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Did Burns Send Cannon to France in 1792? — A New Theory of the Narrative

Abstract: The story of Burns sending carronades to revolutionary France in 1792 first appears in the biography by John Gibson Lockhart (1828). An analysis of the extant evidence, including documents in the National Library of Scotland, suggests the unlikelihood of the narrative and it may be that its origins lie in the real-life events surrounding Professor John Anderson (1723-96) who did take ordnance to France in 1791.

Keywords: Lockhart's *Life of Burns* (1828); Burns in the excise service; Burns's politics; the Rosamund episode; revolutionary France; the Abbotsford documents; Joseph Train; Professor John Anderson; Anderson's ordnance experiments; Anderson's relations with revolutionary France; Marquis de Lafayette; Anderson's relations with the early American republic; George Washington.

Some of the well-known stories about Burns that first circulated in the 1820s and 1830s rest on very weak evidence. Anecdotes about Burns are hard to dislodge once they get into the accretive 19th century biographies, especially if they embroider incidents that are well documented or support one or another slant on Burns's life. Some indeed may indeed have originated in stories about other people. A case in point may be the long-disputed story that in 1792 Burns sent four cannon to France to support the revolutionary government. The story was first published by John Gibson Lockhart (1794-1854) to illustrate his conservative disapproval of Burns's politics and later recurrently cited approvingly to show Burns as supporting revolution. Not only is there no extant documentary evidence for attaching this anecdote to Burns, but there is a very similar well-documented contemporary example of a leading Scotsman exporting cannon to revolutionary France that offers a more plausible original for Lockhart's story.

Lockhart's *Life of Robert Burns* (1828) relates the encounter of the poet and his colleagues on 27 February 1792 with a smuggling ship, the *Rosamund*, that became trapped in shallow water in the Solway Firth. According to Lockhart, the excisemen kept a watch on the vessel while a request for reinforcements was sent to Dumfries. Upon the arrival of dragoons sent to support the government officials, Burns, sword in hand, led the forces in boarding the vessel causing the crew to surrender in great fear.¹ As discussed below, this part of Lockhart's story, though rejected by F.B. Snyder in 1932, is well-documented, and Henry W. Meikle printed relevant documentation in the *Burns Chronicle* in 1934.²

Lockhart also tells us that the ship's confiscated goods and arms were later auctioned at Dumfries, where the poet purchased four carronades which he sent to France along with a letter of support to the French Convention.³ But neither Meikle nor anyone else has found evidence for the second part of Lockhart's story, when he asserted that the poet purchased

¹ John Gibson Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1828), 218-19.

² Henry W. Meikle, 'Burns and the Capture of the *Rosamund*', *Burns Chronicle* (1934), 43-52.

³ *Ibid.*, 219.

four carronades at the auction which he sent to France along with a letter of support to ‘the French Convention’.⁴ It is not surprising that the letter has never been traced since, as Robert Chambers and others soon pointed out, no such body as the French Convention existed until much later in that year, its constitution only dating, in fact, from September 1792. Additionally, no other letter to its predecessor French revolutionary body (the Legislative Assembly which lasted from October 1791 to September 1792) has been found either. Lockhart tells us that Burns’s gifted carronades and letter were intercepted by Customs at Dover and so failed to reach their intended destination, and that this intervention ‘there appears little room to doubt, was the principal circumstance that drew on Burns the notice of his jealous superiors.’⁵ Here Lockhart refers to an episode much later in the year, which remains opaque although better documented than the carronade story. Writing to his excise supervisor Robert Graham of Fintry on 31 December 1792, Burns confesses that he is, ‘surprised, confounded & distracted by Mr Mitchel, the Collector, telling me just now that he has received an order from your Hon^{ble} Board to enquire into my political conduct.’⁶ Perturbed at the prospect of censure and the possible implications for his career in the excise, Burns mounts a robust denial: ‘I say, that the allegation, whatever villain has made it, is a LIE! To the British Constitution, on Revolution principles, next after my God, I am most devoutly attached.’⁷ The internal enquiry into Burns, if indeed there was one, came to nothing and his career in the excise continued to advance. With the carronade story, Lockhart has a potentially plausible cause for political suspicion falling on the poet, except why did it take so long for it come back to bite Burns if British customs had seized the guns, presumably in the weeks following their sale which occurred on 19 April 1792? Also, if Burns believes the cannon to be at the centre of the ‘allegation’, why would he so vehemently deny this, given the supposed existence of an accompanying letter along with the guns themselves, apparently at that point in the hands of the Customs Service? From Burns’s own words to Graham of Fintry, it also sounds much more as though it is his political views, or spoken words attributed to him, rather than any action which has aroused doubts about his loyalty to the Crown.

