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Bishop John Geddes, Robert Burns and Dr Alexander Geddes

In the history of Catholics in eighteenth-century Edinburgh, the winter of 1786 was notable for marking the first meeting of Bishop John Geddes with the poet Robert Burns. Following the first ‘Kilmarnock’, Burns had come to the capital to oversee the printing by William Creech of the enlarged Edinburgh second edition of his poems. In his *Life and Work of Burns*, Robert Chambers recalled that the first meeting between the two was at supper in Lord Monboddo’s house in Edinburgh in December that year, and that the conversation centred round the subject of the Monboddo family.¹

The encounter with the Ayrshire poet made a lasting impression on the bishop. Geddes later gave a detailed report to his friend, the Revd John Thomson, agent for the Scottish Bishops in Rome, on the stellar emergence of a literary sensation.

There is an excellent Poet started up in Ayrshire, where he has been a ploughman: he has made many excellent Poems in old Scotch, which are now in the Press for the third time: I shall send them to you: His Name is Burns: he is only twenty eight years old : he is in town just now, and I supped with him once at Lord Monboddo’s, when I conversed a good deal with him, and think him a man of an uncommon genius, and he has as yet, time, if he lives, to cultivate it.²

By mid-January 1787 John Geddes was preparing for his next visit to the fledgling Catholic community in Glasgow. He told Bishop George Hay in Aberdeen that ‘on Thursday next I intend to set out for Glasgow in order to give our Friends there an Opportunity of making their Christmas Devotions, and to baptize two Children.’³ To another correspondent he conveyed the news of the astonishing success in the Capital of a new writer from the West of Scotland, commenting that

¹ *The Life and Works of Burns*, ed. Robert Chambers, 4 vols (Edinburgh, 1851–4), II, 21.

² University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, Scottish Catholic Archives (SCA) BL/3/496/12, Bishop John Geddes [hereafter Geddes] to Mr John Thomson, 26 Mar 1787.

³ SCA BL/3/496/2, Geddes to Bp George Hay, Aberdeen, 16 Jan 1787.

‘One Burns an Ayrshire ploughman has lately appeared as a very good Poet. One Edition of his Works has been sold rapidly, and another by Subscription, is in the Press.’⁴

Burns wrote to Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop House, Stewarton in Ayrshire, early in November 1787, giving his assessment of Geddes. ‘Madam,’ he began,

It requires no common exertion of good sense and philosophy in persons of elevated rank to keep a friendship properly alive with one much their inferior. Externals, things wholly extraneous of the man, steal upon the hearts and judgments of almost, if not altogether, all mankind; nor do I know more than one instance of a man who fully regards all the world as a stage and all the men and women merely players, and who (the dancing-school now excepted) only values these players, the dramatis personæ who build cities and who rear hedges, who govern provinces or superintend flocks, merely as they act their parts. For the honour of Ayrshire this man is Professor Dugald Stewart of Catrine. To him I might perhaps add another instance, a Popish bishop, Geddes of Edinburgh.⁵

It should be remembered that, when Burns was in the city, Edinburgh may indeed have still been a ‘hotbed of Genius’; but the notorious double-facer, Deacon William Brodie, was still at the height of his powers – a God-fearing member of the Town Council by day but a gambler and burglar by night, up to to his arrest and subsequent execution in October 1788.

Home-grown deception was often matched with the traffic of foreign visitors to Edinburgh, some of whom clearly relied on multiple identities. Geddes was angered, for example, by the high-handed behaviour of a visiting Italian. He complained to John Thomson in Rome that,

The Sig.^f Costa, about whom you inquired, was sometime here under the Name of Benevent and for some time imposed on M.^r Angelo [the riding-master]. He was likewise one of your Adventurer Masters of Tongues. I never could like him: he became acquainted to the Count de la Motte . . . who lodged several Months in M.^r Alex Drummond under the name of Mons.^r Jigger [?], was employed by him to sell precious Stones.⁶

⁴ SCA BL/3/496/3, Geddes to William Thomson, 17 Jan 1787.

