

TO SIR JOHN MALCOLM

on receiving his
Miscellaneous Poems

a poem by
Thomas Telford
written in the year 1831



Thomas Telford (1757-1834) Civil Engineer and Poet.

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PREFACE

Thomas Telford is remembered today as an outstanding civil engineer. It is not generally known that he exercised a talent for versifying, and that his first published work was a poem. In the late 18th century he was a liberal contributor to the poetical columns of Ruddiman's *Edinburgh Magazine* under the signature of "Eskdale Tam".¹ His verses were also included in other contemporary poetical collections² and some of his poems, including his best known work "Esk-dale"³ were printed separately. "Esk-dale" was published in 1781 as a quarto of nine pages and in a revised edition at Shrewsbury in 1795.⁴ It was reprinted on several occasions. With regard to the quality of Telford's poetry, his friend Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate commented on "Esk-dale", "many poems which evinced less observation, less feeling, and were in all respects of less promise have obtained university prizes."⁵

Telford was inspired by the poet Robert Burns to write at least two poems, one of which was printed in 1796,⁶ and an extract from another in 1800 by Dr. James Currie the editor of Burns' Works.⁷ Dr. Currie considered the "poetical epistle from Mr. Telford of Shrewsbury" which he discovered amongst Burns' papers "of superior merit" to other poems admiring the poet's genius and printed twenty-six verses of it. Until now, Telford is not known to have written any poems after 1796, the date suggested for his last poetical work by Sir Alexander Gibb.⁸ The present publication of a poem written no less than thirty-five years later than this is, therefore, of particular interest to students of Telford and Eskdale poetry.

The powerful stimulus which brought forth Telford's Muse in his 75th year was provided by a slim volume of *Miscellaneous Poems*⁹ written by his Eskdale fellow-countryman and friend Sir John Malcolm (1769-1833), the Indian administrator and diplomatist.¹⁰ Telford probably received the poems on Sir John's return from India in 1831. A successful son of Eskdale crowning his achievements in life with a volume of poems: such an opportunity for versifying was not to be missed! It is evident, however, that Telford kept the poem a secret from his old friend

and biographer John Rickman, who reflected: "It might have excited a smile in many of his friends, and probably Telford himself thought so, as he never hinted at the fact, — that the earliest distinction he acquired in life was as a Poet! — nor does he appear to have abjured the Muses at nearly thirty years of age, when he reprinted at Shrewsbury a poem descriptive of the early scenes of his life, entitled 'Eskdale,'..."¹¹

Although the writer believes that the "Malcolm" poem was written by Telford, the evidence for this attribution is circumstantial and the reader may wish to consider the case for himself. The manuscript from which the poem is printed is written in a neat contemporary hand, which is neither that of Telford nor Sir John Malcolm, on paper watermarked J COLES 1830. The poem is signed with the initials T.T. and dated from London on 30th August 1831. Until recently it was included in a miscellaneous collection of Malcolm family papers together with a printed proposal¹² for the Eskdale Memorial Column to Sir John Malcolm which was erected near Langholm in 1835.

It is not difficult from a knowledge of Telford, the content of the poem and the closeness of the Eskdale fraternity to narrow the field down to his authorship. He had previously displayed his poetical susceptibilities for Eskdale sons, his initials were T.T. and he was resident in London in August 1831. He was born in the same Dumfriesshire parish as Sir John Malcolm whom he had known from "youthful days" and for whom he had a high regard. Telford wrote in his autobiography of the scenes of his youth, "since immortalized in verse and prose by a more illustrious borderer" than himself, "Sir Walter Scott. I ever recollect with pride and pleasure my native parish of Westerkirk, where I was born on the banks of the Esk, in the year 1757, and where also were born that eminent brotherhood of the Malcolm family, four of whom have risen to high rank, and the honour of knighthood, in the service of their country. . . I was for some years a school-fellow of the elder brothers of that distinguished family. . ." ¹¹ (although not Sir John, who was twelve years his junior.) The writer is not aware of any correspondence between the two men, but they are known to have met occasionally in London as Telford refers to one such meeting in 1813.¹³

Telford is mentioned in Sir John Malcolm's biography. Sir John travelled by coach as an outside passenger on Telford's Holyhead Road in 1823 and commented "It rained all the way but still I never enjoyed a journey more. The road is the finest in England—constructed by Telford, an Esk-dale man."¹⁴

Telford's regard for Sir John Malcolm shortly before writing the poem is clear from a letter he wrote to Miss Malcolm a few months before his brother's return from India in 1831. He wrote, "Your excellent and justly distinguished brother will, I hope, soon reach his native Isle, where his valuable services, will be brought into operation, and where his thorough and extensive knowledge [of all that] is connected with the great Eastern Empire [will do] his country an essential service, He having... practised long and faithfully every grade of his profession as a Soldier and Statesman, and most deservedly acquired distinction in both..."⁸

On the present evidence it is not impossible that some other person wrote the poem but this is extremely unlikely and the writer has been unable to find any other suitable candidate. Telford is the only person with the initials T. T. from London included in the 188-person subscription list¹² for the Eskdale Memorial Column to Sir John Malcolm. He is listed as the principal subscriber to this monument, contributing £50 out of a total of £396.1s. Other points supporting Telford's authorship are, the similarity in style and sentiment of the poem to parts of "Esk-dale", the provenance of the manuscript and the signing of his previously supposed last written poem⁶ with the initials T.T. There seems little doubt that some member of the Malcolm family, perhaps his friend Miss Malcolm, made and kept this copy of the famous engineer's tribute to Sir John.

