EXAMINING BURNS'S ROLE AS A COLLECTOR, EDITOR, AND ADAPTER OF SCOTTISH FOLK SONGS AND BALLADS

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Annotation. This paper investigates Robert Burns's multi-faceted contribution to the survival, transformation and dissemination of Scottish folk songs and ballads. While Burns is widely celebrated as a poet, his less-emphasised role as a collector of traditional airs, an editor of song-collections, and an adapter who reshaped existing oral material into polished lyrical compositions is pivotal in understanding Scotland's musical-cultural heritage. The study explores three interlinked functions: (1) Burns's collecting praxis—his gathering of songs from oral tradition and earlier manuscripts; (2) his editorial work—particularly his substantial involvement with the six-volume collection The Scots Musical Museum (1787-1803) and his collaboration with George Thomson on A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs; and (3) his creative adaptation—how he revised, rewrote or recomposed traditional songs, thereby bridging folk tradition and literary form. In doing so, Burns sought not simply to archive but to revitalise the Scottish song-heritage for contemporary audiences and posterity.

The enduring legacy of Robert Burns (1759–1796) rests not only on his original, revolutionary poetry but also on his tireless, often underappreciated, role as the caretaker of Scotland's musical heritage. Serving as both an amateur scholar and a skilled literary artist, Burns dedicated significant effort to compiling, annotating, and often completely rewriting traditional folk songs, most notably for **James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum*** (1787–1803). While Burns championed the preservation of authentic vernacular material, his editorial methods were anything but neutral; he frequently engaged in heavy **adaptation**, driven by aesthetic ideals, social propriety, or a desire for universal emotional resonance. This thesis will investigate this crucial tension in his editorial work. It argues that **Robert Burns's primary legacy in folk song lies not just in preservation, but in his calculated adaptation, where he often polished, sanitized, or entirely re-wrote traditional lyrics, prioritizing poetic refinement and emotional breadth over strict fidelity to the raw, localized folk source.** By examining specific textual transformations across his collaborations, this study reveals how Burns

consciously molded the rustic voice of Scottish tradition into a universally accessible, yet distinctly modern, literary form.

The literary landscape of 18th-century Scotland was defined by a tension between the Enlightenment's focus on refinement and the growing Romantic interest in authentic national expression. While the educated elite often favored English models and standard poetic diction, a counter-movement sought to preserve and elevate the native **Scots language** and its wealth of folk materials. Burns's editorial practice sits squarely within this contested space.

His most significant work was for **James Johnson's *The Scots Musical Museum***, a vast project initiated in 1787 to collect and publish Scottish songs with their corresponding melodies. Unlike a modern archivist, Johnson was motivated by a desire to popularize national song, and he relied heavily on Burns to fill in gaps, "mend" old verses, or supply new lyrics where the originals were deemed lost, incomplete, or too **"indecent"** for publication. Burns accepted this task readily, viewing himself as the humble heir to a great tradition, yet also its necessary refiner.

The challenge for Burns was twofold: to **preserve** the spirit and music (the "air") of the folk tradition, and simultaneously to **perfect** the accompanying lyrics for a print-based, pan-Scottish, and often more polite audience. This required him to negotiate the raw vitality of the oral tradition with the polished expectations of contemporary literary taste. This negotiation—the crucial decision to adapt rather than merely transcribe—is the central mechanism through which Burns exerted his lasting cultural influence.

The most powerful demonstration of Burns's editorial role lies in the degree to which he transcended mere collection, effectively transforming vernacular material into universal poetry. This is clearly seen in the composition of his most celebrated love lyric, **"A Red, Red Rose."**

The Transformation of "A Red, Red Rose"

The folk tune and its accompanying fragmented lyrics that inspired Burns had existed for decades in various states, often involving loose associations with travel, farewells, and a simple declaration of love. Burns, recognizing the poignant melody (the air, often "Major Graham"), seized the opportunity to consolidate and perfect these elements into a single, cohesive, and structurally flawless poem.

Folk Source (Fragmented Precursors)	**Burns's Final Adaptation (1794)**	**Thematic Effect of Adaptation**
Focus on specific, localized farewells and personal loss.	Focus on **hyperbolic, universal metaphors** ("till a' the seas gang dry," "the rocks melt wi' the sun").	Elevates the transient, local emotion into an **eternal, abstract commitment**, fitting the polite, published environment of the time.

Folk Source (Fragmented Precursors)	Burns's Final Adaptation (1794)	Thematic Effect of Adaptation
Often contained repetitive, simple, and uneven stanzas.	Exhibits **perfect rhyme and meter** (e.g., the ballad quatrain) across all four stanzas.	Lends the folk form a **literary polish** and structural integrity that guarantees its lasting place in anthologies.
Contained a rougher, more literal declaration of affection.	Introduces the **famous opening simile**: "O my Luve is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June."	Creates an instant, archetypal symbol for beauty and love, which is immediately accessible and emotionally powerful.

The adaptation here is one of **aesthetic refinement**. By weaving together the best lines from various sources, introducing classical poetic devices (like hyperbole and simile), and structuring it formally, Burns essentially **re-created** a new tradition. He did not simply record a song; he elevated the raw material of the folk into a work of high art that preserved the Scottish melody while offering an international literary voice.

A second, though perhaps less aesthetically beneficial, aspect of Burns's editorial process was his commitment to **sanitization**. When dealing with bawdy or overly ribald folk songs, Burns routinely edited or replaced verses to meet the moral standards of his genteel subscribers, particularly those of George Thomson, who aimed to make Scottish songs palatable to the drawing-room. His work for *The Scots Musical Museum* often involved providing **"clean"** lyrics for tunes that were well-known locally for their coarser verses.

In these instances, his role shifted from the creative adapter to the **moral censor**. While this practice ensured the survival of the tunes and broadened the audience for Scottish song, it simultaneously suppressed a segment of the folk tradition—namely, the earthy, unrestrained voice of the common folk—in favor of a more palatable national image. This underscores the central tension of his work: that **preservation was often conditional on refinement.**

In both cases—the beautiful synthesis of "A Red, Red Rose" and the moral editing of bawdy airs—Burns's deliberate textual changes defined the version of Scottish folk culture that would be passed down to subsequent generations, establishing him as an arbiter of taste rather than a simple transcriber.

Conclusion. Robert Burns's engagement with Scottish folk song—as collector, editor, and adapter—was not a secondary hobby but a central act of literary and cultural formation. As demonstrated through the case of **"A Red, Red Rose,"** Burns often prioritized **poetic perfection** over strict fidelity, transforming localized oral fragments

into polished, universal lyrics that secured the survival of the underlying melodies. Furthermore, his necessary role as an editor for propriety meant that preservation often involved **sanitization**, shaping the public memory of folk culture by suppressing its more irreverent elements. Ultimately, Burns's editorial decisions ensured that the distinct spirit of Scottish song—its language, its emotional depth, and its musical structure—was powerfully transmitted into print. However, this powerful influence casts a complex shadow: the version of the Scottish folk tradition celebrated today is often the one filtered, refined, and ultimately **re-created by the National Bard.**

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