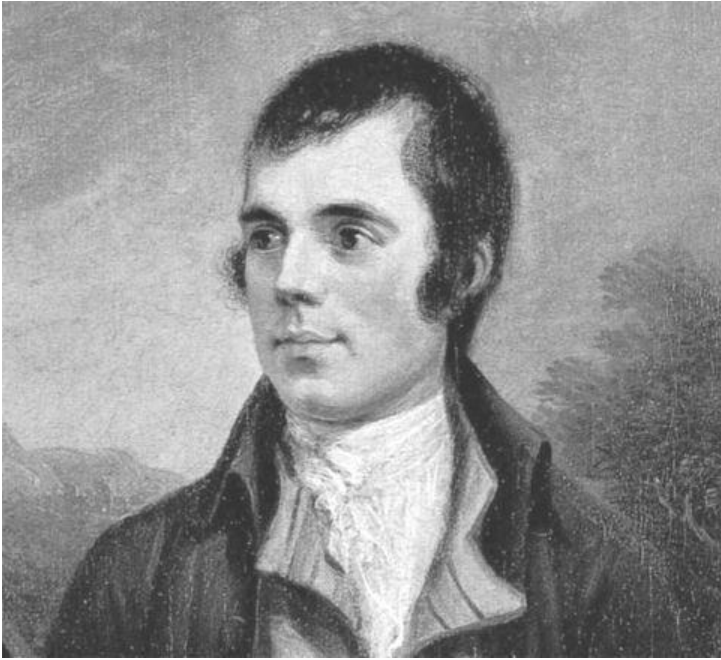


A TRIBUTE TO ROBERT BURNS



Robert Burns: January 25, 1759 – July 21, 1796

A transcript of the “Immortal Memory” given by David Hunter
at the “Oor Club” Burns Lunch on January 8, 2016



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Just seven days ago, as steeple bells ushered in the year 2016, multitudes from all over the world joined in to sing “Auld Lang Syne,” the international anthem of New Year’s Eve.

And on January 25, millions of people will be celebrating the 257th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns — the man who, in 1788, wrote the words of “Auld Lang Syne.”

So after all these years, just what is it about Robert Burns that has made him stand the test of time and become even more popular, more revered, and just as relevant today as he was over 200 years ago?

Well I suppose Burns will mean different things to different people, but the best explanation I’ve heard is that Burns was a man who said what we would like to have said, in a way we would liked to have said it!¹

And today we will often hear people quoting Burns quite possibly without even realizing it.

A few years ago, President Barack Obama could be heard saying ... “We in the African-American community have been at the receiving end of ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’”

This was a paraphrase of an earlier speech made by Dr. Martin Luther King back in the 1960’s but Dr. King, in turn, had taken the phrase “man’s inhumanity to man” from the Robert Burns poem “Man was made to Mourn.” And it’s a quote that has been used many times since.

John Steinbeck’s 1937 novel, a tragedy about two displaced migrant workers during the Great Depression, was entitled “Of Mice and Men” a phrase taken from the Robert Burns poem “To a Mouse” which he wrote after accidentally overturning a mouse’s nest with a plough:

Wee, sleeke², cowerin’, tim’rous beastie,
O, what panic’s in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa’ sae hasty,
Wi’ bickering brattle!³
I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee,
Wi’ murd’ring pattle!⁴

¹ Quote by Scottish actor John Cairney

² sleekeit = sly

³ brattle = clatter

⁴ pattle = plough blade

I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,⁵
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
Frae house or hald.⁶
To thole⁷ the winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch⁸ cauld!

But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,⁹
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men,
Gang aft agley,¹⁰
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear.

Now I'm sure many of you here know that Burns was born in Ayrshire, and that he eked out a living — first as a farmer and then as an excise man. You probably know of his reputation with the lassies. You no doubt will have heard of his utter disdain for authority, snobbery, pomposity and hypocrisy.

But in some strange way, you may also have a rather uncanny sense of feeling that somehow Burns knew you. That over time, the spiritual empathy that

⁵ stibble = stubble

⁶ house or hald = house or holding

⁷ thole = endure

⁸ cranreuch = hoar frost

⁹ thy-lane = alone

¹⁰ gang aft agley = often go awry

flowed from his words, seeped down through your emotions to lodge deep in the innermost depths of your soul — to resurface and resonate with you as you passed the many milestones on the journey of life.

If so, do you mind of the time when you first looked into the eyes of a wee newborn baby? Surely these words by Robert Burns would have been with you then:

Bonnie wee thing, cannie¹¹ wee thing,
Lovely wee thing wer't thou mine,
I wad wear thee in my bosom,
Lest my jewel I should tine.¹²

Wistfully, I look and languish
In that bonnie face of thine.
And my heart it stounds¹³ wi' anguish
Lest my wee thing be na mine.

