institutions that took shape during this time.¹⁴ The planning of the Free Library and Museum commenced in 1867 and was formally opened on the High Street on 1 April 1871. This is where the manuscript is located today, though the building is now known as Paisley Museum and Central Library.¹⁵ The books that formed the Library, according to Metcalfe, came from the Paisley Library Society (1802) and the Paisley Philosophical Society (1808), both of which were founded after McGavin left Paisley. However, this does not take him out of the picture. As is noted above, Brown was careful to describe McGavin’s involvement in the ‘first’ Paisley Philosophical and Literary Association. This likely has ties to the society (re)founded in 1808, perhaps, with the same archive. When it is considered that the present society calls itself the Paisley Philosophical Institution rather than ‘Society’, it is possible that they might have been seen as separate entities for some time.¹⁶ Precisely how and when ‘Sir, Yours this moment I unseal’ found its way into the Free Library and Museum (known today as Paisley Museum and Central Library) needs explaining.

Firstly, the connection between the Paisley Philosophical Association (1793), later Institution or Society (1808) and the Library (opened on 1871) situates both McGavin and Motherwell in the picture. That Motherwell does not claim to have been involved in the manuscript finding its way into the Library makes McGavin’s direct involvement more likely. But the largest, most obvious stumbling block is that Motherwell, who describes



FIG. 2: Photograph of William McGavin Monument, Glasgow Necropolis, taken by Craig Lamont

‘the Paisley Library’ in 1835, must refer to an entity or archive other than the Library, as we know it, opened in 1871. It is left to us to speculate, reasonably, that the manuscript may have been housed originally by the Paisley Library Society or Philosophical Institution. In keeping with Motherwell’s note, the book of regulations for the Library Society constantly refers to itself as ‘the Paisley Library.’¹⁷ Furthermore, McGavin’s brother, John, was a curator of the Library and his old employer Neilson printed the Society’s *Regulations*. All this suggests that he was heavily involved in Paisley’s interconnected literary network during this time, to which the Paisley Library Society was central.¹⁸ Having disinterred McGavin a bit further, an obscure partner in a threadmaking firm to situate him at the heart of the network that pre-dates the Paisley Burns Club, and taking into consideration his roots in Ayrshire, we can now draw some tentative conclusions.

While it might never be possible to present any substantiating evidence as to the identity of the addressee of Burns’s rhyming reply, more research into the McGavin family in Ayrshire may well provide us with a clearer picture. Given his age, it is much more likely that William McGavin (or someone in his family) was the donor, rather than the recipient, of the manuscript to one of these Paisley societies. It then follows that the manuscript was placed alongside the other Burns relics in the display case in the new Museum adjoining the new Library building in 1876. This explains how it was later mistakenly assumed to be the property of the Paisley Burns Club.¹⁹ However it transpired, the rediscovery of a unique Burns manuscript helps us remember two things. First, that even a scrap of Burns, jotted down in a tavern, became a treasure for his admirers immediately after his death. Second, that finding such gems in Paisley ought to be unsurprising. In Robert Tannahill we have a Paisley poet in the mould of Burns: besides his Odes to Burns and his role in the Paisley Burns Club, his themes, sentiments (and even his likeness) are drawn in comparison to Burns. John Neilson, mentioned above, published James Maxwell’s *Animadversions on Some Poets and Poetasters of the Present Age* and Ebenezer Picken’s *Poems and Epistles, Mostly in the Scottish Dialect* (both 1788), with their attacks on Burns, before going on to print the Paisley edition of the famous *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* by the Bard himself in 1801–02. Today, Paisley Museum and Central Library holds one of the only known copies of Alexander Tait’s *Poems and Songs* (1790), in which a variant of Burns’s ‘The

Kirk's Alarm' was printed for the first time.²⁰ Now, with the rediscovery of this manuscript in Paisley, some new light begins to be cast on Paisley's literary history and more research on both the manuscript and this intriguing cultural history might in future be mounted.

