

PREFACE

IN bringing together for the first time the songs of Robert Burns with the melodies for which they were written I do not propose to criticize either. So far as the verses are concerned they have remained famous for more than a century, and are likely to continue famous independent of any literary criticism. So far as the airs are concerned—airs which go to make up the folk-music of Scotland, that particular form of unconscious art of which the vehemence, pathos, and often eccentric progressions have been known outside the limits of the country for the last 250 years—want of space forbids any criticism. A merely verbal description of music cannot convey any real impression to the general reader, and an imperfect technical account of Scottish music would be unsatisfactory to the expert. Both will doubtless prefer to read the music for themselves and form their own opinions. For this reason the Preface will be confined to an explanation of (1) Burns's own theory as a song-writer, (2) how he carried it into practice, and (3) what his qualifications were for writing and adapting his verses to pre-existing music.

To begin with, then, the term song as it is now used admits of more than one meaning. Originally it meant—and was invariably—a combination of poetry and music, something to be sung. It did not mean, as it often means nowadays, verse with or without tune; nor was it, like the songs of most modern poets, purely literary verse to which music might accidentally be attached. For Burns's songs, peculiarly, this latter meaning is insufficient, and I designate Burns a tone-poet because he wrote for music, and his songs with their airs are a study in tone-poetry.

His *Commonplace Book* (recording his experience about the age of twenty-three, and before he was known to the world) makes this evident, and shows beyond all doubt that he always associated music with his songs. Speaking, for example, of a forgotten old song of which he remembered that the verse and the tune were 'in fine unison with one another,' he says that when one would

compose to these Scottish airs 'to sough [hum] the tune over and over is the readiest way to catch the inspiration and raise the Bard into that glorious enthusiasm so strongly characteristic of our old Scotch poetry¹. Again, late in life, when he declined to write for an unfamiliar air, he explains that until he was master of a tune in his own singing he never could compose for it, adding that his invariable way was to consider the expression of the music and choose his theme, 'humming every now and then the air with the verses I have framed².' So invariable with him was this way of writing that his first song was made for the favourite reel of the girl he loved, and his last for the 'difficult measure' of a 'beautiful strathspey'; and (though it may be that he was elevating the music he wrote for at the expense of his own reputation as a poet) when he said that some of his songs were often mere rhymes to express airs, he spoke a literal truth.

Nevertheless, though he knew more of the popular music of his country than any man of his time, and he is unique³ among distinguished poets in writing for pre-existing music, this side of him has been rarely noticed, if at all. His achievement in the reconstruction of old poetry seems to have blinded his critics' eyes to his knowledge of its sister art, Scottish music, of which he was the apostle. Perhaps his very uniqueness in this respect has caused it to escape notice. Old melodies as a vehicle for song have been despised or ignored by literary poets themselves, from Corneille, who execrated the commands of his royal master to write for them, saying that a hundred verses cost him less than two words of a song⁴ (*que deux mots de chanson*), to Lord Byron, who, after trial, flatly refused to be harnessed in music⁵. And though the exquisite songs of the Elizabethan poets were made to be sung, and many of them are to be found only in contemporary music books, there is this difference between their work and Burns, that the music was composed to fit their words, but his words were

¹ *Commonplace Book*, 1872, 52.

² Cf. Note 101.

³ Unless we accept Marot, whose psalms for secular airs are still in the *Genevan Psalter*, and Luther, who led the Reformation by adopting popular melodies for the hymns sung in the Reformed churches.

⁴ See Tiersot's *Chanson Populaire*, Paris, 1889, 441.

⁵ See an important letter of Byron in Hadden's *George Thomson*, 1898, 191.

written for music¹. Burns adopted what other poets rejected—popular airs—and he adopted them consciously. Just as when he was taunted with ‘the ignominy of the Excise,’ he replied that he would rather be thought to do credit to his profession than borrow credit from it; so when Thomson implied a censure on his musical taste, he said that although many cultured persons found no merit in his favourite tunes, that was no reason why being cheaply pleased ‘I should deny myself that pleasure².’ He did not deny himself that pleasure, and as the result his songs are an epitome of Scottish music still known and still admired.

