



Carruthers, G. and Gallagher, K. (2021) A note on Elizabeth Isabella Spence and her Sketches of the Present Manners, Customs, and Scenery of Scotland. *Burns Chronicle*, 130(2), pp. 210-214.
(doi: [10.3366/burns.2021.0024](https://doi.org/10.3366/burns.2021.0024))

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Deposited on 11 October 2021

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Abstract

This article discusses several engagements with Burns and Robert Fergusson by Elizabeth Isabella Spence in the early nineteenth century, as well the textual variance found in several nineteenth-century versions of Burns's 'Epistle to Rob^t Graham, Esq: of Fintry on the Election for the Dumfries string of Boroughs, Anno 1790' (1790). Spence is involved in the contemporary Romantic conceptualisation of Scotland, and she visited Burns's widow Jean Armour in Dumfries as part of a tour of the country providing an account of her encounter. This note examines a particular textual variant which appears in Spence's publication of Burns's 'Epistle to Graham of Fintray', tracing this variant throughout several key early-to-mid nineteenth-century versions.

Keywords – Elizabeth Isabella Spence; Epistle to Graham of Fintry; nineteenth-century romanticism; literary tourism; editorial practice.

A Note on Elizabeth Isabella Spence & her *Sketches of the Present Manners, Customs, and Scenery of Scotland* (1811), especially concerning Jean Armour & Burns's 'Epistle to Robert Graham Esq: of Fintry on the Election for the Dumfries string of Boroughs, Anno 1790'¹

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In 1811 Elizabeth Isabella Spence (1768-1832) published *Sketches of the Present Manners, Customs, and Scenery of Scotland*. This travel-book attests to the contemporary Romantic-envisaging of Scotland, including the large part played in this imagining obviously enough by Robert Burns and Walter Scott. From Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) the volume features the prefatory quotation of several lines following on from the famous apostrophe,

'O Caledonia! Stern and wild' and from Burns's 'Epistle to William Simpson' (written 1785), one of the poet's most important culture-surveying poetic essays: 'O nature! a' thy shews an' forms,/To feeling, pensive hearts hae charms'. Also exemplifying the text-book creation of Romantic Scotland, Spence undertakes something of a Burnsian pilgrimage, visiting Burns's widow Jean Armour in Dumfries. In an epistolary entry, where the author/narrator writes to a friend, dated 3rd July 1810, Spence encounters the 45-year-old Jean:

Last Sunday evening I accompanied a friend to the habitation of Mrs. Burns. It is a small low dwelling in a remote part of the town. She was at home, and introduced me to one of her sons, a fine youth of fourteen. Mrs. Burns is accustomed to be visited by strangers; and she received me with much civility: although she spoke in a broad accent, her address was pleasing. In the parlour hangs the portrait of her husband, painted by Naismyth of Edinburgh, which, she told me, is a very striking resemblance of him. There are likewise two original drawings from the subject of his "Cotters Saturday Night," supposed to be the venerable parents of the poet, and his brothers and sisters.

There is much shrewdness and sense in the general expression of Mrs. Burns's face. Her figure is short and thick, but her husband speaks of the beauty of his "*Bonny Jean*." — If it be true that his affection for her in after years decreased, at least, dear Madam, you will admit its warmth is beautifully portrayed in the following lines addressed to a friend:-

[Spence then quotes those lines from 'Epistle to Davie, written in 1785, in praise of Jean from "This life has joys for you and I" to "Thy most peculiar care"]

Mrs. Burns was so obliging as to shew me the room in which her husband died. As I cast my eyes around and beheld the bed where this exquisite poet terminated his earthly career, and saw ranged on the shelves the very books he once had read, a tear insensibly filled my eye to the memory of a man, whose days had been so few and little profitable on earth; for he died a victim to disappointment, poverty, and disease.

She took down a splendid copy of Allan Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd*, illustrated with beautiful engravings, by Allen, considered the Hogarth of Scotland. It had been presented to him by Dr. Cunningham, who pays an elegant tribute to his

distinguished genius in the title page. I was likewise shewn a beautiful miniature of Mary Queen of Scots, on the lid of a snuff-box, given him by Lady Winifred Constable.²

As a result of her Dumfries peregrination, Spence publishes 'Dumfries' by Robert Fergusson (1750-74), which had appeared in *The Dumfries Magazine* for 28th September 1773 although not, as she rightly claims, in 'any edition' of Fergusson before Spence's book.³ Spence's version features variants, although from where exactly it is unclear. From somewhere too, Spence decants a version of what she entitles Burns's 'Sketch of an Epistle to R. Graham, Esq. of Fintray,' claiming:

The following Poem, by the justly celebrated BURNS, has been transmitted to me, since the preceding part of this Work was printed; and as it was never before published, I hope that the Reader will not feel dissatisfied at finding it here.⁴

Spence is probably mistaken in her belief that she is publishing a version of this text for the first time. There is most likely a prior 1811 publication of the text in the *Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*. This is almost certainly earlier than Spence's book, although the latter could have been in preparation before the printing of the *Scots Magazine* in April.⁵ There is a great deal of misinformation and even funny business that surrounds the first printings of Burns poems as these are claimed in new editions of Burns in the nineteenth-century.⁶ Burns's modern editor, James Kinsley, reflects the claim of Allan Cunningham (1784-1842) that his edition of 1834 was first off the mark with the Fintry verse-epistle.⁷ However, the *Scots Magazine*, followed by Spence, in 1811 represent what appear to be the first publications of Burns's 'Epistle to Graham [...] on the Election for the Dumfries string of Boroughs.'

