

A COLLECTOR'S GUIDE
TO
VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN EDITIONS
OF
ROBERT BURNS

"Marvels of Cheapness, Elegance And Sterling Worth"

By

Robert Carnie, M.A.; Ph.D.

F O R E W O R D

This Guide is intended to serve three main purposes. The first of these is to highlight the Burnsian output of Scottish and English publishers in the period 1837 to 1910. The reigns of Victoria and Edward VII constitute a period of great growth in the British book trade, and of great ingenuity in the production and marketing of an enormous variety of attractive editions of major poets writing in English. Only Shakespeare, Tennyson and Longfellow rivalled Burns in popularity with the general reader, and the twentieth century collector of any of these authors will have, almost by definition, a characteristic and varied conspectus of Victorian and Edwardian printing and publishing styles.

Secondly, the Guide tries to give sufficient information about the books themselves to allow Burnsian collectors of Victorian and Edwardian editions of Caledonia's Bard to identify some of their treasures. Collectors of Burnsiana tend to acquire their Burns material in two different ways - by inheritance from other Burns enthusiasts in their own families, or by purchase in antiquarian and second-hand bookstores. Despite the great volume of bibliographic and critical work published on Burns in this century, there is very little easily available in print about major or minor editions of Burns in the period 1837 to 1910. A great deal has been published about the significant primary editions at Kilmarnock in 1786, and at Edinburgh, London and Dublin in the period 1787 to 1803, but the acquisition of copies of material of that kind is beyond the budget of all but very wealthy private and institutional buyers. The scholarly merits of the major editions of the post-World War II period, such as the Clarendon edition of James Kinsley, or the Alloway Press edition of James MacKay are clearly enunciated in their textual forewords. What this Guide offers is help in evaluating the kinds of editions and publications on Burns treasured by our grandparents and great grandparents - an important part of the cultural history of many Scottish and Canadian lovers of Burns.

Thirdly, the Guide is designed to help identify (where possible) the artists, designers and illustrators whose distinctive work on covers, end-papers, and internal illustrations etc., make the Victorian and Edwardian editions of Burns such a joy to collect.

RHC, April. 1989.

MARVELS OF CHEAPNESS, ELEGANCE, AND STERLING WORTH
EDITIONS OF BURNS
1837-1910

The purpose of this article is two-fold. Firstly it is intended to highlight the Burnsian output of Scottish and English publishers in the period 1837 to 1910; and secondly, by giving sufficient information about the books themselves, to allow Burnsian collectors of Victorian and Edwardian editions of Caledonia's Bard to identify some of their treasures. The material is arranged under the names of the publishing firms concerned (in alphabetical order). Where possible, the notes are also designed to help identify the artist/designers, whose distinctive work on covers, end-papers, illustrations etc., make the Victorian and Edwardian editions such a joy to collect.

It was in the first year of Victoria's reign, following the death of Thomas Cadell, Junior, in 1836, that 'open house' was more or less declared on the ever-popular Works of Robert Burns. Publishers scurried to include one or more editions of his poems and letters amongst their annual offerings.

In the preceding period, from 1793, three years before Burns's death, down to 1836, the firm of Cadell & Davies (later T. Cadell, Jnr.) was the official English publisher of Burns's Works. The name of Thomas Cadell, senior, had appeared, along with that of William Creech of Edinburgh, in the imprint of the 1787 London edition (Egerer, 5) and on the enlarged two-volume second edition that the same pair brought out in 1793 (Egerer, 25). Creech had bought the copyright of all the poems in the 1787 edition on April 17, 1787, for 100 guineas, and he had reserved the right to take the London publisher, Thomas Cadell into the venture. In April, 1792, Creech wrote to Burns asking him for new poems for the 1793 edition, and to name his price for them. Burns sent him a considerable body of new material, and a modest request for a few books he needed, and asked for: 'as many copies of this new edition of my own works as friendship or gratitude shall prompt me to present'. After the book was published, Burns had to write to Creech, reminding him about the non-arrival of these copies, and requesting twenty. The Cadell/Creech volume was republished in 1794, (Egerer, 29), and from that date on, the name of the firm Cadell & Davies was the key name on editions in 1797, 1798, 1800, etc. In 1800, Cadell & Davies made a deal with the Trustees of Burns's estate, which they believed gave them the copyright of all Burns's writings, published & unpublished, and employed Dr. J. Currie to edit a new four-volume edition. The ungenerous Creech, who was to live until 1815, was now largely out of the picture, and the trust administered by Cadell & Davies, arising out of their purchase, paid about 1400 pounds to the Burns's widow & trustees. There were further 'Currie' editions in 1801, 1802, 1803, 1804 and 1806, and from 1808 onwards the contents of Currie's edition, and the contents of Cromek's Reliques, also purchased by Cadell & Davies, were published in various editions. Thus, for the first three and a half decades of the nineteenth century, Cadell & Davies were the chief, and the only authorised British publisher of the works of Robert Burns, and they issued over twenty different editions. The London firm had continuing problems with 'pirated' editions, and some difficulties with those firms, like Constable & Co., who had bought part shares in Creech's copyrights, which were offered for sale after his death.