Considering this it is the more remarkable that Burns’s biographers should with one accord have ignored or omitted a description of his musical perception and his treatment of music. One would have thought that, apart from his peculiar method of writing always to airs—a method which probably goes a long way towards explaining why his songs have outlived and made of no account the songs of so many other poets—his mere musical-editorial talent must have attracted notice. If he communicated to Johnson’s *Museum* only one-half of the forty-five traditional airs which Stenhouse assigns to him, the record is remarkable enough for an amateur musician. But his biographers have not allowed him any musical standing whatever. Currie obviously accepted without comment Murdoch’s opinion, who said of him that he was a remarkably dull boy and his voice untunable, and that it was long before he learned to distinguish one tune from another³. A verdict of tune-deafness seems to have been

¹ Dr. Thomas Campion, a musician as well as a poet, composed for his verses, but the music, like all conscious art of the polyphonic period, is now forgotten and known only to the student. All artistic music fades before the continuous progress of the art; whereas the unconscious and untutored music of nature, the simple anonymous airs of the people, which are the basis of the art, remain unimpaired by age.

² *Works of Robert Burns* (Edin. 1877-9, 8vo, 6 vols.), vi. 304.

³ As John Murdoch, the only schoolmaster of Burns, at the same time said that he was the most unlikely boy to be a poet, his observations—from what was but an immature and dormant intellect—may be disregarded in the light of what came after. Here follows what Murdoch said of Burns and his brother Gilbert:—‘I attempted to teach them a little church music. Here they were left far behind by all the rest of the school. Robert’s ear, in particular, was remarkably dull, and his voice untunable. It was long before I could get

considered proven against Burns, and little or nothing said to counteract the belief. So that we find Tom Moore in 1841 expressing surprise that 'the rare art of adapting words successfully to notes' should have been exercised by Burns, 'who was wholly unskilled in music¹,' and Robert Chambers, in his garrulous *Life of Burns*, ineptly remarking on the subject that Burns thought himself a kind of musician. Thus widely may biographers miss the point.

From the writings of Burns, and particularly from the Thomson letters and MSS. in the British Museum, it is possible to describe with some accuracy his musical knowledge and acquirements. It may be granted at once that about the higher forms of the musical art he knew little and cared less. He never heard a symphony or a string quartette², and though at the houses of some of his friends he listened to sonatas on the harpsichord, they raised in him neither emotion nor interest. His knowledge of music was in fact elemental; his taste lay entirely in melody, without ever reaching an appreciation of contrapuntal or harmonious music. Nor, though in his youth he had learned the grammar of music and become acquainted with clefs, keys, and notes at the rehearsals of church music, which were in his day a practical part of the education of the Scottish peasantry³, did he ever arrive at

them to distinguish one tune from another . . . and certainly, if any person who knew the two boys had been asked, which of them was the most likely to court the muses, he would surely never have guessed that Robert had a propensity of that kind' (Currie's *Works of Robert Burns*, Liverpool, 1800, i. 92).

¹ Moore, in the Preface to his *Works*, 1841, vol. v., says, 'Robert Burns was wholly unskilled in music; yet the rare art of adapting words successfully to notes, of wedding verse in congenial union with melody, which, were it not for his example, I should say none but a poet versed in the sister art ought to attempt, has yet, by him, with the aid of a music, to which my own country's strains are alone comparable, been exercised with so workmanly a hand, as well as with so rich a variety of passion, playfulness, and power, as no song-writer, perhaps, but himself, has ever yet displayed.' Farquhar Graham, in his Notes on the *Songs of Scotland*, stated briefly the result of an inquiry into the musical training and acquirements of Burns, but it received no attention and has been forgotten.

² At a performance of *The Messiah* of Händel he remarked on the infinite pathos of the air 'He was despised.'

