

The Kilmarnock Burns and Book History

By Patrick Scott

Allan Young and I have just published the first-ever attempt to track down all surviving copies of Burns's first book, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (Kilmarnock: Wilson, 1786), the Kilmarnock Burns.¹ Mr Young started working on this project fifteen years ago, and I have been collaborating with him for the past two years. We located just eighty-four surviving copies, which makes Burns's book three times rarer than the Shakespeare First Folio.

At one level, this project might seem merely antiquarian. As early as 1903, the purchase of a Kilmarnock by the Burns Monument trustees was fiercely denounced in an Aberdeen newspaper:

*Really, I think it is absurd for the Burns Trustees to throw away so much money [...] Private individuals may spend their thousands on first editions if they choose: but could the memory of Burns not be honoured in a more practical way than by giving £1,000 for a book which is to go in a glass case and be looked at by tourists?*²

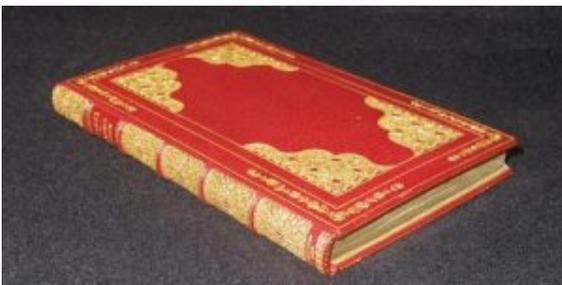
Yet one of the big recent shifts in literary studies has been the growing interest in 'book history', and in the material forms in which we encounter literary texts. Mr. Young and I were not just listing the eighty-four copies, but trying to describe them and track their stories. After 230 years, the ravages of time and the pride of former owners have left marks on each surviving copy. Many copies carry ownership inscriptions, annotations, or bookplates. Some include manuscript poems, a few in Burns's hand. Successive bindings and re-bindings mean that the copies vary quite a bit in size. Some have tears or missing leaves, and even after repair and replacement, most restoration leaves detectable traces. The accumulative of such changes makes every copy distinctive, and through reading these differences one can reconstruct changing attitudes to this book, and to Burns himself.



The Kilmarnock in wrappers (Image by kind permission of Robert Burns Birthplace Museum, National Trust for Scotland)

Like much about Burns, the story is very easy to oversimplify. To its first readers, in July and August 1786, Burns's book made its appearance in plain blue-gray paper wrappers, with the page edges untrimmed, and it was available chiefly through local distribution to subscribers in Ayrshire itself. The wrappers were fragile, and the paper spine cracked away easily, so few copies survive in this original form, but one is at Alloway, in the Birthplace Museum (the same copy that drew that protest in 1903), and it can be viewed on the RBBM website.³

But just as Henry Mackenzie's 'Heav'n-taught ploughman' would morph into the late Victorian National Bard, so the Kilmarnock's original fragile wrappers would in time typically be replaced by fine bindings in gold-tooled full morocco, from such noted London binders as Bedford or Rivière. The majority of copies now surviving are in a binding from this period, though not all quite as spectacular as the one illustrated below, which Ross Roy used to say was more appropriate for the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam* than for a Kilmarnock.⁴



The Kilmarnock rebound: full red morocco, gilt, by Rivière, ca. 1900 (Image courtesy of the G. Ross Roy)

Collection, University of South Carolina / photo: Robert Smith)

Such bindings were not only a statement about the importance of Burns, but also of the owner's wealth and status, and the best examples are collectible in their own right: indeed, most copies in fine bindings were housed in their own protective morocco slip cases or boxes that to the casual eye look equally impressive. By 1900, Burns was not only a prestige author, but an international one. Both buyers and prices had changed: instead of an Ayrshire farmer the typical early twentieth-century Kilmarnock purchaser might be a Scottish peer or an American railroad baron. Burns's original subscribers had paid just 3 shillings (15p), but in 1929 a copy sold at auction for £2,550 (£140,000 at current value). In 2017, while there are still six copies in Ayrshire, and twenty-five in Scotland, there are at least forty-eight in the United States.