⁵ To Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop House, Stewarton. Edinburgh, 4 Nov 1787 (in J. Logie Robertson, *The Letters of Robert Burns*, no. lxxv, on line at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/9863/pg9863.txt> (accessed 24 February 2016).

⁶ SCA BL/3/496/6 Geddes to Mr John Thomson, Rome, 9 Feb 1787.

It is therefore ironic that in years to come Geddes himself became the victim of mistaken identity.

One of Geddes' long-term concerns was to gather materials for a post-Reformation history of the Catholic religion in Scotland. Geddes, as Fr Anthony Ross has shown, was not alone in this, but was part of a network of antiquaries that included David Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan (in 1780 one of the founders of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland) and General Henry Hutton. They had in common a 'romantic sentimental interest in the past' that 'not only prepared the ground for Scott's novels and the more serious editorial work of the same period; it naturally attracted Scottish Catholics by its recognition of what they also considered "a reverend history," a past of which they were proud and about which they had much to contribute'.⁷ Fr Ross adds that, 'There was common ground here between them and their fellow-countrymen, at least in educated circles, and the man perhaps most aware of this and appreciative of it was Bishop John Geddes.'⁸ David Erskine characterised Geddes as 'a worthy rational tolerating prelate'.⁹

To further these antiquarian ends Geddes enlisted the help of Mgr Charles Erskine, who obtained papal permission for a search of the Vatican Secret Archives that would 'lead to a complete arrangement and catalogue of the miscellaneous manuscripts in that prodigious collection.'¹⁰

Geddes cajoled John Thomson in Rome: 'Have always your Eye to the Vatican for Papers. Glean all possible relating to the History of our Missions from the Papers in your hands, and communicate it to us'. He also offered news of a new publication in the offing: 'Mr Menzies is going to publish an *Erse* [Scots Gaelic] *Grammar* by Subscription, at 15s.'¹¹ 'Will you subscribe?', asked Geddes whose working materials for his 'History' are preserved in a bound volume at the Scottish Catholic Archives.¹²

⁷ Anthony Ross, 'Three antiquaries: General Hutton, Bishop Geddes and the Earl of Buchan', *IR* 15 (1964), at 122–39, at 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹ SCA BL/3/496/6, Geddes to Mr John Thomson, Rome, 9 Feb 1787.

¹² SCA B/2/2/1, B-JG/2/1, Geddes, Bishop John, 'A Collection of Materials for a History of the Catholic Religion in Scotland from the year 1542 to the year 1793' (1793), 1 bound volume. Started by Bishop Geddes at Scaln, 21 Aug 1793, and added to in a number of hands, possibly to Bishop Geddes' dictation when he was ill at Aberdeen.

Geddes also continued to make no secret of his enthusiasm for Burns. Writing to Mr John Reid, the priest at Preshome in Banffshire, he enquired,

You will have heard of the Ayrshire Poet M.^r Burns, who was a ploughman, until a few Months ago. His Poems have been lately printed here, and the Subscribers were near to three thousand; He has truly a great Genius, and might improve himself much as he is only twenty eight years of Age; but, I think, he will not be easily advised: he is one of those, who think for themselves, which to some Degree is laudable. I have been twice in Company with him, and we are great Friends. His present Intention seems to be to return to the Country, and get a farm. He will make 600[£] or 700[£] of his Book, which will help him to stock it.¹³

In fact, Burns probably earned about £855 from the First Edinburgh Edition.¹⁴

A few days later, Geddes dispatched a note to John Thomson, promising that, 'I will send to you Burns Poems', and asked, rather absent-mindedly, 'Did I mention this new Poet in my former Letters?'¹⁵ Geddes then goes on to emphasise yet again one of his preoccupations, with the admonition that 'You must also remember the getting Scotch Papers from the Vatican; Money would be readily advanced that Search be made, Lists formed, and that the Pieces, that appear to be worth the while may be transcribed. I could venture myself to be answerable for a hundred Crowns or two for that purpose, and I know much more could be got'.¹⁶

As a former student in the Scots College, Rome, a former rector of the Scots College in Spain, and the driving-force behind the establishment of the seminary at Scalán, Geddes was almost certainly responsible for paying subscriptions for the Scottish Continental seminaries to Burns' *Poems*, which William Creech had just published in Edinburgh.¹⁷

¹³ SCA BL/3/496/15, Geddes to Mr John Reid, Preshome, 5 May 1787.

