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Gerard Carruthers and Pauline Mackay

A Newly Discovered Manuscript: 'Twa Neebor-Wives Upon a Time'¹

Uncatalogued and previously unnoticed in the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, is a Robert Burns manuscript of 'Twa Neebor-Wives Upon a Time', which features in *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1799) with the alternative title 'Our John's Brak Yestreen.'² It is to be found on the opposite side of the second folio-page of a manuscript of Burns's 'The Kirk's Alarm', which the Huntington dates July–August 1789.³ 'Twa Neebor-Wives' is written in pencil and is badly erased to the point of having become invisible at points, especially throughout the middle portion of the text. Here is the text in so far as it is initially to be recovered:⁴

Tune Grama[]
Twa neebor-wives upon a time
 Sat twyning at their rocks,
And they an argument began
 An a' the plea was cocks,
'Twas whether they were sinnews strang

¹ Research for this article was enabled via the AHRC-funded project "Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century: Correspondence and Poetry" (AH/P004946/1) [Principal Investigator: Gerard Carruthers; Co-Investigator: Pauline Mackay].

² *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* 1799, pp.76–7; copy in the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries. We are grateful for the assistance of Elizabeth Sudduth, Matt Hodge and Patrick Scott at USC.

³ Huntington Library, Mss HM 13058. We can trace a definite provenance for the Huntington manuscript of 'The Kirk's Alarm' and so also 'Oor John's Brak' all the way back to Burns's time at Ellisland. See Margaret M. Smith (ed.) *Index of English Literary Manuscripts 1700–1800* (London: Continuum, 1989), BuR 463, where 'Oor John's Brak' is not recorded. The Huntington acquired it from W.K. Bixby – see *Poems and letters in the handwriting of Robert Burns reproduced in facsimile through the courtesy of William K. Bixby and Frederick W. Lehmann* (Burns Club of St. Louis, 1908), after pp.52 & 54. The manuscript was sold at Sotheby's 16th March, 1903 and it is reported that this and another text "were presented by the poet himself to the grandfather of the present owner, who was minister of Keir in Dumfriesshire. The pair were sold for L125" (see the *Dundee Courier*, Tuesday 17 March 1903, p.6); the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* for the same date tells us, "Both these autographs were presented by the poet himself to the grandfather of the bookseller, who was minister of Keir in Dumfriesshire" (p.5). The minister in Keir, Upper Nithsdale, nine miles from Ellisland, from 1777 to 1794 was Rev. James Wallace (see *First Statistical Account* Vol. 12, available at <<https://stataccscot.edina.ac.uk/static/statacc/dist/volume/osa/osa-vol12>> (last accessed 5 June 2023).

⁴ Expensive forensic techniques might in future be applied to retrieve more exactly further parts of the manuscript.

