

Robert, Jean & Burns Night

About the Bard (1759-1796)

Robert Burns, Scotland's greatest poet, was born on Thursday, 25th January 1759 in a two roomed thatched cottage in Alloway, near Ayr where his father, William Burnes, ran a small market garden. Burnes senior came from the north-east of Scotland descending from a line of poor farmers. Robert was to drop the 'e' from the name and become Burns.

Googling 'Robert Burns' gave us more than 1,800,000 results and there are over 1000 books written about our Robert. There have been countless 'Immortal Memories' delivered at Burns Suppers since the first celebration in 1801 at the family home in Alloway.

The debate rages about the type of person he was. Was he a whisky swilling womaniser? A romantic poet? A political radical? Or a ploughman poet? In truth probably all of the above and much more. Whatever your preferred personality, Burns is rooted in the heart and soul of Scotland and is a cultural icon around the world.

Jean Armour, Mrs Robert Burns (1765-1834)

Jean Armour's story began in the little village of Mauchline in Ayrshire where she was born on 25th February 1765, being the second oldest child in a family of eleven!! Who would have thought that Jean's first encounter with Robert Burns, way back in 1784 on her drying green in Mauchline would later lead to her worldwide recognition! Life in the eighteenth century was tough for Robert and Jean and despite Robert's many wanderings, Jean's love for her husband never wavered. As well as bringing up their own children, Jean brought up Robert's illegitimate daughter as one of her own. After Robert's passing, Jean was to become as well-known as the man himself, something which she never sought. She was well respected in the market town of Dumfries where she spent the 38 years of her widowed life until she passed away on 26th March 1834. An excellent read is the book entitled Jean Armour, My Life and Times with Robert Burns, edited by Peter J Westwood and presented as if written by Bonnie Jean herself.

Burns Night

Each year on January 25th, Scots everywhere take time out to honour a national icon.

Whether it's a full-blown Burns Supper or a quiet drink with friends, Burns Night is a night for all Scots but how did it all begin?

On 21st July 1796 Scotland mourned the loss of its beloved Ploughman Poet. Five years after his untimely death at the age of 37 a group of his friends and followers in Greenock set up the first Burns Club, known today as the 'Mother Club', to celebrate the Bard's Life & Works.

The first Burns celebration was held on the 5th anniversary of his death in 1801 in the house where he was born in Alloway. Following this tribute to Burns it was then decided to move the event to the anniversary of his birth. The following year the first Burns Supper was held on 29th January, becoming the first Burns Night and Burns Supper. However, in 1803, a search of the Ayr parish records confirmed the bard's birth date to be 25th January 1759.

Click on 'Read more...' below to see the winners of our 2009 Budding Bards Competition.

The winners of the 250th Anniversary of Robert Burns's Birth

'Budding Bards' Competition in 2009.

If Robert Burns is gazing down on us today then he would surely be proud of our Budding Bards! What a fantastic array of verse and although we are unable to feature all of them here, we have chosen six of the best, so to speak!!

First past the post was a difficult decision so our judges decided to offer a "joint first" and thus the prizes were awarded to our Budding Bards from Canada and Scotland!

John and Bob were the lucky winners of a Robert Burns Anniversary Gift Set and a selection of Robert Burns' goodies including Anniversary Stamps and a wee dram!!

John Beaton, Qualicum Beach,

British Columbia, Canada

Immortal Memory

(for Robert Burns)

The twenty-fifth of January,
1759 A.D.,
brings you into this world, a wee
and helpless bairn,
as Scotland's hope stands hopelessly:
Culloden's cairn.

You live on farms and grow up poor
in penuries that fast inure
men to the plough and stony moor
to scrape a living
from land few farmers can endure—
harsh, unforgiving.

And yet you find small ways to heed
the beauty of that land, to read
its books, its lines, its lore, its breed
of common people
buckled beneath the crushing creed
of laird and steeple.

Your nineteenth birthday—now you link
the joy of words, the work of drink;
you make Tarbolton Inn-mates think
in what you dub
to be a common man's—clink, clink—
debating club.