Between Spence's texts and the *Scots Magazine* text there are two dozen variants, mostly in orthography/punctuation. However, a 'substantive' variant might be noted in the text:

'Grim horror grin'd; pale terror roar'd,' [Spence]/'Grim horror girn'd; pale terror roar'd' [*Scots Magazine*].

Burns's holograph 'Glenriddell Manuscript' reads 'girn'd', and is probably the preferred choice of variant for a properly collated and edited version of the text.⁸ In the third volume of Cunningham's 1834 edition, 'girn'd' is provided for the line.⁹ In the contemporaneous James Hogg and William Motherwell edition of Burns, however, 'grinn'd' is the chosen variant.¹⁰ By 1855, however, a new edition of Cunningham also prefers 'grinn'd'.¹¹ 'Grin'd' or 'grinn'd' is not noted as a variant by Kinsley, who is working from all of the 'Glenriddell', 'Afton' and 'Fintry' manuscript versions of the text which offer 'girn'd'. Hogg and

Motherwell together with later Cunningham (1855) using ‘grinn’d’ in common with the ‘grin’d’ of the recovered Spence text, however, possibly suggest that we might now be retrieving a variant reading from a lost ‘Dumfries’ manuscript, which some editors, including Cunningham and perhaps Motherwell, had access to via its possession in the hand of Burns’s friend John McMurdo (*fl* 1790s).¹² In other instances in the text, Kinsley extrapolates inferentially ‘Dumfries’ manuscript variations via Cunningham but not this one, which in any case does not appear in his 1834 edition but does in his 1855. It is also possible though that the 1855 Cunningham is a composite volume of sorts, employing some texts from elsewhere, including potentially, Hogg and Motherwell or the notoriously syncretic Thomas Tegg London edition of 1840, which itself ostensibly incorporates a bulk of Cunningham material and prefers for the ‘Epistle to R. Graham’, the ‘grinn’d’ variant.¹³ The vast bibliographical description that would be required to sort through all the many nineteenth-century editions of Burns, which are to be suspected often of not being ‘true’ editions is unlikely to be done anytime soon, if ever. Something odd is going on with the print variants but the corrective logic cannot currently be teased out with any certainty in a case such as ‘Epistle to R. Graham’.

A proper re-editing of Burns’s ‘Epistle to R. Graham [...] on the Election for the Dumfries string of Boroughs’ is for the future in the new Oxford University Press edition of the Works of Robert Burns. For now, we note the not completely explicable publication in 1811 of two versions of Burns’s text which awaits further editorial examination.

¹ We are very grateful to Dr Iain Beavan for drawing our attention to the contents of Spence’s book. Likewise for answering queries about Spence, we acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Dr Pam Perkins. The research for this article has been undertaken in the course of work by Gerard Carruthers 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].

² Spence, *Sketches of the Present Manners, Customs, and Scenery of Scotland* (London: Hurst et al, 1811), 62-5.

³ For details see *The Poems of Robert Fergusson* edited by Matthew P. McDiarmid (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1954) Vol. II,306; Spence, Appendix, 7.

⁴ Spence, Appendix, 1-6.

⁵ *Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany* (April 1811), 294-5. The *Aberdeen Press and Journal* for 1st July 1811 advertises Spence’s book ‘this day published’, a publisher’s advertising-formula which is often imprecise, nonetheless one can reasonably assume from it that the book was published at some point in the summer of this year.

⁶ See for instance a recent blog on the 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century' website by Patrick Scott which touches on a rich seam of such instance: <https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/guest-blog-by-professor-patrick-scott-a-burns-antedating-and-another-misattribution-hogg-cunningham-monk-lewis-and-the-hermit/>

⁷ James Kinsley (ed.) *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), Vol. III, 1343-6 & Vol. II, 549-54. Allan Cunningham (ed.), *The Works of Robert Burns* (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1834), Vol II, 297-99.

⁸ See *Commonplace Books, Tour Journals, and Miscellaneous Prose* [The Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns Volume 1] edited by Nigel Leask (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 214.

⁹ *The Works of Robert Burns; with His Life, by Allan Cunningham*, ed. by Allan Cunningham (London: Cochrane and McCrone, 1834), III, 158.

¹⁰ *The Works of Robert Burns. Edited by The Ettrick Shepherd and William Motherwell, Esq.*, ed. by James Hogg and William Motherwell (Glasgow: Archibald Fullarton, and co., 1834) I, 316.

¹¹ Allan Cunningham, *The Complete Works of Robert Burns* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1855) I, 330.

¹² See Kinsley (ed.), 549.

¹³ Robert Burns, *The Works of Robert Burns, Complete in One Volume. With Life by Allan Cunningham* (London: T. Tegg. Cheapside; C. Daly, Red Lion Square, 1840), 298.

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