As Robert Crawford has pointed out, Lockhart had access to papers to papers that were subsequently lost or at least mislaid and ‘only some [of these] have been rediscovered’.⁸ Even the rediscovered ones lack details Lockhart attributes to them. One key document he cites was ‘the private journal of one of the excisemen (now in my hands)’, which according to Lockhart tells of Burns’s impatience staking out the smuggling-vessel while waiting for the dragoons to arrive.⁹ Part of the poet’s time in the wet and cold of his salt-marsh surveillance location, allegedly, is passed in composing the song, ‘The Deil’s awa’ wi’ the Exciseman.’ However, nothing in this incident, the waiting or the song, is in the exciseman’s journal printed by Meikle in 1934, and Burns himself in a letter from around March 1792, only published for the first time in 1877, writes about the text to John Leven a Supervisor in the Excise at Edinburgh, explaining that he had ‘composed & sung [it] at one of his [colleague John Mitchell’s] Excise-court dinners’.¹⁰

⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶ *The Letters of Robert Burns* Vol II, 1790-1796 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 168.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁸ Robert Crawford, *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 350. Lockhart, *Life*, 218, 224.

⁹ Lockhart, 218.

¹⁰ *The Letters of Robert Burns* Volume II, 1790-1796, 139.

The disappearance of crucial documents had long been recognized as problematical. In his 1882 edition of Lockhart's *Life* the editor, William Scott Douglas, writes in a footnote about the materials Lockhart has viewed, 'It is to be hoped that this "private journal" and relative productions in support of so incredible a story a story [the Rosamund story in general] are still in existence at Abbotsford.'¹⁴ Lockhart had worked on his biography at least in part at the home of his father-in-law, Sir Walter Scott, and Scott Douglas's desire that other supporting material might also be extant is based on his hearsay knowledge of other documents at Abbotsford as claimed by Joseph Train to Robert Carruthers, an issue to which we will return below. Funnily enough in the same letter by Burns to John Leven, the poet is exercised over boxes of tea relating to someone called Lawson and held by the poet and exciseman while 'permits' arrive from somewhere, although this tea 'cannot, in quantity, correspond with Permit [and so] are not they also seizable?'¹⁵ This from a period only one month before, we are supposed to believe, Burns sends his present to France. Would Burns have been so careless with his own goods (the carronades) that these are seized at Dover without proper permits, and would he have been unlikely to guess that such items were likely to be seized, with or without proper permits? Although Britain was not at war with revolutionary France until 1793 rivalries between the two countries amid highly delicate continental tensions were such that it seems hugely unlikely that any serving British government employee would have been so injudicious as to undertake the gift to France attributed to Burns.

Even Allan Cunningham (1784-1842), whose own editions of Robert Burns's works contained many spurious anecdotes, was, in the 1830s, sceptical about the story. While he had no problem with tales of Burns's heroism, of his daring leadership in capturing a smuggling vessel, he confessed that he had never heard the coda to Lockhart's version concerning the purchase of cannon for France.¹⁶ However, like so many nineteenth-century Burns biographical accretions, once Lockhart's story was published in his hugely popular *Life*, it became an important narrative in subsequent retellings of the poet's life, albeit a contested one. Another 'mainstream' producer of an edition and life of Burns, Robert Chambers (1802-1871), in turn countered Cunningham in the 1850s:

The whole affair was treated by Allan Cunningham as of a fabulous character; but it has been substantiated in the main particulars by Mr Joseph Train, the successor of [John] Lewars as supervisor at Dumfries, from the original diary of Mr Crawford; an account of the seizure and sale of the vessel by Burns himself; and a document written by Lewars detailing the circumstance of Burns having purchased the four carronades, and despatched them as a present to the French Convention. In the sales catalogue, in

¹⁴ J.G. Lockhart, *The Life of Robert Burns* Vol II (Liverpool: Henry Young & Sons, 1914), p.76.

¹⁵ G. Ross Roy (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Burns* Volume II, 1790-1796, p.139.

¹⁶ Allan Cunningham, ed., *The Works of Robert Burns: With his Life* 8 vols (London: James Cochrane, 1834), I, 284-85.