¹⁴ See: <http://robertburns.org/encyclopedia/EditionspublishedinBurnsslifetime.331.shtml> (accessed 23 Jan 2016).

¹⁵ SCA BL/3/496/16, Geddes to Mr John Thomson, Rome, 18 May 1787.

¹⁶ SCA BL/3/496/16, Geddes to Mr John Thomson, Rome, 18 May 1787.

¹⁷ J. S. F. Gordon, *Scotichronicon* (Glasgow, 1867), Appendix 2, 264–5 for a substantial reference to this relationship and correspondence. See also: SCA B/2/53, the *Geddes Burns*; James Darragh 'The Geddes Burns', *St Peter's College Magazine*, 18, no. 1 (December 1948), 123–131. The original 'Geddes Burns' is in The Huntington Library, San Marino, California (call number: 151851). A facsimile can also be viewed online: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001019909> (accessed 24 February 2016).

These subscribers to Burns' Edinburgh edition of 1787 included the Scots colleges at Valladolid, Paris, Douay and the Scots Benedictine monasteries of St James at Ratisbon and Wurzburg in Bavaria, the latter listed (on page xxxix), but given (on page xl) as 'Maryburg' with 'Mary' blotted out in ink and 'Wurz' scrawled above in what appears to be an eighteenth century hand.¹⁸ Since there is little doubt that Geddes was the moving force in soliciting these subscriptions, it is clear that he promoted Burns and his work by using the network of British educational establishments to make the poems of Robert Burns rapidly known in many Continental intellectual centres.

Adding weight to the conclusion that it was Geddes who instigated and organised these subscriptions is the fact that he appears to have garnered almost the same names as subscribers for Hugo Arnot's *A collection and abridgement of celebrated criminal trials in Scotland, from A.D. 1536, to 1784*, published two years earlier.¹⁹ It is interesting to note that Geddes similarly supported the work of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland by using his wide circle of contacts to obtain foreign correspondents.²⁰

Meanwhile, the friendship between Burns and Geddes took a new twist. Burns borrowed Geddes' edition of his *Poems* that August, carried it with him on his Highland tour (August–September 1787) and then took it to Ellisland before finally returning it in February 1789 via an intermediary, having added twelve poems in his own handwriting on the blank leaves of the book.²¹

This volume, later known as the 'Geddes Burns' was an earlier 'skinking' (feeble) edition.²² The book was accompanied by a note in Burns' in his own hand to 'Rev. Mr Geddes, care of Dr Gregory, wt. A Book', the return of the loaned volume being recorded as having taken place at 'Ellisland, near Dumfries, 3d of February, 1789.'²³ Burns also

¹⁸ Michael Martin, 'The Maryburgh mystery', *Open House*, Issue No. 225, December 2015/January 2016.

¹⁹ Julian Russell, 'Some subscribers to Arnot's *Celebrated Criminal Trials*', *IR* 45 (1994), 87–90.

²⁰ Ross, 'Three antiquaries', 134.

²¹ See *Robert Burns: 1759–1796: A Bicentenary Exhibition from the G. Ross Roy Collection at the Thomas Cooper Library, March–May 1996* (University of South Carolina Libraries, 1996), on line at http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/rbosc_pubs/16/ (accessed 24 Feb 2016).

²² After the first batch had been printed by William Smellie, the type was re-set. In the 'Address to a Haggis' a 'typo' was printed and 'Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware' was changed to 'Auld Scotland wants nae stinking ware'. The second form of the 1787 edition thus became known as the 'Stinking Burns'.

