

## Immortal Memory

On this day in 1759 (261 years ago) Robert Burns was born in Ayrshire, Scotland. We are here tonight to commemorate and to celebrate his birth, and his lasting contributions to the world's poetry. And those contributions were packed into a small number of years. He died in 1796.

To steal a line from musical comedy genius Tom Lehrer, it is a sobering thought that when Burns was my age he had been dead for 23 years. He was only 37.

His family struggled to make ends meet as tenant farmers on poor lands. Burns left formal schooling at the age of 9. In 1786, his first book of poetry was published (at age 27) and this conferred a certain amount of celebrity upon him. After marrying Jean Armour in 1788 they moved to a farm in Dumfriesshire. The farm was soon found to have soil too exhausted to support crops, and as a result Burns found employment in the Customs & Excise travelling more than 200 miles a week on horseback, often in the pouring rain. And remember, the Scots have more words for types of rain than skiers do for types of snow – there would have been rain! Tough to find the time to write with this schedule, but somehow he did.

Burns died on 21 July 1796 and 10,000 people attended his funeral.

Now 261 years is a long time to be remembering a person or an event and this has led me to muse about *why* this occasion should be so persistent. As I prepared to give this Immortal Memory Toast, I reflected on the nature of longevity.

Why is Burns immortal? Why has his work lasted? Why have Burns suppers today?

There are three obvious reasons to consider: (1) his poetry, or (2) the exotic Scottish cultural trappings, or (3) his bad-boy celebrity appeal, and troubled life.

I'll start with (3). It is a conundrum when composing a toast to Burns to address his own behaviour - particularly with regard to women. He seems to have been responsible for no fewer than thirteen children with five women in 11 years. The stance I'll take here is that we are not here to be instructed by him on matters of how to live our lives with his life as a role model. We gain insight into the human condition by reading his poetry.

Probably the most reasonable message to draw from many artist's lives is "it couldn't have been easy to be them." Yet look what they achieved. Let's leave the soap-operatic home life at home, and turn to the works themselves.

So, I would argue that it's not because of his multiple romances and early death that the celebrations continue. His is not the legacy of a James Dean or Jim Morrison.

Nor, to turn to (2), I would argue, is it the exotic Scottish trappings of the event (bagpipes, haggis, single malt scotch whisky; Lowland Scots; kilts) which make it enduring. If it were just celebrating things Scottish, we might expect Ian Rankin or Alistair McCall Smith dinners. And, as much as I love their work, I don't think we'll see those.

Also, when cultural traditions are appropriated by the mainstream to mark an occasion we see a watering down and transformation of the traditions. Think green beer and St Patrick's day. Today we have REAL haggis, bagpipes, kilts, Scots, and whisky).

Now the Lowland Scots dialect may be a bit of a double-edged sword (or *sgian-dubh*). By writing in the local vernacular, Burns connected with a local audience with immediacy. The dialect was a bridge. But it can also be a wall to those who find it, at first, impenetrable. Charles Mackay traces much of Lowland Scots to Flemish and Low Dutch who notes that in a glossary of the works of Chaucer there are 'over 6,000 words which need explanation to modern English readers, but fully half of which need no explanation to a Scotsman.'

The dialect wall, however, can be scaled, and once the meaning is understood then the language is a vehicle to convey that meaning. Think of the famous lines from *To A Mouse*, "the best laid plans o' mice and men gang aft agley". Once you know that 'gang aft agley' is something like 'go oft askew' then you have cracked the code, and when you hear the lines, the meaning touches your heart.

So, why is Burns immortal? I'll go with (#1): because he touches and transforms us when we read his poetry. Even poetry written over two hundred years ago, in a far-off land.

This idea is what underlies Shakespeare's sonnet 18 written a hundred years before Burns.

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:*

*But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

So long as Burns poetry, way with words, and observations of the nature of humanity lives, then he will live too.

Burns was deft at portraying Scottish life with all its foibles front and centre. Remember, this is the country which coined the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320 (honoured now with Tartan Day here in Victoria) to stop the English from harassing them by asking "to leave us Scots in peace, who live in this poor little Scotland, beyond which there is no dwelling-place at all, and covet nothing but our own."

This is the vaunted homeland: *poor little Scotland*. No land of hope or glory. No home of the brave.

For Burns, the reality of life was often explored by bursting the class constructs of high and low. It didn't matter whether you were a high man or woman or a low man or woman. In *The Twa Dogs* – a poem narrated by two dogs, one Caesar – a dog of the gentry, the other Luath, a simple ploughman's collie --Caesar notes:

*Lord, man, were ye but whiles whare I am,  
The gentles, ye wad ne'er envy them!  
It's true, they need na starve or sweat,  
Thro' winter's cauld, or simmer's heat:  
They've nae sair wark to craze their banes,  
An' fill auld age wi' grips an' granes:  
But human bodies are sic fools,  
For a' their colleges an' schools,  
That when nae real ills perplex them,  
They mak enow themsel's to vex them;  
A country fellow at the pleugh,  
His acre's till'd, he's right eneugh;*

*A country girl at her wheel,  
Her dizzen's dune, she's unco weel;*

.....

*There's some exceptions, man an' woman;  
But this is gentry's life in common.*

So don't wish you were high-class; in fact it's better to be a dog than a person, for he concludes:

*When up they gat an' shook their lugs,  
Rejoic'd they werena men but dogs;*

While the high and low classes were socially important, he was quick to point out that these distinctions were not profound or vital. In *To A Louse* he describes the fine lady who has a louse crawling on her unbeknownst to herself.

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

.....

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,*

Robert Burns. He wrote of the potential of all people, and the poignancy of potential unfulfilled.

He was a socially progressive citizen.

*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;  
Their tinsel show an' a' that;  
The honest man, tho' e'er sae poor  
Is king o' men for a' that.*

He was a romantic.

*My love is like a red, red rose,  
That's newly sprung in June....  
As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in luv am I:  
And I will luv thee still my dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.*

"Till all the seas gang dry". A line read at my mother's funeral.

I can still hear my father's voice (with his own Lowland Scots accent) as he recited lines of Burns, unfiltered Buckingham cigarette in one hand, stroking a West Highland White terrier with the other.

Burns' lines of poetry run deep in my family; deep in my heart. I read *To a Mouse* at my father's funeral. And this is a poem which has many modern-day resonances. The poet describes a scene where a plough disrupts a mouse's home in a field:

*I'm truly sorry man's dominion has broken Nature's social union.*

What better anthem for the environmental movements today.

And when he sympathizes with the mouse that *the best laid schemes o' mice AND men gang aft agley, and lea' us nought but grief and pain for promised joy*, he may be talking of his own life, but he is also surely talking about the lives of many people, both rich and poor.

Like many traditions and rituals, a Burns supper honouring the poetry of the man himself has a deep humanistic core. His poetry reflected the dignity and value of everyone who didn't put on airs, or think too highly of themselves. From mouse, to dog, to farmer. He embodied *humility*.

Ten years before he died, he wrote a poem called *A Bard's Epitaph* where he clearly captures some of his own sensitivities when he invites the visitor to his grave to

*...drap a tear...heave a sigh....survey this grave....[and note that the poet ] keenly felt the friendly glow, and softer flame...."*

But he also had some reservations about his legacy, and what he had accomplished over his lifetime, when he writes:

*but thoughtless follies laid him low, and stain'd his name!*

But here we are 234 years after he wrote those lines, still celebrating his name, and his verse. If only some Power had gi'en him the gift to see himself as others see him in 2020.

With great pleasure, I offer the toast... to the Bard of Ayr... to the Immortal Memory of Robbie Burns.