Open piracy, however, remained the chief problem, and even apparently respectable firms, like Oliver & Boyd of Edinburgh, & Bumpus of London, published editions (less than complete) of Burns in the first two decades of the 19th century, ignoring Cadell & Davies's copyright claims. Between the death of Thomas Cadell, junior, in 1836, and the slower death of his firm, which finally disappeared in 1840, there were no further editions of Burns by Cadell, and the ever-growing market for editions of Burns, particularly for cheap and 'popular' issues was now wide open to any British publisher.

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In the history of British publishing the last six decades of the nineteenth century and the period up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was the time of the decorated cloth case. This mode of edition-binding produced tens of thousands of colourful covers, based on designs by individual artists, both named and anonymous. These cloth covers were a primary external device whereby the publisher drew the bookbuyer's attention not only to the contents of his publication, but also to the care and attention that had been taken in printing, illustrating and binding. The 'packaging' of books was a key element in selling them, and some publishers went to extraordinary lengths to persuade a buyer that their edition of a poet was a better buy, than editions by other publishers which were, textually speaking, very similar.

It is no surprise then, that this artistic phenomenon can be well illustrated from editions of Robert Burns, whose poetical & prose works were great favourites with the Victorian general reader. In this period, 1837 to 1910, hundreds of editions of 'the complete works', 'the complete poems', 'selected works', and even of individual poems by Robert Burns, were produced by British publishing firms in an intensely competitive market. Most, but by no means all, of such editions are listed by J.W. Egerer in his A Bibliography of Robert Burns, (Edinburgh & London, Oliver & Boyd, 1964). In his descriptions of editions of Burns's writings, Egerer's emphasis is, rightly, on the history of the text of Burns. For the period, 1786 - 1802, Egerer tries to be comprehensive and 'to include all of the appearances of Burns's poetical and prose works in all media, except anthologies and reprints of poems or prose works in periodicals'. For the period after 1802, Egerer is much more selective, limiting himself to 'check-listings', as opposed to 'complete descriptions', and limiting himself further, with very few exceptions, to 'formal editions', i.e. editions which claim to be complete and bear such titles as The Letters of Robert Burns, The Poems of Robert Burns, etc. But even for publications such as these, the 'check-list' style of description is so meagre in detail that the descriptions are not very useful to anyone interested in such things as fine printing, illustration and the variations of publishers' styles of presentation. Nevertheless Egerer's bibliography remains the starting point of any more detailed analysis of Victorian and Edwardian diversity in producing editions of Burns.

An early encyclopedia article (Chamber's Encyclopedia, London 1861. p.226) enthused greatly about the advantages of the relatively new method of binding whole editions of books in decorated cloth cases:

Formerly, the ornamental and other work on the outside of books was executed in a tedious and expensive way by hand. Now, the operation, at least as regards cloth boards, is done by two or three impressions of an arming press; perhaps not more than half a minute being employed to execute what in the olden time would have occupied a week.

This improvement, the greatest in the art of bookbinding, has been facilitated by an advance in the artistic skill of designers, by advancement in the art of die making, and by corresponding adaptation in machinery - the whole unitedly working towards one end. When it is deemed necessary, for the sake of attractiveness, to stamp a peculiar device on the covers of a book, of which thousands are required, the design is referred to one artist, who, devoting himself to this branch of his profession, devises something appropriate and original. His design, drawn on paper, is cut in brass or steel; and this, in the form of a metal block, gives the stamp at a blow by the arming press. When the design is to be gilt, leaf gold is previously applied. The block, being heated, gives a firm and clear impression. Such is the expeditious method of titling and ornamenting with blind and gold tooling on the cloth covered books commonly in use.

It was claimed at the 1851 Great Exhibition that 1000 volumes could be put in cloth and gilt cases within six hours. When the case was finished it was glued to the volume of pages, which had been sewn, cut and gilt-edged, where necessary, in advance. The spine of the book was not usually attached to the case directly but was covered with a lining of paper and muslin, which, along with the ends of the bands, was attached to the boards with glue. Coloured inks, silver leaf and other polychromatic effects in case decoration were introduced later in the century.

The book-trade entrepreneurs of Victoria and Edward's reigns used the devices of mass-marketing to attract both old and new customers, and very often produced the same text of Burns over a lengthy period of years in a variety of styles, for a variety of prices, and with a variety of cover designs.

A book catalogue issued by the firm of Nimmo, of Edinburgh and London, in 1872, is a good example. The 32 page catalogue is entitled: Catalogue of Popular and Standard Works...published by William P. Nimmo, Edinburgh. It proudly quoted The Observer on the titlepage:

"Mr. Nimmo's Books are well known as marvels of cheapness, elegance, and sterling worth."