Notes

- 1 Initial research on the manuscript underpinning this essay was begun by Dr Colin McIlroy, now of the National Library of Scotland. His research was conducted under the aegis of the AHRC-funded project, 'Editing Robert Burns for the Twenty-First Century' (2011–16), Principal Investigator, Professor Gerard Carruthers [AH/I003738/1].
- 2 *The Works of Robert Burns; with his life*, by Allan Cunningham v. 7 (London: James Cochrane & co., 1834), 341.
- 3 The most recent Bibliography was developed at the Centre for Robert Burns Studies with thanks to funding from the AHRC, under the aegis of 'Editing Robert Burns for the Twenty-First Century'. Craig Lamont, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns for the Twenty-First Century: 1786–1802* (2017) can be downloaded here: www.gla.ac.uk/burnsbibliography. It is hoped that the method of describing the appearance of every item (poem, song, letter, prose fragment) will be carried on in a future phase of the work, whereby every instance of 'Sir, Yours this moment I unseal' can be tracked.
- 4 *The Works of Robert Burns, with Selected Notes of Allan Cunningham, a biography and critical introduction, and a comparative etymological glossary to the poet*, by Adolphus Wagner (Leipzig: Frederick Fleischer, 1835), 500.
- 5 *The Works of Robert Burns, edited by The Ettrick Shepherd, and William Motherwell, esq.* v. 3 (Glasgow: Archibald Fullarton and co., 1835), 311.
- 6 *The Works of Robert Burns; with Dr. Currie's Memoir of the Poet, and an essay on his genius and character*, by Professor Wilson v. 2 (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1844), 160; the piece appears firstly in volume one, page 148 (printed in the previous year).
- 7 *The Poetry of Robert Burns, edited by William Ernest Henley and Thomas F. Henderson* v. 2 (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1896), 359. The piece itself appears on p. 88. A shortened version of Henley and Henderson's note is printed in *The Complete Works of Robert Burns with biographical introduction, notes and glossary* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1900), p. 143.
- 8 *Memorial Catalogue of the Burns Exhibition: 1896* (Glasgow: William Hodge & Company, 1898), 158.
- 9 James Thomson, 'Robert Burns and Paisley', *Annual Burns Chronicle & Club Directory* No. 32 (Kilmarnock: The Burns Federation, Jan. 1923), 12–13.
- 10 James Thomson, 'Paisley Burns Club, a sketch of its history', *Burns Chronicle and Club Directory* Second Series: Volume 2 (Kilmarnock: The Burns Federation, 1927). 132; the 'Catalogue' is cited in *The History of Paisley Burns Club* (1939).
- 11 Our thanks to Dr Dan Coughlan for bringing Robert Brown's *Paisley Poets* to our attention as an historical source.

- 12 Lionel Alexander Ritchie, 'M'Gavin, William (1773–1832)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/17503, accessed 12 May 2017].
- 13 Robert Brown, *Paisley Poets, with brief memoirs of them, and selections from their poetry*, v. 1 (Paisley: J. & J. Cook, 1889), 46–47.
- 14 W. M. Metcalfe, *A History of Paisley, 600–1908* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1909), 400–09.
- 15 As this website makes clear, Paisley Central Library is 'attached to Paisley Museum': www.whatsonrenfrewshire.co.uk/listings/paisley-central-library/
- 16 Metcalfe is slightly vague in his statement: 'Of literary and intellectual societies, there have been many, but few of them now remain, the rest having either died out or been absorbed into those that remain' (p. 404).
- 17 *Regulations of the Paisley Library Society* (Paisley: J. Neilson, 1802).
- 18 For an in-depth study of this interweaving network, cf. John C. Crawford, 'The high state of culture to which this part of the country has attained': Libraries, Reading, and Society in Paisley, 1760–1830', *Library & Information History* 30:3 (London: Routledge, 2014), 172–194.
- 19 Thomson, 'Robert Burns and Paisley' (*Burns Chronicle*. 1923), 10.
- 20 For more information on these publications see the new Bibliography (n. 3, above).

University of Glasgow and The Heritage Centre at Paisley Museum