And you rebel, your sword the pen,
wielded with fiery acumen,

and beard the lions in their den—
the church and gentry—
in bold defense of working men,
their saint and sentry.

You raise the cotter's head up high,
compare drunk Tam to kings and try
false Holy Willie for his lie;
you claim the clan
of humans is ennobled by
the honest man.

Young women worship what you say
and lie with you in summer hay
then bear your brood the following May
when you can't stop
the cultivation then in play
for next year's crop.

So many loves to kiss, enthrall,
and catch as in your arms they fall—
you portion solace to them all
with vows in songs
that part of you, on some fair knoll,
to each belongs.

But in the end it's death you fight—
lost infants, loves, your body's blight—
and, as you do, you write and write
throughout your strife
and universalize the plight
of burning life.

No man can tether time or tide
so off on Tam's gray mare you ride
across Hell's barren countryside
where you compose
a song of hope and plant with pride
one red, red rose.

Rab, look at what you've left behind—
a nation's heritage defined
by peopled landscapes of the mind;
we laud your birth
as yet your old Scots verses bind
the world's worth.

Bob Carruth, Paisley Burns Club, Scotland

Rabbie's comin hame

High heid yins want a homecomin
wae muckle clatter, an unco din.
They're ca'in Scotia's kith and kin
their roots proclaim.
This nicht, the party shall begin.
Rabbie's comin hame.

Whit sights and sounds await oor muse?
Shortbreed tins and hielan' coos,
Donald Trump in tartan trews
wud bring disdain.
Caber-tossin, it wud bemuse.

Rabbie's comin' hame.

Jock Tamson's bairns huv taken root.

Noo, worldwide runs oor repute

Fur worthy, cultural pursuit

tae high acclaim.

An whyles, we like tae tak a toot.

Rabbie's comin' hame.

Lang times pas't since his creation.

This national celebration

must generate inspiration

in oor Bard's name.

Let us tell the Scottish nation

Rabbie's comin' hame.

Four wins hae scattered Alba's seed

yet lang endures oor nation's creed.

Tae reinvigorate we need

tae licht the flame.

Wha's like us, damn few, an' they're deid.

Rabbie's comin' hame.

But here in Paisley's hallow'd ha'

Monie a year we've heard the ca'

An' Scotia's greatest yin of aw

Needs no reclaim.

Fur us, he's never bin awa.

Rabbie's aye bin hame.

Jeremy, originally from Edinburgh and now living in Boston submitted the following fantastic verse:

Jeremy Bell, Boston, USA

'Address to the Tin of Haggis'

Fair fa' your alu-minium face,

Great chieftain of the tin-can race.

Other haggis call ye a disgrace

Of processed fare .

But the test of the puddin' is in the taste

So lets compare!!

There's one Boston deli that will sell

Imported haggis - stomach as well!

It's January, and they can tell

Your time of need.

Nineteen ninety-nine a pound

Pure Yankee greed!

But every year someone complains

'That haggis gave me stomach pains

I was on the toilet with the faints,

Thought I would die!

Felt like I had cultured strains

Of E. coli!

Now mark the tinned haggis man

No stomach lining in this can

All good beef cooked in a pan

If you please

Saturated fat is better than

Mad cow disease!

Now horn for horn they stretch and strave

Deil take the oven – I microwaved!

Add some water, make a paste

In covered dish.

Five minutes on high, add salt to taste!

Oh how delish!

Is there that ow're his Campbell soup?

That condensed mushroom looks like gloop!

Or ramen that would make you spew

Ashamed - you oughta!

Rice-a-roni's instant glue

Just add hot water!

But young kids they will eat that trash

Packet soup, its salty mash!

They'll not touch broccoli for cash

And are sent to bed.

But down the stairs like floods they dash

For Mac and Ched!

Try ser-ving Haggis to the weans,

They would rather eat a dead sheep's brains

So if they ask, just never tell

What's in the dish.

'Ach its all the meat we couldna sell

To the English!'