Nimmo claimed that his editions are: "choicely printed and illustrated, and elegantly bound in entirely new styles," Pages 10 & 11 of the catalogue was entirely devoted to one of Nimmo's series - Nimmo's Popular edition of the Works of the Poets. There were nineteen items in this long-lived series, No. 11 being Burns's Poetical Works and No. 19 being The Prose Works of Robert Burns. All 19 items in the series were in foolscap 8vo, 'printed on toned paper, elegantly bound in cloth extra, with various emblematic designs worked in gold and black, price 3s, 6d. each; or in morocco antique, price 6s. 6d. each; or in morocco extra, raised and with high class medallion portraits on side, entirely new design, price 7s 6d. each. Each volume contains a Memoir, and is illustrated with a Portrait of the Author, engraved on Steel, and numerous full-page illustrations on Wood, from designs by eminent Artists; also beautiful Illuminated Title-page.'

The 1872 advertisement concluded with the 'plug': 'This Series of Books, from the very superior manner in which it is produced, is at once the cheapest and handsomest edition of the Poets on the market. The volumes form elegant and appropriate Presents as School Prizes and Gift-Books, either in cloth or morocco.'

It is catalogue information of this kind which enables a collector to find out which of the many different versions of the The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns, edited by J.S. Roberts, with a memoir by William Gunnyon, put out by the firm of Nimmo, has come into his possession. Lack of information on format, series-title, illustrations, and cover design work, does not allow the purchaser of a Nimmo edition in a second-hand or antiquarian bookshop to identify from Egerer what he has bought. Is it indeed, No. 11 in Nimmo's Popular edition of the Works of the Poets, as described above, and which used at least ten different decorative covers, or is it No. 11 in the crown octavo 'Red-Line' version of the same series, or is it No. 2 in Nimmo's Library Edition of Standard Works in large demy 8vo which was usually bound in green cloth, 'Roxburgh style'?

Within the long period 1837 to 1914, two decades - the 1860's and the 1890's - produced artwork of real distinction on the covers of books. In the 1860's the style called 'Victorian High Gothic' reached its peak, and in the 1890's, the swirling sinuous lines of 'Art Nouveau' dominated the art work for book covers, as much as it dominated in other fields of design.

The following notes and illustrations are admittedly selective, but they should provide some assistance to Burnsian collectors.

BLACKIE & SON.

This Glasgow based firm was founded in 1809 by John Blackie, Senior, in conjunction with Somerville and Fullarton. Right from the beginning, the firm specialised in the publication of books in parts, or numbers, and aimed at the growing market of customers who could afford to buy large-scale works only in this way. The firm, also from its earliest days, specialised in religious books and technical and educational publications. Scottish poetry & song was a third specialisation. According to Agnes A.C. Blackie, the historian of the firm for the period up to 1959, Blackie put out its first edition of Burns in 1816, (Egerer, 190) an edition which was available both in bound form, and in separate numbers (13) at 6d. each. All of the copies I have seen of this edition have been of the collected numbers in secondary bindings. Further issues of this edition appeared in 1819 and 1821. The partnership was dissolved in 1831. The Blackie firm's next major publication on Burns was not an edition but a study called The Land of Burns, (1837-1840), (Egerer, 425) a book of engravings and scenes associated with the life and writings of Robert Burns. The engraved portraits were mostly by John Irvine, and the picturesque scenes by D. O. Hill, also famous as a pioneer in photography. It was issued in 23 parts from November, 1837 to November 1840. The biographical preface was by John Wilson, and the editing by Robert Chambers. When issued in volume form, it was usually in 2 volumes, 4to (Egerer 427).

Blackie's
The illustrations and portraits in The Land of Burns became an integral part of Blackie's two-volume or 21-part edition 1842/1843 edition of The Works of Robert Burns, (Egerer, 440) which was re-issued many times between 1843 and 1878, along with other editions extended to four or five 'divisions' or volumes to increase their saleability in the decorated book market. The state of the illustrations in the various reprints of this edition, according to the note in Egerer, 450, deteriorates sharply in the various reprints. What a twentieth century purchaser should avoid in purchasing any issue of this edition are plates that are missing, torn, spotted or foxed. Many copies are in later twentieth century re-bindings.

CHAMBERS, W. & R.

The firm of William and Robert Chambers of Edinburgh became a force in the publishing of Robert Burns largely because of the scholarly activities of Robert Chambers, who had long collected material for a life of Burns. In 1851, the firm put out a four-volume Life and Works of Robert Burns, ed. by Robert Chambers. (Egerer, 540) It was originally issued in blue paper wrappers and sold for 2s & 6d. All the surviving copies I have seen have been rebound. It was, ostensibly, part of the series entitled Chambers' Instructive & Entertaining Library. A Series of Books for the People. As the Memoir of William and Robert Chambers states: 'It was well received and passed through several editions, to suit different classes of purchasers'. As part of Robert Chambers' campaign to augment the small government pension given to Mrs. Isabella Begg, Burns's youngest sister, Chambers set aside the profits of one the cheap issues. The firm of Chambers was, like that of Blackie, a major force in the 'cheap literature for the people' movement - their chief organ being from 1832 Chambers's Journal. The firm had had great success with Robert Chambers's Memoir of Sir Walter Scott (1832) which sold over 180,000 copies. The 1851