³ Currie, i. 11

composition, except in the case of one melody which he composed for a song of his own at the age of about twenty-three, and this melody displeased him so much that he destroyed it and never attempted another¹. In the same way, although he practised the violin, he did not attain to excellence in execution, his playing being confined to strathspeys and other slow airs of the pathetic kind². On the other hand, his perception and his love of music are undeniable. For example, he possessed copies of the principal collections of Scottish vocal and instrumental music of the eighteenth century, and repeatedly refers to them in the *Museum* MS. and in his letters. His copy of the *Caledonian Pocket Companion* (the largest collection of Scottish music), which copy still exists with pencil notes in his handwriting, proves that he was familiar with the whole contents. At intervals in his writings he names at least a dozen different collections to which he refers and from which he quotes with a personal knowledge. Also he knew several hundred different airs; not vaguely and in a misty way, but accurately as regards tune, time, and rhythm, so that he could distinguish one from another, and describe minute variations in the several copies of any tune which passed through his hands. The Thomson letters (and particularly one about September, 1793, only published in part by Currie) contain a description or criticism of over one hundred melodies. Many of the airs he studied and selected for his verses were either pure instrumental tunes, never before set to words, or the airs (from dance books) of lost songs, with the first lines as titles. That he sometimes esteemed the air of a song more than the words is clear from his saying, 'Better to have mediocre verses to a favourite air than none at all³.' It is hard to believe that a poet with such prefer-

¹ Cf. Note 312.

² On a private copy of his *Epistle to Davie* he describes himself as a brother fiddler, and in his humorous anonymous letter to Sharpe of Hoddam he styles himself a fiddler and a poet (*Works*, v. 366).

³ Note 91. Compare his statement made in requesting permission to insert a song of the Duke of Gordon's in the *Museum*—that he was assisting in collecting old poetry and for a fine air making a stanza when it had no words (*Works*, iv. 293). Also his apology for many trifling songs, which, as he explains, are due to the fact that many beautiful airs wanted words, and he was obliged to pass in a hurry what he had written (Note 19).

ences should have been considered tone-deaf. Of his practical acquaintance with music, his letters to his publishers, wherein he details how he wrote for airs, where the best sets of them are to be found, and how he wished them printed with his verses, show the truth. Concerning Song No. 126, for example, he gives instructions that 'the chorus is the first or lower part of the tune, and each verse must be repeated to go through the high or second part.' For another song (No. 152) he refers the printer to the book where the music is to be found. With all the knowledge of an antiquarian he tells Thomson how the notation of the humorous tune *When she cam ben she bobbit* should be printed¹, and for another² he technically describes the music as it appears in the collection where he found it, with the alterations that are necessary to make it fit his verses.

Such instances go to show the critical interest Burns took in music. But besides this it was his practice to spend considerable time in listening to the playing of tunes, that he might become familiar with the correct swing and cadence of the melodies and form an impression of their meaning. Professor Walker relates how he was calling on Burns in Edinburgh for some particular purpose, and found him so engrossed in correcting his songs, while the tunes were being played on the harpsichord, that he would listen to nothing else. Burns himself tells Clarinda, 'I have just been composing to different tunes³,' and tells Cunningham that *The Suter's Tochter* 'is a first-rate favourite of mine, and I have written what I reckon one of my best songs to it⁴.' And it was this practice of listening to airs and studying their meaning that made of him not merely an enthusiastic collector of traditional airs, but also the means of getting them printed. At home, during the Highland tours, and in his excursions through the South of Scotland, he collected unknown and rare melodies as if it were his business. As he writes to Thomson, 'I have still several MS. Scots airs which I picked up mostly from the singing of country girls⁵.' The book in which he copied these traditional airs, if it still exists, is not known (though, as I have said, Sten-

¹ Note 151.

² Note 48.

³ Note 84.

⁴ Note 87.

⁵ *Works*, vi. 247, where he sends a beautiful little air which he 'had taken down from viva voce.'

house assigns to him about forty-five of those in the *Museum*¹); and it has been doubted whether Burns was capable of writing the notation of viva voce airs. It is true that Clarke, the musical editor of the *Museum*, often did this for him; but it is equally true that Clarke could not always be present when wanted, and it is more than probable that Burns in many cases did it alone with the aid of his violin. For, gifted as he was with a retentive memory, and—as has been shown—with an acute ear for musical sound, combined with a passionate love of Scottish melody, his genius would enable him to do readily what would be laborious for an ordinary amateur, nor can I see any reason why his remark, ‘I took down the tune from the voice of a girl,’ or some other unconditional statement, should not be accepted literally. In fact he obtained many of the fugitive airs from his wife, who was a good natural singer, and from Kirsty Flint, among others, a masculine woman who took pleasure in showing off her vocal powers to him². Two of the best airs discovered by Burns were obtained in the same manner; one, *Ca’ the Yowes*³, from the voice of a friendly minister of the Kirk, and *Craigieburn Wood*⁴ (for which he wrote two sets of verses) from the singing of a girl. He first heard the Gaelic air of Song No. 25, *The Banks of the Devon*, from a lady in Inverness, and ‘got the notes taken down’ for the *Museum*, and obtained for Johnson a better set of the tune of No. 197 than that supplied by Dr. Blacklock⁵.

