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Guide to the Joseph Ritson Collection

GEN MSS 76



by Diane J. Ducharme

December 1986

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
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CALL NUMBER: GEN MSS 76

CREATOR: Ritson, Joseph, 1752-1803

TITLE: Joseph Ritson collection

DATES: 1782-1824

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 1 linear foot (1 box) + 5 volumes

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The collection contains works by and about Ritson, a small quantity of correspondence, and the manuscript of the Bibliographia Scotica.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.ritson>

Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use in the Beinecke Library reading room, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.ritson>.

To order reproductions from this collection, please send an email with the call number, box number(s), and folder number(s) to beinecke.images@yale.edu.

Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Mrs. Bertrand H. Bronson, 1986.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

The Joseph Ritson Collection is the physical property of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Literary rights, including copyright, belong to the authors or their legal heirs and assigns. For further information, consult the appropriate curator.

Preferred Citation

Joseph Ritson Collection. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

JOSEPH RITSON (1752-1803)

Joseph Ritson was born at Stockton-on-Tees in 1752. Although his family was not prosperous, Ritson was articled to a Stockton solicitor and later to the conveyancer Ralph Bradley. He settled in London in 1775 as managing clerk to the firm of Masterman and Lloyd. In 1780 he began business as a conveyancer on his own, taking the Gray's Inn chambers that he occupied until his death. Ritson was appointed high bailiff of the liberty of the Savoy in 1784, and received a life patent of that post two years later.

While Ritson published a few articles on legal subjects, he is best known as an antiquarian and legal scholar. Despite poor health and nervous complaints, he produced many editions and essays, often employing a modified spelling system devised by himself. Between 1783 and 1793 he prepared a long series of anthologies of popular and local poetry, such as *The Caledonian Muse* (1785; published 1821) and *The Northumbrian Garland* (1793). He also published several collections of early English poetry, including *Pieces of Ancient Popular Poetry* (1791), *Robin Hood, a Collection...* (1795), and *Ancient English Metrical Romanceës* (1802), as well as the useful *Bibliographia Poetica* (1802), a useful collection of pre-1600 English poets with short accounts of the works.

Ritson's concern with historical and textual accuracy led him into several lengthy and acrimonious controversies with contemporary scholars, among them George Steevens, Joseph Malone, and John Pinkerton. His first scholarly publication, *Observations on...the 'History of English Poetry'* (1782), was harshly critical of Thomas Warton's interpretations of early English literature. He repeatedly charged Thomas Percy with publishing forged and garbled versions of traditional ballads. The same preoccupation, however, also led to his detection of the Ireland Shakespeare forgeries in 1795 and enabled him to assist Sir Walter Scott with *Border Minstrelsy*.

Ritson's health failed rapidly in his later years. His last publication was a defense of his lifelong vegetarianism, *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty* (1802). In September, 1803, he barricaded himself within his chambers and began to set fire to many of his manuscripts. He was removed to the house of Sir Jonathan Miles at Hoxton, where he died of paralysis of the brain on September 25, 1803.

[From: *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. xvi, p. 1213-17.]

Scope and Contents

The Joseph Ritson Collection contains manuscript and printed material by and about the eighteenth-century antiquarian Joseph Ritson. The material spans the dates 1782-1824.

The collection has been divided into three sections. The first section, *Joseph Ritson*, consists of three volumes and nine folders of works and letters by Ritson. Volume 1 is a first edition of *Bibliographia Poetica*, annotated in two hands which have been identified as Ritson's and his nephew's. Ritson's interest in Scottish literature is reflected in Volumes 2 and 3. Volume 2 is the autograph manuscript of his unpublished *Bibliographia Scotica*, which he described as "a catalogue of historians and poets, native to Scotland, with the titles of their respective works." The listings include Latin authors, works still in manuscript, and pieces which appeared only in periodicals. *Select Scottish Poems* is the binder's title of Volume 3, a composite work assembled from sheets of two of Ritson's unpublished anthologies. The work opens with ninety-six

pages titled *Select Scottish Poems*, followed by corrected and repaginated sheets of *The Caledonian Muse*, and four additional texts copied in Ritson's hand.

Letters by Ritson are located in Box 1, folders 2-9, and are largely devoted to bibliographical and literary subjects. An 1803 letter to George Chalmers contains questions about Scottish writers. Folders 8-9 hold transcripts of Ritson's letters to Joseph Cooper Walker. Topics include Irish literature; romances; Percy's ballads; spelling reform; the French Revolution; and Ritson's poor health and frequent depressions.

