

FURNITURE ASSOCIATED WITH ROBERT BURNS

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For over two hundred years the cult of Robert Burns, national poet of Scotland, has been responsible for the preservation of certain pieces of furniture associated with the man and his life. These items are now in scattered locations, but they originate mainly from the West Country counties of Ayrshire and Dumfriesshire where Burns worked a succession of small farms, finally settling in a small town house in Dumfries, where he died in 1796.

The furniture can be divided into two categories: the first, items which Burns and his family were known to have used; and the second, commemorative pieces which have been made from 'relic' timbers salvaged from objects and places associated with the poet's short and peripatetic life. The first category can shed some useful light upon the nature of common furniture in the western counties during the late eighteenth century, and the second includes antiquarian chairs which are some of the earliest Romantic movement tributes to a literary or historical figure.

The first chair in this anthology is a turned comb-backed armchair which is recorded as having been used by Robert Burns when he was admitted as an affiliate member of the 'Loudoun Kilwinning' Newmilns Masonic Lodge (no. 51) in 1786 (Figure 1).¹ Burns was an enthusiastic freemason, first becoming a brother of Tarbolton Lodge 'St David' in 1781. He was elected, on 27 July 1784, Depute Master of Tarbolton Lodge 'St James', a post which involved the day-to-day running of this meeting. For Burns, the Lodge was a place where he could meet a broader mix of people; landowners and professional men as well as small tenant farmers and tradesmen. At Tarbolton St James, for instance, he met Sir John Whitefoord (1734–1803), 3rd baronet of Blairquhan; the first member of the landed gentry whom Robert was to know personally.² When, early in 1784, Robert and his brother Gilbert moved from Tarbolton to the farm of Mossiel, in the neighbouring parish of Mauchline, he came into the orbit of another major landowner, James Mure Campbell, 5th Earl of Loudoun. This man happened to be of little interest to Burns, but his cousin, the 4th Earl, had been a noted improver and tree planter who had ensured that proper forestry management was introduced on his estates, thus enabling the establishment of a successful chair manufacturing operation which began to thrive, in the late eighteenth century, around the centres of Darvel and Newmilns.³ It is to this local chair-making tradition that Burns's Newmilns Lodge chair belongs. The chair, made from ash and elm, has been used by the Master of the Lodge, but its complete lack of symbolic decoration probably indicates that it is a survivor from a group of chairs intended for general use at the meeting. Its styling is consistent with that of other Darvel/Newmilns chairs, particularly the work of the early nineteenth-century maker J. K. Black; the turning profile of the stretcher spindles for instance, is identical to that in examples of his work.⁴ In other respects, the chair is of



1. Turned armchair, c. 1786, ash and elm; reputedly used by Robert Burns at a meeting of Newmilns Masonic Lodge, Ayrshire
Lodge 'Loudoun Kilwinning' Newmilns



2. Inscribed brass plate recording Robert Burns's use of the Newmilns chair shown in figure 1

Lodge 'Loudoun Kilwinning' Newmilns

very simple construction, the back made from narrow spindles above a slightly backward-tilting seat, producing the boxy and upward-thrusting effect which characterises Scottish turned armchairs from this region. The Newmilns Lodge chair, given a date of around 1786, is the earliest provenanced example of its type, but nineteenth-century versions are relatively plentiful, stamped by makers such as J. K. Black and John McMath. It would not be irresponsible to assume that this would have been a common chair type in the Irvine valley, to be found in cottage, church and alehouse, as well as in the specialised surroundings of the Masonic Lodge.

Writing desks supposed to have been used by Burns are several; examples can be seen at the Writers Museum in Edinburgh, at Dumfries Museum and at the Burns Monument in Alloway. In this group, however, there are some problems in establishing authenticity. A desk in the Writers Museum, Edinburgh, bears a plaque that reads:

This desk belonged to and was long used by Robert Burns the Ayrshire poet. At the sale of the Bard's furniture at his death in 1796 it was purchased by Mr Richardson, Auctioneer, Dumfries, whose son Captain James Richardson, of Gorbals Police, presented it to Mr Archibald McAllister,



3. 'Tam o'Shanter' chair, second version, made by John Underwood to the design of David Auld, 1822, oak timber from Old Alloway Kirk, Ayrshire
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Writer, Glasgow, who in 1852 gave it during his pleasure for the use of Glasgow Nanse Tinnock's Club.

