

Fake Burns manuscript scammers

Fake Robert Burns manuscripts, produced by an “affable” forger in Edinburgh 140 years ago, are still being used to make millions of pounds from unsuspecting collectors around the world, experts on the bard have revealed.

Burns wrote songs and poems right up until his death in 1796. As his reputation continued to grow around the world, the market for his handwritten manuscripts became highly lucrative.

In the 1880s, almost a century after Burns’ death, Edinburgh forger Alexander “Antique” Smith produced hundreds of manuscripts, which he sold on to booksellers, auctions, pawnshops and collectors.

He was caught and sentenced to 12 months in prison in 1893, but many of his counterfeits remain in circulation.

Now, with authentic Burns manuscripts worth up to tens of thousands of pounds each, scammers are cashing in on the fakes.

Professor Gerard Carruthers, co-director of the Centre for Robert Burns Studies (CBRS) at the University of Glasgow, reveals the scam in BBC Scotland series David Wilson’s Crime Files: Scams & Scandals, to be aired on Tuesday.

Prof Carruthers, who travels the world authenticating documents, said Smith's remarkable counterfeits still cause problems for collectors and experts alike.

He said: "I've made three trips this year abroad to look at documents that might or might not be genuine. Most recently I've been in New England 'helping' a collector who had hoped that his seven figure investment was genuine Burns and it turned out certainly to be 'Antique' Smith.

"In other words, even though Smith is now collectable in his own right, that seven figure sum has become at best a four figure sum.

"He'd been hustled. A guy in Texas had said to him 'you've got three days to buy this stuff, I've got another man interested'. The collector confessed to me 'even at the time I thought this doesn't ring true, I'm not sure there is this other man but I'd better grab this'.

"This was an experienced collector of autographs and historic bills so he knew the scene, he knows that forgery exists, he knows the scams but he still fell for it."

Alexander Howland Smith, born in 1859, grew up in Edinburgh's New Town. In the 1880s, while working as a clerk in an Edinburgh law office, he began visiting second hand book shops. He bought large batches of old books with blank fly leaves within the covers to create his counterfeits.

From around 1886, manuscripts purportedly from some of Scotland's greatest writers, including Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg and Robert Burns, began to appear for sale in bookshops across the capital.

The supposed historical documents were snapped up by collectors until 1891 when rumours began to circulate about forgeries and some owners sent their prized purchases for verification.

Smith's scheme began to unravel and the following year he was found guilty of knowingly selling and pawning his forgeries under false pretences.

He told police how he had been tasked by his employer to dispose of some old documents and, discovering they were valuable, had decided to sell them. When these papers ran out, he began to create forgeries.

He claimed that he could create any kind of document. In court, one shopkeeper described him as "brisk in movement and in manner, affable".

Prof Carruthers said Smith's fakes had threatened to "pollute" the records of what Burns did and did not write.

He added: "There's no doubt that American collectors, more than any other, since the 19th century have desired Robert Burns and that's where you find the biggest cache of genuine manuscripts and also fake ones.

"The biggest number of 'Antique' Smith manuscripts have to be found at the New York Public Library – 157 of them – and when they acquired those in the 1890s they thought they were genuine Burns of course and they decided we're going to mount a huge exhibition which they put in place.

"They found out the day before it was supposed to launch that they weren't exhibiting Robert Burns, they were exhibiting 'Antique' Smith, and they had to work through the night to replace that Burns/Smith exhibition with something else."

Dr Ralph McLean, Manuscripts Curator at the National Library of Scotland, said: "The first thing to say is that he was a reasonably good forger. If he was simply rubbish at forging, he would have been caught much earlier.

"He started off a few manuscripts here and there but as he became more successful and the money started to flow in he

turned it almost into an industry.

“It’s lucrative for Smith. He certainly makes money out of it and is probably able to make a living out of it for a short period of time.

“Unfortunately, because he was so prolific they do still turn up on the market. Oddly enough, he is collectable but certainly not to the extent that Burns is. You’re probably talking in the region of a few hundred pounds at most for a ‘genuine’ Antique Smith forgery.”

Dr McLean said there may be over 500 forgeries in circulation, but many contained clues that might “set alarm bells ringing” when attempting to differentiate an authentic Burns document from one of the infamous fakes.

These range from a “bluish hint” or roughness on paper used by Smith to the use of Burns’ signature on songs, poems and letters.

He added: “There are multiple copies of the Auld Lang Syne manuscript and we are fortunate at the library to possess one of those copies. It doesn’t unfortunately have the very famous first verse, but what we can say – and again as an indicator for its authenticity and this may sound counterintuitive – is that Burns does not sign his name at the bottom. He’d just write the poem or the song, whereas on forgeries, what Smith will do is he will always include Burns’ signature.”

* David Wilson’s Crime Files: Scams & Scandals, Counterfeit Art is on BBC Scotland, Tuesday November 14 at 10pm.