Section two consists of works by Ritson's biographer and colleague *Joseph Haslewood*. Volume 4 includes a printed copy and two manuscript drafts of Haslewood's 1824 life of Ritson. The more finished manuscript has been annotated and corrected by Thomas Park. Volume 4 also contains an index of Ritson's anthology of Percy's *Reliques*; the 1803 auction catalogue of Ritson's library; and several portraits and caricatures of Ritson. Volume 5 is another copy of Haslewood's biography, heavily annotated by Edith and T. G. Wright. The notes include information on the ladies mentioned in Ritson's "Verses Addressed to the Ladies of Stockton," and other biographical data.

Additional information on Ritson's life can be found in Section three, *Other Papers*. A short biographical sketch, tentatively attributed to Thomas Park, is located in folder 11. H. C. Selby's letter to Thomas Percy details rumors concerning Ritson's background, early unpopularity, and atheism. Folder 14 contains an account by Robert Smith of Ritson's final insanity, accompanied by a report by Selby of an interview with Smith.

Collection Contents

Joseph Ritson, 1752-1803

b. Vol. 1	<i>Bibliographia Poetica: A Catalogue of English Poets.</i> London. Ritson's copy, with annotations and additions. In original boards.	1802
b. Vol. 2	<i>Bibliographia Scotica: Anecdotes, Biographical and Literary, of Scottish Writers, Historians, and Poets, from the Earliest Accounts to the Nineteenth Century</i> Autograph manuscript. Bound in green morocco by Bedford.	n.d.
	<i>Observations on the Three First Volumes of the 'History of English Poetry,' in a Familiar Letter to the Author.</i> London. See: Volume 4.	
b. Vol. 3	<i>Select Scottish Poems</i> Composite volume: <i>Select Scottish Poems</i> , pp. 1-96, annotated. <i>The Caledonian Muse</i> , annotated and rearranged sheets, with omissions. Three poems, including one by Grainger and two by Burns, in Ritson's hand. Signature of Archibald Constable on the fly-leaf.	n.d.
b. 1, f. 1	<i>Sketch of the Authority of the Burgesses of Savoy</i>	1786
b. 1, f. 2-5	Four letters to George Chalmers.	1792-1803
b. 1, f. 6	Letter to George Ellis.	1803
b. 1, f. 7	Transcript of letter to William Laing.	1793
b. 1, f. 8-9	Transcripts of letters to Joseph Cooper Walker.	1789-1801
b. 1, f. 10	Receipt signed by Ritson as bailiff.	1791

Joseph Haslewood, 1769-1833

- b. Vol. 4 *Some Account of the Life and Publications of the Late Joseph Ritson, Esq.*
Two manuscript drafts, one annotated by Thomas Park. Printed copy. London, 1824.
- A Comprehensive Index to Ritson's Anthology of Percy's 'Reliques.'*
Manuscript.
- Bound with:
Ritson, Joseph. *Observations on the First Three...to the Author.* London, 1782. *Catalogue of the Entire and Curious Library of the Late Joseph Ritson, Esq. ...sold by auction by Leigh, Sotheby and son...December 5, 1803.* Engravings and silhouettes of Ritson. 1782-1824, n.d.
-
- b. Vol. 5 *Some Account of the Life and Publications of the Late Joseph Ritson, Esq.* London. 1824
T. G. Wright's copy, with manuscript notes and additions laid in. In original boards.
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Other Papers

	[Park, Thomas?]	
b. 1, f. 11	Manuscript of a biographical sketch of Ritson.	[1814?]
	Percy, Thomas	
b. 1, f. 12	Letter to Thomas Caldecott.	1804
	Selby, H. C.	
b. 1, f. 13	Letter to Thomas Percy.	1804
	Smith, Robert	
b. 1, f. 14	[Account of Ritson's insanity.] Autograph manuscript, with an addition to the account signed by H. C. Selby and addressed to Thomas Percy.	1804
	Gillray, James	
b. 1, f. 15	Engraving of Ritson. London: Baldwin and Co.	1819

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Authors, English -- 18th century
English literature -- Bio-bibliography
English literature -- Scottish authors
English literature -- Scottish authors -- History
and criticism
Mental illness

Geographic Names

Great Britain -- Intellectual life -- 18th century

Occupations

Authors

Names

Haslewood, Joseph, 1769-1833
Park, Thomas, 1759-1834
Percy, Thomas, 1729-1811
Ritson, Joseph, 1752-1803
Selby, Henry Collingwood
Smith, Robert