This publication of Telford's poem is not expected to take the literary world by storm, but it does serve the useful purpose of illuminating some facets of the character and man behind the engineer and it may perhaps carry a message for the technologist of today.

Roland A. Paxton, *C. Eng.*
Edinburgh, May 1971

TO SIR JOHN MALCOLM
on receiving his Miscellaneous Poems

Thanks for thy little book, which true displays,
Congenial feelings of our youthful days;
Poetic strains which opening minds inspired,
And thine with early, noble ardour fired,
O'er eastern climes to spread deserved fame,
For every gift that stamps a deathless name;—
When Wars fierce contests furious hosts arrayed,
The gallant Soldier boldly stands displayed;—
But more congenial to thy generous mind,
Peace gave thee power to civilize mankind,
Make Tribes ferocious bend to equal laws
And grateful crown thy efforts with applause.—
Beyond even these, has Malcolm's talents shone,
A well known name at Persia's splendid throne;
Realms whence the source of antient lore is traced,
(Now by despotic tyranny disgraced,)
His learned labours have with master hand;
Displayed the annals of that ancient land;
The feeble efforts of a state debased,
Where merit's crushed, and worthless minions raised.—
Yet not the gorgeous splendours of the east
Could change the genuine feelings of the breast,

His native Eskdale! quiet pastoral Vale!
Relations, friends, in every scene prevail;
Her Sons his worth thro' Eastern Realms proclaim,
And India's nations laud the well known name;—
Now far removed from scenes of eastern toil,
And safe within his happy native Isle,
Their welfare still his anxious thoughts engage,
Amid the storms of this reforming age
Lest laws unfit should shed a baneful ray,
And cloud the brightness of their future day.—
His warning voice shall check the crude design,
And bid experience draw the guarded line.—
Thus grateful Nations shall just rights enjoy,
The glorious triumphs of an Eskdale Boy.—

T T

London 30th Augt. 1831

Bibliographical Notes

- 1 [Brewster, Sir David] *The Edinburgh Review*, October 1839. No. CXXI.
- 2 *The Poetical Museum* (Hawick, 1784) and *The Scots Magazine* (according to the obituary notice on Telford in *The Annual Register*.)
- 3 Telford, Thomas. *Esk-dale: A Poem*. London, 1781. 4to, pp. 9.
- 4 Miller, Frank. *The Poets of Dumfriesshire*. 1910. (Miller thought *Esk-dale* to have been first published in 1795.)
- 5 [Southey, Robert] *The Quarterly Review*. Vol. LXII, 1839.
- 6 T[elford], T[homas] *Verses on reading an account of the death of Robert Burns, the Scotch poet*. 1796. Reprinted in Gibb's *The Story of Telford*.
- 7 Burns, Robert. *The Works of . . .* edited by Dr. J. Currie. Edinburgh, 1801. Vol. 1.
- 8 Gibb, Sir Alexander. *The Story of Telford*. 1935.
- 9 Malcolm, Sir John. *Miscellaneous Poems by Sir J— M—*. Bombay, 1829. pp. iii, 80. (pp. 77-80 of the author's presentation copy to his friend James Hogg comprise a "Prologue to *Quite Correct* performed at Poona, July, 1830", the year following the date on the title page. This copy, and probably Telford's as well, must have been printed at least in part after June 1830).
- 10 See *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 11 *Life of Thomas Telford . . .* edited by John Rickman. 1838.
- 12 Reports of Proceedings and List of Subscriptions already received [for the] Column proposed to be erected in Eskdale, Dumfriesshire, in honour of the late Major-General Sir John Malcolm. 1834. fo. pp. 4. (No imprint). Both this item and the MSS. of the poem are now in the writer's possession.
- 13 Holograph letter from Telford to Lt. Col. C. W. Pasley dated from London 21st April 1813. B.M. 41963f.94.
- 14 Kaye, John William. *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm, G.C.B., Late Envoy to Persia, and Governor of Bombay*. 1856. Vol. II.

*Two hundred copies printed
at The Tragara Press
October 1971*

ERRATA

Last page of preface, line 8, for *his* read *her*

The Tragara Press, Edinburgh

THE TRAGARA PRESS, established in Edinburgh in 1954 by Mr Alan Anderson, is named after that region of the island of Capri where Norman Douglas lived during his last years. Mr Anderson, who is knowledgeable on Norman Douglas bibliography, visited that writer there. A number of items have been produced at the Press, all from handset type and each of interest as our checklist shows, many from hitherto unprinted texts. Editions (for private distribution and not for sale generally) have been severely limited. In a few instances several copies have been printed on vellum. On those few occasions when copies have appeared on the second-hand market rather high prices have been obtained. At the time of writing printing machine equipment consists of a crown folio Arab powered platen press and a demy folio Albion handpress (Somerville & Combie, makers, Edinburgh). The handpress has been used only for proving purposes. Handmade paper is mostly employed and decorated paper wrappers from various sources are usual. The following checklist appears to include everything printed excepting ephemeras such as writing paper. Some bookplates have been produced.

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(Baskerville)
Notes on the Bibliography of Norman Douglas, by Cecil
Woolf. 95 printed; 1955. (Bembo)
The Berkshire Kennet, by Richard Aldington. 310 printed;
1955. (Baskerville.) Printed for the Peacocks Press, Hurst,
Berkshire
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The Tattered Outlaw, by John Talbot White. 65 printed;
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printed; 1960. (Baskerville)
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(Baskerville)