Burns's handwriting, which Mr Train possesses, the poet enters himself as the purchaser of the four guns for £3.¹⁷

Chambers here lists the documents Lockhart had apparently used at Abbotsford: material in the hand of Train, Mr Crawford's 'journal'/'diary', an account of the episode by Robert Burns himself, John Lewars testimony and the Rosamond sale-of-goods catalogue annotated by Burns. For many years this material was largely inaccessible at Abbotsford until donated in 1931 and 1932 to the National Library of Scotland. This material now publicly accessible consists of Crawford's (Crawford's) journal (eleven pages), and two sheets of Burns's handwriting detailing the expenses incurred in condemning the Rosamund and monies fetched as auction for its pointed goods (with some corrections in the hand of Crawford). A third document of three pages, most likely in the hand of John Lewars, is an 'Inventory of the Rosamond & Furniture', advertising (presumably text for print bills or the press) the sale of the ship and its goods on 19th April 1792.¹⁸ Most inconveniently, the Lewars account of Burns's acquisition of the guns is not among the papers donated, either because it is missing or perhaps because it never existed in quite the way it has been claimed, or even because it never existed at all.

Crawford's journal affirmed that Burns had been present in the seizing of the Rosamond and Burns's inventory showed that 'four four pound Carronade Guns mounted on Carriages with tackle and furniture compleat' had been sold for £4-2-6 (not for £3 as Lockhart and Chambers had attested), frustratingly with no purchaser listed. If these are the exact documents that were possessed by Joseph Train (1779-1852), who would have been twelve or thirteen in 1792, were these supplemented for Lockhart by other bits of the narrative in the hand of Train or of someone else? Certainly, Lockhart seems to have additional material written by Train which casts doubt on the character of 'Highland' Mary Campbell, and which Lockhart declined to use in his 1828 *Life*, unsatisfied as he clearly was with such *ipse dixit* evidence. Among the Lockhart material in the NLS dealing with the Rosamund there is also a letter from Train dubiously offering something of the back history of Mons Meg (the great gun at Edinburgh Castle) and saying that Allan Cunningham would 'probably if he had it in his power present this anecdote as he did the account of Burns having purchased the cannon and the anecdote of the song "The Deil cam' fiddling through the town" ['The Deil's awa' wi' the Exciseman.']. Mrs Burns, however, before her death publicly admitted the truth of these statements.¹⁹ On the second issue of the song, assuming Jean Armour to have attested in this way, is, as we have seen, contradicting Burns's own account. On the first issue, there is no other account beyond Train's of Jean's 'public admission' about the veracity of the cannon story. Inconveniently (or conveniently) dead by 1834, Jean might have been usefully consulted when Lockhart was writing his biography in the late 1820s on the carronades.

¹⁷ Robert Chambers, *The Life and Works of Robert Burns* 4 vols (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1851-1852), III, 225.

¹⁸ *Correspondence and documents of Sir Walter Scott and of John Gibson Lockhart, formerly in the possession of Major-General Sir Walter Maxwell Scott, Baronet of Abbotsford, Companion of the Order of the Bath, Distinguished Service Order* National Library of Scotland: MSS.1549-1634.

¹⁹ Manuscript letter, undated, Train to Lockhart in *Correspondence and documents of Sir Walter Scott and of John Gibson Lockhart*, Item 91, f.196.

When Henry W. Meikle transcribed a large portion of the NLS documents in the *Burns Chronicle* (1934), he overstated the support of the evidence here for Lockhart's account, seizing on them to counter the wholesale objection of the Rosamund episode by Franklyn Bliss Snyder in his *Life of Robert Burns* (1932). Meikle quotes Snyder's over-determined rejection:

[N]o more picturesque legend was ever invented by the ingenious brain of a romantic biographer . . . The whole thing would do full justice to Gilbert and Sullivan . . . The brig Rosamond affair should be absolutely deleted from any account of Burns's life.²⁰

However, right though Meikle may have been in pointing out Snyder's general error, he makes too great a leap in supposing that the resurfacing of the documents in the 1930s not only affirm the Rosamund story, but also reinstate the likelihood that Burns sent the carronades to France. Given the incomplete testimony of the documents that do surface, especially the missing Lewars document supposedly attesting Burns's actions with the carronades, he remains all too credulous of Train as he writes:

These documents Train states he acquired from Lewars's widow, and 'in 1828 [he] placed them in the hands of Sir Walter Scott, whose son-in-law, Mr. Lockhart, was then preparing his life of Burns for the press.' Sir Walter, unable to trace any acknowledgment of the guns in the *Moniteur*, the French official newspaper of the time, 'applied to the Custom House authorities, who, after considerable search, found that they had been seized at the port of Dover, as stated by Mr. Lewars in his memorandum.' In spite of such specific details, doubts continued to be thrown on the good faith of Train, and, by inference, of both Lockhart and Scott. For it was Lockhart who first published the statement that the carronades were seized at Dover, a fact which, according to Train, had been confirmed by Sir Walter.²²

In fact, all roads lead to Train. Lockhart's version of the Dover interception is taken from Train with no mention of Walter Scott's supposed investigation by Lockhart himself. Train it is who tells Dr Robert Carruthers that Walter Scott confirmed the seizure of the guns at Dover, something that goes unmentioned in Scott's own papers, or in Lockhart.²³

The quoted pieces within the preceding quotation come from the Blackie edition of Burns (1843-44), where Train writes to Carruthers of the *Inverness Courier*. In contradiction to

²⁰ Henry W. Meikle, 'Burns and the Capture of the Rosamund', *Burns Chronicle* (1934) [43-52], 47.

²² *Ibid.*, 45.

²³ The letter from Train to Carruthers first appears in an appendix to *The Works of Robert Burns* 2 vols (Blackie: Glasgow 1843-44).

Meikle's implication that the veracity of Train, Lockhart and Scott are linked in the Rosamund narrative, then, there is no necessary doubt to be thrown on the honesty of either of the latter two although there is the possibility of reading the unreliability of Train. Has Lockhart simply swallowed his wider claims about the Rosamund affair all too readily? Did Walter Scott ever, in fact, make enquiries of Customs at Dover? We simply do not know, and too much clearly relies upon the uncorroborated word of Train. On the basis of the extant Abbotsford documents that became publicly available at the NLS in the 1930s, generally however, we are no surer in solid proof as to the story of Burns buying the guns and sending them to France than we were before this date. Indeed, as the foregoing reading demonstrates it remains an oddly suspicious story in the context of the extant documentary evidence.

If we are to make cultural/political 'logic' of the carronades-to-France story, it can be suggested that from the point of view of Lockhart the Tory, that it was a useful tool for portraying the wild, impetuous character of Burns, now superseded in a more conservative early nineteenth-century literary Scotland with the gentlemanly politics of Lockhart's father-in-law, Walter Scott.²⁵ Even beyond right-wing politics, the Terror of the French Revolution, the long wars between Britain and France and the bogeyman of Napoleon cast the long, dark shadow of a period of mad European tumult now thankfully passed so far as 'mainstream' British thinking went. In 1792 Burns was not to know the extreme events he was encouraging. However, Lockhart's carronades narrative over time backfires, in a sense, in that – ironically – it becomes a version dear to the hearts of many subsequent commentators and followers of Burns from the political left. It satisfies a strong desire to paint Burns's covert politics, helping portray him as a man who served the British establishment but clearly supported the opposing ideals of the French revolution. Even so, among modern biographers, Patrick Hogg is almost alone in suggesting that the incident unambiguously and certainly occurred. In something of a non-sequitur Hogg implies that 'with no corroborative evidence' for the story of the canons' seizure at Dover, which following Train he attributes to Walter Scott, it is a concocted one (concocted Hogg implies by Scott, the latter clearly representing the forces of sinister reaction out to blacken Burns's name). Instead, and with absolutely no corroborative evidence of his own, Hogg suggests a more satisfying account for the transit of the guns: 'It is more likely that Burns contacted the Glasgow group, who were then raising considerable funds to aid the new French government, and despatched the guns to Port Glasgow (or Leith Docks) for shipment to France, rather than use landward haulage to Dover.'²⁶ Hogg never tells us what the 'Glasgow group' is or who composes it, and Port Glasgow and Leith are names more or less plucked out of a hat as ports of departure for the carronades. A question might occur here also, as it perhaps ought to have done re Hogg's or any of the previous iterations of the story. Might Burns not have been better contributing to the pro-French fundraising efforts of the 'Glasgow group' or otherwise sending them funds rather than not only purchasing the canons but also supposedly financing their transportation by whichever route? At around this time Burns had gratefully received his best-ever salary in the Excise of £70 per year but had eight mouths to feed. Would he have spent three weeks salary buying the guns, and then incurred the additional expense of transporting the guns to the south of England and then across the Channel? This would be a not inconsiderable portion of his annual earnings, which, according to Lockhart's story was wasted with the carronades being seized (a risk, as has been suggested, that Burns *must* have realised to be a strong possibility).