"Warm reeking, rich" – these words did jot

Wasn't the only thing Burns liked hot!

Gonorrhoea he finally caught

And that's a fact.

May auld acquaintance be forgot?

'Till tests come back!

So ye powers, I'm talking of McSweans.

Some must get their produce by any means.

They smuggle haggis in the seams

Of their coat lining.

And all the year they have Burn's night dreams

Of finest dining!

Smuggle haggis in? I'll not dare!

I travel with 'nothing to declare'

Don't need an officers stinking glare

And jaup me luggage!

And so I hope that you're prepared

To toast tinned Haggis!

Close to home here in Falkirk, Colin produced a verse for thought:

Colin Ferguson, Grangemouth, Scotland

Sign of the Times

Global warming and the ozone layer

Flash floods tsunamis and still theres mair

earthquakes tornadoes and storms ca,d freak

ice caps are meltin twad mak ye seek

its aw mans doin and its just no fair

whats gonna happen to yon polar bear

x box , playstations, nintendo wii
sat navs, i pods and plasma tv
mobile phones and internet
japanese cartoons and a virtual pet
noo these contraptions well there a' the rage
how shallow weve become in this day and age

buildin a bogey and kick the can
standin for ages in a queue at the van
chinese ropes and a ba' in a sock
pipin hot chips in a newspaper poke
these memories they give me such feelings of glee
now what was a dinosaur Oh dear ITS ME

Jimmy Frew, originally from Grangemouth, just down the road from us, all the way from the St Andrew's Society of Rio de Janeiro: Jimmy Frew, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

My Hert's Been Sair

My hert's been sair, it's had a knock
Gave my system quite a shock
Very nearly stopped my clock
Had me in a spin
Wasna pumpin' air at a'
Makin' a' my pressures fa'
Arteries big an' arteries sma'
Wa's were cavin' in

Where it came frae, how or when
Wise physicians dinna ken
Maggie Frew said "bloody men

Nae doctor's askin' me

He gets mad an' blows his top

Face goes red an' eyes go pop

Ah telt him some day he'd drop

An' I was right" said she

God made lads tae swear an' cuss

At lassies wha mak' a' the fuss

They wad be the death o' us

Or we'd be their slaves

That's the way it always was

Wha can change God's heavenly laws?

They have got us by the ba's

Frae cradle tae the grave

So, wha sae ever's hert gets sair

Doon the close or up the stair

If ye have nae Medicare

It shall not be free

But whether you are fat or thin

Frae whisky, haggis, fags or gin

Here is what'll save your skin

Angioplastie

A great verse from the lovely Ann Marie McAlpine from Reno, keeping up the side for the ladies!

Ann Marie McAlpine, Reno, Nevada, USA

Immortal Memory

Settle in friends and you shall hear

Of the poet of Scots – the one most dear...

The reason we all are sitting here...

Eating our haggis and drinking our beer.

Now let's straighten this out before we get going

Before all the things you soon will be knowing

It's Rabbie – not Rob, nor Bob, nor Bobby.

It's written in stone, like the code Hammurabi

And I've some things to tell you about our fair bard

Whose influence cannot be measured in yards

And if upon "Bobby" you care to insist,

Poor Rabbie... in unsettled repose he will twist.

In seventeen hundred and fifty-nine

The wee bairn poet of Auld Lang Syne

Made his debut in Alloway, Ayr

In a clay and thatch cottage that was really quite bare.

Wee Rabbie was eldest of 6 more to come

Of the Burness' darling brood...

Apparently, Mom just couldn't say, "No!"

And Dad was just in the mood!

Now, William, his da, was a poor tenant farmer

And Agnes, his ma, loved to sing...

Songs of the country, and daily life

To her bairns dear Agnes would bring.

And as much as Rabbie loved those tunes

There was something he loved even more...

Old Betty wove tales of harpies, and selkies

And versed Rab in auld Scotia's lore.

So Rab grew up working hard on the farm,

But his labors held little reward.

The Burness family always just scraping by...

Proper food they could not afford.