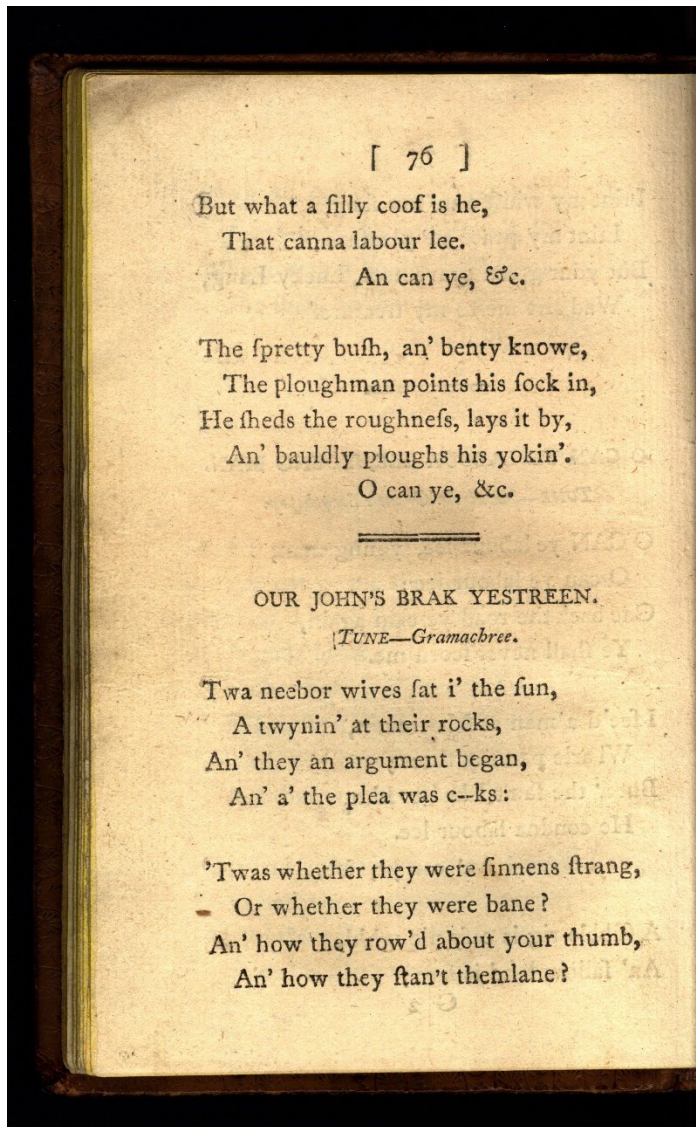


Figure 1. Huntington Manuscript of 'Twa neebor-wives'. Reproduced by permission.

In their attempt to catalogue the authorship of the texts of *The Merry Muses* in their 1959 edition, James Barke and Sydney Goodsir Smith sort these things into categories and 'Our John's Brak Yestreen', in its 1799 print-title, comes under the heading of their second-order classification, 'By or Attributed to Burns – From Printed Sources'.⁸ They also observe that the nineteenth-century Burns editor, William Scott Douglas, 'attributed [the text] to Burns ...

⁸ *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1959), p.8.

in a pencilled note.⁹ Whether Scott Douglas had additional manuscript or other affirmation of this fact, or was merely relying on his (often very good) individual judgement we have no way of knowing. The emergence of the Huntington manuscript in Burns's hand, however, confirms the highly likely – if not absolutely certain – authorship by the poet. This probability is heightened as there is no currently known text of which 'Twa Neebor-Wives' is a close variant.



⁹ *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* (1959), p.84.