This clearly stated provenance is, however, linked to a counting-house desk with steeply sloping top. The context in which Burns used this piece of furniture is not clear, and there is no evidence to suggest that this item is of local design. A similar case occurs at Dumfries Museum which has in its collection a piece which bears the following label:

This table comes from the old manse of Lochmaben and was used by Robert Burns when during one of his visits to Dr Jaffray and his daughter he wrote the song 'I Ga'ed a Waefu' Gait Yester 'Een'.

Again, the retrospective label is our only guarantee of authenticity, but this piece of furniture (Figure 4) was designed for writing and is a simplified version of the specification for a stage-top 'Gentleman's Writing Table' which appears in the *Edinburgh Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Work*, 1805. The piece is clearly Scottish and the tradition that accompanies it at least gives the specific title of a work written at this table.

The publication of an Edinburgh edition of Burns's poems, on 21 April 1787, was of fundamental importance in establishing his fame beyond Scotland, and the printing of this volume has consequently assumed a prominent position in Burns lore. This has caused the preservation of some furniture, which would otherwise have been thrown out, from the printing office where the 'Edinburgh edition' was produced. The printer was William Smellie, Anchor Close, Edinburgh, whose successor, Alex. Smellie printed the first *Edinburgh Book of Prices for Manufacturing Cabinet Work* in 1805, and the pieces of furniture are a pair of three-legged stools upon which Burns was supposed to have sat while correcting the proofs of the 1787 *Poems*.⁵ These pine workshop stools, now displayed in the Writers' Museum, Lady Stair's Close, Edinburgh, follow a standard form consisting of three crudely-rounded legs socketed into a circular seat and united by stretchers nailed on to the outside. This is a pattern which was not exclusive to Scotland but it is one that was used in the country during the eighteenth century and perhaps earlier. In the printing and related trades, there is evidence to show that stools like this were used by bookbinders and draughtsmen.⁶ The setting of type was usually done standing up, so it is most likely that the stools illustrated in figure 5 were used by draughtsmen or proof-readers involved in the preparation and checking of material for printing at Smellie's office. Variants of this functional stool design continued to be made and used until the second half of the twentieth century; one of the latest instances being at the workshops of Falkirk bookbinders Dunn and Wilson, where examples were still in use in 1980.⁷

The spread of his printed work and snippets of biographical information about the 'heaven-taught ploughman' made Robert Burns a great subject of curiosity. Dorothy and William Wordsworth, for instance, could not suppress their own inquisitive natures in the summer of 1803 when they travelled to Dumfries and discovered the poet's house. Dorothy Wordsworth recalled:

Mrs Burns was gone to spend some time by the sea-shore with her children. We spoke to the servant-maid at the door, who invited us forward, and we sate down in the parlour. The walls were coloured with a blue wash; on one side of the fire was a mahogany desk, opposite to the window a clock, and over the desk a print from *The Cotter's Saturday Night*, which Burns mentions in one of



4. Writing table, late eighteenth century; said to have been used by Robert Burns during a visit to the Parish Manse, Lochmaben
Dumfries Museum

his letters having received as a present. The house was cleanly and neat on the inside, the stairs of stone, scoured white, the kitchen on the right side of the passage, the parlour on the left. In the room above the parlour the poet died, and his son after him in the same room.⁸

Written only six years after Burns's death, this recollection indicates that his house had already become a place of pilgrimage and that his furniture was being noticed and recorded by visitors. The description of fireplace, writing desk and print from *The Cotter's Saturday Night* sounds almost like a shrine to the poet's memory, but unfortunately there is no detailed description of the desk.

