

ROBERT BURNS

It is remarkable, in retrospect, that it is a poet who is Scotland's national hero. Most other countries make do with politicians and war heroes, but that Scotland chooses a poet is so unusual - especially given our reputation for starting a row in a cemetery - or on reflection, perhaps, maybe because of our reputation for starting a row in a cemetery. After all, Burns's greatest ballad poem was set in such a cemetery, Kirk Alloway, in Tam O' Shanter.

Burns lived a very short life: merely 37 years, from 1759 to 1796, and it is the 250th anniversary of his birth that we celebrate this evening.

Why then should we honour a man who lived so long ago? What on earth would he have to say to us here and now?

I think that there are 3 main reasons why Burns is important to us in the 21st century.

1. The first is the one which has attracted most attention: praise and condemnation - his rather colourful life: David Daiches once commented that: *'he linked love, sex and parenthood in a way no other poet has done: he rejoiced in all three'*. He wrote about simple things: about a mouse (*wee sleekit, cowerin' timorous beastie*), about a louse: sitting behind a young woman in church on a Sunday, and not having his attention on the sermon, he noticed a head louse roaming over its domain in the bows and ribbons of her hat, and hair

*How daur ye set your fit upon her -- Sae **fine** a lady! Gae somewhere else and seek your dinner On some **poor** body*

The point is that Burns was using a simple, somewhat comical event to make a wider point:

'O wad some Power the giftie gie us to see oursels as ithers see us! It wad frae monie a blunder free us, An' foolish notion: What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us, An' ev'n devotion!

One senses, perhaps, that the unfortunate young woman was one of Burns's few failures in the seduction stakes. What had she done to enter the annals of poetic infamy, one wonders?

He wrote elsewhere about rank hypocrisy; about getting your own back against the 'Holy Willies' - I guess what Americans would call the 'Holy Joes' - of this world:

Holy Willie's Prayer captures the thunderous hypocrisy which makes us wince in recognition:

Lord hear my earnest cry and prayer

*Against the presbytery of Ayr
Thy strong right hand, Lord, make it bare
Upon their heads,
Lord weigh it down, and dinna spare, for **their** misdeeds.*

And then ...

*But Lord remember **me and mine**
Wi' mercies temp'ral and divine
That I for gear and grace may shine,
Excelled by nane,
An' a' the glory shall be thine,
Amen, Amen*

2. Burns was also the essence of ambiguity, a condition quite well known to us Scots:

- A male chauvinist, who would give a pig a very bad name, who could put his finest love songs into the mouths of women he had loved and left (a series of leaving presents so numerous that one wonders how he had the stamina);
- Something of a plagiarist who took the crumbling fragments of his nation's folk songs, and by restoration and judicious rewriting, made them his own.
- A poet who switched effortlessly between Scots and standard English as it suited him, and left stanzas so well known that most folk have forgotten where they came from:
This, from Tam o' Shanter:
But pleasures are like poppies spread, you seize the flow'r, its bloom is shed, or like the snow falls in the river, a moment white -then gone forever'.

In standard English, and then it's as if there is another Burns when he describes the kirk scene:

*As Tammie glowr'd, amazed and curious,
The mirth and fun grew fast and furious;
The piper loud and louder blew;
The dancers quick and quicker flew;
They reel'd, they set, they crossed and cleekit,
Till ilka carlin swat and reekit,
And coost her duddies to the wark,
And linket at it in her sark.*

Burns had little doubt about who he was, but he did recognise the Scottish condition of 'being between', of managing and negotiating what it meant to live in a stateless nation which had so recently lost its parliament:

*O, would, or I had seen the day
that Treason thus could sell us,
My old grey head had lain in clay*

*(be buried) with Bruce and loyal Wallace!
But pith and power, till my last hour
I will make this declaration :-
'We are bought and sold for English gold'-
Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!*

3. **Burns was of course a political poet** who lived through and in the two great revolutions of his time: the American one in 1776, and the French in 1789. That a 'man's a man' was sung at the opening of our parliament on 1st July 1999, and indeed, played at Donald Dewar's funeral little over a year later, is testament to his modernity.

Burns wrote this, possibly his greatest poem, at a time – 1795 – of major political panic and personal danger, and war with revolutionary France. Remember that Burns was a government employee by this time – an exciseman, a customs officer in Dumfries, who would lose his job, and possibly his head, if he had expressed his republican sympathies. As far as we know, he never allowed this poem to appear in print with his signature. He was in constant danger of being 'outed', and he ran many risks, as he had to show his loyalty by joining the Royal Dumfries Volunteers, the local militia.

The poem is manifestly seditious. I saw recently that yon birkie ca'd a lord, Prince Charles, has taken to reciting Burns; not this one, to my knowledge ...

*Is there for honest Poverty
That hings his head, an' a' that;
The coward slave-we pass him by,
We dare be poor for a' that!
For a' that, an' a' that.
Our toils obscure an' a' that,
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The Man's the gowd for a' that.*

*What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hoddin grey, an' a' that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;
A Man's a Man for a' that:
For a' that, and a' that,
Their tinsel show, an' a' that;
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor,
Is king o' men for a' that.*

*Ye see yon birkie, ca'd a lord,
Wha struts, an' stares, an' a' that;
Tho' hundreds worship at his word,
He's but a coof for a' that:
For a' that, an' a' that,*

*His ribband, star, an' a' that:
The man o' independent mind
He looks an' laughs at a' that.*

*A prince can mak a belted knight,
A marquis, duke, an' a' that;
But an honest man's abon his might,
Gude faith, he maunna fa' that!
For a' that, an' a' that,
Their dignities an' a' that;
The pith o' sense, an' pride o' worth,
Are higher rank than a' that.*

*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 gree, an' 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.*

The poet and academic Robert Crawford in his splendid recent biography of Burns, *The Bard*, observes:

'Burns's glory as a political poet lies in a democratic impulse subtly inflected in ways that are republican and Scottish nationalist. This makes him awkward for the British Establishment which has constantly tried to tame him.' (2009:406)

So what do we make of Burns?