So much for Burns’s musical experience, about which there is little more to say, except that he was himself a mediocre vocalist with a rough but not an untunable voice. He was constrained in company sometimes to sing, but he was conscious of his defect, and avoided any exhibition of the kind as much as possible⁶. But though his musical training and practice may have been no

¹ The MSS. of most of his historical and traditionary airs have disappeared, except two or three pieces from his hand, of which one, *The German lairdie*, is now printed for the first time on p. 336.

² Professor Gillespie, from personal observation, related how Burns was in the habit of tying his horse outside her cottage door and sitting by her fireside while she sang ‘with a pipe of the most overpowering pitch.’

³ No. 114.

⁴ No. 90.

⁵ Extensive references to Burns and music will be found on p. 535 infra.

⁶ To a friend, no more gifted than himself, he exclaimed, ‘Heaven knows we are no singers!’ (*Works*, v. 364).

more than that of any ordinary amateur, his attachment to melody and wide knowledge of Scottish music, together with his genius, fully equipped him for writing verse to illustrate the anonymous airs of his country.

It was in the year 1787 that Burns's opportunity came, and he was able to get his verses published with music. From that time forwards he wrote scarcely anything else but songs. For the mere love of the thing, and without fee or reward, ungrudgingly he worked day and night for the last nine years of his life to illustrate the airs of Scotland, and he died with the pen in his hand. His farming brought him no riches, his business of gauger only weariness, his songs nothing at all—then. But it is by his songs that he is best known and will be longest remembered. This he forecast himself: yet, curiously enough, only sixteen songs are in the last authorized edition of his *Works*¹, though by this time he had probably contributed upwards of two hundred to both Johnson's *Museum* and Thomson's *Scottish Airs*. These he never publicly claimed, only disclosing himself as the author of some of them in private letters to intimate friends². So that besides working voluntarily and simultaneously for these two collectors—neither of whom would have succeeded without his constant help—he even denied himself the name of author³.

A few words about the general musical rage of this time, and about these two music books in particular, may be useful at this place. It must be borne in mind that when Burns began to write

¹ Edition of 1794.

² It is important to remember, as a consequence of this, that all his songs in modern editions of his *Works* (except a fraction) have been accumulated by degrees, and are the insertions of a succession of editors. When Burns resolved in 1796 to publish a musical selection of his songs, death prevented him from carrying the resolution into effect (*Works*, vi. 255).

³ With the exception of a few songs bearing his name in the Index, all his writings in Johnson's *Museum* were published anonymously during his life. His name is attached to a large number of songs in many copies of the *Museum*, but not in those of the first issue; the insertion of it in later reprints being posthumous. Many erroneous inferences have been drawn from the assumption that Burns acknowledged the insertion of his name. Compare the copy of the *Museum* in the British Museum, where Burns's songs in vols. ii.-v. are all anonymous, except a few with B. and R. marked by the publisher. A description of the original edition of the *Museum* is in the Bibliography following. I possess three copies of some of the early volumes, all with different title-pages.

for the *Museum* he had comparatively only a small number of vocal airs to choose from. In all the various collections published up to 1787 there were not two hundred different Scottish airs printed with verses, and of these Johnson had utilized a good proportion in the first volume of the *Museum*—that is, before Burns became connected with it. The greater number, therefore, of the airs for which Burns wrote were only to be found in instrumental or dance books, and consisted of pure reels and strathspeys, which had never before had words, or of the tunes of lost and forgotten songs ¹.