The cult of Burns can certainly be seen as an early manifestation of Romantic movement sensibility. After his death, biographers such as Heron and Currie were quick to prepare memoirs,⁹ but the tribute was not only literary; others began to collect *mementoes* of the man, not just personal objects but also pieces of timber from places where the poet had been. The first chairs made to commemorate Burns's life which were constructed from such associative timbers were designed in the Gothic style to



5. Printer's stools, late eighteenth century, pine; said to have been used by Robert Burns in the printing office of William Smellie, Anchor Close, Edinburgh

The Writers' Museum, Edinburgh

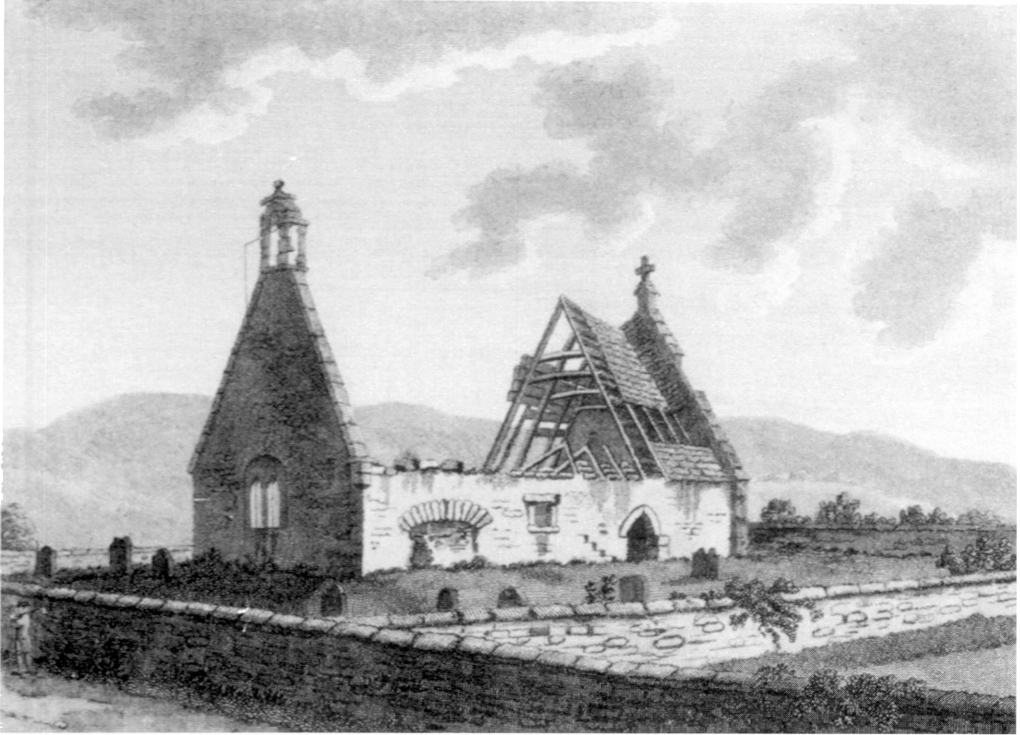
enhance their qualities of historical allusion and perhaps to make them appropriate for a Romantic setting.

The chair illustrated in Figure 6, made by John Underwood and James Loumgair, was made from remains of the oak rafters that composed the old roof of Alloway Kirk, Ayrshire, and presented to Hugh Montgomerie, 12th Earl of Eglinton, in 1818.¹⁰ It is bedecked with references to the poet's work. The front seat rail bears an inlaid plough (a reference to Henry Mackenzie's description of Burns) and the inscription 'IN MEMORY OF ROBT. BURNS'. The brass panels, between the Gothic arcading that forms the principal decoration of the chair back, are engraved with the poem *Tam o' Shanter* and signed 'Robb McWhinnie, Sculp, Ayr'. McWhinnie was an engraver and sculptor in Ayr. The back of the chair is painted with a grisaille scene depicting witches and warlocks dancing, a scene from the poem which appears to have inspired a later painting and popular print by John Faed.¹¹ The supposedly haunted Alloway Kirk



6. The 'Tam o'Shanter' chair, made by John Underwood and James Loumgair to the design of David Auld, 1818, oak timber from Old Alloway Kirk, Ayrshire

Photograph courtesy of Simon Redburn



7. Old Alloway Kirk, published by J. Hooper, in *The Antiquities of Scotland* by Francis Grose, 1789–91. The rafters of this Kirk were used to make chairs in commemoration of Burns

St Andrews University Library collection

appears in Burns's long narrative work, *Tam o'Shanter*, which was originally commissioned as an accompaniment for an engraved view of the ruined monument in Francis Grose's *Antiquities of Scotland* (1789–91) (Figure 7).¹² Alloway Kirk was of modest antiquity, dating from the early sixteenth century and serving as a parish church until 1691 after which Alloway was joined to the parish of Ayr. Robert Burns as a boy was very well acquainted with the Kirk as he was born in Alloway and lived nearby until he was seven years old.