²³ Address by Mr James Black to members of the Burns Club of Detroit, 1 May 1867 in *Bibliophile Society of Boston, Mass'*, facsimile (1908), p 10

appreciated Geddes' efforts to make his works known to a wider audience, describing the Bishop as 'the first [that is, *finest*] cleric character I ever saw was a Roman Catholick'.²⁴ Burns praised Geddes to Mrs Dunlop, and Mrs Nancy McLehose ('Clarinda') also spoke highly of him in one of her letters to 'Sylvander'.²⁵

History, however, proved less than kind to Bishop Geddes, whose warm relationship with Burns and his efforts to promote the poet's publications did not receive the prominence they deserved. This omission (or rather, confusion) seems to have originated in an explanatory footnote on Bishop Geddes' life written by Allan Cunningham in Robert Chambers' *Life and Works of Burns* (1851–4), where Bishop Geddes is mistaken for the Revd Alexander Geddes.²⁶ To some extent, this was a confusion waiting to happen, for John Geddes was born on the Gordon estate of Letterfourie at Mains of Corridoun in the Enzie, Banffshire on 9 September 1735, while Alexander saw the light of day on 14 September 1737 in Rathven, also in Banffshire.²⁷ They were also 'cousins' and both initially educated together at small local schools.²⁸ The confusion was then compounded through an address delivered by Mr James Black to the members of the Burns Club of Detroit, Michigan on 1 May 1867, a text later published in the facsimile edition of the 'Geddes Burns' by the Bibliophile Society of Boston, Massachusetts in 1908. In his introduction to that publication, Mr Black identified the owner of the 'Geddes Burns' as 'the Rev. Dr Alexander Geddes, afterwards Bishop Geddes'.²⁹ This apparently authoritative statement was unquestioningly reproduced in many subsequent publications and library catalogues and, hence, much further confusion and misrepresentation were unknowingly replicated. In this way the true role of Bishop John Geddes in the

²⁴ Michael Martin, 'Sae let the Lord be thankit', *The Tablet*, 27 June 2009, p 20. http://archive.org/details/burnschroniclecl2931kilmuoft/Burns_Chronicle_and_Club_Directory (1892), 160–161 (accessed 10 Jan 2013).

²⁵ *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 30, Issue 1, Article first published online: 1 Oct 2008. http://archive.org/details/burnschroniclecl2931kilmuoft/Burns_Chronicle_and_Club_Directory (1892), 160–161 (accessed 10 Jan 2013). See also: <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021644367#page/n0/mode/1up>

²⁶ Chambers, *Life and Works of Burns*, III, 21.

²⁷ See: <http://www.electricscotland.com/history/spain/college31.pdf> (accessed 24 Jan 2016).

²⁸ Rev William J. Anderson, 'The autobiographical notes of Bishop John Geddes', *JR*, Spring, 1967, vol. 18, No 1, p 36.

²⁹ Address by Mr James Black to members of the Burns Club of Detroit, 1 May 1867 in Bibliophile Society of Boston, Mass., facsimile (1908), Introductory, p 3.

matter of the ‘Geddes Burns’ became misrepresented to future generations.³⁰

Unwittingly James Black credited Bishop Geddes with having translated the Bible, being the author of ‘polemical writings’ and having been ‘better known by his Presbyterian countrymen as the author of the song *Lewie Gordon*, and that humorous ditty called the *Wee Wifuckie*’!³¹ It has taken a century and a half to expose the unfortunate and undeserved misidentification.

With respect to the seriousness and dignity with which Burns regarded John Geddes and his profound effect on the poet, it is enough to read Burns’ letter of 3 February 1789, with its ontological theme.

Venerable Father, as I am conscious that wherever I am, you do me the honour to interest yourself much in my welfare, it gives me pleasure to inform you that I am here, at last, stationary in the serious business of life; and have now not only the . . . leisure, but the . . . inclination, to attend to those great and important questions, what I am, where I am, and for what I am destined.³²

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³⁰ See also: Leslie, F., “Who really did receive the ‘Geddes Burns?’” *Burns Chronicle* (Kilmarnock: Burns Federation, 2002).

³¹ Address by Mr James Black to members of the Burns Club of Detroit, 1 May 1867 in *Bibliophile Society of Boston, Mass.*, facsimile (1908), Introductory, pp 3–4.

³² See: <http://www.scalan.co.uk/scalannews039.htm> (accessed 23 Jan 2016).