In these numerous instrumental collections of the eighteenth century, and particularly those of the latter half, when Burns flourished, is stored the most characteristic Scottish music in peculiar scales and with eccentric intervals. Never before had there been such a plentiful crop of Scottish dance and other music, and never has there been since. Dancing in Scotland ² had reached its climax. In Edinburgh every coterie had ‘Assemblies,’ and each of the resident dancing-masters followed suit. Captain Topham ³, on a visit to Edinburgh, was amazed at the vigorous dancing practised in the Northern Capital. Every class indulged in it—duchess and housemaid and grave professor alike—and danced for dancing’s sake. And it was to find appropriate words for some of these dance tunes that Burns set himself. Before he could do this he was obliged to study their accent and rhythm. This was no difficult task for him as long as he was free to choose or reject; but when the egregious Thomson not only selected airs for him, but tried even to dictate the orthography of his text, it became hard enough. ‘These English verses gravel me to death,’ he groans; or, when criticized, declines to alter his words, and says with regard to a disliked air, ‘the stuff won’t bear mending.’ And, as a result of his compliance in other cases, the Thomson series contain—among a number of brilliant

¹ In some cases Burns utilized the whole tune, in others he selected particular movements or measures of the air for the verses he proposed to write.

² At the close of the century reels and strathspeys became fashionable in London, and the *habitués* of Almack’s engaged Niel Gow, the famous fiddler in the North, to lead the music in their ball-room.

³ *Letters from Edinburgh*, 1776, 262.

songs—many no better than the average artificial product of the eighteenth-century song books, and quite beneath the standard of the genius of Burns¹.

Nevertheless it was from his intimate connexion with this publication and with the *Scots Musical Museum* that Burns became an extensive writer of songs. To *Scotish Airs* he contributed verses, partly at his own discretion, partly at the request of the proprietor—though in neither case had he power to decide what should be published². Of the *Museum* he was the real though concealed editor from a little after the time when, being engaged then in correcting the proofs of the Edinburgh edition of his *Works*, he made Johnson's acquaintance. James Johnson was a practical engraver in Edinburgh. In February, 1787, with the assistance of two gentlemen interested in the anthology of Scotland, he had projected and advertised a 'Collection of Scots, English, and Irish Songs in two neat 8vo volumes. . . .' The first volume was nearly ready when Johnson met Burns, and it is surmised that Burns suggested the title of *Scots Musical Museum*, under which title the volume—despite the more accurate description given of it in the advertisement—appeared in May. Burns eagerly grasped the opportunity of associating himself with a work which eventually he remodelled and extended into six volumes. His position of author, editor, and contributor of verse became more and more established as the original advisers of the publication fell into the rear. His sole assistant was a professional musician, Stephen Clarke, who corrected technical errors in the music and fitted the tunes for presentation to the public in the prescribed form. Johnson was unfitted to conduct any work of the kind. He was of a simple confiding nature, entirely illiterate, and as poor as Burns himself. However, like Burns also, he was an enthusiast for the Songs of Scotland. He undertook the cost of printing

¹ The peculiar rhythm of the *Caledonian Hunt's Delight* only fetched one poor stanza of English verses, although it is the popular and favourite air of the vernacular *Banks o' Doon* (No. 123). The beautiful strathspey *Rothiemurche* for his last song (No. 12) is practically obscured because he was constrained to write verses of the ordinary sort to please Thomson.

² There were fundamental differences between Burns and Thomson, for which reason *Scotish Airs* contains a large number of Burns's songs with editorial insertions (both in verse and air) for which Burns is in no way responsible.

and publishing the work. Burns neither expected nor received reward, and the tacit understanding between the two continued, and the connexion remained unbroken, up to the death of Burns in 1796. Burns always knew Johnson as an 'honest worthy fellow,' and in his first extant letter said that he had 'met with few whose sentiments were so congenial with his own.' Johnson seems to have belonged to the social Crochallan Club, and must have had some qualifications to be admitted as one of its members, considering that among them were 'rantin roarin Willy' Dunbar, the President; the grisly philosopher—printer Smellie; the irascible Latinist Nicol, the writer Cunningham, 'auld Tennant' of Glenconner, Masterton the composer of *Willy brew'd a peck o' maut*, and probably Henry Erskine, the most brilliant member of the Scottish bar. This was the society in which Burns recreated himself after dining with more formal company in the then New Town.