Although Eglinton Castle, seat of the 12th Earl, was furnished by Gillow of Lancaster in a neo-classical style,¹³ the house was nevertheless a suitably Romantic setting for one of the first antiquarian chairs to commemorate Robert Burns.¹⁴ The 'Tam o'Shanter' chair was received into a house that had been rebuilt in the Gothic 'Castle Style' between 1798 and 1803 by architect John Paterson, and in which the patron was attempting to create an antiquarian interior. The completed setting was later the venue for one of the most important historical-revival events of the nineteenth century, the Eglinton Tournament of 1839, the mock-mediaeval splendour of which succeeded in bankrupting the 13th Earl.¹⁵ The Burns chair of 1818 satisfied two criteria for the historically minded connoisseur; firstly, it had a striking mediaeval look created by a



8. The 'Tam o'Shanter' chair, back panel showing inscribed brass plates

Photograph courtesy of Simon Redburn



9. The 'Tam o'Shanter' chair, reverse of back panel showing oil-painted scene of witches and warlocks dancing

Photograph courtesy of Simon Redburn

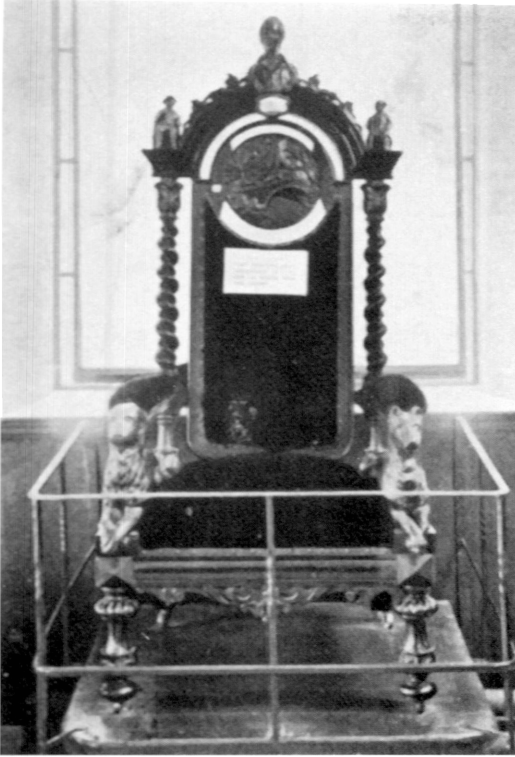
combination of cluster columns, dramatic scalloped spandrels and Gothic arches, and secondly, it was made from relic timber of a firm Scottish provenance. In these respects it is very similar to another early example of commemorative 'relic' furniture; the 'Robroyston' chair, that was made for Sir Walter Scott *c.* 1822.¹⁶ In addition to being made from fragments of historic wood, both chairs are very deliberately decorated with thistles. This can be read simply as a symbol of Scotland, but it is also perhaps a more specific reference to sixteenth-century Scottish carved woodwork, in which the thistle was given special prominence.¹⁷ Two Scotsmen must be credited with the original conception and subsequent promotion of the 'Tam o'Shanter' and 'Robroyston chairs'. Their names are Joseph Train and David Auld, individuals who caused the first stirrings of a trade in antiquities in Scotland and whose legacy was to influence the nineteenth century. Joseph Train (1779–1852), Supervisor of Excise at Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbright and later at Cupar, Fife, was one of the first collectors of Burnsiana, many items of which he sold or gave to Walter Scott at Abbotsford,¹⁸ but he was also responsible for commissioning pieces of furniture fashioned from different Scottish relics. The 'Robroyston' chair was made to celebrate Sir William Wallace, and was made by a Kirkintilloch wright, John Stirling,¹⁹ from relic timber supplied by Train. This had supposedly come from the rafters of a cottage on the Robroyston estate in Lanarkshire where Wallace was abducted by the English in 1305. Train can be seen as an impresario who supplied materials and arranged for pieces to be made, but there is no evidence that he actually designed furniture.



