



Carruthers, G. (2021) Who really wrote the epigram on Edmund Burke attributed to Robert Burns? *Burns Chronicle*, 130(1), pp. 111-114.

(doi: [10.3366/burns.2021.0012](https://doi.org/10.3366/burns.2021.0012))

This is the Author Accepted Manuscript.

The material cannot be used for any other purpose without further permission of the publisher and is for private use only.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/227845/>

Deposited on: 14 January 2021

Who really wrote the Epigram on Edmund Burke, attributed to Robert Burns?<sup>1</sup>

In 2004 the present writer published an article showing that an epigram on Edmund Burke (1729-1797), attributed to Robert Burns since 1932 had appeared in the London periodical, *Politics for the People* in October 1794.<sup>2</sup> The appearance in this publication strongly suggested that Burns, then, was not the author of the epigram but had merely enjoyed and recited it to his friend John Syme (1755-1831) in whose hand the text came to be associated with the poet.

I should first of all record two other claims to authorship alongside that of the best candidate, and these include an attribution to the junior defence counsel, Sir Robert Dallas (1756-1824), in the long-running Warren Hastings (1732-1818) impeachment case of 1788-95 involving alleged misdemeanours by Hastings in India. This has been reiterated by a recent Burke scholar who notes that Burke, part of the prosecution team, was so upset by the text that he quoted it in his closing speech in proceedings.<sup>3</sup> It should likewise be pointed out that the epigram has a nineteenth-century tradition of repeated, if less than certain, attribution to Edward Law (1750-1818), Burke's opponent as senior counsel for Hastings.<sup>4</sup>

It might be suggested, however, that the author of the epigram on Burke was, more than likely, John Williams (1761-1818) the English satirist who sometimes wrote under the pen-name Anthony Pasquin. Williams had a chequered career as a literary controversialist, coming to blows on one occasion in a London bookshop with the journalist, William Gifford (1756-1826) whom he had insulted.<sup>5</sup> Williams had previous and ongoing form where Burke was concerned. In 1790, in response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Williams published his "Burke's Pamphlet. An Epigramatic Apology for the evident Tergiversation of political Principal in a certain Character, and his sudden Adoration of the Trappings of Royalty. By Anthony Pasquin." This appeared in the newspaper, *Diary, or Woodfall's Register* for 16th November 1790. It runs as follows including a note which, as with the epigram on Burke later in *Politics for the People*, riffs on Burke's Irishness:

When his governing jerkin was tatter'd and torn,  
And B— saw that Ridicule spurn'd it:  
To HIDE from keen scorn what was worthless and worn,  
In the face of the universe TURN'D it!!!

\* To those hyper-critics who may snarl at the idea of a man's turning his coat in the face of the world by the way of hiding it, I have only to remark that the Right Honourable Gentleman is a native of Catherlough in Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

Again in 1796, Williams satirically anticipates Burke's demise with his 'Epitaph on Don Edmund' in the *Morning Post and Fashionable World* for 8<sup>th</sup> June 1796:

Here lies poor B\*\*\*\*, the slave of Fright and Fiction,  
Who liv'd and died a splendid contradiction;

With love of books he fled the World, and gave  
His Country wounds, whene'er he meant to save;  
'Till pension'd poor, when pension'd full of pride;  
He liv'd a changeling, and a changeling died.

What I have also now discovered is that the *Politics for the People* epigram had a prior publication in the *Dublin Evening Post* for 14<sup>th</sup> June 1794. The text was re-circulated decades later by the reformist editor Richard Carlile (1790-1843) in his publication *The Republican* dated from Dorchester Gaol, 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1825, where Carlile was incarcerated for 'seditious libel' and it went on to have a long nineteenth-century afterlife.<sup>7</sup>

The *Law Review or Quarterly Review of Jurisprudence* for 1833 is categorical on the authorship of the 'Burns' epigram and relates it specifically to the Warren Hastings impeachment case, saying:

The following epigram, thrown to Burke in court, and torn by him to shreds, has always been attributed to [Edward] Law, but erroneously:-

"Oft have we wondered on Irish ground  
No poisonous reptile has e'er yet been found  
Revealed the secret stands of Nature's work  
She saved her venom to create a Burke!"