²⁵ See Gerard Carruthers, 'Remaking Romantic Scotland: Lockhart's Biographies of Burns and Scott' in Arthur Bradley and Alan Rawes (eds), *Romantic Biography* (Aldershot: Routledge, 2003), 93-108.

²⁶ Patrick Scott Hogg, *Robert Burns: The Patriot Bard* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2009), 237.

The evidence for Burns sending carronades to France is incomplete and unreliable, but Lockhart's (or Train's) story might be traceable, not to Burns, but to another very well documented incident involving a different prominent 18th century Scotsman. There are other cases of Burnsian biography making such appropriations. For instance, in the early twenty first century a Masonic chatroom hosted the claim that George Washington at some point was looking to 'rescue' Burns from Britain and was about to send the 'USS Otter' to whisk him away across the Atlantic. Here again we have over-amplification of Burns's radical/reformist activity. Voicing clear reformist messages in his poetry and songs, the poet was, nonetheless, never in serious danger of arrest/punishment from the authorities.²⁷ 'The Otter', in fact, was not an American military vessel, but a commercial ship out of Boston, aboard which Thomas Muir of Huntershill (1765-1799) escaped from Botany Bay. Muir's experience, then, in this instance is grafted on to Burns. This is a biographical equivalent of the Burns apocrypha, the numerous poems, masonic, sentimental and religious as well as political, attributed to Burns that he did not write but that people wish he had composed.²⁸

Was the carronades story similarly appropriated and adapted for Burns? Here we might turn to the Glasgow professor of Natural Philosophy, John Anderson (1723-1796). Anderson was a gifted teacher, insistent on the practical application of education, but whose strong individualist streak, as well as his more conservative Calvinism, gave rise to frequent clashes with his professorial fellows.³⁰ Anderson was also deeply immersed in radical politics, and unlike Burns who had to tread carefully in expressing in political views, the professor was not timid in the public expression of his reformist ideas. Anderson was both a supplier of artillery pieces to the French and the inventor of new artillery technology of greatly enhanced potential on the battlefield, or so he claimed. A combination of his immersive teaching technique whereby he would conduct experiments in the presence of students, and his interest in munitions and military technology led to Anderson being dubbed by his students 'Jolly Jack Phosphorus'. However, he was far from a merely eccentric professor academic, being entrusted also with the location of the powder magazine in Glasgow and tasked with the design of the defensive works erected at Greenock to guard the mouth of the Clyde.³¹ Paul Wood has speculated that Anderson's initial engagement with experiments on artillery and munitions may have been rooted in patriotism, even although it was ultimately the French who were to benefit from his inventions.³² Anderson first approached the British government with his pioneering work on cannon and championed it

²⁷ Numerous examples of this abound in the peculiar interstitial, or fictional, space that exists in the secondary materials about Burns. Examples abound of such 'imaginative' works that purport to have worked out historical fact: for instance the novel by Alistair Campsie, *The Clarinda Conspiracy* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1989) which peddles the theory that British government sought to control and ultimately ruin the health of Burns by ensuring his employment in the excise; similarly, the film, *A Red Rose* (2004) suggests that the government conspired to murder Burns for his radical politics. The carronades episode, although differently motivated politically, fits the long tradition of Burns's over-determined radicalism.

²⁸ See Gerard Carruthers & George Smith, 'Bard Behaviour: Imitating, Mistaking and Faking Burns' in Gerard Carruthers (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Robert Burns* [forthcoming]

³⁰ See Gerard Carruthers & Satinder Kaur, 'Thomas Muir and Staff and Student Politics at the University of Glasgow', 89-111, and Ronnie Young, 'Thomas Muir at Glasgow: John Millar and the University', 112-140 in Gerard Carruthers & Don Martin (eds), *Thomas Muir of Huntershill: Essays for the Twenty First Century* (Edinburgh: Humming Earth, 2016).

³¹ J. J. Sharp, "John Anderson: University reformer", *The Vocational Aspect of Education* 29 (1977), 84.