It was after the inspiring Highland tours, in which Burns had laid in a good stock of new poetic ideas, that he set to work in Edinburgh to reorganize the *Museum*. The venerable author of *Tullochgorum*, and other friends, were put under contribution, so much so that about this time Burns informed a correspondent that he had 'collected, begged, borrowed, and stolen all the songs' he could find¹. An accident which confined him to the house for a considerable time enabled him within ten months from the publication of the first volume to issue the second volume of a hundred songs, of which forty were his own, all bright and merry and flashing with wit and humour. In the buoyant and aggressive preface he remarks that 'ignorance and prejudice may perhaps affect to sneer at the simplicity of the poetry or music of some of these pieces, but their having been for ages the favourites of Nature's judges—the common people—was to the Editor a sufficient test of their merit.' Here we have partly exposed the reason why Burns concealed himself, and the meaning of the phrase put against many of his songs, 'Mr. Burns's old words.'

The third volume, containing a 'flaming preface,' took nearly two years to complete and publish. During the interval he was

¹ *Works*, iv. 298.

partly in Mauchline and partly at Ellisland—a period which included many sorrows, ending in a prudent marriage and a solitary residence on the banks of the Nith preparing a home for his wife. Such was his life while he wrote the *Honeymoon* and other songs¹ for the *Museum*.

More than fifty songs in this third volume are his own, and during the process of preparation for the press he was constantly informed of the progress of the volume and exhibited the greatest interest in it. He asks Johnson ‘to send any tunes or anything to correct,’ and afterwards tells him that when he comes to Edinburgh he will overhaul the whole collection.

Immediately after the publication of the fourth volume, in August, 1792, the attention of Burns was diverted from the *Museum* by the intervention of George Thomson, and four years elapsed between the appearance of the fourth and the posthumous fifth volume, which, however, was all sketched and nearly ready for publication at the poet’s death. Thus, about the end of 1793, Burns informed Johnson that he was laying out materials for the fifth volume; a few months later he sent ‘forty-one songs,’ and still later he requests that ‘those tunes and verses that Clarke and you cannot make out’ should be sent to him. In June, 1794, Johnson intimated that the fifth volume was actually begun. In March, 1795, Burns returned a packet of songs, and a year afterwards had proofs sent him to correct. In this way Burns knew the contents of the posthumous volume, which was indeed far advanced in the press when he died. The surplus songs left over from this and the previous volumes constitute nearly one-third of the last and sixth volume, yet it took Johnson seven years to complete and publish it.

The *Scots Musical Museum* remains the standard collection of Scottish Song, and as a work of reference cannot be superseded. Considerably more than one-half of the pieces in the following pages were originally published there, and next to the authorized

¹ A facsimile, which follows the Bibliography, of the holograph list of songs proposed for the third volume and heretofore unnoticed is an important document. It discloses Burns as the author of a considerable number of songs hitherto unsuspected and anonymous, among which may be named *Sir John Cope* (No. 291), *The Campbells are comin* (No. 336), *Johnie Blunt* (No. 335), and many others.

editions it is the most important authority on the works of Burns. It contains, moreover, his most happy and spontaneous effusions, published with their melodies, as he wrote them, free from outside interference. Johnson without remark acted upon instructions, accepted what was sent to him, and printed the verses with the tunes selected. And Burns, by portraying in that collection the morals and manners of his country with a rare fidelity and sympathetic humour, became famous.

But in the meanwhile Burns had become associated with another publication. Immediately after the appearance of the fourth volume of Johnson's *Museum*, George Thomson, a government clerk and amateur musician (who, by the way, always despised the *Museum*), applied to Burns to assist him with verses for a collection of twenty-five Scottish airs which he would select. He said he wanted the poetry improved for 'some charming melodies,' and he would 'spare neither pains nor expense in the publication.' He declared himself in favour of 'English' verses, which English 'becomes more and more the language of Scotland'; and he said elsewhere, but not to Burns, that the vernacular was to be avoided as much as possible, 'because young people are taught to consider it vulgar,' and, with an eye to business, 'we must accommodate our tastes to our readers.' How the partnership with this opportunist in art was maintained is set out in the long series of letters now in Brechin Castle. It is amusing to remember that Thomson, who engaged Burns to destroy the Scottish vernacular, should have been the unconscious instrument of its preservation. Burns, although fully occupied with Johnson, promptly accepted the invitation conveyed to him, but with conditions. He would accept no wages, fee, or hire, he would alter no songs unless he could amend them, and his own would be 'either above or below price,' and, if not approved, they could be rejected without offence. 'I have long ago,' he says, 'made up my mind as to my reputation of authorship, and have nothing to be pleased or offended at your adoption or rejection of my verses.'