But as poor as William's family was
For his children better things he yearned.
John Murdoch was hired to teach his bairns,
And ensure that the Burness boys learned.

With brother Gilbert at his side,
Rab studied English, Latin, French...
Murdoch taught them poems and songs
And thirst for knowledge tried to quench.

O, poor, but educated Robert was
And he especially loved to read
Of heroes like Hannibal and Wallace, too.
Which made him proud to be Scottish indeed!

Young Robin – aye, another name
Loved playing at hero as well.
He went a-rantin', and a-rovin round...
An escape from his harsh, farm-life hell.

But if Rabbie ranted or roved too far
When he should have been tending his classes,
John Murdoch had leave to punish him harshly...
With a belt he tended to lashes!

Now age fifteen, at harvest time
Rab's first young love he met.
'Twas handsome Nell who once he lov'd
And we're ever in her debt...

For you see, as Rabbie later said
That up until that time,
He'd never had the slightest thought
To express himself in rhyme.

But the gate was opened wide, I say

By that bonnie, sweet, sonsie lass,
And the spontaneous words of Robert's heart
Spilled out for us at last.

After courting Nelly for a time
Our Rab was sent away
To improve his education, O
In Carrick he did stay.

Young Burns had grand adventures there
And met some salty folk...
Plus there were a lot more girls
For the saucy, randy bloke.

But adventures were cut short, alas
And back to the farm Rab was called
When a new, mean, nasty rent collector's
Behavior had Robert appalled.

The creep had raised the rent so high
Burns' da just could not pay...
Rab's help was needed to make ends meet
And keep the collector at bay.

Now, as hard a lesson as this was to learn
It opened up Rabbie's eyes wide
To how unjust the world could be – for some...
And his ire bubbled up from inside.

So started Burns' writing life
That the world would come to know...
He wrote about life's daily struggles...
Of the common person's woe.

And the thing that made Rab different,
That made his writing hot...

Was that he reached his audience
With the language of the Scot.

Rab had a gift for making
The ordinary grand –
He wrote of daisies, mice, and haggis
Oft comparing them to man.

And let's not forget that topic
That he NEVER did outgrow...
The one that started Burns' tale
The one that we all know.

It started out with handsome Nell,
And ended with wife Jean...
Mary, Peggy, Anna, Jessie
And countless more between.

Robert surely sowed his wild oats
The lasses he adored...
He fathered fifteen children, aye
The man was never bored.

So Rabbie's words and wild ways
On occasion brought him trouble...
But that certainly never stopped our bard,
And, in fact he might redouble

His efforts to knock down
Self-righteous, high and mighty folk...
And defend the rights of all mankind
With a sharp tongue he'd provoke.

He fought the Holy Willies
And aristocrats as well,
And he really didn't like the king

Felt he could rot in... London.

So Burns has been described
As a poet of the poor,
An advocate for social change
And aye, a little more...

An opponent of all slavery,
Pomposity and greed...
A man's a man for a' that...
Words today we still should heed.

In seventeen hundred ninety-six,
The doctors knew they had the fix
To ease poor Rabbie's aches and pains.
To rid him of rheumatic strains,

In Solway Firth he should daily dip...
Not just a toe, nor just a hip...
But a full-blown dunk should do the trick
To keep at bay Burns' constant sick.

O, had the doctors only known
That soaking sick folks to the bone
In icy, muddy waters deep
Just helped their ailment's forward creep.

So Robert's health turned for the worse.
The hard-lived years would not reverse...
And in the bonnie summertime
Dear Burns was stopped short – in his prime.

The ploughman poet, Heaven-taught,
Bard of love, life, drink and Scot
At thirty-seven breathed his last...

And shed his earthly bonds, alas.

On the day that Burns was laid to rest,
Ten thousand mourners did attest
To their love of the bard they held most dear,
To the reason we all are sitting here
Eating our haggis, and drinking our beer.

So grab your glass of eau de vie
And charge it high for all to see!
Let's toast our honored invitee...
The bard of all humanity...
To Burns' Immortal Memory!

Slàinte Mhath!