³² Paul Wood, "Jolly Jack Phosphorus in the Venice of the North; or, Who was John Anderson?", in *The Glasgow Enlightenment*, eds. Andrew Hook and Richard B. Sher (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1995), 117.

before Charles Lennox, the Duke of Richmond (1764-1819), and the Board of Ordnance in 1789. However, Richmond was less than impressed and opted not to take up the option of Anderson's artillery for the British military. Anderson, clearly, was stung by the rejection, a few years later offering his munitions technology directly to the President of the United States, George Washington (1732-1799), complaining that 'such are the habits of Professional men, and the powers of Aristocratic wisdom, that His Grace not only saw no merit in the invention, but used me ill: and desired me to carry it to foreign countries, where, he said, it would either be found to be good for nothing; or, if found to be of any value, would be returned to him with improvements.'³³ Taking Richmond at his word, Anderson first made overtures to Washington and then courted the French where he spent time with the Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834) and other French officers at Paris in the summer of 1791. He noted that his invention was warmly received.³⁴ Indeed the primary reason for Anderson's visit to the French capital was to present the National Constituent Assembly with his new cannon.³⁵ Anderson was not shy about trumpeting the value of his invention, stating that 'The success with which the French made use of the Guns of my invention, and with which they wrought their Common Artillery, in consequence of the advices I gave them, is known over Europe'. His boast was not without merit however, as the Assembly made him an honorary citizen of the French Republic. Indeed, it kept one of his ordnance-pieces at its meeting place and which was accompanied by the inscription 'The Gift of Science to Liberty'.³⁶ A similar phrase was used by Anderson himself when he had William Kay complete an engraving of the professor of Natural Philosophy surrounded by his militaristic inventions.³⁷ The words 'The instruments of Liberty from the hands of Science' accompanied the image, and if anyone was in any doubt as to Anderson's political sympathies the phrase also appeared in French next to the English. However, the original may have been destroyed, and possibly by Anderson himself as the print was published in January 1793, just before Britain went to war with France.³⁸ As an honorary citizen of the French Republic he had to tread carefully in Britain as war fever took hold, especially one who had publicly professed to supplying the enemy with superior cannon, and someone who had previously noted with approval the revolution in France.³⁹ This did not escape the notice of 'Asmodeus', an anti-radical critic who corresponded with the *Glasgow Courier*. Although Anderson was not mentioned by name, Asmodeus's description could hardly have been clearer: "Jolly Jack Phosphorus the Cannoneer, who now tries *experiments* in politics; because his artillery made a greater noise at Paris than Woolich".⁴⁰

Undeterred by the door that was now closed to him by the outbreak of hostilities, Anderson switched his focus from the European theatre to America where his cannon technology could

³³ John Anderson to George Washington, 26 August 1793, *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, ed. Christine Sternberg Patrick (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 547-552.

³⁴ Anderson to Washington, 26 August 1793.

³⁵ Roger L. Emerson and Paul Wood, "Science and Enlightenment in Glasgow, 1690-1802", in, *Science and Medicine in the Scottish Enlightenment*, eds. Charles W. J. Withers and Paul Wood (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2002), 97.

³⁶ John Butt, *John Anderson's Legacy: The University of Strathclyde and its antecedents 1796-1996* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1996), 9.

³⁷ William Kay's name appears on the print, but Roger Emerson has identified John Kay as the print's creator. See: Roger Emerson, *Academic Patronage in the Scottish Enlightenment: Glasgow, Edinburgh and St Andrews Universities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 204.

³⁸ [Professor John Anderson - 'the instruments of liberty from... | Flickr](#)

³⁹ Emerson, *Academic*, 189.

⁴⁰ Anon, *Asmodeus; or, Strictures on the Glasgow Democrats* (Glasgow: David Niven, 1793), 24.

prove highly useful to the fledgling United States. Anderson contacted Washington directly to promote his artillery improvements. In typically candid fashion Anderson outlined the ways in which his work could be of service to the United States: “I am convinced that the Field Pieces of my invention would be very serviceable at present to the troops of the United States, because my Ship Guns would be of use to the small armed Vessels with which America abounds, and because You give the greatest attention to whatever can forward the prosperity of the States over which You preside”.⁴¹ In essence Anderson had developed a new alloy for cannon that could be mounted on a much lighter gun carriage.⁴² Anderson was keen to elucidate on the innovations that he had introduced to reduce the recoil of field pieces and played upon his French connection with Washington’s old comrade in arms, the Marquis de Lafayette. Anderson had recently published research into the science of projectiles in his *Essays on Field Artillery* (1788), although according to Ronald Crawford, this volume appears to have been printed only for private circulation and was not widely distributed.⁴³ Anderson himself claimed that the purpose of the essays was to provide evidence to the Duke of Richmond on the military advantages of employing his cannon.⁴⁴ Although few copies of the work were printed, Anderson did send a copy to George Washington which remained in his Library until his death.⁴⁵