10. Underside of 'Tam o'Shanter' chair inscribed with makers' names 'JNo UNDERWOOD & JAs LOUMGAIR' and the date 1818

Photograph courtesy of Simon Redburn

David Auld, a merchant in Ayr, is a less well-known figure who can be credited with the original idea of making furniture to commemorate Robert Burns. His design for the 'Tam o'Shanter' chair in 1818²⁰ was innovative because it did not reflect fashions in contemporary domestic furniture nor was it an approximation of a historical type (as was the 'Robroyston' chair).²¹ Auld's design was a synthesis of historical components and indeed, different materials which was to provide a useful prototype for commemorative chairs later in the nineteenth century. Auld attempted to exploit the success of his first Tam o'Shanter chair by commissioning a second version in 1822 (Figure 3). This is now in the Royal Collection at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh.²² For this second chair, which shows a different scene from the poem *Tam o'Shanter* on its painted back panel, Auld seems to have dispensed with the services of the cabinet maker James Loumgair, who collaborated on the first version.²³ John Underwood, who was solely responsible for making the second chair, is listed in Pigot and Co.'s *New Commercial Directory of Scotland*, 1825–26, as a cabinet maker and chair maker in Main Street, Ayr.



11. Postcard view of chair made from wood that composed the printing press on which the first (Kilmarnock) edition of Burns's poems was printed. Postmarked 1910

Dick Institute collection, Dean Castle, Kilmarnock

The last piece in this anthology (Figure 11), can be seen as the monstrous progeny of these early nineteenth-century commemorative chairs. It is a throne-like chair that was made from 'wood which composed the Printing Press on which the First Edition of Burns Poems was printed'.²⁴ Only a picture postcard survives to supply an image of this exhibit that was once in the collection at Dean Castle, Kilmarnock, and there is no date of manufacture given, but it appears from the chair's elaborate carving, velvet upholstery and stylistic similarity to exhibition chairs of the 1850s and 60s, that it is a product of the second half of the nineteenth century, when the search for relic timber associated with Burns had reached a fever pitch. Mackay, the recent biographer of the poet, has described the scene at East Mossgiel farm in 1858, when the house that had been inhabited by Burns and his family between 1784 and 1786 was partially demolished: 'crowds of souvenir hunters converged on the place and bore away pieces of the decaying roof timbers, many of which ended up as snuff-boxes and other products of the Smith Boxworks in neighbouring Mauchline.'²⁵ It can be seen that the quest for Burns timber continued throughout the nineteenth century, almost sustaining the small giftware industry in Ayrshire but supplying an ever-decreasing quantity of pieces suitable for making furniture. The most significant commemorative furniture was undoubtedly that produced by David Auld in 1818 and 1822. His idiosyncratic 'Tam o'Shanter' chairs were presented to important figures with great solemnity and public show, probably as a shrewd promotional exercise for his business. The

exclusivity of the timber of these chairs was strongly emphasised and perhaps Auld was able to sell other objects made from this rare commodity. Although David Auld and Joseph Train are not known to have been connected, it is interesting that they were both operating in the same district. The south-west seems to have been an early nineteenth-century laboratory for the development of historical mementoes.

The spirit of poetic genius found Burns at the plough, not seated at a chair; in fact we can see from his writing that he was not in the least interested in furniture. But the cult of Burns made a resounding impact in the field. It was responsible for the preservation of a considerable repertoire of eighteenth-century regional furniture which might otherwise have been lost and happened to stimulate an early nineteenth-century antiquarian impulse that provided innovative chairs for the Romantic interior in Scotland.