The real author was one Williams, notorious by his nom de guerre, Anthony Pasquin.<sup>8</sup>

The *Law Review* is most credible, given not only the long context of William's epigrammatical assaults on Burke, but also the former's anti-Burkean pamphlet, published while attending sessions of the Hastings impeachment and under his Pasquin pseudonym, *Authentic Memoirs of Warren Hastings, Esq, late Governor-General of Bengal, with Strictures on the Management of his Impeachment: to which is added, an Examination into the Causes of the Alarm in the Empire* (London: J. Bew, 1793).

Frequently reprinted throughout the nineteenth-century, though variously attributed to those others mentioned above, to Hastings himself, or as an anonymous production surreptitiously sent to Burke and which he received one morning while shaving, the text, 'Oft have we wondered on Irish ground', is fairly clearly generated as part of the intense London circus surrounding the Hastings case. It was also more widely published in the eighteenth-century than I had previously thought and it is most probable that Burns learned of it from a source other than *Politics for the People*. This is likely as the *Politics for the People* version lacks the title as provided by the hand of John Syme. The modern Burns editor James Kinsley seems somewhat awry when he opines that 'there is no reason to doubt [Burns's] authorship', not least when he supplies in his 1968 edition of Burns's *Poems*

that very intimacy-signalling title from Syme's manuscript generated, one might assume, from a currently unknown print-source: 'On Mr Burke by an opponent and a friend to Mr Hastings.'<sup>9</sup> John Williams very probably, and less likely Robert Dallas, was that satirical friend to Hastings and opponent to Burke.<sup>10</sup>

Gerard Carruthers

University of Glasgow

---

<sup>1</sup> The research for this article has been undertaken in the course of my work as Principal Investigator on the Arts and Humanities Research Council grant, 'Editing Robert Burns for the Twenty-First Century: Correspondence and Poetry' [AH/P004946/1]

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Carruthers, 'Robert Burns' "Epigram on Edmund Burke" published in *Politics for the People*, October 1794' in *Studies in Scottish Literature* 33/34 (2004), 469-71.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 79. Robinson's source is perhaps John Cordy Jeffreson, *A Book About Lawyers* (New York: Carleton, 1867), 355, which claims this attribution.

<sup>4</sup> See Rev T.H. Bullock, *Lectures Delivered at Crosby Hall* (London: Edward West, 1860), 29.

<sup>5</sup> The best introduction to Williams' life remains James Sambrook's article in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-29520>

<sup>6</sup> This and the next text here by Williams can conveniently be found on the excellent website compiled by David Hill Radcliffe, 'English Poetry 1579-1830: Spenser and Tradition': <http://spenserians.cath.vt.edu/AuthorRecord.php?&method=GET&recordid=33114>

<sup>7</sup> *The Republican* Vol XI (London: R. Carlile, 1825), 126

<sup>8</sup> 'Life of Lord Ellenborough' in the *Law Review or Quarterly Review of Jurisprudence* Vol X for August and November 1833, 322.

<sup>9</sup> See James Kinsley *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), Vol. III, 1464 & Vol. II, 757.

<sup>10</sup> A search for a manuscript, besides the one in the hand of John Syme, turned up an undated volume, 'Poems by Various Authors' (Eng MS 656) in the John Rylands library, University of Manchester. Item 150 in this miscellany contains two squibs on Burke, one of which is that text attributed to Burns. These are headed up: 'Mrs. Woodman presents Compts to Mrs. Piozzi & has the Pleasure of sending the Verses she desired. Mrs. & Miss Woodman beg their best Compts to Miss Thrale'. The Welsh diarist Hester Lynch Thrall, later Piozzi (1740/1-1821) is presumably receiving transcriptions from a published source with Mrs Woodman, presumably again, not the original author of these texts. I am most grateful to Dr Gill Hughes for checking the contents for me.