PREFACE

I cannot give to my country this edition of one of its favourite poets, without stating that I have deliberately omitted several pieces of verse ascribed to Burns by other editors, who too hastily, and I think on insufficient testimony, admitted them among his works. If I am unable to share in the hesitation expressed by one of them on the authorship of the stanzas on “Pastoral Poetry,” I can as little share in the feelings with which they have intruded into the charmed circle of his poetry such compositions as “Lines on the Ruins of Lincluden College,” “Verses on the Destruction of the Woods of Drumlanrig,” “Verses written on a Marble Slab in the Woods of Aberfeldy,” and those entitled “The Tree of Liberty.” These productions, with the exception of the last, were never seen by any one even in the handwriting of Burns, and are one and all wanting in that original vigour of language and manliness of sentiment which distinguish his poetry. With respect to “The Tree of Liberty” in particular, a subject dear to the heart of the Bard, can any one conversant with his genius imagine that he welcomed its growth or celebrated its fruit with such “capon craws” as these?

“Upo’ this tree there grows sic fruit,  
Its virtues a’ can tell, man;  
It raises man aboon the brute,  
It mak’s him ken himsel’, man.  
Gif ance the peasant taste a bit,  
He’s greater than a lord, man,  
An’ wi’ a beggar shares a mite  
O’ a’ he can afford, man.”

There are eleven stanzas, of which the best, compared with the “A man’s a man for a’ that” of Burns, sounds like a cracked pipkin against the “heroic clang” of a Damascus blade. That it is extant in the handwriting of the poet cannot be taken as a proof that it is his own composition, against the internal testimony of utter want of all the marks by which we know him—the Burns-stamp, so to speak, which is visible on all that ever came from his pen. Misled by his handwriting, I inserted in my former edition of his works an epitaph, beginning

“Here lies a rose, a budding rose,”

the composition of Shenstone, and which is to be found in the church-yard of Hales-Owen: as it is not included in every edition of that poet’s acknowledged works, Burns, who was an admirer of his genius, had, it seems, copied it with his own hand, and hence my error. If I hesitated about the exclusion of “The Tree of Liberty,” and its three false brethren, I could have no scruples regarding the fine song of “Evan Banks,” claimed and justly for Miss Williams by Sir Walter Scott, or the humorous song called “Shelah O’Neal,” composed by the late Sir Alexander Boswell. When I have stated that I have arranged the Poems, the Songs, and the Letters of Burns, as nearly as possible in the order in which they were written; that I have omitted no piece of either verse or prose which bore the impress of his hand, nor included any by which his high reputation would likely be impaired, I have said all that seems necessary to be said, save that the following letter came too late for insertion in its proper place: it is characteristic and worth a place anywhere.