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REFERENCES

1. I am grateful to Stephen Jackson for bringing this to my attention.
2. The detail of this biographical sketch can be found in: James Mackay, *A Biography of Robert Burns*, Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, 1992.
3. See David Jones, 'Darvel Chairs', *Regional Furniture*, Vol. ix, 1995, pp. 64–71.
4. *ibid.*
5. The original provenance of one of these stools is given in: Robert Duncan, *The Story of the Original Burns Relics*, Andrew Elliot, Edinburgh, 1910, p. 46.
6. Foulis Academy.
7. David Jones, *Looking at Scottish Furniture*, St Andrews & Glasgow, 1987, cat. no. 36.
8. William Knight (ed.), *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, published by Macmillan, London, 1924, p. 168.
9. Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns*, Edinburgh, 1797; James Currie, *The Works of Robert Burns*, Cadell & Davies, 1800.
10. It is inscribed on a brass panel: 'To the Right Honble. Hugh Earl of Eglinton, &c &c &c. THIS CHAIR made in Memory of BURNS from the remains of the Oak which composed part of the roof of Alloway-Kirk. Is most respectfully presented By David Auld. AYR, September 1818'.
11. The painting on the chair appears to be a prototype for an oil painting by John Faed dated 1855 and a subsequent engraving of this entitled *And, vow! Tam saw an / unco sight / Warlocks and witches / in a dance* in the National Library of Scotland collection.
12. The poem *Tam o'Shanter* is printed opposite an engraved view of Alloway Kirk in Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, Vol. II, London, 1789–91, p. 199.
13. Jacqueline Urquhart has recently researched the Gillow furnishing of Eglinton Castle, revealing that between 1798 and 1800, the 12th Earl of Eglinton ordered household furniture, predominantly in the neo-classical taste, for his two Ayrshire seats, Eglinton Castle and Coilsfield House. The final account with Gillow in 1800 was £4,529 14s. Jacqueline Urquhart, *An Analysis of the Scottish Commissions of Gillow of Lancaster*, unpublished Honours Dissertation, University of St Andrews, 1997.
14. It must be mentioned also that the 12th Earl of Eglinton was an important patron of Burns and a subscriber to the Edinburgh edition of his *Poems* in 1787.
15. See Ian Anstruther, *The Knight and the Umbrella. An Account of the Eglinton Tournament*, 1839, London, 1960.
16. The 'Robroyston' chair, presently at Abbotsford, Roxburghshire, is discussed by Clive Wainwright in *The Romantic Interior: The British Collector at Home 1750–1850*, New Haven and London, 1989, p. 198, and by Clare Graham in *Ceremonial and Commemorative Chairs in Great Britain*, V&A, London, 1994, p. 99.
17. Discussed in David Jones, 'A Sixteenth-Century Oak Cupboard at the University of St Andrews', *Regional Furniture*, Vol. IV, 1990, pp. 71–81.

18. See John Paterson, *Memoir of Joseph Train*, Edinburgh, 1857, and James C. Corson, *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott. Notes and Index to Sir Herbert Grierson's Edition*, Oxford, 1979.
19. Stirling is identified by Corson (*ibid.*, p. 203) as coming from Kirkintilloch. He is incorrectly cited as 'John Stirling of Kirkcudbrightshire' in Graham (*ibid.*, p. 99).
20. Auld is identified as the designer of the 'Tam o'Shanter' chairs in an inscription on the lower back panel of the chair now at Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh. The relevant words from this read: '... the Witness subscribing did take said Oak from the inside of Alloway Kirk into which it had fallen from the roof and delivered the same to John Underwood Cabinet Maker in Ayr with instructions to make the said oak into this Chair according to a plan or model delivered unto him by the Deponent (David Auld) and depones that no other Chair can now be made from the oak which composed the roof of Alloway Kirk ...'.
21. The 'Robroyston' chair is based on the design of high-backed cane-seated chairs of the 1680s. This type of chair was categorised by J. C. Loudon as 'Elizabethan' in his *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farmhouse and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, 1839, and it became the ubiquitous item of seat furniture in the antiquarian interior of the early nineteenth century.
22. The chair is in the Great Gallery, Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh. Royal Collection no. H60284.
23. The two chair makers inscribed their names on the underside of the seat: 'THIS CHAIR WAS MADE BY IN. UNDERWOOD & IAs LOUMGAIR CABINET MAKERS. AYR.FEBy. 1818.'
24. Caption from postcard postmarked 'Ayr 1910' and sent to an address on Arran, in the Dick Institute collection, Dean Castle, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. The first edition of Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* was printed in Kilmarnock at the press of John Wilson, 1786.
25. Mackay (*ibid.*), p. 140.