The contrast seems obvious enough. A Kilmarnock as originally issued was all of a piece with hodden gray, hamely fare, and a' that. The Kilmarnock as later collected was a precious icon of world literature. Relatively few of the later collectors aimed to build a comprehensive collection of Burns editions. Most of them were adding a Kilmarnock alongside other Great Books. Indeed, part of its prestige in the market was its inclusion in *One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature*, a collector-list published in 1902 by the Grolier Club of New York.

Both sides of this contrast need more nuance. The original page format and paper show the Kilmarnock was always intended to look superior to John Wilson's previous books. The distinctive title-page decorations, also used throughout the book, seem to have been specially purchased to reflect this ambition. The paper covers were intended to be temporary, and most purchasers had their copy put in a more serviceable binding; Burns himself told his friend John Richmond 'you must bind it neatly'.⁵



As Andrew Crauford, Wright, Dalry, read the Kilmarnock: full tree calf, recently conserved (Image courtesy of Innerpeffray Library / photo: Bill Dawson)

These early bindings, rather than the copies in wrappers, show best how Burns was read by his Ayrshire contemporaries. Distribution also qualifies too populist a narrative. As Richard Sher has pointed out, the immediate economic success of the volume came more from the backing of a few major supporters than from individual subscribers; over two thirds of the 612 copies were bought by just seven names.⁶ In November 1786, when a letter to the *Edinburgh Evening Courant* complained that 'not one' of Ayrshire's 'Peers, Nabobs, and wealthy Commoners' had 'stepped forth as a patron' to Burns, Gavin Hamilton fired back that, of the original print run, 'the greatest part [...] were subscribed for, or bought up by, the gentlemen of Airshire'.⁷

On the other side, even in the 1890s and early 1900s, many individual Kilmarnock owners on both sides of the Atlantic have not been people of great wealth. Duncan M'Naught, longtime editor of the *Burns Chronicle*, was parish schoolmaster of Kilmaurs, but owned two Kilmarnocks. One of the most famous wrapped Kilmarnocks was owned in the 1890s by A. C. Lamb, proprietor of a temperance hotel in Dundee. By 1900, too, many copies had become tatty, and the elaborate bindings played an important role in their survival. Unlike the

Shakespeare First Folio, the Kilmarnock Burns is a thin volume that, in an undistinguished early binding or in bad condition, could well be overlooked when an owner dies or a house is cleared. Part C of our book contains several anecdotes of this kind. It was not till the collector generation that the special importance of the surviving wrapped copies was recognized, and the competition between collectors who couldn't get one put a special premium on other copies with early inscriptions or manuscript material. Once a Burns manuscript had been bound up with a Kilmarnock in red morocco gilt, its survival was ensured. It was many years later before university libraries and other public institutions took over this role to any significant extent.



The Kilmarnock in a contemporary binding: full calf, gilt spine with label, edges trimmed (The Earl of Glencairn's copy / image courtesy of Dr. William Zachs)

In his own times, Burns's poetry was disseminated in many different ways, not just in books, from manuscript and oral transmission to newspapers, chapbooks and broadsides. Burns himself wrote a satiric squib about fine bindings and insect damage in an aristocratic library:

*Through and through th'inspired leaves,
Ye maggots, make your windings,
But, oh! Respect his lordship's taste,
And spare his golden bindings.*⁸

Two centuries later, the importance of Burns's own poems means that all

Kilmarnocks, whatever their binding, can be of great research interest as well as of monetary value. Even a copy that is damaged or imperfect tells a story. It is often through the material form in which Burns's first book has survived, in the ambitious 'improvements' made by earlier owners and in the traces of neglect or mishandling, that we can now reconstruct the varied ways in which Burns has been valued.

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