A recently uncovered group of letters sent by Anderson to George Washington’s personal secretary, Tobias Lear (1762-1816), further illuminates Anderson’s efforts to market and distribute his technological innovations.⁴⁶ The three letters show an anxious Anderson keen to hear back from Washington one way or the other. Anderson and Lear had previously met during the winter of 1793-94, when Lear visited Britain, where Anderson returned to the theme of artillery improvements. Anderson had remarked to Lear that he had contacted Washington directly but he was still without a response. For Lear’s part he was clearly impressed with Anderson’s ingenuity and his demonstration of how the cannon operated. Lear even went as far as to suggest that the United States should poach Anderson for their own universities, a task which would be made easier by the Glasgow professor’s radical politics. “If we should carry into effect the intention of establishing a national University in Washington City, Mr A. would be a great acquisition to it, provided he could be drawn over there. He is spoken of wherever [sic] he is know[n] as a man of great talents as a Natural Philosopher and Mathematician; but his liberality of opinion in politics gives great offence to the high government folks here”.⁴⁷ Despite the lack of direct contact with Anderson, Washington had not forgotten him. He shared, with Lear, the idea that it would be to the benefit of the United States to encourage Anderson to emigrate, but did not believe that he had the power to convince him. Washington also appeared to keep an open mind on

⁴¹ John Anderson to George Washington, 26 August 1793.

⁴² Tom Furniss, “Reading John Anderson’s Will: Improving Nature, Science and Scotland in a Commercial Society”, in *Cultures of Improvement in Scottish Romanticism, 1707-1840*, eds. Alex Benchimol and Gerard Lee McKeever (London: Routledge, 2018), 176.

⁴³ Ronald Crawford, *Professor Anderson, Dr. Franklin and President Washington* (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 2014), 45-48.

⁴⁴ Anderson to Washington, 26 August 1793.

⁴⁵ Appleton P. C. Griffin, *A Catalogue of the Washington Collection in the Boston Athenæum* (Cambridge, MA: Boston Athenæum, 1897), 537.

⁴⁶ [WASHINGTON GEORGE Anderson John Letters concerning a Scott \(swannalleries.com\)](http://www.swannalleries.com)

⁴⁷ Tobias Lear to George Washington: 26 January 1794: [To George Washington from Tobias Lear, 26–30 January 1794 \(archives.gov\)](http://www.archives.gov)

employing Anderson's artillery upgrades, however, while they may have still been under his consideration discussion ultimately stalled.⁴⁸ Although most appeared to have approved of Anderson's innovations the decision to progress matters stalled in Congress and ultimately faded away.⁴⁹ A letter to Anderson was drafted which addressed the situation, but it does not appear to have survived.⁵⁰

The idea presented here that Anderson's adventures with ordnance and the French revolutionaries might underpin the story of Burns and Rosamund's carronades carries no direct evidence. It is highly circumstantial, but, close to the time when Burns was supposedly communing with the post-revolutionary authorities in France, it may be that Anderson's connection inspired Joseph Train, or someone else, to appropriate it as a useful 'new' piece of information for Lockhart in 1828 as he assembled his *Life of Burns*. Favour with Lockhart meant potential further favour with Walter Scott, a man revered by Train. Train was a keen but not always reliable antiquarian, perhaps with the guile to spot a convenient opportunity. Unless further documentary proof appears, the story of Burns sending guns to France on the basis of the existing evidence is highly unlikely.

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⁴⁸ George Washington to Tobias Lear: 6 May 1794: [From George Washington to Tobias Lear, 6 May 1794 \(archives.gov\)](#)

⁴⁹ Henry Knox to George Washington: 17 May 1794: [To George Washington from Henry Knox, 17 May 1794 \(archives.gov\)](#)

⁵⁰ Knox to Washington: 9 July 1794: [To George Washington from Henry Knox, 9 July 1794 \(archives.gov\)](#)