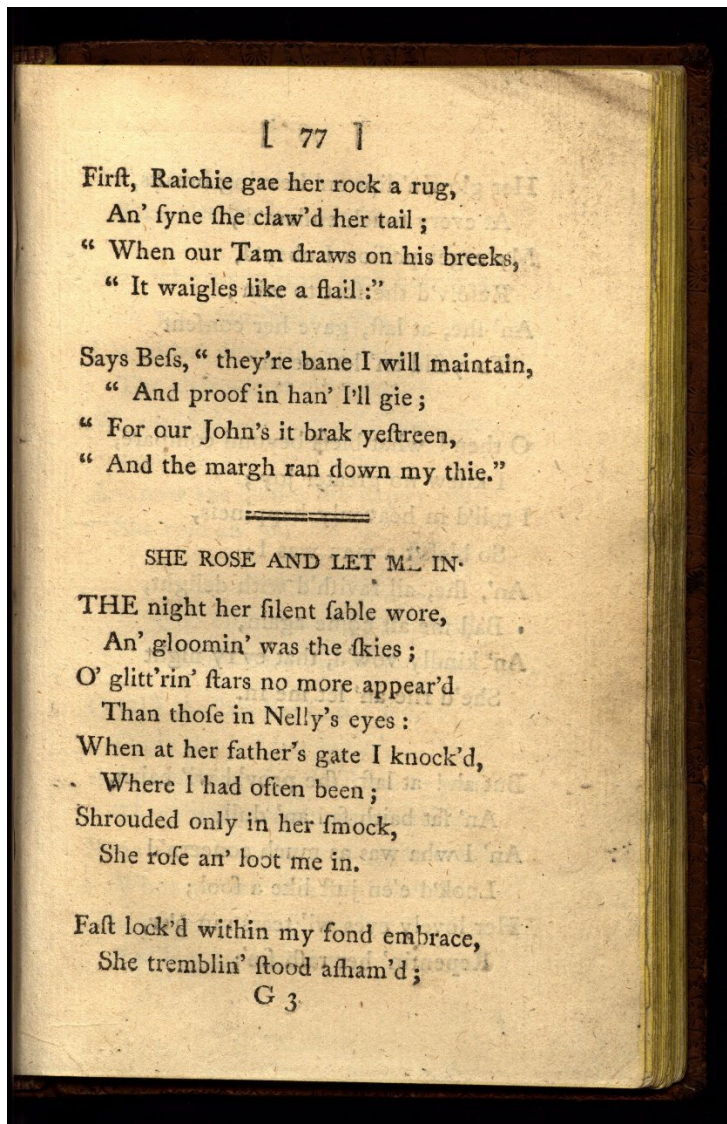


Figure 2. 'Our John's Brak Yestreen' as it appears in the 1799 printing of *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*. G. Ross Roy Collection of Scottish Literature, University of South Carolina Libraries, Columbia, S.C.

In his 1968 edition of *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, James Kinsley, rather than categorising the song with 'Undated Poems and Dubia' (as he does several works included in *The Merry Muses* for which there is no holograph evidence), includes it in an 'Appendix' of verses 'admitted at various times to the canon of Burns's work, either wrongly or on inadequate evidence'.¹⁰ He quotes (as is his practice in such cases) the opening couplet as it appears in *The Merry Muses* in 1799 and notes that the song is comprised of 4 stanzas,

¹⁰ *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns* ed. James Kinsley, 3 Vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), II, pp.897–916.

recording: 'marked Burns in Scott Douglas's copy, but without evidence. The song is a traditional "wives brag", a medieval kind still current in folk poetry.'¹¹ It appears that Kinsley too was unaware of the Huntington manuscript.

In keeping with the fragmentary title in the Huntington Manuscript, the accompanying air is recorded in *The Merry Muses* (1799) as 'Gramachree'. Burns's familiarity with this air is apparent from his note accompanying 'The Maid in Bedlam' in the 'interleaved' copy of the *Scots Musical Museum* (1787–92) gifted by the poet to Robert Riddell:

The song of Gramachree was composed by a Mr. Poe, a Counsellor at law in Dublin. This anecdote I had from a gentleman who knew the lady, the 'Molly,' that is the subject of the song, & to whom Mr Poe sent the first Manuscript of his most beautiful verses.—I do not remember any single line that has more true pathos than—

"How can she break that honest heart, that wears her in its ↑(core!↓

But as the song is Irish, it had nothing to do in this Collection.—¹²

Scholars have since identified the original air 'Gramachree Molly' as, 'the composition of George Ogle (1742–1814), written in 1759, published in the *London Magazine* in September 1774 and addressed to Miss Mary Moore.'¹³

Though the date range for the 'interleaved' *Scots Musical Museum* suggests Burns's engagement with the air at the turn of the decade, whether or not the 'Twa Neebor-Wives' manuscript shares the 1789 date with 'The Kirk's Alarm' on whose pages it is written is impossible to tell. But the period closeness is broadly suggestive. Burns first refers to his collection of bawdry, though not by the title *The Merry Muses*, in a letter circa February 1792 to John McMurdo, as 'a Collection of Scots Songs I have for some years been making', and so

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.924.

¹² *The Scots Musical Museum*, ed. Murray Pittock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), III, p.218.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.13.

1789 may well precisely fit.¹⁴ Most importantly, we now have proof – and in a comparatively rare instance – of direct manuscript connection of a *Merry Muses* text with Robert Burns.

Centre for Robert Burns Studies, University of Glasgow

¹⁴ G. Ross Roy, ed, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), II. p.138; we also see Burns's serious enjoyment in reading bawdry at least as early as 1788 in a letter to William Stewart of 9th July (*Letters*, II, p.292), and he was involved with the Crochallan Fencibles Club – for whom the first edition of *The Merry Muses* is printed – across 1787-88, all of which makes a potential 1789 dating for 'Twa Neebor-Wives' most credible.