Wit and Grace and Love and Beauty
In ae constellation shine!
To adore thee is my duty
Goddess o' this soul o' mine!

And for those of you who were born in Scotland, those of you made that monumental decision to pull up roots and leave your friends and family behind to start a new life here in Canada, Burns was with you as well just as he was with our early pioneers when they left their native shores:

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing the deer -
A-chasing the wild deer, and following the roe;
For my heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.

Farewell to the Highlands, farewell to the North
The birthplace of valour, the country of worth;
Wherever I wander, wherever I rove,
The hills of the Highlands for ever I love.

¹¹ cannie = delicate

¹² tine = lose

¹³ stounds = thrills with pleasure

Farewell to the mountains high cover'd with snow;
Farewell to the straths and green valleys below;
Farewell to the forests and wild-hanging woods;
Farwell to the torrents and loud-pouring floods.

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the Highlands a-chasing the deer
A-chasing the wild deer, and following the roe;
My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.

And for those of you who still hold auld Scotland near and dear to your hearts,
Burns is with you to set your sense of patriotism on fire with these immortal
words:

Scots, wha hae¹⁴ wi' Wallace bled,
Scots, wham Bruce has aftimes¹⁵ led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to victorie!

Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour;¹⁶
See approach proud Edward's power
Chains and slaverie!

Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave?
Let him turn and flee!

Lay the proud usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
Liberty's in every blow!
Let us do or dee!¹⁷

Is there, by any chance, anyone here who has done or said something they later
regretted? Aye! I thought so! Haven't we all. Well Burns was with us then too:

¹⁴ Scots wha hae = Scots who have

¹⁵ aftimes = often times

¹⁶ lour = look menacingly

¹⁷ do or dee = do or die

O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.¹⁸

As you all know, to be parted from a loved one of the hardest things to bear. It is indeed a test of true love and devotion. And Burns was no stranger to the emotions stirred up by separation whatever the cause:

Go, fetch to me a pint o' wine,
And fill it in a silver tassie;¹⁹
That I may drink before I go,
A service to my bonnie lassie.

The boat rocks at the pier o' Leith;
Fu' loud the wind blows frae the Ferry,²⁰
The ship rides by the Berwick-law,²¹
And I maun²² leave my bonnie Mary.

The trumpets sound, the banners fly,
The glittering spears are ranked ready:
The shouts o' war are heard afar,
The battle closes deep and bloody;

But it's no the roar o' sea or shore,
Wad mak me langer wish to tarry!
Nor shouts o' war that's heard afar—
It's leaving thee, my bonnie Mary!

And so it is through his words that we are given the key to understanding the life of Burns for nobody can provide an insight into Burns better than Burns himself.

I think Burns was a man who lived in his imagination. Can you imagine what must have been going through a mind like his driven into boredom by the repetitive tedium of work on the farm, at the mercy of wind, weather and the ceaseless demands of the seasons?

¹⁸ from the poem: To a louse

¹⁹ tassie = goblet

²⁰ Ferry = Queensferry (a town on the River Forth near Edinburgh)

²¹ Berwick-law = A hill overlooking the East Lothian town of North Berwick

²² maun = must

In my mind's eye, I see him after a hard day's work rushing home to grab pen and paper to jot down the words that had been swirling around in his head all throughout the day.

And what epic words these are:

“A cup of kindness” from Auld Lang Syne

“Nursing her wrath to keep it warm!” from “Tam o' Shanter”

“Some are full o' love divine, some are full o' brandy!” from “The Holy Fair”

Or from “The Cotter's Saturday Night:”

From scenes like these, auld Scotia's grandeur springs
That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad:
Princes and lords are but the breath o' kings,
An honest man's the noblest work of God

Burns was a man who used the old Scottish vernacular — the language of the common people. It has been said that his poetry... “is the only example in history of a language made classic by the genius of a single man.”²³

But sometimes we come across some words of Burns that we just can't make any sense of. His poem, “Whistle o'er the lave o't!” is a good example of this. “Whistle o'er the lave o't” literally means: Whistle over the rest of it — but it's an obsolete and archaic term and nowadays we would replace it with something like, “C'est la vie!” or “Tough! Get over it!”

Here's the poem. It's one that Burns wrote to sympathize with a married friend, one whose days of youthful infatuation had long since passed away along with any notion he might have had of being the boss in his own house!

First when Maggie was my care,
Heav'n, I thought, was in her air,
Now we're married — speir nae mair,²⁴
So whistle o'er the lave o't!

²³ From a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson

²⁴ speir nae mair = ask no more

Meg was meek, and Meg was mild,
Sweet and harmless as a child-
Wiser men than me's beguil'd;
So whistle o'er the lave o't!