The conventional clerk, who was very early impressed with the genius, enthusiasm, and industry of his correspondent, rapidly extended his aim, and resolved to include in his collection 'every Scotch air and song worth singing.' All through the long corre-

spondence he tenaciously held his original opinion of 'English' verses and his choice of airs. So far he had the best of the arrangement, for Burns wrote many pieces which he disapproved, and for airs which he disliked. Only five songs written for *Scottish Airs* were published in Burns's lifetime, and these are more or less incorrectly printed. For the rest, Thomson was under no control, and without compunction altered the text when it suited him, added stanzas, and adapted them for unauthorized airs. There was, as I have said, little sympathy between the two men. Thomson cared nothing for a human lyric, and preferred the insipid compositions then current. Burns told him 'exotic rural imagery is always comparatively flat,' and, in another place, 'You are apt to sacrifice simplicity in a ballad for pathos, sentiment, and point.' Again, he tries to console Thomson by saying that the English singer will find no difficulty in the sprinkling of the Scottish language in his songs¹; or refuses pointblank to change the orthography of a piece with the remark, 'I'll rather write a new song altogether than make this English².' But Thomson meddled and muddled on without regarding him. Airs and verses alike had to submit to his editorial jurisdiction. Burns had to complain that the accent of his *The-lea rig* had been altered, and advised him to 'let our natural airs preserve their native features.' But Thomson preferred his own way; and when Burns refused to rewrite some disputed lines, he altered them for him. The story of *Scots wha hae* (which I have told in Note 255) illustrates particularly the fashion in which Burns was constrained to change metre in order to have his ode fitted to a melody which he had not contemplated. And though most of the songs written for Thomson were spontaneous, and sent to him for approval, he would never return those he considered unsuitable, but retained them in the manner described. Nevertheless, shortly before Burns died, he assigned to Thomson without consideration the absolute copyright of the songs he had sent to him.

Thus *Scottish Airs*, in five sumptuous folio volumes completed in 1818, came to contain much of the text of Burns in an untrustworthy form. Its airs, too, with their many editorial improvements, are to be disregarded as too artificial. When it is known that

¹ *Works*, vi. 247.

² Note 51.

Thomson had the audacity to suggest alterations in the compositions of the great Beethoven¹, who told him that his music was not written for schoolgirls, no one need wonder that the songs of the amiable Burns were altered and excised. The most that can be said for the collection is that it is interesting in so far as it contains accompaniments by some eminent composers, who failed in what they attempted; and for Thomson the most that can be said is that in selecting the famous air for the verses of *Auld Lang Syne*, he achieved a success which covers a multitude of sins.

Since I am resolved, for want of space, not to enter in this Preface upon any criticism, nor yet to insist (further than is necessary for an explanation of the purposes of this book) on the musical aspect of Burns's songs so uniquely made to melodies, nothing really remains to be said except a few words about the TEXT. This, which is unexpurgated, has been drawn from original MSS. and the authorized editions, and from the *Scots Musical Museum*, and it is collated with the two modern standard editions of the *Works* of Burns. I have left unnoticed, with a few exceptions, readings in the various writings of the poet other than those here selected. Every song and ballad which could be published is entire, and the collection is so complete that it includes many pieces now printed for the first time as Burns's work. The greater number of these pieces appeared originally in the *Scots Musical Museum* from Burns's MSS., most of which are still available for reference. More or less all have been reprinted as anonymous in miscellaneous publications. The chief authority for inserting many of them is *Law's MS. List*. This list confirms many statements of Stenhouse, who had the *Museum* MSS. through his hands early in the nineteenth century. As regards those pieces which Burns himself has designated 'Mr. Burns's old words,' the evidence is for the most part negative, and further investigation may reveal that the original publication was earlier than Burns. The presumption is that some of the narrative or historical ballads previously existed in some form; but how little or how much Burns altered or amended is unknown to me except