Burns is probably a more important national icon than Scotland's patron saint, St Andrew, but possibly just as accreted in myth. Burns Suppers grew up as a way whereby his friends remembered his life and exploits after his death: a kind of panegyric which grew rapidly into something of a hagiography (proving of course that religion is never very far away in Scotland: secular saints (and sinners) as the order of the day.

The Burns cult which grew up from the 19th century was often misogynistic and masonic, couthy and self-satisfied, and rightly excoriated by the likes of Hugh Macdiarmid: Burns Suppers attended by '*nocht but zoologically men*'. He says in a *Drunk Man*.

*A greater Christ, a greater Burns may come,
The maist they'll dae is to gie bigger pegs
To folly and conceit to hank their rubbish on.
They'll change folks talk but no their nature, fegs!*

Macdiarmid, though, was hugely influenced in *A Drunk Man* by Tam o' Shanter; imitation as the most sincere form of flattery. It was Macdiarmid, not Burns, who proposed as his own tombstone epitaph: *'a disgrace to the community'*, but it would have been just as appropriate for Burns. - just as Norman McCaig would have liked Macdiarmid's death marked, not by 2 minutes' silence but by *'2 minutes pandemonium'*.

Like Macdiarmid, not all Burns poetry is memorable. Indeed, some is almost sub-McGonigall- but that is a contradiction in terms. Consider this paen to our fair city:

*Edina! Scotia's darling seat
All hail thy palaces and towers
Where once beneath a monarch's feet
Sat legislation's sovereign powers.*

- not, I think you'll agree, his best, but obviously something designed to pay the rent, and to ingratiate himself into the lairds and notables in Edinburgh when he first came in 1787. As Robert Crawford witheringly observes: *'This sounds unthinkingly high-falutin'*. (p.245)

On the other hand, at its best, Burns' poetry is, in the words of David Daiches, a *'combination of emotional integrity of folk tradition, the literary richness and maturity of the 'art' tradition of older Scots literature, and lessons of craftsmanship that he drew from classical English literature that is working in Burns' greatest poetry'*.

Anyone who can write *'ae fond kiss'*, *'bonnie wee thing'*, *'address to the unco guid'*, *'the twa dugs'*, *'rattling roaring willie'*, *'tam o' shanter'*, and *'john anderson my jo'* (in its unexpurgated form of course) can be forgiven the maudlin *'Cottar's Saturday night'* (which was dinned into us at school and has become, in the words of the authors of the Canongate Burns, an Ark of the Covenant of all things kailyard. I think somewhere in the deep files of the SQA I have a Higher English answer on that).

To those who think what he wrote was easy, however, let them heed Burns' own observation: *'those who think that composing a Scotch song is a trifling business - let them try'*.

And again: *'I have ever observed that once people who have nothing to say have fairly set out, they know not when to stop'*.

In the last few years, we have seen successful attempts to recover the radical Burns from the wastes of couthy kailyardism. Those with long memories may recall that in the days when we had a Tory government, the Scottish Tory politician Ian Lang who became Scottish Secretary of State back in the Thatcher times once replied to Dennis Canavan's reciting of Burns in a PQ, by quoting triumphantly from the *'Dumfries Volunteers'* (not one of Rabbie's greatest; it begins with the lines: *'Does haughty Gaul invasion threat, then let the loons beware, sir!'*

Unionists had dug up the lines: *'be Britain still to Britain true among oursels united'* as proof that Burns was really one of them (one of us, as the lady would have said). Burns - a jolly good Scot - as she said of Adam Smith. It seems to get worse: Burns, they claimed, was a monarchist: take the lines *'who will not sing God Save the King shall hang as high's the steeple'*. The problem -like the inexperienced student essay writer, is that it is a partial quote, and misses out the crucial bits.

'be Britain still to Britain true among oursels united' continues as follows *'for never but by British hands maun British wrongs be righted'* - an appeal to government to sort out its own mess. Similarly, the lines *'who will not sing God Save the King shall hang as high's the steeple'* are followed by *'but while we sing God save the King, we'll never forget The People!'* Burns was merely being very circumspect, and writing in coded language lest he lose his stipends, and worse, his head, at a time of political panic in the land - much as dissidents under communism in Eastern Europe did later. You had to speak and write in coded language; make statements thirled in allegory.

We have since recovered Burns as the man of the people, the author of 'a man's a man for a' that'. As Robert Crawford said:

'Born poor, unable to vote, a villager denied much formal education, in his very tone of address, his attitude to authority, his commitment to common humanity and his consummate, learned skill with the formal and informal music of words, Burns made himself a wonderful love poet and the greatest poet of democracy'. (p.14)

A Scot, Burns has become just that – the great poet of democracy; celebrated in many countries from the United States (it is said there are more statues to him there than to any other person, and not simply because he refused to fight the ‘rebels’ at Bunker Hill during the revolutionary war); as well as in the former Soviet Union where, I believe, they went in for very long, and rambling Burns Suppers in Russian (and many, many toasts with vodka).

In this year of *The Homecoming* 2009, the 250th anniversary of our greatest poet and patriot, I ask you then to be upstanding and toast the immortal memory in words Burns meant us to toast. I give you **The People**.