Who I wish were maggot's meat,
Dish'd up in her winding-sheet,²⁵
I could write — but Meg maun²⁶ see't!
So whistle o'er the lave o't!

But what else did Burns have to say? What other words of his have touched our hearts and tugged at our emotions?

Burns was a close observer of human nature — a man who used humour and pathos to make us alternate between being... “all kind o’ smiley round the lips, and teary round the lashes.”²⁷

Burns, of course, was the consummate romantic, the great lover, and there are few among us, untouched by these immortal lines:

My love is like a red, red, rose
That’s newly sprung in June.
My love is like a melody,
That’s sweetly played in tune.

But the course of love does not always run smooth as expressed by Burns in these lines, inspired by separation from a loved one:

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, alas, for ever!
Had we never loved sae kindly,
Had we never loved sae blindly,
Never met, or never parted,
We wad ne'er been broken-hearted.

Burns, of course, experienced and wrote about the excitement, passion and intensity of youthful love — all too often rather short-lived. But he also witnessed and wrote about a much more enduring type of love: that unflinching tender loving kindness shared by couples throughout the whole of their life as he expressed so well in this poem:

²⁵ winding sheet = A sheet in which a corpse is wrapped

²⁶ maun = might

²⁷ Quote is from the novel “Oxley” by “Lyndon” published in 1873 by Scribner, Armstrong & Co., New York

John Anderson my jo,²⁸ John,
When we were first acquent,²⁹
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonnie brow was brent;³⁰
But now your brow is beld,³¹ John,
Your locks are like the snow,
But blessings on your frosty pow,³²
John Anderson, my jo!

John Anderson my jo, John,
We climbed the hill thegither,³³
And monie a cantie³⁴ day, John,
We've had wi' yin anither;
Now we maun totter doon,³⁵ John,
And hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep thegither at the foot,
John Anderson, my jo!

And while on this topic, here is one of his poems that I hold especially dear to my heart:

O' a' the airts³⁶ the wind doth blaw,
I dearly love the west,
For there the bonnie lassie lives,
The lassie I love best:
There wild-woods grow, and rivers row,³⁷
And mony a hill between;
But day and night my fancy's flight
Is ever wi' my Jean.

I see her in the dewy flowers,
I see her sweet and fair:
I hear her in the tuneful birds,

²⁸ jo = darling

²⁹ acquent = acquainted

³⁰ brent = smooth

³¹ beld = bald

³² pow = pate

³³ thegither = together

³⁴ cantie = happy

³⁵ maun totter doon = must hobble down

³⁶ airts = directions

³⁷ row = run

I hear her charm the air:
There's no a bonnie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw,³⁸ or green,³⁹
There's no a bonnie bird that sings,
But minds me o' my Jean.

Burns lived in Scotland in the 1700's when human existence was a hard and precarious affair and the loss of loved ones a harsh fact of life. Who has not been moved by the poignancy of these lines?

Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon,⁴⁰
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?
How can ye chant, ye little birds,
And I sae weary, fu' o' care!

Ye break my heart, thou warbling bird,
That wantons⁴¹ through the flowering thorn!
Thou minds me o' departed joys,
Departed, never to return.

Burns lived at a time of monumental change. Revolution was in the air in both the American colonies and in France. Burns's poem "Is There for Honest Poverty" captures the essence of this period and has become famous for its expression of egalitarian ideas of society. It was sung at the opening of the new Scottish Parliament in May, 1999 and contains these famous lines:

Then let us pray that come it may
(as come it will for a' that)
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth
Shall bear the gree⁴² and a' that
For a' that an' a' that
It's coming yet for a' that
That man to man, the world o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that

Liberty, equality and fraternity were indeed noble objectives, but Burns went one step further when he wrote:

³⁸ shaw = woods

³⁹ green = grassy place

⁴⁰ Doon = the River Doon near the town of Ayr

⁴¹ wantons = wanders with no respect

⁴² bear the gree = take priority

While Europe's eye is fixed on mighty things,
The fate of empires and the fall of kings;
While quacks of State must each produce his plan,
And even children lisp the Rights of Man;
Amid this mighty fuss just let me mention,
The Rights of Woman should merit our attention.

257 years after his birth, the legacy of Burns lives on — just as it did on the 100th anniversary of his birth when, speaking of his memory, Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

“Every name in old Scotland keeps his fame bright. The memory of Burns — every man, woman and child carries snatches of his songs, which they know by heart.

“The wind whispers them, the birds whistle them, the corn, barley, and bulrushes rustle them, nay, the music-boxes at Geneva are framed and toothed to play them; the hand-organs of all the great cities repeat them, and the chimes of bells ring them in the spires.”

So ladies and gentlemen let us now raise our glasses in our toast to Robert Burns; his life was short but his words live on. They have become the property and solace of this wonderful world of ours.

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