¹ A German editor asserts that in the Scottish collection Thomson has 'not only incorrectly printed, but wilfully altered and abridged' the music of Beethoven (Hadden's *George Thomson*, 345).

in so far as is recorded in the Notes, which are the result of an examination of several hundred song books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Until positive evidence is produced they, with many others, may remain at least as editorial originals of Burns. Among the original authorities which I have consulted it is necessary to name the interleaved *Scots Musical Museum*, in which Burns wrote a large number of 'Strictures' or Notes on Scottish Song. By a singular fatality these four important volumes have not been publicly examined until now for nearly a century. They contain an unsuspected holograph copy of *Auld Lang Syne*, which is printed on page 208. In the Notes the numerous wilful and negligent errors in Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808) are now pointed out for the first time and corrected, and an abstract of Cromek's misdeeds will be found in the Bibliography following.

For the 303 AIRS the AUTHORITIES are the poet's writings and — occasionally—Johnson's *Museum*. The tunes in that collection, in a few cases, are not those selected by Burns, for the reason that the latter had previously appeared in the first volume of the collection with other verses. Certain of Burns's songs have not until now been printed with any air. Such, for example, are the best set of verses of *The Banks o' Doon* ('Ye flowery banks o' Bonie Doon'), and the powerful invective, *The Kirk's Alarm* ('Orthodox, orthodox! wha believe in John Knox'), which few realize is a song at all; and 'Amang the trees where humming bees' to the curious air *The King o' France he rade a race*. On the other hand, many songs are nearly always published with wrong airs. Among others *Rantin rovin Robin* and 'The gloomy night is gathering fast,' which belongs to the beautiful air *Roslin Castle*.

The TUNES have been drawn from early MSS. and from the numerous vocal and instrumental collections of the eighteenth century, including the *Museum*. Two are from the MSS. of Burns and therefore interesting, and a few are rare examples. If there has been any system in selecting any particular set of the tune, it has been to form a representative collection of examples from the earliest sources to the close of the eighteenth century, sometimes even at the expense of the verses. Some of the airs are at least three hundred years old, and obviously none are less than a hundred. Excluding the exceptional English and Irish airs,

they form an epitome of Scottish music which probably would have been more attractive to the general reader with pianoforte accompaniments. But this is not a music book in the modern sense, only a quarry for the constructive composer and for the student of folk-songs. Most of the airs are anonymous. They floated in the air for an indefinite time until caught and chained by the printing-press. Of a few alone are the composers known, those by the friends of the poet, too amiably adopted, being among the worst in the collection, with the brilliant exception of *Willie brèw'd a peck o' maut*.

I have only to add that, although great care has been taken in revising and correcting the NOTES, it would be vain to expect that all the references are complete. To discover the historical origin of the airs, much time has been spent in the examination of a large number of musical collections, and those who have experience of research among undated books will most readily forgive editorial imperfections and errors which have escaped notice in revision.

My thanks are due for much valuable assistance in the compilation of this volume. Among others I am indebted to the late Thomas Law, of Littleborough, for permission to insert a facsimile of the original MS. of Burns, which is referred to under the title *Law's MS. List*, and also for the loan of the copy of the *Caledonian Pocket Companion*, which belonged to Burns; to the Scottish Text Society for permission to reprint the verses of *Welcum Fortoun*, on p. xxix, from *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis*, 1897; to Mr. George Gray, of the County Buildings, Glasgow, for the use of the detached sheets which are referred to in the Notes as *Gray's MS. Lists*, and for the use of some rare song books; to Mr. John Glen, of Edinburgh, for the dates of publication of some scarce musical collections, and for the loan of old music books and assistance in tracing airs; to Miss Oakshott, of Arundel Square, Barnsbury, London, who permitted me to copy for insertion the Notes of Burns in the *Interleaved Museum*; and, though last not least, to Professor Joseph Wright, of Oxford, the editor of the colossal *Dialect Dictionary*, for valuable suggestions in compiling the Glossary.

11 OSBORNE AVENUE,
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